



Helena Dorembus (clockwise from left) before and after the war, and today.

Through He

A survivor's diary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising

**HELENA
ELBAUM
DOREMBUS**

The Nazis established the Warsaw Ghetto in October 1940, building a wall to keep the half million Jews from Warsaw and the provinces imprisoned and impoverished. Deprived of food and medicine, the death rate in the ghetto from starvation and epidemics, especially typhoid, was so high that mass graves were dug for daily burials. Nearly 15,000 Jews, however, managed to escape the ghetto and live in hiding or under assumed names in Warsaw. After her mother and daughter were taken to Treblinka and gassed, Helena Elbaum Dorembus and her husband escaped and were hidden by Stach, a neighbor and the brother of a Polish friend they had assisted financially. Stach helped the writer and her husband pass as Christians. On April 19, 1943—the first night of Passover—the Nazis came to deport the remaining Jews in the ghetto to death camps and were met by fierce opposition from the Jewish underground. It took the Nazis more than a month to subdue the outnumbered and outgunned Jews in the ghetto. Mrs. Dorembus, who wrote for the Polish Jewish journal *Moment*, the publication whose name is now remembered in this MOMENT, was 35 when she witnessed the uprising. Today, 85 years old, she commutes between Boston and Israel. This excerpt, published on the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, is the first English presentation of her memoir, *On The Aryan Side*, which appeared in Yiddish in Israel in 1954.

Wipeless Eyes

Easter preparations are in full swing. Kazia, my Polish landlady, brings home bundles of food: meat, sausage, brandy. She is so heavy she can hardly move. I have to do all the work. I wash the windows and doors, beat the bedding, cook, polish. Not a spare moment.

I am coloring the Easter eggs. The children made me agree to go to church with them. Stach explained the entire Sanctification ceremony to me so that I do not make any mistakes.

There is an air of anticipation about the dark ghetto. The walls look like drowned, bloated corpses—blind, vengeful.

Holy Monday, April 19, 1943. Mrs. Szultz, a German neighbor, rushes in with the news of an uprising in the ghetto. "Finished!" she exclaims, gesticulating with her hands. "An end to the Jews! One, two and they're all wiped out!"

Boczek [a neighbor] comes running through the court calling: "See the lion playing with the mouse! They felt like having an uprising!" He chortles.



A member of Helena Doremus' family. His head and face were forcibly shaved by jeering Nazi officers. The author has carried this photo with her since her own days in the ghetto.

On the trolley car I had heard talk that the Germans were preparing to "clean up" the ghetto. Governor Hans Frank [governor general of Poland from 1939 to 1945] wants to give Hitler this little birthday present.

I am "free" while they, there behind the walls, await their end. I dreamed of an air raid over Warsaw during which the Jews in the ghetto might escape. But my prayers haven't reached God. The heavens are silent.

Boczek and Mrs. Zaleski [a neighbor]

return from town with incredible reports. They tell of hundreds of dead Germans, wrecked tanks and wounded, frightened soldiers being taken by first aid personnel to the hospitals. Mrs. Zaleski seems to gloat as she praises the Jews for their heroism.

Through my kitchen window I see bright rockets speeding across the night sky, then hear the explosions.

Exploding hand grenades cry their last protest against injustice and murder. "Revenge!" calls every bottle of kerosene exploding against a German tank—revenge for all the dear ones, revenge for oneself, for the humiliation, the terrible days and nights, the atrocities. Unqualified revenge!

No one in the ghetto expects victory. Their heroism is, therefore, all the greater, all the more sublime and all the more tragic. Young boys, old folks, women and children unite in the desire for vengeance and death with honor.

Two flags fly from a roof near Muranowski Square in the ghetto: the Polish flag and the blue and white Jewish flag.

On Bonifraterska Street, several Germans feverishly mount a mortar. One of the Germans tells the onlookers to move on. They seem to fear sabotage.

Someone says, "Look, one of the Jews is sitting on the balcony with a gun!" We all push to the window to see a kneeling figure holding a rifle. Suddenly an explosion rends the air. The house shudders. It was the German mortar. Bullets and grenades come in our direction from the ghetto.

We enter an apartment where, together with the tenants, we hide in a back room. Some of the people press against the walls.

When it becomes still, I look out the window. The street is empty, dead. Three Germans sprawl in pools of blood. The mortar stands dumbly. The Jew on the balcony still holds the same position, the rifle in both hands. The scene is very queer. Someone explains that through his opera glasses he has seen several Jews tie a dead body to the balcony, apparently to draw the attention of the Germans away from the live fighters.

I go down to the street and for the first time I see shot Germans. I feel like reciting a prayer of thanks to God over the firing of the first Jewish bullets.

"They won't hold out much longer,"

Jozef [Kazia's husband] says when he returns from work. "They have no arms. What they get off the dead Germans is like a toy against the German cannons and mortars. But they're putting up a stiff fight. I'd never have believed that Jewboys could make such a showing! They haven't let a single tank out of the ghetto in one piece. About 50 Germans fell today."

The engineer Lenski is helping. Israel and I were there when a tall, pregnant woman carrying a basket came in. Ignoring us, he took several pistols and three bags of ammunition from behind the oven—where a Jewish couple is hiding. From under her dress the woman took a small pillow full of pockets and compartments, arranged the guns and ammunition around her waist with tape and fluffed up the pillow. She put on her coat, leaving it unbuttoned. It looked like a genuine pregnancy.

"Jews like this woman and those in the ghetto are an honor to themselves and to us," Lenski said. "Those are the Jews I like. I'll do anything for them, even give them my last drop of blood."

Lenski is an enigma. He keeps trying to convince us that he can't stand the Jews. But the Stock family and the others he is hiding assure us that he loves the Jews more than the Poles. We see how proudly he speaks of the uprising, of the munitions he raised. He frequently fills glasses and orders everyone to drink a toast with him and to join him in singing the Polish national anthem. Pleasurably, he rubs his hands and smacks his lips.

The Germans bombard the ghetto with their big guns as Poles roam the streets bordering the ghetto. There are discussions, arguments. Some mock the German "heroes" who can't seem to manage the caged Jews.

The ghetto is burning.

Thick black smoke envelops it. The ground doesn't cease quaking from explosions. This almost seems like a repetition of Maccabean times, an echo of long-forgotten heroism.

The shriek of shrapnel, the whistle of bullets. Red lashes cut the darkness.



COURTESY OF THE WARREN ARCHIVES

Flocks of tiny birds soar over the Aryan streets—thin, burnt pages of sacred books veined with sacred letters, like Jewish death lists. When I pick up one of these scorched pages, it crumbles to bits. Each bit becomes the skeleton of a word.

Groups of Poles watch women with children in their arms leap from the blazing balconies.

The Aryan tables are set. The smell of Easter dishes nauseates me. My landlord shuts the window to keep out the smoke of the ghetto.

"I would put in a monument to Hitler for the thorough job he's doing," Boczek says.

On this bright blue spring day I feel like crying. But I have no place to vent my anguish.

From where I am I can see the ghetto. On a balcony, a young woman struggles with her little boy, who refuses to be thrown from the third floor. Tiny hands push the helpless mother's hands. Tongues of flame mingled with knots of smoke leap from nearby windows. The mother bends down to her child and speaks to him, embraces him and together the two bodies plummet

The Warsaw Ghetto burning, taken by General Jurgen Stroop, who proclaimed in a triumphant message to Hitler: "There is no Jewish quarter in Warsaw any more!" Stroop, an SS Oberführer, was dispatched to Warsaw on April 17, 1943, the eve of the scheduled liquidation of the ghetto. He ordered his 2,000 soldiers, equipped like frontline troops, to kill without restraint or discrimination. The ghetto uprising lasted until May 8, when the ZOB (the Jewish fighting organization) headquarters fell to the Germans. A U.S. military court in Dachau in 1947 condemned Stroop to death. The verdict was not carried out. Stroop was extradited to Poland, sentenced by the Warsaw district court in July 1951 and hanged that September for his crimes in the Warsaw Ghetto.

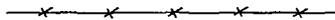
Children on the streets of the Warsaw Ghetto, 1941. When the Nazis established the ghetto they herded some 400,000 Jews into one-and-a-half square miles; that is, some 30 percent of Warsaw's population in 2.4 percent of the city's area. That number rose by 150,000 as refugees from the Warsaw district and closed labor camps were transferred into the walled ghetto. Thousands were homeless. This photo was taken on September 19, 1941 by Heinz Jost, a hotelkeeper who served in the German army in a camp near Warsaw. Jost illegally entered the ghetto on his birthday. An exhibit of his photos "A Day in the Warsaw Ghetto: A Birthday Trip in Hell" is traveling the U.S. through 1995 (See "A Birthday Tour of Hell," February 1991). For information call SITES, 202-357-3167.

to the ground. The sound of their fall drowns in all the racket.

"Jesus, Jesus, have mercy. After all, they are human beings," a woman cries out near me. She covers her eyes with her hands.

A German soldier runs down Bonifraterska Street shouting. Suddenly he hurls his gun away, halts, flings his cap to the ground, strips off his tunic and blouse and, frothing at the mouth, cries, "Barbarians! We're barbarians!"

Two guards rush over and beat him unmercifully till they have him under control. "He went out of his mind," all in the street agree. "Yes, he went out of his mind. He couldn't take it anymore, that German!"



All week long crowds are drawn to the ghetto walls.

"Ah, all that gold melting in there!" someone exclaims.

"They should have been poisoned like mice," a tall Pole near me says. "Then nothing would have gone to waste."



Those who wipe their eyes do so because they are smarting from the smoke of the ghetto.

The Germans and Poles were certain that the ghetto would be liquidated quickly. But they've been disappointed. In

every burning house the Jews are defending themselves. Fighters are busy behind every column of smoke. The women fight more stubbornly than the men. Rumors have it that the Communists are smuggling munitions into the ghetto and that Russian parachutists, German deserters and Poles are fighting beside the Jews; otherwise, the uprising would have been suppressed immediately.

The gentile mind cannot conceive of Jewish heroism—of charmed people hurling themselves at the enemy with knives, axes or iron bars. Stach maintains that if not for the Polish Socialist party's fighting beside the Jewish rebels and the arms Polish workers are smuggling into the ghetto, the Jews would long since be done for.

But the underground bulletins do not confirm these rumors. Almost all of them pay ample respect to Jewish heroism, with not a word about help from anyone.

The bulletins are full of reports of the progress of the war in North Africa, the Pacific and Russia. In one I read:

"Human beings are falling and there is heroism also at the front lines. But they are fighting and dying under circumstances quite different from those here in the ghetto. Here it is the doomed waging grim battle against cruelty and depravity. The bulletin of the Battle of the Ghetto should be read at the foreign fronts, so the sol-



COURTESY OF SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION TRAVELING EXHIBITION SERVICE (SITES) AND YAD VASHEM ARCHIVES

diers there might take pride in the comradeship of those who go down fighting with their arms in their hands in the houses and streets of the Warsaw ghetto. The smoke over Warsaw must not vanish without a trace. If it does, the concept of heroism will lose its meaning and the German crimes, which cry out to heaven for revenge, will be forgotten.”

The Jews in the ghetto plead in vain for arms. “We are fighting for you and your freedom, for your honor and our own. We need arms!” But the Poles do not answer this constantly repeated plea.

Alone they are fighting, immured in the ghetto walls, surrounded by cannons, harried day and night amid the burning buildings. Heroes—the only heroes in history.

Meanwhile, the Germans, to distract the public and prevent any possible sympathy for the Jews, announce several times daily a report of a massacre of several thousand Polish officers in Katyn [a town near Smolensk in the former USSR]. They place photos of the dead officers in shop windows along the main streets, lists of the names of the massacred men, letters they have received from their families, medals, rings. Beneath these displays they place placards: “This is how the Jewish Bolsheviks are massacring our beloved brothers.”

On the ghetto walls, at every corner, hang placards containing a disgusting caricature of a face with a long nose, bloodshot eyes and fleshy lips. Underneath is the caption: “The Scourge of Mankind.”

The Germans also spread reports that the Jews who fled from the ghetto are killing Poles, raping women and burning villages. The loudspeakers carry reports of murders committed by unknown assailants, “probably Jews.”

Hatred brings to the fore the basest instincts of the masses. The number of Poles helping to flush out the few Jews surviving on the Aryan side grows.

Franeek [Stach’s brother] has brought me a bulletin containing the text of General Wladyslaw Sikorski’s [commander-in-chief of the Polish Armed Forces] speech of May 5.

“The greatest crime in the history of mankind is being committed. We know



COURTESY OF SITES AND YAD VASHEM ARCHIVES

that you Poles are helping the Jews as much as possible. I thank you, brothers, in my own name and in the name of the government. I beg you to go on helping them in every possible way and also combat the terrible atrocities which the Germans are committing against the Jews.”

But there is no response to his words.

In the evening a young Pole passed our house carrying a set of jaws which had belonged to a Jew. Among the two rows of teeth were several golden ones.

“A hundred, a hundred, the best quality gold!” he cried, as though conducting an auction.

Luczak [a neighbor] bought the treasure, commenting: “There are piles of gold at every goldsmith. Many teeth have diamonds stuck away in them. It’s worth the risk. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!”

Black clouds over the sky. A swollen, pus-filled night comes at us from the ghetto, gaping with huge, burnt-out eye sockets and shattered walls through which the last sparks fly. ❧

Disease, epidemics and starvation took their toll of the population of the Warsaw Ghetto. By the summer of 1942, it is estimated that over 100,000 Jews died in the ghetto proper. It was not uncommon for all the members of a family to die on one day or in the course of a few days. Dead bodies were carried away for mass burial in horse-drawn carts, hand-carts, bicycle rickshaws and stretchers.