NON OMNIS MORIAR

Not All of Me Will Die

(From Horace, 65-8 BCE)

Innumerable books in many languages have been written about the Holocaust, but perhaps the most authentic and poignant were those that were composed during the time of actual events. This essay will feature narratives written in the first person and present tense by witnesses almost all of whom failed to survive the war — as such, their words became their immortal legacy.

Probably the most famous example was *The Diary of Anne Frank* but because most of the time the Dutch teenager was hiding in an attic, her account didn't provide first-hand descriptions of what was happening on the streets outside. A very different perspective was evident in *Pamietnik*, the war diary of **David Szpiro**, a young man who described his daily life in Bialystok — sometimes mundane, even boring, other times horrific. Unlike testimonies of other Holocaust victims that either were hidden or buried, David's diary went unnoticed, sitting in plain sight on a shelf for more than seven decades until, about to be discarded with trash, someone opened it and appreciated its potential historic importance. *Pamietnik* is the only contemporaneous account of life in the Bialystok ghetto that has been fully translated from Polish to English and serves as a riveting and invaluable shard from that vanished world. (It was substantially reproduced in my book *Voices from the Bialystok Ghetto*.)

David Szpiro was nearing age eighteen when he began writing his diary in December 1939 and during the next nearly four years, he made more than fifty entries. The last was written shortly before the Bialystok ghetto was liquidated by the Nazis and the remnant of Jews either slaughtered on the spot or transported to death or work camps. Probably David died shortly after his last diary entry but we can only imagine the details. He appears to have been an ordinary teenager, certainly not a heroic fighter, and at the end of 1942 he disappeared without a trace — except for his crudely bound diary. Perhaps memoirs written by others may have provided broader context, but few were as affecting as this account that was written in real time by a post-adolescent trying to find his way in a terrifying world.

In one entry David Szpiro mused:

> *If someone reads my diary in the future, will they be able to believe something like that? Surely not, they will say poppycock and lies; but this is the truth, disgusting and terrible; for me it's a reality which I would like to avenge so much.*

Alexandra Garbarini's book *Numbered Days* (2006) was based on roughly one hundred Holocaust diaries, most of them written in Polish. In her preface Garbarini noted, "I aim to make it possible to see diarists as active subjects in history - not as passive victims or heroic resisters, but as ordinary men and women who were subjected to extraordinary events and who tried in different ways to cope with them." Taken together these snapshots create a composite that provides the reader with an unmediated understanding of the Holocaust.

WARSAW

Among 400,000 Jews who in 1942 were forced into the Warsaw ghetto was the pediatrician Janucz Korczak who in 1912, with a devoted colleague, Stefa Wilczynska, had opened an orphanage in Warsaw for Jewish children and nine years later, another one for Catholics. In these "children's republics" Korczak experimented with his progressive ideas by allowing the children to govern themselves with as much independence as possible. Disinterested in personal affairs, he never married and lived a monastic existence. He performed the most menial tasks such as mopping the floor, making beds, ironing handkerchiefs or cobbling shoes. Every morning at 6 o'clock he emptied the chamber pots while wearing a green smock and more than once was mistaken for a janitor.

From 1926 to 1939, Korczak edited a weekend supplement to a popular newspaper that was entirely written by children, thus providing them with a national voice. About 10,000 letters a year were received including articles, essays, news and poetry. During the same period, Korczak was offered his own radio program. The officials insisted that he adopt another pseudonym (his real name was Henryk Goldszmit) since they didn't want to be accused of allowing a known Jewish educator a chance to shape the minds of Polish children.

Believing that it was better to seize the opportunity anonymously than not at all, he agreed to be called “The Old Doctor.” It was said that on his program Korczak spoke to children as if they were adults and to adults as if they were children. He once explained, “Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today.” For two years Korczak did his best to create an environment of normalcy, but limited to about 180 calories a day, everyone began to starve. His guiding principle was that “When everyone is inhuman, what should a man do? He should act more human.” Dr. Korczak refused a chance to escape and on his 64th birthday, large shipments of people out of the ghetto to Treblinka began.

On the day selected to liquidate the orphanage, Korczak felt that there was no need to tell the children what was happening so he had his staff instruct that they were going for a treat in the country and to bring along a few toys. Two hundred children marched out of the building heads held high and carrying their flag that Korczak had designed – green with white blossoms and the star of David.” Here’s how an eyewitness described the scene:

> *Slowly they go down the steps, line up in rows, in perfect order and discipline, as usual. Their little eyes are turned toward the doctor, they are strangely calm, they feel almost well. Their doctor is going with them, so what do they have to be afraid of? They are not alone, not abandoned. The children are calm, but inwardly they must feel it, they must sense it intuitively, otherwise how could you explain the deadly seriousness in their pale little faces? But they are marching quietly in orderly rows, calm and earnest, and at the head of them is Janusz Korczak, marching with two small children in his arms.*
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> *Their faces were smiling apparently he was telling them funny stories… Singing to the accompaniment of a little fiddler, they walked in double file in the hot sun the two miles to the collection site, their wooden shoes clattering and thousands of faces silently watching. Many jeering Poles yelled, “Goodbye Jews.” At the assembly point the children were counted, and then their yellow armbands were snipped off and thrown into the center of the courtyard. A policeman remarked that it looked like a field of buttercups.*

The last recorded sight was that of a solitary man comforting the children as they mounted the train to Treblinka. Korczak, the martyr, became a legend and a new rallying cry in the ghetto was “Remember Korczak’s orphans,” as if only now did every Jew realize that they were next and just two weeks after the orphanage was evacuated, the Warsaw resistance movement began. The life of Janusz Korczak, stands as one of the finest examples of selflessness and caring for others in human history.

Dr. Korczak was one of twenty-eight physicians in the Warsaw Ghetto who participated in a study of the very thing they all were suffering from — starvation. Their motives were unclear –- perhaps it was a way of keeping their sanity, or of bearing witness, or leaving something useful to posterity, or just setting an example of how to behave as a human being. The leader of the project was Dr. **Israel Milejkowski**, a dermatologist and leading Zionist before the war, who was responsible for supervising public health — an oxymoron in the Ghetto.

He also headed an underground medical school there for more than a year. The object was to document the physiologic effects of what they called “hunger disease.” The work was carried out in a room in one of the cemetery buildings which seemed symbolic of their situation. One hundred forty subjects were studied — most had been on an 800 calorie, low-protein, low fat diet for months or years. Those selected were thought to suffer from pure hunger, not associated with typhus or TB or some other known disease. Using their ingenuity, the doctors revealed information that had never been reported before –- vital signs, blood tests, electrocardiograms and even autopsies.

The study lasted for only five months and ended on the day that deportations to Treblinka began. On May 16, 1943, *SS* and Police Chief Jurgen Stroop proclaimed, "180 Jews, bandits, and subhumans were destroyed. The Jewish quarter of Warsaw is no more.” As Milejkowski wrote, “The system of extermination was much more efficient than hunger; we have the data to prove it. The closing of the ghetto walls resulted in 43,000 deaths, [but] in two months deportation resulted in 250,000 deaths.” Dr. Milejkowski described The Hunger Report as being an unfinished symphony, but he declared that the legacy of this work was that “I shall not wholly die.” Shortly afterward he committed suicide.

Emmanuel Ringelblum was a man with a mission who felt a need to write “from inside the event.” He encouraged witnesses to record their impressions immediately so they wouldn’t be skewed by “the distorting lens of selective memory.” It was vital to capture everyday details of Jewish life in Warsaw under German occupation in order to meld individual testimonies into a collective portrait for as Ringlelblum explained, “These documents and notes are a remnant resembling a clue in a detective story…We are noting the evidence of a crime.” Ringelblum formed a clandestine group of nearly sixty men and women known as *Oyneg Shabes* (Joy in the Sabbath) and encouraged members to gather all manner of documents.

As historian Samuel Kassow noted in his book *Who Will Write Our History*, “In good times and bad, Polish Jewry spoke in many different voices; the men and women of the *Oyneg Shabes* did all they could to record those voices and ensure their survival until someday someone would listen.” These materials were buried in tin boxes and aluminum milk cans, a first cache hidden in August 1942 at the height of the Great Deportation was followed by another in February 1943 not long before the Uprising broke out. One trove was unearthed shortly after the war ended while a second was discovered in December 1950, a third cache was never found but, all told, nearly 30,000 documents were retrieved.

Chaim Kaplan could have secured an exit visa, but felt obliged to remain in order to record events during the occupation. To write everything down was a self-appointed “sacred task,” as if bearing witness to the suffering of Warsaw’s Jewry spiritually sustained him. Every day he added to what he called his “scroll of agony” filling a notebook of 200 to 400 pages roughly every six months. Kaplan wrote, “We are so tired. There is no strength left to cry; steady and continual weeping finally leads to silence. At first there is screaming; then wailing; and at last a bottomless sigh that does not leave an echo. We live broken and shattered lives.” Another time: “my mind is still clear though it is now five days since any real food has passed my lips.”

Friends urged the sixty year old Chaim Kaplan to stop writing: “What is the purpose? How will these words of yours reach future generations?” But he refused to listen. Shortly afterward he commited suicide.

Kaplan knew that events recorded in reportorial style can be of historical value and although he acknowledged that it was beyond his capabilities to describe every event in organized form, he hoped that others would do this when the appropriate time came. His diaries weren't hidden in Ringelblum's archive, but separately buried by a family friend on a farm outside the ghetto and retrieved after the war. Although both Emmanuel Ringelblum and Chaim Kaplan died in the Warsaw Ghetto, eventually their words did reach future generations but they are not nearly familiar enough in the present day.

Wladyslaw Szlengel (pron.Shlengel.) was among those who contributed to Emmanuel Ringelblum's archive. In prewar Warsaw he had been a popular poet and songwriter but, paradoxically, his output while confined in the ghetto was ironic, sarcastic, even light-hearted (think of Joel Gray in Weimar Germany in the movie *Cabaret.*) Aware that they were destined to die, it was as if his subjects insisted that you can kill our bodies but not our spirit. In contrast to conventional heroic narratives of resistance, his poems depicted the tragedy of hapless, helpless ordinary people — "the living dead" — some called him the "chronicler of the sinking." During the ghetto uprising Szlengel and his wife were discovered in their hiding place and shot. Unfortunately, few of his poems have been translated to English.

BIALYSTOK

The young resistance leader **Mordecai Tenenbaum** knew of Ringelblum's project and also felt compelled to preserve documents as testimony for future generations. He recruited assistants to collect materials that reflected everyday life in the ghetto. Most documents were written in Yiddish and included minutes of *Judenrat* meetings, posters, poems and personal testimonies. After reading scraps of writing found in discarded clothing of two individuals who'd perished at Treblinka, Tenenbaum wrote, "I wade through them all day and cannot stop for a minute. It feels as if my pockets are on fire. It's monstrous appalling." After several months of gathering, Tenenbaum had the archive buried outside the ghetto by a sympathetic Pole and after the war, it took more than a year before a map was discovered that helped locate the materials.

Mordecai Tenenbaum's diary was written in Hebrew and in it. He explained that to him the main function of the resistance was to defend the honor of the Jewish people; and in a letter to Zionist leaders in Palestine: "With these lines I want to establish a memorial, however inadequate, for those dearest to me who are no longer with us. Comrades, the movement feels honored to have produced such people, people who have spent months preparing for a beautiful death. Can there be such a thing? Do not forget them." In an epilogue to her own memoir, survivor Chaika Grossman wrote that more than once Mordecai read to her what he'd written before it was sent to be hidden outside the ghetto:

> *I knew that* his *words were written in moments of tension, when the writer wavered between hope and despair over the future of the ghetto, the people, political leaders, institutions, movements, and the Judenrat. They were penned in fragments, hurriedly, feverishly, almost automatically, without any real opportunity to balance, analyze or summarize. That is perhaps the great historic value of Mordecai Tenenbaum's entries.*

When a major a*ktion* began on February 5, 1943, each morning at dawn soldiers entered the ghetto, rounded up Jews and took them away to the transports. At night residents in hiding prepared for the next day's onslaught and when the first round-up came to an end after about a week, Tenenbaum described the scene as survivors emerged from their shelters:

> *Only now one begins to comprehend the full gruesomeness of the past few days; scores of crazed people are running through town looking for their kin. They run and fall, get up and fall again. Smothered children are being dragged from the shelters. They began crying during the searches and were suffocated. It seems everyone is carrying belongings. Everywhere there are tears…At the cemetery, gigantic heaps of dead bodies are buried in mass graves. Again, loud wailing. "Today snow has fallen, covering the bloodstains on the ground. Underneath the whiteness of the snow appears a shiny redness. In the afternoon it rained. All has been washed away.*

Two weeks after the February a*ktion,* Tenenbaum told the remaining Jews: "We are surrounded by the dead. We know what took place in Warsaw. No one was left alive….We are the last to survive. It is not a particularly comfortable feeling to

be the last [but] it is a special responsibility. Now is the time to decide how to act tomorrow." Then there was a six month interval of relative calm and the *Judenrat* urged people to work, pay taxes and bills, and keep their apartments and yards clean. But when the first news of what was happening at Treblinka came in March, Tenenbaum wrote "There are no more illusions….our only option is defense." He had written a manifesto in Yiddish exhorting the ghetto's desperate youth to resist and make a stand. The document wasn't distributed for six months until "the moment when we proclaim the counteraction." Just before the start of the final liquidation and uprising, women of the underground to distribute handbills with the manifesto throughout the ghetto:

> *Fellow Jews. Fearsome days have come upon us. More than the ghetto and the yellow badge, hatred, humiliation and degradation - we now face death! Before our own eyes our wives and children, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters are being led to the slaughter. Thousands have already gone; tens of thousands will shortly follow. In these terrible hours, as we hover between life and death, we appeal to you.*
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> *Be aware - five million European Jews have already been murdered in Europe by Hitler and his henchmen. All that remains of Polish Jewry is about ten percent of the original Jewish community. In Chelmo and in Belzec, in Auschwitz and in Treblinka, in Sobibor and in other camps more than three million Polish Jews were tortured and butchered. Don't kid yourselves - all transports lead to death!*
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> *Do not believe the Gestapo propaganda about letters supposedly received from the evacuees. That is a damnable lie! The road on which the deportees have gone leads to gigantic crematoria and mass graves in the thicket of the Polish forests. Each one of us is condemned. You have nothing to lose! Work can no longer save you.*
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> *After the first liquidation there will be a second and a third - until the last Jew is killed. Dividing the ghetto into various categories is a sophisticated Gestapo method of deceiving us and making their dirty work easier. Jews, we are being led to Treblinka! Like leprous beasts we will be gassed and cremated.*

Let us not passively go like sheep to the slaughter. Even though we are too weak to defend our lives, still we are strong enough to preserve our Jewish honor and human dignity and to show the world that although they have broken our bodies, they have not broken our spirits! We have not yet fallen.

Do not go willingly to your death. Fight for your lives until your last breath! Attack your executioners with tooth and nail, with axes and knives, with acid and iron rods. If we fall as heroes, even in our death…we shall not die. Let the enemy pay for blood with blood. Their death for our death! Will you cower in your corners when your nearest and dearest are humiliated and put to death? Will you sell your wives and children, your parents, your soul for another few weeks of slavery? Let us ambush the enemy, kill and disarm him, wage resistance against the murderers. And if necessary die like heroes.

Except for our honor we have nothing to lose! Do not sell your lives cheaply! Avenge the destroyed communities and uprooted settlements. When you leave your homes, set fire to them. Burn and demolish the factories. Do not let the hangman inherit our possessions! Jewish youth! Follow the example of generations of Jewish fighters and martyrs, dreamers and builders, pioneers and activists - go out and fight.

Hitler will lose the war. Slavery and murder will vanish from the face of the earth. The world will one day be cleansed and purified….For the sake of mankind's bright future you must not die like dirty dogs! To the forest, to the resistance fighters. Do not flee the ghetto unarmed, for without weapons you will perish. Only after fulfilling your national obligation, go to the forest armed. Weapons can be seized from any German in the ghetto. BE STRONG!

The next day more than 100 young comrades launched their final revolt, but the Germans had learned from experience recently gained in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and were well prepared. To over 3,000 heavily armed SS troops they added armored vehicles, tanks and aircraft. The battle raged for five days but unable to break out of the ghetto, about 70 fighters retreated into a bunker where all were shot. It was suggested that as the last resistance positions fell, Mordecai Tenenbaum saved the last bullet for himself.

It's remarkable that Tenenbaum's powerful manifesto is hardly known today. To be sure, similar appeals exhorting armed resistance were distributed in the Warsaw and Vilna ghettos and it's astonishing to realize that nearly every detail of what befell European Jewry was known to Jews trapped in Bialystok's ghetto while the world waited and watched.

Pesach Kaplan had edited a daily newspaper in Bialystok before the war, but his ghetto diary began "How does one describe the destruction of Bialystok as the author of the Book of Lamentations would have adequately done? It is possible for me only to record cut and dry facts indelibly inscribed in my memory about the recent bleak and bloody days." Immediately after the Germans returned in June 1941, there was this: "Our souls are tortured by the unanswerable question: how much longer will our lives be prolonged — for days or for weeks? Optimists believe we will be permitted to live for another month while the pessimists disagree. People move about like shadows, physically and mentally shattered, their gazes reflecting hope extinguished, moving automatically through inertia, like lunatics." Kaplan's diary was smuggled out of the ghetto and carefully preserved in a kerosene can on a farm outside Warsaw. Originally recorded in Hebrew script, it is a detailed eyewitness report of the Nazi occupation of Warsaw and a unique account of the destruction of the Jewish communities of Poland.

The wives of those who were taken away on Saturday July 3 were known as Sabbath widows and in this poem Pesach Kaplan expressed their anguish:

Rivkele the Sabbath widow
works in the factory
spins threads
twines cord
Oh the ghetto's so dark
It's been too long already
Her heart contracts
with too much pain
Her darling Hershel
has gone, departed.
Since that Sabbath
that moment

Rivkele mourns
Day and night she weeps
and besides the loom
sits and ponders
Where is my beloved?
Perhaps he's alive? Where?
Perhaps in a concentration camp
Working his knuckles to the bone?
It's so hard for him there
So hard for her here
Since that Sabbath, that moment..

Pesach Kaplan continued to record daily events until March 1943 when he contracted a fatal infection. His last entry: "Remember when the time comes for taking revenge, pay them back for what they have done."

POETS

Jerzy Ficowski (1924-2006) was another Pole who was haunted by the fate of Jews and gypsies (Roma.) His parents taught him not to judge people by their affiliation, beliefs, nationality or faith. Raised in that creed, as a teenager in Warsaw during World War II he saw Jewish men being humiliated by the Nazis and their children starving in the streets, but felt helpless against the barbarity, During the war he fought in the Home Army, participated in the Warsaw Uprising and was briefly imprisoned by the Nazis.

Ficowski found his poetic voice shortly after the war's end but it would take a long time for him to find the right words to describe the horror. Then he read a recently published book (*Dziecci oskarzaja*) that included transcripts of children who had survived the war. He felt that no poetry or prose could so authentically express tragedy as the children's own words and decided to insert italicized excerpts — what he called "flourishes in prose" — at the beginning of certain stanzas. Because of Soviet censorship his 27 poems, collectively called in translation *A Reading of Ashes,* weren't published until 1979. Some critics praised them as "the most moving depictions of the Holocaust ever written by a non-Jew or, as he once described himself, "I, their unburnt brother."

One of these poems had a curious title — *A Letter to Marc Chagall,* and when Ficowski sent a preliminary copy to the famous artist, Chagall was inspired to create five illustrative etchings. In 1960 they were printed in France along with the Pole's "Letter" in a limited edition folio. Because neither the poem nor Chagall's illustrations are known in this country, in 2022 I produced a short video that combined these different forms of creativity that deplore inhumanity. (View: https://vimeo.com/742062236. Password: Chagall)

Zuzanna Ginczanka (pron. Gin-sonka) was a prodigal Jewish poet during the interwar period. Although she published only a single collection of poetry in her lifetime, that book *O centaurach* (*On Centaurs*, 1936) created a sensation in Warsaw's literary circles. Zuzanna was 26 when she was arrested, tortured and months later was executed in a prison courtyard in Krakow shortly before the end of World War II. Her last and most famous poem, *Non Omnis Moriar* (Not all of me will die) written shortly before her death, was a virtual last will and testament. In recent years there's been renewed interest among Polish scholars about this beautiful and brilliant Jewess whose bright future was abruptly cut off at age 27. Even in the West currently there's a veritable Renaissance with at least four translations of her works into English either completed or in process.

While hiding in a building in Lviv, Zuzanna's female concierge resented having allocated space to a Jewish fugitive and saw her opportunity to rid herself of an unwelcome tenant and at the same time to enrich herself. In the summer of 1942, she denounced Ginczanka to the authorities as a Jew hiding in her building on false papers. The Nazis attempted to arrest Ginczanka, but other residents of the building slipped her out the back door, the police persisted and eventually caught her, but she escaped again, temporarily. Sources differ as to the exact circumstances of what followed, but whatever the details, this provided time for her to scribble her best known poem *Non omnis moriar.* According to a woman who later shared a prison cell, Ginczanka told her that her arrest was due to betrayal by her landlady which is described bitterly and sarcastically in the poem.

Although this poem was untitled, it commonly is referred to as "*Non omnis moriar*" from its opening three Latin words. They were taken from an ode by the ancient Roman poet Horace and the rest paraphrased a well-known 19th century Polish poem. Although translation from Polish to English is challenging, here's a version of Ginczanka's last poem:

Non omnis moriar — my noble estate,
My fields of tablecloth and expansive sheets,
My steadfast wardrobe bastions, still replete
With pastel-colored dresses will outlive me yet.
I left no successor to inherit these
Jewish things. May your hand then reach,
Mrs. Chomin of Lvov, [her landlady] brave wife of a snitch,
A Volksdeutcher's mother, for them if you please.
May they serve you and yours. For why should it be
Outsiders? Neighbors, you — that's more than empty name.
I still remember you, and when the *Schupo* [police] came,
You remembered me. Reminded them of me.
May friends of mine sit down and raise their jugs
To drink away my death, toast the things they'll own:
The platters and candles, tapestries and rugs.
May they drink all night, and at the break of dawn
May they search for gold and for precious stone
In mattresses, couches, and duvets in turn.
Their work will go so fast, it will almost burn,
While billowed horsehair, seagrass, eiderdown,
And clouds from gutted pillows will drift gently
Down to their arms. And then my blood will cling
To fiber and to fluff and form wings,
Turning those in seventh heaven into angels.

One of Zuzanna's colleagues described *Ginczanka's Last Poem* this way: "Hers is the most moving voice in Polish lyrical literature, for it deals with the most terrible tragedy of our time, the Jewish martyrdom….I find its impact impossible to shake off. We read it for the first time pencilled on a torn and wrinkled piece of paper, like the secret messages that prisoners smuggle out of their dungeons….

The most despairing confessions, the most heartrending utterances of other poets before their death fall far below this proudest of all poetic testaments. This indictment of the human beast hurts like an unhealed wound. A shock therapy in verse.""

Others described *Non omnis moriar* as an indictment of Polish antisemitism by a Jewish woman who wished more than anything else to be accepted as being Polish rather than as an exotic "other." Indeed, Ginczanka never espoused a Jewish identity, her preoccupations primarily focused on her being a marginalized woman. Ginczanka frequently changed hiding places; in Kraków she spent most of her time in bed because on rare outings in the street her exceptional beauty attracted unwelcome attention of passers-by. The circumstances of her final arrest remain unclear, but in prison, she was interrogated under torture and shortly before the end of the war was shot in the head either by a single rifle or by a firing squad. Zuzanna was 27 years old.

Ginczanka was ignored and forgotten in postwar Poland as communist censors deemed her work to be undesirable. Her poems fell into obscurity until the end of Soviet control when a wave of renewed interest led to numerous books and exhibitions about her in Poland and across Europe; however she remained largely unknown in the West until the last few years with English translations. Ginczanka's poems revealed tensions of gender and race as well as mounting political conflicts. Her warnings about the nature of fascism were prescient and deserve attention in our own time, when authoritarianism, misogyny and gender, ethnicity and race are very much part of public discourse.

Bohemian dermatologist **Karel Fleischmann** was both a poet and painter and his diary read like something that might have been written by an earlier Prague resident Franz Kafka. Here Fleischman described what it felt like in 1942 while waiting for deportation to Terezin, some forty miles from Prague:

> *All of us felt a sense of sliding helplessness, again and again, day after day, night after night, you descended toward the abyss whose bottom was unfathomable…you felt only the downward movement, the fear, what next?…The morning of our deportation was pitilessly cold….*

The clouds as black as ink, the rising sun blood red in the background… Darkness on earth, darkness in our souls…a nightmare. We arrived in Terezin in the evening. Really you did not arrive, you were consigned. Someone managed for us for we no longer were we –- we had become an object, a number, a ground substance, a kneaded mix of humans…

Tired to the bones, sick, longing for quiet and sleep, we came into the cellars and dark holes of the barrack…still the mass was mixed, kicked and reduced to nothing, dirtied, put on the floor, kneaded and rolled till we became a formless porridge, a heap of rubbish…poisoned with the taste of the stable…

Your helplessness became more and more pronounced as you lay denuded among the hundreds of strangers on the concrete floors or on bunks in the huge barracks…We lived like rats in a cellar and become shy of the light and shy of people….We had a feeling not only of loneliness . Your helplessness became more and more pronounced as you lay denuded among the hundreds of strangers on the concrete floor or on bunks in the huge barracks….

Such eloquence from a mere doctor. Consider these lines: “Nobody will hear my song…The world of my time ends behind these walls.” And yet, there was this note of optimism: “One of us will teach the children how to sing again, to write on paper with a pencil, to do sums and multiply; one of us will get there.” Karel Fleischmann was partially mistaken because after the war’s end more than a thousand of his drawings, written notes and poems were found and collected in archives in Czechoslovakia and Israel. His drawings hauntingly depicted life in Terezin and in his time there, the doctor learned a crucial survival technique: he could help himself best by helping others.

Similar concepts of resilience were expressed by Fleischmann’s assistant in the ghetto’s geriatric section, the Viennese psychiatrist **Viktor Frankl.** During about two years that he spent at Terezin, he cared for many suicidal elderly patients whose minds he attempted to engage in constructive ways. Viktor Frankl survived three camps after Terezin and whenever possible he would jot down ideas on pieces of stolen paper which he hid in the lining of his clothes.

After the war ended, Viktor Frankl published *Man's Search For Meaning* that eventually sold over nine million copies in nineteen languages. The core of his philosophy was that there must be a purpose to suffering and dying. Everyone can rise above their fate but must discover the meaning in life for themselves, either by creating a work or doing a deed –- by experiencing something or encountering someone. He observed that in the camps those without hope were the ones who died the quickest. Conversely, those who held on to a vision of the future were more likely to survive.

> *In the concentration camp, we witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions, not on conditions. Our generation is realistic because we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers and he is also that being who entered the gas chambers upright with the Lord's Prayer or the S'hma Israel on his lips.*

A redemptive spirit that was evident among many prisoners of Terezin was captured in the lilting refrain of a song known as "The Terezin March" that was sung at the end of every performance in the ghetto's cabaret:

Hey! Tomorrow life starts over,
And with it the time is approaching
When we will fold our knapsacks
And return home again.
Where there is a will, there is a way.
Let us join hands
And one day on the ruins of the ghetto
We shall laugh.

CONCLUSION

What makes these shards from the past worthy of our attention? One reason is that anti-Semitism is resurgent world-wide and many of the younger generations appear to be ignorant of Holocaust history; it's not that they've forgotten, rather that they never knew. A recent survey found that more than one-fifth of American millennials have not or are not sure if they have heard of the Holocaust.

Indeed, many people seem to learn more about World War II in movie theaters or on TV than in classrooms. Reading about the Holocaust is never entertaining, it is depressing; nevertheless, the stories can never be told often enough.

Dear Reader, If you think you already know a great deal about Holocaust history, ask yourself whether you even know the names of some of those martyrs described here — Israel Milejkowski, Chaim Kaplan, Wladysko Szlengel, Mordecai Tenenbaum, Pesach Kaplan, Zuzanna Ginczanka, Karel Fleischmann. Because none of them survived the war, their written words were their legacy — they were important words. Or consider how much do you really know about the more famous ones other than their names — Emmanuel Ringelblum, Januscz Korczak, Viktor Frankl? If your answer is not very much, then there's much more work for you to do. It matters.

Michael Nevins
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