

Introduction

SEVERIN HOCHBERG

Shortly after her arrival in Palestine in March 1944, Renia Kukielka wrote down this memoir of her experiences as a survivor of the Holocaust in Poland. One of the earliest survivor accounts, it is startling and quite unique in its directness, raw power, and unprocessed immediacy. This is especially so because it was written by a teenager. *Escape from the Pit* is a personal chronicle, but Renia seems to have been aware that she was a witness to important historical events, and was writing to tell the people of the world about what she had experienced. Her account therefore constitutes an important primary source that sheds light on a number of historical issues. The topics upon which she reports include the brutality of the German seizure of her native southern Poland, the extent of antisemitism and other aspects of Polish–Jewish relations, the Zionist youth movements and their attempt to mount resistance in the ghettos, and the rescue network that existed during 1943–44 to facilitate escape across the Carpathian Mountains into Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Palestine, the so-called eastern land route.

German Invasion

Renia gives a vivid description of the chaos, violence, and destruction that she encountered in the immediate aftermath of the German takeover of southwestern Poland in the early days of September 1939, bearing testimony

to the cruelty against civilians committed in the Kielce region during the initial stages of the invasion. These atrocities are not as well-known as are the later measures inflicted on Jews in Poland and the USSR. Southwestern Poland and Eastern Upper Silesia were heavily attacked during the first two weeks of the German assault on Poland by powerful German military forces, including armor and aircraft. The region was strategically located and included Poland's Central Industrial Zone, the largest industrial area in the country and thus of special importance to the Germans, who planned to annex part of the region and use its infrastructure to support an attack on the Soviet Union. Once the invasion began, the Germans were met with ferocious (and largely unexpected) resistance by Polish Army units as well as civilian militia. In order to deal with that opposition, the Wehrmacht units were augmented by formations of the Waffen-SS, by Einsatzgruppen, and by armed Volksdeutsche units made up of ethnic Germans who had fled the region between the wars. This combination of forces, backed by Hitler's order to the military to cooperate in SS operations, gave license to the violence against civilians, including the execution of thousands of Poles and the atrocities committed against Jews. Whatever the initial reservations that some German commanders may have had, the more conventional military forces very rapidly moved to assist the SS in crushing civilians. Kielce was the headquarters of Army Group South and for a time the Wehrmacht Tenth Army was led by the notorious General (later Field Marshal) Walther von Reichenau, who allowed SS Death's Head units to carry out "special actions" against Poles and Jews in Kielce province. Himmler's September 3 order that "insurgents be shot on the spot," directed against Polish civilians, gave bureaucratic sanction to this form of "antipartisan" action, while his September 8 order to spread "fear and terror in the population" was directed largely against the Jewish population and aimed at forcing Jews to flee the area before its annexation to the Reich on October 8. On September 10, Kielce had been "pacified" enough so that Hitler was able to visit the city. The following day in Krakow, Heydrich transmitted Himmler's orders to the Einsatzgruppen commanders in southern Poland and urged them to "expel Jews to the East," over the San River, which became the demarcation line between German- and Soviet-occupied Poland. From September 6 to September 11, a series of atrocities against Jews were perpetrated in the cities of east Upper Silesia.³ This was the backdrop to the frantic efforts of Renia, her family, and her fellow Jews desperately running from town to town in order to find some measure of safety. She describes these attempts in her opening chapters.

Polish Antisemitism

The book sheds light on the controversial issue of Polish–Jewish relations, especially in southern Poland.

Renia's encounters with indigenous antisemitism are vividly described. While she is emphatic about her hatred of the Germans and her desire for vengeance against them, a desire that seems to motivate her actions and her will to survive, her attitude toward her Polish neighbors and countrymen is one of anger, mixed with a feeling of betrayal. Those experiences bring out the great paradox of Polish–Jewish relations. In her personal account, Poles help the Germans uncover Jewish hiding places; Poles attack and kill escaping Jews in the forest. Poles are blackmailers and thieves who hand over Jews to win German favor. She bitterly describes how Poles rejoice at the catastrophes visited upon the Jews. At the same time she notes the suffering of Poles at the hands of the Germans, vividly describing the deliberate strafing of Polish civilians by German aircraft. She also mentions the fact that some Poles hid Jewish children, smuggled food into the ghettos, and were sentenced to death for helping Jews. She tends to attribute most obliging actions by Poles to bribery rather than altruism, yet she clearly is aware that her own survival and escape would not have been possible without Polish help.

In 1940, Emanuel Ringelblum noted that Kielce province, where Renia was born, “was known for its exuberant anti-Semitism.” In Kielce city, known as a “holy city” because of its fervent Catholicism, the Narodowa Democracy (ND) Party cofounded by Roman Dmowski (August 1864–January 1939) had a strong following and significant influence, with many Catholic clergymen among its members. This nationalist antisemitic group organized economic boycotts against Jewish-owned shops, sponsored mass demonstrations, and occasionally indulged in violence. Well before the famous postwar pogrom of July 4, 1946, which set in motion a westward movement of Jews from Poland, Kielce, on November 11, 1918, witnessed a pogrom in which ten Jews were killed and several hundred wounded. In Jędrzejów, Renia's hometown, local police prevented an ND-organized pogrom in September 1939. Boycotts of Jewish-owned stores and destruction of Jewish-owned property were fairly common during the 1920s and 1930s, as were random attacks on Jews. There were many instances of such antisemitic violence in this region. Renia wrote that “because of prevailing antisemitism, it was impossible for me to enter high school.” This was not an uncommon experience for Jewish children, especially in the decade before the Second World War

when relations between Jews and Poles deteriorated, and anti-Jewish actions increased following the death of Marshal Josef Pilsudski in May 1935.⁴

Youth Groups and Resistance

Renia's account illuminates the role of Zionist youth groups in occupied Poland. Divided by ideology and goals, they nevertheless managed to achieve remarkable unity by the spring of 1943, when it became clear that the German aim was completely to destroy the Jewish population. That youth-group members were aware of the extent of the catastrophe earlier than were most Jews in Poland is well documented in this memoir.

Because of their organization and activities and their ability, despite great risks, to keep open lines of communication between the ghettos, the organized youth groups were less isolated and had greater access to information. This helps explain Renia's references to Chelmno, Treblinka, and Auschwitz. While some of this knowledge may have been acquired after her arrival in Palestine and the exact details may not be entirely accurate, it is clear that a lot of the basic information was known to her while still in Poland because of her connections to the leadership of the youth groups.

Renia arrived in Bendzin, where she joined her sister, in November 1942, and became a member of its "kibbutz," a socialist-Zionist collective preparing for emigration to Palestine. After the horrors she had previously witnessed, she described the Bendzin "kibbutz" as "a paradise to me . . . Jews who lived like human beings, people of vision who looked forward to the future [in Palestine]."⁵ The community of thirty-seven individuals belonging to various Zionist youth groups clearly became, for Renia and the others, a kind of substitute family.⁶

The situation in Bendzin, which was annexed to Germany on October 8, 1939, was relatively better than in some other ghettos, at least for a while. Until March 1943 it was an "open" ghetto, allowing for more movement in and out than at other locations. Initially, by July 1940, thirty thousand Jews had been concentrated in Bendzin and more than seven thousand of them worked in factories producing uniforms for the Wehrmacht, many in a factory run by Alfred Rossner, a sympathetic German. The head of the Zaglembe regional "Jewish Council" or Judenrat, Moshe "Moszek" Merin, was based in Sosnowiec and was in charge of thirty-two ghettos in Reich-annexed territory; Bendzin was among them. Merin more or less shared the philosophy and strategy of Mordechai Rumkowski, leader of

the Lodz Judenrat, believing in active cooperation with the Germans in order to save “productive” Jews while sacrificing the rest if necessary. Ultimately, as in the case of Lodz, the remaining Jews of Bendzin were sent to Auschwitz.

Renia’s respite in Bendzin was to be short-lived. In February 1943 the members of the youth groups in Bendzin, under the guidance of the Warsaw underground, made the decision to prepare for resistance against the Germans. Mordechai Anielewicz, who would become the leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, had visited the Zagłębie region, including Bendzin, in June 1942 and organized the local resistance movement, establishing ties to the Warsaw underground. Despite great difficulties, something resembling a national underground was created, and the Bendzin group, like those in other ghettos, received its directives from Warsaw. Renia documents the many difficulties in carrying out armed resistance in Bendzin: harassment by the Judenrat and Jewish police, insufficient weapons, and the hostility of the local Polish underground, which did not welcome Jews and gave them little assistance. There was also the fear of savage German reprisals against the remaining Jews in the Bendzin Ghetto, for whom the youth-group members felt compassion and a great deal of solidarity. There was the continuing capture of Renia’s comrades, killed off one after another.

Contact between the underground organizations was maintained mostly by a group of young Jewish female couriers who could pass as Christian Poles. Renia’s account of her activities as a courier for the underground are among the most gripping ever written. Like most of the couriers, Renia was young, spoke Polish well, did not appear stereotypically Jewish, and because she was female, aroused less suspicion. Using forged identification papers under the name Wanda Biduchowska, she made several trips to Warsaw, crossing the border into German-occupied Poland and back to Bendzin, in Reich territory. She carried money, forged passports and identification documents, and revolvers acquired in Warsaw. She witnessed and described the atrocities committed against Jews in Warsaw during the uprising and escaped from the Bendzin Ghetto during its liquidation. On her last trip to Warsaw, in late August 1943, she was caught near Katowice, tortured in the Gestapo prison during her two weeks there, then transferred to Myslowice prison as a political prisoner. She was spared the fate of ending up in Auschwitz probably because her German captors believed she was Polish and might be able to provide information about the Polish underground.

In the face of certain catastrophe, youth-group members were faced with the choice of attempting to escape or resisting to the very end. Repre-

sentatives of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine), who managed to establish contact with the Bendzin group from Istanbul and Geneva, urged escape. The Zionist leadership in Palestine, while profoundly sympathetic to Polish Jews and heart-stricken by their massacre, regarded them as doomed. They did what their resources permitted as they were opposed to the martyrdom of highly motivated youth-group members who might be rescued and could play a key role in the building of a Jewish state after the war. Their emissaries urged *tiyul* (excursion), that is, escape via the “eastern route” through Slovakia, Hungary, and the Balkans to Palestine and were willing to facilitate the rescue of as many young people as could leave. Most youth-group members in Poland insisted on staying until the bitter end, alongside their fellow Jews, and favored armed struggle wherever possible. Renia describes the resolve of Frumka Plotnicka, a leader of the Warsaw underground, who after organizing resistance in a number of ghettos joined the Bendzin group. The Zionist leaders in Istanbul and the Warsaw ZOB (Jewish Combat Organization) offered to facilitate her escape to Palestine or to The Hague, but she declined, writing: “If it is decreed that we must die, let us all die together; but insofar as possible, let it be an honorable death.”⁷ The Bendzin Ghetto was among the last to be destroyed, and the armed uprising finally took place on August 1–3, 1943, during the last deportation of Bendzin Jews to Auschwitz. A few Germans were killed. Most of the remaining members of the underground were killed in the uprising.

Renia escaped from Myslowice prison on November 12, 1943, with the help of her sister Sarah and a woman named Halina⁸ sent from Warsaw. There was nowhere for her to go at that point and, after a period in hiding, she joined a group undertaking an escape across the Tatra Mountains to Slovakia.

Escape to Slovakia

Among the Zionist leadership in Palestine the rescue of Polish Jewish youth, as important as it was, was nevertheless referred to as a “minor rescue plan” compared to the larger Transnistria and “Europa” rescue plans that were being contemplated in 1943. Yet it was determined that priority be given, wherever possible, to rescuing children and Zionist youth who had survived annihilation. In addition to the natural affinity felt toward the young Zionists in Poland and admiration for their astonishing courage, it was considered that these young people might inform the world about the

mass slaughter that they had witnessed firsthand, and would be most valuable in the coming struggle for the creation of a Jewish state. Scarce resources were therefore allocated, on a modest basis, to saving members of Zionist youth groups.⁹ In order to carry out this particular form of rescue, money and an organized support network were crucial. Money was needed to pay smugglers and to bribe officials, to forge documents, and to pay for food and transportation. Much of this work was done by the clandestine Section for Special Operations of the Jewish Agency Political Department (Lishkat Hakesher) based in Istanbul, which reported to David Ben-Gurion, Eliezer Kaplan, and Moshe Sharett. Ben-Gurion was the *de facto* leader of the Jewish community in British Mandate Palestine; Kaplan was the treasurer of the Jewish Agency and Sharett was the head of its Political Department. Part of the costs were borne by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.¹⁰

Only a small number of individuals were able to escape from occupied Poland via the exact eastern land route used by Renia and to arrive legally in Palestine.¹¹ Small groups of Polish Jews had escaped to Slovakia beginning in 1941. These crossings were suspended during the period of deportations from Slovakia and resumed during the latter half of 1943. Although this was a difficult and dangerous journey, especially for someone in Renia's condition following her incarceration, she was fortunate in the timing of her clandestine journey to Slovakia and then on to Palestine via Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. She happened to be close to the Polish-Slovak border and crossed the mountains along a route where contacts already had been established. Smugglers and guides on both sides of the border were well paid to facilitate the journey. Once in Slovakia, Renia was in a country that had stopped deporting Jews in autumn 1942 and many of its officials were willing to look the other way in exchange for bribes as long as Jews from Poland were en route to Hungary. "We were all amazed at the efficiency with which every step of the trip had been planned. Each detail had been attended to," wrote Renia about her crossing into Slovakia.¹²

Renia and other members of her group arrived in Hungary, officially passing as Poles, a few months before the German invasion of that country in March 1944. Her stay in Budapest would have been impossible a few months later; she got out in late February, a step ahead of the Germans. The Jewish Agency's Palestine Office in Budapest provided passports and Turkish visas and her group registered at the Budapest consulate of the Polish government-in-exile. After affirming that they were Roman Catholics, adherents of Sikorski (prime minister of the government-in-exile) and

not members of the PPR (Polish communists), they received identification certificates. The officials at the consulate almost certainly knew they were Jews, but had been heavily bribed with money from the Joint Distribution Committee.

The situation in Romania and Bulgaria during her journey through those countries was equally propitious, since both nations were in the midst of talks with the Allies and increasingly unreliable in their support for Nazi Germany. Once in neutral Turkey, where there was a strong Jewish Agency presence, the group received precious Palestine immigration certificates from the British Mandatory authorities and were able to make their way legally by train through Syria to Palestine, where Renia arrived on March 6, 1944, and began writing this powerful memoir.