

Koza, part 1: The story of Yitzhak Suknik

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It is now generally accepted that around 5,800,000 Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, a figure so large it is almost impossible to grasp and we often fall into talking about the Holocaust in the plural: six million Jews.

But doing so masks the fact that every one of those victims was an individual, each with their own unique story. For the vast majority of them, these stories will never be told. Their names will never be remembered. They were forgotten as soon as they died, absent in the memory of any living person.

This is the remarkable story of one of those 5,800,000 Jews. Just about fifty per cent of the Jews killed in the Holocaust were murdered in the six German Death Camps. Ca. 1 000 000 were shot by the Einsatzgruppen on the East. But almost million who died in the Ghettos are often forgotten in the sense that number is subsumed in the much larger statistic.

This is the story of Yitzhak Suknik who fought and died in the Warsaw Ghetto, the largest of more than six hundred ghettos set up by the Nazi Germans on the occupied Polish soil.

Yitzhak's parents came from Chmielnik, a small town near Kielce in central Poland, where Jews made up a majority of the population. Towards the end of the 19th century members of the family – in common with other Jews – began to leave the town in search of better paid work. Some emigrated, others to larger Polish cities and the pattern of emigration didn't end there: some members of the family would also leave those cities to go elsewhere in Europe, including Belgium and France.

Yitzhak's grandmother Mariem had married Josek Suknik in Warsaw in 1889 and they had five children, one of whom was Meir, born in Warsaw in 1897. Meir married Cesia Lament and they had three sons: Moshek (1918), Yitzhak (1920) and Srul (1927).

We know the family lived and worked around Twarda Street and we know too life was a struggle, so much so that in 1931 Meir travelled to Brussels on a short-term visa hoping to join his brother, Szyja, who had set up a successful furrier business. His sister – also called Cesia – had moved there 2 years earlier and married a fellow Polish Jew, Naftali Rozenblum. Meir was refused a visa extension to stay and was deported back to Poland in 1932.

According to Cesia's testimony written after the War, Meir had a difficult life when he returned to Poland.

The Warsaw that Meir returned to was home to 370,000 Jews. It was a very diverse community, not just in terms of religious observance but also in their political affiliations. The majority of Jews were Zionists, ranging from the socialist Zionist groups to the revisionists on the right. Others believed that emancipation for Jews should be in the countries where they lived rather than emigrating to what was then Palestine. The most prominent of these groups was the secular, socialist Bund.

Meir's son, Yitzhak Suknik, was a socialist Zionist, a member of Hashomer Hatzair. For a while in 1939 and in the early stages of the war he lived on a Hashomer Hatzair farm near Pniewy where the aim was to prepare its members for emigration to Palestine and life on a kibbutz there. Yitzhak had already completed his military service in the Polish army, where he ended up as a sergeant and was regarded as an excellent shot.

At some point in his life Yitzhak had acquired the nickname, Koza – Polish for goat, intended to reflect his happy-go-lucky character, a young man described as always having a smile on his face.

But the start of the Second World War and the German occupation of Poland in 1939 soon meant his life took a very different course. His mother and younger brother Srul were killed during the German attack on Warsaw in September 1939, most probably in the air raids on the city. Yitzhak returned to Warsaw, where the city's Jewish population and many from the surrounding areas were now forced to live in the ghetto.

During 1941 Yitzhak suffered the imaginable loss of the remaining members of his immediate family, most probably the victims of typhus: his grandfather died in June, his older brother Moszek in August and finally his father in November.

It was after his brother's death that his character changed. Yitzhak swore revenge on the Germans, and it became his sole focus. The cheerful lad, who always had a smile on his face, became a bitter, revengeful man.

In September, Yitzhak escaped the city to join another Hashomer Hatzair training farm, this one near Częstochowa. It was not a success. At some point in the middle of 1942, they disbanded and whilst many in the group moved into the Czestochowa Ghetto, Yitzhak was encouraged to return to Warsaw to take an active part in Hashomer Hatzair.

It was at this time that Warsaw witnessed a terrible turn of events. Over two months from the end of July to September 1942 the Nazi Germans deported more than 270,000 Jews from the Umschlagplatz in the north boarder of the Ghetto to the Treblinka death camp sixty miles northeast of the city. Virtually all of the deportees were murdered within hours of their arrival.

After the Grossaktion, as the Nazi Germans called it, around 50 000 Jews remained in the rest-ghetto. They knew death was inevitable and the aim of the Nazi Germans was to eliminate all the Jews from the Ghetto. The seeds of resistance were sown.

The vast majority of the 50 000 remaining Jews undertook passive resistance, building hiding places and bunkers underground, storing food and avoiding roundups, refusing to cooperate

with the occupiers in any way possible in the hope that they could survive until the Russians came to their rescue. The active resistance was formed along political lines. On the right was the ZZW, the Jewish Military Union, whilst the ZOB – Jewish Fighting Organisation, was formed by the coming together of a number of left-wing Zionist movements and the non-Zionist Bund. There was one fundamental difference between the ZZW and ZOB. The ZZW built a secret escape route under the ghetto walls, not just the smuggling of arms, but as a means of escaping in order to carry on the fighting after the inevitable fall of the ghetto.

From the very beginning the leader of the ZOB, Mordechai Anielewicz, set the tone by making it very clear that no escape plans were to be considered, it was to be a fight to the death.

Like so many of the people who joined the ZOB, Yitzhak was young, his family having all died because of the conditions in the Ghetto or been deported from the Ghetto. He had no dependents and little chance of realizing the dream of getting to Palestine. With a strong political affiliation to Socialism and Zionism he was now ready to take on an active role in resisting the Nazi drive to annihilate the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Koza was no longer the nickname of a happy go lucky young man. It was the nom de guerre of a fighter in the resistance.

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