

Koza, part 3: To pick the time and place of our deaths

‘Even while the war was still in progress, the story of the Warsaw ghetto uprising became a legend that was passed on, with awe and emotion, as an event of rare historical significance.’ (The Holocaust Encyclopaedia).

After the 18th January the inhabitants of the Ghetto were under no illusions: they were aware the Germans’ attempt to clear the Ghetto had suffered a temporary setback. They were in no doubt they’d return.

It was only a matter of when.

The Jewish Fighting Organisation and the ZZW used the time after 18th January to re-group and to plan, modelling themselves as partisans rather than street-fighters.

The Germans came three months later. After the initial entry into the ghetto on the 19th of April 1943, Sammern-Frankenegg was replaced. In charge now was SS-Brigadeführer Jürgen Stroop and he chose the date to resume the clearance of the Ghetto carefully. Like the 18th January, the 19th April was also a Monday morning and it had further significance: it was the eve of the Jewish festival of Passover and also the day before Hitler’s birthday.

Stroop had a force of more than two thousand men under his command, comprising two Waffen SS battalions of more than 800 men, a hundred Wehrmacht, 1,300 non-German troops and around 100 security police. And although this time they were prepared for some resistance he had good reason to assume he’d be able to present the clearance of the Ghetto as a birthday

present for Hitler.

The events of the Uprising are well known. The account that follows is specific to Yitzhak Suknik and his role in the Uprising. Some of the sources use an alternative spelling of his surname (Sukenik), but have been changed here to be consistent.

By now the Jewish Fighting Organisation (ZOB) was under the overall command of Mordechai Anielewicz and had around 750- 1000 fighters, a handful of weapons and homemade explosives. The twenty-two battle groups were organised in three distinct areas: the Central Ghetto, the Brushmakers Workshop area and the Toebbens-Schultz Workshop area.

Koza fought in a combat unit commanded by Mordechai Growas in the Central Ghetto area: his unit was positioned between 29 and 30 Zamenhofa Street.

At 6 a.m. on 19th April two German columns entered the Central Ghetto, one of which moved towards Nalewki Street where a battle ensued for over two hours before the Germans retreated.

At the same time the second Nazi German column accompanied by tanks and armoured cars entered the Central Ghetto at the Gęsia-Zamenhofa junction, placing Jewish Policemen at the front to act as human shields and advanced up Zamenhofa. The ZOB fighters waited for the Policemen to cross the intersection of Miła and Zamenhof then attacked until the Nazi Germans were once again forced to retreat.

Later in the morning the Nazi Germans directed artillery fire at the buildings on the Zamenhofa-Miła intersection and so the ZOB fighters retreated to a prepared bunker.

We know that on 21st April the ZOB's HQ at Miła 29 caught fire and had to be evacuated.

Anielewicz led a group of around twenty fighters towards Nalewki street but decided to spend the night at Miła 17 where they were joined by other fighters.

Koza was part of this ZOB group at Mila 17. In an account (*Out of the Flames* by Chaim Frymer) of the fighting around Mila 17 on 22nd April the author describes how the Germans were positioned in Kupiecka Street, parallel to Mila. According to Frymer, the fighters positioned themselves in a large yard and prepared to ambush the Germans. He writes:

'This time Koza was with me, my first shooting instructor, and a terrific shot. Koza's post was just in front of the gate. And indeed, when the Germans came, Koza lived up to our expectations and shot two of them dead with one bullet, something which raised his reputation amongst the fighters. A few more Germans were killed in the yard.'

The next we hear of Koza is on 1st May. By now much of the Ghetto was in ruins, ravaged by fire and the German's artillery. The fighting that day centred on the large bunker at 30 Franciszkanska Street and on Nalewki, Leszno and Nowolipie Streets.

In the Jewish Fighting Organisation with its predominantly socialist ideology, it hadn't gone unnoticed that this was May Day. According to Tuvia Borzykowski in *Between Tumbling Walls* 'we thought of ways to mark (international workers holiday) in a manner befitting the circumstances and we finally decided to do it by a vigorous attack on the enemy.'

Borzykowski describes an ambush of the Germans, which unusually took place during the day rather than at night. 'When the right moment came we attacked. Yitzhak Suknik (Koza), a member of Hashomer Hatzair sent a burst of fire at the Germans, felling three of them.'

This is corroborated in a more detailed account in *Out of the Flames* by Chaim Frymer.

'The commander of the group was Merdek (Mordechai Growas). Koza, the best shooter in the Organization, came with us and so did four more fighters, one of them a girl from Hashomer Hatzair. So we were seven people, each carrying a pistol. Koza was the only one with a rifle.

Mordechai rounded us up and briefly explained the mission. He basically said: "Jump them wherever you can get them".'

He continues: 'We reached 43 Nalewki Street, which seemed suitable for an ambush. We found some pieces of bread and a few potatoes. We broke a couple of chairs and lit up the fireplace. We placed the potatoes in the fire and once they were ready, we hungrily ate them. The house had running water so we cleaned ourselves up a little. Then we found a convenient spot to place an ambush. We positioned ourselves on the top floor of the building, looking over the yard, just across the entrance gate.'

A group of Germans entered the building and according to Frymer: 'As the Germans turned to leave the yard, Koza said: "Just look, now they're mine!" He took the rifle, and once they reached the gate, Koza pulled the trigger. One soldier fell, as the other staggered away. We left our position immediately and looked for another hiding spot.'

By 7th May the situation in the Ghetto was desperate. The few hundred remaining fighters were hiding in bunkers in an ever-decreasing area. They'd taken heavy casualties and were low on ammunition. Above them was a landscape of utter destruction. Conditions in the bunkers were appalling, unbearably hot and with little food and water. The temperature in the bunkers was around 38 degrees Celsius.

We know that by the 7th May Koza was at the ZOB's HQ, now at Mila 18 where Mordechai Anielewicz had begun preparation for two groups of fighters to try and escape to the so-called Aryan side. One group of 10 to be led by Israel Kanal would enter the sewer system from a bunker at Mila 69.

Koza was assigned to the other group, which was to go via Franciszkanska 22, a five-room bunker with a connecting passage to the sewer system built by the ghetto garbage collectors, also used by smugglers before the uprising for bringing in goods from the so-called Aryan side. This group comprised eleven people, including guides. Their objective was to reach the Aryan side, beyond the ghetto walls and meet up with ZOB fighters hiding there. They were given an

address to go to on Marszalkowska Street. One of the group was Hela Schupper, who survived the Ghetto. The account of their journey that night is based on her book (translated from Hebrew) Farewell Mila 18.

She describes how the group prepared for their journey: they were given haircuts and clean clothes presumably to make them less like people who'd lived underground for weeks.

'As a last piece of food, we were given a sugar cube and a handful of Barley flakes.'

They began their perilous journey, eventually reaching the bunker in Franciszka. Hela Schupper describes it thus: 'The Bunker in Franciszka had a group of fighters from the Bund movement in it. They got there after the battle in the Brushes workshop, wandering and escaping through different cellars and basements. Tuvia Buzikovsky ran into them and that's how we learned that there was an entrance to the sewer canal in the Franciszka 22 Bunker and that someone knows the way.'

Their journey through the sewers continued. The guide was supposed to take them to Bielanska street but the sewer system was a hazardous maze, difficult to navigate and they ended up at Długa street across from Krasinski Park. As this was still on the Aryan side they decided to leave the sewers there.

Here she describes what happens as they left the sewer.

'It was still dark, before dawn, when we decided to go out. Shimon went first (I only remember his face). I stood behind him. When half of his body was already out of the canal, his gun holster slipped towards me. I told Pavel standing behind me: "They took his gun" because that's what I thought had happened. "Tell the others behind not to give up their weapons." I went up the ladder, leading the way out. A few Polish policemen were standing in the street. They jumped Shimon and forced the gun out of his hands. I crawled out of the

sewer and heard them saying, "Let's go into that yard, we'll fix it all there." "We're not going into any yard," I said. "I'll pay you here if that's what you want." Meanwhile, the fighters came out of the sewer one by one. The policemen kept trying to persuade us to go into the yard but we feared it was a trap. I decided I'd rather face them in the open street. "How much money do you want? I'll pay," I said. Suddenly, a German who noticed the commotion, unusual for such an early hour, started shouting: "Halt! Halt!" I heard gunshots. Koza, that's Yitzhak Suknik, who was probably one of the best shooters in the ZOB, ran towards the German to shoot him with his gun. As he was shooting, the others dispersed. I ran as well. Pavel and I tried to stay together, despite the shootings continuing down the empty streets.'

Hela Schupper and at least one other person managed to evade capture. She describes how she hid in an abandoned house.

'We looked up at the sky, happy we'd succeeded – we had been under terrible peril but escaped. I hoped the others escaped as well.'

But the other members of the group hadn't escaped. They'd all been killed – either by Polish policemen or German troops.

Yitzhak Suknik was dead. His life was too short but was a remarkable one nonetheless. And there is no doubt he died – as did so many other in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising – a hero.

It isn't hard to work out the motives of Yitzhak Suknik and his comrades in resisting the Germans when the odds were so heavily stacked against them and death was a near certain outcome. Despite being in his early twenties, Koza had nothing to lose and no doubt an understandable desire for revenge. He was the sole surviving member of his immediate family. If asked why he'd

taken part in what has been described as the greatest single civilian act of resistance against the Germans he'd have probably responded by asking how he could not have done so.

The Uprising had been, in the words of Marek Edelman, a chance for the fighters 'to pick the time and place of our deaths.'

Alex Gerlis & Jeff Kutcher

The following link will take you to where you will find more detailed information, maps, documents and sources on the lives of Yitzhak and his family. Research will continue and as new information comes through it will be added via this page.

http://www.jskutcher.name/Kutscher_Szklarek_Littman_Zmidek/Zmidek/Zmidek_Suknik_Lamenn.html

Publication

date: 2021-12-06

Print date: 2023-04-20 05:51

Source: <http://1943.pl/en/artykul/koza-part-3-to-pick-the-time-and-place-of-our-deaths/>