

Women in the context of the Warsaw Ghetto to Uprising

19 April marks the 77th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. We would like to invite you to read a column by Paweł Wieczorek (PhD) in honour of the female fighters, mothers, daughters, nurses, woman liaison officers, and all brave and devoted heroines of the uprising.

That moment separated two worlds. It was here and now on one side, while an uncertain future on the other. There were emotions between them: “Seeing this is worth living” – shouted out her emotions Stefania Szochur (Staszewska) at the sight of a destroyed tank – “The Germans keep creeping around, they are afraid of the ‘Jewish bandits’”. It was the first day of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The author of these words fell victim to a round-up not much earlier. In Żelazna Street, she awaited the execution “completely indifferently”. Not much later, having been shepherded into the Umschlagplatz, she waited for deportation with several dozens of others. Someone shouted: “Poniatowa lager”. The train set off at night: “We see a large blood-red glow over Warsaw. The ghetto is fighting, the ghetto is burning”. And then the only thing she did was to ask: “Does the world see this glow?”. [4; 177 – 178]

That moment brought together two worlds. There was still life on one side, while inevitable death awaited on the other. Between them there was a combination of anger and misery. The Germans failed to nip the Jewish uprising in the bud. So they decided to use the scorched-earth policy on a large scale. They started fires building after building. As a result, there were “living torches”, that is people trapped in burning hiding places, who had to escape them in order to live. Still, they often failed. Pola Elster served in the ranks of ŻOB (Jewish Combat Organisation). On the third day of the uprising, she witnessed human tragedies when she was trying to retreat from the fire zone with her unit. A girl, aged only 17, was dying right before her eyes. Her legs were charred. She begged with her last breath: “Kill me!”. “It is difficult to forget that scream,” wrote Pola Elster. [1; 338]

Three women: the first days of the uprising and their completely different roles in it. What they all had in common was temporariness and enclosed space. The tragedy of those doomed to extermination happened in these dimensions. These roles were not given to them by fate: they were the ones to decide their fate. Staying in the ghetto, they put up active or passive resistance. They were fully aware of what they would be up against in return. Did an idea – or a hope – of survival have a chance of crossing their minds? Perhaps. But sacrifice and courage were much before it. The statistical average of all three of them was only 23 years old. The youngest one died first. Her identity is unknown. The oldest one, Pola Elster, 32, died several months later in the Warsaw Uprising. Stefania Szochur (Staszewska), aged 20, was the only one to survive World War II.

From the very beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto, the process of reversing life roles was happening. The traditional patriarchal system collapsed. The Germans rendered men powerless, so it was women who became responsible for providing for their families, caring for siblings, their own children, and often parents. They also cared for their husbands or brothers in hiding. At least until mid-1941, they were led to believe that they would not suffer the same fate as men did, which was forced labour or deportation to concentration camps. At the end of 1939, there were approx. 195,000 women out of approx. 360,000 Warsaw Jews. Several months later, approx. 367,000 Jews in Warsaw included over 211,000 women. Those numbers changed drastically as a result of the so-called Grossaktion, which was the mass murder of the Jewish population – including women, children, and the elderly – in the Treblinka extermination camp. In the first quarter of 1943, there were approx. 60 000 people (legally and illegally) in the ghetto, with the majority (approx. 91%) being people of working age. Out of them, only 15,000 were women. There was one exception, however. There were more women aged 20-29 than men in the same age range (by approx. 15%). [5; 208-209 also 9; 227]

Zivia Lubetkin, one of the leaders of the resistance movement in the Warsaw Ghetto, was 29 years old on the eve of the outbreak of the uprising. Like many, she felt ashamed. Because, unlike many, she survived. She wanted to fight. At a meeting with people like her, there was a suggestion: "Let's all get out to the streets, set fire to German depots, shoot at the murderers until we have no bullets left". However, reason prevailed: "We decided to try to use the break

between operations to reorganise our forces once again". [10; 774] Nineteen-year-old Masha Glajtman was one of the leaders of a group of fighters. There were ten people, including three women, in her ranks. All of them were located in barracks and were theoretically learning how to use a pistol. They were getting ready to fight. Perhaps that was the unit Emanuel Ringelblum mentioned. He wrote: "Three female fighters staying in the apartment prepared meals and carried out various sorts of dangerous missions and orders. Discipline and order were exemplary". [3; 126] Years later, Masha Glajtman herself explained her commitment in the following way: "We held together just because we wanted revenge". [11; 48]

Her peer was Luba Gawisar. She found refuge on the "Aryan side". However, her "good looks" were not enough to protect her from danger. It was probably due to a report made by her "kind" neighbour that caused a Gestapo official with a Blue Police officer force their way into her hiding place. They tried to make her cooperate: "I was only to say where Jews lived". Luck was on her side: "My life instinct told me how to react". [11; 126] She made it. She ran away. With the help of Aleksander Kamiński, she found a new shelter. Her place of stay was at the same time a contact point for ŻOB. As for her, she kept participating in underground operations. She was one of the persons to organise supplies of weapons to the ghetto. Adina Blady-Szwajger, 23 at the time, also became a middlewoman. She did not see herself on the "Aryan side". She urgently wanted to be there and fight. Following a suggestion by Mark Edelman, however, she started to contribute to the ŻOB cause in the Polish part of Warsaw thanks to her "naturally blonde hair and blue eyes" and an excellent command of Polish. [7; 136 also 12; 62]

Four women on the eve of the uprising. Young, brave, courageous, often suffering from the loss of their loved ones. Even though they did not perform any functions in the authorities of the underground resistance movement, they played a major role in it. The role they cast themselves in. They were ready to sacrifice their lives: "To make your small contribution to the fight for freedom, for human dignity". [4; 178] In defiance of the rules imposed by the Germans, all of the cited women survived.

Women fought. All of them. All of them had their own way of fighting; they fought as hard as they could and were able to. They fought to the end of the uprising and, most often, to the end

of their lives. As befits mothers. The uprising broke out: a young woman with her child was unable to get out of the building on Niska Street. The last safe place for them was the balcony. Until it caught fire: "She took the child in her arms and jumped out of the balcony". A moment earlier, she said to the Germans who were making sure that none of the convicts escaped: "You will certainly be punished for what it is happening to us today". [1; 361] April was drawing to an end. The uprising was still underway. Another young mother hid her two sons in a storeroom in her second-floor apartment. She went out – probably to get food for them. When she returned, the house was nothing more than charred ruins. Since then, she stood in front of the ruins and whispered the names of her sons every day from dawn to dusk. Perhaps she believed that she would soon get to meet them: "One night, when we left the shelter, we saw her corpse". The witnesses recalled that "there were roaming Germans in the courtyard" on that day. [4; 198]

They fought just as nurses do. Let us take, for example, Blimberg and Rachmanowa from the hospital on Gęsia Street. They were very devoted. From the very beginning of the uprising, they helped patients and insurgents alike just to die shortly after. The building was bombed at first. Then the Germans entered it and began carnage: "The patients were thrown into the fire, the newborns were massacred by smashing their heads against walls. In the maternity ward, they slit stomachs open and ripped bowels out. Almost the entire hospital staff were burned alive". [1; 271]

They fought just as woman liaison officers do. Bunkers were dangerous. Some of them – fighters and "civilians" – made an attempt to escape the ghetto through underground tunnels, which was often their last one. Individually, in groups, on their own, or with the help of "guides". The Germans knew about those attempts. They threw grenades into the sewers, let gas into them, blocked the exits. Twenty-one-year-old Regina Fuden (pseudonym Lilit) was regarded as an expert in "walking in the sewers". [6; 265] At the end of April, she managed to lead approx. 40 fighters out of the ghetto to the "Aryan side". She went back to the ghetto to help even more people. She could not. She died fighting the Germans.

They fought just as daughters do. Eleven-year-old Hena Kuczer (Krystyna Budnicka), together with her sister and parents, managed to survive in a bunker on Zamenhofa Street until

September. Then it was time to escape – through the sewers themselves. Not all of them were able to: “My parents did not have the strength to escape – they stopped under a soldered hatch. So did my twenty-three-year-old sister Pola, who did not want to leave them alone”. They stayed in the sewers forever. [10; 810] She survived.

They fought like their fellow brothers. Franciszka Rubinlicht saw a sixteen-year-old girl having only Molotov cocktails. She jumped out of the balcony onto an approaching tank. In her post-war testimony, she emphasised: “and it was successful because she destroyed it, dying together with the tank crew”. [1; 276] Perhaps that tank was the one Stefania Szochur (Staszewska) saw when she was being transported to the Umschlagplatz?... In the last days of April, thirty-six-year-old Helena Sterling held her own in a bunker in the Warsaw district of Nowolipki. When she ran out of ammunition, she “threw herself at the murderers with a whip, hitting one of them in the face”. [1; 358] She was murdered moments later. In parallel with the fights, the Germans were razing the ghetto to the ground. They were opposed by the so-called “twos”. They were fighters. In an empty building at Miła 40 Street, Masha Glajtman and Majloch Perelman, having little ammunition, waited for the “arsonists” to arrive. These “two” were not only able to defeat their enemy but also able to obtain much needed weapons and explosives. They returned to 18 Miła Street at night.

Women fought. Even Jurgen Stroop, who despised the Jewish population thoroughly, mentioned women in his reports written during the uprising several times. He described them as those always accompanying “battle groups”, while their attitude “incited more resistance”. He gave examples and emphasised that: “Women fired from pistols held in both hands. It was often the case that they hid pistols and hand grenades in their galligaskins in order to use them against SS, police, and Wehrmacht soldiers”. [8; 37 – 38] Perhaps Malka Zdrojewicz Horenstein and Bluma and Rachel Wyszogrodzka were the symbols of such women for the “executioner of the Warsaw Ghetto”? He added a photograph of them: “Women with guns...” – taken on 13 May, right after the Germans “captured” the bunker in which they had been hiding and right before they were shepherded into the Umschlagplatz – to the report summarising the ghetto fighting. Bluma was executed by firing squad, Rachel was gassed in Auschwitz, and Malka survived Majdanek...

The actions taken by the young Jews were probably a combination of madness and courage as well as of determination and faith in the meaning of such a form of resistance. Attitudes and views were redefined. Survival at any cost was traded for the effort that the Germans had to put into fighting the Jewish rebels. This rebellious bid was unique in many ways. Not only because it happened. And not because it lasted so long. Not only because it was doomed to failure from the start, while the Jewish insurgents were doomed to death. It was unique because of those who participated in it. Shame had as many faces as there were Germans or people from ethnic divisions taking part in the suppression of the uprising. Heroism had as many faces as there were Jews in the ghetto at that time. Including women...

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Photo: Malka Zdrojewicz and Bluma Wyszogrodzka (Bundesarchiv)

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