

By Bennett Muraskin

In this series we are featuring profiles of leading secular and humanistic Jews from various countries and eras. These profiles are written by Bennett Muraskin, a regular contributor to *Outlook*, *Humanistic Judaism* and *Jewish Currents*. Many of these profiles appear in Bennett's book *Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Humanistic Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman*, published by the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) and the Center for Cultural Judaism.

**M**arek Edelman, the last surviving commander of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, died in Poland on October 2 at age 90. He remained in Poland after World War Two, through the communist era, the emergence of Solidarity in 1980, the fall of communism in 1989, and to the day he died, even as nearly all surviving Jews departed for Israel or the West. In this stubborn refusal to leave, he held true to the core principle of the Jewish Labor Bund—*doikayt* (“here-ness”)—that Jews should strive for democracy and social justice in their native lands. The Bund, a popular institution that was at the same time a labour union, political party and cultural organization, promoted Yiddish and socialism in opposition to assimilation and Zionism. Was Edelman on a fool’s errand? That will be up to history to judge.

Edelman was born in eastern Poland (now Belarus) in 1919, but grew up in Warsaw. His father died when he was a young boy; his mother, a leader of a Bundist women’s organization, died in his early teens. Following his parent’s example, he joined the Bundist youth movement *Tsukunft* (future).

Trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto established by the Germans in 1940, Edelman took a job as a messenger for the ghetto hospital. This brought him to the *Umschlagplatz* on a daily basis, where he witnessed the loading of thousands of Jews on trains and their transport to the East. He quickly saw through the German lies of “resettlement” and realized that the trains’ final destinations were death camps, where Jews were being systematically exterminated. Using hospital passes, he pulled people off the trains by claiming that they were too ill to travel. The Germans allowed these rescues to maintain the fiction that healthy Jews were required for factory work. But rather than select sick deportees, Edelman selected Jews who were good candidates for the anti-Nazi resistance, then in formation.

The story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which

## Marek Edelman (January 1, 1919—October 2, 2009)



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began on April 19, 1943, has been told many times, but Edelman told it first in his 1945 memoir, *The Ghetto Fights*.

Edelman represented the Bund in the Jewish Fighting Organization, led by Mordecai Anielewicz, a Left Zionist, and took over command after Anielewicz was killed in combat. As he told it, a relative handful of poorly armed Jewish youth drove off a contingent of German soldiers and their collaborators who were intent on rounding up the remaining Jews in the ghetto. They then held off

for three weeks merciless German attacks which included artillery, aerial bombardment and finally setting fire to the ghetto. Most perished in the fighting or committed suicide to avoid capture. “For the first time German plans were frustrated,” Edelman wrote. “For the first time the halo of omnipotence and invincibility was torn from the Germans’ heads. For the first time the Jew in the street realized that it was possible to do something. It was a psychological turning point .... No one believed they would be saved. We knew the struggle was doomed, but it showed the world there was resistance against the Nazis.”

Edelman and a few others escaped into the sewers. Forty-eight hours later, they emerged on the “Aryan” side and were spirited away by Polish comrades to the forest and safety. Edelman then joined the Polish Home Army and fought in the two-month Warsaw Uprising against the Germans that began in August 1944 and resulted in the complete destruction of city.

After the war, Edelman went to medical school and became a noted cardiologist. He married Alina Margolis, who had worked as a nurse in the Warsaw Ghetto and later became a pediatrician. Together they had two children and lived in Lodz. In 1967, the Polish government launched a campaign against Jews in the guise of “anti-Zionism.” Edelman’s position at a Lodz hospital was eliminated and he was dismissed from a military hospital. His wife and children responded by leaving Poland for France, but Edelman stood his ground.

Apart from his 1945 memoir, Edelman did not speak much about his experiences during the Warsaw Ghetto until 1976. He then agreed to be interviewed by Hannah Krall, a Polish-Jewish journalist, who wrote *Shielding the Flame: An Intimate Conversation with Marek Edelman, the Last Surviving Leader of the Warsaw Ghetto*, which first appeared in English translation in 1986. Edelman’s observations stirred controversy as he claimed that there were no more than 220 ghetto fighters and disputed the charge that most Jews “went like sheep to the slaughter.” He

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## DILEMMA ...

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ture, health care, education, research, preventing extreme poverty or homelessness, protection of persons and property. The result of such stinginess is a less able and less well-equipped labour force to produce the incomes of the next generation.

There is a wealth of writing by respected economists further explaining our discussion of deficit-phobia. Examples are chapters in *Hard Money, Hard Times*, edited by L. Osberg & P. Fortin (Lorimer, 1998), and in

*False Promises*, edited by R.C. Allen & G. Rosenbluth (New Star, 1992).

Once a depression is actually upon us, as now, even conservative governments abandon deficit-phobia and run deficits to fund the types and levels of services required to maintain voter support. Neo-Keynesian governments and parties (the NDP) now face the dilemma already mentioned: the choice between a low unemployment rate with a high inflation rate and a high unemployment rate with a low inflation rate. The only way out, to achieve a low unemployment rate and a

low inflation rate, is to move to a very interventionist policy: price and income control, supplemented by control over what people study and train for and where they work. Such a policy was easy for Keynes to recommend in wartime, as mentioned above. In peacetime, however, it means moving beyond neo-Keynesianism. That means moving either closer to democratic socialism or towards interventionist dictatorship.

We have seen examples of both. A rational choice in the public interest could exist only in a classless society.♦

## EDELMAN...

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insisted that the overwhelming masses of Jews who did not resist with arms should also be considered heroes, because they struggled with all their might to keep themselves and their children alive. "These people went quietly and with dignity...It is definitely more difficult than to go out shooting."

After the war, Edelman and others tried to reconstitute the Bund, but the new communist regime would not tolerate an independent socialist party and in 1948, forced it and the Polish Socialist Party to merge with the ruling Polish United Workers Party. In 1997, Edelman participated in a conference in Warsaw to mark the Bund's centennial.

In 1976, Edelman joined the Workers' Defense Committee, a precursor to Solidarity. When the Solidarity union movement emerged in 1980, Edelman immediately declared his support. He was briefly imprisoned in the Polish government's crackdown in December 1981. Two years later, he declined an invitation by the same government to serve on a committee to prepare for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, describing Poland as a country "where social life is dominated by humiliation and coercion." In 1988, in concert with Solidarity activists, he unveiled a monument at the Warsaw Jewish cemetery to Henryk Erlich and Victor Alter, two Bundist leaders

who died in Soviet prisons during World War Two. He delivered a powerful speech condemning Soviet tyranny.

Edelman also served as a consultant to Solidarity on health policy and participated in the talks that led to the fall of the communist regime in 1991. In the free election that followed, he lost a close race for the Polish Senate.

A frequent critic of Israel, Edelman created quite a stir in August 2002 by writing an open letter "to all the leaders of the Palestinian military, paramilitary and guerilla organizations" and "to all the soldiers of the Palestinian militant groups." Although he chastised the Palestinians for attacking innocent civilians and engaging in suicide bombings and strongly appealed for a peaceful solution through negotiations and concessions from both sides, the mere fact that he addressed the Palestinians as "leaders" and "soldiers" rather than as "terrorists" outraged Zionist opinion. On the other hand, those on the far left misinterpreted his letter as an endorsement of the Palestinian cause. Invoking the example of Northern Ireland, Edelman wrote, "Both you and the State of Israel have to radically change your attitude. You have to want peace in order to save the lives of hundreds and perhaps thousands of people and to create a better future for your loved ones, for your children...."

Edelman made numerous visits to Israel, but due to hostility toward his Bundist convictions

and criticisms of Israeli policies, he never received official recognition. Although honoured by the Polish and French governments, he was not honoured during his lifetime by the Jewish state.

During the war in Bosnia in 1993, Edelman travelled to besieged Sarajevo to deliver relief supplies. In 1999, he argued in favour of NATO intervention in Kosovo to stop what he believed was Serbian genocide against the Kosovar Albanians.

Edelman was a genuine Jewish *apikoyris* or "heretic." The phrase "shielding the flame" that Knall used as the title of her book about Edelman came from a quote in which he explained his personal philosophy. "God is trying to blow out the candle, and I'm quickly trying to shield the flame, taking advantage of his brief inattention. To keep the flame flickering, even if for only a little while longer than he would wish."

One thousand mourners gathered in front of the stone monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes for Edelman's funeral service. Lech Walesa called Edelman "an upright, unequalled human being" and stated, "There are no words to express the loss."

In an act of Jewish solidarity, Edelman chose to be buried in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery, near a mass grave of Jews murdered by the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto.

(You can see still photos and watch portions of the funeral on various Internet sites.)

*Koved zayn likhtikn ondenk--honour to his bright memory.♦*