



In Memory of Marek Edelman (1921?-2009)

A Reluctant Hero of Our Times

By Roni Gechtman

The year of Marek Edelman's birth is uncertain, partly because his parents died when he was young. It has been given variously as 1919, 1921 and 1922. - Eds.

On October 2, 2009, Marek Edelman, the last surviving member of the five-man command group which led the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943, passed away at the age of eighty-eight (or ninety, according to some versions). For most people in Canada and around the world, and even for most Jews, including those Jews who care a great deal about the Holocaust and those who commemorate Holocaust Day, precisely the day that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising started—for almost all of them, the loss of Marek Edelman went unnoticed. The reason why Edelman's death went unnoticed is, in large part, his own reluctance, for most of his life, to see himself, or cultivate a reputation as, a hero.

It took three weeks for the German *Wehrmacht* to conquer Poland in September 1939, in what became the first battle of the Second World War. Shortly after, the Germans began to concentrate the Jewish population in ghettos, under extremely harsh conditions; the supply of food and other vital necessities was kept below the minimum necessary for subsistence. In Warsaw, over 400,000 Jews (from all over the city and the surrounding area) were crammed into a relatively small quarter of the town. Over the next two years, thousands died of starvation and disease. After the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the harsh treatment of Jews turned into actual extermination (mostly in the territories conquered from the Soviet Union); by early 1942, the systematic use of extermination camps became official (albeit secret) Nazi policy.

On July 22, 1942, the German authorities issued an order to "resettle" the entire Jewish population of Warsaw "in the East." In practice, the vast majority of Warsaw Jews were sent to the gas chambers in Treblinka. During the *Großaktion*, as this German initiative became known, the population of the Warsaw Ghetto was reduced to less than 60,000 in less than two months.

It was at the time of the *Großaktion* that members of several Jewish youth organizations active in the Ghetto (mostly Labour Zionist factions and Bundist youth organizations) united to form the Jewish Combat Organization (in Polish: *żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, or ZOB). These young activists had no illusions about the Germans' intentions, nor, for that matter, about their own chances of survival under the Nazis, whatever

action they took. They received reliable information about the extermination camps in Treblinka and Chelmno, and publicized that information, through leaflets, to the general public in the ghetto. Despite being confronted with a threat to their own existence, the members of the different groups did not easily achieve cooperation. The Zionist groups insisted on an exclusively Jewish rebellion. Members of the right-wing Betar found it impossible to collaborate even with Labour Zionists, and formed their own organization, the Jewish Military League (in Polish: *żydowski Związek Wojskowy*, or ŻW), though later they did participate, as a separate organization, in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

The Bund representatives led by Marek Edelman insisted, for their part, that a purely Jewish organization had no chance of success without coordination with the Polish resistance. They believed that the struggle against Nazism should have a socialist, rather than sectarian-nationalist, character. In consequence, and thanks to the contacts the Bund maintained with socialists in the Polish resistance, in November 1942 the ZOB became affiliated with the *Armia Krajowa* (the Polish "Home Army"), and officially (though not effectively) subordinated its activities to the AK high command. By that time, the total armament of the Jewish resistance group amounted to one pistol. The collaboration with the AK allowed the Jewish resistance to establish contact with the resistance movement in the "Aryan" sector of Warsaw and resulted in the smuggling of weapons into the ghetto, and eventually, the escape of the few survivors to the "Aryan" side. Edelman himself became one of the five members of the very young Command Staff of the ZOB. "I was probably the oldest one there," Edelman recounted many years later, "twenty-two years old; Anielewicz was a year younger.



Marek Edelman

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Together, all five of us, we were a hundred and ten years old.”¹

During the months of the *Großaktion*, Edelman stood in the *Umschlagplatz*, the square that served as the gathering place from where Jews were taken to the trains for “resettlement.” Edelman, at the time employed by the Ghetto hospital, witnessed the exodus of hundreds of thousands of victims to their final journey. As official hospital messenger, he could identify people who were “too sick to travel.” In that way, Edelman saved a few people from their doom; however, his main mission was to save those who were members of, or could be useful to, the underground rebel organization. “I was merciless,” he later confessed. “One woman begged me to pull out her fourteen-year-old daughter, but I was only able to take one more person, and I took Zosia, who was our best courier. I selected her out four times and each time ended up having to take her out all over again.”²

When the Nazis initiated a second wave of deportations in January 1943, the ZOB resisted it with the few firearms they had at their disposal. A few months later, in April, when the Nazis launched their final “action” aimed at the total extermination of all Jews in Warsaw, the ZOB staged a massive armed resistance using guerrilla tactics, and hid most of the remaining 30,000 Jews still living in the ghetto in bunkers. The Warsaw Ghetto fighters amounted to a few hundred, with only several dozens of guns and explosives. They managed to withstand the German army for three weeks, roughly the same time that the whole Polish army resisted. The ferocity of the Jewish resistance caught the Germans off guard; however, after a few days, the German army changed tactics. Instead of engaging the rebels using urban counter-insurgency methods, it began to systematically destroy and burn the entire ghetto. According to Edelman, the ZOB fighters were not defeated by the Germans in combat: “We were beaten by the flames, not the Germans.”

On May 8, Mordechaj Anielewicz, together with several remaining fighters isolated in one part of the Ghetto, took their own lives. On the morning of May 10, Edelman, with the help of couriers from the Polish underground outside the Ghetto, led around fifty of the last remaining fighters and survivors, through the sewers, out of the ghetto. The Germans completed the burning and destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto on May 13. Edelman himself, together with some of the surviving members of the ZOB, among them Zivia Lubetkin and Icchak “Antek” Cukierman, fought with the Polish resistance in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

After the war, Edelman continued to confront life and death. He studied medicine and became one of the leading heart surgeons in Poland. In other words, he dedicated the rest of his life to saving other lives. Edel-

man never left Poland, because he remained committed to the Bundist belief he had held since his youth, that the Polish Jews should build their future in the country where they already lived. Since he had promoted this idea before and during the war, he felt compelled to stay in Poland. He was also committed to the memory of those who had perished in the Holocaust, his comrades in arms and the many others he saw leaving from the *Umschlagplatz*, and could not abandon them either. He did not leave Poland in 1945, nor did he leave in 1968, when many Jews lost their jobs in a series of anti-Semitic purges. (Edelman’s wife and his two children moved to Paris at this time.) When asked about this recently, his matter-of-fact answer was that Poland was his home, and it was only natural that he would choose to live in his home country.

From Cukierman’s death in 1981 until his own death, Edelman was the only surviving commander of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Still, he refused to refer to himself, or to the actions in which he had participated, in heroic terms. In this connection, Hanna Krall’s “intimate conversation with Dr. Marek Edelman” (originally published in Poland in 1977), where he narrates the events of his exceptional life in ordinary terms, is essential reading.³ When asked recently by a group of Israeli students if he regretted the fact that his role in the Warsaw Uprising was unknown to most Israelis, he dismissed the question, claiming that what was important was that the events be studied and known and minimizing the role of particular individuals, including himself. To be sure, he expressed great pride in his important contribution to the fight against fascism, but did not expect recognition for that as an individual.⁴

Edelman remained faithful to the Bundist version of socialism as well: a strong commitment to revolutionary working-class solidarity and democracy (and thus, he was deeply anti-Stalinist). As a socialist and an anti-Zionist who chose to stay in Poland, Edelman was almost completely erased from the popular memory of the Holocaust in Israel, and by extension, in most of the Jewish world. According to the popular narrative, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had only one leader, and that was Mordechaj Anielewicz. The State of Israel never honoured Edelman, nor was he ever awarded an honorary degree from any of the Israeli universities (even though they claim to be ideologically independent from the Israeli state).

In Poland, by contrast, Edelman was recognized, during the last three decades of his life, as one of the country’s most respected voices and moral authorities. In the mid-1970s he became active in the Workers’ Defense Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, or KOR), that later developed into *Solidarność* (Solidarity). It was at this crucial moment in Polish history that

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¹ Hanna Krall, *Shielding the Flame: An Intimate Conversation with Dr. Marek Edelman, the Last Surviving Leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. Trans. Joanna Stasinska and Lawrence Weschler (New York: Henry Holt, 1986), 3.

² Krall, *Shielding the Flame*, 7.

³ There are two editions of the English translation, both of which are relatively rare. One is Krall, *Shielding the Flame* (see n. 1 above). The same translation is included in *The Subtenant / To Outwit God* (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1992). The interview was also staged as a play, translated into English as *To Steal a March on God*, trans. and ed. by Jadwiga Kosicka (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996). For Edelman’s own account of the uprising, published shortly after the end of the war, see *The Ghetto Fights* (1945; London: Bookmarks, 1990).

⁴ See the 1977 short documentary “Edelman” in <http://www.tapuz.co.il/blog/ViewEntry.asp?EntryId=1458538>, which includes a brief but moving interview with Edelman.

and girls often forcefully undressed, and the floors in the apartments torn up to enable the police to look for hidden treasures. Soon there was wild shooting in the suburb, which was to die down only the next day. The loud wailing and lamenting of people who had been abused could be heard increasingly often. But—oh wonder!—at that same hour I suddenly heard behind the wall children’s clear voices singing in German:

Be embraced, ye millions,
This kiss to all the world!
Brothers, beyond the stars,
Our kind father dwells.²

Perhaps it was only one of the usual singing classes to begin the school day, or perhaps the children had struck up this marvellous song on their own—who knows?

Soon afterwards I had to leave Dietel Street 62 because it was confiscated by one of the countless bureaus of the General Government. I was thus no longer near the orphans. Many months later, however, I saw them again. The Jewish population of Cracow was just then being forced to move into the ghetto in Podgorze on the opposite side of the river Vistula. It was by chance that I was able to observe the children of the orphanage, the older children pushing wagons



Roman Rosdolsky

with a few wretched pieces of furniture, the younger and even very little ones carrying desks and chairs. Yet this time there was no laughing mob to accompany them. The Gestapo jail of Cracow and the concentrations camps were by this time devouring hecatombs of victims and the Polish people were bleeding to death in an incomparable battle—who would have dared to mock the misfortune of others? And thus the orphans walked in silence and unnoticed along the very long Starowislna Street towards the bridge over the Vistula.

Another year passed, and I also wound up in the claws of the Gestapo. In Auschwitz, in the concentration camp, there were many children—Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, but, most of all, thousands

of Jewish children who were forced into the gas chambers. The Jewish orphans most probably were among them, and there was no father above to rescue them. In the storage barracks thousands of children’s shoes were piled up, and our *Obersturmführer* Sauer ordered the *kapo* to select a pair of nice, little shoes for his son Ewald. Those of us permitted to continue living and who were forced to witness the children’s death grew increasingly grim and bitter, even though most of us still loved our fellow human beings and perhaps even believed in a good father above.

Since that sad time, some years have passed. In the cities and villages of Europe there are thousands and even millions of pale, hungry, and cold children. What will their future be like? Will they at least be spared the horrors of war and totalitarian terror? ♦

² Seid umschlungen, Millionen,
Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt!
Brüder, überm Sternenzelt
Muss ein guter Vater wohnen!

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Edelman regained widespread recognition:

“One of the most important legacies of the sixteen months of Solidarity’s above-ground existence, from August 1980 through the imposition of the martial law in December 1981, was the way in which the buried issue of Polish-Jewish relations was uncovered. ... Marek Edelman ... was discovered as a *Polish* hero for his contributions in the common anti-Nazi effort. He became an important Solidarity figure in his native Lodz and was indeed elected as a regional delegate to the union’s first (and last) annual national congress in Gdansk in September 1981. There, one veteran of the Home Army interrupted the congress’s celebration of his own exploits to insist that the convention had in its midst a hero of considerably greater stature, Dr. Marek Edelman over in the Lodz delegation. The congress rose in ovation.”⁵

When martial law was declared in Poland in December 1981, Edelman was “interned” by the Communist authorities. He was nonetheless invited to participate in the official commemorations of the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising two years later, but he refused. By the end of the decade, Edelman took part, as a Solidarity representative, in the Round Table Talks of 1989, in which the transition to democ-

racy and the terms for the first free elections in Poland were negotiated. He served as a member of the first Sejm between 1989 and 1993. In 1998 Edelman was awarded Poland’s highest decoration, the Order of the White Eagle. France granted him the Légion d’honneur in 2008.

Edelman continued his commitment to the defense of human life, dignity, freedom, tolerance and justice to the end. In 1993, when ethnic cleansing became, once again, a practice on European soil, Edelman accompanied a convoy of goods into Sarajevo, then under siege. As a freedom fighter, he repeatedly expressed his sympathy for the Palestinian struggle and addressed Palestinian leaders directly; at the same time, he openly criticized suicide bombers. He worked at a clinic in Łódź almost until his last day.

Edelman’s funeral, a secular ceremony (Edelman was an atheist) at the Jewish cemetery of Warsaw, gathered a crowd of two thousand people, including Polish President Lech Kaczynski, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, and former President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Walesa. Edelman’s coffin was covered with a Bund banner inscribed “*Bund - Yidisher Sozialistischer Farband.*”

In Canada, the news of Edelman’s death was barely mentioned in the media. He was, nevertheless, one of the greatest heroes of our times. ♦

⁵ Stasinska and Weschler, “Translators’ Afterword”, in Krall’s *Shielding the Flame*, 120-1.