

Leokadia Silverstein

Tak właśnie było.

[This is how it really was], translated from English by Hanna Sochacka-Kozłowska, Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny 2002 (Wspomnienia, relacje, dzienniki, vol. 8), 262 p., ill. ISBN: 83-85888-65-9

Stefan Grajek

Po wojnie i co dalej. Żydzi w Polsce, w latach 1945-1949.

[After the War and Beyond] translated from Hebrew with notes by Aleksander Klugman, Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny 2003. 240 pp., ISBN: 83-90931-29X.

Leokadia Silverstein was born Leah Hamersztein in 1924. Her memoir report is based in part on older sketches extending back to 1946. After her emigration from Poland, she lived for twenty years in Israel, where she married Abram Zylbersztajn, whom she had known since 1941 and met again in Israel. In 1968, she went to live in the U.S. and adopted the new spelling of her name. In 1984, she set to work on her early notes and expanded them into the present text (p. 260), which was translated from the unpublished English manuscript onto Polish by Hanna Sochacka-Kozłowska. Ms. Silverstein worked for a long time as a senior cataloger at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

The author was from the Praga district of Warsaw and grew up there, beset by poverty and in very difficult family circumstances. When World War II began, she had just finished her ninth year at school, including two years at a secondary school. Leokadia spent the years of German occupation moving from one locality to another. Initially she was an active member in the Zionist youth movement *Hashomer hatsair*. After her forced relocation in October 1940, she lived in a kind of kibbutz (that is, a shared apartment where like-minded people of Zionist and socialist convictions lived together) within the Warsaw ghetto (Nalewki 23). While she enjoyed relative safety in the group, her father and grandmother (to whom she was very close) died of starvation in the first half of 1941. That summer she fled the ghetto, traveling to a farm in Żarki outside of Częstochowa, where *Hashomer hatsair* had arranged for a few members to stay. She remained there for about a year. Visitors, including Mordechai Anielewicz and Arie Wilner, told the group about the Nazis' systematic murder of the Jews that had started in Vilna and Kulmhof/Chelmno, and finally about the brutal deportation of the Warsaw Jews.

Hashomer hatsair now began to prepare armed resistance against the Nazi murder campaign. Leah went to a *Hashomer hatsair* kibbutz in the Częstochowa ghetto. Since her appearance allowed her to pass herself off as a Pole, she was given the job of serving as courier and maintaining contact between the resistance groups, and she assumed the 'Aryan' identity under the name Leokadia Bukowska (p. 80). Since she could no longer remain on the farm, which in the meantime had become derelict, she went to the ghetto in Kraków. Here too, the situation was worsening by the day as the 'resettlement to the East' loomed ever nearer. Leokadia decided to go instead to Tarnów, where most of the Jewish population had already been deported. But those still remaining were totally despondent and apathetic after the horrible manhunts that had ravaged the inmates of the Tarnów ghetto. So she returned to the Kraków ghetto, and shortly thereafter fled to the 'Aryan side.'

She found a job working in the kitchen of a military hospital, and was forced to adapt to a life of dissembling, where she was constantly hiding behind a guise. Leokadia faced totally new living circumstances in working together with the other women at the hospital drawn from the lower ranks of society, and living together with her roommate, a prostitute. At the same time, she maintained contact with members of her Zionist youth league. At great personal risk, she managed to purloin a weapon from the room of a hospital patient and pass it on in stealth to a comrade in *Hashomer hatsair*. After Arie Wilner, a friend with whom she was corresponding, was arrested by the Gestapo in March 1943, she was forced once again to flee.

She now sought refuge in vain in Lviv, the ghetto of Częstochowa and in the Warsaw ghetto, which a few days before the Uprising was, as she describes it, 'a nightmare to behold' (p.

109). Since there were insufficient weapons, she arranged to have herself clandestinely taken out to the 'Aryan side' once again, and lived there for a time with the help of the *Żydowski Komitet Narodowy* (Jewish National Committee). Leokadia has described the Ghetto Uprising elsewhere (see p. 115, fn. 11). In the summer of 1943, she went back to Częstochowa, initially finding employment in a home for soldiers, and later became a domestic in the family of a German functionary in the occupation administration. The work soon became too much for her, and she was also under great mental strain. Leokadia heard these Germans and their guests repeatedly talking about Jews, and they were proud the Jews were finally getting what -- in their eyes -- they 'deserved.' 'During the day I was like an actress on stage, forced to play a role I despised. Having to dissemble all the time was nerve-wracking' (p. 129). Then the mistress of the house began to threaten her maid 'Lotte' (as she called her) with being sent to a concentration camp.

'Lotte' eluded that by fleeing in March 1944 to Warsaw. Basia Berman gave Leokadia the job of courier for the Jewish resistance, and she made several trips to other localities in the Generalgouvernement. During the Warsaw Polish Uprising (August 1 -October 2, 1944) she fought with survivors of the *Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa* (Jewish Fighting Organization) in the ranks of the communist *Armia Ludowa* (People's Army).¹

When the leadership of the Uprising surrendered, and the plan of the now especially endangered Jewish fighters to flee over the Vistula to the Russians proved impossible to implement, she went into hiding with a dozen comrades, among them Cukierman, Lubetkin and Edelman. They spent seven weeks in a well-concealed hideout on Promyka Street in the destroyed Warsaw district of Żoliborz. Here Leokadia's report becomes most dense and detailed (pp. 149-227), and is enhanced by a greater emotional immediacy of language. Thus, she often calls the Germans by the pejorative 'Szwaby' (Swabians) instead of the neutral 'Niemcy.'

After the withdrawal of the German occupiers, pogroms erupted that shattered plans for a reconstruction of Jewish life in Poland 1945/46 (p. 246). Leokadia Silverstein's remembrances stop abruptly after liberation, and her later life is only touched on briefly.

Unlike the case for most of Europe's peoples, as Stefan Grajek put it, 'the struggle of the Jews did not come to an end [...] after the war's end, only the means changed, and its aim' (p. 69). Grajek had also been active in Jewish resistance in occupied Poland². The present report on the first five years after the war in Poland, written long after the events, was translated from the Hebrew manuscript to Polish. Grajek is currently Chairman of the World Federation of Polish Jews, based in Israel.

His report begins with the arrival of the Red Army, which he witnessed in Suchedniów near Kielce; the troops were welcomed with joy. Beginning in January 1945, with an account month after month in short chapters, Grajek chronicles the events that transpired down to his emigration to Israel in the autumn of 1949. So the prime focus here is on the transition phase of the early post-war years, when Jews were constantly leaving the country and Poland was a transit space for persons who had managed to save themselves in the Soviet Union from murder at the hands of the Nazis.

Grajek at the time was Secretary General of the Zionist party *Poale Zion*, which was social-democratic in orientation. So the report provides many details on the political life of the groups that were split into many competing parties and fractions, whose activists saw themselves as representing the interests of the Jewish community. Representatives dispatched to Poland from Jewish parties in Palestine/Israel also were attempting to influence developments to their advantage.

In addition, Grajek was active in organizing for the *Bricha*, the planned illegal immigration to Palestine of Jews from Europe. In this connection, Zionist groups were searching for Jewish children who had survived living among Poles disguised as non-Jews or in hiding. They wished to bring them back into the fold of the Jewish community. In some cases, such

¹ On the *Armia Ludowa* see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armia_Ludowa On the ZOB, see http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%Zydowska_Organizacja_Bojowa

² See also Chalom Stéphane Grayek, *L'insurrection du ghetto de Varsovie*, Paris 1978.

children were even taken from children's homes run by the *Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce* (Central Committee of the Jews in Poland), which was working very closely with the Polish communist government.

Grajek's attitude toward the new authorities is ambivalent. On the one hand, he notes that the reason Jews from Eastern Europe were fleeing to the West was their 'terrible fear of the communist system' (p. 33). A number of times, he voices his criticism that the Polish communists and their allies were attempting to persuade the Jews to stay on, and thus did not look with favor on the activity of the Zionists (even though they did not dare to openly impede their work). On the other hand, however, it becomes repeatedly clear that all the Jewish parties active in Poland, and not just the anti-Zionist Bund, gave energetic support to the new regime. When the great mass of emigrants were kept longer than expected in the camps for DPs, Grajek was one of those who helped maintain contact between the 'dispatch points' in Poland, the refugee camps in occupied Germany and Austria, and the leadership committees of the Zionists in Western Europe.

At numerous points, Grajek directly quotes documents and statements of other contemporaries, often without indicating any source, and without integrating these into the course of events as described. So he unfortunately does not limit himself to presenting an autobiographical report; rather, he tries to combine his memories with a historical narrative. However, he apparently lacks the necessary historical distance for such a project. After the murders in Kielce, Grajek was involved in the informal organizing of the Jewish emigration (or rather: mass flight) from Poland thanks to his contacts to general Waclaw Komar (p. 99) who, as a boy, had once been a member of *Hashomer hatsair*. Grajek's description of the anti-Jewish disturbances in Kraków (August 1945) and Kielce (July 1946) largely follows the pattern of communist propaganda, even down to the language and phraseology used (p. 94), presenting these pogroms as planned actions by anti-communist adversaries. Grajek opines that the anti-Jewish violence was 'principally directed against the rule [of the communists],' and was meant to 'deal a palpable blow to their authority' (p. 55).

The names of a few localities here are incorrect. A number of the prisoners on death marches from Auschwitz to the West arrived in Lauchhammer (p. 66); the first assembly of Jewish refugees was in Sankt Ottilien near Munich (p. 35), and another camp was close by in Pöcking (p. 150); Czeladź is in Upper Silesia, not Lower Silesia.

Both memoir reports from the 'cursed decade' (Jan T. Gross) of East-Central Europe provide information about a whole series of details previously unknown, and which underscore the special role of the Jews as victims, resistance fighters and refugees.

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Translated by Bill Templer