

GUNNAR S. PAULSSON

Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw 1940–1945

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Secret City, an alluring title, is also the paradigm of Gunnar S. Paulsson's book about Jews in hiding in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. His core thesis is that Jews who hid there comprised not a handful of atomized escapees from the ghetto, but rather a 'secret city'—with its own institutions, its own language and culture, its own rules. Drawing on witness testimonies and the records of Polish and Jewish wartime aid organizations (in particular oral testimonies collected just after the war by the Central Jewish Historical Commission and the Berman archive at Beit Lohamei ha-Getaot), Paulsson describes an elaborate underground network in which all participants were interconnected, and even strangers were divided by no more than a degree or two of separation. This was a covert society that came into being spontaneously, through personal contacts, beginning with (but ultimately not limited to) assimilated Jews and Jewish converts to Catholicism. Nor were 28,000 fugitive Jews the sole inhabitants of this 'secret city'; they were joined by, according to Paulsson's figures, 70,000–90,000 Polish 'helpers' and 3,000–4,000 *szmalcowniki* (Poles who extorted money from Jews hiding on the Aryan side by threatening to reveal their whereabouts to the Gestapo) and other injurious members of the Polish underworld. Altogether, Paulsson contends, this secret city included some 100,000 people, 10 per cent of Warsaw's population. Paulsson treats this underground Warsaw—a different but related underground Warsaw than that of the Home Army—as an extraordinary and hitherto unappreciated phenomenon. 'There has never been', he writes, 'anything quite like it' (5).

Paulsson's central argument contains two claims: many more Jews went into hiding on the so-called Aryan side; and a much larger percentage of them survived the war than we had thought. The author has a predilection for numbers, and thus tells us exactly what he means by 'more than we had thought': namely, that some 28,000 Jews hid on the Aryan side, and about 11,500 survived the war, with an overall survival rate of 41 per cent. Moreover, many more would have survived were it not for two 'aberrational' events: the Hotel Polski affair (in which Germans tricked Jewish fugitives into volunteering for an imaginary prisoner exchange) and the 1944 Warsaw uprising (which resulted in the destruction of Warsaw and massive civilian deaths of Poles and Jews alike), which taken together account for some 8,000 Jewish deaths.

There are corollaries to this argument. One is that, given that hiding on the Aryan side was not nearly so marginal a phenomenon as had been assumed, the numbers could not have included only assimilated Jews. This further suggests that while before the war Poles and Jews in Warsaw had lived 'by mutual consent' in two separate worlds, neither of these realms was hermetically sealed. A second corollary (and the one that will render the book controversial) is the implication that many more Jews might have saved themselves by hiding among Poles. Of the 28,000 Jews that Paulsson argues eventually fled the ghetto, most did so only after the *Aktionen* had begun—and thus when escape from the ghetto was exponentially more difficult than it had been earlier. Among the many reasons for this hesitation, the author suggests, was an overly pessimistic view of the Poles (and thus of the chances for survival among them). Here Paulsson makes a

perhaps surprising argument: however widespread antisemitism may have been, it mattered, he claims, much less than one might expect. In the end, Poles who actually denounced Jews were few and far between; rather ‘most Poles were passively protective towards the Jews, even when their attitudes were antisemitic’ (240). What mattered more, the author claims, was that Jewish fears of Polish antisemitism often served as a deterrent to escape from the ghetto. In this way, ‘both excessive optimism and excessive pessimism could kill’ (246). ‘What needs to be explained here’, Paulsson writes, ‘is not why betrayal was so frequent, but why so many witnesses believed it to be more frequent than it was’ (19).

Secret City enters into dialogue with the existing historiography in various ways. In the first place, the book rejects the tendency to end the history of Warsaw Jewry with the 1943 Warsaw ghetto uprising and subsequent destruction of the ghetto. Paulsson takes issue as well with the ‘Hilberg-Arendt thesis of Jewish passivity and compliance’. ‘Evasion’ as a Jewish response to the Holocaust, he insists (using Hilberg’s own terminology), was neither a marginal phenomenon nor one that should be dismissed pejoratively. On the contrary, Paulsson sees evasion as an active response, one demonstrating agency and resourcefulness. In the course of exercising such resourcefulness, Jews in hiding relied upon various ‘helpers’--including even some Nazis who harbored views surprisingly heretical to Nazism. In this way Paulsson also explicitly rejects the Goldhagen thesis of undifferentiated “willing executioners” “culturally programmed with “eliminationist antisemitism.”” (65)

Perhaps most interestingly, Paulsson’s work speaks to that of Jan T. Gross—in the first place, in its notion of a kind of parallel *polis*. The ‘secret city’ Paulsson describes is somewhat analogous to the society of underground resistance Gross describes in *Polish Society under German Occupation*. Paulsson refers to the Delegatura’s notion of ‘three Warsaws’: that is, the ‘proper, underground, heroic, fighting Warsaw’; the ‘Warsaw of Mr. and Mrs. Kowalski’ who remained passive and self-protective; and the ‘shameful Warsaw’ of society’s dregs and collaborators. From the Jewish point of view, too, Paulsson argues, these three Warsaws existed—only the lines of demarcation did not always correspond to those of the first set. Valiant members of the heroic underground could reveal themselves to be antisemites and even (as in one particularly heartbreaking case during the Warsaw uprising) murderers of Jews, and the ‘dregs of society’ could on occasion be surprisingly helpful. For better or for worse, people at times behaved unexpectedly (Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, the antisemitic founder of the Council for Aid to the Jews, being the most famous, but far from the only such case).

Paulsson’s work implicitly addresses as well a question Gross and many others have raised: why did more Poles not hide Jews during the war? *Secret City* portrays all kinds of Poles, each of whom was an individual with attitude and sympathies that were not necessarily static. Paulsson describes a Polish society divided between right and left, a society in which attitudes toward Jews varied dramatically, even within the same family. Paulsson declines to answer the question of why more Poles did not help, emphasizing instead certain problems of historical methods: namely, in the case of a *szmalcownik*, how can we distinguish antisemitism from greed? Since even a rare threat becomes more probable with repeated exposure, how can we judge its extent at any one moment, given the cumulative ‘running-the-gauntlet’ effect that colours memoirs? Since the unusual or unexpected generally receives much attention while ‘the dog that didn’t

bark in the night' tends to go unnoticed, how can we determine, for example, how many Poles entrusted with Jewish property *were* willing to return that property? Or how many Poles did not--or would not have--denounced Jews they discovered in hiding? Paulsson's most striking pronouncement is this: Warsaw, 'a city so overcrowded, impoverished and terrorized managed to find room for 28,000 Jewish refugees, more than most of the neutral countries took in over the entire war...' (231). Moreover, had it not been for the deaths caused by the Hotel Polski scheme and the Warsaw uprising, the survival rate among Jews in hiding in Warsaw would have been about the same as that in Western Europe. From this analysis, Paulsson does not conclude that Polish antisemitism was a myth, but rather that Polish antisemitism played only a marginal role in Jews' fate. '[T]here seems to be', he writes, 'no firm connection between the strength of native antisemitism and the overall rates of Jewish survival' (245).

Paulsson is quite wedded to quantitative methods. While statistical analysis might be (and is) aesthetically disruptive to historical narrative, it does serve as a potential antidote to trauma-laden debates—which often bring into sharp focus the emotions of all concerned but leave the empirical contours of 'what actually happened' rather vague. This reviewer's qualifications to evaluate Paulsson's use of statistical methods (necessarily involving much extrapolation given the fragmented nature of the sources) are unfortunately non-existent. It is the case, though, that in the 'non-quantitative' pages of *Secret City* the author seems to have made efforts to be meticulously fair-minded.

A caveat: Paulsson insists that his book is not about Poles, or about Polish–Jewish relations, but rather about Jews and Jewish self-help. This is somewhat disingenuous--all 'positivist', quantitative methods aside, no such possibility of disentanglement exists. The book is very much about Poles, and about Polish–Jewish relations, and will be read as such. This is, perhaps, not such a bad thing.

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