



Twenty years ago, on April 19, 1943, the surviving fragment of the Warsaw Ghetto took up arms against their destroyers. Without illusions as to the outcome, without thought of "victory" or even survival, they proceeded to write a page in the history of humanity's struggle for freedom which, with each passing year, gains in meaning.

Each fact, each memory of that fateful time has a transcendent value for our understanding of the event. One such is by Rachel Gourman, now living in Israel. A member of the staff of ORT, she set down her record in several reports after the war.

It is a leaf on the wind of memory, an episode described without adornment—and all the more revealing because of this.

A Leaf from the Warsaw Ghetto

TWO WEEKS AFTER THE FALL of Warsaw, when the houses were destroyed and the ashes still smoldered, when one had to walk to the Wisla to fetch a bucket of water, when there was not one whole window—all of a sudden, life started again in the ORT workshops.

It was late September when the occupying forces permitted ORT to open courses, the only legal school in the ghetto.

As news spread that the ORT workshops were to be reopened, the excitement mounted. Those admitted almost danced for joy because they could earn something immediately with which to buy a loaf of bread or a head of cabbage.

In retrospect, it is difficult to realize what it meant to enter an ORT shop at 5 o'clock in the morning, to devote oneself utterly to work until evening. And one has to remember that during all that period there was not a single incident of anybody being taken away from ORT and deported to Treblinka. . . .

Life became almost "normal." There was work, there was earning, there were even May Day celebrations and political discussions; there was confidence and, amazingly enough, the belief that things would straighten out somehow.

In the Midst of Chaos

When I look back and think about the variety of courses which were suddenly opened, I find myself incapable of explaining how it was possible. With the outbreak of war ORT in Warsaw was cut off from the World ORT Union and was left without funds. Somehow, we collected the necessary monies, quite substantial sums. . . . Dozens of courses were opened for which the necessary material had been procured.

Everything around us was demolished. People arrived at the school naked and barefoot. But every student attending the courses was able to earn something. During those "happy" days, there were cases of students and instructors fainting from hunger at their work. This however, never diminished their devotion to their task. . . . Undernourished, humiliated and oppressed, four and half thousand ORT pupils between ages of 16 to 60, were absorbed in their activities, and in them they found consolation and hope for the future. It seems like a fairy tale to recall that in those days the distribution of ORT

certificates was celebrated in the schools, that Chanukkah and Purim were observed.

In ORT, one could forget the nightmare of reality and find new courage to live. The classrooms became a kind of literary and cultural circle. In addition to many teachers and instructors of various courses, others who passed through Lezno Street began to drop in for a chat and a glass of tea.

This glass of tea had its history, too. ORT had organized a course in pastry-making. The "Joint" distributed foodstuffs to hospitals, children's homes, etc., and it was from the "Joint" that ORT received the sugar which was returned to "Joint" as candy. When I delivered to "Joint" the candy made by us, the good Mr. Winter (J.D.C. official—Ed.), who was in charge of food supplies, always managed to give me some "rab" sugar. And that is why there was always a glass of tea in ORT, and that helped to make things cosy.

Among our "habitués" were Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, (historian of the ghetto—Ed.) Mrs. Dora Simchovich (a teacher in Yiddish schools—Ed.), several people from Lodz and many others whose names I no longer remember. We discussed politics or just chatted, and the horror that was all around us was forgotten. And to such an extent that it was a shock to hear about a new decree, beatings, murders, anti-Jewish measures.

An ORT identification card was supposed to protect one from deportation. And indeed, after some roundups, the Germans released a few ORT pupils, boys and girls. Whereas several persons were nabbed on the Lezno Street, no one ever entered the ORT premises at Number 13.

The Seal of Fate

Life went on like that until the fateful Wednesday, July 22, 1942. At two in the afternoon, everyone knew that deportations had begun. The Germans started systematically to deport six to ten thousand people to Treblinka daily. The ghetto shrank until only a few streets remained. It was impossible to remove the machinery from the vacated ORT shops.

On August 16, 1942, the ghetto area was still further reduced and ORT moved to smaller premises at 29 Gensza Street. Teaching permits were withdrawn, but the work continued. Garment and shoe workshops were opened; there were 15 machines and a very limited amount of tools and raw materials.

These workshops served a double purpose: the workers were issued so-called "life certificates" that were supposed to save the holder from deportation. On the other hand, they helped clothe the Jews of the ghetto, for most of them had nothing but rags to wear.

The Germans did not talk about "liquidating" Jews: they merely wanted to "remove" from the ghetto "the superfluous elements." Thus, those who worked were relatively safe and requests were again made to have the ORT workshops opened. Finally, and in spite of great difficulties, ORT managed to install two workshops, and their management was entrusted to Mr. S. Grinberg, who had been an ORT teacher for many years.

Once again ORT premises became a pleasant place

to be in. In working, one forgot the sad state of things. And at the stroke of three, one would say: "And to think that we must go home now, listen to horror stories; here one can forget everything. . . ."

It wasn't a secret to anyone that the ghetto's complete liquidation was scheduled for the spring of 1943. But ORT continued its activity. A hiding-place was arranged and there was always a guard at the door to warn the workers of the approach of danger, so that they could hide in the garret.

The End Approaches

But even under these conditions the classrooms remained a sort of oasis. We sang while we worked, we read Sholem Aleichem . . . Esther Goldenberg, a great actress from the Vilna company, often came to the workshops for a bit of a chat. On April 15, 1943, *Letters of Menachem Mendel to Scheine Scheindel* were read and the audience laughed wholeheartedly. . . .

It should be noted that on Sunday, April 18, the workshops continued their work until 4 o'clock. The people did not know that this was the last day of even the limited life they had been permitted to live.

During the night of April 18-19 the ghetto was surrounded. The same night the revolt of the Warsaw ghetto flared up.

Let us remember . . .

Rachel Gourman concludes her narrative with the following.

Let us first of all remember the Director, Joseph Jashunsky. Exhausted and depressed, he would arrive at his office early each morning . . . Sometimes he arrived with broken glasses, his face covered with blood. Because of his near-sightedness, he would not notice a German coming his way and so would not leave the pavement or take off his hat. On January 18, 1943, during the "small operations," he and his family were taken to Treblinka.

With the same selfless heroism, Dr. Meyer Meisner, Eng. Kielin and the members of the ORT Committee in Lodz, Dr. Schimon Wysheviensky, Samuel Faust and Dr. Eiger, continued their work until the last.

Indescribable devotion was shown by the head teacher, Jeshie Griberg and by the other instructors, men and women, particularly those of the girls' school in Warsaw who had shared in this work for more than 16 years. . . . Edzie Wollmann, Branie Birnzweig, Channe Kowarski and Tolie Wettlaufer. The latter had graduated with honors with the first group from the girls' school. She had been sent by ORT to Paris and Vienna for further studies, and in time became a model instructress. Let us also remember Prof. Zentnerschwer who was in charge of the courses for chemistry and entirely devoted to his work.

The memory of these martyrs shall never perish!