

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

‘Thank you for inviting me, Mrs Silverman,’ I said, proffering a bottle of red wine purchased the day before at the kosher supermarket on Glen Huntly Road.

‘It’s our pleasure.’ Hannah Silverman was a slender woman in her fifties and the evening’s host. ‘After all, you’re a nice Jewish girl studying here in Melbourne all alone. That means you’re in need of a good home-cooked Shabbos meal. Especially with Pesach coming.’

I just smiled, deciding that discretion was the best response when it came to any mention of my irreligious Upper East Side New York Jewish family. I suppose the best way to describe us would be cultural Jews. Or ‘three-fers,’ a term I once heard that was used to describe those who showed up at synagogue only on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover. My parents were American progressives who looked to *The New York Times* for guidance, rather than the Torah. So, some things were probably best left unsaid.

‘We are also privileged to have at our table tonight my eldest cousin, Ya’akov Zeigler, along with his wife Channah, who are visiting us from Israel. And I also want to welcome our other guests, Etty’s parents, Moshe and Rachel.’

A pleasant pine scent pervaded the house, emanating from a stocky yellow candle that burned on the mantelpiece.

A portly man in his fifties approached. I saw he wore a knitted kippa atop his balding head. ‘I’m Hershel, Hannah’s husband. Welcome to our home. There are nine seats, sit anywhere you like.’

‘Thank you so much for your hospitality,’ I replied, sliding into the nearest chair, which was midway down the long dinner table.

Hershel tapped his spoon on the Kiddush glass and gazed at his guests in expectant silence as the room fell quiet. 'It's lovely to see everyone. We have three generations of friends and family assembled in one home. That alone is a living triumph over Tzorera Yisrael – the oppressors of the Jewish people.'

He nodded in my direction. 'And our lovely guests from America and Israel, of course.'

I blushed as all eyes turned to me. 'Hi, I'm Anna Lushkin from New York. I'm here doing my MBA at Melbourne University. Thank you very much for the invitation and thanks to AUJS ... the Jewish student organisation on campus, for connecting me to the Silverman family.'

A bookish young man in his late twenties or early thirties smiled at me. 'I'm Aaron Silverman, Hershel's son. And this is my wife Etty.'

The pretty dark-haired woman seated beside him pointed towards a cot in the corner. 'Don't forget our little Amalia.'

I rose from the table for a quick peek at the sleeping infant. 'She's gorgeous,' I cooed. 'How old?'

'Four months,' replied Etty, her face glowing with maternal pride.

'Lovely to meet you,' I replied.

A slender, bespectacled man in his seventies with a head crowned by a thick shock of silver hair sat quietly without joining the round of introductions. I waved and received a sombre smile in reply.

Over my four undergraduate years at Swarthmore College, I attended more than a few Shabbos dinners at the campus Hillel House. So, I was familiar with the sequence of blessings and rituals. The lighting of candles, followed by the Kiddush over the wine and ceremonial washing of hands.

After everyone retook their seats with cleansed hands, Hershel reached forward and removed the ornate doily on the table to reveal two

loaves of braided challah egg bread. Using a serrated knife, he cut the challah into small squares and distributed it to the seated guests.

'Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech Haolam, ha motzei lechem min ha'aretz,' he intoned before taking a bite of bread.

'Amen,' the guests echoed in unison.

Hershel gestured towards the platters heaped high with chicken, roast beef and vegetables. 'I now invite you to dig in with good appetite. Once you've eaten there'll be a treat in store.'

Over the next twenty-five minutes, conversation competed with the delicious food that was available in abundance.

After dessert was cleared away and the dinner attendees were sitting around the table with satisfied expressions, Hershel tapped his wine glass with a fork.

'Gut Shabbos, everyone. As you know, this is Shabbos Hagadol, the final Shabbos before Pesach ... the Passover holiday. Passover is a celebration of our liberation as a people over four thousand years ago. But this Pesach of Taf Shin Samech Gimel – the year 5063 in the Hebrew calendar – also marks the anniversary of another Jewish struggle for freedom. Sixty years ago, a handful of brave young Jews rose up against the Nazi regime that was murdering our people. Armed only with pistols, homemade grenades, a few rifles and a couple of machineguns, these Jews were completely outmatched by the SS.'

Hershel paused and sent a glance of silent appraisal around the room, nodding in satisfaction at the rapt expressions he saw around him.

'Despite the hopelessness of their cause, these Jewish fighters – men and women alike – fought on. Not with any expectation of victory. It was simply out of a desire to die on their feet with dignity, rather than go as passive victims to the slaughter. We are privileged to have at our

table tonight one of those heroes, my cousin Ya'akov Zeigler, who is visiting us from Israel along with his wife Channah.'

Hershel indicated the quiet silver-haired guest whom I saw was seated beside his heavy-set wife of similar age.

'In 1943, when he was just fifteen years old, Ya'akov took part in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as part of the Jewish Military Association, one of the two Jewish militias who fought the Germans. He was one of the few who survived – to be smuggled out of the city through the sewers. He spent the rest of the war as a partisan fighting in the Białowieża Forest. Deciding that Europe was nothing more than a massive Jewish graveyard, he made his way along Aliya Bet smuggling routes to Italy where he boarded a Haganah ship that would try to run the British naval blockade of Eretz Yisrael.'

'What was the Aliya Bet?' I asked.

'The campaign to smuggle Jewish Holocaust survivors past the British navy blockade into Israel,' replied Hershel.

'Like in the book *Exodus*?'

'Yes, and the movie,' said the silver-haired Ya'akov, his eyes alight with a mischievous smile. 'In those days, I was even better-looking than Paul Newman.'

Everyone at the table – including me – doubled over as a gale of laughter swept the room.

'Anyway,' continued Hershel after regaining his composure, 'Ya'akov's ship was intercepted by the Royal Navy and he was sent to a detention camp in Cyprus. And that's where he met Channah.'

Channah Zeigler blushed as a shy smile flashed across her face.

'After the State of Israel was created, Ya'akov and Channah made Aliyah to Israel and he fought in the War of Independence. He later studied law at the Hebrew University and went on to a career as a

lawyer, and then magistrate. Having reached the mandatory retirement age, Ya'akov and Channah have embarked on a tour of the world. They have four children and thirteen grandchildren.'

'So far,' smiled Ya'akov, triggering another eruption of titters around the table.

'I'll stop here,' said Hershel. 'I think it's pretty clear that Ya'akov can tell his own story. So, rather than me relating it second-hand, you'll find it more interesting to hear from the man who lived through it. Ya'akov?'

'Well, Hershel, I certainly wasn't expecting this,' smiled Ya'akov, his fluent English tinged with a strong Polish accent. 'So, I don't know whether I should thank you or curse you.'

He paused to allow the laughter of his audience to subside.

'But I suppose I'm now on the spot.'

'Please continue,' implored Ety. 'It would be a privilege to hear your story.'

Ya'akov nodded. 'I was born in 1928, the youngest of four children. My father was a professor of orthopaedic surgery at the Medical University of Warsaw and my mother kept one of the city's most fashionable social salons. Of my entire family, I am the only one to survive the war. My two sisters, my brother and my parents were all murdered by the Germans and their Polish collaborators.'

He sighed, and paused to remove his glasses and wipe a tear from his eye as the mood around the table darkened.

'My parents were Revisionist Zionists. Followers of Jabotinsky. They planned to emigrate to Eretz Yisrael during the 1930s, but there was a strict immigration quota for Jews imposed by the British. So, we were still stuck in Warsaw when the Germans invaded.'

'Damn the British and their White Paper,' muttered Moshe, an older man perhaps in his seventies.

Ya'akov shrugged. 'In April 1940, the Germans forced Jewish men into working parties that built a wall around a designated area in the middle of Warsaw. By November the wall encompassed an area of over three square kilometres. The ghetto.'

'For local reference, that's just slightly larger than Elsternwick,' added Hershel.

'The Nazis crammed almost half a million people into the ghetto. The six of us shared one room with two other families. Fifteen people living in a space two-thirds the size of this one.'

'If "living" can be used to describe such conditions,' snorted Hannah.

Another shrug from Ya'akov. 'Of course, disease ran rampant. We became used to the sight of the dead being carted through the streets in wheelbarrows. By mid-1942 over 90,000 ghetto residents had died from typhus and malnutrition.'

'Did the Germans provide any food at all?' asked Aaron.

'Official rations accounted for a few hundred calories per day,' shrugged Ya'akov. 'One-tenth of a healthy adult diet. So we smuggled in what food we could get on the outside.'

'How did that work?' asked Hershel.

'There was a flourishing black market on the gentile side of the wall. Children were the best smugglers because we were small enough to squeeze through gaps in the wall or the sewers.'

'Wasn't that dangerous?' I asked.

'Oh yes,' nodded Ya'akov. 'There were summary executions almost daily. Anyone caught trying to cross the wall was put up against the nearest wall and shot. We were desperate. People sold whatever valuables they had for food, but it was never enough. My parents ...'

Ya'akov's voice cracked and I saw his Adam's apple bob up and down. He swallowed in an effort to maintain his composure.

'My parents were the first to go. Momma died, followed a month later by my father. They kept giving us most of whatever food we managed to acquire. We watched them waste away before our eyes.'

'Bastards,' I muttered as my eyes began to prick with tears.

Ya'akov graced me with a sad smile. 'Yes, they were, and most of the Poles were little better. There were a few righteous people who risked their lives to save Jewish lives. But antisemitism in Poland was rife at that time.'

'Today as well,' interjected Hannah Silverman. 'Look at the current Polish government's law against Holocaust restitution.'

'Oh yes,' agreed Ya'akov. 'There were many Poles who were quite happy to take possession of empty Jewish homes and businesses. But the Germans were impatient. Starvation and disease weren't doing the job quickly enough. So in July 1942, the deportations began. People were ordered to assemble for resettlement at the Umschlagplatz on Mila Street next to the railyard.'

'That was just a ploy, wasn't it?' asked Hershel.

'Exactly so. In the beginning, people were convinced by the stories of work camps with good food and living conditions. But then we saw what happened when they showed up at the Umschlagplatz ... the assembly area. They were set upon by German troops and the ghetto police, and forced into cattle cars. Then we received reports about what was happening at Treblinka.'

'What were you told?' I asked. 'And by whom?'

'I was a member of the Jewish Military Association, the ŻZW. I'll talk more about the resistance groups later. But one of our members had a railway-worker friend and managed to slip aboard the locomotive of a

train leaving the ghetto. The railwaymen told him that up to six trains arrived at Treblinka each day. All of them packed with thousands of Jews. When the trains left Treblinka, they were empty. Our man could see no barracks for so many people. There were no wells to supply drinking water and no supplies of food delivered. Then there was the stench.'

'Aah' gasped Etty, her hand rising to cover her mouth as Aaron slipped a comforting arm around her shoulders.

'The camp was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence with pine branches interwoven between the strands to obscure lines of sight. He could see the tops of several smokestacks that were belching black clouds into the sky. He returned to report that the resettlement story was a lie. That the trains were delivering our friends, neighbours and family to a death factory.'

'You mentioned the ghetto police. Who were they?' I asked.

'They were scum who worked as enforcers for the Germans,' Ya'akov snorted, his mouth curled in contempt. 'Low-life Jews who sold out their people for a bit of extra food and special privileges.'

'So they were like Kapos?' asked Hannah Silverman.

'Just as bad,' Ya'akov growled. 'A handful joined to work as double agents for the resistance. But most of them were just mamzers. The lowest of the low.'

'So, once you found out what was happening at Treblinka, you began to organise the resistance?' asked Hershel.

Ya'akov shook his head. 'Our group, ŻZW, was organised in November 1939. It was led by several Jewish officers in the Polish army and most of the fighters were recruited from the Beitar youth, the conservative Zionist youth group founded by Jabotinsky.'

'But wasn't there another underground group?' Aaron asked.

‘Yes,’ nodded Ya’akov, ‘the ŻOB, the Jewish Combat Organisation. They came into being later. In 1942.’

‘Why so late?’ I asked.

‘There are several theories,’ Ya’akov replied. ‘I tend to think that it’s because of Hitler’s alliance with Stalin.’

‘The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact?’ I asked.

‘That’s the one. You see, the members of the ŻOB came from two left-wing Zionist movements, the socialist Dror and the Marxist Hashomer Hatzair. There are those who believe that the Jewish Left didn’t want to rock the boat while Germany and the Soviet Union were allies. Of course, the survivors of those groups deny this, but it’s a view that I share. At this point, the issue is rather moot, anyway. What’s important is that once we learned what was happening at Treblinka, our two underground militia groups began working together.’

‘How did you get weapons?’ asked Aaron.

‘By hook and by crook. We stole them, bought them on the black market. Our group, the ŻZW, was led by former Polish army officers, so we used their personal connections to acquire weapons and explosives from the Armia Krajowa ... the Polish Home Army. We were better armed than the socialists of the ŻOB, but still, we didn’t have nearly enough. Six machine guns, around twenty submachine guns, fifty rifles and fifty pistols. A few hundred homemade grenades.’

‘Not much against the might of the German army,’ I murmured.

‘You don’t understand, my dear,’ said Ya’akov. ‘We had no expectation of victory. We simply wanted to kill as many Germans as possible before going to our deaths with dignity. The fact that I’m alive amazes me even after sixty years.’

‘So did you and the ŻOB work together?’

Ya'akov nodded. 'I once read a quote by Benjamin Franklin who warned the American rebels against Britain that "if we don't hang together, we'll all hang separately". And when weighed against what the Germans were doing, the differences between our conservative Zionist philosophy and their socialist Zionist viewpoint seemed insignificant. So we joined forces and in January 1943, Mordechai Anielewicz led our first armed action.'

'Kibbutz Yad Mordechai is named after him, no?' asked Aaron.

'Yes, it is. Anielewicz began as a member of the ŻZW, but the ŻOB offered him the leadership role in 1942. So he went over to them.'

'What was this first action?' prompted Hershel.

'It happened in January 1943. By this stage over half of the ghetto's population had already been deported, but during that first wave we didn't have the weapons to intervene. Once the second mass roundup was announced we weren't going to wait any longer.'

Ya'akov paused for a moment to polish his glasses before forging on with the story that held everyone's rapt attention.

'On January eighteenth, a group of a dozen fighters from both resistance movements spread among the crowd at the Umschlagplatz – the assembly point near the railway line where people were loaded onto trains. Our people opened fire with pistols on the SS guards and ghetto police, killing over a dozen. Most of these resistance fighters paid with their lives to enable thousands of Jews to escape the roundup back into the ghetto. This was the opening salvo, so to speak, in the uprising.'

'How did the Germans react?' I asked, despite dreading to hear the answer.

'Three days later they rounded up and shot one thousand Jews. But the deportations stopped for a time.'

'The uprising itself began on the first night of Passover, didn't it?' asked Ety. 'So, what did you do between January and April?'

Ya'akov smiled. 'We dug bunkers and connecting tunnels. We continued to beg, buy and steal weapons and ammunition. We trained as best we could. I was issued a Luger pistol and 50 bullets. It was my pride and joy. I would practise for hours in the cellars, disassembling and assembling the pistol and dry firing. There wasn't enough ammunition for live fire training, so the first bullet I ever shot was into the back of an SS trooper on the first day of the revolt.'

'A good day,' I said, surprising myself with my bloodthirsty vengefulness.

'It was a good feeling,' nodded Ya'akov.

'We delivered justice to every collaborator we could lay our hands on. Ghetto police and officials of the Judenrat ... the ghetto Jewish government. And every informer who was lurking around the streets. We held trials and carried out death sentences.'

'And rightly so,' I found myself saying indignantly.

'So by mid-April, 1943, we were as ready as we'd ever be,' Ya'akov continued. 'We had about seven hundred fighters. Men and women, teenage boys and girls. I'd just had my fifteenth birthday and some of our fighters were younger than me.'

'How terrible,' gasped Ety.

Ya'akov shrugged. 'Desperate times. We knew that the Germans were about to restart the deportations to Treblinka. So we warned all remaining Jews in the ghetto to take shelter in the bunkers we'd built. Shortly after midday on April nineteenth, a column of SS and Ordnungspolizei marched through the main gate of the ghetto as if on a parade ground. We were waiting for them.'

Ya'akov paused to sip from a glass of mineral water.

'We were there to show them a new type of Jew. A Jew who was prepared to kill and unafraid to die. This was something they'd never before encountered. Their arrogance turned to panic when we opened fire. They scattered like scalded rabbits. It was a glorious sight to behold.'

'How many of them did you manage to kill that first day?' asked Aaron, smiling.

Ya'akov looked at him in earnest. 'I got one. In total, we killed twenty-seven and wounded another thirty-two, with only seven casualties on our side. When the Germans returned later that afternoon for a second try, they brought two armoured vehicles that we destroyed with petrol bombs thrown from the rooftops.'

'Poetic justice,' I said, 'burning the Nazis who were coming to burn Jews.'

'Yes,' agreed Ya'akov, 'that's an irony that we recognised. But after that first day, things became harder. The Germans were no longer goosestepping, but advancing in tactical formation. They brought up artillery to destroy any building we were firing from. They used flamethrowers to burn us out. I'll never forget the petrol stench of the flames and the smell of burning flesh. To this day I can't refuel our car. Channah has to do it.'

Channah Ziegler leaned over and took her husband's hand in hers.

'So it went, day by day, house by house and block by block. The Germans pushed us back until by late April we were surrounded in a four-block area around the ŻZW command bunker on Muranowska Street. That meant we were separated from the remnants of the ŻOB, who were fighting around their command bunker at number eighteen Mila Street.'

'So, what did you do?' I asked, utterly enthralled by this story.

Ya'akov shrugged. 'We fought. One of our strongholds at seven Muranowska Street was just across from the ghetto wall. There was a tunnel that we'd dug to the gentile side of the city and we received supplies of ammunition from the Polish Home Army – but there was never enough. By early May, we were down to a couple of dozen fighters with almost no ammunition. Paweł Frenkiel and most of our other commanders were dead. So we decided to break out through the Muranowska tunnel on the night of May third, but even that didn't go to plan.'

'What happened?' gasped Etty.

'Betrayal.' Ya'akov grimaced. 'One of the Polish resistance men who was supposed to guide us turned out to be a double agent. He led us into an ambush. We had to fight our way through. Those of us who survived made our way to the Kampinoski Forest. We travelled in a horse-drawn cart owned by a sympathetic local – we were fortunate. And when we got there we joined a unit of partisans. We later heard that Anielewicz and the last remnants of the ŻOB committed suicide at the eighteen Mila Street bunker, rather than surrender.'

Ya'akov stopped for a long moment before announcing in a sombre voice, 'That's my story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.'

'So tragic,' Etty said, her voice trembling.

'So much courage,' I murmured.

Hershel stood up from his seat at the head of the table. 'Thank you so much for sharing your story. It's been a privilege to listen to you. If anyone thinks others might be interested, Ya'akov will be speaking at our shul's Kiddush lunch following the Shabbos morning service tomorrow morning.'

'Which shul is this?' I asked.

Hershel smiled at my question. 'Young Israel on Inkerman Street. It's just around the corner. Now please join me as we *bensch*. You should each have a prayer book with the blessing after the food.'

I picked up the Hebrew-only booklet and turned to the first page, striving to keep up with my Bat Mitzva-level grasp of the right-to-left text.

'Shir hama'alot beshuva Adonai et shivat Ziyon hayeenu ke'cholmim ...'

I was soon left behind as the others thumbed their way through the 600-plus words of the blessing.

Then, after thanking my hosts, it was time to take my leave. But not before receiving an invitation to the Silverman family Passover Seder that coming Wednesday evening.

I came away from that Shabbos evening meal feeling happy, but unsettled. Of course, I knew of the Holocaust, having taken a course in college and endured Sunday school lessons at my reform synagogue. But my great-grandparents moved to the United States during the great wave of Jewish emigration from Tzarist Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. So, while I certainly knew there were members of my family who perished at Nazi hands, the links were rendered too tenuous by time and geography to give that catastrophe a human face. Until now.

That night was the first time I came face to face with someone who had actually been there. A hero, no less. At the time, my grand plan was to combine my Australian MBA with my American BA and embark on a career in international business management. As time passed, I began to wonder. The fact that I had never visited Israel became an itch I just had to scratch. So, the next stop on my global mystery tour was the Hebrew University. There I completed a specialised masters in entrepreneurship and innovation. After all, where better to study such things than the famous 'start-up' nation?

To cut a long story short, that's where I met a remarkable man named Alon who became my husband.

So, in a way, it all began at the Shabbat dinner table in Melbourne. Half a world away, with a Jewish husband and three Jewish children, I feel as though I'm doing my bit to repair the world from the catastrophe visited upon my people by the Third Reich.

Bernard Marin AM

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