

Heroic

by Mark Cecil Stevens

When Meir Avraham came to the ghetto, my father Jakob, who led the Judenrat, clapped his arm around his shoulders in the street and proclaimed him a hero.

“Survivor!” he shouted, “Arise from the pit at Babi Yar. He shows us that even such a massacre cannot claim us all.”

Meir was humble, his face down-cast, his shoulders folded in across his chest like a dove's wings. I thought at the time that he wanted to hide the bullet wound in his side with his posture. Still, I could see a smile, there, at the edge of his mouth.

My brother Abraham stared openly at the spectacle with as wide a grin as he had displayed since the ghetto had been fenced in. His eyes captured and fortified the thin light that the winter sky let shine down on us. His joy was cast in the faces of the crowd. A murmur passed through the group, warm and approving, which could well have been a shout in other times.

Meir was not a big man, not the kind of hero that we expected. He was thin, but not athletic. He had the sort of undernourished build that we would all come to wear in time, if we wore one at all. He did not have a powerful countenance—rather, he tucked his chin into his neck so that it almost disappeared. His hair was thin and waved, spent, from his jutting crown. He almost never spoke, and when he did, it was only pleasantries, not oratory.

Meir's story overran the ghetto without opposition. Other stories always had proponents and detractors-- some people wanted to believe that Rachel Schreier sold herself to the guards. Some protested her innocence. Rumors of partisans swarming to liberate the town brought out the optimist in a few people while others scoffed. Corruption in the Judenrat was debated, but not settled.

Meir's story was better than any of these. Meir had lived through a horror-- one about which it would normally be taboo to speak aloud, except that the story lifted the teller and the listener, not the way that tragedy usually sat on your neck. Meir had been shot at

the Babi Yar and had fallen into the ravine. The bodies had covered him and he had hidden in the heap until after the soldiers had thrown a thin layer of sand over the grave and left. The sand was the most chilling aspect of the tale. That thin sand, which allowed Meir to survive, promised more corpses soon.

Meir was invited to nearly every home for supper, and though they would always ask, he would never tell the story himself. His hosts would have to satisfy themselves with a view of his scar. Father used to chide him that he had the strongest shoulders in the town from lifting his shirt. He was given a place on the Judenrat, and though he had neither ability to lead nor experience in organization, my father found it a wise decision because of the effect that it had on the people.

Meir came to live with us. Being from Kiev, he had no home in Lwow. He slept in the bed that Abraham and I had shared in the apartment that sat over our father's derelict candle shop. We moved to a cot in the corner next to the old armoire that was overfull with clothes. The others had been broken into firewood for the stove. At night, Abraham would tell me stories about the partisans. They were fantasy, but they helped me to sleep better at night.

"Do you think that Meir will go to fight in the forest with Uncle Aaron?" I asked one night.

"He could, but the fence is tight and the guards are watching. Especially him. Because he's lucky with bullets. They can't shoot him now. He'd have to be hung. Or something else."

"But he can get through the fence. He escaped the pit, and that must have been guarded," I countered.

"But the pit was open at both ends. The fence goes all around."

I wanted to reply, but a grunt and a creak from Meir's bed choked my answer.

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Before the capitulation of Lwow, when there was no Judenrat or guerrilla force in the forest outside, my father and his brother had been partners in their business. Although they feared the Soviets coming and seizing it, they were relieved when our part of Galicia

was ceded to the Russians rather than the Germans after Poland was captured. The smell of tallow grew fainter over time, though, as when refugees came spilling in from the west, animal fat was used only for food. The stories that they brought, of mass abduction and massacre, reinforced the brothers' sense of relief. Of course there was no ghetto then, only a neighborhood. No fence or guards to fear— just crowds and hunger and shabby profit. In the summer when the Russians were defeated, my uncle, Aaron, fled the city and went into the mountains to fight with a group of men that he had known. One of the men knew a Pole who had escaped deportation under the Russians and had stayed to fight with the Armia Krajowa, the Polish home army. He had promised to arm them if they came out into the forest.

“Let's leave the city, Jakob, the business is finished anyway,” Aaron said.

“I couldn't. Where will my wife and boys go? A family camp?”

“Lwow will become little more than a camp anyway.” Aaron's accosting eyes tried to catch my father's, but they escaped. Aaron left the city alone.

It was actually because Aaron had left that my father had become the leader of the Judenrat that next winter. He was already very easy with others, an even-handed negotiator in business and in private life. But his connection to the partisans was his strongest endorsement. The Judenrat filtered information from those closest to the guards through my father to my uncle. And so they managed to stay out of areas where there was active searching in the mountains, or even organized ambushes on those patrols.

It was December when Meir came into Lwow, around the time that the selections began. Few refugees came from the east—most had fled further into Russia—but a few had come this way, perhaps hoping that the bridgehead to Romania was still open. At first the selections were organized to take the very old or sick. A few thousand were removed from the ghetto that winter. When Spring came, they began to take more, so many that the crowding in the ghetto eased. No one took this as a relief. My mother fell sick then

with consumption and had to stay at the hospital. My father cursed that he would have sent her to Odessa for a cure if they would have let him.

We thought that this was the peak of our misery, the height of fear. But in late summer the selections rose again. So many were collected that I began to dream that they had dissolved, just steam from the factory stack. They cleared out the hospital in August and shot most of them, and my father, despairing that they had taken our mother, organized an attack on the train by Aaron's band of soldiers.

The attack was bootless and the guards immediately arrested Meir, the hero of the ghetto. A day later they took my father as well. On the first of September my father was hanged in the street with a sign on his neck that said "Jakob Meier: Leader of the Judenrat." Meir was not there.

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Even with the ghetto half empty the stories traveled so quickly that in the street we had already heard that Meir had told the Germans that he hadn't organized the raid; that our father had. And he told them more-- that he had never been shot at Babi Yar at all; that he had fallen asleep in the ravine, drunk, the night before and awakened to gunshots. He had tried to run but he was knocked down by a falling body. The wound was from a branch onto which the corpse had forced him.

When Abraham and I returned from the scene, Meir was not at home. In fact, I never saw him in the house again. I only ever saw him twice more.

Once, we were walking by a fountain where a group of guards had taken a break for lunch. Meir sat in a doorway, mostly in shadow, his head bent out into the light. The Germans were laughing and calling him "Herr Mayer", a joke conferring the Middle German station of steward on him.

My brother sneered and whispered, "He took such care of us, didn't he?"

The soldiers were eating dried sausages on the edge of the fountain, twisting the strings of intestine from the ends and

throwing them at Meir. His hand would slip out from the dark portal and gather them in. He hardly moved otherwise. I couldn't see if he ate them.

My brother broke up the taunting when he grabbed a pair of sausages and ran. The guards chased us, leaving Meir entrenched in his hollow. We wound through alleys and came up free. I only ate half of my sausage, and sneaked back to the doorway. Meir took the offering, and although he was too quiet to be certain, I think that he thanked me. When I got home, Abraham hit me on the nose and I bled. As I cried I could taste only the blood, not tears.

The last time that I saw him it was in front of the same fountain. So few people remained in the ghetto that they had begun to make selections there. The crowd was dense in the street, pushed together as tightly now as they were almost a year earlier, when Meir had arrived a hero, although they huddled now more in avoidance than in admiration.

The soldiers had a book, an old one from the Judenrat, that listed the names of the people in the ghetto. One soldier would read from the book, shouting out the names. If nobody came forward, a few other soldiers would wade into the mass and start beating a path through the people with batons. People invariably parted from around the designee, leaving him standing alone, an outpost within the crowd. If they didn't, the soldiers took someone else. After a few selections, people simply made space around the victim, the implicit beating as good as given.

On the day that I last saw him, I might not even have known that he was there, but that he was prodded into the crowd next to my brother and me. He seemed half as small as he had been when he had arrived, and even then, he had been thin. He bent over in a ridiculous bow, so that I wondered how he could possibly see to walk. My brother spat, and although I'm sure that he meant it for the ground, it landed and sparkled on Meir's dirty shoe.

"Sokoloffsky! Mendel!" The soldier with the book scanned the crowd, his staccato voice ringing like gunshots between the

buildings. The inevitable push came; the crowd separating somewhere that we couldn't see, offering this man to our captors.

I could hear the man weep as the soldiers pushed in to take him. And so it went. The list of names, we never knew how long, continuing, the crowd surging like waves as each innocent was delivered to the conquerors. Meir was so bent that his breathing rasped in my ear, Abraham's muttered curses filled the other.

"Meier! Abraham!" The name made me start. The crowd, perhaps sensing my reaction, began to pull away from my brother and me. Only Meir stood with us in that hole. It was quiet then. Meir's breathing was silent, as if he held his breath. Even the fountain, long robbed of its function, seemed to be waiting. My brother didn't move for a second too long, and the guards began to pull their batons from their belts. Then Meir spoke.

"I am Meir Avraham," he said, standing. It was then that I first noticed that Meir was a tall man, that he stood a good head taller than most of the crowd. His voice was cannon fire in the silence, pealing over our heads. The soldiers began to tuck their weapons away. And Meir advanced through the crowd, gently easing others away, and made his way to stand with the selected residents. He looked doubly tall there, among his doomed fellows.

