

Escape from the Pit: A Woman's Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Poland. Renia Kukielka. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2023. ix-xv + 200 pp. \$24.95. Paperback. ISBN-13: 9781438494777.

Originally written in 1944, upon her arrival in Palestine at nineteen, Renia Kukielka's memoir contributes much to the scholarly understanding of the lived experience of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland (1939-1945). She navigated the brutality of the initial Nazi occupation, ghettoization, forced labor, and imprisonment, in one of the most dangerous places for Jews to be during the Holocaust. An added, important dimension of her memoir is that Kukielka shares honestly about how she felt, the loneliness of searching for a new place of safety, the sorrow of being separated from her parents, and the fear of being found, while hiding.

The memoir itself is framed by essential context. It includes a detailed map of her escape route, to orient readers to her path to Palestine. Severin Hochberg, retired staff historian at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, provides important background and context for this new edition of her memoir. It also includes photographs of Kukielka and her family, other members of the Jewish resistance in Poland, and those who testified at the Eichmann trial. Asya Kovnat, who prepared this new edition, wrote an afterword that discusses Kukielka's life in Palestine upon arrival and later in the new state of Israel, including additional information gained from interviews with Kukielka about her experiences and about the publication and early reception of her memoir. Additional historiographical engagement, placing this work in conversation with recent scholarship, would have been a welcome addition, especially for those assigning it to undergraduate students in History.

Kukielka is unflinching in describing the complicated relationships among Jews, including the role of the Jewish Council and Jewish ghetto police. She records that most members of the Jewish ghetto police "behaved like beasts of prey, some even worse than the Germans" (15). She writes of their arrogant behavior, their willingness to take bribes and impose arbitrary fines, and their role in rounding up Jews for deportation (61). Of the Jewish Council, she notes caustically "serving the oppressors as it did, [it] took good care that none of the Jews meandered about idly" (49). She is pointedly critical of the role played by the head of Zaglembe region's Jewish Council, Moshe Merin, who saw labor as the means to save adult and able-bodied Jewish lives, even if it supported the German war effort (producing Wehrmacht uniforms), and meant that children, elderly, and those not capable of work were deported.

Her descriptions of the complicated relationships among Jews, Poles, and Germans during the Holocaust are likewise honest. She writes of the encounters between Polish Jews and Polish Christians, noting that many non-Jews profited at their expense (19; 36; 54), demanded substantial payments to hide them (26), blackmailed Jews in hiding (28), and willingly helped Germans track down Jews in hiding (32). She speaks with many other Jews in prison, most of whom were denounced by Poles, while also noting that most of the Poles imprisoned had hidden or assisted Jews in escaping from a ghetto (111). She describes the brutality of the German occupiers, noting the capriciousness of their round-ups of small groups of Jews, driven out of town, to murder them

and how they tormented Jewish men in public, pulling on their earlocks and plucking their beards (21-22). She also remembers being warned by a German supervisor of an impending deportation, so she could flee (37).

Throughout her memoir, the imminent danger that Jews in Poland faced between 1939 and 1943 is palpable. And yet, Kukielka began to engage in a variety of resistance activities, drawing on her pre-war skills and knowledge, while also acquiring new ones. So much of what she did was illegal, an essential element of understanding the riskiness of resistance under Nazi occupation. Beginning in November 1943, she began to work in a more official capacity within Jewish resistance, joining the Hechalutz Dror (Freedom Pioneers) kibbutz in Bendzin. She writes about her two primary motivations: Zionism and knowledge of the Final Solution and the extermination camps, gained from a Polish engineer on the trains to Treblinka (49-51). She and the other members of the kibbutz engaged in training, focused on defending themselves, and established contact with other resistance groups, especially in Warsaw. They shared tactics, established caches of weapons, and communicated escape routes. She also notes the lack of positive engagement and exchange with Polish resistance groups, due to the scarcity of weapons and antisemitism, and the loss of twenty-five members of their group when they attempted to join the local partisan group but were betrayed by the Poles to the Germans (64-65; 78-80). Her account of the final liquidation of the Bendzin kibbutz captures the difficulty of surviving within a hidden bunker, the indiscriminate round ups of Jews, regardless of their labor potential, and the short-lived Jewish resistance and brutal German reprisals (72-74; 84-90).

Kukielka became a courier (*kashariyot*), an incredibly dangerous commitment, moving between Bendzin and Warsaw, and provides eyewitness testimony of the ongoing ghetto uprising in March 1943 (66-71). She writes about how her ability to speak Polish fluently, her non-Jewish looks (according to Nazi stereotypes), and her confidence allowed her to transgress boundaries and operate in the public sphere. This was mentally taxing work, and it expanded on her previous attempts at “passing,” having to attend Catholic mass and the strain of correctly mimicking the movements and behaviors of the congregants, while posing as a non-Jew in domestic service (42). She writes about having to be constantly on guard in public, to be able to withstand brutal interrogation techniques, and to respond immediately to threats. She notes that “a strong will was the greatest requirement” (72). Some Poles were a daily danger to her, for instance, following her and accusing her of being Jewish. She extricated herself from this encounter by indignantly slapping the Polish woman and defending herself to the Gestapo, an audacious maneuver that required courage and certainty in her forged identity documents with her Polish name, Wanda Biduchowska (91-92).

Her forged paperwork, which had allowed her to move more freely between cities and towns and into the ghetto itself eventually got her arrested by the Gestapo on a train, as they had ascertained a pattern in counterfeit documents from Warsaw, with an irregular but consistent seal (103). After enduring torture, multiple interrogations, and filthy and dangerous conditions within several Gestapo prisons, she successfully escaped with the assistance of her sister (119-123), a clear example of Jewish self-help. Between November 1943 and February 1944, she was smuggled

across multiple borders, transversing the eastern land route (Slovakia-Hungary-Romania-Bulgaria-Turkey). Notably, her departure from Hungary to begin her journey to Palestine, occurred in late February 1944, just weeks before the Nazi occupation, which resulted in mass deportations to Auschwitz. She arrived in Palestine in March 1944, in part with the assistance of the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee and having engaged in bribery, falsification of documentation, and continuing to claim to be a Catholic Pole. The necessity of illegal activity persisted during this phase of her resistance.

For Holocaust scholars who work in the fields of resistance as well as gender, her memoir consistently illustrates key and core elements of current scholarship. She posits her actions as resistance, although they rarely were violent. While she operated as part of an organized group, she also took individual actions. Her Zionist beliefs were central to her resistance, as was her youth and the impact of losing family members. Her resistance activities gave her information about the Final Solution, perhaps earlier than those not involved, and the immediacy and reality of the destruction spurred her to action. Her commitment to Zionism also was fraught with tension as she grappled with whether she should flee to Palestine, leaving behind loved ones and comrades. She initially refused to do so, despite entreaties from the Yishuv, who were committed to moving young Zionists to Palestine, both to give witness to Nazi crimes and to be a core group in the creation of a Jewish homeland.

Kukielka spoke openly about her experiences with other Jews in Palestine, bringing them timely and complete information about the Final Solution. Hakibbutz Hameuchad asked her to write her story, which she did in Polish between April and August of 1944, with the events still fresh in her mind. She was motivated by wanting to bear witness to the Holocaust, as a responsibility to those she had left behind and to those whom she had lost. An unauthorized version of her memoir was published in English in 1947. This memoir reminds us that Holocaust survivors were not silent until the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 in Israel. Fairly well known in the immediate postwar years, her memoir went out of print. Given its resonance with current scholarship on gender, resistance, and the Holocaust, it could have reshaped the conversation and understanding far earlier in the historiographical development of writing on these intertwined topics.

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