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SYLWIA CHUTNIK AND MONIKA SZNAJDERMAN,
KWESTIA CHARAKTERU.
*BOJOWNICZKI Z GETTA WARSZAWSKIEGO**
(A MATTER OF CHARACTER. WOMEN COMBATANTS FROM
THE WARSAW GHETTO)

“**T**his book simply had to be written,”¹ – with these words, Sylwia Chutnik and Monika Sznajderman begin a collective monograph devoted to Jewish women fighting in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. It had to be written and it is good that it finally came to be published. The stories of Jewish girls – young and teenage – and women during the German occupation, including those involved in various underground initiatives, have so far not been comprehensively reflected in academic and popular science publications on World War II and the Holocaust.²

* *Kwestia charakteru. Bojowniczki z getta warszawskiego*, ed. Sylwia Chutnik and Monika Sznajderman (Wołowiec–Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czarne, Polin Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich, 2023), 344 pp.

¹ *Kwestia charakteru*, p. 5.

² For more information on the presence of Jewish women in underground organisations and their involvement in the underground during different periods of the occupation and during the Ghetto Uprising, see, among others, *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 1–36

Their testimonies, on par with men's testimonies, served – and in many works still serve – to describe a certain universal history of the period. This makes it all the more important that the authors of the subsequent chapters of the reviewed publication did not conform to general historiographical trends and indeed posed completely different research questions as well as trying to extract as much information as possible from the biographies of the selected heroines. Sylwia Chutnik and Monika Sznajderman try to uncover the key facts from their lives and attempt to analyse their mentality, experiences, views, and activities in a given organisation and in their private sphere. This was – due to the very limited source base – not an easy task. As Chutnik and Sznajderman noted:

[...] scraps of life and information scattered across archives, witness testimonies, and publications related to the history of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were like individual crumbs from which a story had to be pieced together. Consequently, some texts reveal the struggle with form, the inability to create a complete picture, the blank spots, and the hesitation. This is undoubtedly an asset, as are the emotions, which are not typically associated with professional, “scholarly” work.³

Similar sentences, whether about the shortage of sources, about gaps that one would like to fill but where there is a lack of information, or about emotions, appear in most of the texts included in the volume. Could the story of these

(Warsaw, 2012–2023); T. Borzykowski, *Between Tumbling Walls*, trans. from Yiddish M. Kohansky (Beit Lochamei ha-Getaot, 1972); I. Cukierman, *Nadmiar pamięci (siedem owych lat). Wspomnienia 1939–1946*, trans. Z. Perelmutter (Warsaw, 2000); M. Edelman, *Getto walczy* (Warsaw, 1945); Ch. Folman-Raban, *Nie rozstałam się z nimi...*, trans. I. Wajsbrot, D. Sternberg, ed. B. Engelking (Warsaw, 2000); D. Goldkorn, *Wspomnienia uczestniczki powstania w getcie warszawskim* (Warsaw, 1951); C. Lubetkin, *Zagłada i Powstanie*, trans. M. Krych (Warsaw, 1999); H. Rufeisen-Schüpper, *Pożegnanie Milej 18. Wspomnienia łączniczki Żydowskiej Organizacji Bojowej* (Cracow, 1996); J. Batalion, *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos* (HarperCollins, 2022); B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście* (Warsaw, 2013); B. Engelking, D. Libionka, *Żydzi w powstańczej Warszawie* (Warsaw, 2009); A. Grupińska, *Po kole. Rozmowy z żydowskimi żołnierzami* (Warsaw, 1991); A. Grupińska, *Ciągle po kole. Rozmowy z żołnierzami Getta Warszawskiego* (Warsaw, 2013); A. Grupińska, *Odczytanie listy. Opowieści o powstańcach żydowskich* (Cracow, 2003); I. Gutman, *Walka bez cienia nadziei. Powstanie w getcie warszawskim* (Warsaw, 1998); D. Libionka, L. Weinbaum, *Bohaterowie, hochsztaplerzy, opisywacze. Wokół Żydowskiego Związku Wojskowego* (Warsaw, 2011); R. Sankowska, *Ludzie z dzielnicy zamkniętej. Z dziejów Żydów w Warszawie w latach okupacji hitlerowskiej. Październik 1939 – marzec 1943* (Warsaw, 1993).

³ *Kwestia charakteru*, p. 6.

women, however, be described without commitment and a certain amount of emotion?

The stories of eleven women-combatants outlined in the reviewed work are a reminder that during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising – the largest of all acts of Jewish armed resistance – women stood up to fight as well. They threw Molotov cocktails, fired firearms (insofar as they had them, but that is a problem for a completely different discussion), and carried out other actions of a military nature. They fought against the Germans alone or side by side with their colleagues. They were at the heart of events and behind the front lines. Some, like Dorka Goldkorn, were given the task of finding a way out of the ghetto to the so-called “Aryan” side through the sewers. This, however, was not the only aspect of their activities. Women were present and active in the underground for many months before the outbreak of the Uprising. They were given various tasks. They took care of logistics in the broadest sense of the term, and because of their contacts on the other side of the wall, they organised the so-called “Aryan” documents and premises outside the ghetto. For this, they used the knowledge and experience they had gained from their activities in pre-war Jewish Zionist organisations (for example, in Ha-Shomer ha-Cair or Ha-Noar ha-Ivri “Akiba”). During the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Icchak Cukierman spoke of them in the following manner:

The word “liaison officer” does not describe what these women did. They were not just messengers. They [...] smuggled weapons, grenades, ammunition [...] risked their lives moving between ghettos [...]. It is necessary to call these amazing girls *kashariyot*, from the word *kesher*, which means “bond.”⁴

Kashariyot – Jewish women liaison officers – acted as a link between towns/ghettos to transport documents and funds or pass on information. This required great courage, creativity, and the ability to remain calm regardless of the circumstances, comments, and situations they witnessed. Some of them played key roles in the leadership of Jewish underground organisations, while others were involved in diversion actions.

⁴ As cited in: K. Sulej, “Francia Beatus. Sziksa,” in *Kwestia charakteru*, p. 254.

Work in the underground and preparations for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began in the late autumn of 1942. Initially, it was mainly focused on consolidating internal structures and establishing understanding and cooperation between the various groups.⁵ This was followed by planning the necessary actions and considering whether an armed struggle against the Germans was feasible. Women took an intensive part in these planning activities. In January 1943 – in response to the subsequent deportation of part of the ghetto inhabitants to the Treblinka extermination camp – the struggle began. This first Uprising was followed by recruiting new members of underground organisations and training those already active. The civilians were encouraged to join in the preparations. Residents were urged to create a network of shelters, hideouts, and underground tunnels. Information was also distributed throughout the ghetto and leaflets and proclamations were distributed calling for and motivating people to join the resistance. Women were present and active everywhere.

Researchers and scholars from various fields are still unable to answer many seemingly basic questions about the participation of women in the Jewish underground. It is not clear exactly how many female members there were in the two largest armed organisations in the Warsaw Ghetto: the Jewish Combat Organisation (*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, ŻOB) and the Jewish Military Union (*Żydowski Związek Wojskowy*, ŻZW). The most common estimate is that around five hundred members of the ŻOB and nearly two hundred and fifty members of the ŻZW took part in the uprising in April 1943. How many women were among them is still an unanswered question. These issues are not discussed more extensively in the reviewed volume either; however, that was not its purpose. The authors focused on the biographies of a few women who fought in the Uprising, possibly leaving the writing of a broader monograph on this topic to future researchers.

What is known – and is still being discovered – are a few biographies of Jewish women involved in underground activities. The literature in the field usually contains only names, pseudonyms of some women and perfunctory information about them – alongside much more extensive descriptions of the biographies

⁵ More in B. Engelking, J. Leociak, *Getto warszawskie*; D. Libionka, L. Weinbaum, *Bohaterowie, hochsztaplerzy, opisywacze*.

and activities of their colleagues in the organisation. Thanks to the book, readers have gained the opportunity to learn more about such icons of the Jewish underground as Tosia Altman, Mira Fuchrer or Cywia Lubetkin. The book also provides a wider audience with an opportunity to look at the biographies of these lesser-known women, such as Frania Beatus, Rywka Pasamonik, Bronka Feinmesser or Regina Fudem. "There were younger and older girls among them. [...] Brave or timid, determined or hesitant. "It's a matter of character," says the son of one of them."⁶

Neither the choice of the biographies themselves nor of the people who reconstructed them was random. In their preface, the editors underlined:

In order to describe the female ghetto fighters, we have invited authors who deal with the Holocaust, herstory or remembrance in various ways; who speak with their own voice and, in addition to their professional competence, knowledge and talent, are also emotionally involved in the issues of reclaiming the past, especially the past of groups previously unrepresented.⁷

The book consists of a preface by the editors of the volume, an introduction by Zuzanna Hertzberg, eleven themed articles and two cross-sectional texts concerning personalities (one by Anna Szyba and Karolina Szymaniak; the other by Hanka Grupińska) whose biographies are not reproduced in such detail. The authors of the biographical texts are recognised female researchers in women's history – herstory – and gender studies: Kalina Błazejowska, Katarzyna Czerwonogóra, Agnieszka Dauksza, Patrycja Dołowy, Agnieszka Glińska, Hanka Grupińska, Agnieszka Haska, Natalia Judzińska, Magdalena Kozłowska, Joanna Ostrowska, Karolina Sulej, Anna Szyba, Karolina Szymaniak and Monika Tutak-Goll. The cross-sectional texts on the fate of Jewish women fighters, as well as on research methodology and the authors' own experiences with them, authored by Zuzanna Hertzberg, Anna Szyba and Karolina Szymaniak (the article entitled "Splatanie historii" [Weaving of History]), and Hanka Grupińska (the article entitled "Tak

⁶ *Kwestia charakteru*, p. 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

o nich wiem, tak słyszałam” [That’s what I know about them, that’s what I’ve heard]), also constitute an important supplement to the volume.

The paraphrased words of Dolek Liebeskind, one of the leaders of the underground organisation from the Cracow Ghetto – “We are fighting for three lines in the history textbooks” – became, so to speak, the motto of the first text in the volume (entitled “Wstęp. Więcej niż tylko trzy linijki” [Introduction. More than just three lines]) and the guiding principle of all the biographies reproduced in the volume. The author of the article, Zuzanna Hertzberg, an artist, activist, performer and researcher, shares her thoughts on how she got started with herstories of Jewish women, as well as her own experiences of working in archives – of discovering individual fates and reconstructing them from scraps of information. This is an interesting study, and many researchers undertaking work on minority history can identify themselves with the views expressed in it. The author points out that some of the previous findings on the participation of Jewish women in the ghetto uprising need to be reconsidered and re-written:

The concept of herstory needs to be clarified here. There have been many publications on women’s participation in the Warsaw Ghetto by historians, but also by women who unconsciously reproduce men’s stories or the mental maps that men outlined. On these maps, women were only tiny points in a sea of male heroism.⁸

Moreover, even if not everyone agrees with this rather radical assessment, it is worth reading the studies prepared so far with care and greater awareness. The great value of the reviewed volume is that it sensitises the reader to this kind of reading. Each article included here is marked by an open message, critical analysis, and an unconventional perspective on both sources and popular and scholarly texts.

Kalina Błazejowska, a film expert and journalist, in her text “Tosia Altman. Przebić głową mur” (Tosia Altman. To Break Through a Wall with Your Head), attempts to reconstruct the last years of the life of her protagonist, who was one of the few to leave the uncovered bunker at 18 Miła Street on her own. “Very little is known about her, although hundreds of people knew her. Most of them

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

did not survive the Holocaust.”⁹ The author analyses the available testimonies, but also photographs which show a smiling, confident young woman. She shows the networks of contacts of the Jewish underground between different ghettos. Of particular importance is her attempt to reconstruct the last moments of Tosia Altman’s life. Although we will not find answers to many questions in the volume, what is important is the author’s inquisitiveness, her ability to extract information even from scraps of sources and her ability to pose new research questions.

Agnieszka Haska, a sociologist and researcher, dedicated her article to Regina Fudem, alias “Lilit.” Her text is a flashback. The author begins with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the last moments of Regina’s life. One of “Lilit’s” tasks was to lead people to the “Aryan” side through sewers. She treated her mission with great responsibility. She did not survive one of such crossings. In the subsequent pages of the book, Haska recalls earlier events in Fudem’s biography, as well as information about the people with whom she was connected. As a whole, the book is an important contribution to the history of women’s Jewish underground, which brings the profile of one of its activists closer.

From the reviewer’s perspective, the text on Mira Fuchrer by journalist and reporter Monika Tutak-Goll is particularly significant. Until now, Mira has been portrayed as merely the “girlfriend” or “partner” of Mordechai Anielewicz, the leader of the ŻOB during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This article, however, restores her empowerment and agency. The author shows her involvement in the Ha-Shomer ha-Cair organisation and the activities she undertook during the German occupation. All of this makes Mira Fuchrer step out of Anielewicz’s shadow, ceasing to be merely a “companion in his life” and becoming a full-blooded fighter of the ŻOB.

Agnieszka Dauksza, a researcher and assistant professor at the Faculty of Polish Studies of the Jagiellonian University, has prepared a text on Rywka Pasamonik. This personality has a complex biography. She came from a traditional, religious family, but “chose a different direction, non-religious, non-conservative, non-patriarchal, non-assimilationist and non-commercial.”¹⁰ Rywka Pasamonik became involved in

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Ha-Shomer ha-Cair before the war and lived in a kibbutz (possibly on Grochowska Street in Warsaw). She was active in many fields: in recruiting new members to the organisation, in first aid courses, Hebrew language courses, in combat training, including shooting lessons. All these activities appeared important under the Occupation. Rywka Pasamonik died on 8 May 1943 in the bunker at 18 Miła Street.

One of the key personalities in the Jewish underground in the Warsaw Ghetto was Niuta (Rywa) Tajtelbaum, and it is to her that Patrycja Dołowy, writer, artist and social activist, has devoted her extensive text. It is also one of the most fully reconstructed biographies in the reviewed publication. Niuta was a communist, a member of a “special group” of the People’s Guard (*Gwardia Ludowa*) for sabotage tasks. She survived the Ghetto Uprising, but died shortly afterwards, in July 1943. Dołowy dispels the myths that have grown up around Niuta Tajtelbaum’s biography, and shows her commitment and dedication “to the cause.”

Joanna Ostrowska, a historian, film critic and playwright, contributed with a piece about Dorka Goldkorn, an activist of the Union of Independent Socialist Youth “Spartakus” (*Związek Niezależnej Młodzieży Socjalistycznej “Spartakus”*), one of the few who wrote memoirs from the Occupation period. The author emphasised that Dorka’s biography is “a pretext for a collective history. Her biography forms the axis of the story of Jewish teenagers and young women involved in the radical leftist movement just before the outbreak of the Second World War.”¹¹ This is therefore another contextual biography included in this volume. Such contributions enable readers to gain a fuller picture of the links between individuals and organisations, and to see how far a particular fate did or did not fit into the profile of a generation. Goldkorn died tragically in 1947.

Magdalena Kozłowska, a historian, Judaist and translator, has penned an article about Chaja Bełchatowska, a member of the ŻOB in the Warsaw Ghetto, who fought in the Uprising, throwing, among other things, homemade Molotov cocktails. Together with a group of other fighters, she escaped from the burning ghetto through the sewers, then hid for some time in the forests near Wyszaków. She survived the war. Soon after war ended, she and her husband Boruch emigrated to Canada via Sweden. She stayed there for the rest of her life.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Natalia Judzińska, a cultural studies scholar, lecturer and activist, dedicated her article to Cywia Lubetkin, “a woman – legend” and one of the most recognizable personalities of the Jewish underground. It is an interesting study of another woman who still remains to some extent in the shadow of her partner, Icchak Cukierman. Although, as Judzińska noted, “Cywia Lubetkin, [is] the most important and highest-ranking soldier of the Jewish Combat Organisation who managed to survive the Holocaust, and after the Uprising, the only woman in the Command.”¹² She survived the war, co-founded the Kibbutz of the Ghetto Fighters in Israel, was a witness in the Eichmann trial, and wrote down her memories of what happened during the German occupation. Judzińska collected a great deal of information not only about Lubetkin’s activities in the Jewish underground, but also about her private life. Particularly the latter is interesting, as it shows Lubetkin, as she was, without the mask of heroism.

Two subsequent articles, one by Agnieszka Glińska, an actress, director and lecturer at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Cracow, dedicated to Bronka Feinmesser, and the other by Karolina Sulej, a cultural studies scholar and journalist, on Frania Beatus, are works that introduce the personalities of lesser-known Jewish underground fighters. Agnieszka Glińska begins the text with the words: “She took part, but does not appear in the credits. She is the main character from only one perspective – in the son’s story about his mother, carefully cobbled together from scraps and episodes into a plot.”¹³ Bronka Feinmesser, one of the women liaison officers, not only survived the war but also documented her experiences in written testimonies. Her reconstructed biography is an important addition to the history of the ghetto uprising and a reminder that there were many such women, many more than the few most often mentioned on the occasion of successive anniversaries. Equally painstaking work has been done by Karolina Sulej, reconstructing the fate of Frania Beatus, a young ŻOB liaison officer with “good Aryan” looks, working with Icchak Cukierman. One could only wish for more such texts.

The last of the biographical articles included in the volume concerns Pnina Grynszpan-Frymer and was prepared by Katarzyna Czerwonogóra, an educator

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

and researcher. The interview conducted with Pnina by Nathan Beyrak for the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., plays an important role in the reconstruction of Pnina's fate. Although this is one of the shorter texts in the volume, it stands out for its narrative, the research method employed by the author, and the new findings it contributes to historiography.

It is worth noting that the article by Karolina Szymaniak and Anna Szyba includes valuable material for the biographies of the following women activists and fighters: Szoszana Kossower, Halina Balter, Miriam Hajnsdorf, and Miriam Szyfman. It offers a significant reconstruction of their fates, which can inspire further research – both to delve deeper into these biographies and attempt to reconstruct other women's lives.

There is no doubt that the reviewed book is a significant and unique contribution to the historiography of Jewish resistance, particularly the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. It presents women's stories from a herstory perspective, from a minority history point of view, in a language that fits the subject matter, free from any patriarchal bias, judgment, or condescension. Chutnik and Sznajderman emphasised this in their preface:

It seems particularly important that women hitherto overlooked in the official narrative or 'lost in memory' finally regain their place in history – and that contemporary women authors become midwives for their reintegration into the official circulation.¹⁴

The subject matter of the individual articles is based on a solid source and bibliographic foundation. Photographs are also included to show the faces of the persons outlined. The book as a whole, written with a skillful pen, is intelligible not only to specialists but also to people who do not deal with historical topics on a daily basis. We can only reiterate that the book “just had to be written” and express the hope that the work on reconstructing the fates of more women fighters from the Warsaw Ghetto and other ghettos in occupied Poland will be continued. Further publications about these women fighters “must” and should be written.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.