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Once We Were Dreamers: A Collection of Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust

Jewish history has been reduced to a singular narrative of loss and powerlessness. Collective memory of The Holocaust makes Jews afraid, and rightly so in some ways, of letting the world in. Every year, hundreds of thousands of Jewish children learn to generalize the lives, deaths, and experiences of six million victims, instead of learning how to create a better world using their stories as beacons. This tension is something I have always struggled to overcome, but my book collection of works centering on Jewish resistance during The Holocaust has allowed me to answer the question: “What is the alternative?”

When I was eleven I acquired my first book on Jewish resistance, *A Surplus of Memory: A Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* by Yitzhak Zuckerman. The first time I tried to read it I stopped on the second page, the names, dates, and ideas were too complex for me to understand at the time. The book was relegated to a corner of my shelf, designated as unreadable. In the intervening time between then and high school when I picked the book back up, I started my understanding of Jewish Resistance. The stories of Hannah Senesh and Anne Frank paved the way to the start of my obsession, so when I did return to Zuckerman the book was eye opening.

I found solace in the stories of the people who lead The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising because they were emissaries of an impossible dream, a dream in which the Jews stood tall and firm against those who sought to erase their existence. It was an unfathomable story of youth movements, and the power their members who led most of the ghetto uprisings saw in resistance. It was the first time that I understood, with clarity, that The Holocaust was not only a narrative of tragedy, but a narrative of victory as well. In a matter of days *A Surplus of Memory* rearranged the way I understood my Judaism, because it was finally a

Judaism that changed lives, and fought wars for the sake of protection and idealism. It was perhaps the first time in my life I felt empowered by my heritage.

Four years later, in February of 2015, I was standing in front of the monument at Mila 18 in Warsaw, where the ghetto fighters had made their last stands before martyrdom. Two months of fierce determination, of crude bombs set off all over a snow covered Warsaw, had lead them to a bunker at 18 Pleasant Street, where they still lie “buried as they fell.” Something immensely tragic occurred to me in that moment whilst standing there: these are heroes of The Holocaust and millions of Jews do not, and may never, know their names. The heroes of Warsaw, Bialystok, Treblinka, Terezin -- and so many other places don't have a place in Jewish memory anymore. They do not appear in popular literature, and their names do not hold regular places on the walls of most of the Holocaust museums I been to. I decided that I wanted to change the way Jews understand their history to fight the erasure, so that Jews could remember their struggle for freedom.

I began actively collecting as soon as I returned from Warsaw and realized so many books that I had loved for years fell into the collection. Something important about the collection is that this body of work is finite, it is not alive. Aside from a couple of choice exceptions, books on this topic are no longer readily published. Rather, this endeavor is best categorized as a scavenger hunt through history. In my mind I have often thought of it as reunifying a once fractured family, so they can live the remainder of their existence among those stories that understand them best. Through dusty collections of ancient Tel Aviv bookstores, late nights combing through any keyword on Ebay I felt could be related, and a trip to a thrift

store in every state I've been to since beginning this project, the collection took shape. Every time I hold a new book in my hand I feel more confident that this history is not going to just disappear.

Any money I have earned through my meager summer wages went to procuring these books. It became my sole expense and my sole passion. The collection exploded in number quickly, its contents tripling in just under four months. As of now, the collection is a vibrant array of autobiographies, anthologies, teaching materials, art books, movies, and memorabilia. Most of the work is out of print and rare. Many books have come to me from library discard piles and are marked as such. Though I look at my collection with pride, I feel as though I still have many more works to collect in order to make it truly comprehensive.

I want people to know this history exists. The idea that someday these books may serve as the greatest unified private collection of works on this subject saddens me, but after I have nurtured and grown this collection I will find it a permanent home where others will love it as much as I have. I suspect it will leave its immensely important mark on others, just as it did on me. I have been so honored to have been able to read these books, and to feel as though I know these stories intimately. Throughout this process I have often felt the ghetto fighters, the artists, poets, camp revolters, and dreamers who call this collection home standing, and watching over me. They gave me a chance to find passion through them, and they themselves exist as a part of my identity.

Collecting these works has taught me that resistance comes in many more forms than a molotov cocktail thrown off the roof of a snow covered building like in Warsaw. Resistance is subverting the idea of helplessness in whatever way possible. Resistance is the audacity to choose something besides being a

victim. The Jews whose stories fill this collection resisted not just for the chance of life, but for the sake of resistance itself. Leaders of the Krakow Ghetto Uprising, whose names are now lost to history, once stated simply that their resistance was for “three lines in history, so that the world will know that Jews did not just go like lambs to the slaughter,” (Dror, 48). I think most forms of resistance described in this collection could fit nicely into that wish. It was the desire to be heard, so that their experiences reminded people that they were human, and their lives mattered.