

**Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary,**  
Avraham Tory, translated from the Yiddish by Jerzy Michalowicz,  
with an Introduction by Martin Gilbert and notes by Dina Porat  
(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

Kovno is of particular interest to me because my great grandparents once lived there. The attractive maps in this book by Avraham Tory are filled with place names which are part of my family folklore. The numerous pictures of the residents of that ghetto must include some of my distant cousins whom I never met. One of these people could have been me if my ancestors had not become Americans in 1882.

The diarist, who changed his name to Avraham Tory when he found refuge in Israel, after the war, was born Avraham Golub. We are fortunate that he had the energy and the determination, not only to record the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, but to preserve the text in well protected boxes buried in a safe place where the Germans could not find them. Several lengthy diaries have survived, all of which record Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis. They include records from Warsaw, Bialystok, and Lodz. Shorter diaries survive from the ghettos of Vilna and Minsk. In addition, the post war reminiscences of survivors in Israel have been recorded and preserved at the Yad V'shem documentation center in Jerusalem. There is also the sworn testimony of numerous witnesses who supported the prosecution of Nazi war criminals. However, this text of almost 550 printed pages is probably the longest published diary to recount the years of the Holocaust.

The reader of this diary is made aware immediately, of the moral dilemma which was forced on the Jews of Europe by the Nazi occupation. Part of the ingenuity of the German plan lay in allowing the Jews to govern themselves within the walls of the ghettos. It was the Jewish Council, composed of the most distinguished members of the community, which was used by the Nazis to carry out demands for forced labor quotas, food rationing, and the thousand other dictates of the Gestapo and S.S.. Jewish policemen rounded up their fellow Jews for labor companies, and arrested Jews found guilty of breaking regulations. The German Occupiers were thus out of sight, entrusting the Jews with the day-to-day nastiness of life under tyranny.

For the victims the alternative would have been a high-minded, but suicidal determination to offer passive resistance, that is, doing nothing to cooperate with the Nazis, but surely hastening the ruin which threatened all the inhabitants of the ghetto. It is important to remember that few Jews regarded death at the hands of the Nazis as inevitable, they held out the hope that cooperative labor could win improved conditions. The Jewish leadership believed that the war could not last very long, and that with peace would come a better existence.

As one reads this book, it nags at one's conscience that the diarist held the position of Deputy Secretary of the Jewish Council. He was, therefore, in a far more comfortable position, physically, than the masses of Jews crowded in the ghetto. However the diarist does not hide the fact that he ate better, lived more comfortably, and even had access to some luxuries totally unknown to his poorer brethren. The fact that the diarist even had his own private secretary to assist him with keeping this record is part of the paradox.

Nevertheless, it would be smug as well as unfair for a reader in the 1990's to condemn the diarist almost fifty years after the fall of Nazi Germany. Furthermore, to pass judgment on the courage or the integrity of a man who did everything possible to ameliorate the condition of the less fortunate would be unjust. Precisely because of his privileged position, the diarist was able to record the deterioration of the condition of the Kovno Jews, year by year. Happily, he was also able to document Jewish resistance to the Nazis, the escape of small bands to the Partisans fighting in the forests, and even the especially courageous behavior of children who carried messages from one band of resistors to another.

This diary, like all the other testimony so painfully gathered, is the only answer to those false-historians, who even now are trying to deny that the Holocaust transpired. When the last of the survivors are dead, it will be easy for revisionists to fabricate history. Then, in the twenty-first century, we will have only the Holocaust Museum, Yad V'shem and the written records left by a few brave men and women, records like this diary, to bear witness to the truth.

Arnold Blumberg  
History Department  
Towson State University