The Light of Days

What’s in it for me? Discover a lost chapter of World War II history – the story of Poland’s women resistance fighters.

Bela Hazan was one of the best couriers in Poland’s Jewish resistance. She had exactly what the job required: she looked Aryan, she spoke flawless Polish, and she knew how to flash a perfect smile whenever the military police checked her phony travel papers. For good measure, she wore her golden cross and carried her Christian prayer book wherever she went. Bela was so good, in fact, that she not only smuggled weapons, ammunition, and money between three different cities; she also got a job working at a Gestapo office. The Nazis liked her. There’s a now-famous picture of Bela and two other resistance couriers attending a Christmas party, surrounded by Gestapo. While their stories have largely been forgotten, women were a vital part of Poland’s Jewish underground resistance. For men, illegal travel through the Nazi-occupied country was a far riskier proposition. It was up to the women to smuggle goods, spread information, organize people and keep hope alive. In these blinks, you’ll learn

why women made better couriers than men during World War II; how Jewish youth movements led to the underground resistance network; and how a teenager from a small Polish village became a political prisoner.

A Network of Youth Movements

In 1938, Renia Kukielka was 14 years old and finishing up school. Unlike other girls she knew, Renia wasn’t dreaming about becoming a nurse or a doctor. Her ambitions at the time were more humble. She was planning to enroll in a stenography course, with the intention of working in an office. Renia had two older sisters, Sarah and Bela, whom she loved dearly. She looked up to her sisters and, when she became old enough, she wanted to join the Freedom youth organization that they were in. Their brother Zvi belonged to The Young Guard youth group. These were more than just community organizations; they served an important purpose for Poland’s young Jewish population. In the 1930s, Jewish communities were flourishing throughout Poland. In fact, they’d been establishing themselves in Poland since the 1500s. In Warsaw, a bustling modern European city, Jewish people made up around a third of the population. But there were also smaller towns like Będzin, in Western Poland, and Jędrzejów, where the Kukielkas lived, that were home to thriving communities of modern Jewish families. In the years between World War I and World War II, though, things had become less stable. There was rising anti-Semitism in many European countries, including Poland. Simultaneously, there was a growing Zionist movement that was helping Jews emigrate to Palestine. Even before the start of World War II, people and families were torn between fighting to stay in their centuries-old communities within Poland, or settling elsewhere. This dichotomy between fight and flight would only intensify in the years to come. Deeply unsettled by anti-Semitism, a large number of Jewish children growing up in Poland belonged to youth groups that helped to instill a sense of belonging and positive self-esteem. Many of these groups were international. And many helped prepare teenagers for the communal kibbutz lifestyle. But the youth groups also varied. Some were liberal

and secular, while others were more conservative – in fact, they often aligned with one of the many Jewish political groups that were active throughout the country. Crucially, youth movements such as The Young Guar and Freedom, which was affiliated with Poland's Labor Zionist party, also published their own newspapers. Warsaw alone was home to 180 different Jewish newspapers – some written in Polish, some in Hebrew, and some in Yiddish. Members of the youth organizations were constantly criss-crossing through Poland, delivering newspapers, sharing information, and keeping people connected. Renia's sister Sarah, who was 23 at the time, was a devout Labor Zionist and put a lot of effort into traveling the country, fighting for social equality, and helping to organize training camps for kids. Such was the life of the comrades who were united in Poland's Jewish youth movements. And while they were politically conscious young adults, they had no way of knowing that the skills and connections they'd been developing would be put to a completely different use in the years ahead.

Nowhere to Go

In September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Immediately, Renia's hometown of Jędrzejów was under the gun. The family fled. Their destination was the town of Chmielnik, 21 miles away. It was across the Nida River – hopefully just far enough out of reach of Hitler's army. It was a full day and night of walking on foot, with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Air raids had left dead bodies scattered along the road to Chmielnik, and the family arrived to find the town already decimated. The town was 80 percent Jewish, and the Kukielkas had relatives there, but it was clear that they were still in harm's way. The first night, they took shelter in an attic and were able to avoid being found by marauding German soldiers, who tore apart the house below them. Renia could see the tanks rolling into Chmielnik, and at one point she witnessed a single Jewish boy with the bravery to stand up to the invaders. With a pistol in his hand, he ran out into the street and fired back at the soldiers. The boy was quickly torn to pieces by the soldier's guns. But he left a lasting impression on Renia: he chose to die fighting. For ten days the threat of the initial invasion remained. Then, finally, the Germans let up, and a new life of German-occupied Poland began. The Kukielkas quickly found themselves in the Jędrzejów ghetto. Throughout Poland, Jewish families were being forced to move into one of over 400 ghettos that were being established in the country. Forcing them into small, overpopulated areas and cutting them off from the rest of the world was a way to kill them using starvation and disease. While this was happening, the youth organizations never stopped working. Many of the group leaders were away on summer retreats when the first invasion took place. Some were given opportunities to stay in Switzerland or go to Palestine, but a surprising number chose to return. They would not leave their comrades behind. One such leader was Zivia Lubetkin, who was part of the Freedom movement in Warsaw along with her friend Frumka Plotnicka. With Frumka's help, Zivia was smuggled back into Poland. When she returned, she was astonished to see a transformed Warsaw – only a few Jews were on the streets, and they were forced to wear white armbands. She'd only been gone a few months, but the world had drastically changed. Zivia and Frumka were both 25 years old, but they were now two of the most senior members of Warsaw's Freedom branch. They immediately set about helping to feed and support the Jewish population and setting up classrooms for kids. The postal system was still working, and walls hadn't come up yet. There was still a sense that they'd get through this, and that the new war would be similar to the previous war. No one could have guessed what was to come.

The Girls of the Ghetto

The rules in the ghettos were constantly changing. At first, anyone could leave for work or food. But then that stopped. There were also no walls around the ghetto to start with. But soon, they arrived – as did curfews, restrictions, and more restrictions. In Warsaw and in other ghettos, a Judenrat was established. This was a Jewish-run office that presumably acted as a liaison between the Nazis and the Jewish communities. They were supposed to represent the Jews, but they rarely had the will or the power to stand up to the Nazis. Still, it soon became a rule that to leave the ghetto, you needed a pass from the Judenrat. Even with the rules, walls, and travel restrictions, there were ways out. Bribing guards was one of them. Other times you could find ways of going over or under a wall. But if you were going to travel illegally, it was often safer to be a woman – preferably, one who could pass for Aryan. One reason for this was that men could always be subjected to the so-called “drop-pants” test: if a Jewish man was trying to pass as Aryan, a Gestapo officer could force him to take his pants off to check whether or not he had a circumcised penis. The fear of the drop-pants test was so great that some Jewish men who went into hiding even paid for operations to have a foreskin reattached. Women had other advantages as well. They were more likely to have gone to public school, and so more likely to speak Polish without an accent. And because it was normal for women to carry purses and bags, they naturally made for less suspicious couriers of illicit supplies. Also, the Gestapo officers were not immune to being disarmed by a beautiful, smiling, flirtatious woman. Sometimes, an officer would even help a woman with her bags, unaware that weapons, ammunition, or a collection of forged travel documents were hiding within. For these reasons, women were the primary couriers, or kashariyot, for the underground Jewish resistance. Women like Zivia and Frumka already had a network in place through their involvement with the Freedom movement. As the Gestapo tightened their grip on the Warsaw ghetto, the resistance began to strengthen that network. Freedom messengers traveled out to local areas throughout Poland and established groups of “fives” – five people who would be in charge of carrying out activities in that area. In fact, many of the kashariyot would end up being known as “Zivia’s girls.” Renia’s sister Sarah was at a Freedom kibbutz in Będzin when the first invasion took place. Like many family members, they’d been separated, with few options for reuniting or staying in contact. But soon, Renia would be setting out on her own – hoping that her looks and instincts would keep her safe and maybe even get her closer to her sister.

On the Run

In the summer of 1940, the Jędrzejów ghetto was already being overrun by typhus. The males who were strong and healthy were being sent to labor camps. Then came the notice that the 400 wealthiest families, including the Kukielkas, had to pack up everything and move to Wodzisław by day’s end. By the time these families arrived, the cold was setting in. Wind was cutting through everything. Mothers were screaming as their babies turned blue. Families huddled together in a synagogue to try and keep warm. Groups of drunk German soldiers started showing up in town with the names of 30 people they would drag into the street, beat, and kill. The terror was reaching new levels. Even as her parents became more despondent, Renia never gave up hope. And by the summer of 1942, she was preparing to escape. There was hardly anything left in Wodzisław. Nearly all remaining belongings had been sold to non-Jewish Poles for next to nothing. And rumor had it that the Nazis were planning an Aktion, where a large

military force would descend upon the ghetto with a long list of names of people to take away. Already, many had fled – and many had died in the process. But Renia had to try. It was heartbreaking to leave her parents, but she was now 17 years old, and there was a chance she could find work. Renia had the advantage of looking indistinguishable from a typical Polish peasant girl. But that didn't mean she could travel worry-free. Her first destination was a Jewish labor camp where her brother had been working. The camp was run by Nazis, but the guards actually treated the workers relatively well. In fact, some workers paid to be at the camp, under the belief that it would protect them from worse camps. Renia arrived in August, accompanied by Yochimovitz, a friend from Wodzisław. They were allowed in, but after a few days, the German camp director approached Renia and told her she would have to run. The Aktion had taken place at Wodzisław, and now her name was on the list. If she stayed, she'd be taken. Renia and Yochimovitz ran into the forest. But it was already too late. The German police quickly caught up with them. Renia pleaded to be let go. She asked, "Do you really think I'm a Jew?" The police officer had to concede that he didn't. She spoke perfect Polish and looked Aryan. But Renia knew that wasn't the case with her friend. The policeman told them both to start running, so they did. Then a gunshot rang out, and Yochimovitz fell to the ground, dead. But Renia had to keep running. She spent days in the wilderness. Wandering. Thinking of what to do next. She finally arrived at a village with a train station. She fixed up her appearance as best she could and traveled a few stops to a town where she knew a friendly family. But then, when she got off the train, she saw something amazing laying on the ground. A woman's purse. With money. And, more importantly, a passport.

Becoming an Orphan

Even with a passport, and the new name of Wanda Widuchowska, a simple train ride could be filled with danger. Renia was able to get some food and a change of clothes from a family she knew, but she couldn't stay – the neighbor was already suspicious. Renia headed to Kazimierza Wielka because there were rumors that Jewish people still lived there. But on the train, she had the worst luck. Sitting across from her was a man she recognized from Jędrzejów. He didn't say anything, but it was obvious he recognized her. When he stood up and walked away, Renia thought, for a moment, she was safe. But then the whispers began to tumble back down the train toward her. "Yes, she's a Jew," she heard someone say. She stood up and moved to the back of the train. She opened the door and stood on the little platform at the back, watching the ground move under her feet. Then the conductor opened the door. He suggested she come back inside where it was safer, checked her ticket, and left. At that point, Renia knew there were only two options: face military police at the next stop, or jump. She jumped. The fall knocked her unconscious for only a few moments. When she awoke, her legs were sore – but otherwise she was fine. She kept moving and found a friendly man who let her spend the night indoors. Fortunately, she wasn't too far from her destination. The next day, she was able to walk to Kazimierza Wielka and saw that there were a few Jewish people still walking the streets, easily spotted by their white armbands. But Renia had to keep acting. She maintained her identity as a Catholic Polish woman, and found a job as a housekeeper for a half-German family. It got her off the streets, but to keep up appearances, she had to go to church with the family and act like it wasn't her first time at a Catholic service. It was immensely stressful, but she passed the test. As well as keeping her hidden, the job allowed Renia the opportunity to write to her sister Sarah. She didn't know if she was still in Będzin, or even if she was still alive. But, thankfully, a few days later, Sarah's reply arrived. Not only was she still alive, she was going to help

bring Renia to Będzin so the two sisters could be together. Soon after they were reunited, the sisters received a letter from their parents. They'd been forced to live in squalor, hiding in a tiny space with other desperate people. They had nothing to eat, and no relief from bugs and sickness. It would be the last letter in their correspondence. Renia and Sarah's parents were saying goodbye, and letting them know that they would at least die knowing that their daughters were still alive. As Renia herself later put it, that was the moment her heart turned to stone and the fire of resistance began to burn inside her.

"Renia felt disoriented . . . . She had to realign her being, remind herself that now she lived for her sister, for her comrades."

Taking Up Arms

By the time Renia reached Będzin in October 1942, the spirit of resistance had been steadily building. The Freedom movement and The Young Guard had joined forces. Strong connections had been built between Będzin and Warsaw. And, thanks to the efforts of Zivia and other youth group leaders, the Jewish Fighting Organization – better known by its Polish initials, ZOB – had just been formed. Earlier that year, word had begun to reach Freedom members about the mass killings taking place at concentration camps. Then, in mid-April, the first Aktion took place in the Warsaw ghetto. Known as the "Bloody Sabbath," it led to 52,000 Jews being taken away. After that, it was clear that the Nazis were planning to kill them all. The leaders of the youth organizations decided they had to fight back, and the ZOB militia was born in the summer of 1942. Quickly, the question became, How do we get guns? Tosia Altman was one of the Freedom comrades who had first brought word to the Warsaw ghetto about the death camps. She was another fearless kashariyot, but she was also warm and unflaggingly optimistic; everyone felt better when she was around. And it was cause for celebration when Tosia managed to bring a box of nails into the Warsaw ghetto – a box that also contained guns and hand grenades. Frumka Plotnicka had been the first to smuggle in guns, hiding them in a sack of potatoes. Dynamite was also brought in, and soon a hidden weapons lab was set up within the Warsaw ghetto. While Zivia and the ZOB leadership plotted, the Aktions kept coming. Three hundred thousand people were taken to the Treblinka death camp, leaving only 60,000 in the Warsaw ghetto. Debates raged about whether to plan a large-scale attack, or to simply launch individual suicide missions. Zivia was ready to die for the cause, but others talked her down. Their own action needed to be organized. It needed to be big – a statement that no one could ignore. Meanwhile, Frumka had traveled to Będzin to help organize resistance, spread the word about the death camps, and further ignite the spirit of rebellion in comrades like Renia and Sarah. But it was the city of Kraków that struck one of the first big blows, even though it was home to the Nazis' General Government. Hela Schüpper, a kashariyot for the Kraków ZOB who was known as a "voluptuous beauty," smuggled in two rifles under her raincoat along with several handguns and clips of ammunition in her trendy handbag. Members began to leave the ghetto to stalk and kill Nazi officers in town. These killings escalated into a collaboration between the ZOB and the Polish Communist Party. The union was made possible by Gola Mire. She was a Jewish poet who had once been deemed too radical for the youth organizations, but who'd proved valuable to the resistance. With her help, a "Christmas surprise" occurred on December 22, 1942 – grenades were thrown into a café that catered to German soldiers, killing at least seven Nazis and wounding several others.

The Rising Resistance

The successes of the ZOB in Kraków further emboldened the Warsaw branch, which grew to be several hundred strong at the start of 1943. They began to put up posters throughout the city, stating in no uncertain terms that the ZOB would retaliate against anyone who harmed Jews – even if it was another Jewish person. They made good on that promise. At the time, the Judenrat and the Jewish militia were still collaborating with the Nazis, and after the ZOB assassinated two militia and council leaders, people in the Warsaw ghetto began to pay more respect to the young resistance fighters. All of this was leading up to the first Warsaw ghetto uprising. It was supposed to take place on January 22, but the Nazis surprised everyone with another Aktion on January 18. With people getting rounded up, a group of armed men and women let themselves get captured, and when they were told to line up in the town square, they quickly took out guns and grenades and unloaded upon their captors. Only two fighters survived the German retaliation, but the impact was revolutionary. Meanwhile, another group, including Zivia, quickly plotted an ambush in a building they knew the Germans were going to search. They had pipes, sticks, four shotguns, four hand grenades, and some fire bombs made out of lightbulbs and acid. The Germans fell right into their trap. Two were immediately shot and killed; others were quickly overcome by the surprise attack and retreated. Nazi guns, grenades, and ammunition were taken. Only one comrade was injured. Zivia couldn't believe it – many of them assumed they would die that day, but they had killed Nazis and survived. The January 18 Aktion took days for the Nazis to complete as pockets of resistance continued to interfere with their efforts. There was a renewed sense of hope in Warsaw at the start of 1943. The same urge to fight back gripped Renia in Będzin. Here, too, Nazis were regularly taking more and more people away from the ghetto. Renia recognized the urgency. They couldn't go quietly; they had to fight. This is when she became a kashariyot for the ZOB. Będzin needed weapons, too. So Renia and another courier, Ina Gelbart, were sent to Warsaw for guns. By this point, Renia had heard the stories of the women who'd smuggled weapons for the resistance. Havka Folman and Tema Schneiderman hid grenades inside menstrual pads in their underwear. And Bela Hazan was so fearless that she worked in a Gestapo headquarters as a translator. Renia learned quickly. The train ride to Warsaw went smoothly, and once they arrived they bought guns and strapped them to their bodies. They stashed grenades and Molotov cocktails in their bags. But on the way back, passengers were searched. As Renia later explained, "You had to have an iron will." Face-to-face with a Nazi, you had to smile. As they rummaged through her bags, Renia happily explained she was just carrying some potatoes. The Nazi pocketed a few and moved on. This time, she was safe.

"Jews saw they could kill Germans, halt an Aktion, and live, and Zivia sensed that the ghetto psychology had shifted."

Fighting to the End

April 20, 1943, was meant to be a happy day for Hitler. It was his birthday, after all. But the same couldn't be said for Warsaw. Two days prior, another surprise Aktion had taken place in the ghetto, and the ZOB had been caught off guard. They'd been planning a large-scale uprising, and now they knew that the time was upon them. Since the mini uprising in January, more guns had been smuggled in, some of them sent by sympathetic organizations such as Poland's Home Army resistance. The ZOB had also learned to

make Molotov cocktails in their weapons lab, as well as explosives from old water pipes. Those explosives were placed under the street at the entrance to the ghetto. When the tanks and the 2,000 Nazis came marching in, the bombs went off. Body parts went flying through the air. As the soldiers scattered, more explosives came raining down upon them. The Germans retreated, and the first night was full of celebrations. But it was only the start to a campaign that ended up being painfully drawn out over several weeks. The Nazis began setting fire to everything, pushing the ZOB fighters into underground bunkers. They could only emerge at night, and at great risk. One hundred and twenty fighters were massacred in the ZOB headquarters. Zivia was horrified. She was supposed to have been there as well – and only escaped death due to a last-minute change of plans. The only way to get the remaining people out was through the sewers, which could lead them into the Aryan side of Warsaw. It was a torturous ordeal, crawling through putrid slush. Perhaps even worse was that they had to wait for over a day in the foul water until it was safe enough to climb out. Forty of the remaining 60 fighters were able to escape in the back of a truck and find temporary refuge in the forest. Zivia was among the survivors, but she would never shake the guilt of leaving those other 20 comrades behind. Over 100 Jewish women fought in the ghetto uprising. Another survivor was Niuta Teitelbaum. She belonged to a Communist group known as Spartacus. This former Warsaw University student quickly earned a reputation for being a notorious assassin after she walked right into a Gestapo office and killed a high-ranking Nazi as he sat behind his desk. On another occasion she shot three Gestapo officers. And when she found out that one of them survived, she disguised herself as a doctor and killed him in the hospital. The Gestapo referred to her as “Little Wanda with the Braids.” The braids were part of her disguise.

The Beginning of the End

In many ways, the resistance in Poland lived on in the forests. The forests were the home of the partisan fighters, also known as the Polish resistance, who were generally indifferent to helping the Jewish resistance movement. The partisan men were also unwilling to take in women as anything other than cooks, cleaners, or sexual partners. Still, there were several Jewish resistance fighters in the forests, too. The FPO, or United Partisan Organization, was started by Jewish fighters who fled to the eastern border town of Vilna. The group was highly active in sabotaging train lines, as well as smuggling people and weapons. And women like Ruzka Korczak and Vitka Kempner were central in carrying out those missions. Once the ghettos started disappearing, many of the ZOB fighters and kashariyot had to go into hiding. The lucky ones were able to get fake identification documents, find work, and pretend to live the life of a non-Jewish Pole. But there was still the constant threat of being found out or blackmailed. Zivia was able to find an apartment in Warsaw to hide out in with Antek, a ZOB leader who was also her boyfriend. She tried to remain busy. She wrote letters to Będzin, pleading with them to launch their own major uprising. Renia, who was still in Będzin, was hoping to do just this. But first they needed more documents so that those who escaped would have a fighting chance. So Renia was sent on another mission to Warsaw, where she would meet up with her old traveling partner, Ina. Only this time, nothing went as planned. Ina was nowhere to be found when they arrived at the designated place and time, and on the train ride to Warsaw she overheard rumors that the Jews of Będzin had been taken away en masse. Renia’s head was spinning. She was able to get the 22 fake visas she came for, but still no Ina. She headed back. And, sure enough, when she arrived back in Będzin on August 1, 1943, Nazis had the ghetto surrounded. People were being lined up into trains. The dead were being carried away. She had to

turn around, not draw any attention to herself, and get as far away as possible. The remaining members of the ZOB arranged a place for Renia to stay while she tried to figure out what had happened in Będzin – what happened to her sister Sarah. She was able to meet up with Ilza, a teenager who had escaped the raid at Będzin. Ilza explained that the Nazis had set up a liquidation camp there. Some, including Frumka, had tried to hide out in a bunker – but to no avail. Frumka was dead. But Renia's sister, Sarah, was alive. In fact, the Będzin survivors knew that the guard at the liquidation camp could be bribed, and Sarah could escape, if only they could find a way to keep her hidden. Ilza also needed to be hidden, so both she and Renia obtained forged travel papers in order to get to Warsaw. Tragically, those papers would be their downfall.

The Great Escape

Renia knew that two people traveling with papers forged by the same person could be in trouble. That's why Renia and Ilza sat in separate train cars. But it wasn't enough. The guards recognized the forgeries. They'd seen too many of them by this point. The two women were caught and brought in for questioning. Renia told the police that she'd never met Ilza before. What was all of this about? She was Catholic. A Pole. She'd gotten her travel papers from work. They were not forgeries. She maintained her innocence – even after they started beating her and dragging her across the floor by her hair. They were certain she was Jewish. It was the stamp on her papers. Everything else looked good except for the stamp. They knew it was a fake. They'd already caught other Jewish people with the same stamp. But Renia never deviated from her story. The next day, Renia and Ilza were taken to the Katowice prison. Both assumed they'd die there. They contemplated ways they might kill themselves. Then the guard came for Renia. She was taken to a room with a Gestapo officer who asked her the same questions about the forged stamp. Again, she stuck to her story. Again, they beat her without mercy. After three hours of questioning she was moved to a different room where she was whipped and kicked until she passed out. When she awoke, she was taken outside, and a gun was held to her head. Confess now, and she could stay alive and work as a Nazi spy. She didn't confess. So they whipped her again until she passed out. Then she was sent to the notorious Mysłowice prison, where political prisoners were tortured. But then: nothing. A month passed. Had they forgotten about her in this flea-infested hellhole? Renia decided to take a chance. A friendly Polish prison guard agreed to mail a letter for her. A few weeks later, in November 1943, a response from Sarah arrived. She and other comrades were alive and had found places to hide in Polish homes. They planned to break her out of prison – all she needed to do was switch places with another woman who was on outdoor work duty. Amazingly enough, it worked. Sarah and her crew bribed a guard with booze, got him drunk, and made a quick escape. The problem was, Renia had to run on foot and was weak from months of malnutrition. But, somehow, she did it. They ran for miles, Renia following her sister to freedom. A Polish man by the name of Kobiletz was hiding Sarah and some others in a bunker in his home. From there, they were able to arrange passage to Slovakia. Smugglers met them at the border. Getting across that border required a six-hour hike across a snow-covered mountain. Renia continued to feel weak, and her feet were freezing, but she did it – somehow, she made it out of Poland alive. The only problem was, Sarah had stayed behind to help the others organize their crossing. While Renia soon found herself in Budapest, applying for refugee status and making arrangements to travel to Palestine, she never spoke to her sister again.

Epilogue

On March 6, 1944, Renia Kukielka reached Palestine. She was 19 years old and had been sure she was going to die many times in just the past twelve months alone. But, somehow, she'd survived. Other female comrades survived as well – including Zivia, who had stayed alive in Warsaw until it was liberated by the Russians. She eventually made it to Palestine as well, but her survivor's guilt stayed with her always. Even though their stories quickly became popular, and Renia's story was part of a book about women's lives in the ghetto published in 1947, their heroics soon became lost to history. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with The Light of Days as the subject line and share your thoughts!