

Never Forget

‘So, let me begin with a question,’ said Moishe to the three dozen VCE students from Ben Yehuda College sitting opposite. ‘Have any of you heard the name Emanuel Ringelblum?’

They were seated around a large table in the Melbourne Holocaust Museum, with sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling glass doors, burnishing the glossy hair of the teenagers.

Moishe glanced around the room, noting the blank faces opposite.

‘No worries,’ he smiled. ‘How about the Warsaw Ghetto? I’m sure you’ve all heard of that.’

A young girl with red hair raised a hand.

‘And what’s your name?’ asked Moishe.

‘Rachel,’ replied the girl quietly.

‘Please go on,’ Moshe nodded.

‘It’s a neighbourhood in Warsaw where the Germans imprisoned the Jews before sending them to concentration camps.’

‘Very good, Rachel,’ smiled Moishe. ‘The Warsaw Ghetto was a walled-off section of the city around 3.5 square kilometres that was created by the Germans in November 1940. Now, your school is in Caulfield South. Does anyone know its geographic size?’

After several seconds of silence, Moshe spoke again. ‘Before you came, I did a bit of research. Caulfield South takes up an area of 3.3 square kilometres, which is almost the same

size as the Warsaw Ghetto. Do any of you know what the population of Caulfield South is?’

‘Ten thousand?’ shrugged a blond boy with a mouthful of shiny braces.’

‘According to the last census, 12,300 people. Now, does anyone want to estimate how many Jews were forced into the ghetto?’

Silence.

‘No one?’ pressed Moishe as he glanced from face to face. ‘Well, the answer is over 450,000.’

Gasps of astonishment erupted from young people around the table.

‘That’s right,’ nodded Moishe. ‘So let’s do the maths. Over thirty-five times the population of Caulfield crammed into a space that’s just slightly smaller. That means two or even three families were forced to live in a single room. Diseases like typhus, scurvy and rickets were rampant. And when you add starvation rations to that systematic overcrowding, the result was a public health disaster. Which, of course, is precisely what the Nazis intended.’

‘You mean the Germans wanted to starve them to death?’ asked a slender boy wearing a kippa on his head.

‘Exactly,’ said Moishe. ‘And with considerable success. Almost 100,000 Jews died of malnutrition and associated diseases.’

‘What happened to the other 350,000?’ asked Rachel.

‘Didn’t you study this in your Holocaust curriculum at Ben Yehuda?’ asked Moishe.

'We learned about Auschwitz and some of our class went on March of the Living,' replied the boy with braces. 'But I don't remember us studying that much about the Warsaw Ghetto.'

'Well, let's do what we can to fill in the gaps,' sighed Moishe. 'So it turned out that death by famine wasn't efficient enough for the Nazis. They rounded up most of the ghetto residents and put them on trains to the Treblinka death camp where they were gassed and their bodies were incinerated.'

The students sat motionless in stunned silence until Moishe spoke.

'It's a horrific story, but it's that story that brings us to my original question ... who was Emanuel Ringelblum? Ringelblum is the primary reason we know what we know about the Warsaw Ghetto. The archive of material he collected and preserved gives unique and irreplaceable insights into daily life for half a million Jews confined there.'

'Did he die?' asked Rachel. 'Did the Germans kill him?'

'We'll get to that,' sighed Moishe, 'but for now let's focus on his activities in the ghetto. Fair enough?'

The students nodded.

'Good. Ringelblum was a trained historian with a doctorate from Warsaw University. So he decided to do what he knew best: to document the horrors that the Nazis were inflicting on the ghetto. He assembled a team of people, including an Orthodox rabbi and Jewish writers and editors. They called themselves by the codename *Oneg Shabbat*, which means Sabbath Joy. My grandfather was a member of that group.'

'Wow, that's amazing,' marvelled the boy with braces.'

'And what's your name?' asked Moishe.

'Henry,' the boy replied with a cheery smile.

'Well, Henry, do you know the word *zayde* in Yiddish?'

'Sorry,' Henry shrugged, his face reddening with embarrassment. 'My family isn't that ... observant.'

'Don't worry about it,' said Moishe in a tone of reassurance. *Zayde* is the Yiddish word for grandfather, and my *zayde* told me that the group would meet behind closed doors each Saturday afternoon.'

'Why behind closed doors?' asked the boy wearing the kippah.

'You'll have to tell me your name,' smiled Moishe.

'Ben,' the boy replied. 'Sorry.'

'Nice to meet you, Ben,' said Moshe. 'They met behind closed doors because the Germans were running a sophisticated disinformation campaign. They built a model concentration camp at Terezin in Czechoslovakia where a handful of prominent Jewish prisoners were held in very good conditions. This is where the Nazis would put these special prisoners on display to the Red Cross, foreign diplomats and international press to disprove stories of atrocities against the Jews. So what do you think would happen if the Germans discovered that their abuses in the Warsaw Ghetto were documented by the Oneg Shabbat group?'

'Everyone in the group would have been killed,' said Ben.

'Precisely,' Moishe affirmed. 'So, during the day they took notes on life in the ghetto, the cruelty and maliciousness of the Germans, the hunger of the Jews, the living conditions, their

medical and sanitary conditions, their schools and underground publications, the rumours, their jokes and even their street life. Then, at night, they would meet in secret to incorporate those notes into comprehensive reports.'

'What sort of information did they collect?' asked Rachel.

Moishe shrugged. 'They described daily life in the ghetto ... and daily death. They wrote about the baker's trucks that would circulate each morning to collect the bodies of Jews who had died overnight from malnutrition and disease. They described the mice and rats gnawing at the carcasses that lay in the street waiting to be collected. And starving people scavenging through rubbish bins and gutters looking for food and cigarette butts to trade.'

'Why didn't people escape?' asked Henry.

'Some did,' replied Moishe. 'But it wasn't that simple or easy. The entire area was walled off and guarded by armed sentries. The Jews within were forced into a desperate struggle for survival against disease, starvation and random Nazi brutality. The daily food ration provided one-tenth of the required minimum daily calorie intake for a healthy adult. So, many of those who got out of the ghetto returned with supplies of food they smuggled in to help their families.'

'What did people do all day inside the ghetto?' asked a burly boy with wrestlers shoulders.

'And your name is ...?' asked Moishe.

'Simon,' replied the wrestler.

'Well, Simon, they went about living their lives as best they could,' sighed Moishe. 'Despite everything, you had artists and

intellectuals who continued their creative endeavours. There were underground libraries, youth movements, schools and even a symphony orchestra. Books, study, music and theatre served as an escape from the harsh reality of daily life.'

'You said earlier that Jews were transported to the death camp at Treblinka. When did that start?' Ben asked.

'In July 1942,' Moishe replied. When the first deportation orders came in from the Germans, Adam Czerniaków, the chairman of the Ghetto Jewish Council ... the *Judenrat* ... refused to prepare lists of persons for deportation. Rather than comply with that German demand, he took his own life on the 23rd of July 1942.'

Moishe noticed that Rachel's eyes glistened with tears as she wiped her cheek with the back of her hand.

'What sort of documentary evidence did Ringelblum collect?' asked Simon.

'Diaries, reports, posters and Nazi decrees. Over 25,000 pages of documentation that described daily life, the activities of the *Judenrat* and social relief organisations. They also recorded the deportations from July to September 1942, and reports of Jews being gassed at the death camps at Chelmno and Treblinka.'

'What did they do with those documents?' asked Ben.

'They were transmitted to the Polish Home Army, which smuggled the information to the Polish Government-in-Exile in London. In December 1942, Polish Foreign Minister-in-Exile Count Edward Raczynski made a formal statement denouncing the murder of Jews and promising punishment for the guilty.'

Rachel's hand rose slowly ... tentatively.

'Yes?' nodded Moishe.

'I read somewhere a while ago that new documents were uncovered at the Vatican showing that the Pope knew what was happening to the Jews,' she said, half in question and half in statement.

Moishe's mouth curled in a diplomatic smile worthy of the most polished DFAT ambassador. 'Let's just say that the behaviour of Pope Pius XII during World War II is the topic of vigorous debate among scholars. But I suggest we leave that controversy to the historians. Instead, I'd like to talk about the role played by Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.'

'Last year I saw a movie on TV about that,' said Simon.

'Which one?' asked Moishe. 'There have been several.'

'The one about a piano player,'

'Entitled *The Pianist*,' grinned Moishe, triggering a wave of laughter that swept through the student audience. 'But yes, in April 1943, the two Jewish armed underground organisations joined forces to strike against the Germans. Ringelblum not only participated in the rebellion, but he recorded the events leading up to it.'

'Why were there two underground groups?' asked Rachel.

'Because the Jewish community tends to be very political,' Moishe said. 'It's not for nothing that we say "two Jews, three opinions".'

Another wave of laughter came from the students.

‘And so, there were two rival underground militias in the ghetto, the socialist Jewish Combat Organisation, or ŻOB, and the conservative Jewish Military Union, or ŻZW. But in early 1943, they came together to form a united front to fight against the Germans.’

‘Why so late?’ asked Ben. ‘If the ghetto was created in November 1940 and the deportations began in 1942, why did they wait until 1943 to fight back?’

‘A great question,’ nodded Moishe. ‘Try and think about it this way. When the first reports of gassings at Treblinka trickled back to the ghetto, a lot of people simply didn’t believe it. They didn’t believe that a modern, civilised country like Germany would instigate a program of mass murder. Especially when it was fighting a two-front war against superior enemies.’

‘America, Russia and Britain,’ said Simon.

‘And Australia,’ Rachel added.

‘And Australia,’ echoed Moishe. ‘Our diggers were fighting against the Afrika Korps in Libya and Egypt. So, when the evidence of mass murder became impossible to ignore, the Jewish underground groups faced the challenge of acquiring weapons. They were able to buy some guns and ammunition on the black market and the Polish Home Army provided a few more. But all that took time.’

Ben nodded his understanding.

‘Then in January 1943, the Germans stepped up the frequency of deportations to Treblinka. Their objective was to eradicate the ghetto by sending all remaining Jews to the gas

chambers. So the ŻOB and ŻZW felt they couldn't delay any longer.'

'What did they do?' asked Rachel.

'On the 18th of January, a group of resistance fighters joined a crowd of Jews at the Umschlagplätze, the holding area where trains to Treblinka were loaded with people destined for death. On a prearranged signal, the Jewish fighters pulled out their hidden pistols and opened fire. They managed to kill around a dozen Germans and wound several dozen more while suffering many casualties of their own. But their most important achievement was bringing deportations to a temporary halt.'

'Amazing,' Henry marvelled.

'Yes, it was,' agreed Moishe. 'The battle of the 18th of January galvanised the spirit of resistance throughout the ghetto. People began to defy deportation orders and go to ground in hiding places. The ŻOB and ŻZW constructed bunkers and fortified positions that overlooked access points to the ghetto.'

'Who were the leaders of those underground groups?' asked Rachel.

The ŻOB's was led by twenty-four-year-old Mordechai Anielewicz. He began as a member of the conservative Beitar Zionist youth movement. But he later changed his views and joined the socialist Shomer Hatzza'ir. The leader of the conservative ŻZW was a former Polish army officer named Pavel Frenkiel. The uprising began on the evening Passover Seder.'

'Was that intentional?' asked Henry, his face darkening with a frown.

'Yeah, were they adding insult to injury?' echoed Simon.

‘We can’t know for sure,’ shrugged Moishe. ‘But I wouldn’t be surprised if they thought it was a great joke to launch the final assault against the ghetto on the Jewish holiday of liberation. But if so, it was a joke that blew up in their faces ... literally.’

There was some nervous laughter, but as Moishe glanced around the room he was gratified at the looks of rapt fascination on the faces of his audience.

‘The German column was hit by homemade grenades, Molotov cocktails and gunfire, mostly from pistols and a couple of submachine guns. The shocked SS troops beat a retreat beyond the ghetto walls, leaving a dozen men dead on the street behind them.’

‘That’s good,’ growled Simon.

Because of this failure, the original SS commander was replaced by Standartenführer Jürgen Stroop, the SS and Police Leader in Warsaw. Stroop was experienced in anti-partisan warfare and brought two thousand troops, reinforced with artillery and tanks, to the task of wiping out the ghetto.’

‘And what about casualties in the Jewish Resistance?’ asked Henry, concerned.

‘The ŻOB and ŻZW agreed to put aside their ideological differences and fight as a combined force. There were about seven hundred Jewish fighters in all who were armed with pistols, homemade grenades, a few automatic weapons and rifles. They had no military training, but made up for it with fierce determination to fight for their dignity. They had no illusions about survival.’

‘Wow,’ muttered Ben.

'The Jews did have the advantage of knowing the local terrain. They waged a guerrilla war of hit and run, ambushing the Germans and then retreating to bunkers across rooftops and through underground tunnels. The remaining Jews of the ghetto thwarted German roundups, hiding rather than following orders to assemble at the Umschlagplätze.'

'How long did they hold out?' asked Rachel, her face solemn.

'For twenty-six days. In the end, the Germans went block by block with flamethrowers and explosives. By the 8th of May 1943, the Germans finally succeeded in razing the ghetto to the ground. Anielewicz and many of his staff commanders are thought to have committed suicide to avoid capture. On the 16th of May, Stroop reported to Berlin that the former Jewish Quarter in Warsaw is no more.'

'Were there any survivors?' asked Henry, his eyes awash with tears.

'About 7,000 Jews were killed during the fighting,' sighed Moishe. 'Of those who survived, 42,000 were sent to forced labour camps and the Majdanek death camp, and another 7,000 were gassed at Treblinka. A handful of fighters managed to escape through the Warsaw sewer system.'

Moishe paused and flashed an uncharacteristically shy smile. 'It just so happens that my grandfather was one of those fighters who survived.'

Gasps of astonishment burst from the students.

'If the entire ghetto was blown up by the Germans, what happened to Ringelblum's records?' asked Simon.

‘Now that’s a really interesting part of the story,’ replied Moishe. ‘The Oneg Shabbat group buried the documents in caches before the outbreak of the rebellion. Ten clay-covered tin boxes were discovered in September 1946. Although they were damaged by water, their contents were still salvageable. And in December 1950, two metal milk cans were found in a cellar of a ruined house in what had been the ghetto. The material within was in much better shape and included issues of underground newspapers, public notices by the *Judenrat*, concert invitations, milk coupons, chocolate wrappers and reports on deportation actions. Today, this archive serves as a major source for the history of the Warsaw Ghetto.’

‘Did they find all of it?’ asked Ben.

Moishe shook his head. ‘No. There were stories of a third milk can. But despite extensive searches, it was never found. Some people say it’s now located beneath the Chinese Embassy building.’

‘So I guess we’ll never know where it is,’ said Henry.

‘Tell us more about Ringelblum,’ pressed Rachel.

‘Okay,’ nodded Moishe. ‘He joined the Jewish self-help society, ZTOS, after Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. ZTOS set up soup kitchens that offered not only food, but also provided opportunities for people to socialise. In addition, it served as a cover for underground political activities. Ringelblum arranged employment for the thousands of Jewish teachers, writers and intellectuals in the ghetto who were left with no means of support.’

‘What about before the war?’ Ben asked.

Moishe coughed and poured himself a glass of water from a jug on the table, taking a long swallow to settle his throat. 'Emanuel Ringelblum was born in the town of Galician Buchach in 1900. At the time, Galicia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When he was a teenager, his family moved to the city of Nowy Sącz in what is now Poland. A few years later the Ringelblums moved again, this time to Warsaw. In 1922 he enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy at Warsaw University, completing his PhD five years later. His academic focus was on the history of Polish Jewry from the late Middle Ages until the Napoleonic emancipation. Along the way, he married Yehudit Herman and they had one child, a boy they named Uri.'

'Did he become a professor?' asked Simon.

'No, he taught history at the Yehudiya High School for girls in Warsaw. He was active in Jewish politics, joining Poalei Zion, a Marxist-Zionist group.'

'That sounds weird,' said Henry. 'I read somewhere that Marxists believe in internationalism. But isn't Zionism a form of Jewish nationalism? So how could they be both?'

'That's an excellent question,' said Moishe, 'They believed in the creation of a socialist regime in Palestine where Jews could escape antisemitism. But some members couldn't accept that and broke away to create a rival group. Remember what I said about two Jews and three opinions? Well, that's a good example.'

Moishe paused to allow the students' laughter to subside.

'In 1923, Ringelblum helped to create the Young Historians Circle, a group that advocated for Jewish civil rights in Poland.'

He found work at the Institute for Jewish Research and published over 100 articles in academic journals. He also joined the Landkentenish movement, which promoted the virtues of life in the countryside.'

'He was a very busy man,' observed Rachel.

'A veritable dynamo,' laughed Moishe. 'In addition to all that he also worked for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, an international social service agency. He was central to the establishment of Jewish free loan societies. Does anyone know what a free loan society is?'

There was silence in the library for several moments until Simon raised his hand.

'Yes Simon?'

'Ah ... a society that provides loans for free?' he grinned impishly, triggering a spate of laughter from his fellow students.

'Not exactly,' grinned Moishe. 'In fact, they were a serious solution to a serious problem. Antisemitism was deeply engrained in Polish society in those days. So much so, that it was impossible for Jewish individuals and businesses to obtain credit from Polish banks. So these Jewish free loan societies ... there were almost 900 of them ... would offer 50 per cent of the amount needed for the loan. For example, let's say you were a Jewish businessman who wanted to found a company of some sort. A free loan society would lend you half on reasonable repayment terms, while you would have to come up with the other 50 per cent on your own. That's how it worked.'

'That's amazing,' marvelled Rachel.

'Wait, there's more,' grinned Moishe. 'In October 1938, Emanuel Ringelblum was appointed to lead the Joint Distribution Committee relief team in Zbąszyń, a small town on the German–Polish border.'

'What happened there?' Ben asked.

'At that time the Nazi regime expelled six thousand Polish Jews who had been living in Germany. Even though these Jews held Polish citizenship, the government in Warsaw didn't want to accept them.'

Rachel shook her head. 'That's terrible.'

Moishe nodded. 'Yes. You had around 17,000 people ... men women and children ... trapped in limbo along the Polish–German border. So Emanuel Ringelblum organised food supplies, a hospital and health services, a social welfare system and even a court of arbitration. He was a truly amazing man.'

'What happened to him?' asked Simon. 'Did he survive the war?'

Moishe shook his head. 'Alas, no. Just before the uprising, in March 1943, Ringelblum and his family were smuggled out of the ghetto into the non-Jewish part of Warsaw. But he chose to return just before the fighting began. He was captured and taken to a German labour camp, but the Polish underground helped him to escape. He returned to Warsaw and joined his family in hiding, but he was betrayed to the Germans by a local Pole and arrested.'

A sad silence settled over the library until Moishe broke it. 'The Polish underground found the betrayer and killed him.'

'Good,' snorted Simon.

Moishe nodded. 'Emanuel was confined to a cell with his son Uri while his wife was locked up in the women's section. A plot was hatched to move him from the death cells to a section from where prisoners were sent to work in Germany. But Ringelblum refused.

'Why?' moaned Rachel. 'Why would he reject the chance to stay alive?'

'Well, according to the man who snuck into his cell to propose the plan of escape, Ringelblum asked about his son and wife. The answer was obvious ... he would have to leave them behind. And Emanuel Ringelblum was not prepared to do that. "I prefer to do *Kiddush Ha-Shem* with my family," he's reported to have said. It's the Hebrew for the sanctification of God's name.' He paused and looked around at their young faces. 'Emanuel Ringelblum, his wife and son were shot by a German firing squad in March 1944.'

'He was a hero,' murmured Henry, his eyes glistening with tears.

'Indeed, he was,' agreed Moishe. 'And as a mark of respect, the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw bears his name.'

Moishe glanced around the room at the flushed faces and reddened eyes of his audience. 'Are there any additional questions?'

After several moments of silence, he nodded. 'Then all that remains is for me to thank you for your attendance and attention today.'

Bernard Marin AM

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