
Reviewed by Rivka Chaya Schiller, YIVO, NYC

The title of the personal account, *On Both Sides of the Wall* by Vladka Meeed (given name Feigele Peltel; b. 1921, Warsaw), stems from Vladka’s work as a courier for the Jewish underground during World War II. In this risky and courageous position, she smuggled goods, which included food, money, and arms; and relayed messages to and from the Warsaw ghetto to the “Aryan”1 side beyond the ghetto wall. She also helped Jewish children escape from the ghetto and found them safe living quarters, usually with Polish (Christian) families. Vladka was able to achieve these successes – even during such a terrifying period, when Jews were literally hunted down – on account of her “Aryan” features. She could pass as a Pole and had acquired fluency in Polish, although her schooling had been in a secular Yiddish *folkshul*, where all the subjects had been taught in Yiddish.2 Her assumed name, which she used for much of the time during her underground courier days, was “Wladyslawa Kowalska,” hence the nickname “Vladka.”3

Vladka’s account first appeared in Yiddish as *Fun beyde zaytn geto-moyer*, as early as 1948, at a time when many Holocaust survivors were still unable to speak or write about their experiences in the Holocaust. According to Elie Wiesel, who wrote the introduction to *On Both Sides of the Wall*, this publication was significant in that it was the first authentic document

1 “Aryan” is used in this and other contexts to mean “un-Jewish” or “Gentile.” More specifically, in the case of this and other Holocaust accounts set in Poland, the term “Aryan” frequently refers to “Polish” – not necessarily to “German.”


3 In Polish “Vladka” would be spelled “Wladka,” but since this book was written for an English-speaking audience, the name has been spelled with a ‘v’ instead of with a ‘w.’
about the uprising and destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, or about the Holocaust in general, to reach the free world.\textsuperscript{4} Wiesel concludes his introduction by asking the rather sobering and ironic question: “Who is to be pitied in the aftermath of this catastrophe?” His reply: “Everyone. And even more, not for the victims (it is too late for pity) but for humanity. For with open eyes, it betrayed Feigele, and itself as well.”\textsuperscript{5} Although this reader comprehended the meaning of Wiesel’s words, the full implication of his message became even more apparent after reading Vladka’s account.

Vladka’s narrative begins on July 22, 1942, around the time when deportations in the Warsaw ghetto became increasingly prevalent. This was just before the suicide of Adam Czerniakow, the head of the ghetto’s \textit{Judenrat},\textsuperscript{6} on July 23, 1942. Vladka makes reference to this tragedy by stating that Jews in the ghetto speculated about what had caused this grim turn-of-events. Some said that Czerniakow had had a nervous breakdown, while others remarked that “he had refused to serve as a tool for the Germans.”\textsuperscript{7} But whatever the cause, Jews could not spend much time pondering it, as they needed to worry about avoiding being rounded up and deported to some unspecified location, where they would supposedly be put to work. Even at that stage, though, many Jews were suspicious of what this meant, as they certainly did not trust the Germans.

Furthermore, as a result of these increasing round-ups and deportations, Jews began to go into hiding. Others came out of hiding and surrendered themselves to the Germans, who used ruses such as free bread and marmalade to lure the starving Jews into their nets. Some did not trust these ruses and even had authentic work permits to protect them; however, they turned themselves in to the Germans, only because they feared being separated from their loved ones,

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  \item \textsuperscript{4} Vladka Meed, \textit{On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto} (Israel: Ghetto Fighters’ House, 1972), 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{6} The definition of \textit{Judenrat} is Jewish council. In this position, Czerniakow oversaw the various functions of the Warsaw ghetto and acted as a liaison between the Jews in the ghetto and Third Reich officials.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} Meed, \textit{On Both Sides of the Wall}, 21.
\end{itemize}
who were going to be deported. Indeed, it was during the chaos of one of these round-ups in early August 1942, which followed one of the Germans’ notorious shooting raids, that Vladka lost sight of her mother and brother. Later, she learned from a neighbor that the two had gone to Umschlagplatz. It was then that she realized that she would never again see her loved ones.

Somewhat later on, Vladka’s only surviving family member, her sister Henia, who had a position working in a soup kitchen, was also deported. This left Vladka entirely alone and only needing to worry about her own safety. In addition to these personal calamities, she witnessed, along with the rest of the ghetto, the final march of the orphans of Janusz Korczak’s orphanage. According to Vladka’s description, this was a pitiful scene with children walking silently and clutching their blankets while accompanied by the noted and aging educator [Dr. Korczak], who refused to abandon his charges, even as they marched into the hands of death.\textsuperscript{8}

It was also around this time that rumors began to circulate about Treblinka.\textsuperscript{9} A few survivors who had miraculously managed to flee and return to the Warsaw ghetto, reported on the horrors they had witnessed at this final destination site of many of the Warsaw ghetto’s transports.\textsuperscript{10} Vladka refused – at least at this point in time – to think that her loved ones had been among the death factory’s claimed victims.

Vladka makes frequent reference throughout her book to the members of her underground network, as well as to the Jewish Fighting Organization (the “Z.O.B.” in Polish),

\textsuperscript{8} The final march of Janusz Korczak and the children of his orphanage has been well-documented in numerous Holocaust memoirs, literature, and in films, such as Korczak (1990) by Polish filmmaker, Andrzej Wajda. In addition, the Polish Parliament has deemed 2012 the year for commemorating the seventieth anniversary of Korczak’s premature death. Korczak’s fate was doubly tragic, for he was given the opportunity to go free. Yet, he decided to remain with his children, providing them with a sense of calm, even while knowing all the while their inevitable and collective fate.

\textsuperscript{9} According to Ervin Birnbaum, the first accounts of Treblinka reached the Warsaw ghetto in August 1942 through the eyewitness testimonies of two escapees, Azriel Wallach and Yankel Wiernik. See: Ervin Birnbaum, In the Shadow of the Struggle (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House Ltd, 1990), 187.

\textsuperscript{10} Although Vladka does not specify who these Treblinka survivors were, she later relates the account of Azriel Wallach, who also happened to be the nephew of the Soviet diplomat, Maxim Litvinov. See: Meed, On Both Sides of the Wall, 104.
which was likewise an underground movement. These inter-linked groups were comprised of young Jews mostly in their teens and twenties who represented a number of different Jewish youth groups and accompanying ideologies: the Bund, Hechalutz, Dror, Hashomer Hatzair, and the Communist Party. Among the leading figures were Mordechai Anielewicz, Abrasha Blum, Marek Edelman, Leon Feiner, Zygmunt Friedrich, Michal Klepfisz, Arie Wilner, and Itzhak Zuckerman. Many of these courageous individuals would ultimately die in the Holocaust under varying horrendous circumstances. Of the aforementioned, only Marek Edelman and Itzhak Zuckerman (both of whom are now deceased) managed to survive.

At first, members of the Jewish underground simply broached the subject of staging some form of resistance. The initial hope was that no more than 60,000-70,000 ghetto Jews would be deported. Given these conditions, the Jewish underground did not believe it just to jeopardize the lives of the entire Warsaw ghetto for the sake of an active resistance. However, the underground’s outlook would ultimately change with the growing awareness that the Germans intended to liquidate the entire ghetto – as well as its yet surviving Jewish residents.

Before conditions reached the point of an all-out active resistance on the part of the Jewish underground and the Jewish Fighting Organization in the form of the Warsaw ghetto uprisings, beginning in January 1943, there were numerous rescue and smuggling efforts carried out by couriers such as the unassuming-looking Vladka. As Vladka relates, it was at one of these underground meetings that the decision was made that she would cross over to the “Aryan” side of Warsaw, where she could best serve the Jewish cause. Once Vladka was back on the streets of her own city again, posing as a Pole, she could not help but observe the startling dichotomy

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11 Among the names listed above, perhaps the most well remembered is that of Mordechai Anielewicz, who was affiliated with the Hashomer Hatzair movement, and who died a valiant death – along with many of his comrades – in a bunker at Mila 18. Today in Warsaw, there is a monument commemorating Anielewicz (and his fellow ghetto fighters) at Mila 18, as well as a major street, “Ulica Anielewicza” named for him.

12 Marek Edelman, who always remained an enigmatic figure, lived out his life in Poland and died in 2009. In contrast, Itzhak Zuckerman, a member of Hechalutz, went to Palestine in 1947 and helped to found Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot (the Ghetto Fighters’ Kibbutz). He died in Israel in 1981.

13 Meed, *On Both Sides of the Wall*, 69.
between conditions there and in the ghetto. On the “outside,” as she expresses, everything seemed to function in a “business as usual” manner, with people frequenting shops and children heading off for school.

As Vladka’s manifold near-brushes with capture and death on the “Aryan” side attest, a Jew posing as a Pole had to constantly watch his/her back. Somehow, according to Vladka, regardless of how “Aryan” a Jew might appear or how well he/she spoke Polish, “Poles had no difficulty in recognizing Jews.” Furthermore, there were those criminal elements among the Polish populous that took advantage of this situation and blackmailed Jews who had the means of paying. Less fortunate Jews were those who had no means of paying off their blackmailer-pursuers – otherwise known in Polish as szmalcownicy. These individuals simply did not stand a chance, as the blackmailers would usually turn them over to Gestapo agents.

On these latter unfortunate circumstances, Vladka wryly remarks that “Without these Polish informers, the Germans would never have caught as many Jews as they did.” Vladka further remarks on the subject of the szmalcownicy that the Jewish underground even attempted to combat these evil-doers by appealing to the Polish underground to issue statements in their secret press, declaring these individuals criminals and advocating that they be dealt with accordingly. Sadly, for the Jews, these appeals were ignored, and the szmalcownicy continued their deplorable and calculating activities.

Although Vladka’s narrative has an objective tone that is not highly emotional, in light of all that she personally experienced and witnessed during the war years, there are certain key passages that struck this reader as being more emotionally charged than others. One such passage relates a vignette that took place not long after Vladka passed over to the “Aryan” side. As she was walking nearby the ghetto wall one day, Vladka took in the sight of Poles of varying ages frolicking in Krasinski Park. The Poles continued to enjoy themselves even after hearing a volley of gunfire followed by anguished screams coming from the ghetto. According to Vladka, the

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14 Ibid., 89.
15 Ibid., 90.
general lack of concern or empathy among the Poles for their Jewish compatriots at such a moment was captured in the following remarks of a young Pole, who proceeded to ride on a park swing even after the previous disturbance, “That was just for the Jews.”\(^{16}\) This was as if to say that they Poles need not worry themselves, since these violent acts of retribution did not affect them.

One of the most poignant tasks entrusted to Vladka was that of aiding Jewish children by smuggling them out of the ghetto and/or finding them living quarters on the “Aryan” side. In many cases, this entailed finding Poles who were willing to risk their own lives—often, for pay—for the upkeep of children who did not necessarily have “Aryan” features. More promising were the instances in which orphanages or churches agreed to shelter Jewish children. Nuns, for example, could generally be trusted not to turn in their Jewish charges. But establishing these types of contacts with religious, Christian institutions was far more complicated for the Jewish underground, compared to locating private residences for these children. According to Vladka, a number of these children managed to survive the war, although their parents did not always share their fate.

Vladka describes all of the events leading up to and transpiring during the course of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, which was initiated by the Jewish Fighting Organization under the command of Mordechai Anielewicz, on January 18, 1943. This was the first time Jews offered organized resistance against deportation. The next uprising battle ensued on the morning of April 19, 1943, the eve of Passover. Vladka witnessed horrifying, indelible scenes of the uprising from the “safety” of the “Aryan” side, while all the while bearing a sense of guilt that she was not doing more to aid her suffering and combatant comrades within the ghetto.

At the same time, she once again observed the overall lack of involvement on the part of Poles who were cognizant of what was taking place just beyond the ghetto wall. She and her comrades kept asking themselves the following troubling questions: “Where was the help our neighbors had promised? And the rest of the world—why was it so silent?”\(^{17}\) The Warsaw ghetto –

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 88.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 147.
which was indicated by the German commander, SS General Jurgen Stroop, as having been made Judenrein as of May 16, 1943 – was ultimately liquidated. In Vladka’s words, the Warsaw ghetto uprising only ceased “after the last Jewish insurgent in the ghetto had perished.”

The final chapters of On Both Sides of the Wall pertain to the Warsaw uprising, which began on August 1, 1944; the conclusion of World War II and its immediate aftermath; and the impressions that Vladka and her husband, Benjamin Meed – also a Holocaust survivor from Warsaw – had upon returning to Poland thirty-three years after the war. Insofar as the latter category, Vladka portrays her and her husband’s return trip to have been of a generally depressing and disheartening nature. For one thing, according to her estimates at that time, there were only some 6,000-7,000 remaining Jews in Poland. Of those, most were either retired and elderly, or assimilated partners in mixed marriages.

Vladka and her husband were saddened to find that so little of their hometown of Warsaw had remained recognizable, and that what had once been such a bustling Jewish center was no more. Indeed, Vladka remarks that ironically, the first overtly Jewish site that she and her husband witnessed in Warsaw was that of the Nathan Rapoport monument to the Warsaw ghetto martyrs and heroes. Ultimately, the two made the journey to visit Treblinka, where most of Vladka’s immediate family had perished. Yet, according to Vladka, even this former factory of death showed little evidence of the horrors that had once taken place there. All that remained was a vast and empty field, as the Germans had taken great care not to leave behind any traces of their crimes.

In commenting on the impact that On Both Sides of the Wall made on this reader, it is worth mentioning that she was initially drawn to this book on a personal level. Like Vladka, this

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18 Ibid., 154.

19 The Warsaw uprising of 1944 lasted for two months before the Poles capitulated to the Germans. According to Vladka, Jews who had been in hiding up until this time, as well as several hundred Jews bearing assumed Polish names who had been incorporated into various Polish combat units, were among those who participated in this battle. See: ibid., 254.

20 See: ibid., 264.
reader’s grandmother was a Holocaust survivor born in 1921 and a native of Warsaw who, similarly, had the good fortune of hiding among Polish gentiles for a portion of World War II. For these reasons, especially, this reader found Vladka’s accounts difficult to process on an emotional level. Intellectually, though, this reader found a wealth of information about the Holocaust as it affected Polish Jewry – particularly, in Warsaw and its environs.

Given the close proximity of this book’s original publication (in 1948) and the end of the war, this reader is struck by the fact that there is not greater emotionality – that there is a generally objective-sounding tone – present in this work. On this point, Vladka herself conceded in a 2001 interview, that at the time when she wrote this book, she limited her emotions, since this was intended to be more of a “narrative of events in Warsaw than a memoir.”21 In Vladka’s mind, she could not help but consider her own feelings unimportant in light of everything that had taken place. Furthermore, because most Holocaust survivors were not yet in the mode of committing their wartime experiences to paper and the world did not yet appear ready to hear these accounts in the late 1940s, there was perhaps an even greater need for factuality and objectivity at that time than there is today – some sixty-five years plus after the Holocaust. It is due to the sheer objectivity and early publication date of this work that this reader recommends that On Both Sides of the Wall be incorporated into the teaching of the Holocaust on both the high school and university levels.

In addition, it would be interesting to compare this edition (English, 1972) with that of the original edition (Yiddish, 1948). From superficial appearances, the two look identical except for the fact that the English edition includes the epilogue detailing Vladka and Ben Meed’s return trip to Poland some thirty-three years after the end of World War II. It would also be interesting to see how Vladka would have written this work now, at a time when (a) return trips

to Poland and (other ancestral countries) have become fairly commonplace, and b) the face of Poland’s Jewish presence and past history has changed and continues to do so. For example, this reader is curious to know what Vladka’s sentiments are regarding the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which is currently being built near the Rapoport monument. Also, what are her views regarding Polish-Jewish relations in Poland today in light of everything that she witnessed during the Holocaust and describes in her book? These are but a few of the many questions that this reader would like to ask Vladka, if given the opportunity.22

22 Vladka Meed died in Phoenix, AZ, on November 21, 2012. [Editor’s note.]