What Happened to Mary Berg?

A young girl’s account of the Warsaw Ghetto was a big success. Then the diary—and its author—disappeared.

By Amy Rosenberg  |  July 17, 2008 1:24 PM  |  Comments: 0

Mary Berg, born and raised in Poland, was nineteen in March 1944, when she stepped off a prisoner-of-war exchange ship from Lisbon and onto a dock in New York. She stood with her American-born mother, her Polish father, and her younger sister, clutching a suitcase that contained her U.S. passport (thanks to her mother’s citizenship) and a set of twelve diaries describing her experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto. Before she cleared immigration, she met Samuel L. Shneiderman, a journalist who had come from Poland a few years earlier. Thirty-seven at the time, Shneiderman had worked as a reporter in Warsaw, become the Paris correspondent for a few Polish dailies, and covered the Spanish Civil War until he left Europe in 1940. In New York, he made it his mission to spread the news of Poland’s pain, and in particular the pain of its Jews. It’s not known quite how he and Berg met on the dock after her ship anchored; it seems he was milling about, seeking stories, and she captured his attention. (Judging from pictures, she cut a striking figure, tall and sturdy, with dramatic dark looks and gigantic eyes.) However it happened, he learned about her journals and convinced her to let him edit them.

The two worked together closely, Berg growing close to the journalist’s family as she spent weeks turning her Polish shorthand into actual narrative at Shneiderman’s kitchen table, his
wife and two children looking on. After advising her about clarifications and additions he thought she should make, Shneiderman translated the narrative into Yiddish, and two months later, not long before D-Day, an excerpt appeared as the first in a series of ten monthly installments in one of New York’s leading Yiddish newspapers, the politically and religiously conservative Der morgen Zshurnal.

The grim facts Berg described are familiar to us now—all too familiar; we can easily fail to register their horror—but American readers in 1944 did not know them. A few other articles and pamphlets offering eyewitness testimonies emerged around the same time, but none did what Berg’s did: chronicled day-to-day life in the ghetto from its initial days through to the eve of residents’ first armed resistance, more than two years later.

Searching for food in the courtyard, drawn by Mary Berg

Here, in brief outline, is the story the excerpts told: Berg was fifteen in the autumn of 1939, when the German army invaded her native city of Lodz. She and her family fled, walking and bicycling the seventy miles to Warsaw. The ghetto was officially established about a year after the family settled in. As part of the moneyed class—her father was a respected art dealer and they’d managed to escape with some funds—they had it easier than many around them. (Berg felt guiltily aware of her advantages. “Only those who have large sums of money are able to save themselves from this terrible life,” she wrote, describing the hunger and sickness she’d seen in others.) In some ways, her accounts of daily life are astonishing for the normality they portray: relatives getting married, people going to work, friends chatting in cafés, students—herself included—working toward graphic arts degrees, theatre aficionados attending cabarets. But all that was short lived, and her accounts of the outrages she saw on the street are equally astonishing: “Sometimes a child huddles against his mother, thinking that she is asleep and trying to awaken her, while, in fact, she is dead.” In July 1942, Berg and others with foreign passports were put into the Pawiak prison, near the center of the ghetto, while most of the rest of the inhabitants were deported to their deaths. She watched them leave from the prison windows. “The whole ghetto is drowning in blood,” she wrote that August. “How long are we going to be kept here to witness all this?”

After its initial appearance in Der morgen Zshurnal, translations of Berg’s tale landed on the pages of several other papers—the leftist (and nonreligious) English-language P.M., Aufbau, a German-language paper aimed at a Jewish readership, and Contemporary Jewish Record, a precursor to Commentary. Soon after, in February 1945, L.B. Fischer—a German press that fled Europe and established temporary wartime headquarters in New York in 1942—published the diary in book form with a dust jacket Berg herself had drawn, an image of the brick wall that marked the ghetto boundary. Laudatory reviews appeared in the Saturday Review and The New Yorker. In The New York Times Book Review, Marguerite Young wrote, “Without qualification, this reviewer recommends Mary Berg’s Warsaw Ghetto to
everybody.” Fellow Poles realized the significance of the books as well.

The original cover of *Warsaw Ghetto*, drawn by Mary Berg

Renowned poet Julian Tuwim, also a native of Lodz and an occasional customer of Berg’s father, called the book “a Baedeker of our misery.” Over the next two years, translated versions appeared in five countries, and Berg became widely enough known that she was considered a New York celebrity. She marched on City Hall with signs demanding action to save Jews still alive in Poland. She gave talks before audiences and interviews on the radio. And then she, along with her book, disappeared.

In fact, if you’re not a Holocaust memoir buff, you’ve probably never heard of Berg’s wartime account, whereas you surely learned of Anne Frank’s diary before you were old enough to be a buff of anything. That’s in part because Berg’s book fell out of print in the early 1950s, right around the time the English-language edition of Frank’s diary was issued. (Frank’s has been in print continuously ever since.) On the surface, the two teenage diarists had a lot in common. Both were from well-off families, both wrote about the hardships they suffered. Both began their diaries on their birthdays (or, in Berg’s case, on her adopted birthday, because her actual one coincided with Hitler’s, and Jews weren’t allowed to be born on the same day as the Führer). But Frank was hidden from the full horror of the war while she wrote her diary; her entries necessarily focus on her own emotional development and the quotidian aspects of life in a small space. Berg stepped out into the streets and saw atrocities every day. Her words bear witness to the suffering and violence all around her and make her tale harder to take. Lawrence Langer, author of the landmark study *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, puts it this way: “Anne Frank’s diary was and is more popular because it records no horrors; the horrors came after she stopped writing, so readers don’t have to confront anything painful.”

S. L. Shneiderman in 1992
Last year, Susan Pentlin helped usher into publication a new edition of Berg's diary—sixty-two years after its initial release. Pentlin, a professor emerita of modern languages at the University of Central Missouri, suggests that Berg's withdrawal from the public eye played a big part in the forgetting of the book. Pentlin interviewed Shneiderman in the early 1990s, a few years before he died, and he told her that Berg walked away from the book at some point in the early 1950s. She wanted nothing more to do with it and hoped to forget the life she'd led in Europe, Berg had told him, as she broke off contact with him and his family. Sometime earlier, in 1950, L.B. Fischer disbanded its American outpost and returned to Germany. The company sold the rights to Berg's diary to A.A. Wyn, publisher of Ace Books, an imprint famous for its paperback genre novels and, at the time, for its stinginess toward authors. Wyn sat on the rights. After he died in 1967, his widow sold them back to Shneiderman. Berg still refused involvement.

Until the diary was republished last year, interest in it had been scarce. Historians and researchers knew of it, certainly, as it appeared frequently in bibliographies of Holocaust studies, but it was only in the mid-1980s, when a Polish version was published for the first time and a Warsaw theater staged a dramatic reading, that public attention rekindled briefly. The play's director contacted Berg to invite her to the show, but she responded through friends, refusing to return to Poland to watch it, according to a New York Times article at the time. And when Pentlin contacted her in 1995 about the possibility of reprinting the book, Berg responded bitterly.

Mary and her sister Anna in the Warsaw Ghetto

"Instead of continuing to milk the Jewish Holocaust to its limits," she wrote, "do go and make a difference in all those Holocausts taking place right now in Bosnia or Chechin....Don't tell me this is different." Berg wanted nothing to do with any revival. "She told me to 'bug off,'" Pentlin says. "I also understand that she has denied being Mary Berg on several occasions." At the time, she was seventy-one years old and still living in the United States; if she knows where, Pentlin isn't saying. Pentlin also says she doesn't know if Berg is alive today, and there is no obituary on record.

It goes without saying that Berg was one of the lucky ones. Unlike Anne Frank, she escaped Europe alive. Her family escaped with her, and she saw her story published. She heard critics, reviewers, and readers call her a hero, her story evidence of, as The New York Times put it, "the dignity of man." But perhaps this reception was what eventually drove Berg away from her story. "Dignity," says Langer, "is the last word I would use to describe the anguish of the ill and starving Jews in the ghetto. If you check some of the early reviews, you will see how eager most of them were to transform this into a heroic story." Berg did not want to be a hero.
As she wrote from the Vittel internment camp in France, where she was sent after her ghetto imprisonment, “We, who have been rescued from the ghetto, are ashamed to look at each other. Had we the right to save ourselves? Here everything smells of sun and flowers and there—there is only blood, the blood of my own people.” The account in Der morgen Zshurnal was published before the war ended, before the Jews of Hungary were decimated, while it was still possible to hope some people might be rescued. Berg published her diary as a call to action. “I shall do everything I can to save those who can still be saved,” she wrote. “I will tell, I will tell everything, about our sufferings and our struggles and the slaughter of our dearest, and I will demand punishment for the [Germans]...who enjoyed the fruits of murder....A little more patience, and all of us will win freedom!”

Mary Berg as a young girl

But not all of them did, of course, and Berg’s disappearance suggests that even those who escaped were never free. Is it grim to wonder what would have become of Anne Frank had she survived Bergen-Belsen, what would have become of her book? Philip Roth does so in his first Zuckerman novel, The Ghost Writer. Alive and in hiding (according, at least, to Zuckerman’s imagination), Frank, under her assumed identity, explains why she could not reveal herself after learning about the publication of her diary: “I was the incarnation of the millions of un-lived years robbed from the murdered Jews. It was too late to be alive now. I was a saint.”

With memoir, it is the fact of a life outside the pages that gives the book its aura. If that life has a tragic end, like Frank’s, it’s possible, as Roth suggests, to feel a kind of catharsis—often a desperately needed one. If the life that comes after is one of triumph over adversity (like, say, Elie Wiesel) we derive something different—a sense of hope, perhaps, or at least satisfaction. Mary Berg’s diary offers neither catharsis nor satisfaction. The story that comes after it is not tragic or triumphant; there is, in fact, no story. A terrible, true event took place, and someone lived to tell about it, and the world responded either indifferently or with misguided sympathy, and many hundreds of thousands more died despite the truths that had been told. After that there was nothing left to say.
RIP Joseph Sargent, Director of the Greatest Jewish Action Movie
U.S. to Pay Alan Gross $3.2 Million After Five-Year Imprisonment in Cuba
Report: Anti-Semitic Acts in Britain at 30-Year High
Polish Film 'Ida' Shortlisted for Best Foreign Language Film Oscar
In South Dakota, a Shrinking Jewish Population

Forbidden Fruit
Judith Katzir on the lives of Israeli women, both real and imagined
By Eryn Loeb