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JOHN HERSEY

Pulitzer Prize-winning author of A BELL FOR ADANO and THE WAR LOVER



The

WARSAW Ghetto

The monumental epic about the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II

ILLUSTRATED BY ANTONIO DI NOVI • THE COMPLETE

ILLUSTRATED EDITION

THE
WALL



JOHN HERSEY



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THE WALL

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This is a work of fiction. Broadly it deals with history but in detail it is invented. Its "archive" is a hoax. Its characters, even those who use functions with actual precedent—such as the chairmanship of the *Judenrat*, for example—possess names, faces, traits, and lives altogether imaginary.

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EDITOR'S PROLOGUE

ONE SUNNY DAY IN THE SUMMER AFTER THE END OF THE war, a search party found the Levinson Archive buried in seventeen iron boxes and a number of small parcels, the latter wrapped in rags and old clothes, under the sites of what had been, before the razing of the entire Warsaw ghetto, Nowolipki Street 68 and Swientojerska Street 34. Could but poor Levinson have been there himself that day!

The search party consisted of four survivors of the ghetto, including Henryk Rapaport and Rachel Apt, together with a team of surveyors from the Warsaw municipality, some city employees with digging implements, and a number of government people. Their search was as difficult as if they had been mariners hunting for some Atlantis under an uncharted sea. In hard fact, there was nothing left of the ghetto except the encompassing wall. Within, there was only an immense quadrangle of ruin: scores of city blocks reduced now to a plaza of thoroughly raked-over bits of mortar and crumbled brick, with here and there unaccountably untouched hills of rubble, like careless piles of husks and pollards left around after a threshing. For the most part, the wreckage had been cleared and everything but masonry carted away, as if even the down-pulled ruins of Jewry had been offensive. Among thousands of buildings that had once been ranked on this ground, only one—one building!—was left standing: fittingly, the Gensia Street Jail. Around the prostrate quarter was an eight-foot wall, into the rounded mortar at the summit of which bits of prohibitive glass had long ago been stuck, and

Rachel Apt says the walltop sparkled that day in the summer sun, with glints of amber and blue and green.

Thus it was the task of the search party to go out into the huge wrecked space within the twinkling wall and try to find, not only the location of two specific nonexistent buildings, but also the exact situation of their respective former courtyards, and inside those courtyards certain corners, and under those corners the little tombs of Levinson's Archive: like finding a couple of coins dropped into the sands of a wide, dry beach. It is public knowledge that in a matter of hours the party was successful.

Fortunately, the searchers had started out with three specific pieces of guidance as to where they should find the archive: a letter in Noach Levinson's own handwriting, dated November 5, 1942, which Levinson had sent through Hechalutz couriers to Palestine and which had been returned to Warsaw directly after the war; a memorandum by Rachel Apt, written down by her soon after her escape from the ghetto, based on what Levinson had asked her to memorize; and a document that had been sent up to Warsaw from Budapest, notes put down in German by a German underground courier who had visited the ghetto just a month before it was destroyed and had been given Levinson's directions by Rachel Apt. The three documents were in proper accord. Rachel Apt's included one fact the others did not: the depth to which the strongboxes had been sunk (on the average, their tops were said to be half a meter, about twenty inches, down); and Levinson's own letter was more specific than the others, in that it actually dealt in meters *and* centimeters, in telling how far out from the corners—from the courtyard and cellar walls in both cases—box-edges might be found. Long after the archive had been found, other sets of directions were still drifting back to Warsaw from various points of the compass and from as far away as Shanghai; Levinson, a meticulous man, had made certain that his labors would not be wasted.

The morning of the search, the surveyors, equipped with the three documents, with prewar waterworks charts, and

with an alidade, triangulated the spire of the Cathedral of St. John, the north side of the Gensia Street Jail, and the skyscraper on Napoleon Square. Gradually they moved toward their objective. Before ten o'clock, the chief of the surveying team, standing by his tripod on a little plateau of brickbats, shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, try here."

The diggers cleared away surface fragments and found that they were indeed on the flat ground of a former courtyard. With mallets they drove down long, slender star drills until—before noon—one of the workmen hit a box of the Swientojerska cache. The collection in the Nowolipie courtyard was located in mid-afternoon.

Two days' digging brought up the whole treasure. Naturally the search party was nervous about the possibility of missing some units of the archive, especially one or more of the cloth-wrapped parcels which Levinson evidently buried toward the end and in haste. Explorations were therefore made far outside the areas designated in the three documents of guidance. It is practically certain that everything was found.

Most of the archive had been buried for more than two and a half years, yet it was, by and large, in excellent condition. Some of the strongboxes had corroded, and all the cloth around the smaller packages was pretty much rotted; but Levinson and his helpers had packed the archive with affectionate care, and only in the case of one strongbox, about a third of whose contents seemed to have been badly soaked, had any of the documents been rendered totally illegible. Each major manuscript was separately enveloped in several layers of paper and each box and parcel was very tightly crammed or wrapped. One can imagine that the clothing bound about the parcels must have been taken from dead bodies or from deserted apartments.

A forlorn task it must have been, putting this archive to rest: but carried out with what love and zeal!

The Levinson Archive is famous in Poland and in Palestine. So far the Historical Commission has published in the Polish

language thirty-seven volumes of material from it, and many more are promised.

What a wonder of documentation! The archive contains all sorts of rich things, mostly intensely moving, simple, personal writings: diaries, novels, notebooks, account books, minutes of meetings, collections of letters, plays, poems, short stories, sketches, musical compositions; as well as a great mass of official records, mostly from the *Judenrat*, every single page of which tells a human story, dry as the intent may have been. Levinson, driven by his obsession that the only legacy the crowds in the ghetto would have to pass on would be their history, collected all this. He kept calling himself, in a rather scornful and half-humorous way, Archivist, or Historian, but he was only interested, really, in separate Jews, in people. He must have been a lonely man.

This volume contains excerpts from Levinson's own document, and a remarkable one (the editor will be pardoned if he feels that) it is.

For eight years Noach Levinson made almost daily entries in a loose-leaf notebook. He tried to write down everything. He nearly succeeded! During the three and a half years with which this book is concerned, he wrote more than four million words—which the editor, with a diffidence he cannot express, has been obliged to reduce, by selection, to one twentieth their original scope. Who knows how many notebook fillers Levinson consumed? His pages alone filled three of the iron filing cases of the archive. He was a paper-thief: this is the only misdemeanor the editor has been able to attach to Levinson.

Levinson wrote in Yiddish in a tiny, beautiful hand—a calligraphy worthy of a scribe of the law. His hand is crystal clear: it is doubtful whether there are a thousand illegible words in all his four million, and considering the tension under which he wrote toward the end, that is a remarkable minimum. Yet he must have written with great speed. Writing was his grace and agility.

Like a living being, the manuscript changed as it grew. Before the troubles in the ghetto, it consisted, as Levinson

wrote, mocking himself, of "the slightest kind of personal, diaristic notes for some polite Jewish history I intended in a quiet year to write." Later, it was, he wrote, "only the febrile, hand-tremorous act of recording." Nevertheless, the whole has a unity, which rests upon Levinson's feeling that events were less important than people's reactions to them. Had he ever written his "polite history," it must surely have been a humanistic work, a sociology.

It would be hard indeed to classify what Levinson left behind him: it is not so formidable as history; it is more than notes for a history; it is not fiction—Levinson was too scrupulous to imagine *anything*; it is not merely a diary; it is neither journalism nor a journal in the accepted modes: it has scant precedent. This writing seems to reflect the life and mind of Noach Levinson in troubled times. Yet the editor cannot help feeling that it may be other than it seems.

Levinson never had time to go back over what he had written and revise it. In fact, he chose not to. He refers, in the entry dated July 29, 1942, to "the rule I set myself long ago that I should never destroy anything from this record: the principal value of these jottings for later use will be as a guide to the reactions of the moment, and I cannot help it if they remind me and embarrass me." We can be glad of this rule, for it gives us an opportunity to see the shifting opinions, the inconsistencies, the resourceful self-delusions of a man in final difficulties.

With all his thoroughness, Levinson must have had some prejudices or blind spots. How else account for some of the omissions from his notes? For instance, he never mentions the underground radio transmitter, which broadcast even at the beginning of the final battle in the ghetto under the call letters SWIT. He must have known about it. He must not have *wanted* to write about it. Why?

Although Levinson reveals himself quite thoroughly in the body of this book, as he writes about other people, perhaps a few words about him might be helpful here. The editor,

who never met him, must rely on the accounts of Levinson's surviving friends.

In appearance, Noach Levinson was, it seems, not only unimpressive: most accounts agree that there was actually something repellent about his looks. His stature was small. He had the face of an intellectual, narrow and drawn out forward, and upon his unruly nose sat a pair of steel-rimmed glasses whose lenses were so thick that Levinson's eyes seemed, to one who looked into them, far larger than most human eyes. These glasses, and the piscine eyes they gave him, made him look, they say, like a snooper. His hair was seldom tidy. No one has ever spoken to the editor about his clothes, so they must have been drab but in no way disgusting.

Even Levinson's closest friends cannot say exactly how old he was. His skin had the transparency of that of a man with a delicate constitution who has driven his body, by discipline and through hardship, into a kind of toughness. He was probably traversing his early forties during the ghetto years. He had had a hard life. Born of an orthodox, lower-middle-class family in Skierniewice, he was sent to religious schools and went on as a Yeshiva student until he was about eighteen. He then ran away from home, rebelling, as many of his generation did, against the rigidity of his devout parents. He lived in Warsaw, poorly, working as a shoemaker, writing poems and stories, and educating himself in secular subjects. In 1928, or thereabouts, he went to work for the Yiddish paper, the *Togblat*, but resigned four or five years later in some sort of disagreement with the editor. For several years he supported himself as a clerk in a capmaker's shop, but one gathers that his real life was at night, when he studied and wrote. During that period, he published his famous scholarly books, *The Diaspora* and *Customs*. In the early 'thirties, he took work in the secretariat of the *Kehilla*, the Jewish Community Council, which was, under the Germans, transformed into the *Judenrat*. He was there at the time of the beginning of this book.

Levinson began writing in his notebooks late in 1935. Five years later, in the ghetto, they had become, in a sense, his career. At first, in this later phase, he was rather furtive about

his writing, though he almost always had his loose-leaf about him. He worked through conversation and observation, letting new material come to him as it would. Evidently he read back over his notes quite a lot, for we find him picking up details that interested him in some event, months after the event took place, tracking down the details and filling them out.

Gradually he lost his inhibitions about his work, to the point where many people considered this persistent and tactless little ferret to be a dreadful nuisance. He would ask anyone anything. People who were fighting for their existence could be pardoned for wondering whether Levinson had nothing better to do than to go around asking personal questions. As his inhibitions fell away, his sense of the need for his work grew. He came to feel that anything that happened to any Jew belonged in his notes. In the midst of the most commonplace conversations, Levinson might be seen sitting there taking notes. Rapaport tells a story, which he got from Dolek Berson, of something that happened one day in the *Judenrat*: Apparently a man named Morgenstern, who worked in the Vital Statistics Department, was paid a visit at his office by his wife. She was very upset about something, and Morgenstern went out into the corridor to talk with her. There the couple fell into a bitter argument. All of a sudden in between husband and wife comes Noach Levinson's nose. He is not there with advice or mediation; no, he is taking notes! (The editor has succeeded in finding the Levinson passage on this incident. The Morgensterns were arguing about an intensely private matter of household finance. The end of the passage is cryptic, but it suggests how some people felt about Levinson's labors. He wrote: "Their fight, though harsh, was satisfactorily concluded when both Mr. and Mrs. Morgenstern were diverted by their alliance in an argument against N.L., the substance of which is not worth recording.")

The editor can do no better than to quote from a letter about Levinson by Rachel Art:

"He was a queer man, but we loved him. Until he joined our 'family' he was all alone. He had never developed any

ties of any kind, and he had no relatives. Thus he had plenty of time for work.

“His voice was always a surprise, it was so deep and strong, coming from that narrow neck, as if a flute could make a noise like a trombone. Sounded very important.

“I remember one time we were walking along Gensia Street, Noach and Dolek and I, and he came right out and said, ‘I decided today that I am a coward.’ He talked that way, but of course he wasn’t. He had too much on his mind all the time to be a coward. His eyes were so strange because of his glasses. The pupils were terribly big, and one had the impression they were actually embedded in the glass. Toward the end we only seemed to see each other’s eyes. We didn’t look at faces any more, because they were all the same, and everybody’s eyes seemed to get bigger and bigger.

“It is funny. He could get anything out of you. Why would people confess intimate things to Noach, who was so impersonal? Well, he was an ear, he would listen, while everybody else was so busy thinking about himself. But there was something else also. There was a timid warmth in Noach. When he recited poetry! He could make us all cry, he could even make Dr. Breithorn cry. I loved him, he was so intense. I never thought him a bother, as some did.”

Levinson died of lobar pneumonia in March, 1944, nearly a year after the destruction of the ghetto. Doubtless the physical attrition of the ghetto years had made him too weak to fight off the sickness.

When the Levinson Archive was first dug up, the Historical Commission took it over and spent several months sorting it and selecting the most likely manuscripts for immediate publication. Being so bulky, the Levinson notes were put aside. Finally, in nine months of 1946, they were translated into Polish. It then seemed unlikely, however, and it still seems unlikely, that the Historical Commission would get around to publishing them for several years, because of their wordage and because they are, in their raw state, rather chaotic.

Thanks to the persistent appeals of Rachel Apt and others,

the Historical Commission was finally persuaded, after the Polish translation was completed, to send the original manuscript of the Levinson notebooks to Palestine. Levinson's final notes, which he did not bury but entrusted to Rachel Apt before his death, were also dispatched by her to Palestine. While on a visit to Tel Aviv early in 1947, Mr. A. Breslin, of the Jewish Historical Institute of New York, heard about the Levinson papers, examined them, and managed to have them shipped to the United States. It was at the request of the Institute that the present volume was undertaken. At the time of publication of this work, the manuscript will still be at the library of the Institute, 313 Madison Avenue, where it can be seen by qualified persons. Before long it will doubtless have to be sent back to Israel.

A word about the editing. It has taken two years. It could take twenty, and the editor would still be dissatisfied with the result. The problem, of course, was one of selection. After consultation with others, the editor decided it would be wisest to use for the most part only those passages which concerned the members of the "family" which Levinson joined, and a few others. He wrote just as much about scores of people whose names never appear in this volume. He would write as much as fifty thousand words in separate notes about a man, and all those notes would culminate in a bleak sentence: "Menachem Bavan was taken away today." In having selected a number of people to follow who survived the ghetto, the editor may be guilty of putting too much emphasis on survival in a situation where that was by far and away the exception. Yet Levinson was much interested in survival—and not merely his own.

In the case of each note, the reader will find first the date of the events therein described, and then the date of Levinson's entry. Levinson was careful in every note to designate his source, and these attributions have been kept. Where the note was based on his own observation or opinion, he used, and this volume uses, the initials N.L. The reader will notice that a number of passages are marked with a star (☆). The

passages are all taken from the context of a series of interviews that took place on May 9-10, 1943.

At last, the editor must express his gratitude to the two translators, Mendel Norbermann and Mrs. L. Danziger. Both of them worked with feeling. Mr. Norbermann's mother, Sara Norbermann, was deported from the Warsaw ghetto in September, 1942. Mrs. Danziger's brother-in-law died there of typhus. Their task was very difficult: they had to try to convey in English the life of Eastern European Jews without falling into the colloquialisms, word orders, and rhythms which, as taken over and modified by the American Jewish community, have become part of an entirely different culture: the connotations would have been misleading.

It is time to let Noach Levinson speak for himself.

THE EDITOR

THE WALL PART I

1

EVENTS NOVEMBER 11, 1939. ENTRY NOVEMBER 17, 1939. N.L. . . . Of all the pleasures in this surprisingly agreeable week in Pawiak Prison, I think the greatest was making the acquaintance of Berson.

He likes to argue. That is fine.

He is what political sophisticates call "a backward man": disinterested in affairs, honest about his confusion. But he has good instincts. He is, above all, zestful. He is both strong and qualmish. He has a powerful physique, but he refused to kill a spider that walked up the wall of our cell one morning: Dr. Breithorn did the job, with some relish, I thought.

I would call Berson a drifter: he lets life carry him along in its stream. He himself said that when we took him into the Community Building off the street the other day, he followed the crowd with a sensation of being dragged and buffeted by the wake of a vessel. He is a drifter, no doubt of it, and that may be why I have become curious about him: we have so many here who let themselves float along in whatever currents.

In one way Berson differs from your commonplace drifter. He is full of gusto, and to him everything is a skylark. He asks a million questions. He even discovered and exploited a certain entertaining quality in ugly little Schpunt. Not that he is all piquancy; he has a moody temper. . . .

EVENTS NOVEMBER 4, 1939. ENTRY DECEMBER 3, 1939.
FROM SYMKA BERSON. Froi Berson has finally told me of the events of November 4, from her point of view. Poor girl, she had no idea what was happening.

That day was the Bersons' fifth wedding anniversary. Symka Berson says she set out in mid-afternoon to shop for the party she had planned for that evening. She went down the stairs from her apartment irregularly: that is to say, she walked two or three steps, then somewhat sidewise trotted a few, pleased by the way her red skirt fanned brightly under her open coat, then more carefully took two at a time for a bit with hard, clean blows of her high heels on the wood; and so on, mixing paces. She hurried at the landings. She says she was in good spirits.

At the foot of the stairs she found Tomasz Kucharski, the Polish janitor for the apartment house, very recently stirred, she could see, into low-flickering activity by the telegraphic taps of her footsteps. He moved a broom without conviction across the floorboards of the entrance hall, gently fanning rather than cleaning them. He wore black trousers and an old green sweater, frayed open at the elbows—for bending's sake, as he would say.

Symka, facing the brilliant opening out into the courtyard:—Isn't this sunlight fine?

Kucharski, breaking off his sweeping with a disgusted sigh, as if the abandonment were a considerable sacrifice, and looking up:—Be careful out there. Don't get a sunstroke. (The grey-haired janitor smiled, as if his heavy irony needed a signal. It was November and cold.) I'm waiting for the new family. I think these people are rather disorganized. They sent me a note to say they would arrive at nine this morning, and what is it now? Have you a watch?

—A few minutes past three.

Symka observed to herself that old Tomasz had, as usual, found a way of asking the time. To the janitor, life seemed to be a series of impatient waits between sleeps.

Kucharski:—I don't think they like moving to this section.

Symka, lightly rejecting a statement that (she now realizes) might have stood some reflection:—I can't help it.

Kucharski:—They'll have me carrying things upstairs all evening, I can see that.

The janitor was started now; Symka moved toward the door and down the courtyard steps, half listening and half leaving. Tomasz prattled on and raised his voice as Symka walked away.

—I hear a family from Praga is going to move in next week. . . .

Now Symka was stepping rapidly across the cobbled yard; she turned and waved a kind of dismissal to the lonely old gossip, who was shouting:

—This courtyard has been as bad as a hotel for the last month. Coming and going. . . .

Poles going wholesale; Jews coming. Symka did not explore the thought. Walking rapidly along Sienna Street, she says she gave herself up to the mood of sunlight. [NOTE. N.L. I can imagine that in the bright day she looked slightly pinched and sallow; she is a delicate girl, with quick, big, dark eyes and a docile, soft mouth. She has long, black hair, with a wonderful freedom and luster. Outdoors her coat, which is brown, doubtless looked faded. She walks along with short steps, swinging her arms freely, and one can guess that she tilted her head back a little that day to face the friendly sky.]

Symka turned into Wielka Street and walked diagonally across it to Menkes' Bakery, on the far side. As she entered the yeasty shop, a tall, huge man was carrying forward, above his head, a flat pan whose still warm freight was covered over with clean, damp gauze.

—*Sholem aleichem.*

—*Aleichem sholem*, Froi Berson. (The baker slipped the pan onto one of the deep shelves lining the shop walls, and did not look around at her.) And how is your big talker since the other night?

—You shouldn't have baited Dolek so. He doesn't know when he is being teased.

The baker turned toward Symka. His bald head glistened.

He wiped his powdered hands on his powdered apron, to no purpose, and said:

—I wasn't baiting him. We were talking seriously enough, and when your husband began to argue absurdly, as usual, I simply phrased my questions absurdly, for the sake of reciprocity, and he wasn't alert enough to realize it. My Symka, you are married to a baboon.

—I know, and isn't he a splendid one?

—No!

Both laughed. Symka said, with mock severity:

—A loaf of white bread and a dozen sweet buns, if you please, Fraind Menkes.

—Please, Froi Berson.

The big man turned, reached up for a golden lump from a laden shelf, and slid out from another level a pan on which, when he peeled back its gauze overcast, were discovered many ranges of sugar-capped buns. He broke off twelve, then tossed two extra ones onto the pile.

—Anything else, Froi Berson?

—You're coming tonight?

—Could I miss it?

—Just think: five years today! It hardly seems possible.

—Just think! (Like the bullfrog trying to imitate the thrush.)
Hardly possible: that you haven't left him yet.

Symka, laughing:—Six o'clock. . . . Dolek's gone to the Old City, and he said he wouldn't be back till after six. You know what that means, with him. We'll have plenty of time to be on hand to surprise him.

—If he is capable of being surprised.

Symka let herself out of the door and hurried homeward. In Sienna Street, at the entrance to the courtyard at Number 17, she saw two wagons piled high with furniture and bundles; a number of porters, speaking Polish, were bustling around the wagons, untying cords, arguing, postponing their real work as long as possible. Symka says she realized the "new" family must have arrived. As she turned in at the courtyard gate, Symka met Rabbi Goldflamm. [NOTE. N.L. He is a middle-aged man with a round, young face, in which expres-