The Diary of
Mary Berg

GROWING UP IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

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ON E W O R L D
Oxford
CHAPTER XII

THE PRIVILEGED GO TO PRISON

JULY 19, 1942
This is only the third day of our internment in the Pawiak prison, but I can hardly believe that we have not been here much longer, for so many things have happened during this short time. We are now adjusted to the new conditions and we feel as if we belonged to the same family as the people who share this room.

My last night on Chlodna Street is still vivid in my memory. We made our last preparations with taut nerves. I was in a state of utter confusion and had to repack my suitcase several times. Over and over I asked myself the same question, “Have I the right to save myself and leave my closest friends to their bitter fate?” Each of us was allowed to take only one suitcase, and I had to be careful in choosing among my belongings. However, I took my notebooks, my photographs, my drawings, and my armband.

Uncle Abie stayed with us for the night. He is going to take our furniture and the other things we left. My father took his tallith and phylacteries and the little volume of the Psalms from which he had not parted in all his wanderings during the entire war. We went to sleep at two in the morning, but I had no sooner fallen asleep than I was awakened by the noise of frequent shots accompanied by police whistles sounding near by. I ran to the window. My parents had preceded me there. We could not see anything unusual on our street, but the firing continued. The sky was red, and for a moment I thought that a building was burning, but it was the sunrise, as red as the blood that has been shed in the streets of Warsaw for the past three years.

At seven in the morning, two Jewish policemen came to escort us to the Pawiak. They told us that the cause of the shooting was an attack by an armed group of people belonging to the underground movement on a workshop manufacturing uniforms for the German army. I wondered whether Romek had taken part in this attack, for I knew that recently he had been very active in the underground movement, although he never told me any details about it.

We left our house with tears in our eyes. My parents went first, and beside them were the two policemen and Uncle Abie. My sister Ann and I followed. Miss Sala, Bronka, Rutka, and Vera, who had come at daybreak to spend the last few hours with us, accompanied us. Groups of people from all the neighboring houses on Chlodna Street came out and watched the procession with sad eyes.

This July 17, 1942, was a sunny Friday. The sky was of a pure blue color, completely cleansed of the early morning redness, just as the ghetto pavement was washed of the blood that had been shed during the night. It seemed to me that never before had there been such a clear beautiful day in the ghetto.

We were led to the yard of the police station on Ogrodowa Street, where we found about seven hundred citizens of various neutral European and American countries. A police commissioner quickly checked our papers. Then a group of
policemen drew up in two ranks, formed a closed circle around us, and ordered us to walk.

I recognized one of the policemen—he was Jozef Swieca, my friend Inka’s fiancé. He came over to me to wish me a pleasant journey. “Inka was sorry she couldn’t come,” he said, “and asked me to give you her regards. I hope we’ll see each other again,” he added automatically, as though he believed what he said.

When we came out into the street, hundreds of people stood waiting on both sides of the pavement. Suddenly I heard several voices crying together, “Mary! Mary!” I saw Eva, Rena, Bronka, and Vera Neuman, trying to make their way to me through the crowd. Vera and Rena succeeded in getting through, and Rena handed me a bag of candy and a letter. “Don’t forget us!” she called after me. Eva, Rena, and Bronka waved to me with one hand, and with the other wiped their eyes. Miss Sala followed us with lowered head, sobbing loudly.

The mob on the sidewalks grew constantly. Everyone wanted to have a look at the lucky seven hundred foreign citizens. At the corner of Zelazna and Leszno Streets, the police were compelled to make use of their sticks to disperse the crowds that barred the passage. From all sides came remarks. “It’s a bad sign if they’re being taken away,” said one. “True, we can’t expect that anything good will come of it for us,” said another, and a third added, “Now they’ll finish us off.”

Literally all the able-bodied inhabitants of the ghetto were up that morning. Beginning at the corner of Smocza Street, that is to say, in the most crowded part of the ghetto, access to the street was completely closed. At last our procession reached Dzielna Street and stopped in front of the Pawiak gate opposite the church. The German officers who were waiting for us there ordered the Jewish policemen to leave. Uncle Abie, who had been helping us to carry our luggage, quickly gave it to us, and murmured to my mother, “How can you leave me?”

I burst into tears. Uncle Abie’s words were spoken in a tone that shook me completely. But we could do nothing. My mother embraced him for the last time, and I, too, hugged him warmly.

The Germans called out the names in alphabetical order and ordered each internee to pick up his own suitcase. All of us said goodbye to our friends among the Jewish policemen and to our close relatives, who were the only persons allowed to accompany us to the Pawiak. Finally, the prison gates opened and we found ourselves behind the bars. The Germans kept counting us. I do not know whether they did it out of fear that someone was missing or that someone had sneaked into this paradise behind iron bars. We were led through various winding corridors until we reached the large prison yard. In a corner, I noticed prisoners at work.

A table and chairs were set up in the courtyard, and the German officers sat down and spread out their lists. Then Assistant Commissioner Orf ordered the American and British citizens to form one group and the neutrals another. Now the real registration began. Each name was read several times, and the person named had to appear before the table and answer questions. When my turn came, I was seized by the fear that my father and I would not be recognized as entitled to be exchanged. I approached the table with shaking knees. The Germans asked us why only my mother’s and sister’s names had been reported. My mother explained that at first Commissioner Nikolaus had refused to register my father and me, but that later the order had been changed. Without saying a word, the German officer put our names down in the files.

After the registration, a woman approached the Germans and asked what she should do about her sick child who was in a ghetto hospital. “My little boy is dangerously ill and has a high fever,” she explained. The German officers answered, “He must be brought here at once!” This answer filled us with amazement. Several of us expressed the opinion that some
drastic action against the inhabitants of the ghetto was surely imminent.¹

We were led again through complicated corridors. Finally, the group of Americans and British were brought to a one-story building formerly inhabited by prison employees. We were placed in several rooms, ten persons per room, women and men separately. The other foreign citizens of neutral, occupied, and South American countries were locked up in prison cells, the men in the central building and the women in the special women’s wing, the so-called “Serbia.” There are rumors that these foreign citizens will be transported to the Aryan side and released. They were not allowed to take any luggage.

The room in which I am staying now is on the second floor. It is four to five square yards in size. Straw mattresses have been placed on the floor along two walls—six on each side. There is no other furniture. We are supposed to remain here for only a few days. At least, that is what we were told, but nobody believes it. I know that my friend Bola spent two whole weeks in the Pawiak before being taken to the Liebenau camp.

There are thirteen women and one eight-year-old girl in our room. My mother, my sister, and myself occupy two mattresses pushed together to form one large bed. Two of the women are British, the rest American. The whole apartment consists of four rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. Two of these rooms are occupied by men. The woman attendant who guards us has a little room of her own. We are prisoners, but have the right to move freely from one room to another.

The first night of our imprisonment, we recalled the history of this prison and the heroic exploit of Jozef Pilsudski, who saved ten prisoners who had been condemned to death here by Czarist judges. This incident served as a subject for one of the best Polish moving pictures, The Ten Prisoners of the Pawiak.²

JULY 20, 1942

Today we were summoned for a new registration that took place in the little prison yard. It turns out that most of us are citizens of various South American republics—there are only twenty-one United States citizens. The others, in order of their numerical importance, are citizens of Paraguay, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Haiti, Bolivia, and Mexico.¹

Thus it is clear that many Jews could be saved from the ghetto with the help of South American passports. The Germans recognize the validity of such passports, although their possessors can speak neither Spanish or Portuguese. It seems that the Germans need human material for exchange against the Germans interned in the American republics. How can the world be informed that human lives can be saved with these little slips of paper?

During the late afternoon there was terrible agitation among the internees. Letters arrived from outside with frightening news. The ghetto is in a state of panic. The population expects a mass deportation of three hundred thousand people. President Czerniakow and all the community leaders have tried to calm the people by declaring that the Germans have officially denied these rumors. But the panic increased when it became known that the Transferstelle had received several freight cars used for transporting animals, cars which some time ago had been crowded with Jews transported from the ghetto to various labor camps.

In the eyes of the ghetto inhabitants, deportation is worse than death, for it means death after the most horrible tortures and humiliations, and it means death without burial. The thousands of Jews who were sent away with the first transports vanished without a trace.

The news of the imminent deportation has particularly shaken a young woman in our room who left her parents and three younger sisters in the ghetto. She is lying on her mattress, muttering unintelligible words.
The “information service” of the Pawiak works well; the guards let themselves be bribed without difficulty, they take out and bring in letters, and give us detailed information about what is happening in the ghetto.

Opposite our building is the prison laundry, where many women prisoners are employed. Near by is a kitchen in which potatoes are peeled, and beets, turnips, and carrots washed. I can observe all this from our windows, some of which face the prison yard. The women prisoners sit on little stools, and work without enthusiasm. There are women of various ages and appearance. Some of them have intelligent faces, but they look dejected, and there is not the slightest smile on their lips. Sometimes one of the prisoners quickly bites off a piece of carrot, and looks around with a frightened expression to see whether the guard has noticed her. I also observe the prisoners when they take their regular walk in the yard, with their hands behind their backs.

From the other window, which faces Dzielna Street, I see the policeman on guard walking back and forth. There are no passers-by because Pawia and Dzielna Streets, which run parallel on both sides of the prison buildings, are closed to traffic.

Close to our window we sometimes see a Jewish policeman walking out of Numbers 27–31 Dzielna Street, which is Dr. Janusz Korczak’s children’s home. I can see many little beds through the windows of this house. During moments of quiet I hear the sweet voices of the children who live there, quite unaware of what is happening around them.

An hour ago, a guard ordered all the British nationals to come to the yard with their luggage. We do not know whether they are really going to be sent away. Meanwhile, our room is less crowded. On one side, the mattresses are occupied by the W. family—the mother, a daughter, Rosa, and a daughter-in-law, Esther. The two opposite corners are occupied by Mrs. H., Mrs. R., and ourselves. On the remaining mattresses are Mrs. G., her little daughter Alusia, and a young girl, Guta E. Each of us is busy with something different, but all of us are constantly thinking of our relatives and friends in the ghetto, whom we are unable to save from the mortal danger hanging over them, only a few steps from our prison.

JULY 21, 1942

Today sixty hostages were brought to the prison, among them prominent members of the Council of Elders and well-known physicians and engineers. The most prominent of these hostages are Engineer Jaszunski, the educational director of the community, Abraham Gepner, chairman of the Provisions Office, S. Winter, and Dr. Kohn.

The ghetto is still in a state of panic. The great disaster is expected at any moment. Nazi guards run through the streets shooting people for no reason at all. The hunger is increasingly
terrible—food has simply vanished. A pound of bread now costs twelve zlotys. All of us in the Pawia are living in the same state of panic, and we, too, are literally starving. Our reserves are exhausted. The food we get here consists of a little boiled water with a piece of potato or beet in it. These soups are given out twice a day, for lunch and dinner. In the morning we receive a slice of black bread, and water, which is called “coffee.” But this is nothing when compared with the hell outside the Pawia gates.

JULY 22, 1942
Today the ghetto had a bloody Wednesday. The misfortune everyone expected has struck. The deportations and street pogroms have begun. At daybreak, patrols of Lithuanians and Ukrainians led by Elite Guards surrounded the ghetto, and armed guards were stationed every ten yards. Anyone approaching the gates or showing himself at a window was shot on the spot. The Lithuanians and Ukrainians displayed great zeal in their murderous work. They are tall young beasts of seventeen to twenty who were especially trained for their job by German instructors.

For a long time there has been talk in the ghetto of the impending replacement of the German guards, mostly old soldiers, by young Ukrainians and Lithuanians. Now these rumors, which were generally disbelieved, have been confirmed.

Last night the German authorities informed the Jewish community that all the inhabitants of the ghetto would be transported to the east. Only forty pounds of luggage are allowed per person; all remaining possessions will be confiscated. Everyone must bring provisions for three days. The deportation was supposed to begin this morning at eleven o’clock. The order exempts only those Jews who are employed in German factories and workshops in the ghetto, as well as the officials of the various ghetto institutions. This includes the Jewish police force, the community officials, the employees of the ambulance service, the hospital staffs, the undertakers, and all possessors of registration cards issued by the Labor Office who have not yet been assigned jobs. The families of these chosen people are also exempt from deportation.

The Jewish police is charged with the sad task of preserving order during the deportation and of employing force against those who refuse to give themselves up.

The concentration point of this mass migration is situated at the Umschlagplatz on Stawki Street. The Germans demand 3,000 persons a day for deportation. The panic in the ghetto is indescribable. People with bundles in their hands run from one street to another, and do not know what to do. Many are trying at the last moment to obtain jobs in the German factories of Toebens and Schulz, which are situated in the ghetto. I was told that some people are paying bribes of as much as a thousand zlotys for such a job. The Jews themselves are trying to organize large workshops to make goods for the Germans, in order to give employment to people threatened with deportation.

Today the Jewish police gathered up all the beggars from the streets and emptied the refugee camps. These unfortunate were locked up in freight cars without food or water. The transports are being sent in the direction of Brzesc, but will they ever reach there? It is doubtful that all these starving people will arrive at their destination alive; they will perish in their sealed cars. A hundred persons are crowded into each car. The Polish prison guard who whispered all these details to us had tears in his eyes. He lives near Stawki Street, and he witnessed horrible scenes of people being driven into cars with whips, just as though they were cattle.

Today we received a package of food from Uncle Abie, in which he enclosed a note. Fortunately for us, he is on the police force, otherwise he would not have been admitted to Dzielna Street. His short note expressed despair. He cannot accept the idea that, as a policeman, he will have to help in the
deportation, and is thinking of resigning from his job. But, on the other hand, his job protects him from deportation. He wants to know what we think about it.

From our window I can see that something unusual is going on in Korczak's children's home. Every now and then someone walks in and, a few minutes later, comes out leading a child. These must be the parents or families of the children, who in this tragic moment want to be with their loved ones. The children look clean, and are dressed neatly though poorly. When I bend out of the window I can see the corner of Smocza Street. There is terrible confusion there; people are running back and forth as though possessed. Some carry bundles, others wring their hands.

Dzielna Street must have been opened for traffic, because suddenly many passers-by have appeared there, and until now it was empty. Often I can see whole families, parents with their children, the mothers holding babies in their arms, and the bigger children following them. There must be many Jews who are reporting voluntarily for deportation—those who have no other way out, no possibility of hiding. The Germans give them a kilogram of bread per person, and promise them better working conditions. But these desperate volunteers do not fill the quota of 3,000 people a day. The police must supply the rest by means of force. They drag their victims out of their homes or seize them in the streets.