

Magda Jaros · Leon Weintraub
Reconciliation with Evil

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RECONCILIATION WITH EVIL

From Polish translated
by Michał Weintraub

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Foreword

BY SASCHA FEUCHERT

Leon Weintraub's memories gathered in this volume are unique in Holocaust literature: on the one hand, there is the dialogical form, which makes it easy for the reader to follow the narrative, but which also fits Leon's character very well. After all, his whole life is geared towards dialogue, sharing, conversation and sincere interest in one's neighbor. And that, in turn, is closely related to another special feature of these memoirs: Leon's look back is not one in anger, nor on revenge, but he is one who is always looking for the positive and focuses on what lets us live on. When Leon Weintraub talks about reconciliation, he doesn't have forgiveness in mind. Of course, he cannot forgive the murder of members of his family and of many millions of other people. This guilt will remain, it is irrevocable for all time. Rather, what Leon means by reconciliation is that he is looking ahead, wanting to break the cycle of violence and counter-violence in order to realize his ideals of humanity. His desire for reconciliation in no way blinds him to the current evil, which he fights with everything he has at his disposal. His tireless commitment as a contemporary witness is aimed precisely at this: sensitizing people and arming them for their own fight against right-wing extremism, nationalism and racism. Leon does not allow himself to be discouraged, not even at a time when Nazis and populists are on the rise across Europe. He remains an optimist—and speaks plain language: In this book, too, he takes a hard stance on the current government in Poland, his home country.

Leon Weintraub looks back on almost a whole century, his world view is shaped by wisdom, a large portion of humor—but also by pain. A pain that stems from the early loss of his father, of whom he no longer remembers, from living in poverty in Łódź, Poland,

from years of terrible humiliation in the ghetto and in the camps. But there is something else that distinguishes this charismatic man and that becomes visible under the surface when you get to know him just a little better: an indomitable will that, coupled with iron discipline, has led him out of all the misery he had to experience. He studied medicine without a high school diploma, and he had to start over and over again in his life, learn new languages, find his way around, be strong. And even today, at almost 100 years old, he puts on a workload that would make quite a few younger people sweat.

Dr Leon Weintraub is a phenomenon, his memories are unique—and getting to know him, also through this book, is a privilege.

Prof. Dr. Sascha Feuchert
Research Unit for Holocaust Literature University of Giessen

From the authors

I made it ...

This description of my reaction when I handed this book over to my readers is explained by the fact that I am 95 years old. I had time to reconstruct and describe my long, extraordinary life.

After leaving the profession at the age of 71, my commitment to conveying to young people, by the example of my own life, the consequences of Nazi ideology: from resentment towards others with different backgrounds or beliefs, to mass genocide in the gas chambers, grew. I was often asked about my position towards the perpetrators. Forgiveness, or justification, of these crimes beyond human imagination is not possible for me. What remains is reconciliation, which, once mutual accusations have ceased and the spiral of hostility and evil has ended, makes it possible to create a human future together. As a Holocaust survivor, I have consciously adopted this attitude: readiness for reconciliation.

I used to end my meetings in schools with several messages. I say that modern knowledge of DNA, the carrier of our genetic ancestry, proves that there is only one race of people—*homo sapiens*. It follows that Hitler's ideology was based on false premises. I would also like to mention that when I performed surgeries, whatever color the patient's skin was, the tissues underneath were identical in everyone.

This book was written thanks to Magda Jaros and on her initiative. It was her inspiration and merit that I managed to recreate and convey what I experienced in my long life. Its beginnings were characterized by poverty, my youth by inhuman living conditions in the Litzmannstadt ghetto (there was never a ghetto in my hometown of Łódź), and by concentration camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Gross-Rosen, Flossenbürg and Offenburg, a sub-camp of Natzweiler.

The return to normality was sometimes strewn with thorns, but on the whole, I can evaluate the post-war stage as a very positive one. I had, and still have, a rich life and I achieved a lot. I am grateful to Magda for her patience, insight and often curiosity in “unraveling” the details hidden in the recesses of my brain.

I have three sons and a daughter who have already started their families. I owe a lot to my wife—for 45 years Evamaria has been my support and it is to her credit that I feel so well.

I am, for all my age, in good mental and physical condition, so I derive much satisfaction from my life. After Auschwitz, I don't use the word “complain” because everything is much better now.

To the readers of this story, I wish to convey my unshakable conviction that common sense will prevail in all human relationships.

Leon Weintraub Stockholm 2020

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It was an impulse. I saw Leon Weintraub on a news channel when he spoke on behalf of the Survivors at the 74th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. He spoke about the risks of a resurgent nationalism in Poland and around the world. He radiated pride and dignity, but also sadness. I called to congratulate him. I had known him since the times when, as a child in the coarse communist Poland, I went on holiday to Sweden, where my aunt had emigrated. I knew that he had been in concentration camps, and once I even tried to see if he had a number tattooed on his forearm—he did not. He never talked about his experiences, and I never asked. I guess I felt shy and respectful. After that phone call, we exchanged emails, and I finally dared to propose a book. “It's about time,” he wrote back, and I took that as agreement.

Our conversations began in a different world. We met in Warsaw, where Leon was a frequent visitor in the summer of 2019. He recorded a documentary for Bavarian television, took part in ceremonies commemorating the liquidation of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, and accompanied a group of German students to memorial sites. In autumn, I managed to catch him in Oświęcim—he flew in

solely to meet with scouts from Łódź. In December, I visited him in Stockholm. He spent the winter of 2020 in Arizona, which is warm and sunny at this time of year. He joked that these were the only weeks when he slowed down and recharged his batteries. And then came the pandemic, which he spent in his flat in Stockholm. I'm sure if it hadn't been for the forced "house detention", this book would never have been written. He finally had the time.

We met on Skype and with every conversation I became more and more aware of what an interesting story and extraordinary man I was dealing with. Leon surprised me with his phenomenal photographic memory. He accurately reconstructed the topography of cities, the interiors of flats. Sometimes he had difficulty recalling emotions which, as he explained to me, he had to freeze for the war years. I did not ask about the great history, which we leave to historians, although it is inevitably intertwined with his fate. We talked about ordinary things: about pre-war Łódź, everyday life in the ghetto, the nightmare of the camps, and then the return to normality and adulthood. He spoke in beautiful Polish, with a sense of words, even though he hasn't lived in Poland for fifty years. When we came to his views on the modern world, he surprised me with the accuracy of his remarks, but also with the boldness of his opinions. I understood that at his age a man does not have to bite his tongue and instead really says what he thinks.

Despite the large age difference between us, I did not feel it at all. It was Leon of the two of us who often seemed younger, although he had the right to be in a bad mood. He did not go out of the house, he saw his loved ones, apart from his wife, only on the phone or computer screen. However, he always greeted me with a good mood, he was positive, motivated. He had enough energy for several people. He compared his disadvantages to living in a golden cage. So, what would he complain about? He repeatedly said that except for the ultimate things, like death or illness, there are no problems, and that the troubles we stumble over every now and then simply need to be solved. I have taken this to heart. I don't know if a friendship was born out of our many hours of conversation, but a deep bond certainly was. Thank you, Leon.

Magda Jaros Warsaw 2020

Cogito ergo sum (Descartes)

I think, therefore I am

*Good will, mutual respect and readiness
to make concessions are indispensable conditions
for the successful resolution of disputes.*

Leon Weintraub

Introduction

A villa on the outskirts of Munich, September 2020. A warm, sunny day. Three tables stand in the garden, cameras are waiting on rails at the ready. In a moment three people will meet who, although they do not know each other, are connected by the past. Leon Weintraub is a Jew from Łódź, Jens-Jürgen Ventzki is the son of Werner Ventzki, the mayor of Litzmannstadt, i.e. Łódź incorporated into the Third Reich, and Julie Lindahl is the granddaughter of an SS man who followed the Wehrmacht army into Greater Poland (Großpolen), where he seized the farms.

The granddaughter and son of the perpetrators and their victim (importantly, Leon will later be called the winner) are to talk about history. The conversation is recorded by the Bayerischer Rundfunk station, which makes a series of broadcasts with the Survivors while they can still talk about their experiences.

Werner Ventzki, although the ghetto management and head of its administration, Hans Biebow, was under his authority, was never tried in court. After the war he was an activist with the Union of Expellees [*Bund der Vertriebenen*, translator's remark], and died in 2004. Julie's grandparents fled to Brazil in the early 1960s for fear of trial. Both she and Jens-Jürgen discovered the dark past by accident, sifting through family documents. They did not run away from it, did not sweep the painful matters under the carpet. Ventzki wrote the famous *Shadow of the Father*, also published in Poland, and Lindahl wrote *The Pendulum*, published in the United States and Sweden.

The meeting was brought about by Leon Weintraub, a Swedish citizen and obstetrician-gynecologist. He thought it would be interesting to juxtapose three generations whose fates are common thanks to history. Julie Lindahl, born in Brazil, lives in Sweden just like him and was introduced to Weintraub by a friend. He knew

from friends, also Survivors, that Jens-Jürgen Ventzki was writing a book and looking for contact with people who had survived the war in Litzmannstadt, on the other side of the barbed wire.

“We raised the issue of guilt, responsibility, and Ms. Lindahl added the issue of shame,” says Weintraub. “At first, I turned to Ventzki. I said, ‘I don’t know what it means to have a father, mine died when I was a year and a half old.’ But I can imagine what a shock it was when he discovered that the man he had loved and admired, who had been a role model for him, had turned out to be a member of the genocidaires and to be co-responsible for what had happened in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, on the grounds of my city of Łódź. I feel sorry for him that he survived this, but on the other hand I pay tribute to him for having the courage to overcome this and, as a democratic man, to dissociate himself from everything that his father represented.”

The Ventzki family lived in a beautiful, Art Deco-style villa of Hilmar Girbardt, on Bednarska Street, surrounded by a garden. They had three servants, a chauffeur, a cook and a gardener at their disposal. Jens-Jürgen remembers their privileged life. With tears in his eyes, he said that his mother, the wife of a prominent man, could buy goods confiscated from Jews and delivered to the ghetto management in Bałucki Rynek. For 540 Reichsmark, which is for nothing, she bought an astrakhan coat, silver fox fur and golden rings. His father was faithful to the Führer until his death, he never condemned him. He regretted that his family had lost their position after the defeat of Germany. Jens-Jürgen’s brothers thought similarly, they did not allow him to mention Thomas Mann, who was considered a traitor by the Nazis, because he fled from Germany.

Julie Lindahl is treated by her relatives like a black sheep. Her mother never wanted to talk to her about her parents, she suppressed the past. She treated its extraction into the light as a betrayal.

All three of them thought the same—they condemned everything that Nazism and NSDAP ideology stood for. Jens-Jürgen hoped that after watching the documentary other people with ancestors like his would have the courage to speak out against their relatives and the past. This is the only way to counter the brown menace in the world and in Europe. In the end they did not shake hands—this is

pandemic time—but elbowed each other. Then they had dinner in a friendly atmosphere.

“For me it was symbolic,” says Leon Weintraub. I, a poor boy from a Jewish family, who experienced with all its cruelty and brightness what repression, dehumanization, and persecution were, met a man who carried in himself the genes of my tormentor. In a way, he was close to me, even though everything separated us: birth, the religion in which we grew up, material status. However, we had one thing in common—my city, Łódź.¹ This is where it all began.

1 The National Socialists renamed the occupied city of Łódź to Litzmannstadt in April 1940. It was named after the former general Karl Litzmann (1850–1936), who won an important battle near Łódź during the First World War. Litzmann was later a functionary of the NSDAP and, among other things, a member of the Reichstag (with interruptions from 1932 to 1936). The Litzmannstadt ghetto was not under the control of the SS, but of the civilian city administration, headed by Werner Ventzki (1906–2004) between 1941 and 1943.