

The Big Action

This is where it starts for me – October 28th – every time. This day when destiny is determined by the flick of a finger. In this gesture the fragility of life comes sharply into focus. My life began on October 28th, 1965. Had I been born on any other day of the year I may not have needed to tell this story.

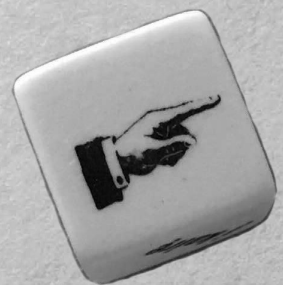
On the 28th of October 1941, the entire population of the Kaunas ghetto rises before dawn. In truth, most have not slept. They pour from their houses in an unnatural and solemn silence, some carrying candles to light their way, shrouded by the mist of their breath on the freezing night air. Was it snowing that morning? I can't tell you.

The vagaries of memory became almost an obsession for her in later life. Here is a case in point. My father remembers snow, as does my uncle Solly; my mother and uncle Val only remember the cold and the dark. Stories often take different paths in different mouths, different shapes in different memories, but not this one. I've heard it told so many times, by so many people, and yet it is like a shared and learned text. The only variance – whether it snowed or not.

An order, posted the day before, has demanded that all ghetto inhabitants assemble at 6am in the Square of the Democrats. A census is to take place, and the population is to be divided into workers, and non-workers. Workers will receive a greater food allocation; non-workers will remain on current rations. Few believe this is the true intent. There was intense debate within the Aeltestenrat about whether or not to post these notices, and so become complicit in this game, yet the German announcement stated that anyone remaining in their houses would be shot. The elders sought the opinion of Rabbi Shapiro, who sat all night considering the dilemma in light of the teachings of the holy

books. Finally he decreed that it would be better to comply, if it meant there was a chance that lives might be saved.

Now in the darkness, from all corners of the ghetto, flows this reluctant rolling wave of people. At every street corner it gathers force, sweeping up the slow, gathering in the stragglers. They assemble in the square as instructed, in columns according to their work details. They stand and they wait as the cold day breaks slowly around them. It is not until 9am that Rauca arrives. He installs himself on a mound and the columns are herded past him. He gestures with one hand – to the left or to the right. Sometimes whole families waved to the same side, sometimes a family divided with a nod and a flick of the finger. After only an hour, Joseph finds himself standing before Rauca. He holds up his Jordan Pass. It is no guarantee of safety but it is all he has, and he brandishes it in hope. He and Mother are sent to the right – but it is still unclear which side is the 'good' and which the 'bad'. As hours pass it becomes evident that the majority of the elderly and infirm are being sent to the left. Joseph's luck seems to have held once more.



By the time Mara's turn arrives, late in the afternoon, this day has already stretched into a seeming eternity. To stand and to wait, cold, hungry, and bewildered – grasping at rumour and conjecture as it ripples through the crowd – brings time to a near standstill. Yet now Rauca is before her. His eyes skid across the surface of her face, revealing nothing. Her body jangles, heart hammering... He waves her to the right.

She turns to go, but her Mother and little Alik

do not follow - they are sent to the other side. She falters, should she turn back, can she re-join them? And then, in this frozen moment, a man speaks out. "You must not send this woman to the left. Zhenia Shtrom is a key member of a brigade that cooks meals for hundreds of Germans." Without a second glance, but with a second wave of his hand, Rauca re-directs her to the right and she is at Mara's side. Alik somehow slips by to stand beside them.

Now comes the turn of Mara's Aunt Dora. Her husband Aidik has worked the nightshift at the airport and come straight to the square. The night's work has taken its toll; he looks fit for nothing. Rauca immediately waves them and

their young son Mulia to the left. Others step aside but she holds her ground and simply and politely asks him, in good German: "Wieso dahin?" Why there? He gestures to the right and moves on. Just two words.

Those on the right are forced to remain standing, hour upon hour, in the square. They can only watch as the Lithuanian guards surround those sent to the left, corral them with blows, and drive them over the bridge into the small ghetto. As dusk falls they are finally allowed to return to their homes. The square empties - almost. Some who survived the selection process have not survived the twelve hours standing in the square, and their bodies remain on the ground.

Back in once crowded houses, debate rages about the fate of the missing thousands. Will the small ghetto be annexed? Is there to be a deportation? Zhenia is adamant, "They will be sent to their deaths." Others round on her, "Why are you spreading panic with such vicious lies?" they demand. "It is people like you that will be the downfall of this ghetto, and you will take us all down with you."

And this is the woman, whose name I was given - Yvgenia, Eugenia, Zhenia, Jenny, Jen - this woman who always feared the worst. Is my eternal optimism a result of a life lived in blessed times? I might believe that, were it not for the fact that my mother, her daughter who stood beside her on that day, witnessed so many scenes of horror and never lost her sense of hope.

Most accounts of that night tell of the wailing that arose at 4am as those in the big ghetto were woken by the sounds of lorries leaving the small ghetto. The cries came from those who rushed to the barbed wire fence, and saw in the lights of the lorries, the endless column of people being marched in the direction of the IXth Fort. The stream of people numbered almost 10,000 and flowed late into the morning. This was no deportation. All were dead before night fell.

