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RUNNING THROUGH FIRE

HOW I SURVIVED THE HOLOCAUST

BY **ZOSIA GOLDBERG**

AS TOLD TO HILTON OBENZINGER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY **PAUL AUSTER**



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PREFACE

BY HILTON OBENZINGER



Zosia Goldberg—Warsaw, 1938

I had always heard Zosia's stories growing up, or half heard. Often she would remember an incident but not tell it all, or she would blurt it out to my parents in Polish I could not understand, or she would only refer to nightmares. But, in fragments, I began to learn of the particular ordeal she had to endure to survive the Nazi onslaught against Europe and the Jews.

Years later I decided to record my aunt's story from beginning to end so I could finally determine some sense of the real dimensions of Hitler's murder of my family, to extract them from the nightmares I had growing up of ovens and bones, the photographs of people standing like skeletons behind barbed wire. This mania to know, to comprehend the totality of such horror, became part of writing an earlier book. In the spring of 1979, we recorded seventeen hours of tape as Zosia and I walked up and down the tree-lined streets of Valley Stream, Long Island, a suburb right outside New York City, or sat alongside her dining-room table over the course of many days. We walked and she talked. I prodded some, but once she began to talk the problem was rarely faulty memory, but a rush of details, the confluence of so many sub-plots with the immensity of the brutality, ugliness, pain. Her telling, and the childhood legend of it in my own psyche, contributed to my earlier book, yet the need to know remained, and grew.

Sofia (Zosia) Goldberg, my mother's sister, came from an assimilated Jewish family in Warsaw. Her father had fought with Pilsudski for Polish independence, and he was the highest Jewish civil servant in the Polish government. Zosia never knew Yiddish, and she had even gone to Gentile schools and learned Catholic prayers. As the roundups and

deportations mounted in the Warsaw Ghetto, she tried to think of ways to save herself and her mother. Hearing noises, she ran down the stairs of her apartment to find out if the Germans were on their way to clear out their building. An old, bearded man, startled at hearing her speak in Polish, screamed something at her in Yiddish. Zosia ran upstairs to her mother to find out what the man had said, and her mother exclaimed, "Who told you this curse?" The old man had said, "*May you die amongst the goyim!*" It was his utterance of disgust at what to him was my aunt's starkly un-Jewish manner, but Zosia took it not as a curse but as the voice of God. *She would survive by escaping to the Aryan side of the walls to pose as a non-Jew.* Eventually, she purposely allowed herself to be captured as a Pole to be taken to Germany for forced labor. She calculated that life on the streets of Warsaw would be too dangerous; the safest place for her to hide would be as a Gentile in the heart of Germany itself.

And so, Zosia's story of survival takes place in the ghetto, the streets of "Aryan" Warsaw, and several sites for forced labor in Germany. She eluded going to any of the death camps, yet she did witness the brunt of the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. And, as a Jew hiding amongst Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian workers, French POWs, and the many others forced into labor by the Third Reich, Zosia was also able to see some of the violence done to the other peoples of Europe. She also lived amongst the German civilians, the small farmers, the bureaucrats and technicians. And she came to know the Gestapo and other Nazi interrogators and torturers the several times she was captured after attempted escapes.

She avoided certain death many times because she was a young, shrewd, and beautiful woman. She was also courageous. She learned early on that, in order to hide her true identity, she could show no fear, that fear in the face of an interrogator or even torture was as good as a confession: "Once you were in their hands, and once you showed them

you were scared, you were finished." She would curse, accuse her accusers, and even confess to lesser crimes in order to cover up the far more serious "crime" of being Jewish.

But mainly she avoided death because of luck. She would run through the gunfire of "actions" and roundups for the cattle trains inexplicably unscathed. Using the French term to describe herself, she was a *débrouillarde*, someone who was resourceful, who could run through fire without getting burned. It is such luck that most perplexes a survivor like Zosia. So very often she could have died, and should have, given all logic—and so many did die, no matter how smart, courageous, or beautiful. The morning after American tanks liberated that part of Germany where she had worked, she stretched outdoors to exult in her new freedom, and a hidden Nazi suddenly cocked his rifle—even then, having survived the entire war, she should have died. The fact that she did not die there—or in the ghetto or on the streets of Warsaw or when she was tortured by the Gestapo—remains the kind of thing that renders the nature of life and of evil more mysterious and impossible to comprehend.

Years after these tapes were recorded I decided to produce this book, if for no other reason than to give it to the next generation of our family, to Zosia's son, my own son, and my brother's children. Virtually all that remains of both of my parent's extensive families, they are the ones who need to know and to preserve her story. I had the hours of tape transcribed, I edited and adapted them, rearranged the narrative in chronological order, and did everything to make the story known. Still, in great part I produced this document because of that mania that is a legacy of the Nazi murders handed to the children or, in my case, to the close relatives of survivors—that mania to make it knowable, to have those vague whispers in Polish during my own childhood become hard, spoken English, a compulsion that probably would not be felt by others, at least not in the same way.

I prodded, but she spoke. And, while I have corrected grammar and rearranged sentences, I have kept Zosia's basic idiom, an English buffeted by Polish, German, French, even by the Spanish she learned when, after first living in the United States for some fifteen years, she moved with her late husband to Caracas, Venezuela, in the early sixties.

Zosia spoke, prodding me. She was particularly anxious that her story might be misunderstood. "I talk so much about Germans who saved me and Jews who were collaborators and denouncers. I don't say enough who did the killing, how much the Nazis were killing," she would tell me the several times we edited this book together. I believe her story quite clearly shows how monstrous were the Nazis; but it also shows how some Jews coped with the impossible situation with utmost selfishness, and how there were some German soldiers and officials who were capable of helping. Still, Zosia remains concerned that too many exceptions may have unmade the rule. I don't think this is the case, her anxiety over the point only underscoring the horror even more starkly.

Yet another problematic situation we have had to contend with has been the response of the publishing world. Although the book was originally intended for private use, friends urged me to send it to publishers, arguing that the narrative deserved a broader public. But as we sent drafts of this book to different publishers, we received surprising replies that were far stranger than the usual "this book is very moving, but it does not fit our publishing focus" or "the market's flooded with this stuff right now." As dismaying as such responses to an account of actual horror may be, there were others far more disturbing.

One publisher thought the story was very compelling, but felt that the book required "more character development." It seemed to make no difference when I reminded this editor that the book was not fiction but oral history. Zosia's narrative reads like fiction, so therefore it demanded

better treatment as fiction, in this editor's eyes. Despite the constant anxiety by survivors that their stories would not be believed, this editor *wanted* it to become fiction. While his confusion seemed to testify to the narrative power of Zosia's voice, expanded "character development" is not an element of her account.

Another publisher responded that the book was "incredible; in fact, too incredible. After forty or so years, she may be exaggerating. I don't mean that she's lying, but ... Well, even if she *is* lying, it still could be an interesting book. In fact, it might be even more interesting ..." This editor recommended that I have the manuscript reviewed by academics to verify its authenticity. Such a response—not to be believed—is the survivor's bane, and Zosia was saddened, disheartened. For my part, it little matters whether the names of cities are all correct, or whether all the details of her narrative are chronologically precise, or whether events are slightly distorted by time and personality, although I do believe her story is substantially accurate—her remembrances remain vivid and precise—and it is substantiated by other accounts. What matters more deeply is the story's basic truth, the telling of what a survivor knows, and, as has been argued by others, "testimony" as a form of oral literature is validity enough. But it so happens, in the course of pursuing publication in the U.K., the manuscript was shown to Rafael Scharf in London. Scharf, a Holocaust scholar and Polish Jewish survivor himself, validated the authenticity of Zosia's account.

As these examples show, the search for a publisher became part of the legacy of Zosia's story. Eventually, I gave up, printing the document for our family's use only, letting the matter rest for a decade. However, Paul Auster had been impressed by Zosia's story when he read it years ago, and when I visited him in the fall of 2000, he suggested that I try again, and he agreed to write an introduction to help secure publication. This time we succeeded.

Zosia and I have our differences—age, cultural background, political views—yet she told her story to me, willingly confided in me, returning to the hideous fear that had never entirely left her after so many years. I listened, we worked together crafting this document, and a bond was formed no matter what *we* think: The memory is important in and of itself. We feel a need to make sure that people know, a need that eclipses what we may think about the story itself or the dilemmas of today. What the world does with the story is an entirely different matter, a serious one, but one that is beyond our powers. Glad that at least we could make this document, we can only hope for life.

This book came about because of the help of many people who should be mentioned here. Most especially, Paul Auster for his dedication to storytelling of all kinds, and for his persistence in bringing Zosia's story to the public. Stephen Vincent for transcribing the tapes with a poet's ear, and for his considerable creative input and insistence on making the book a reality. Kirsten Janene-Nelson and everyone associated with Mercury House for the courage and vision to publish Zosia's story. Steven, Zosia's son, for gathering photographs and facilitating the book's production. Mark Obenzinger, my brother, who grew up also hearing these stories and who assisted with the means to complete the book. My parents Nathan and Romana Obenzinger for their support, particularly as many of the interviews were done in the streets by their home. My wife, Estella Habal, for understanding my nightmares and mania. And, of course, Zosia, for her wit, determination, and patience.

Hilton Obenzinger
San Francisco—Stanford, California
1990—2004

INTRODUCTION

BY PAUL AUSTER

I thought fast. I was lucky and got an idea. These two short sentences come toward the end of Zosia Goldberg's remarkable account of how she managed to live through the nightmare years of the Second World War, and they encapsulate the spirit of the entire story she tells us. Like a female Odysseus, this beautiful and resourceful young woman needed more than simple courage to overcome the dangers that surrounded her. Survival demanded cunning, quick thinking under pressure, a ferocious will to adapt to the most frightening and intolerable conditions, and sheer dumb luck—a chance encounter with the right person at the right moment, removal from one prison to another just hours before the first prison was bombed, an endless series of small, unfathomable miracles.

Why did some live when so many millions died? In Zosia Goldberg's case, it seems to have been the result of a rare and fortuitous constellation of circumstances. She was a woman, which gave her the possibility of posing as a Gentile—an option not available to Jewish men—and she came from a highly assimilated secular family. Polish was the language spoken at home, not Yiddish, and therefore she could speak without having to worry that her accent would give her away. But beyond these accidents of birth and language, there was the question of character. Although just twenty-one when the Germans invaded Poland, Zosia Goldberg was no longer a girl, and to hear her talk about her experiences to her nephew, Hilton Obenzinger, she was no ordinary person. Stubborn, opinionated, sexy, fearless, with a clairvoyant's ability to read and judge the intentions of other people, she had an unbending trust in her own instincts. Early in her story, for example, when an ex-boyfriend pro-

poses to escape from the ghetto with her and find shelter in the Aryan section of Warsaw, she hesitates. “Should I or shouldn’t I?” she tells her nephew. “First of all, he was not faithful to me. He was never faithful. If he was not faithful in love, he would not be faithful for more important matters like life and death. This type of fellow I did not need.”

On the other hand, she never deluded herself into thinking she could survive without the help of others. One of the most disturbing aspects of this book is where Zosia Goldberg sometimes found that help. At several perilous junctures she was aided by older German soldiers (the young ones were invariably die-hard Nazis, she discovered), and in some of those instances, even after her Jewish identity had been exposed, these men did not betray her. This contradicts nearly everything we have been told about German conduct during the war, and when you factor in the additional help she received from working-class Poles, and then combine that with the various examples she mentions of Jews betraying other Jews, the stark black-and-white picture we have drawn of the Holocaust dissolves into a muddled, terrifying gray—a world in which humanity carried on with its usual greeds and lusts, its occasional flashes of goodness and self-sacrifice, its eternal unpredictability. In one chilling passage about conditions in the ghetto, Zosia Goldberg tells us: “People hated each other. You understand, they were starving. They could kill each other for food. We had a family from Lodz in our apartment. My mother cooked. The wife of this man came and ate up my mother’s soup, so my mother complained to me. The man did not like my mother complaining, so he pushed her around and beat her up. When I came home from work that day I hit him on the head with an iron pot. I got even for my mother. He got no pity from me. He never touched her anymore.” And then, one paragraph down on the same page: “We were so demoralized that people became disrespectful of each other. If a married man had a sweetheart, he brought her to his house, and the wife was lucky if he did not throw her out on the

street. If he gave his wife food and a place to sleep on the floor, she was considered lucky.”

Eventually, Zosia Goldberg slipped out of the ghetto by way of the sewers, got herself captured on purpose, and was shipped to Germany, where she spent the rest of the war doing forced labor—in a munitions factory and on a number of farms. Every day carried the threat of denunciation, of arrest and torture, of death. But she had been given some good advice by one of her father’s Gentile friends before leaving the ghetto, and she learned her lessons well. “Remember one thing,” the man told her. “When somebody attacks you, never show fear. Use vulgar words like anybody else, the most dirty words so that you sound sure of yourself. And attack *them!*” The point being, as she explains to her nephew, “... if a German beats you up and you don’t fight back, that means you are a Jew, that you are scared. A Gentile always strikes back.”

Knowing that things could turn against her at any moment, she was constantly prepared for the worst. “I had long hair tied in a knot at the back. I had razor blades hidden in the knot in order to commit suicide in case I could not take it anymore.” But Zosia Goldberg never succumbed to despair. She was interrogated by the Gestapo and badly beaten; she was often close to starvation; she suffered from hepatitis, from mange itch, from lice; and at one point she felt that her spirit had finally been broken. But it wasn’t. In the end, I believe that was her most transcendent accomplishment—as great, if not greater, than the fact that she survived. *Running Through Fire* is a book filled with unspeakable horrors—but it is told without a shred of self-pity. Zosia Goldberg never complains, never bemoans her lot. She battles and endures, and in this raw, unvarnished tale of human suffering, she has given us a manual of hope.

Paul Auster
Brooklyn, New York
July 2003