

# THE JERUSALEM POST

OPINION

By SETH J. FRANTZMAN \ 07/11/2016 20:47

## Julian Kulski's war

75 years ago, a 12-year-old boy joined the resistance against the Nazis in Poland. His memoir 'The Color of Courage' reminds us what it means to stand against evil.



A STREET in Warsaw destroyed during the failed 1944 uprising against Nazi occupiers. (photo credit: WIKIMEDIA)

"Ludwik and I had a long talk and he revealed to me something I had not known before, the existence of a secret military organization...he asked if I would like to join and fight the Germans. I was thrilled and accepted at once."

It was July 12, 1941. Several weeks prior, three million Nazi and Allied soldiers and 3,500 tanks had emerged from behind lines of forest and attacked the Soviet Union. In a war that would take almost 30 million lives, the Germans laid waste to the Red Army on the frontiers. The world was dark.

In the West, England stood alone. It's hard to imagine now that in Poland, and in other parts of occupied Europe, resistance to the unbridled power of Nazi rule was emerging.

Julian Kulski was one of those boys who grew up during the Nazi occupation of Poland. At age 10 he saw the Nazi invasion of Poland and was 15 when the Poles rose up against the Germans in the Warsaw Uprising. He writes in his introduction to *The Color of Courage* that he is descended from a 19th-century chief rabbi of Warsaw and an 18th-century king of Poland. Written in 1945, soon after he was released from a POW camp run by the Germans, **Kulski's war diary is immensely accessible today and the account of a young teen's coming of age.**

"It is a superb lesson of humanity and patriotism," Lech Walesa, former president of Poland, said of the book.

Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich called it "inspiring."

With the passing of those like Elie Wiesel, we are reminded that the survivors who had experienced the evils of Nazism firsthand are becoming fewer every day.

**How do we communicate to today's young people, especially the privileged in the Western world, about the threats of totalitarianism, racism, extremism? How can they who live lives with "safe spaces" understand what it is to take up the rifle at age 15?** Kulski writes in a chapter on the Warsaw Uprising, in which the Polish Home Army, the main Polish resistance organization, fought against the Germans in Warsaw: "Then came the long-awaited order to fire.

"We put the muzzles of our rifles, Sten guns and machine guns forward through the windows and poured a murderous fire down on the Germans who were taken completely by surprise."

The subsequent razing of Warsaw, after the Jewish ghetto had been razed in 1943, destroyed 90 percent of the city. It is a scene captured tragically in the 2002 film *The Pianist*.

When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Kulski was living in the northern part of the city in Zoliborz.

His father was the deputy mayor, and the younger Kulski had a girlfriend named Zula.

On that fateful day, he was picking mushrooms. "We saw planes flying overhead, just above the tree tops. They had black crosses on their wings."

When he ran towards home, he passed a town square.

“Peasant women in colorful babushkas perched on the wagons, selling their goods to black-clad Jews, the babble of Polish-Yiddish mixing with the cackling and squealing of the animals.”

Germany had invaded Poland, he would learn. This scene of people of different backgrounds meeting as they had for centuries at the market was about to be replaced.

Some 800,000 residents of Warsaw would die in the war.

Three million Polish Jews and almost three million Christian Poles, one-fifth of the country, would be slaughtered in this epic conflict and unremitting evil that the Nazis would bring.

Kulski’s diary, written after the war by a man now battle-hardened but also traumatized, tried to capture the scenes in the opening days of the war and occupation of the city. But there is something cold in his writing, without enough shock, too used to the horrors of war in 1945 to recall the first shock of 1939. As the occupation begins, Kulski describes the first anti-Semitic decrees, the banning of kosher slaughter on October 26, 1939, and in December the decree to wear the Star of David.

Resistance to tyranny begins with small actions.

Elie Wiesel, who was almost the same age as Kulski and living in Hungarian-occupied Romania in 1940, said in his Nobel Prize speech in 1986, “We must always take sides; neutrality helps the oppressor.”

Kulski began his “private war” by stealing German signs to confuse troops trying to get to their base. Soon underground units were spray painting signs of the Polish home army. Kulski writes firsthand about the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto and those he knew in it. His uncle was sent to Auschwitz in January of 1941. “Every day I became more outraged. How can the Germans get away with it? How can grown men be herded together and taken off in trains like cattle? Why don’t they fight or at least run away?” writes the author. In July he resolved to fight and joined the underground.

Kulski’s account is fascinating because of its blend of attention to the persecution of Jews and his descriptions of the issues that non-Jewish Poles faced. Not only did they have the Nazi enemy, but they also feared that a Soviet victory would destroy the chances of an independent Poland – as it eventually did. In September of 1941, for instance, Kulski entered the Warsaw Ghetto via a cellar tunnel and provides firsthand accounts of mass starvation there. “People moved like skeletons – scarecrows with

sunken, glassy eyes," he writes. Haunting photos of men and women accompany the text.

In 1943 Kulski witnessed the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto and describes the small groups of ghetto fighters who escaped to freedom. The real heart of the tale is the Polish uprising in August of 1944 against the German army in Warsaw. For two months Kulski and his fellow Poles fought the German army, only to surrender and be shipped to Germany as POWs. Two months after turning 16, he was liberated by the American army.

Memoirs like this serve an essential purpose in binding together the history of the Holocaust and the countries in which it took place. The persecution of Jews was not some isolated event in a vacuum but part of the destruction of Europe. It is not a Jewish issue only, as this book reminds us, but one that crosses boundaries of family and life. This account binds together Jewish and Polish history and speaks to the common struggle against tyranny and the fight for freedom that people sought in the 1940s and are still seeking today.

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