

**BEYOND SILENCE & DENIAL:  
THE WARSAW DIARY OF CHAIM KAPLAN**

On September 1, 1939, Chaim Kaplan, a Jew of Warsaw whose life ended in a crematorium at Treblinka, launched a prophecy which had significance far beyond any he imagined: “We are witnessing the dawn of a new era in the history of the world.”<sup>1</sup> This “new era,” an era whose calendar begins at Auschwitz, initially leaves the ghetto residents “imprisoned between fear and hope” (211)—stunned to near catatonia—and it commences with an overabundance of atrocity so senseless and barbaric that both rationality and imagination are condemned to silence. It does not take long, however, in the Warsaw Ghetto or in the world today, for humans to acclimate to the given level of atrocity and to thereby unwittingly endorse the nightmare by taking it for granted and, as a result, offering little resistance to the doom it holds in store. “Even abnormal living becomes normal when it becomes constant” (21), Kaplan tells us, “A worm that lives in a horseradish thinks that it is sweet” (314).

The question of how this mass self-deception of relative “sweetness” drove millions of people to their deaths in concentration camps is a pathetic one. Nietzsche cuts through the levels of rhetoric in which the answers have been masked by making clear that man would rather will nothingness than not will. The residents of the Warsaw Ghetto willed life where there was no hope of life, they clutched their shreds of optimism as did, more discreetly, their spokesman Kaplan, but underneath the make-believe and denial of the noose slowly strangling them they found—again with Kaplan—their tiny optimisms finally undercut and rendered untrue by the confession that “There is no happier moment now than the one which is free of thoughts” (23).<sup>2</sup> All of their hope, all of their undoing of gloom to construct for themselves a future worth living—any future at all—could not bear the scrutiny of reflection. Warsaw Ghetto residents found, in the end, in the smoke above Treblinka, that what they willed (despite the artifice of future and hope) was indeed nothingness.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaim A. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, tr. and ed. by Abraham I. Katsh (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 19. All further references to this work will appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Primo Levi, in his *Survival in Auschwitz*, also makes this point clearly: “It was better not to think.”

It is no wonder that in the midst of overwhelming atrocity individuals withdrew and ceased to respond, that they padded themselves with silence so as not to shatter their fragile psyches struggling to maintain integrity, so as to put the truth in a coma. "We have stopped reacting," Kaplan wrote on October 22, 1939, "Even if they forbid us to breathe we will make peace with that too" (56). When one adds to this defeated acceptance the fact that human acts (particularly aesthetic and creative acts) become absurd when barbarism and cataclysm are shoved to the forefront, it is difficult to understand how something like Kaplan's *Scroll of Agony* could have been written at all, let alone written under the paradigm of nonconductive conditions and then smuggled from the ghetto nearly intact.

When Sartre asks, "Does it make sense to go on living while there are people who beat others till the bones in their bodies are broken" we, I think, must ultimately admit that it does make sense, that given what man is we, men, choose to continue under these circumstances. When posed in its grand eschatological manner Sartre's question, in the final analysis, is defeated, but if we reduce his grandeur to acts concerning the mundane milieu in which people grope daily—the Warsaw Ghetto, for example—our response, if we face it, threatens all of our certitude. It does not make sense to love life, to think something precious or to ease smooth diction into a lovely, rhythmic image when men beat one another to pulp and ash systematically, bureaucratically and without feeling. It does not make sense, but reason—like ethics—is among the first of human assets to be disposed of when the psychological baggage becomes too heavy, and we therefore see, under the cruelest conditions, the persistence of pathetically human and stubbornly optimistic individuals: some praying and others singing, some on the transport lines with bundles under their arms, some writing their *Scrolls of Agony*. It is the effort of one in the last group of these would-be survivors, the writers, that is my primary interest here, for his burden was to face the beast and call it by its proper name while many others saw only a wolf passing.

While the literature written by survivors provides us with retrospective accounts, in various genres, of the atrocities we name the Holocaust, Kaplan's diary—written by a man who did not survive—allows us to see a psychological process unfolding, the process a literary mind must suffer in attempting to deal with the extremities of barbarism. Because they were delivered in unimaginably intense and continual doses, the Nazi brutalities elicited in their victims a single enduring response: stunned silence.<sup>3</sup> This silence is one that acknowledges devastation and defeat; those who suffer it, those who survive having suffered it, begin to seek a way out. There are basically two: the first, the choice that the large majority herded to, like sheep, as it

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<sup>3</sup> Another Polish writer, Tadeusz Borowski, dubs this reaction "numb inactivity." One also recalls that Jerzy Kosinski, in *The Painted Bird*, literally went dumb.

led them to the gas chambers, is one that denies the intensity of the situation, that inflates rumors of salvation, and that, in short, deceives itself into passive acceptance of bad times that, surely, are passing. This is a “path of least resistance” that gives new meaning to the cliché.

We have a Jewish tradition that an evil law is foredoomed to defeat. This historical experience has caused us much trouble since the day we fell into the mouth of the Nazi whose dearest wish is to swallow us. It came to us from habit, this minimizing of all edicts with the common maxim, “It won’t succeed.” In this lay our undoing, and we made a bitter mistake<sup>4</sup> (324).

The “bitter mistake” was one of ungrounded hope, of lying to one’s self in order to deal with the silence and its source. This route out of silence proved to be a costly one, for it wedged millions of people “between fear and hope” and there reduced them—assisted by the Nazi’s programs of physical and psychological dehumanization—to the passivity that extermination required.<sup>5</sup> It is no wonder, however, that this was the choice adopted by the masses, for its alternative is psychologically more excruciating.

An individual of great honesty, integrity and insight—an individual like Kaplan—cannot easily deceive himself out of stunned silence by puffing up with empty rumors of hope. He must, at the same time, find a way to deal with “darkness so thick it can be felt” (25), a way out of the painful silence, out of the fire and into the frying pan. While many people in the ghetto closed their eyes to the truth in order to make peace with it, Kaplan compels himself to face the atrocity head-on—to override the silence by demanding that it address its cause—and thereby resists denial and assumes his mission to bear witness: “I will write a scroll of agony in order to remember the past in the future” (30). While much of Jewish Warsaw unwittingly assists the enemy—becomes tame for him—by deceiving itself into inactivity, Kaplan wagers a literary resistance grounded in whatever truth he can sift from propaganda and assemble from his perceptions, his pen wielded for want of a sword. The virtue of his act bears little relation to the efforts of underground pamphleteers; Kaplan’s resistance is personal rather than political. He finds in documentation a means to avoid silence and denial, as well as a catharsis venting the gloom he has compelled himself to face. Kaplan’s commitment to bear witness, in short, is at once an act of resistance and self-preservation.

In discussing the means by which individuals re-emerge from withdrawal we must keep in mind that the initial stunned silence, almost like the gloom

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<sup>4</sup> See also pages 46, 64 and 103.

<sup>5</sup> Following the Holocaust Tadeusz Borowski developed this theme, arguing that it was the inability to give up hope that drove people to the gas chambers. “Never before in the history of mankind has hope been stronger than man, but never also has it done so much harm as it has in this war, in this concentration camp. We were never taught how to give up hope, and this is why today we perish in gas chambers.”

of guilt, always lurks on the fringes of one's consciousness. It is not something that one resolves and leaves behind, as Kaplan's laments well document, but rather something one attempts to stay on top of. (Many could not, and those in the concentration camps who withdrew irretrievably into silence, the "Muslims," were quickly fated to their doom.) Although Kaplan occasionally retreated into silence or the denial/passive acceptance of the masses, he was able to control his mission for the most part, and he realized that in the long run a vocal tragedy is more bearable than a silent one.

In the ghetto we are used to vocal tragedy, to loud lamenting, to shouts, groans and sighs, but here, in the giant building of the former business school at 12 Prosta Street, I encountered silent tragedy, victims of a great disaster who sit buried in their own sad thoughts. Their eyes are without a ray of hope or a spark of life. (260)

This scene, the emblem of stunned silence which, in turn, represents the voice of what was to come (death), upset Kaplan "so that even my heart, a heart which has turned to stone, was moved" (260).

Once Kaplan accepts and commences the mission that redeems him from both stunned silence and wholesale self-deception ("... a strange idea has stuck in my head since the war broke out—that is it is a duty I must perform. This idea is like a flame imprisoned in my bones, burning within me, screaming: Record!" [144]), he finds that his task is a formidable one replete with difficulties. The initial problems were ones that later, post-Holocaust writers would inherit: how does one deal with subject matter that defies and makes a mockery of even the most brutal imagination, and how does one order and give structure to meaningless atrocity and chaos?

This is a topic fit for a classical elegist, capable of creating a new expression to describe the magnitude of destruction. . . . I was surrounded by disorder, and therein lay the difficulty—how was it possible to describe a disorderly thing in an orderly fashion? (38/41)

And near the conclusion of the diary:

The appalling events follow one another so abundantly that it is beyond the power of a writer of impressions to collect, arrange, and classify them; particularly when he himself is caught in their vise—fearful of his own fate for the next hour, scheduled for deportation, tormented by hunger, his whole being filled with the fear and dread that accompanies expulsion. (336)

The problems that Kaplan laments here lay rooted in language's fundamental incapacity to speak truthfully, immediately and effectively, with minimal distortion, about incidents of unthinkable atrocity. In the following passage Kaplan approaches the realization that language, because it necessarily abstracts horror, can never quite do the job. In the end he bails himself out of the logical conclusions of his thoughts, however, because without doing so his diary—his mission—could not go on:

Descriptive literary accounts cannot suffice to clarify and emphasize its [Nazi barbarism's] real quality. . . . Even a Jewish writer who lives the life of his people, who feels their disgrace and suffers their agony, cannot find a true path here. Only one who feels the taste of Nazi rule in all his "248 organs and 365 sinews"; only one who has bared his back to the lashes of its whips; only one who has examined the various nuances of its administrative and legal tactics in relation to the Jews . . . only such a writer, if he is a man of sensitivity, and if his pen flows, might be able to give a true description of this pathological phenomena called Nazism. (115)

When *everything* in one's life is replete with atrocity, it becomes less than difficult to negate *everything* into *nothing-worth-mentioning* and finally, à la Nietzsche, into Nothing. Under the temptation of such a negation Kaplan finds himself in a bind well expressed by Samuel Beckett:

There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express . . . together with the obligation to express.

The obligation, in Kaplan's case, overrules the impossibility, but not without endless struggle to avoid silence. As the *Scroll of Agony* develops, Kaplan grows increasingly weary and occasionally loses faith in his mission and language:

It is not pleasant for a musician to tune his instrument for an elegy. (96)

A whole week without an entry. My ink well has grown tired of lamentations [an interesting projection here—his dismay becomes the ink-well's]. If I tried to write everything down in order, I couldn't, nor would I be recording anything new. Robberies, murders, humiliations, deprivations—nothing more. (137)

All day I thought it over. Should I write? Not because of a lack of impressions, but because of too many of them. (210)

I haven't the strength to hold a pen in my hand. I'm broken, shattered. My thoughts are jumbled. I don't know where to start or stop. (319)

Each time it would seem as though Kaplan would abandon the painful course—or discourse—he has committed himself to, each time he would wish to retreat to either the self-deceptive spirit of the masses or an overwhelmed state of stunned silence ("There is no strength left to cry; steady and continual weeping leads finally to silence" [85]), he bounces back and maintains his stand. In the same entry in which we find this passage:

The terrible events have engulfed me; the horrible deeds committed in the ghetto have so frightened and stunned me that I have not the power, either physical or spiritual, to review these events and perpetuate them with the pen of a scribe. I have no words to express what has happened to us since the day the expulsion was ordered. (323)

We also find this one:

I feel that continuing this diary to the very end of my physical and spiritual strength is a historical mission which must not be abandoned. My mind is still clear, my need

to record unstilled, though it is now five days since any real food has passed my lips. Therefore I will not silence my diary. (328-324)

Kaplan's bold stamina and his ability to avert the silence that would shroud each word of his scroll ("My heart trembles at every isolated word" [339]) is now called into question. Given the pain of his continual lamentation, the conditions under which he wrote, the illegality and potential danger resulting from his act, the inability to order the deluge of brutality, the language that fails him, and the possibility that his efforts would never reach the historian he envisioned, how did Chaim Kaplan continue with his diary?

The answer to this question remains a mystery until one discovers, along with Kaplan, an insight which enjoys its own paragraph in the December 16, 1940 entry: "Were it not for my pen, my delight, I would be lost" (233). Even though Kaplan realizes that he is doomed to a *senseless* death ("And here, perhaps, lies all the tragedy of it" [27]), and even though he has given, and will continue to give, the impression that his text is a burden to which he is chained for historical purposes, we now come to realize that the very act of writing and its product are his salvation and "delight." As the *Scroll* progresses, Kaplan slowly sheds the weight of his disappointments—his people, his ruined world, his hope, his God. When the divine "test" evolves to proportions beyond even Job's imagination, and when the world of man has romped off into madness with all of its glory, Kaplan has nowhere to turn for meaning but to his own creation, to the text he both fathers and delivers himself over to. The need to bear witness, we come to understand, is only one dimension of a larger need: a need for meaning. Kaplan's diary restores a measure of sense to the absurd death planned for him; his diary's primary purpose is to structure a human rationality for unthinkable events so as to resist a personal plunge into the abyss above which the ghetto was suspended. His scroll, when his God dies, becomes his soul. It is a part of Kaplan that is smuggled through the wall and off into immortality, the part that endeavored to tear itself from the demise of God and man, that tried—by way of a language predisposed to fail him—to hold the grammar of sanity intact. "If my life ends—what will become of my diary?" (340); what will become of meaning and of the remnant of Polish Jewry if, indeed, the exterminated latter becomes literally a people of the book?

Beyond its obvious literary and historical worth, Kaplan's diary endures as a document of resistance, a document that defies Himmler's twisted hope that the Holocaust would be "an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory" in German history. As the countless deaths tolled daily at Treblinka with no scrap of dignity, Kaplan's death, at least on paper, made sense, and in a gruesome way legitimated the sense that his *Scroll of Agony* made. It is a shame that the pen can do no more.