

Remembering Marek Edelman

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By Shana Penn

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) -- Marek Edelman could be said to embody both Poland's Holocaust history and its modern Jewish revival. The last surviving leader of Warsaw's ghetto uprising, a man credited with "awakening" Poland's postwar generation to its proud Jewish legacy, Edelman was a hero to Polish Jews and gentiles.

His death Oct. 2 in Warsaw at the age of 90 brings to a close his generation's contributions to Poland's democratic culture even as his influence reverberates throughout the country's revitalized and growing Jewish community.

Edelman's role in the Warsaw ghetto uprising elevated him to a place of honor among Jewish and gentile resisters to Nazi predations. A fighter of unusual skill and courage, this 24-year-old commander survived the 1943 uprising to participate in the valiant but doomed 1944 general Warsaw uprising against Nazi occupation.

Only 280,000 of Poland's 3.5 million Jews survived the Holocaust and returned at the end of the war. By 1970 that number was down to 20,000 or 30,000, as many fled the communist regime. Edelman's wife and children left Poland during the Cold War anti-Semitism of the late 1960s, but he stayed.

"Warsaw is my city. ... Someone has to stay here with all those who died," said the man who emboldened three postwar generations to rebuild Jewish life in Poland.

By the 1970s, few Poles knew anything about the Warsaw ghetto or its uprising. The communist

government had made a point of systematically erasing Poland's past, leaving the postwar generation with what it called "biale plamy" -- history's blank spots.

Then in 1976, the anti-communist underground published a book-length interview with Edelman. Forty thousand copies sold with remarkable speed and the biale plamy began to fill in. Edelman became Poland's only famous living Jew, and the postwar generation began to learn about its Jewish history.

"Marek awakened my generation," Holocaust researcher Anka Grupinska told me in 1990.

In the late '70s, together with gentiles interested in Jewish culture, Jewish activists organized secret, underground groups -- "flying universities" -- that sought to supplant the negative stigma around Jewishness with positive meaning. They studied Jewish history, held Holocaust commemorations and practiced religious observances.

This reclamation of Jewish identity and culture became a meaningful expression of anti-communist resistance, and it imbued the 1980s Solidarity movement with respect for Poland's Jewish heritage. Indeed, Edelman became an inspiration to the Solidarity labor movement that presaged the fall of communism in Poland.

With communism's collapse in 1989, the Jewish activists came out of hiding and began to revitalize Jewish communities in a free Poland. Throughout his long life Edelman continued to

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play an active role in Polish political and Jewish cultural life.

I was fortunate to meet Edelman a handful of times, and like nearly all who knew him, I can attest that he could affect a gruff exterior. He stated his strong opinions bluntly and did not mince words -- certainly not when confronting injustice and hypocrisy.

He could be a tough pragmatist, even to the point of seeming heartless. Edelman would tell a story in which he characterized himself as having been "merciless" during the war. As a young messenger for the ghetto hospital, he carried documents that allowed him to rescue a few Jews from trains transporting them to the gas chambers. He consciously saved those he thought most capable of aiding the coming ghetto revolt. Only those who experienced the horrors of the Warsaw ghetto, he said, could understand the decisions he and others were forced to make.

Making such tough life-and-death decisions did not preclude, and perhaps heightened, Edelman's capacity for empathy. He often spoke of the

courage exhibited by those Jews who chose to stay with their families, even when staying together meant the strong accompanied the weak to a certain end. What others condemned as shameful meekness Edelman saw as courage that was as great, he said, as that of those who fought the Nazis with homemade weapons.

"These people went quietly and with dignity," he said. "It is an awesome thing, when one is going so quietly to one's death. It is definitely more difficult than to go out shooting."

Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek of Warsaw has said of Edelman that it was his decision to stay in Poland that "made him fight so hard for his Jewish and Polish identity. He became a real witness, he gave a real testimony with his life."

For that decision and that testimony, Poland and its revitalized Jewish community -- and in fact Jews everywhere -- have much to be grateful.

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