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*The life of Mordechai Anielewicz reconsidered.*

### **Background of the project**

Mordechai Anielewicz (1919-1943), the commander of Warsaw ghetto uprising, is certainly amongst the most famous Jewish individuals in the history of the Holocaust and probably entire 20<sup>th</sup> century. His bravery, determination, and devotion to the cause of a Jewish resistance against the Nazis undoubtedly make him a hero. Yet, what do we really know about Anielewicz, his life course and the choices he had made? How a boy born in provincial Wyszaków, raised in poor Warsaw neighborhood, one out of many local leaders of Hashomer Hatzair, had become

‘the Anielewicz’ we know today? How was he remembered by his colleagues and how was he commemorated in various social and political contexts? How were his deeds interpreted?

The idea to write a monograph about Anielewicz emerged from my previous research: I have edited documents related to Hashomer Hatzair youth movement in the Warsaw ghetto that were preserved in Ringelblum Archive (Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto). I have prefaced them with articles introducing history of Hashomer Hatzair in the Warsaw ghetto, organization’s leaders, and their activities. I have also researched the history of the youth movements for the chapter of my PhD dissertation pertaining to the emergence of knowledge about the Holocaust among the members of the Jewish underground in Warsaw. In this sense, even though “The life of Mordechai Anielewicz reconsidered” is a new project, it continues the research that I have already conducted.

As I was working on the edition of the documents and uncovering the history of Hashomer Hatzair in the Warsaw ghetto, I have discovered with huge surprise that despite the significance of Anielewicz and the fame that surrounds him, quite little is known about his pre-war and war-time fate and that his biography has not been written yet. The only existing book is a first book of Israel Gutman, famous Israeli historian, which was written in 1963 and relied only on the documents that he had access to. My project aims to fill this gap. I do have background both in sociology and history and I am combining historical research on this important figure with cultural and sociological analysis of the ways in which Anielewicz was remembered and commemorated. I am also planning to demonstrate how this memory was shaped in various post-war political realities.

### **Basic facts about Anielewicz’s life**

Mordechai Anielewicz was born in Wyszaków, small town northeast of Poland's capital city, Warsaw. As a child he moved to Warsaw's poor and neglected neighborhood of Powiśle, where he lived until moving to the Warsaw ghetto in the late 1940.



Building at Solec Street 113, where Anielewicz grew up

source: State Archive in Warsaw, Referat Gabarytów, 5732

Anielewicz was a talented student and his mother, who traded fish in the local market, did her best to save up money for his education. He attended Hebrew high school "Loar". He

first engaged in the activities of the right-wing Zionist youth movement Betar, but after just a few months, he joined left-wing Zionist Hashomer Hatzair. He started out as a regular member, but quickly he became part of the local and then state-level leadership.

In 1939 Anielewicz was only 20, but he was an experienced activist of Hashomer Hatzair. In September 1939, after the German attack on Poland, he fled to the East, first to Kovno (today Ukraine), then towards Romanian border, where he was hoping to establish a path for illegal immigrants to Eretz Israel, who would be crossing the Mediterranean by ships leaving from the port of Constanza. He was caught by Soviet soldiers and arrested. After leaving the jail he returned to Warsaw, but only to immediately depart for then Lithuanian Vilna, where other leaders of Hashomer Hatzair were temporarily staying (including his girlfriend, Mira Fuchrer). At this point, it seems, he had abandoned the plan to organize the immigration to Eretz Israel and decided to stay in Poland to organize clandestine activities of his organization. In early 1940 he returned to German-occupied Poland with other leaders of Hashomer Hatzair. The movement was left without a regular contact with its leaders in Mandate Palestine and local leadership, comprising mostly of people in their early 20s, just like Anielewicz himself, had to face war-time reality alone. New situation gave them responsibility they have never had before, and the freedom to transform the organization. In a letter sent to a friend in Mandate Palestine in 1940 Anielewicz wrote: 'We are on a crossroads (...) right before a new chapter in our history'

Anielewicz was responsible for maintaining contacts with Hashomer's branches in provincial towns in Kielce and Zagłębie regions, he travelled a lot under a false 'Aryan' name, he brought underground press and supervised activities of the local groups of *shomrim*. He remained active in pedagogical and educational work conducted in Warsaw (and then in the Warsaw ghetto), and he edited clandestine press (for example 'Neged Hazerem' as well as

bulletins from radio monitoring). He earned a living by teaching Hebrew, which he spoke fluently.

In Warsaw ghetto he was one of the people in charge of movement's ideological policy – his articles show him as a tireless discussant who fought for the causes he had believed in. Anielewicz and his friend, Shmuel Breslaw, another young leader of the movement, became radically pro-Soviet during the war (in the same time they remained convinced Zionists, which today may seem paradoxical). It was a result of at least twofold reasons: as Polish branch of Hashomer Hatzair had rarely received news from Eretz Israel and although the activists felt more distant from the Mandate Palestine (they also felt disillusioned with their comrades in *yishuv* and their insufficient efforts to maintain contacts with members in occupied Poland), their belief that only the Red Army had the power to defeat Hitler and liberate the Jews became firmer. In Anielewicz's and Breslaw's articles in the clandestine press, Zionism was knitted with their communist inclinations. It also partially resulted from Hashomer Hatzair's alliance with other Zionist and pro-Soviet party in the Warsaw ghetto: Poalei Zion Left. Anielewicz certainly was a young radical, whose opinions sometimes conflicted with those of the senior members of his own organization such as Josef Kaplan, and complicated their cooperation with some of the other Jewish political movements. On the other hand, he was charismatic and intellectually influential.

Anielewicz was not present in Warsaw when the liquidation of the ghetto began in July 1942. He was visiting Zagłębie branch of Hashomer Hatzair at the time and mobilizing Jewish youth there for resistance against the Nazis. He was developing this concept ever since he heard first news about the extermination of the Jews – first by bullets, then in gas chambers. I argue that the concept of resistance against the Nazis was important for the members of the youth movements long before the uprising and that this meaning translated into the myth about the

alleged resistance in Nowogródek in the spring of 1942. Anielewicz recounted this legend to his subordinates in Będzin too.

When the deportations from the Warsaw ghetto had begun, Anielewicz was devastated by the news received from his friends, but could not return immediately. At the time he was contemplating going abroad in the effort to alarm the world about the fate of Jews in Poland. He left Będzin in September after receiving the tragic news of the death of Josef Kaplan and Szmuel Breslaw, his close friends.

In the moment of crisis, when he returned to Warsaw ghetto from Zagłębie he managed to lift up the spirits in Hashomer Hatzair, cooperate with leaders of other organizations within Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) and mobilize people for the armed resistance against Nazis. He initiated the revenge actions on the German collaborators in the ghetto, he was one of the people responsible for gathering money to buy guns for the ŻOB.

He participated and got wounded in the first fights against Germans in January of 1943, and then kept on growing as a leader who eventually became the commander of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. On May 8, 1943, Mordechai Anielewicz committed suicide together with many other fighters in the bunker at Miła 18 Street.

The story of Anielewicz was written after his death, by people who personally knew him, saw him as a friend and as a hero (e.g. Chajka Klinger, Emanuel Ringelblum, Israel Gutman, Marek Edelman – just to mark the most influential ones). His biography as we know it is governed by the master-narrative of Jewish resistance and heroic, yet hopeless, defiance. It is narrated as if the main path in Anielewicz's life was to become the commander of the ghetto uprising and die a tragic and heroic death later compared to that of Masada fighters. Some say that history is written by the victors – in this case, it was written by the survivors of one of the most tragic events in human history who wanted to commemorate the heroism of their friend,

but also to show that Jews did not go 'like sheep to slaughter', but fought heroically, killed Nazis and took righteous revenge for the murdered.

### **Goals of the project and research questions**

In my project, I am looking at Anielewicz's biography from a different perspective. I am addressing the questions about who he was before the war and how his wartime biography was evolving? I am currently gathering and analyzing archival materials and existing literature that will allow me to describe Anielewicz's youth and his prewar career within Hashomer Hatzair. I want to reevaluate the first months of the German occupation as a key moment that had determined the path that the leaders of the Polish branch of Hashomer Hatzair took in the following years.

In my project, I am addressing questions when, how and why did Anielewicz become such a significant leader? What does his biography tell us on the complexity of Jewish reactions to political reality and involvement with ideology during World War II? How the friendship with Shmuel Breslaw influenced Anielewicz's way of thinking about defiance against the Nazis and the concept of 'dying with honor', in the fight? How is it intertwined with the Zionist understanding of the 'new Hebrew man' as apposed to the diasporic, passive Jew? How Anielewicz's experiences and worldview influenced his decisions and engagement? What did he think of the future of the Jews after the war? I also want to reflect on how and when the idea of armed resistance started to be so central to Anielewicz and how did he promote it among other members of the Jewish underground in Warsaw and other places he had visited.

Second important goal of my project is to show how Anielewicz was remembered and commemorated. How did various stories about him resonate with various postwar political realities of the State of Israel, Poland and Western countries? A lot of what we know about

Anielewicz is an interpretation (or even the interpretation of an interpretation). Is it even possible to peel off those layers and see what is under, to reconstruct and write the story of Anielewicz's life anew? To see all major narrating patterns along which his life was written and rewritten? Of course, my book is going to be yet another interpretation of his life. I argue however, that enough time had passed and that now it is actually possible to reevaluate not only Anielewicz's life, but also its reception. This is why I am planning not only to write a detailed life history of Anielewicz, but also to look closely on the ways his memory was constructed over time in Israel, Poland and other countries. These two sides of Anielewicz – his life and his 'afterlife' are complementary and essential for understanding this figure and its social, political, and historical meaning.

To some extent it was Anielewicz himself and his powerful, yet full of pathos, letters sent outside the Warsaw ghetto during the uprising, that contributed to the way this myth was built. First biographical sketches on Anielewicz were written already during the war: Emanuel Ringelblum, while in hiding on the 'Aryan' side of Warsaw, was the first one to create a heroic narrative about the commander of the uprising. A lot of memoirs that discuss Anielewicz were published both in the post-war press published by Hashomer Hatzair as well as other Jewish organizations and as separate books. In my article devoted to those early, post-war discourses about Anielewicz, I am arguing that his biography was subjected to various, conflicting interpretations even shortly after his death. Many surviving members of the Jewish Fighting Organization and other Jewish clandestine organizations wrote their own memoirs, almost all of which mention Anielewicz, discuss and evaluate his actions as the underground leader and the commander of the uprising.

My project is also aiming to reflect upon how memory of Anielewicz and Warsaw ghetto uprising was being institutionalized and used for various political purposes – very different in the State of Israel, that came into being just 5 years after the uprising, in Poland that



after 1945 found itself under the communist rule and behind the Iron Curtain, and eventually, Western countries. I also want to reflect upon what meaning it holds today in various political and social realities.

I plan to critically discuss ‘Anielewicz’s myth’: I will employ the tools of cultural and sociological analysis to understand what Anielewicz has been embodying for historians and survivors’ community. I will also address the question what this figure represents in public discourse and social memory today.

My planned monograph will around Anielewicz as the central figure, which allows me to include a bigger time span, and continue my narrative from 1943 up until the present times. Anielewicz is the prism through which I am watching the changing meaning of the uprising over the years in various political and historical contexts, and his biography provides a narrative structure for the first part of the envisioned book.

### **Methods, theoretical framework**

I will use the example of Anielewicz to reflect on the possible usage of the micro-historical framework for writing a biography of a hero whose story is somewhat trapped in the master-narrative of heroism. I believe that this particular case shows possibilities of writing microhistory while acknowledging some of the criticism it has met in recent years. I will also discuss how the writing of the new biography of Anielewicz may allow us to reexamine and put in question some of the commonplace schemes in the reflection upon the Holocaust (for example, the simple opposition between fighters and ordinary people).

Given the special status of Anielewicz in Jewish history, more of a symbol than a human being, my project creates a chance to ask several questions regarding writing an academic biography. Is biography a vehicle to tell a bigger story and to address vital historical problem,

or simply a reconstruction of a life story of a person who was significant for a certain reason? Anielewicz case is specific, for his biography had already been used (and abused) to address bigger problems and questions – about resistance, bravery, heroism, revenge – and almost solely for this purpose. I argue however that biography, as a genre and narrative structure, allows to address some of the bigger questions regarding continuity and rupture in regard to the Jewish history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while following life course (as well as memory and interpretation thereof) of one individual.