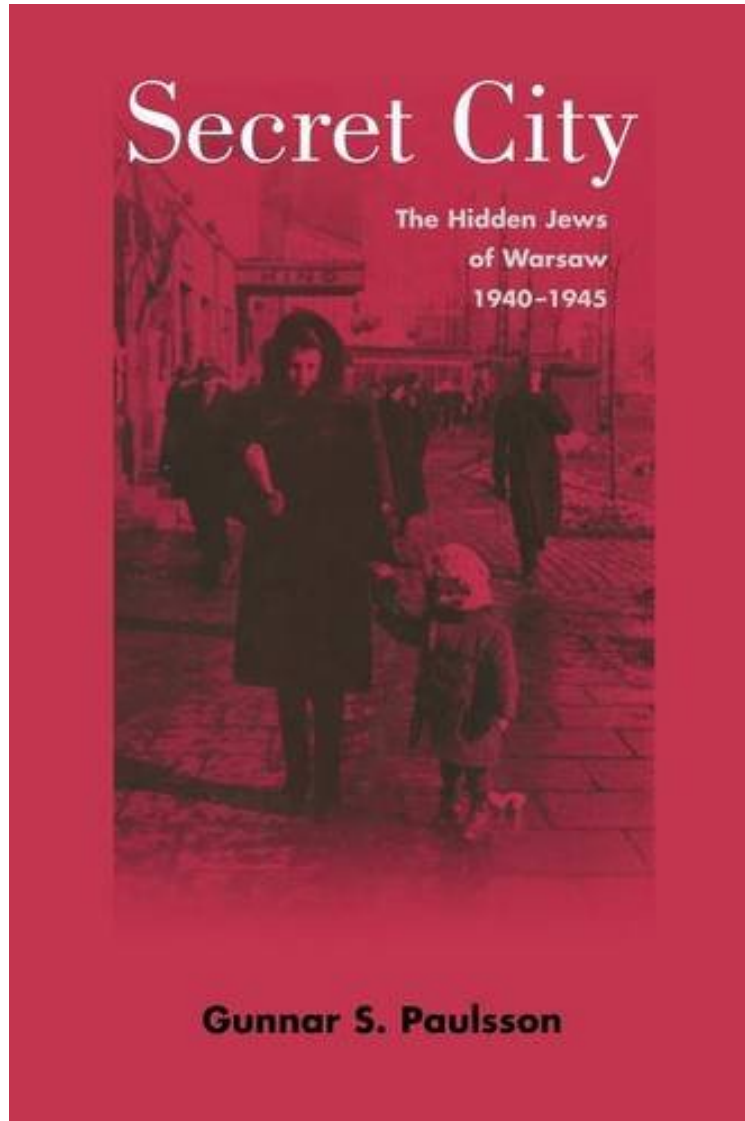


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Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945

Gunnar S. Paulsson

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Gunnar S. Paulsson : Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945 before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945:

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful. Excellent, With One Flaw By Danusha V. Goska "Secret City" is one of the best books I've ever read. "Secret City" could captivate not just historians, but any intelligent reader. Paulsson is not just a powerful, innovative, courageous scholar, but also a gifted writer. His style - fast-paced, spare,

sprinkled with subdued, wry comments - is reminiscent of film noir. "Secret City" tells the stories of Jews who escaped from the Nazis and lived outside the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Poles who aided them. Accounts of human endurance and skill, virtue and surrender to the demonic in one of history's worst manmade hells, are the core of the book. Endurance is a universal theme; as such, this book deserves a much wider audience than Holocaust scholars. Gambling for one's own life is a gripping motif. Some Jews, without allies, approached complete strangers and received aid and shelter. Others met horrific deaths. No sign separated Poles who would act as saints or demons. The facade of an aristocrat or a peasant, a student or a priest, even one's fellow Jew, might hide salvation or denunciation. The reader puzzles over what makes one man good, and another evil. In cases like that of Borys Pilnik (150-51), I'll be wondering how one man could save some Jews, and profit financially from the ruin of others. Merely by taking up the topic of escape, Paulsson risks censure. He cites two superstar Holocaust scholars: Hilberg, associated with an assessment of Jewish response as "passive," and Arendt, associated with an assessment of Jewish response as "compliant" (7-8). Paulsson innovates in emphasizing "evasion." Asking, as Paulsson does, why relatively few Jews escaped leads to several problems. First, some Jews held their non-Jewish neighbors in such low esteem that they didn't want even children to be sheltered by them, as such shelter might lead to them becoming like non-Jews (87). Truly, for these Jews in Poland, it was better to be dead than Polish. Too, that many Jews, even without close Polish friends, survived in hiding, weakens the canonical stereotype that Poles are anti-Semitic scum. Further, escape was an option that served the individual, not the group. Discussion of escape might discomfit some whose emphasis is on group identity at any cost. Finally, the wrongly motivated might use this book unfairly to judge those who did not escape. There is one glaring problem; the reader is advised to read superior authors on this point. Paulsson attributes anti-Semitism to Polish identity: especially peasant "folk" culture, and Christianity. He includes a gratuitous smear of one of the great souls of the twentieth century, Maximilian Kolbe. Paulsson's smear is especially egregious for several reasons. First, Kolbe had nothing to do with Paulsson's focus - escaped Jews in Warsaw. Kolbe died a horrible death in Auschwitz after defying the Nazis and sheltering up to two thousand Jews. Schlafly and Green investigated trumped up charges against Kolbe and proved them wrong. Sigmund Gorson, a Jewish survivor who knew Kolbe personally in Auschwitz, is one of many who has testified eloquently to Kolbe's true nature. On Kolbe, please read Treece, "A Man for Others." Paulsson never mentions Schlafly or Green, Treece or Gorson, all of whom would weaken his gratuitous smear. That Yale allowed this gratuitous, distorted smear into press speaks loudly of anti-Polish and Christophobic bias. As has been emphasized by everyone from Walesa to Wojtyla, Poles and Jews are inextricably linked. The horrible wrong of the Holocaust demands a virtuous response. Any time any of us, even just in our vocabulary choice, adopts hate and stereotyping, we fail in our duty to the victims. We owe it to them to be at our best. We can't change the past; we can change the present. Other authors, scholarly and popular, Polish and Jewish, in recent years, have analyzed Polish Jewish relations and acknowledged that Polish culture, Polish peasant status, and Christianity are not the roots, nor are they necessary and sufficient cause, of anti-Semitism. Please see Eva Hoffman, "Shtetl," and Michael Steinlauf, "Bondage to the Dead." I've made it a point to cite Jewish scholars because Paulsson speaks with great disdain of Polish scholars addressing these questions. In his book he slights any Pole who does not identify Polish identity as the cause of anti-Semitism as a disgusting fascist (245); here on he referred to a Pole as an "idiot" and a "troglodyte," i.e., "caveman." These terms are all too reminiscent of stereotypes of Poles that are best jettisoned. In any case, the following facts can't be denied (in fact, Paulsson cites them all): In eras when Poland was staunchly Christian, majority peasant, and nationalist, it was a refuge, indeed, proverbially, a "paradise" for Jews; in other eras, that very same Poland became a graveyard for Jews. Some Poles, staunchly Catholic, nationalist, and peasant, risked their all, and gave their lives, for Jews; others, equally nationalist, peasant, and Catholic, murdered Jews. Given these realities, factors other than Polish identity, peasant status, and Christian faith are the root of the problem. Accurately identifying its roots, as authors like those cited above attempt to do, is a step toward extirpating anti-Semitism. Demonizing an ethnic identity and misrepresenting a religion merely continues the cycle of hate that we all wish to transcend.

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. excellentBy ALEXANDER ASKANASwell reaserched, great book. One of the best I ever read on this topicCongatulations to the writer 1 22 of 2 people found the following review helpful. If you can only read a few books about the Holocaust in Poland, let this be one of themBy MeaghanA word of warning: this book is very heavy on numbers, and it is not a good book to read if you don't already have a good grounding on the Holocaust in Poland and the Warsaw situation in particular. Dr. Paulsson, a professional historian and the son of a Holocaust survivor from Warsaw, uses statistical analysis of the available sources to arrive at some surprising conclusions. He leads the reader every step of the way through his reasoning, so you can see why he thinks as he did, and I came to agree with his ideas. Most of the memoirs and other available literature about the Holocaust in Warsaw say it was incredibly difficult to survive in hiding on the Aryan side and pretty much pointless to try, unless you had money, connections and a "good" (that is, non-Jewish) appearance. However, Dr. Paulsson demonstrates that survival on the Aryan side was not nearly as impossible as the Jews believed. He calculates that about 28,000 Jews went into hiding in Aryan Warsaw. Of these, about 11,500 survived the war. 8,000 of the Jews that died were either killed in the Hotel Polski scheme in the summer of 1944 (where the Nazis tricked 3,500 Jews into turning themselves in) or in the Warsaw Uprising in August/September 1944 (where 25% of the city's population as a whole was killed, mostly in

military action). If you discount those 8,000, nearly 70% of the Jews hiding on the Aryan side would have survived the war. And even the actual survival rate of 41% is much better than I've seen listed in other books ("almost all" or "five out of six" hidden Jews killed etc) and much, MUCH better than the survival rate within the ghetto itself, where about 99% of the occupants died. But the memoir writers and other scholars never sat down and actually analyzed the numbers; their estimates are more a matter of perception, and as Dr. Paulsson indicates that perception was seriously skewed out of fear. As he points out, for the survival rate to be as high as it was, the Aryan population cannot have been nearly as vicious as most survivors and scholars make it out to be. Certainly the small number of monsters who denounced Jews and sent them to their deaths racked up a huge mortality rate; however, it appears that most of the Polish Varsovians, while antisemitic in principle, were not willing to actually murder individual people, or turn them in to the Germans which they knew was much the same thing. Dr. Paulsson gives a demonstration of this by relating a story from one of the memoirs he studied, where a Jewish woman on a crowded tram was recognized by a former classmate who called, "Jew! Catch the Jew!" She jumped off the tram and ran away and no one tried to stop her. Assuming that the crowd contained 50 people (a pretty conservative estimate), and working off the Jewish perception that the vast majority of Poles would have had them arrested if they had known their true identity, the fact that 49 of the people present did not try to hinder the woman's flight is nothing short of miraculous. Yet it happened again and again and again throughout the city; similar incidents are mentioned in many survivors' memoirs. This simply would not have been possible if the Polish population had been as rabidly prejudiced as the survivors believed. Although the book can be repetitive at times (Dr. Paulsson repeats his "dog didn't bark in the nighttime" analogy to the point of tediousness) and the number-crunching doesn't exactly make gripping reading (particularly in the last chapter, which Paulsson actually advises readers to skip if they don't care for statistics), I think this is a very fine work of history that all scholars of the Holocaust in Poland should read. It goes a long way towards correcting many myths and misconceptions about what was going on in Warsaw during that time.

When the Nazis forced most of Warsaw's Jews into the city's infamous ghetto during the Second World War, some 28,000 Jews either hid and never entered the Warsaw Ghetto, or escaped from it later in what Gunnar S. Paulsson calls 'the greatest prison-break in history'. This book - the first detailed treatment of Jewish escape and hiding during the Holocaust - tells the story of these hidden Jews of Warsaw. Using memoirs, diaries, testimonies and the records of Jewish and Polish organizations that helped the fugitives, Paulsson shows that after the 1942 deportations nearly a quarter of the ghetto's remaining Jews managed to escape and, despite appalling difficulties and dangers, more than 11,000 of them lived to see the end of the war. Connected by elaborate networks of which Poles, Germans and the Jews themselves were largely unaware, they formed what can aptly be called a secret city. Paulsson challenges many established assumptions. He shows that, despite the social gulf that separated Jews and Poles, enough private contacts existed to make escape on a large scale possible, without much help from the Polish or Jewish underground; that the much-reviled German, Polish and Jewish policemen, as well as Jewish converts and their families, were key in helping Jews escape; and that many more Poles helped than harmed the Jews, though most stayed neutral and often expressed antisemitic sentiments. He argues that the Jewish leadership was wrong to dismiss the possibility of escape, staking everything on a hopeless uprising. Paulsson's engrossing book offers a new perspective on Holocaust history. 'For many of us in this field it is difficult to imagine something new: the main lines of our understanding were sketched by some often formidable authors, many of whom lived through these terrible events. Paulsson manages to break new ground, however, with an intelligent, fresh, and independent-minded analysis.' Michael Marrus, Professor of Holocaust Studies, Toronto University 'the best, most complete examination we have to date of the texture of hiding and rescue in Nazi-occupied Warsaw - or anywhere in Nazi-occupied Europe' Lawrence Powell, Professor of History, Tulane University 'an important, formidable - and bound-to-be controversial - book' Berel Lang, Trinity College, Hartford Co-winner of the 1998 Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History Gunnar S. Paulsson has been the senior historian of the Holocaust Exhibition Project Office at the Imperial War Museum, London; Koerner visiting fellow and lecturer at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew Jewish Studies; and Pearl Resnick fellow at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. He is the son of a Holocaust survivor.

From Publishers Weekly This amazing and moving study sheds new light on details of the Holocaust that have up until now not been examined. Under the German occupation, "ninety-eight percent of the Jewish population of Warsaw"- 480,000 Jews-perished in WWII. But while the conditions of the infamous Warsaw Ghetto and its insurrection have been detailed numerous times, this study focuses on a new area of scholarship: Jews who evaded detection or fled the ghetto. Using diaries, witness testimony, and quantitative analysis (in which he tries to ascertain the precise numbers of people in the various groups he is writing about) Paulson draws a vibrant portrait of the complexity of Warsaw life, and especially of what he calls the "secret city," a collection of 28,000 Jews not confined to the ghetto, "together with the many non-Jews who helped hide them, and the criminal element that ceaselessly hunted them." Detailing a wealth of incident-from Jews involved in complex networks of survival to those who passed for non-Jewish but were sent to work camps for being Polish-the author argues that both Jewish and non-Jewish life in Warsaw was far more

complicated than has been thought. Paulson, a fellow at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, explains that this material was not examined earlier because of a "stigma attached to flight" and a valorization of resistance, such as the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. While this is more a scholarly than popular account, it is an important and fascinating analysis that calls for serious thought and reevaluation of Holocaust studies. 16 illus. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. a compelling portrait of Jews in hiding ... bestowing dignity on this specific response to Nazi persecution. -- Gabriel Finder, *East European Politics and Societies*, May 2004a model of clarity for the handling of so intricate a topic -- Guillaume de Syon, *History Teacher*, November 2004a model of studying the relatively neglected topic of evasion during the Holocaust ... a passionate call for historical engagement -- Tim Cole, *IHR Online*, April 2004diversified sources and convincing methods ... quite novel approach ... a most significant addition to the immense Holocaust literature. -- Shimon Redlich, *American Historical*, April 2004impresses with its careful scholarship and restrained presentation of [some] controversial ... propositions ... [tells] a very moving and important story -- Anita Shelton, *History: of New Books*, 9/22/2003From the PublisherWinner of the 1998 Fraenkel Prize in Contemporary History (for "an outstanding unpublished work in one of the fields of interest of the Wiener Library. These include Central Europe and Jewish history in the 20th century, the Second World War, fascism and totalitarianism, political violence, racism, etc."). Also winner of the 2004 Polish Studies Association / Orbis Prize (for "the best first book in English on any aspect of Polish affairs published between 2002 and 2004")