Erev Pesach 1943

It is April 19, 1943, in Warsaw, in Nazi-occupied Poland. My parents, hiding out in the open and holding counterfeit documents, are traveling east – positions of the orderlies and cleaners appear available at a small hospital in Bychawa, not far from Lublin. (This is where the story of Arnold will take place. [The story of Arnold | Ariel Paz-Sawicki | The Blogs (timesofisrael.com)](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-story-of-arnold/) It happens to be Erev Pesach – Passover Eve - but I am not sure they were aware of it – as “good Polish Catholics” they certainly were not going to mark it. In my mother’s diary there is a line saying “we are waiting for the train to Lublin.” They had traveled from Czestochowa to Warsaw where they could catch the Lublin train.

But the date is significant. This was the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. This was the beginning of a month-long battle during which mainly young Jewish fighters, some not older than 14, often using improvised weapons, in effect freed the last remaining survivors and ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto from the Nazis. Having nothing to lose but their lives, these young fighters, many associated with a number of pre-war Jewish organizations whose members often came to blows over such ideas as socialism, Zionism, Revisionism or communism, chose to fight together and not get on the trains that ferried Warsaw Jews to their extermination.

My parents were not aware of what was going on, although they surely must have heard the echoes of explosions and gun fire. They were inside the waiting hall when at a certain moment all the doors were closed and a number of uniformed policemen came inside. Many of these officers also stood by the windows. These were not German policemen. They were members of the Polish Dark Blue (uniforms) Police – the *Polnische Polizei im Generalgouvernement* – the Polish police set up late in 1939 to carry out many of the “chores” of the Nazis. With the fighting raging in the ghetto, they must have been ordered to look for Jews trying to escape. Two officers approached my parents and asked to see their documents. I guess they saw nothing wrong with their papers but it must have been something about how my father looked that they decided to take them aside. The first thing they did was to order my father to drop his pants. “We knew that you were a “parszywy Zyd” – a dirty Jew – was the first thing they said, at least that was what my father remembered. They then turned to my mother and started screaming at her for trying to save a Jew.

This was when my father realized he had little to lose and yelled back at the policemen. “How are you going to save yourselves!” he shouted. “The Russian army will be here next month and you all Hitler-lovers will be shot for collaborating with the Nazis! You are not better than the Nazis! You are bringing shame to Poland!” He remembered shouting for many minutes.

Something must have scared them. They emptied my father’s pockets, they emptied my mother’s pocketbook, took all the little cash and ration cards they had, they pulled off their wedding rings, and told then to get out of there. Sometime later they got on the train to Lublin and then hitched their way to Bychawa. In my mother’s diary, on that day, they were only waiting for the train to Lublin.

My father remembered the incident in early October in 1973. Besides the incident in Warsaw, he also recalled a similar incident at the train station in Czestochowa, sometime in late 1942, when two Gestapo officers wearing hats and long black leather coats went around asking people for their documents and asking “are you a Jew? Don’t lie, are you a Jew?” Somehow my parents were lucky and did not raise suspicions. Now fast forward to early October 1973. Two men wearing hats and long black coatsenter the TWA waiting area at JFK where passengers are waiting for a flight to Paris and then with many intending to switch for a flight to Israel. “Are you a Jew? Are you a Jew?” these ultra-orthodox Jews in traditional garb were asking. Most likely they wanted to put together a *minyan* – a quorum of ten Jewish men – in order to pray. For my father, this triggered those unhappy memories of Chestochowa and Warsaw. For a moment he became disoriented. He remembered becoming short of breath and sweating. The moment passed, they flew to Paris for a brief holiday. They never made it to Israel that year – on the Sixth of October the Yom Kippur War broke out and most airlines cancelled their flights. El Al continued to fly but the airline gave priority to pilots and soldiers rushing back home to rejoin their units.