Balakirsky Katz on Baskind, 'The Warsaw Ghetto in American Art and Culture'

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This book demonstrates as much as it analyzes that the Warsaw Ghetto—established during the Holocaust and the site of the Jewish uprising launched on April 19, 1943, that staved off two thousand German troops for twenty-eight days—has been an enduring source of inspiration for American writers and artists, apparently second only to the Anne Frank story. As so many conclusions that sound almost intuitive once they have been articulated, the work required to arrive at it is exhaustive.

Samantha Baskind has collated a wide range of individual and collaborative American projects and gives the representational history of the Warsaw Ghetto shape across seventy-five years of cultural productions. Beginning with the radio dramatization of the ghetto narrative only two months after the tragic end of the ghetto, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising seemed to grip American audiences as relevant to their own survival and the survival of American freedoms in a world threatened by evil. Corralling smaller audiences but responding in the more long-lived mediums in pencil, ink, and oil, graphic artists Arthur Szyk and William Gropper were among those who represented the uprising within months of the ghetto’s fall. With the war still raging, the first anniversary of the uprising evoked political activist projects fighting for an uncertain future for Jews on both sides of the Atlantic. That year, the Yiddish play The Miracle of the Warsaw Ghetto opened in New York already bearing the optimistic and heroic stamp that the uprising would acquire in the later resistance narratives of John Hersey’s The Wall (1950).

The second chapter explores the efforts to challenge what was developing into a conventional lens of “good versus evil” in Millard Lampell’s theatricalization of Hersey’s The Wall and Rod Serling’s teleplay In the Presence of Mine Enemies (1960). These projects introduced both Jewish and gentile characters and both the desire for and resistance to fighting, and they focused internally on the psychological dramas within the ghetto walls. These nuanced experiments proved short-lived as the theme of militant heroism returned to popular acclaim with Leon Uris’s Exodus (1958) and Mila 18 (1961), the subject of the third chapter and the one with which most readers will be the most familiar.

The last two chapters focus on the less-known and less-studied subject of the ghetto’s children, expanding the image and narrative of the ghetto to those who did not, could not, and were not
expected to fight. Baskind demonstrates that artists deploy the image of the child as a symbol of innocence and all that was lost and on whose behalf we must tolerate no naivete in the future. The attempt to process the horrors of Holocaust realities, often recorded in photography by the perpetrators, can be traced in the varied appropriations of the boy with his hands in the air from the Stroop Report by artists Samuel Bak, Judy Chicago, Audrey Flack, and Jack Levine. The final chapter focuses on the 2003 graphic novel *Yossel: April 19, 1943*, in which the artist Joseph Kubert fantasizes his way out of the totality of the ghetto dust by imagining an alternative ending for his alter-ego Yossel in a counter-history that imagines his family not immigrating to the United States in the 1920s.

As she painstakingly draws the map of American culture produced against the backdrop of the Warsaw Ghetto, Baskind analyzes the broader contours that all the individual projects in various media reveal in tandem about this corner of the American art scene. Baskind suggests that the desire to turn to the subject of the Warsaw Ghetto “suggests a meta-awareness on the part of the makers” not only of the heroism that brought forth the Jewish uprising “but also the struggles to record, preserve, and remember, which are always heroic imperatives in their own right in the penumbra of the Holocaust” (p. 13). For the artist who has devoted his life to the struggle to record, preserve, and remember, the act of representation is itself a heroic imperative. In various points throughout the book, Baskind creates symbolic links between the physical “combat” that inspired these artists and the artistic “combat” work of the cultural producers she has included in the book. If the analogy seems overwrought, the fact that some of the artists and writers included in the book, as well as Baskind in her own research, turned to the Oneg Shabbos archive established by those sealed in the ghetto to record their own experiences certainly speaks to the mutual drive to survive through the historical record.

But for the scholar, the bundling of these various individual projects as a category of cultural analysis carries different implications. While the Polin Museum at the site of the Warsaw Ghetto has sought to contextualize the ghetto, its uprising, and its destruction in a thousand years of Polish Jewish history, Baskind has chosen a single and exceptional event in Jewish history as a subject of academic inquiry. As a result, this book asks the question: can we discuss the Warsaw Ghetto apart from the Holocaust? To borrow a modified version of Nathan Englander’s query about that other Holocaust icon Anne Frank: what are we talking about when we talk about the Warsaw Ghetto?

Baskind engages with this thought experiment throughout the book, sometimes landing on the rivaling of Frank as a tragic symbol to manifest hope in a more heroic response and a different outcome to tyranny. Although offering no fixed answers, Baskind has produced a daring work of scholarship on American art in very concrete terms by including not only voices critical of America’s abuses of power but also those promoting interventionist foreign policy, gun ownership, and Jewish and American exceptionalism. Since Baskind’s subjects often buoy the theme of ghetto resistance with the threat of fascist repetition, their representations of the Warsaw Ghetto often explore extreme positions that challenge the ideological tenets that many of the artists included in this book express in their other works. This includes the use of the term “armed resistance” for the Warsaw Ghetto context, as it is ubiquitously described, to promote private gun ownership in America by imagining, as Jon Bogdanove’s Superman does, the victory over past and future Reichs. It also includes the use of the ghetto to project revisionist Zionist perspectives and to characterize criticism of Israeli militarism as a left-wing iteration of fascism. Given how unpopular these perspectives are in a culture that frowns upon gun violence and militarism, the result is a broader spectrum of political
and ideological visions than art historians typically present.

Although Baskind does not explicitly offer this conclusion herself, her richly illustrated book reveals that artists often reject (or co-opt) political correctness to engage with the Warsaw Ghetto as a historical subject that tests the premises and limitations of universalist values.

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