



The Wall

John Hersey

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Riveting & compelling, *The Wall* tells the inspiring story of forty men & women who escape the dehumanizing horror of the Warsaw ghetto. John Hersey's novel documents the Warsaw ghetto both as an emblem of Nazi persecution & as a personal confrontation with torture, starvation, humiliation & cruelty--a gripping, visceral story, impossible to put down.

The Wall Details

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Author : John Hersey

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From Reader Review The Wall for online ebook

Roger says

One of the best and most important novels I've read.

The story follows the lives (if you can call it life) of a dozen of the half million Jews trapped in the Warsaw ghetto during the war, their struggles to cope, to live life, to survive, as the wall is built, conditions steadily worsen in the face of hunger, disease, and Nazi "manhunts," and fellow citizens are "deported." Some try to persevere, some try to escape, some try to fight back, some just give up.

Though this is a fictional novel, it is based on true events, and I learned more about ghetto life, extermination camps, and underground resistance than I could in any history class. I suggest printing a map to refer to while reading (I found a good one of the ghetto in 1942-1943 online). It may take 20 or 40 pages to get used to the format (a journal with dashes in place of quotation marks), but it's well worth it and gets more and more fascinating, poignant, profound, and enthralling. I'll never forget some of the heroic characters, especially Rachel and Berson.

Here are a few quotations, not the best of the book, just what I had a chance to copy:

"To me, it makes no difference whether I am to die at the hands of Nazis or of microbes." - Goldflamm.

"The fact that a man is a man is more important than the fact that he believes what he believes."

"I now see that the greatest mistake we can make is to try to judge a whole man from the few things we hear him say and see him do." - Levinson.

"There is nothing like an expensive mistake to show a man to himself." - Berson.

Dennis Gardner says

Several months ago I read The Zookeeper's Wife. An ok book but what I remember about it was the work done by the Polish resistance during the Nazi occupation. I've since read the Polish Resistance was the fourth largest army in WWII. I wanted to read more about these people. Did some research and read this book as I was familiar with the author from the book Hiroshima. This is a powerful, intense and heartbreaking book. The author created several amazing characters which I will have a hard time forgetting. If you are interested in WWII history I very highly recommend this book.

Violet wells says

In the Warsaw Ghetto there was an underground group of archivists known as the Oyneg Shabbes. Their function was to chronicle the Nazi atrocities for posterity. These journals were famously buried in parts of the ghetto. Some were later discovered; others weren't. John Hersey writes this novel in the form of one of these fictitious journals. He reports the conversations he has with a group of disparate characters, including a Jewish Policeman, members of the Jewish council, smugglers, Gestapo informers and fighters. It's a form that allows him to load the book with information, cram in as much of his research as possible - in other words it gives him the overview scope of a non-fiction book. What's lost in this process is dramatic tension. The individual characters are dwarfed by all the historical information. Also, various genuine journals have survived so why write or read a fictitious one? If historical novels are to provide us with an experience that eludes non-fiction books, it's critical they press us up much more closely to the events described through an

empathy with the central characters. In many ways *The Wall* is the novelist playing safe - he is admitting his own limitations by cocooning himself in a bunker and relying on other voices to tell him what happened. For me he could have been imaginatively braver; he could have embraced the spirit of fiction more daringly instead of submitting so conscientiously to chronicling facts. Fiction at its best transcends fact. (Lauren Binet playfully examined the fact vs fiction conflict so brilliantly in his novel *HHhH*.)

I recently read a real journal of the Ghetto which got me interested in the subject and one of the fascinating things about it was the profusion of untrue rumour or, in modern parlance, fake news. Fake news abounded in the ghetto where virtually all contact with the outside world was cut off. The populace was made all the more insecure by not having a clue what to believe and what to disbelieve. Intelligence deteriorated into ignorance and ignorance is the first step to mindlessness, to dehumanisation. Hersey has the hindsight to correct all the fake news. So, most of what he writes is uncannily true - except, conversely, it wasn't true in spirit because often he was giving his archivist his own hindsight. What this means, is this novel occupies a kind of hinterland between fiction and non-fiction - but again without the irony Binet masters in *HHhH*.

As I said, the form of the novel, reported conversations with his cast of characters, might allow him to load the novel with information from different perspectives but it doesn't favour dramatic tension. Never is this more apparent than during the uprising itself, perhaps the most difficult of all ghetto events to imagine, and this is the weakest part of the novel - probably because it's also the hardest part of the true story to research. Most participants died, survivors only experienced the fight against the Nazis in a piecemeal fashion. The most baffling aspect of the uprising was how so few individuals completely untrained in handling weapons managed to hold out longer against the Germans than the entire Polish nation. You can't help wondering why the Nazis fled so easily. It's hard to believe many were killed by individuals firing a loaded weapon with so little ammunition for the first time in their lives from great distances. Without wanting to belittle the achievements of the Jewish fighters in any way you have to assume that the SS regiments engaged in the ghetto fighting, unlike the Wehrmacht, were a cowardly bunch. Typical bullies in other words. They didn't like being shot at.

There's a lot of wisdom in this novel and, despite its flaws, it does give a comprehensive picture of what life in the Warsaw Ghetto entailed so I'd recommend it if you're interested in the subject matter. I'd also recommend it to lovers of dystopian fiction as the Warsaw Ghetto might serve as the archetypal end of time experience for anyone who lived there.

Sarah says

I was led to this author through Orson Scott Card who called him one of his favorite writers. Hersey's book is a powerful study of human nature and a literary depiction of the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. One of the best WWII books I ever read.

Lacey says

I first read this book as a 16 year old almost 40 years ago. Although I have read literally thousands of books since then, this one I remember to this day. It was the book that personalized the Holocaust for me as much as, or even more than *Flowers in the Attic*, much as *Schindler's List* has done for so many more recently, and sparked a life long interest in the Jewish culture as well. I have added it to my read again list, something I

rarely do.

Ernst G. says

I read this book a long time ago. It created many pictures in my head that won't go away. Since I am going to visit Warshaw in may 2017 I decided to read it again. My opinion on the Polish people has been influenced by this book and the upcoming travel has forced me to read about the Poles in the second world war. I have been surprised by what I read. A formidable underground army, a special bataillon to help the Jews, a decisive Roel in the Battle of Britain, strong presence in the Arnies that liberated the Netherlands. Good to know. However the Wall is a truth that haunts you and makes you want to look away and at the same time wish you were there when it happened. Thanks to John Hersey this history cannot be forgotten. Moments of despair and hope and as the introduction states: the writer has focussed on the resilience of the people, not on the hopelessness of their fate. To be read and remembered in these fateful times.

Stephen Glenn says

So far, the best novel I have ever read. The strength of the book lies in its character development, which is deep and has a very authentic feeling. Some reviewers were critical because the story is slow, but that is because the author is willing to take the time to let the reader really get to know the characters. When they go through the horrific events of the story, the reader will feel compelled to stay with them, and when the book ends, some readers will feel like they had to say goodbye to several good friends. The diary style of the story is an approach that Hersey used in some other books. Here, it is most effective. Rarely does a novel offer the chance to view the unfolding events from the perspective of so many characters, but the account in each chapter is told by a changing group of characters who contribute to the record of Levinson's history of these events. By the way, there was a real-life history of these events too. It was recorded by Emmanuel Ringelblum, and it is, of course, even more horrific than this novel. Hersey makes the story much more bearable. He did his homework, too. Some characters here have real-life equivalents, and not just Noach Levinson as Emmanuel Ringelblum. Rachel Apt clearly matches Zivia Lubetkin, and there are others.

S.B. Lerner says

This is written in an unusual style, as if a historian was keeping a diary of the events he witnessed in the Warsaw Ghetto, along with interviews of the inhabitants. The preface refers to the Levinson Archives, discovered after that war. Of course, that's just part of the fiction, but it was so believable, I didn't realize it at first.

Despite the terrifying situation, most of the book is about relationships and personalities. Levinson, a recluse, finds a spirit of camaraderie and a "family" as people are forced to move into ever-closer quarters and to rely on one another for survival. The story gets more harrowing as the end draws near, and the ingenuity, bravery and breaking points of the various characters are tested.

It's a unique look at the Warsaw Ghetto and I liked the diarist style. It's long, 640 pages, but it is riveting. I would love to be in a book group to discuss it. Sometimes I wonder why we need all these new books, when there isn't time to read the old ones. And most of those can be read more than once.

Lewis Weinstein says

Brilliantly written ... the part I've read so far forces the reader to feel the relentless closing of the ghetto

Nancie says

An incredible book that tells the story of the Warsaw ghetto from the very beginning to the heartbreaking end. If you are interested in WWII literature, don't miss this one. It is a work of fiction that is well researched and told in a non-fiction format.

Andrew says

Author John Hersey was a Pulitzer Prize winning writer, best known for his small first person account of the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima, called Hiroshima.

And when he writes historical fiction, as he does in *The Wall*, it is very close to actual events. Based on the real documents found buried inside the destroyed Jewish ghetto of Warsaw after WWII ended, it tells the story of the Jews who were trapped there by the Nazis who took over Poland in 1939, and the escalating determination to wipe out these people by their oppressors.

But *The Wall* also is about, not just destruction, but a determination to survive under the most harrowing of conditions. Hersey writes this novel as if it were the journals of one of the characters. He observes and reports on the events of the community...from the trivial to the momentous. He also documents the noose tightening around the community as the years of the war go by, and the Nazi determination to destroy all Jews grew ever stronger.

At times the book is utterly heart-breaking. Tears were in my eyes as the underground fighters had to kill a baby to keep its cries from leading the Nazis to their hiding place, which would have been death for all of them. And yet...somehow Hersey is able to write into this always an underlying hope...a ray of life...a value that while there is life, there is still hope.

Many of the events that Hersey fictionalizes here actually happened, or events very close to them did. That he able to humanize these horrible atrocities, that he is able to individualize this mass destruction, is a gift of a master storyteller and journalist.

The Wall is a devastating work...because of the reality right behind the fiction. It is also an uplifting work, because of the hope that is in life.

Emily says

I am not surprised if you have not heard of this book, but please, please read it. It's one of the most incredible

pieces of literature I have ever picked up. It is the archives of a man named Noach Levinson who lived through the Warsaw ghetto and chronicled in minute detail his experiences and the lives of those around him. It is both fascinating and terribly heartbreaking to see the way in which the Jews in Warsaw were systematically destroyed through the eyes of one of their own. I have never read a book on the subject that even comes close to the depth of knowledge and feeling in *The Wall*.

Emily says

In my ever increasing interest in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, I've been gathering books from various libraries to try and wrap my brain around the perilous and courageous act of the Jews of Warsaw during 1943. One of the books in my pile was *The Wall* by John Hersey, a 640 page novel that I honestly wasn't sure I'd get around to any time soon. But then I read the first few pages and I was hooked. It was a lot to take in. I feel like I need to read it a few more times to fully understand everything.

The story opens with four survivors of the Warsaw ghetto finding the buried Levinson Archives. Noach Levinson is a Jewish historian who documents life in the ghetto from 1939-1943. Levinson—a recluse—is forced to move in with strangers when the ghetto is formed. But they become like family to him as the story progresses. The cast of characters are diverse and entertaining. Levinson finds, to his great surprise, that he rather enjoys being apart of a family. He writes of the day to day struggles of living in filth, poverty, and persecution. You see the hard and sometimes horrible choices people had to make in order to survive. When the Nazis start to deport the Jews to Treblinka, the Jews make the choice to fight back. They begin smuggling in weapons and the Z.O.B. (Jewish Fighting Organization) is formed. The family is broken up by the "relocation" but those who are left take up arms, build bunkers, and prepare to fight back.

It's all fictional, but the archives are so believable that at first I thought they were real. The historical accuracy is amazing, and although Hersey changed the names of actual historical people, I was able to recognize some of them from previous research. Noach resembles Emmanuel Ringelblum, Jewish writer whose archives were discovered buried in an underground bunker. Rachel Apt's leadership is very similar to Zivia Lubetkin. Yitzhok, I believe, is intended to represent Mordechai Anielewicz. The head of the Judenrat is most definitely based on Adam Czerniaków.

The writing is beautiful. It's one of the books you feel enriched by every time you pick it up. It's full of pain and bravery, horror, and determination. It's a hidden gem of a book that I'm very glad that I found.

“You're not impatient any more. Then you were in a hurry, because you thought you could encompass everything in your life. You wanted to learn everything and experience everything and be everybody. In a way, that was charming and delightful in you: I used to write in my notebooks that you were zestful. But it also made you seem confused. You did things in fits and starts. You learned as a stammerer talks ... Today, you are not in such a hurry. I think you have decided that you can do only a few things at all well, and they are more than enough.” —John Hersey

Jack Goodstein says

Not at all what I thought I remembered from my first reading mote than 50 years ago--almost clinical in its

structure.

Ellen says

Tremendous. Hard to read, as any novel set in the Warsaw ghetto should be. And yet I could not put it down.
