

The Wall Short Guide

The Wall by John Hersey

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Characters

In this, his second novel, Hersey's characters are much more complexly human than in *A Bell for Adano* (1944; see separate entry). They are also more alien to his experience. The Jews forced behind the wall of the Ghetto at first constitute what Noach Levinson, their historian, calls "a small France." They are divided into innumerable splinter groups from far left to ultraconservative. They are highly diversified in their working histories, too, from day laborers to professional men and university professors.

Some rarely, if ever, practice their religion; others are fanatically devout.

Noach Levinson's is the voice heard constantly throughout the novel. He had published two books before coming to the Ghetto, and he now takes any conversation, anecdote, any scrap of information he can find to make his record complete. Small, homely with thick glasses, there is something about him that causes people to talk freely and respond to his probing questions by revealing things they would not tell anybody else.

The Ghetto has given him friends, something he lacked in his pre-war life.

Through him the personalities of the other principal characters are revealed. As his archive grows, these people develop.

Dolek Berson, a graduate of Bonn University and a skilled musician, has always drifted along in his life. Born wealthy, there has never been any necessity for him to struggle, or to make any kind of commitment, political or otherwise. He becomes a leader behind the wall, one who plans the underground bunkers which will be vital for the defense of the Ghetto when the uprising begins. He also is important to the morale of his fellow inmates thanks to the buoyancy of his personality and to his nightly performances on a concertina after his piano is no longer available. He will later go over to "the Aryan side" in disguise to buy arms and ammunition.

Rachel Apt, plain to the point of ugliness, becomes a heroine in the Ghetto.

Her concern for others wins her the nickname "little mother." The confidence she inspires will make her one of the group leaders when the Ghetto rises. She and Berson are Hersey's protagonists in the novel. Maurizi Apt, Rachel's father, once a prosperous jeweler, moves over to the Aryan side disguised as a Polish Roman Catholic. Her sister, Halinka, noted for her beauty, seems characterless at first, not equal to the many crises in the Ghetto, but later becomes an agent for the combat teams when she is sent out to negotiate with smugglers for arms.

These people survive the Ghetto.

Another memorable character is Lazar Slonim, a lawyer who was a fellow student when Berson was at Bonn University. A leader of the socialist Bund, it is he who confirms the suspicions of Ghetto leaders that those trains supposedly taking people to Russia for



resettlement are actually making trips several hours only to Treblinka, a death camp. Pavel Menkes, a baker, and vital to the lives of many others, is a conservative who masks his timidity with bluster, but dies fighting after he finally realizes that no other course of action is possible. The six hundred pages of this novel cannot quite equal Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) in its many characters, but it rivals that panoramic novel. However, the atmosphere in *The Wall* is claustrophobic, while Tolstoy makes readers aware of Russia's huge expanse.

The most frequent complaint about the characters in *The Wall* is that they are not authentically Jewish. Critics who are Jewish themselves have been quick to point this out. Despite Hersey's obvious sympathy for the plight of these people and despite his admiration for their courage and tenacity, he could not be expected to reproduce their ethnicity in its entirety. This would have required an impossible feat of empathy. However, some Jewish critics, Alfred Kazin and Maxwell Geismar, for example, have praised Hersey's accomplishment and noted the human warmth with which he has invested his characters.



Social Concerns/Themes

During World War II John Hersey had been more anti-Japanese than anti-Nazi. He had seen the results of Japanese atrocities before the Americans entered World War II. Visiting Hiroshima, he realized the enormous suffering of civilians, which he documented in his nonfiction book *Hiroshima* (1946).

In the closing years of the war he also toured the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Lodz and Tallin ghettos as well as a detention camp at Klooga, Estonia. The concentration camps, like the fate of the innocent on Hiroshima, represented slaughter on a scale that was beyond imagination. He thought that no novel could adequately capture the horror inflicted on that mass helpless humanity, as he had successfully captured in *Hiroshima*, now considered a landmark of imaginative journalism. But after witnessing the ghetto and its heroic resistance, he thought that he might recapture the destructive more imaginatively than through journalism.

Although Jews have a history of living through persecutions, the German concentration camp system, of which the Warsaw Ghetto was an extension, all too frequently destroyed the human qualities of its victims before it killed them. Former university professors were reduced to fighting for scraps of food in their guards' garbage heaps. *The Wall*, like *Hiroshima*, expresses Hersey's determination to show the extent of the twentieth century's inhumanity.

Human tenacity in the face of overwhelming odds is a theme in many of Hersey's books, fiction and nonfiction.

Hersey examines how the constant threat of extinction affected the people's sense of themselves as individuals and of their sense of their collective identity as Jews who were denied the opportunity to practice their ancient customs.

The Ghetto was a sadist's paradise, and the Germans destroyed their victims piecemeal, and always without revealing their real intentions. When the Jews learned what was happening to those people sent out for "resettlement," they finally did rebel. In *The Wall*, Hersey suggests that there is a strength in human dignity that is almost indestructible.



Techniques

The novel is based on Levinson's archives, dug out of the ruins of the Ghetto after the war. The archives are fictional but the information contained in them is based on authentic records. Hersey had translators read those records into a recorder. There were diaries, medical records, letters, and songs which became part of the material for his novel.

Hersey began looking for these materials early in 1947 and lived with his tapes for almost a year and a half before starting to write.

When about four-fifths of the way through his first draft, Hersey decided that his whole plan was wrong. He had been writing a third-person singular narrative with occasional interchapters by Noach Levinson commenting on what was taking place. But Levinson was too important to the narrative to be confined to this system. Hersey decided to rewrite the whole book, using Levinson's voice throughout. The second draft went much more rapidly; Hersey had discovered the right structure for his novel. Levinson records events from day to day, always supplying the date on which something comes to his attention as well as the date on which the event occurred. Hersey has Levinson summarize the significance of Ghetto experience in a lecture on the great scholar Peretz. Peretz is also the ultimate authority on the question of "What is Jewishness," and their Jewishness has made the residents of the Ghetto triumphant in spite of their situation.

This is on April 23, 1943. The Ghetto will be completely destroyed in about two weeks, but now its inhabitants are ready to fight until the end.

The uprising is the climax of the novel, and the pace of the narrative is quickened from the time of the first clash on January 12 until the defenders succumb to overwhelming odds. When their resistance begins they have been reduced to about one-tenth of the number of uprooted, bewildered persons originally crowded into the area. Their passivity is the result of the overwhelming sense of helplessness they originally felt. Members of their group had built the wall which confined them, and as their numbers were reduced their space was more and more constricted as deportations emptied street after street, work place after work place. The Germans are not treated individually for the most part, but are the guards and officials who call occasionally on the Judenrat or on the heads of the various industries set up in the Ghetto.

Hersey has written a combination of history and fiction, "a novel of contemporary history" as he calls it. He read extensively on the history and religion of the Jews to make certain that his presentation of this ancient people would be accurate. The result is impressive both in its historic accuracy and its fictional qualities.

Adaptations

Milton Lampell's dramatization of *The Wall*, a play in three acts, opened at the Billy Rose Theater, New York on October 11, 1960. George C. Scott played Dolek, and Yvonne Mitchell played Rachel. The role of Noach Levinson, so important in the novel, was eliminated.

The scenes of the novel which have the greatest emotional impact were retained.

A revised version of the play, the one now more generally staged, was first presented by Arena Stage, Washington, D.C., on January 29, 1964. The Germans, except for the young private in the first scene, appear as menacing shadows in sharp blacklight. The horror of the situation facing the inhabitants of the Ghetto defies translation to the stage.

Although the screen rights to *The Wall* were sold to David O. Selznick for \$100,000 plus royalties in 1950, the film was never made. In 1983, however, the CBS Network presented a movie version.

Key Questions

Hersey's novel, written five years after the end of World War II, is an early part of what has since become a whole library of books dealing with the Holocaust.

Despite the huge volume of material documenting what has been called "the worst atrocity in human history," for a decade or more some historians have been trying to deny that it ever happened.

On the eve of World War II, Hitler, whose plans to destroy the Jews was already part of his New Order, remarked: "Who remembers the Armenian massacres now?" He knew the human tendency to forget by any means possible the monstrous deeds the race is capable of perpetrating. Henry Adams in the concluding sentence of his famous *The Education of Henry Adams* looked forward to an age of peace for which his good friend John Hay, recently dead, had worked. If he could have had his friends return to 1938, the centenary of their birth, they might find "a world that sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shudder."

But 1938 was the year of the Purge Trials in Moscow, of the last Nuremberg rally of the Nazi party, and later is the year of Kristall nacht, a series of pogroms all over Germany which cost the lives of thousands of German Jews. So much for Adams's very guarded optimism. Have we any real assurance that such atrocities will not recur?

Has the literature of the Holocaust really helped prevent other such events from happening? A look at recent history is not that encouraging. Yet, dismissing the Nazis as merely part of ancient history and the Holocaust as a fabrication will not brighten future prospects. Is there a remedy against human depravity which might prevent future atrocities apart from drastic Skinnerian measures?

1. Is *The Wall* as Hersey finally wrote it the best way of presenting the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto? Noach Levinson is left out of the dramatic version of the novel.
2. Hersey is sometimes referred to as a crusading moralist. Does the tone of *The Wall* sound like that of a crusader? Can he be charged with preaching in any part of the novel?
3. Dolek Berson and Rachel Apt are respectively the hero and heroine of the novel. How does each one develop into these roles?
4. Rabbi Goldflamm is dismissed by many in the Ghetto as more of a gossip than a holy man in the usual sense of the term. How does Levinson come to respect him and his attitude toward the situation everyone in the Ghetto faces?
5. "No matter how prideful or how fearful we may be, we are a people who can do things—can even prepare for death—with an ironic air." Other people in the Ghetto have not



recognized Levinson's ironical bent. What other evidence of his sense of humor are we given?

6. Hannah Arendt, after the publication of her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was attacked by other Jews because she said some of them in the concentration camps betrayed their own people. Does Hersey ever suggest that the Judenrat in the Warsaw Ghetto is guilty of this?

7. Dolek Berson for a time was a member of the Ghetto police force but soon resigned. Contrast his behavior with that of Stefan Mazur who remains in the police force until his death. What effect does this work have on him?

8. Formerly a skilled pianist, Dolek Berson becomes a performer on a concertina. How important is this little instrument to him and the others through those days up until the Ghetto finally collapses?

9. The wall has a number of characters who play important roles in the life of the Ghetto. Has Hersey created in Fischel Schpunt, Yitzhok Katz, Mordecai Apt, Rutka Mazur, and Felix Mandeltort, to name a few, fully realized human beings?

10. Noach Levinson says that his speech on Jewishness as explained in the writings of Y. L. Peretz cost him more anxiety than the constant fear of death which was part of daily life in the Ghetto.

How effective was this speech as a morale builder and in confirming their identities for his audience?

11. The Z.O.B. (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa), or the Jewish Fighting Organization, set up on July 28, 1942 would consist of about six hundred and fifty fighters most of whom were armed with ineffectual revolvers with ten rounds of ammunition each. Against them were twenty-one hundred Germans armed with the finest modern weapons. What enabled the Jews to keep this force at bay for several weeks?

12. According to David Sanders, one of Hersey's leading defenders among literary critics, *The Wall* "is an achievement that defines the novel of contemporary history: the narrative of an event with its full historic implications and without any melodramatic action or single sentimental cliché." Do you think the novel fulfills this definition?

13. Why does Hersey never focus more precisely on the German destroyers of the Ghetto, for example, not even naming Jurgen Stroop, the S.S. general who finally levels it?

14. Rachel Apt's voice concludes the novel: "—Nu, what is the plan for tomorrow?" She and about forty others have reached a place of comparative safety.

What does her question indicate about their future actions?

Literary Precedents

Nazi atrocities in Poland were vividly described in *The Black Book of the Polish Jewry* (1943). A section on the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto was included. One of Hersey's primary sources was Emmanuel Ringelblum's chronicle, the most celebrated of Jewish communal archives documenting the Jews' experiences under German occupation. *Oneg Shabbat* gives an account of events from September 1939 to 1943 when Ringelblum was killed.

The work had been published in its original Yiddish, but in a bowdlerized version, in 1952. A complete revised edition appeared in 1963. The English translation, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* (1958), is based on the 1952 edition. It is one of the works Hersey had on his wire recordings.

An earlier work whose subject matter parallels the experiences of the defenders of the Warsaw Ghetto is *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1934) by the Austrian poetnovelist Franz Werfel. In World War I Turkey became an ally of Germany. In 1915 the Turkish government began exterminating its Armenian citizens. It is estimated that from one to two million Armenians were slaughtered in a massacre which deserves to be called a holocaust in its own right. Writing in 1933 when Hitler's National Socialists were in their first year of power, Werfel, as the noted critic of German literature, Heinz Polizer, has pointed out, provides a forewarning of the fate of European Jews.

After twenty-three years in Paris, Gabriel Bagradian returns to his native village in Syria about thirty miles from Antioch on the Mediterranean coast. A reserve officer in the Turkish army, he has come back just as the pogroms are starting.

Near his village is the mountain, Musa Dagh, where the inhabitants of seven Armenian villages led by Gabriel resist the Turkish army during the forty-days siege. Gabriel is killed at the end of the novel, but the survivors are rescued by French warships. Unfortunately, the defenders of the Warsaw Ghetto fought without hope of any assistance. Werfel was praised for his realistic handling of historical incidents in this book, generally regarded as his best novel.

Related Titles

Here to Stay: Stories in Human Tenacity (1962) is a book of essays which includes Hiroshima, Hersey's most famous survival story, and what some critics believe is his masterpiece. One story, "Survival" is an account of John F. Kennedy's heroism after a Japanese destroyer had cut his torpedo boat, 109, in half. Kennedy 6661 rescued some of his crew, and with a back injury that would later force him out of the navy, swam for help. A news report had already reported his death.

Some other accounts such as "Tattoo Number 107, 907," feature other holocaust survivors. "Joe Is Home Again" describes a GI with an amputated left arm and his adjustment problems. An old woman on the roof of her house during a flood stubbornly refuses to give up her struggle for life in "Over the Mad River."



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