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Jasia Reichardt, *Quinze voyages de Varsovie à Londres 1940-1945*

Klara Kemp-Welch

- ¹ Newly translated from Polish, Jasia Reichardt's *Quinze voyages de Varsovie à Londres 1940-1945* provides a polyphonic account of the day to day events leading up to the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942, and of Reichardt's remarkable, collectively orchestrated, survival, and subsequent emigration to the United Kingdom. The story is told through family letters, photographs, and drawings, accompanied by a detailed autobiographical commentary. Together, these form a history from below a story entirely narrated by female protagonists articulating their concerns to other women, their messages transmitted across Europe by a network of women. It is a history that has been put together in such a way as to preserve the perspective of a child. Jasia Reichardt was just 6 when the war broke out, and 9 when she set off, alone, under a new identity, for an uncertain future, while others knew they would perish. The artist Franciszka Themerson kept letters received from her deceased sister and mother in a box for decades, only showing them to Jasia Reichardt a few days before her death in 1988. *Quinze voyages* opens with Jasia Reichardt as a finely dressed six year old, cross that she is soon to be made to attend a French elementary school: "of course, I did not even know I was Jewish". Soon after the German invasion, her artist grandfather Jakub Weinlas's house in Warsaw was burned down, and his life's work destroyed. Family members did their best to keep their spirits up. Jasia's mother, Maryla Chaykin, a children's illustrator, wrote to her sister that she continued to play the piano, playing "a farewell concert for herself every two or three days. Because one never knows". Her letters were tender, seeking to reassure Franciszka that the family were well and that she need not worry. In October 1940, they were forced to move to the so called "small ghetto", where wealthier Jews were re-settled. The minutiae of everyday life take centre stage in Jasia's narrative. Her protagonists include a reassuring white wardrobe, a much-loved porcelain doll that has to be sold, and a lone tomato grown on a balcony with no view, that never reaches maturity. Jasia recalls that leafing through atlases was one of her favourite pastimes, that she dreamed of Africa, that nobody ever seemed to talk about the future. Her mother observed that the girl

played at planting, replanting and watering the same beans several times a day. Still, the family tried to make her life as normal as possible, keeping up her music and other studies. They spent days on end drawing a rabbit they had asked a friend to procure for them for food as there were “few other past-times”. It was not only the children who felt it: “C’est assommant, cette monotonie”, Maryla admitted to her sister. Their world contracted; they stopped going anywhere; a walk was reduced to taking turns up and down the street or courtyard. Jasia describes a sudden raid by the Gestapo. Though she could see her mother was furious when they confiscated her sheepskin coat, nobody discussed the event: “silence in response to these facts becomes our *modus vivendi*”. Writing to her sister in Paris in February 1940, Maryla confessed: “We live by the letters received from our nearest and dearest”. Letters arrived with a 2 to 3-month delay, if at all. People carried letters with them in their pockets, reading and re-reading them. The reproduced letters record interventions by the censor, erasing information sent by family members concerning the whereabouts of others to be passed on. Maryla recounted that some women were going to see clairvoyants to try to get a sense of where their menfolk might be, out of desperation. The letters repeat, like a refrain: “we are in good health and we want for nothing”. These many repetitions are painful to read, conveying a sense of hopelessness, a reduction of communication to the bare essentials, to an affirmation of life, little more. Despite their attempts to reassure Franciszka, it is clear that the family’s material situation deteriorated as time went on. The food parcels Franciszka Themerson sent become a lifeline rather than a supplement. Parcels became as materially essential as the letters were spiritually: the things they contained could be bartered for other necessary provisions. Jasia Reichardt recounts that the arrival of parcels had become “the most important event in our life”, the only means of survival as of the autumn of 1941. And yet parcels sent to one branch of the family were not automatically shared with family members living in the other rooms in the three-room apartment and relations among the different branches of the family living in cramped adjoining rooms began to deteriorate. If they never fell apart entirely, Jasia remarks that this must have been because her mother was so set on keep the peace as to acquiesce to anything. She reflects that “confronted with danger, a family can become nothing more than a collection of frightened individuals”.

- 2 Franciszka Themerson’s letters are not included. A glimpse into the remarkable efforts entailed in supporting her family from a distance is provided by the reproduction of a letter from the Treasury and Board of Trade in London, however, officially informing her that “it is forbidden... to have any commercial, financial or other intercourse or dealings with or for the benefit of any person in enemy or enemy occupied territory”. Such activities were being carefully monitored: “in asking friends in the United States to send money to Lisbon to be expended in the despatch of parcels of food to your mother in Warsaw, you have infringed these provisions”. The packages continued to flow though, over 120 reaching the family by early 1942.
- 3 Maryla wrote to her sister in the autumn of 1941 that she felt a new wave of uncertainty. They tried to live in the present, she said: “I have understood that one should rejoice in not having to worry about one’s loved one, and that if you can see them, what more could one ask for...”. If ever they left the apartment, Jasia’s mother would cover the child’s eyes to prevent her seeing atrocities. At the time she still knew nothing of the deportations as of May 1942. The letters became shorter and shorter, and then stopped. The last one received before the liquidation of the ghetto in June

1942 was from Jasia's grandmother, via Warsaw, Berlin, and Lisbon. She asked a friend to thank her daughter in London for her gifts, to say that they were all well and that they sent her their best wishes. Jasia later realised that the family must have sold their Bechstein piano to pay for her escape. There are no goodbyes. Her father, hitherto outside the ghetto, came to join the family to arrange her escape. He was to be transported to Treblinka, along with her mother, where both were killed. Jasia, though, was secretly transported to a hospital in Otwock with her grandmother. Having been taught her prayers and given careful instructions, with some money sewn into her coat, she continued her journey alone, aged just nine. She had to make her way through the forest at night to meet an unknown man who had been paid to wait for her on the other side. She instinctively understood that the gravity of the situation meant that her religious re-education as a Catholic was a "passport for the future". At each step of the journey, she asked herself what decision her parents would want her to make, though she knew that she was now "responsible for her own life". Armed with a new Polish identity and a list of addresses, she undertook more than a dozen "journeys", shuttling between a range of family friends, hospitals, orphanages and convent schools. She writes that she even came to enjoy the tranquillity of life in the final convent, where she was tasked with maintaining a small orchard. Small talk was the order of the day among the children: they talked about nature and name-days, but never about food, money, the Germans, their parents or other such "essentials". An announcement found by chance by her teacher in a paper was to reunite Jasia with cousins who were looking for her, who, in turn, arranged for her to join her aunt and uncle, the Themersons, in London. She describes the trauma of seeing Warsaw in ruins in January 1946 en route to London, and the difficulties of adjusting to her new life with the Themersons, who arranged for a scholarship that enabled her to board at Dartington. There she developed a passion for the theatre. In later life she retained a strong relationship to the intellectual community of émigré Poles in the UK and became a key figure in the London art world, first working at the ICA, then, in the mid 1970s, becoming Director of the Whitechapel Gallery. Stefan Themerson once told her that she could either live in the past or in the future: she chose the future. She only felt able to begin to excavate her past very recently. The result is a remarkable testimony and the invaluable gift of her memories to the next generation.