

Extracts from Aron Kaplan Diary

October 1939

I find it hard to even hold a pen. My hands tremble. I have lived through a catastrophe that has left me crushed and physically broken. And what is worse even as I sit and write these lines, I am still not certain that the catastrophe is over. I only comfort myself with the hope that I will come out of this alive.

October 1939: In our scroll of agony, not one small detail can be omitted. Even though we are now undergoing terrible tribulations and the sun has grown dark for us at noon, we have not lost our hope that the era of light will surely come. Our existence as a people will not be destroyed, but the Jewish community will live on. Therefore, every entry is more precious than gold, so long as it is written down as it happens, without exaggerations and distortions.

January 1940 "I do not know whether anyone else is recording the daily events. I sense within me the magnitude of this hour and my responsibility to it.

August 1940 - There is no end to our scroll of agony. I am afraid that the impression of this terrible era will be lost because they have not been adequately recorded. I risk my life with my writing, but my abilities are limited. I don't know all the facts. Those

that I do know may not be sufficiently clear, and many of them I write on the basis of rumours whose accuracy I cannot guarantee. But for the sake of truth, I do not require individual facts, but rather the manifestations which are the truth, and the fruits of a great many facts that leave their impression on people's opinions, on their mood and morale. And I can guarantee the factualness of the manifestation because I dwell among my people and behold their misery, their souls' torments.

October 1940 – The creation of the ghetto is accompanied by such severe birth pangs that they are beyond description.

December 1940 – My inkwell lay dormant for a few days because of my mental distress. Every hour there is a new edict from Job. Every so often I remember that I am a prisoner in the ghetto; that I am penned within a piece of land four or five kilometers in size without contact with anyone outside. That by law I am not allowed to buy or even read book in a foreign language. When I remember all this I become desperate, ready to break my pen and throw it away. But this despair does not last forever. The spirit of dedication which had left me in my moments of spiritual agony, as though some hidden force were ordering me: Record! Were it not for my pen, my delight, I would be lost.

November 1941 -This journal is my life, my friend, and ally. I pour my innermost thoughts and feelings into it, and this brings me relief. When my nerves are taught and my blood is boiling, then I am full of bitterness. In my helplessness, I drag myself to my diary and at once I am enveloped by a wave of creative inspiration, although I doubt whether the recording that occupies me deserves to be called creative. The important thing is that in keeping this diary, I find spiritual rest. That is enough for me.

January 1942 -The whole nation is sinking in a sea of horror and cruelty. I do not know whether any one else is recording the daily events. The conditions of life which surround us are not conducive to such literary labours. Any one who keeps such a record endangers his life, but this doesn't alarm me. I sense within me the magnitude of this hour and my responsibility to it. I have an inner awareness that I am fulfilling a national obligation. It is a historic responsibility. My words are not rewritten, momentary reflexes shape them. Perhaps their value lies in this. My record will serve as material for the future historian.

January 1942: The cold is so intense that my fingers are often too numb to hold a pen. There is no coal for heating and electricity is sporadic or nonexistent. In the oppressive dark and unbearable

cold your mind stops functioning. Yet even in such a state of despair the human spirit is variable. The call for a free tomorrow rings in your ears and penetrates the bleakness in your heart. At such a moment one's love of life reawakens. Having come this far I must make the effort to go on to the end of the spectacle. It is hard to foretell who will live and who will die, and it is especially hard to depart from this earth without knowing the final outcome ...

July 1942 – Some of my friends and acquaintances who know the secret of my diary urge me, in their despair, to stop writing. why? For what purpose? Will you love to see it published? Will those words of yours reach future generations? How? And yet in spite of it all I refuse to listen to them. I feel that continuing this diary to the very end of my physical and spiritual strength is a historical mission which must not be abandoned. My mind is still clear, my need to record unstilled, though it is now five days since any real food has passed my lips. Therefore I will not silence my diary!

July 1942 – My powers are insufficient to record all that is worthy of being written. Most of all, I am worried that I may be consuming my strength for naught. Should I too be taken all my efforts will be wasted. My utmost concern is for hiding my diary so that it will be preserved for future generations. As long as my pulse beats I shall continue with my sacred task.

The final entry in the diary is dated 4 August 1942: *If my life ends – what will become of my diary?*

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