

EXCERPTS FROM *ON BOTH SIDES OF THE WALL*

Vladka Meed

Feigele Peltel-Miedzyrzecki was seventeen when Hitler's army occupied Poland and entered Warsaw. From the first days of the Nazi occupation, Feigele had been a member of the underground. Feigele was transformed into "Vladka Meed" when she was called upon to work on the "Aryan side" by the underground movement. Thanks to her "Aryan" appearance, her fluent, accent-free Polish (rather than Yiddish), and her resourcefulness, she gained a reputation as a courageous underground courier. The following are excerpts from Vladka Meed's autobiography, *On Both Sides of the Wall*.

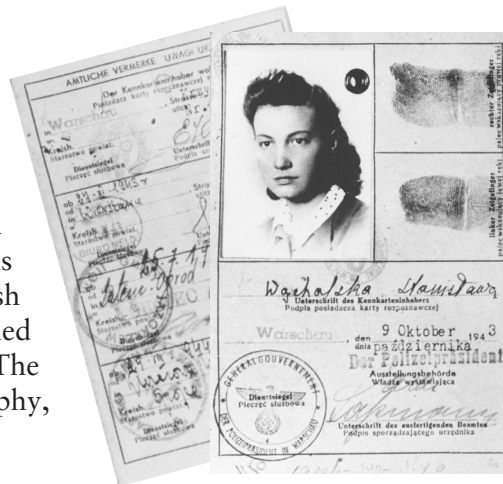


Photo of Vladka Meed's false identification that allowed her to "pass" as an "Aryan."

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From Chapter 32, "Jewish Aryans"

The common denominator of Jewish life on the "Aryan side" was fear! Fear of the Germans, fear of the Poles, fear of the blackmailers, fear of losing one's hideout, fear of being left penniless. Fear was a constant companion not only of those who, because of their typically Jewish appearance, had to keep out of sight in Gentile lodgings but also of those of us who had the "Aryan" features—fair hair, blue eyes and snub nose—which meant the chance to move about the streets.

These so-called "Aryans" had to blend with their surroundings, adopt Polish customs, habits, and mannerisms, celebrate Christian religious holidays and, of course, go to church. They had to watch their every movement, lest it betray nervousness or unfamiliarity with the routine and weigh their every word, lest it betray a Jewish accent.

Nevertheless, there were always trivial but telltale signs that could not be controlled, and these could betray one's identity. For example, lack of known relatives or reluctance to cultivate friendships with Gentiles aroused mistrust. The eyes were a special danger sign. A careworn face might be transformed by a smile; an accent could be controlled, church customs and prayers could be learned, but the eyes... How could one hide the mute melancholy, the haunted look of fear?

"Your eyes give you away," our Gentile friends would tell us. "Make them look livelier, merrier. You won't attract so much attention then." But our eyes kept constantly watching, searching the shadows ahead, glancing quickly behind, seeing our own misfortune and foreseeing even worse to come. Haunted by fear of betrayal, our eyes betrayed us; and this knowledge only increased our fear.

Jews with Aryan features were forever asking their Polish friends and themselves, "How is it that everybody seems to know we're Jews? Don't I look completely Aryan?"

Appearances could, indeed, be flawless, the face authentic, the deportment utterly correct; the speech one hundred percent Gentile—but we were recognized as Jews. Apparently there was something innately Jewish about us which the Polish eye, particularly the discerning eye of a Polish policeman and, above all, the trained eye of the *szmalcownik* (blackmailer) could detect at a glance. The Jews who thought that their Aryan looks allowed them to walk about freely in public were those most often victimized by the ubiquitous blackmailers. Wherever they went, curious and piercing eyes seemed always turning in their direction.

The strain of eluding the *szmalcownik*, the constant changing of names and addresses, the incessant fear of exposure drained the last drop of vitality brought by these latter-day Marranos from the ghetto. The life of almost every Jewish survivor was a harrowing saga.

From Chapter 31, “Polish Friends”

It must be stressed that not all the Poles with whom we dealt were treacherous blackmailers or calculating mercenaries. Most of the Gentiles did, indeed, demand cash for any service rendered. But there were also those who were kindhearted and sympathetic to our sufferings. Some even risked their lives to rescue Jews. Without the cooperation of this handful of friendly Gentiles, the Jewish underground on the “Aryan side” would not have been able to accomplish much. At crucial moments and at times of great peril, these friends enabled us to carry out our missions.

Excerpted from Vladka Meed, *On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto*. Originally published by the Holocaust Library in 1993, reprinted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1999. Used with the permission of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.