

Words to Outlive Us – Eyewitness accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto
edited by Michal Grynberg. Translated by Philip Boehm.
Granta Books, 2003.

This is not a book to be read for any length of time, indeed short bursts was the most that I could manage. This is not because its content is poor but because the words that it contains sear the heart and chills the mind, and there is only so much of this that anyone can take at a single sitting.

Words to Outlive Us is a collection of testimonies by those caged up in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Nazi occupation of Poland during the Second World War. Lovingly collected and collated by the late Dr Michal Grynberg, who was one of Poland's leading scholars of the Shoah, these hitherto unpublished documents are part of the archive of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. They have been sensitively translated by Philip Boehm, a leading translator of German and Polish into English, and some of the power of the material is undoubtedly due to the quality of the translation.

All of the aspects of the ghetto that one might expect are here: life in the ghetto and its institutions; the roundups, selections and deportations; resistance to the Nazis both active and passive; life on the outside and finally liberation. Some testimonies bear their author's name; others are anonymous; where the fate of the authors is known this is detailed before each entry.

Overall this must rank as one of the most significant books on a key aspect of the fate of Polish Jewry under the Nazis, a testimony to the depths of depravity to which human beings can sink and the courage and endurance to which they can rise in the worst circumstances imaginable.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh