Marek Edelman

A leader of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, cardiologist, and political activist

Marek Edelman was a national hero in Poland. The day after he died the front pages of all the major Polish newspapers were decorated with his picture and obituary. His military funeral was attended by the Polish president, Lech Kaczyński, the former Polish prime minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and the former Israeli ambassador to Poland Shevah Weiss.

Edelman was born in Gomel, a provincial town in Belarus, into a humble Jewish family that soon moved to Warsaw. His father was connected with Russian socialist revolutionaries and died when Marek was young. His mother was a secretary in a hospital and was a member of the Bund, a secular Jewish socialist party. When his mother died in 1934, Edelman started to work to support himself and also became a Bundist. “They believed that Poland was their country and they fought for a just, socialist Poland, in which each nationality would have its own cultural autonomy, and in which minorities’ rights would be guaranteed,” said Edelman in a recent interview.

Steal a march on God

When the second world war started, Edelman stayed in Poland and was moved into the Warsaw ghetto, an overcrowded territory of five square miles surrounded by a three metre high brick wall, with almost half a million Polish Jews inside. In July 1942 the Germans started shipping 5000-6000 Jews a day out of the ghetto to the gas chambers of Treblinka. Edelman worked as a hospital courier and could obtain waivers for some residents on the pretext of their ill health. Every day he was on duty at Umschlagplatz, a gathering point where people were herded into wagons bound for the concentration camp. “I was merciless. One woman begged me to save her 14 year old daughter [from deportation], but I could take only one person and selected Zosya, who was our best courier,” he recalled.

Adults could avoid deportation by being sent to the cemetery in coffins or to the hospital, but only after getting permission of the Germans, who had started to check sanitary transportation. Old men and women were taken to a special room in the hospital where nurses deliberately broke their legs without anaesthesia. Edelman would cite the example of a nurse in the ghetto hospital, who he said was greatly admired for smothering newborn children to save their mothers the inevitable pain that would come when the babies starved to death. Another example is a doctor who gave cyanide to sick children: “Cyanide is the most precious and indispensable thing. It brings quiet and peaceful death, which saves from the nightmare of deportation. But it is impossible to get it.” Later she became a well known paediatrician.

Edelman was one of the founders of the resolute underground organization ZOB (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa or Jewish Battle Organisation). He fought in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, which started on 19 April 1943, when the Germans decided to close the ghetto. Two hundred and twenty poorly armed youngsters were fighting for three weeks against two thousand well equipped troops. Hanna Kral, a Polish journalist, recorded Edelman’s experience, which appeared in 1977 in a book, which was adapted for the stage, with the title To Steal a March on God.

According to Edelman, they could choose only how to die. “Humanity had decided that dying with a gun is more beautiful than dying without a gun. So we went along with this decision,” he said. “Possibly, it wasn’t tragic at all. Tragedy is when you are free to make a decision, when something depends on you. There [in the ghetto] everything was foredoomed.

Nowadays in the hospital a patient’s life is at stake, and I always have to make a decision. I am much more anxious now,” he said. Within three weeks the ghetto and its 40000 remaining inhabitants ceased to exist. According to official German records 16 soldiers were killed and 85 wounded. Edelman, with a small group of fighters, managed to escape from the ghetto through a sewer and went underground. He joined the Polish army Armia Krajowa and fought again in the Warsaw uprising of summer 1944.

After the war Edelman felt at a loose end. By that time he had married Alina Margolis, who was a nurse in the Warsaw ghetto, and moved to Lodz. He recalled deep apathy and spent weeks sleeping in bed. Finally his wife enrolled him in the medical school. After graduation Edelman specialised in cardiac surgery. He worked at the department of internal medicine at his alma mater and in 1972 became the chief of intensive care at the Ni Pirogov Hospital in Lodz.

Together with Professor Jan Moll, Edelman pioneered the treatment of coronary artery obstruction by means of reversed circulation. He persuaded Moll to introduce this risky operation for myocardial infarction by making an arteriovenous fistula (arterialisation of a coronary vein). Many people were saved who would otherwise not have survived a heart attack.

Tend the graves

After the war Edelman was active in the Bund once again and protested its decision to disband in 1948. In 1960s he was twice fired from his hospital jobs and his habilitation dissertation was rejected for political reasons. He did not leave Lodz even when his wife and children emigrated to France in 1968 during a wave of antisemitic persecution.

When asked why he decided to stay in Poland, he replied, “Someone had to stay here to tend the graves.” Each year on 19 April at noon he placed yellow daffodils at the Ghetto heroes monument in Warsaw. This year he visited in a wheelchair.

In the mid-1970s, Edelman became involved with the democratic opposition, first in the Workers’ Defence Committee (KOR) and then in the independent trade union Solidarność (Solidarity). In December 1981 he was interned. He was involved in the underground Solidarity movement until 1989 and also took part in talks in 1989. In 1989-1993 he was a member of the Polish parliament. In 1998 he was awarded the order of the white eagle, the highest state medal of Poland.

“It is life itself that is most important. And if there is life, then most important is freedom. And then one gives one’s life for freedom. It is hard to say what is most important after that,” he said. Edelman was predeceased by his wife and leaves a son and a daughter.

Boleslaw Lichterman

Marek Edelman, cardiologist and political activist (b 1919 or 1922; q Lodz, 1951), died 2 October 2009.

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Anthony Sidney Fairbank Butcher

Former consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Amersham and High Wycombe (b 1926; q Cambridge/Guy’s Hospital, London, 1951; MA, FRCOG), died from bronchopneumonia on 20 August 2009.

As a student, before he got down to serious medicine, Anthony Sidney Fairbank Butcher (“Tony”) became an outstanding oarsman. Within four years he had rowed in the crew that won the boat race for Cambridge, the Thames Head of the River, the Grand, the Stewards, and the Silver Goblets at Henley. He also competed in the 1948 Olympics and the 1950 Empire Games. Tony did his national service in the Royal Army Medical Corps with the Brigade of Guards, and was consultant in Amersham and High Wycombe from 1962 to 1991, helping to develop the obstetric service in South Buckinghamshire. He leaves a wife, Peggy; four children; and nine grandchildren.

Adrian Fairbank
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Donald Yardley MacKenzie

Former consultant in rheumatology and physical medicine Guildford (b 1925; q St Thomas’ Hospital, London, 1948; FRCP), died from acute pancreatitis on 23 October 2009.

After house jobs and national service in the Royal Air Force, Donald Yardley MacKenzie (“Yardley”) worked in Chertsey and London, becoming a senior registrar in paediatrics at Guy’s Hospital. A lack of career opportunities persuaded him to train in physical medicine at St Thomas’ under James Cyriax, and he developed a special interest in back pain. Appointed consultant in Guildford in 1965, he retired from the NHS in 1990 but continued to practise privately until 1995. He enjoyed driving fine cars, which he put to good use commuting between Guildford and his home at Angmering-on-Sea. He leaves his wife of 60 years, Geraldine, two children, and six grandchildren.

Nicholas J Odom
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Terence Harold Pringle (“Terry”) was the most distinguished graduate of his year. After general training in Dublin, he specialised in cardiology in Massachusetts, Glasgow, and Belfast, as well doing research in clinical pharmacology, including an MD on the benefits and side effects of blockers. In 1987 until his death he was consultant cardiologist in Dundee. He developed coronary angiography, echocardiography, and cardiac pacing services, shortly before his death promoting the now established coronary angioplasty services in Tayside. Having been orphaned before he was 5 and also having lost his brother early in life, Terry was interested in genealogy. He leaves a wife, Zelda, and three children.

Graeme McNeill
Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b5005

Neil Watson

Former consultant orthopaedic and hand surgeon Oxford and Milton Keynes, and professional artist (b 1944; q Oxford/Guy’s Hospital, London, 1967; FRCS), died from a brain tumour on 4 October 2009.

After orthopaedic house jobs, Neil Watson became senior registrar at the Oxford Orthopaedic Centre. Consultant at Oxford and Banbury, and then clinical reader at Oxford University and fellow of Green College, he moved to the new hospital at Milton Keynes to concentrate on hand surgery, writing or co-editing three books. Neil moved to North Carolina and, unable to gain a licence to practise, became a professional artist, while teaching microsurgery workshops. He had a major exhibition in Venice, and co-wrote Seeking Venice with Renato Pestriniero, later teaching art at university level in California, and producing three books on drawing and painting. He leaves three children.

David K C Cooper
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Anthony Whiteside

Former general practitioner Fleetwood, Lancashire (b 1941; q Liverpool 1966), died from coronary artery thrombosis on 26 May 2009. After house jobs at Blackpool Victoria Hospital, Anthony Whiteside entered practice in Fleetwood. He built up the practice from small beginnings to become the largest practice in the Fleetwood area, also developing the out of hours service on the Fylde coast. An expert in disability benefits analysis and war pensions, he was for many years a central figure in assessing benefits for the Department of Social Security and the War Pensions Bureau in Blackpool. His down to earth manner was respected and appreciated by generations of patients in Fleetwood. Predeceased by his wife, Audrey, he leaves a daughter.

Howard Duncalf
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Raymond Ivor John Williams

Former general practitioner Bexleyheath, Kent (b 1926; q Guy’s Hospital, London, 1950), died on 19 August 2009 from complications after surgery for colon cancer. After house jobs, Raymond Ivor John Williams (“Ray”) joined the Royal Air Force as a medical officer. After demobilisation, he joined a practice in New Eltham and then took over the Bexleyheath practice. He retired in 1996, having spent the last 10 years of his working life as a medical officer with the Department of Health. In his youth he played rugby football for Blackheath, and he was later a member of a golf club for 30 years. He also liked gardening and was very knowledgeable about tomatoes and fuchsias. Predeceased by a daughter, he leaves a wife, Pat, and two daughters.

Brian Orme
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