

The Woods, Breathing

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For almost three years Adam Czerniakow was chairman of the Warsaw Judenrat – a man devoted to his people, who served as ‘mayor’ of the Warsaw Ghetto. One of the inspirations for this work is a line taken from his diary which he kept whilst living in Warsaw in occupied Poland from 1939 to his death in 1942. On September 14th 1941 he wrote:

“...In Otwock. The air, the woods, breathing.”

It’s a sparse entry but one full of meaning nevertheless, for not only do these poignant words tell us something about Czerniakow’s terrible predicament (in that for him the woods and breathing are so unusual) they also illustrate something which I always try to articulate in my work: an authenticity in history - a sense that past events did not happen in the past but in what was then the present. We all know what it’s like to stand in woods and of course to breathe and these few words give us a means of identifying with a time and events which are otherwise too appalling to imagine.

For most of the time, the only freedom Czerniakow could find was in the books he read at night. One of those books was ‘Pilgrims of the Wild’ by ‘Grey Owl’, and of that book, on January 19th 1940 Czerniakow wrote:

“...During the night I read a novel, ‘Pilgrims of the Wild’ - Grey Owl... The forest, little wild animals - a veritable Eden.”

In a previous entry, dated December 26th 1939, he wrote of how when reading:

“... [I am] constantly envying all the heroes of my novels because they lived in different times...”

In many ways, he seems to envy Grey Owl (real name Archibald Belaney) for the freedom he enjoyed – a freedom he could only discover for a moment in the woods at Otwock. Having bought a 1935 edition of the book ‘Pilgrims of the Wild’, I wanted to find a way of working with the text to create a work exploring the wider theme of the Holocaust. This project is a result of that work.

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