

RESISTANCE AND THE HOLOCAUST

by Steve Fankuchen

“Like sheep to the slaughter!” How many times have we been told that Jews did nothing to resist annihilation at the hands of the Nazis and their supporters? “What can you expect? Jews don’t fight.” “Maybe Jews are even the cause of the Holocaust, of anti-Semitism; they’re such easy targets.” Let’s talk about the Holocaust and the myths of Jewish non-resistance and passivity.

First, we must touch on the nature of resistance—especially in the extraordinary context of the Holocaust. Is merely staying alive in the face of death resistance? Or, must one pick up a gun and try to kill the Nazis to earn the description and title of “resister”? Does maintaining one’s personal dignity in the face of utter degradation count? Is it relevant that Jews maintained communal institutions in the ghettos in the face of attempts to create total fragmentation? What of praying, when such meant death? My purpose here is to outline the scope of resistance in its *broadest possible sense* both to dispel myths of Jewish passivity and to provide a context within which further political analysis of resistance can develop.

The struggle to perpetuate the ideals as well as the physical reality of the Jewish people can be divided into eight categories: staying alive, maintaining a sense of communal responsibility, acts of religious affirmation, acts of individual defiance, affirmation of the possibility of life in the future, escape, sabotage, and armed struggle.

For the Germans, the Jewish desire to stay alive was something of an impediment. Mass suicide was expected and encouraged both by the view that Jews were inferior creatures and by the practical consideration that large scale suicides would, through its demoralizing effects, be self-justifying and, therefore, self-perpetuating. As it turned out, the suicide rate in the ghettos and camps was exceedingly low, apparently significantly lower than that of Jewish communities composed of people who had escaped from the immediate physical threat of the Holocaust. Of 300,000 taken to Treblinka, there were only several hundred suicides. The German response to this was to complain that the Jews lacked honor for refusing to kill themselves in the face of such miserable conditions.

For the Germans, it was very important to destroy the social fabric of the Jewish community as a precursor to physical annihilation. This was done in ways much more subtle and personal than by gross destruction of existing institutions. For instance, people were pitted against each other continually for scraps to eat and places to sit. Those who broke a rule to stand quietly in line were summarily shot if they reached down to another person who had collapsed from hunger. Some were offered a few additional hours of life for digging the death trenches of those victims who preceded them. Such efforts by the Germans were designed to break down the sense of mutual responsibility and, therefore, the sense of communal legitimacy and strength. We do have, however, many examples of people refusing to be so degraded, people who refused to put themselves on the same plane as their murderers. These were people who chose their own

death long after the question of life became moot.

Religious Jews were involved in forms of resistance common to all. In addition, their position required something unique: the refusal to obey German orders to refrain from religious observances. For these Jews the choice was between the words of the Nazis and the words of the Torah, knowing full well that death was the price to pay for personal integrity.

Throughout the Holocaust, wherever there were Jews, there were innumerable acts of defiance, of personal resistance. Some, such as curfew violation, stealing from the Nazis, and working slowly, risked death. Others, such as talking back to or spitting in the face of a German, meant immediate death.

The affirmation of communal continuity was an important element in the struggle against the Nazis. For virtually all Jews, of whatever religious or political persuasion, the overriding consideration was how best to preserve the community and, when that was no longer possible, to preserve its dignity and memory. As a result one finds monumental efforts that were made in the ghettos—always at the risk of torture and death—to preserve the past, record the present, and build for the future. In the midst of devastation, archives were established, photographs taken, theater groups created, and schools maintained.

In this context the Ringelblum archives merit special note. Emmanuel Ringelblum was an historian and leading communal figure of Polish Jewry. After the German takeover, he organized a secret organization in the Warsaw ghetto to do studies on and record every aspect of Jewish life, including Jewish police, communal life, the school system, cultural activities, Jewish-Polish relations,

continued next page



smuggling, youth and women. In addition, Judenrat files were acquired, underground newspapers collected, and a photographic record made. In August 1942, at the height of the deportations, the archives were sealed and buried beneath the ghetto. After the war two of the three containers were found.

Escape as a form of defiance and resistance occurred individually and collectively, from the ghettos and the camps. In many instances the physical difficulties of escape were the easiest to deal with, since the German policy of collective responsibility meant that individuals who escaped would be guaranteeing the immediate execution of their family, neighbors, work brigade, or organization.

Sabotage was another type of resistance. Sometimes it took the form of destroying factories, sometimes lists of people to be deported, and sometimes the machinery of destruction itself, as in the case of the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sobibor death camps.

Armed struggle by Jews occurred on a wide scale, individually as well as collectively, spontaneously as well as planned. The story here begins in Spain in 1936. The Spanish Civil War was, among other things, a testing ground for German troops, weapons and tactics. Approximately 35,000 premature anti-fascists came from all over to form the International Brigades. The fact that they chose to fight against Franco, Hitler and Mussolini well before it became popular to do so, still goes largely unrecognized today. Of those volunteers, at least 6,000 (17%) were Jews. Of the 3200 volunteers from the U.S. 30% were Jews. From the Palestinian Jewish community of one half million came at least 250, a per capita rate 15 times that of the overall American rate. When the Brigades were disbanded, many veterans of that struggle went on to fight in the allied armies, as partisans, in the ghettos, and in the death camps. Some who managed to survive the Holocaust went on to fight in Israel in 1948.

Of the eleven million Jews outside Nazi control during World War II, the large majority were children, the aged, and women who, for the most part, were not involved in regular military units. Of the several million remaining who were combat age men, two million fought in the allied armies, a rate of resistance unsurpassed by any other people. In the Soviet Union, 70% of all male Jews of age fought in the army or with the partisans.

Fighting as partisans, Jews served in both Jewish and mixed units. One group, operating out of the Ukraine and led by Misha Goldenman (a.k.a. Diadia Misha), was composed of hundreds of fighters. Another group under Tuvie Bielski maintained a community of 1500 who were involved in production, communal service, and fighting. In Yugoslavia 5000 Jews fought as partisans. In Belgium and France 15%-20% of the resistance movements were composed of Jews.

In all three of the preceding cases—Spain, armies and partisans—we see Jews fighting against the Nazis out of proportion to their numbers in the population. Clearly this is not the picture of a passive people, a fearful people lacking in self-respect.

Armed resistance occurred in many of the ghettos, most notably Vilna, Bialystok, and Warsaw. Here the struggle was complicated not only by the general refusal of the non-Jewish resistance to cooperate, but also by the unique nature of the Holocaust itself. Much of the Jewish communal leadership was imbued with a concept of modern Jewish history as cyclical with pogroms coming and going. As is the case with most entrenched leadership, they were traditional in outlook. It was no easy matter to break with the past and recognize that what was happening was manifestly not a huge pogrom, not even an attempt to destroy Jewish religion and culture but, rather, an attempt at the physical annihilation of all Jews.

A variation of the pogrom mentality operated in the population at large, within non-Jews as well as Jews. This was the inability to comprehend another unique aspect of the Holocaust: namely, that Hitler's war against the Jews was more important to him than the war against the Allies. Such was his intent and practice, and the yardstick by which he measured success.

Another factor operating to mitigate resistance in the ghettos was the aforementioned German policy of collective responsibility. This particular burden the Jews shared with others under Nazi rule.

The revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto stands out as a milestone in Jewish history. Himmler had set April 19, 1943, Hitler's birthday, as the date for the final liquidation of the ghetto. Instead of a birthday present the Germans were faced with the first urban insurrection by any people in all occupied Europe. (It was well over a year before the rest of Warsaw rebelled.) In several months of fighting, thousands of Jews fought against tanks, automatic weapons, and aerial bombardment with knives, Molotov cocktails, an occasional gun, and determination. Unable to conquer the ghetto even with heavy armor and air power, the Germans were forced to go through the ghetto blowing up and burning, building by building. While most of the fighting was over in several months, as late as June 1944 three Germans were killed by a Jewish fighting group that remained in the rubble of the ghetto.

Knowledge of resistance in the death camps is hampered by the fact that, in many cases, there are neither records nor survivors to tell the story. It appears, however, that the struggle was carried on in all of the camps. In Auschwitz there was an active resistance with people smuggled in as well as out. Pictures were taken to inform the world of what was happening. There was a small number of totally successful escapes. In addition there was a mass escape of six hundred after a well organized destruction of one of the four crematoria.

In the camp at Sobibor, six hundred escaped under the leadership of Alexander Pechersky, a Soviet Jew. Much of the camp, whose ovens burned 15,000 people a day at their peak, was destroyed. The Germans completed the destruction of the camp themselves when they realized that a couple hundred witnesses would live to tell what had been happening there.

“Like sheep to slaughter.” Who are they talking about? Certainly not the Jews! It is bad enough that non-Jews believe the myth. It is much worse when we believe and perpetuate it ourselves. Perhaps all of what I have delineated should not count as resistance. Certainly we should not hold illusions about the number of Jews saved through resistance or otherwise. But as to going like sheep to slaughter, this simply was not so.

