

## Jewish Cultural Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto

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Each year, the commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising - which began on the eve of Passover, April 19th, 1943 - makes us feel astonished by the fact that the revolt took place at all. The Second World War was in its fourth year. The Nazis had been carrying out their plan to annihilate Jews in the occupied parts of Eastern Europe with unimaginable brutality, efficiency and ferocity - this, in an area densely settled by Jews for hundreds of years. By April, 1943, the great majority of Jews in the villages, shtetlekh and cities of these lands had been murdered. Still, some of the 50,000 Jews alive in the Warsaw Ghetto (the remnant of a wartime peak of 550,000, packed into little more than a square mile of the city) had the courage and daring to rise up against the most heavily armed nation in the world at that time.

The Uprising had much greater significance than those who fought could realize. The Polish underground newspaper *Głos Warszawski* (The Warsaw Voice) wrote at the time that that all oppressed peoples, including Poles, ought to use the ghetto Jews as a role model. "We can all learn a lesson from this battle . . . The revolt in the ghetto teaches us that it is possible to fight a war against the Germans . . . In the Warsaw ghetto a new front was opened. . . ." The uprising resounded among the Nazi leaders too. General Juergen Stroop, charged with crushing the Uprising, wrote to Berlin in an early report, "We are doing everything we can to combat the Jewish bandits . . . day and night . . . They surrender only when they no longer have strength to resist . . . They prefer to remain in burning buildings rather than surrender . . ."

On June 2, Himmler ordered that the ghetto "be leveled flat with the earth . . ." Partisan skirmishes continued, however, until mid-July.

We commemorate Warsaw, but Jewish uprisings against the Nazis took place in numerous ghettos, in the Polish and Byelorussian forests, and even in the concentration and death camps. The concept of Jewish self-defense was not a new one in eastern Europe. In modern times, self-defense started in the wake of a wave of pogroms in Russia following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. That Christmas, mobs in Warsaw began to rob Jewish stores and attack individual Jews. The police stood by and did nothing. Historian Jacob Shatsky quotes a liberal Polish journalist who described the pogrom as "an incomprehensible madness" that seized the Polish masses. Nahum Sokolow (President of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in the 1930s), a resident of Warsaw in 1881, described in his *Memoirs* how the porters and servants who worked in the stores drew the hoodlums into the narrow Jewish alleys and "in a real Napoleonic tactic beat them up severely."

On Easter Sunday, 1903, just 100 years ago this year, a pogrom took place in Kishinev, Bessarabia with the connivance and support of the Russian police. The Kishinev pogrom shocked the civilized world and was memorialized in Chayim Nakhman Bialik's epic poem, *In Shkhiteh Shtot* (In Slaughter City), in which he chastises Jews for failing to oppose the hoodlums. As he later found out, Bialik was wrong: the Jews had fought back. According to his biographers, Bialik intended to revise the text of the poem but did not manage to do so.

Jewish self-defense was better organized during the period between the two World Wars, a difficult one for Jews in Poland. Nearly four million Jews lived in the country, nearly 400,000 in its capital, Warsaw. The Polish government, already somewhat anti-Semitic right after Poland gained independence in 1919, issued more and more oppressive decrees towards the end of the 1930s. An economic boycott was declared against Jewish businesses, doctors, lawyers and other professionals. Jewish university students had to sit in special "ghetto sections" in class, and pogroms frequently occurred around the country. Dr. Heszil Klepfisz, an historian who lived in Warsaw during that period, described his reaction to the situation in one of the volumes of his cultural history of eastern European Jews: "The Self-Defense took responsibility for protecting Jewish lives. Young and middle-aged men volunteered to protect Jews during pogroms or to prevent them from taking place. They were willing to risk their lives . . . Historical truth requires it to be known that Self-Defense groups were mainly composed of members of the Jewish Labor Bund . . . Of course members of other parties participated also . . ." In short, the Jewish fighters in the ghetto uprisings and in other settings came from a tradition of resistance to oppression.

Resistance to the Nazis was not limited, however, to physical actions. En route to genocide, the German occupiers forbade educational activities, closed down religious and secular schools, closed libraries and bookstores and attempted to disrupt other cultural activities. All of these repressions met with cultural resistance.

EDUCATION. The Nazi objective was to train workers, artisans and farmers. Only elementary schools and trade schools were permitted. On December 4th, 1939, the last Jewish school in Warsaw was closed. By then there were some 60,000 children, 5-12, in the Ghetto, including thousands who were unsupervised and exposed to the dangers of the street. Many teachers were unemployed. Appeals were made to the Judenrat and to the Federation for the Care of Orphans to begin a clandestine schooling program under the guise of child protection. A number of kitchens were opened at the initiative of the Federation and former school organizations. They provided several hours daily of unofficial schooling. In September, 1941, the Germans permitted opening 16 schools - three using Hebrew, four Yiddish, four Polish, and five religious schools. Ten thousand children, or one fifth of the Ghetto's total, were organized into three grades. Cold, lack of heat, lack of shoes and clothes were among the reasons that kept attendance low, despite the fact that for the kids, school constituted the only bright spot in the day. Secondary education was forbidden, so it was conducted clandestinely in the form of "student contingents" of six to twenty, organized by former teachers. There were several hundred such contingents in 1941, with about 20% of former secondary students "enrolled." There were also two clandestine university-level courses in medicine and technology, as well as an education course to train teachers for Jewish schools.

The chief problem was finding school accommodations; since much of the activity was clandestine, it was necessary to avoid the watchful eyes of the Gestapo and Jewish spies. Other problems involved getting textbooks and other supplies, finding teachers (many had fled eastward), using the "school" location in shifts, and deciding on the languages of instruction. The main achievement of the clandestine school networks was in giving some shelter to pupils and teachers from the demoralizing reality of daily ghetto life.

**LIBRARIES.** Statistics indicate that in pre-war Poland there were some 1,000 Hebrew and Yiddish libraries, dozens in Warsaw alone. To this should be added the libraries in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and other lands in eastern Europe. Libraries were found in every synagogue, house of study, chasidic prayer house and yeshiva. In addition, labor unions, trade societies, political and social organizations and schools of all political leanings had their own libraries, large or small, communal or private. Volunteers worked in the libraries for a couple of hours in the evening after returning from their daily jobs.

To implement their plan to annihilate the Jews and their spiritual soul, the Nazis set out to destroy the book centers. One of their first acts after occupying Poland was a September, 1939 decree closing all Jewish libraries. A few months later, several libraries were allowed to function, provided that all works insulting the Fuehrer and the Nazi party were removed. In a short time, however, the previous decree was back in effect. Large transports of confiscated books, religious and secular, were sent off to the "Nazi Institute for Research of the Jewish Question" in Frankfurt-am-Main. Large numbers of other books were simply destroyed.

Yiddish and Hebrew libraries went underground. Books were carried into bunkers so that the libraries could function anew. Catalogs were prepared, along with secret codes to protect the lists of library members. A system was developed for lending books, in which young volunteers would carry the books to subscribers. It was a pathetic picture: Clothed in rags, shivering with cold, faint from hunger, young people and children carried packages of books wrapped in sheets and cloths. They scurried along streets and alleys in the ghettos of cities and towns distributing books that had been borrowed and taking orders for new ones. Many were caught and tortured to death by Gestapo agents.

Others involved in the illegal library activities were also killed, but the bunker libraries did not interrupt their work. There seemed to be a continuous supply of new volunteers to replace those who had disappeared, and the heroic library work went on until the bitter end. Only when the entire Jewish people had been carted away and murdered in the death camps did the underground library activity end. The words of Yitskhok Katsenelson's epic poem, *The Murdered Jewish People*, come to mind here: "No one is left, a people lived, lived and is no more."

**CULTURAL ACTIVITIES.** The Nazi authorities allowed certain cultural activities. Historian Isaiah Trunk wrote that their interest lay in promoting "vulgar amusement culture, providing an outlet for wide sections of the population and demoralizing them." The Nazi Propaganda Ministry disseminated pornographic films and magazines with the purpose of numbing the population's sense of resistance by distracting their attention from the actual, imminent danger. A new high-income class arose in the Ghetto - smugglers, con men, and others who cheapened the level of entertainment in the amusement halls and theaters.

According to Emanuel Ringelblum's *Ksuvim fun geto* (Notes from the Ghetto), there were 61 amusement halls in the Warsaw Ghetto in April, 1941, giving employment to some of the 267 professional actors and 150 musicians registered with the Central Programs Commission. According to the *Gazeta Zydowska* (Jewish Gazette), a legal newspaper in the Ghetto, this Commission arranged 1,814 artistic programs in one year, including eight symphony concerts (cited by Trunk). A string quartet and a chamber music group also gave concerts, and so did the synagogue and children's choruses. The Commission continued its efforts to provide cultural programs until the big deportation at the end of July, 1942, which brought an end to open cultural activity in the Warsaw Ghetto.

There were five "permanent" theaters in the Ghetto - two Yiddish and three Polish. These were not under the jurisdiction of the Central Programs Commission. The Polish theater, according to actor Jonas Turkov (cited by Trunk), chairman of the Programs Commission at that time, maintained a repertory with a high level of

taste. There were also several ballet studios and dance schools operating in the Ghetto, and a puppet theater organized by refugee artists from Lodz.

ARCHIVES. Documentation of life went on in several ghettos. In Lodz there was even a ghetto newspaper, the Lodz Geto tsaytung, which published for half a year under the control of the Judenrat and the Gestapo. The real documentation was clandestine. In Warsaw it was under the aegis of Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, a well-known historian from before the war (see my article on Ringelblum in the March, 1994 issue), who urged all Jews in the Ghetto and elsewhere to make notes about the atrocities they witnessed and to bring the notes to him. The result was the Oyneg Shabes (or Oneg Shabat) archive - a name meant to obscure the importance of the activity. Written clandestinely, enclosed in tin cans and buried in bunkers, the Oyneg Shabes archive constitutes the wealthiest cache of material on Jewish life in the Nazi-occupied territories. When the materials were recovered after the war, they were named the Ringelblum Archive.

**Nota:***[In preparing this article, I relied heavily on an as yet unpublished translation of a cultural history of Ashkenazi Jewry by Dr. Heszil Klepfisz, on a lengthy article in the 1969 YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science entitled Religious, Educational and Cultural Problems in Eastern European Ghettos, by I. Trunk, and to a lesser degree on Ringelblum's Ksuvim fun geto.]*

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