

RESISTANCE IS THE LESSON

THE MEANING OF THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING



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By Morris U. Schappes

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PASSOVER, 1948, will mark the fifth anniversary of the unforgettable rising of the Warsaw ghetto. The date will be the occasion for exercises of commemoration wherever Jews live and wherever heroism in the war against nazism is still lauded. We who mourn the loss of all our six million dead pay the special tribute of honor to those who died fighting. Boundless pathos and tragedy are stamped on the death of the unresisting millions who went down with no hand lifted against the enemy, but inspiration comes to us from those who took arms and killed Germans before they died. There is fearful warning but no example in the millions dead; but the spur to emulation rises like a light above the unmarked graves of the tens of thousands of Jews who actively resisted the nazi.

Emulation is still the first order of the day. To do as they did, is still the first commandment of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Those do them little honor who praise them fashionably in words, and fail them dishonorably in deeds.

Speed and timing are essential in battles. As more and more accounts of the Warsaw ghetto are published, in Yiddish, Hebrew, English, Polish and other languages, one great question keeps welling up. Why, in the Warsaw ghetto that contained all told some 600,000 to 650,000, did so few fight so late? Why was the real fight begun only after about a half million Jews had been exterminated, and there were only some forty or fifty thousand left to make the last unbending stand? Why did not more fight—sooner?

Perhaps we should first inquire: dare we even ask the question? Dare we Americans, who did not face the terror of nazi occupation at first hand, ask why Jews who lived under that terror in the frightful conditions of the ghetto were so slow to organize resistance? Is there not an impious righteousness and a moral insolence attached to putting the question? Should we not heed the caution of Marie Syrkin, that "those who were never subjected to a similar test should be wary of passing moral judgments" (*Blessed Is the Match, The Story of Jewish Resistance*, Philadelphia and New York, 1947, p. 189)?

An Imperative Question

But the matter is not only or even now primarily one of moral judgments given from on high by those who are on the side-lines of battle. It is urgent for those who wish to fight fascism and reaction to know whether, from the point of view of the struggle against the nazi, it was right or wrong to be passive, to oppose resistance, to die by the hundreds of thousands with no damage to the enemy, and to leave it to a remnant at last to take up arms. If it was wrong, we do not want to repeat that mistake, and therefore we must ask why it was made and analyze the causes.

Whether we shall have enough intelligence, strength, will and moral energy to avoid repeating the error, we cannot know in advance. But it is an axiom in training for combat, political as well as physical, that proper judgments on mistakes of past campaigns are an aid to victory.

Once the question is placed, the main answers emerge without too much difficulty. In general I should say that resistance in the Warsaw ghetto was so slow in developing because the bulk of the population underestimated the Germans' will and capacity for the destruction of the Jews and overestimated the ultimate strength of the Germans. Therefore those who told the truth about nazi objectives were derided as alarmists. Miss Syrkin notes that "despite the candid declarations of policy by Goebbels and Hitler, very few believed that these pronouncements [of extermination] were more than threats" (*Ibid.*, p. 153).

The nazis were cunning in spreading this suspension of belief in the obvious. They fostered every possible illusion to prevent that stage of disillusionment that might become the prelude to an attitude of resistance. They sought to make the masses feel that their fate depended upon the nazi will—good-will or caprice—rather than upon their own courage in resisting and thwarting that will.

Ghetto as Escape

In the first place, there were many who accepted the very idea of segregation in the ghetto, and found "national" and spiritual comfort in the fact that the nazis had arranged for a Jewish "administration" (the *Judenrat*), Jewish signs and outward symbols of authority, a Jewish police. While some Jews tried painfully to organize an underground resistance, others were soothed by the fact that they could ride in Jewish-owned street horse-cars painted in blue-and-

white, with the Star of David big and clear on the sides. Thus Miss Syrkin observes that "to some the ghetto even appeared as a shelter," while some who had escaped from Warsaw to Soviet territory "returned to the Warsaw ghetto of their own accord. *They had heard that an autonomous Jewish community had been set up in Warsaw.*" (*Ibid.*, pp. 153, 157, my emphasis—M. U. S.)

Mary Berg, who escaped from the ghetto after three years because she was an American citizen, wrote the following in her diary on December 22, 1940, about five weeks after the ghetto was officially organized: "The Jewish police is an accomplished fact. More candidates presented themselves than were needed. A special committee chose them, and 'pull' played an important part in their choice. At the very end, when only a few posts were available, money helped, too. . . . Their uniform consists of a dark blue police cap and a military belt to which a rubber club is attached. Over the visor of the cap there is a metal badge bearing the Star of David and the inscription *Juedischer Ordnungsdienst* (Jewish Order Service). . . . I experience a strange and utterly illogical feeling of satisfaction when I see a Jewish policeman at a crossing—such policemen were completely unknown in prewar Poland. . . ." (*Warsaw Ghetto, a Diary*, ed. by S. L. Shneiderman, New York, 1945, pp. 40-41.) Those who could see progress and a promise for the future in such mockeries of Jewish aspirations were of course not ready to jeopardize these advantages by resistance.

Another factor was the nazi abuse of the Jewish community's faith in education. An "official" school system was established and certain types of cultural and artistic activities were encouraged in order to dupe the people. The idea was nurtured that so long as the Jewish youth could study the history and culture of their people, learn Yiddish and Hebrew and so forth, a future of death was incredible.

This idea had deep popular roots. The nazis depended on that. Shortly before the official liquidation of the ghetto began on July 22, 1942 (during the next eight weeks about 300,000 Jews were deported to death), the nazis allowed the *Judenrat* to organize several new elementary classes and kindergartens, as a blind almost to the very end. Those who preached self-education as a substitute or a foil for resistance did not serve our people well.

Nazis Create Palestine Illusion

The Palestine ideal also was exploited by the nazis. Sometimes they were subtle and sometimes they were crude; too frequently they were successful. On May 20, 1941, Mary Berg noted this in her diary: "the German authorities permit a large group of volunteer farm workers to leave the ghetto every day to cultivate the fields outside the city. The work affords the young people of the ghetto the opportunity to breathe a little fresh air. Most members of these groups are young Zionists who believe that by some miracle they will succeed in getting to Palestine. For that reason they are glad to gain experience as farm workers. I look with a feeling of pride at these ranks of boys and girls who march along the ghetto streets, returning from work outside. All of them are tanned by the sun and refreshed by the free air they have breathed in the fields beyond the city. . . . Every one of them carries a loaf of fresh bread received from the peasants. Officially it is forbidden to bring bread in from the outside, but in this case the Germans let it pass because they need the labor power of these young people." (*Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.) How accommodating of the nazis, to help train pioneers for Palestine, and even to wink at infractions of their own regulations to make the Jews strong and skillful! It took time for the young Zionists, who later

played an important role in the resistance, to turn from miracles and illusions to fight against the nazis.

Cruder but even more successful was the nazi ruse by which they beguiled many Jews who were unregistered in the ghetto to report their presence. In response to an announcement calling for registration with the ghetto authorities of all Jews who wanted to go to Palestine, more than 150,000 Jews had their names placed on a list that then made the nazi objective of extermination easier of attainment, and the warnings of those who exposed the snare were disregarded. It was not yet seen that Palestine was attainable, not by the cooperation of, but only over the dead body of nazism.

Illusions were bred on the basis of wealth and class. The ghetto was a miserable place, but there were oases, and money was useful. Mary Berg testifies: "New cafes and expensive grocery stores have appeared, where everything can be had. On Sienna and Leszno Streets women are seen in elegant coats and dresses fashioned by the best dress-makers. The ghetto even has its own styles. Most women wear long jackets without collars or lapels, so-called 'French blazers,' and full skirts. The hats are mostly small . . . high cork heels . . . stylish colors are gray and dark red . . . good dresses of French silk. . . ." (May 20, 1941, p. 60.) And then health and wealth had their correlations too. Even typhus did not affect all equally. With hospitals overcrowded, despair spread. Miss Berg records again: "Setting sick people down in front of hospitals has become a daily occurrence. Mothers, unable to stand the sight of their children suffering without medical aid, hope that by this method they will succeed in getting the patients to a hospital. The epidemic has assumed a particularly acute form in the regions of Gesia, Nalewki, Nowolipki and Nowolipie Streets. In the Little Ghetto, the situation is somewhat

better, because it is inhabited by relatively well-to-do people who can afford private medical care. Recently, antityphus serum has been imported from Lwow, which fell to the Germans a month ago. . . . But only wealthy people can afford to buy it—the price runs as high as several thousand zlotys a tube.” (July 29, 1941, p. 84.) And so it went, private medical care, free enterprise, silk dresses, a black market, and the masses in terrible, dying poverty.

Motive of Self-Preservation

There was always a “theory” to explain away the looming facts. Mass murders of Jews in other ghettos could be reported in Warsaw by eye-witnesses, but they could be interpreted as reasons for feeling safer in Warsaw. In October 1941 the news of mass executions in the Vilna ghetto arrived and was authenticated, but “an explanation arose,” states Miss Syrkin, “that the Germans were killing Jews in former Russian-occupied territories on the charge that they had supposedly been communists and had supported the Russian regime. If this reasoning were correct, the Jews of Warsaw could consider themselves safe, particularly as large factories had been opened in Warsaw in which Jews had to work as slave laborers. . . . The slaughter should be interpreted as an anti-communist rather than as an anti-Jewish act.” (Pp. 163, 205.) How did this “explanation” arise? Were the nazis the only ones to launch it? Or were there others already habituated to the idea that it was safer and better not to be a communist so that the nazi would regard you as a “good” Jew, and “let” you live? But those who sighed that communists, even Jewish communists, might be a scapegoat for them did not fool or divert the nazi; they made it easier for him to kill Jews according to his own undisturbed schedule.

Underlying these and many other phenomena that slowed up the development of the resistance movement was an intense individualism that was the product of the basic social structure of capitalism in which the Jews of the ghetto had lived. "Save yourself," "personal survival," these became not only ends in themselves, but they were ends that were considered an adequate justification of any means used. The ghetto fighters themselves have openly described the situation. Thus Marek Edelman, active in the Bund¹ resistance groups, reports that with the establishment of the ghetto, "only the present day really mattered. Only matters of the most personal nature, the closest circle of friends were by now the focal point of interest of the average ghetto inhabitant. *The most important thing was simply 'to be alive.'* . . . The *instinct of self-preservation* finally drove the people into a state of mind permitting them to disregard the safety of others in order to save their own necks. . . ." (*The Ghetto Fights*, Warsaw, 1945, translation into English, New York, 1946, pp. 5, 18, my emphasis—M. U. S.)

Did this "instinct of self-preservation" lead to self-preservation? On the contrary, it led to mass extermination, and must be judged as such. In practice, the "cult of self-preservation" was bankrupt and can be no model for new battles. Tactically, nothing but resistance succeeded; morally, nothing but resistance was "good."

There are those who would exculpate, or at least warn us against harshly judging, not only those who did not resist but even those who collaborated with the nazi with the best of intentions. Yet it is becoming clearer that the rôle of the *Judenrat*, for instance, was reprehensible. Miss Syrkin remarks that the head of the Council, Adam Czerniakow, "believed that he was tempering the fury of

¹ The "Bund" is a Jewish socialist organization founded in Russia in 1897. It is nationalist and petty bourgeois in ideology and leadership.—Eds.

nazi persecution by his parleys and compromises" (p. 189), and that when he finally realized that the Council was actually administering the orders for the mass deportations to death that began on July 22, 1942, he immediately committed suicide the next day. Lest we fall for similar illusions, however, what should be instructive for us is not *what* he believed, but *that he was wrong*.

"The condemnation of the Jewish police," Miss Syrkin reports, "is more universal" among survivors of the ghetto. But she asks us, "in justice to them [the Jewish police]," to believe that the nazis would have been worse had they done their own policing. Essentially, would the nazis have been worse? Evidently the nazis thought the Jewish police could do the job better, and they did so good a job for the nazis that the nazis refrained from killing the Jewish police until near the very end. On the day the death deportations began, July 22, 1942, Mary Berg wrote in her diary: "The Jewish police is charged with the sad task of preserving order during the deportation and of employing force against those who refuse to give themselves up. . . . Today the Jewish police gathered up all the beggars from the streets and emptied the refugee camps. . . . Today we received a package of food from Uncle Abie, in which he enclosed a note. Fortunately for us, he is on the police force, otherwise he would not have been admitted to Dzielna Street. His short note expressed despair. He cannot accept the idea that as a policeman he will have to help in the deportation, and is thinking of resigning from his job. But, on the other hand, his job protects him from deportation. He wants to know what we think about it. . . . The police must supply the rest [of the daily quota of deportees] by means of force. They drag their victims out of their homes or seize them in the streets." (Pp. 170-171.)²

² On September 22, 1942, the nazis ordered the deportation of over

Underground Organizes

Nevertheless, despite the nazi terror and the nazi cunning, the Jewish underground began to organize itself. It was met by a propaganda preaching resistance to the idea of resistance. In the "safety" of the ghetto, resistance was denounced as "dangerous," and the resisters were branded as enemies of the Jews. As Miss Syrkin says very temperately: "there was frequently the active opposition of the Jewish councils and the Jewish police. . . . The appeals of the underground were characterized as the irresponsible propaganda of young hotheads who were prepared to bring catastrophe down upon all. Again, it should be remembered that this point of view was advanced by people who held it in good faith. . . ." (Pp. 197-198.) Need it again be asserted that if ever good faith was a bad justification for ruinous tactics it was such pre-eminently in this "active opposition" to the underground? If we have not learned that lesson, then indeed commemoration of the heroic uprising becomes a solemn mockery, serving as an opiate that dulls the sense of battle, and fathering a code that justifies passivity and "the cult of self-preservation."

What was the source, then, of the idea of resistance, which spread despite all obstacles? It rose primarily among organized groups based on class or national consciousness (or some combination of both), and dedicated to programs of struggle to achieve their ends. Such groups, before the war and the institution of the ghetto, had become accustomed, in their attitudes and conduct, to integrate the aims of the individual with those of the group and the cause. To the

2,000 Jewish policemen and their families, leaving only about 400 of this police for work still to be done. Uncle Abie, who had decided after all not to resign, escaped from the nazi round-up, and is last noted in the diary on October 2, 1943, after the ghetto had been razed, as working in the Warsaw suburb of Praga.

extent that they were dedicated to struggle, these groups understood that risks were involved, and that victories were never won without losses. They realized that they had an enemy to overcome, and that interfering with the enemy, and damaging him at all costs, was a necessary part of their program. In one degree or another, their philosophy was antithetical to that of the "cult of self-preservation."

Therefore it was among the organized labor and Zionist forces—trade unionists, communists, socialists, labor Zionists, socialist-Zionists—that the resistance took shape. Self-sacrifice was not alien to them. Some of them had already in the past, so it seemed to the self-preservers, "courted" danger. Thus an Elia Moses, who had been in the International Brigade in Loyalist Spain in 1936, was a military instructor of Warsaw ghetto fighting squads until he was killed in the summer of 1942. But to be effective, these separate resistance movements had to be unified. Unity too came slowly, but it came. By March and April, 1942, an anti-fascist bloc had been formed consisting of the Hashomer Hatzair, the Left Labor (Poale) Zionists and the Jewish division of the (Communist) Polish Workers' Party (known as P. P. R., the initials of the name in Polish). At an all-party conference in March, "Jewish socialists . . . refused to merge their groups with those of the socialist-Zionists." (Marie Syrkin, *op. cit.*, p. 207.) But the anti-fascist bloc persevered in the campaign for unity, and from its efforts there emerged the Jewish National Committee, which added to the three parties already mentioned the Labor (Poale) Zionists, the Socialist-Zionists, and democratic militant elements among the General Zionists. By October 20, 1942, all-party unity was achieved in a fighting organization when the Socialist Bund adhered to the organization. Preparations for the active large-scale military resistance were carried out under the leadership of five

commanders, headed by Mordecai Anilewitz of Hashomer Hatzair, and including Michael Rosenfeld of the Polish Workers' Party (P. P. R.). Other leaders came forward: Adam Berman, the Labor Zionist, Sonia Novograduka of the Bund, Henech Kirschbaum, the Zionist. In the fighting itself, both on January 18, 1943, when the nazis met armed resistance for the first time, and in the weeks after April 19, 1943, when the final ghetto battle was joined, mass heroism was forged. The unity that had already been achieved was further tempered in the heat of battle and the flames of the Warsaw ghetto.

Of the 40,000 who were in the ghetto when the rising took place, most were annihilated. The nazis lost more than 1000 troops, materials, time and prestige. And it was more than individual Jews that survived. An example survived, and spurred on resistance in other ghettoes, in death-camps, and in other partisan movements. Jewish unity against fascism survived, and has been since the end of the war the basis of the all-party unity of the Central Committee of Polish Jews. The democratic unity of Jews and non-Jews survived,³ and is now the basis for the fact that the Jews are an honored and in some respects, because of their great losses, a favored part of the new democratic Polish government.

For us in the United States, and for Jews and other people all over the world, there have survived lessons and examples, patterns of what to do and what not to do in the fight

³ Much has been written of the inadequate and grudging aid given the ghetto fighters by the Polish "underground" that had its headquarters in London and that apparently had other more important objectives than to fight the nazis. Not enough is yet known in this country of the splendid aid rendered by the Polish Workers' Party, founded in January and February, 1942, with headquarters in Lublin. Thus Christina Kovolska, secretary of the Warsaw Branch of the P.P.R., was almost a daily conspiratorial visitor in the ghetto during the preparations for the uprising, supplying contact, arms, and instructors limited only by the available means.

against reaction and fascism. Some had learned these lessons even then; many have been taught only by hindsight. But it is necessary to guarantee that the hindsight of today becomes the foresight of tomorrow.

Everywhere that there is reaction, fascism and imperialism, resistance is the only lesson. It is still easier to resist, especially in the United States, than it was in the Warsaw Ghetto. One must resist the propaganda that nourishes the "cult of self-preservation" by telling us that the attack is aimed "only" at the communists, or at "greedy" labor, or at the foreign-born, or at the Negro people, and not at "us." The road to fascism is paved with exceptions that lead nowhere except to the extermination centers. The infinite cunning of nazism was penetrated only too slowly and at too great cost in the Warsaw ghetto. The American face of reaction will have its own special features, but we must learn soon to penetrate the disguises and read the death-warrants made out for our names. It will be a deluding comfort that we shall be taking if we lull ourselves into the "belief" that the Taft-Hartley road, the Truman loyalty-decree road, the Hoover reconstruction of a powerful reactionary Germany road, the deportation road, the bi-partisan road of strengthening reaction in Europe, the Near East and the Far East, are anything but the roads to fascism, American style.

In order that it be not desecration, commemoration of the Warsaw ghetto heroes should mean resistance above all; resistance immediate, continuous and victorious.



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