# HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL PROGRAMS



Ervin Birnbaum

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# Ten Original Programs Commemorating the Shoah

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*Ten Original Programs Commemorating the Shoah*

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Second edition 2026

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First edition edited by Elisheva Lahav;

printed and bound by Courier Graphics, Phoenix, Arizona;

and designed by Petrafied Designs, Maui, Hawaii.

All links to the optional songs and QR codes provided within are subject to change.

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This book is dedicated
to my pure, wonderful, beloved family members
who were murdered by the Nazis in the Shoah

My maternal grandparents:

Eliezer David Krischer and Ita Bergman

My paternal grandparents:

Eliezer Birnbaum and Amalia (Malcsi) Bergman

My aunt and uncle:

Chayei-Sara Krischer and Shlomo Klagsbald
and their three young children: Haim-Eber, Miriam, and Yehuda-Leib

My aunt and uncle:

Esther-Malka Krischer and Shimon Gluck

My great-aunts:

Rivka Matel-Bergman and Leiba Bergman

My great-uncle:

Joshua Bergman

My cousins:
Ela-Malka Abraham, Samuel Birnbaum, 3 girls of the Beranek family,
and Shlomo Schlamovitz, who was taken away in front of our very eyes
(I'll never forget the look on his face as he was led away)

And other members of our extended family

# A NOTE FROM THE FAMILY

## Baruch Dayan Emet

Our Patriarch, Rabbi Ervin Birnbaum, departed this life on July 24, 2022 (25 Tamuz, 5782).

His death is a grievous loss to our family and our community. To us, this volume represents a memorial and tribute to him, as well as to the heroes of the Shoah, both martyrs and survivors.

He and the rest of the Shoah survivors witnessed and contributed to the amazing modern miracle of the rebirth of the People of Israel in its ancient homeland. As an individual, and as a community leader and educator, he devoted much of his life to that great historic endeavor. Our family was blessed by his warmth, caring, wisdom and idealism.

We are grateful that he got to see this book in pre-publication form. He would be very glad to know that it will help community leaders and organizers present moving Holocaust Memorial Programs in their communities.

In this spirit we remember him and celebrate his life work while wishing you all success in yours, for the betterment of Israel and of all humankind.

October, 2022

# HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL PROGRAMS

# Ten Original Programs Commemorating the Shoah

## INTRODUCTION

This anthology presents a collection of independent programs that deal with themes related to the Holocaust (the Shoah) perpetrated by the Nazis and their collaborators. Each one focuses on a specific location (such as Warsaw, Vilna, or Minsk), or a specific aspect of the Shoah (such as Resistance). They are meant to be presented to an audience, although they may also provide material akin to a Holocaust reader.

Each program is original and unique. Dealing in depth with just one theme leads to a stronger response and more lasting impression. All were presented at Congregation Bet Israel, Netanya, and without fail, audience participants responded with sustained silence and tears in many eyes.

Every program opened with an introductory responsive reading followed by a song. Then the main body of the program was narrated by volunteers, with appropriate songs performed to break up the content and for enhanced effect. (Links and QR codes provided herein for convenience may of course expire over time, but the suggested songs can be found on the net.) Programs were concluded with a special reading and Kaddish, lighting of six memorial candles, Yizkor prayers, and the singing of Ani Ma'amin and Hatikva.

The suggested format and readings are presented in detail in the appendices.

I used various sources to research the topics herein, and often translated Yiddish and German sources myself. Any errors are my own. I used a number of books in researching these topics over the years, and I thank and salute the authors of these works. A selected bibliography appears in the back of the book.*

It is my fervent hope that these programs will be useful to you in organizing a meaningful Holocaust Memorial experience, or Holocaust study. The programs are especially relevant now, as Holocaust survivors are quickly dwindling in number. They are designed to help participants learn and remember, while touching their hearts and minds even as they commemorate the horrific historical events and the lives of the millions caught up in this relatively recent and most evil genocide in the annals of humankind.

We stand together and vow that we will never forget, and that nothing like it will ever be allowed to happen again.

**ERVIN BIRNBAUM**
Netanya, Israel, January 2022

* *These programs were created for live presentation — for audiences gathered to remember, mourn, and learn. Professor Birnbaum wrote as a survivor, an educator, and a witness to history, drawing on decades of reading, study, and personal experience. His sources included the works listed in the selected bibliography, as well as articles and testimonies citing primary sources — but because the programs were designed for the stage rather than the page, formal citations were not part of their original form.*

*The historical record on which these programs rest is well-documented. If you nonetheless encounter an error or ambiguity, please email me so that future editions may be corrected, thank you.* aitonbirnbaum@gmail.com

*AB*

# Like Sheep to Slaughter? Were the Jews Passive Victims in the Shoah, or Did They Demonstrate Resistance?

*This program examines a tough question regarding the Six Million victims. Were they somehow to blame? Could they have fought the Nazis and changed their fate?*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

During the Shoah, did the Jews really behave like sheep led to the slaughter?

Why didn't they resist? If they didn't have guns − why didn't they pick up knives, axes, iron bars, anything − to stand up to their murderers?

Where was their basic instinct of self-preservation?

Six Million is an enormous, incomprehensible number. How could a villain murder so many without being stopped by his intended victims?

We would like to consider these questions, as we recall the greatest slaughter inflicted on any people in the entire course of human history.

Some, like Mordechai Gebirtig, anticipated it. Years before the Shoah, he wrote the song of warning, "Es Brent, Bridelech" − Brothers, Our Village Is Burning!

In the annals of history, we actually learn of early Jewish resistance to Nazism. In 1936 a young Jew, David Frankfurter, outraged by Nazi anti-Jewish provocations, attacked and killed Wilhelm Gustloff, a Nazi leader, in Davos, Switzerland.

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In 1937, in Berlin, the very heart of Nazism, a Jewish resistance group known as the Baum Group was born. They could not count on outside support. They lacked a tradition of struggle and proper leadership. The group members engaged in mutual aid, monitored radio broadcasts from London and Moscow, and distributed leaflets. In their most daring act of resistance, they set fire to a Goebbels Nazi propaganda exhibition. Although they posed no real threat to the Hitler regime, members of the group were mercilessly hunted down simply for standing up to oppose the Führer. Dozens were apprehended in 1943 and, without delay, the Hitler courts decreed death by decapitation on them all.

In the beginning of November 1938, in reaction to the deportation of his parents from Germany to Poland, Herschel Grynszpan entered the German Embassy in Paris and killed Ernst von Rath, the Third Secretary of the Embassy. The Nazis used this as a pretext to unleash a pogrom throughout Germany, in which they destroyed over 300 synagogues, ransacked thousands of Jewish homes and stores, killed 36 Jews outright, and sent 70,000 more to the Dachau concentration camp.

Kristallnacht, as the event was called − the Night of Broken Glass − clearly demonstrated that the Germans feared no repercussions from other nations for their violent anti-Jewish actions. This was demonstrated by the Evian Conference, convened by U.S. President Roosevelt in July 1938 − four months before Kristallnacht − to find places of refuge for the Jews of Germany and Austria. Of the 32 nations represented at the conference, only one small country, the Dominican Republic, was willing to accept Jewish refugees. Hitler saw that the world cared little about the fate of the Jews.

The Jews themselves could not fathom the potential depths of German cruelty. The indisputable fact is that even with the outbreak of World War II, and throughout the horrendous war accompanied by the slaughter of millions of innocents, the Jewish mind remained largely incapable of comprehending the possibility of such genocide in a “civilized world.”

The Jews were unable to comprehend that a culture that produced brilliant minds like Goethe, Kant, and Hegel, could become drunk on Jewish blood.

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The Jews could not accept that human beings could strive to kill their fellow human beings − from newborn infants to the elderly − only because of their Jewish origin.

Jewish sensibilities could not imagine that creatures in human form could be more bloodthirsty than the most vicious wild beasts.

Because of the Jewish conception that − despite occasional criminal acts − human beings are innately incapable of wholesale mass murder, the Jews could simply not fully realize what was unfolding before their unbelieving eyes.

After all, the days of the Inquisition, with its tortures and autos-da-fé, were long over. It was 300 years since the barbaric hordes of Khmelnytsky threw Jewish babies out of windows to be caught at sword-point. Blood libels were common in past centuries. Anyway, each of them affected a localized population. Jews in Christian Spain. Jews in Ukraine. Jews in Norwich, England. In Blois, France. In Damascus, Syria. A few dozen here. A few hundred there. Perhaps thousands further away.

Our world changed with the French Revolution. Jews broke out of the ghetto. They became Germans of the faith of Moses. They became model Hungarians. They became loyal citizens of the countries they lived in, good neighbors, partners-in-business, friends. They earned Iron Crosses for being heroic soldiers. They earned Nobel Prizes and Olympic medals that brought honor and pride to their countries of residence.

Jews were finished with the past, and they marched toward the rising sun. If the Nazis wished to resurrect the past and again hound the Jew, the Jews would just have to patiently endure and wait for the storm to pass. No doubt − it was but a temporary aberration. The Jews thought, "We will survive it. Our loyalty to our country is well known. We've worked for it. We've fought for it. If they won’t want us in the army, we'll serve our country in the work battalions. We'll build roads, construct bridges, work in munitions factories. We'll make our contribution, endure the occasional humiliation, suffer momentary deprivation, until society regains its balance and emerges from temporary insanity − with us an integral part of it once again."

The Jewish mindset, hermetically sealed to the possibility of ultimate evil and complete annihilation of a people, had a major impact on developments. No less significant was the cunning way the Germans handled their intended victims. People capable of resistance were the first to be siphoned off. They were mobilized for work brigades, with the promise that as long as they worked, their lives would be spared and no undue harm would befall them. To the Jewish mind, this seemed entirely rational. Why should the Germans destroy a good source of competent labor that could contribute to their war effort?

When the deportations began, they were accompanied by a string of enormous lies. They were called “resettlement,” with slogans like *Arbeit macht frei* − promising freedom to those ready to work. The Nazis forced early transportees to write postcards that were sent back home, describing adequate, even pleasant conditions in their new homes. The Germans and their cohorts generally ordered the deportees to pack some belongings, thereby reinforcing the belief that they were genuinely being resettled. They even gave the Jews receipts for their clothes and valuables at the very threshold of the “showers” to maintain their disarming deceit until the very end, and thereby avoid unrest and resistance.

When the ghettos were established, they, too, could be conceived to be for the purpose of organizing labor power. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were forcibly concentrated by the Germans into over 400 ghettos in the occupied Eastern territories. Only when “work units” were marched out of the ghettos, never to be seen again, did implausible rumors begin circulating as to their fate. It was still impossible to believe that the Germans would wantonly destroy valuable manpower and that people would kill people without rational cause. However, as group after group continued to disappear, suspicions began to grow that they fell victim to some incomprehensible fanatic Nazi hatred, and that the Germans might actually plan to liquidate the ghettos.

Slowly, what seemed impossible to the Jewish mind began to take on an aspect of possibility, and gradually of probability. Some postcards sent home from deported transports gave distinct hints: “My wife went for a visit to Aunt Sophie,” wrote one deportee. The Nazi censor had no way of knowing that Aunt Sophie had died years before.

Slovakian soldiers in the ranks of the German Army on the Russian front, on home leave, told of wholesale murders of Jews in occupied Russian territory, such as the story of Babi Yar, near Kiev. Despite continuous, strenuous denial by the Germans, they could not suppress all the information, and it took on wings and spread.

A teacher, Tema Katz, was in a group taken from the Vilna Ghetto. Under cover of darkness, wounded, and semi-delirious, she smuggled herself back into the ghetto, and told the incredible story of Ponar. The group had been taken from Vilna into the Ponar forest, she related, forced to dig a pit and strip naked, and then were shot into the pit. Tema feigned death, although she was only wounded, and there she was, a trustworthy person telling an inconceivable story.

Masses of Jews in the ghetto could not believe what they heard. Tema's tale was so absurd, so fantastic, so senseless, so preposterous, so contrary to their image of man, of the cultured German. But some did, and those who found it credible began looking for ways to stand up to, or escape the murderers and to communicate the information to other ghettos. They joined together in forming partisan resistance groups, searching for weapons and hiding places.

In those days, a 12-year-old boy wrote the melody of the poignant song *Shtiler, Shtiler, Lomir Shveign, Kvorim Vaksn Do*

Quiet, quiet, let's keep silent,

Graves are growing here,

Secretly planted by our foes,

To the very heavens rise our woes,

To Ponar leads our way,

Yesterday, tomorrow, every day.

*Shtiler, Shtiler*

Words: Shmerke Kaczerginsky; Music: Alek Volkovisky

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYr0v-FHOXg

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

Messengers went out of Vilna to neighboring Jewish communities carrying warnings and advising escape, but armed resistance in the early stages was impossible. Everyone was well aware that the Polish army that consisted of several million trained soldiers was totally overwhelmed by the German Wehrmacht in three short weeks. Mighty France, backed by the resources of an empire, lay smashed by the German army in humiliating defeat after a six-week war. The armies of both these nations collapsed like a deck of cards in the face of superior German might. What could one expect of civilians who were never trained to hold a weapon and who, at any rate, had no access to arms?

Lisa was a sparkling, beautiful, Aryan-looking young woman of 20, one of those angels who fearlessly maintained vital contact with the other Jewish communities. The partisan headquarters in Vilna sent her to warn the Jewish community of Oshmiana, about 30 kilometers away, that their deportation was imminent. The community had close to 1,000 Jews. One hundred of them left with Lisa for the forest to join the partisans.

When Lisa returned to take out another group, she was caught by the Nazis. They set up a cross by the *aron kodesh*, the holy ark of the synagogue, and forced the entire Jewish community into it as they nailed her to the cross and watched her expire in slow, protracted agony. Then they set the packed synagogue on fire.

Henceforth, the newly-formed UPO – United Partisan Organization – that took its fledgling steps in Vilna, used the password *Lisa ruft* – Lisa calls.

In Dolhynov, near Vilna, in 1941, two young boys escaped from the ghetto and refused to return. In retaliation, the Germans and their willing helpers killed the entire Jewish population of the ghetto.

In Bialystok, Abraham Melamed shot a German policeman. The Germans entered the ghetto and randomly shot 120 Jews who happened to be on the street. They threatened to destroy the whole ghetto if Melamed didn't turn himself in. To save the ghetto, he surrendered three days later.

When four Jews managed to escape from the Treblinka extermination camp, the Nazis shot 26 Jewish inmates. For the murder of a German officer in Treblinka, the guards executed 160 Jews.

Using such "collective punishment" was one of the ways the Germans stifled resistance by the Jews. It is difficult, if not impossible, for a Jew to become heroic at the expense of his fellows. One escapes and 26 are shot . . . What's the use? One German killed for 120 or 160 . . . What does that accomplish?

As long as there was the slightest hope of staying alive, heroic deeds that threatened a large number of Jews or an entire ghetto population were considered self-defeating. And since by their very nature people live with hope, Jews kept hoping that the Germans would soon realize their need for Jewish workers, or that the Allies would win the war before the Nazis killed them.

It took a long time for active, large-scale Jewish resistance to materialize. From half a million Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1939, there remained barely 20,000 when the ghetto population – with their meager accumulation of arms, grenades, Molotov cocktails, and knives – was ready to meet Wehrmacht units on the unforgettable Passover of 1943.

Remember: Polish resistance lasted three weeks. French resistance, six weeks. The Germans planned to take the ghetto, of whose resistance cells they became aware by the beginning of 1943, in three days. They employed 9,842 fully armed troops, backed by heavy mortars, tanks, flame-throwers, and planes. In the words of Emanuel Ringelblum, "This was a struggle between a fly and an elephant." It took the Germans 49 days to clear the Warsaw Ghetto of its pockets of Jewish resistance. The last fighting encounter in the ghetto was recorded in mid-July, 1943.

Warsaw became a symbol of Jewish resistance. But it wasn't the only ghetto to revolt. In Bialystok, Jewish resistance fighters made a valiant four-day effort in a desperate, hopeless fight against overwhelming German might to open the road for the remaining 40,000 Jews, where they could have joined the partisans in the forests. In Vilna, hundreds escaped thanks to the resistance groups.

Other lesser-known ghettos deserve mention:

In Marcinkonis, White Russia, when the Germans and their minions began to liquidate the ghetto in November, 1942, the President of the *Judenrat* (the Jewish leadership council appointed by the Nazis), Aron Kobrovsky, one of the few *Judenrat* leaders who helped the resistance, cried out, "Jews! Whoever wants to live, let him run where he can. We are facing the devil!" Pandemonium broke out. Jews attacked the Germans with their bare fists. Hundreds were killed. Hundreds more managed to hide in deep bunkers prepared in advance for just such an eventuality. Hundreds reached the forests and joined Jewish partisan groups. In what was supposed to be the major, final, and orderly action of liquidation of the Marcinkonis Ghetto, barely two dozen Jews were caught alive for the planned "resettlement."

The Lachwa Ghetto, the Tuczyn Ghetto, the Minsk Ghetto, and others – each offers us a chapter of Jewish heroism, **once the intention of the Nazis became clear. They absolutely did not walk like sheep to the slaughter!**

Records indicate that at least **60 ghettos attempted resistance, revolts, and mass escapes.**

*Es shlogt di sho!* They declared:

Brothers, the hour has struck!

*Mir Zeinen Do!* We are here!

Although today we are enveloped by deep, impenetrable darkness,

The day shall dawn when evil shall fall!

*Es Shlogt Di Sho!* Words and music: Kasriel Broydo

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRl7QlVdJR8

(Performed by *WanDeRer Quartett*)

What was true for the ghettos was equally true for the concentration and extermination camps. When the intent of the Germans to liquidate the Jews became clear, the determination of the Jews to hold on to life for as long as possible, and as best as possible, solidified.

In Auschwitz, from the moment new arrivals were unloaded onto the selection platform, they were in a universe all its own. The principles and rules of the normal world were obsolete. Prisoners needed all their strength and concentration to keep fit, so as not to be consigned to the “showers.” Only the strongest could weave dreams of survival, resistance, or escape under such circumstances. Periodically, the Jewish inmates were reminded by their satanic German prison guards: “From here one leaves only through the chimney.”

Nevertheless, 667 escape attempts were made in Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945. Jan Vrba’s escape in the first half of 1944 deserves special mention. He brought detailed descriptions and maps of Auschwitz to the Jewish leadership of Slovakia and Hungary; the information was passed on to the West with pleas to bomb the rail lines leading to Auschwitz, or the camp crematoria – to absolutely no avail.

It is noteworthy that Auschwitz also contained a large number of Russian military prisoners of war, who were eager and able to engage in resistance, stage a breakout, and liberate as many prisoners as possible. While the Jews could not count on the surrounding Polish population for any help, Russian and Polish POWs would have had local assistance. However, since there were no weapons available, even these soldiers were unable to break out.

In October 1944, as Russian troops quickly advanced westward, the Jewish prisoners in charge of burning bodies in the crematoria – called the Sonderkommando – learned that the Germans were planning to kill them, in order to eliminate all witnesses of what went on in Auschwitz. Several hundred of them staged a successful breakout, killing three SS guards in the process and taking their weapons. However, German reinforcements arrived quickly and within two days all the escapees were killed or captured, only to die in the camp under horrendous torture.

The Germans learned that one young Jewish woman, Roza Robota, slave-laborer in a nearby munitions factory, had supplied explosives with which the Sonderkommando demolished a crematorium prior to their breakout. Several days later, all the Jewish inmates of the camp were forced to witness the hanging of Roza and her three friends – Esther, Ella, and Regina. Although Roza was horribly broken in body as a result of cruel torture, when the noose was placed around her neck, she shouted out in a clear, ringing voice to all assembled, *Chazak v'ematz!* – "Be strong and of good courage."

Revolts also took place in the Treblinka, Sobibor, and Mauthausen extermination camps.

The Treblinka revolt led to the deaths of 20 Nazis, and the escape of about 200 Jews. The vast majority were recaptured by the relentless Germans, who did not want witnesses to survive. The uprising, however, led to the destruction of Treblinka's facilities by fire, and its early shutdown.

By the time of the revolt in Sobibor, 600,000 Jews had been murdered in the camp. The uprising resulted in 10 German dead. Approximately 400 Jews broke out of the camp, but about half of them fell to landmines planted around the camp by the Germans. Others were killed by pursuing aircraft, and by thousands of pursuing German troops. More were murdered by fascists of the *Armia Krajova* -- the Polish resistance group, who hated the Jews as much as they hated the Germans.

The leader of the Sobibor revolt, Alexander Pechersky, was a high-ranking Russian-Jewish officer taken captive by the Germans in the battle for Minsk. With a group of 60 men and women, he successfully eluded pursuit and joined a Russian partisan group. Two days after the revolt, Himmler issued an order to dismantle and level Sobibor, with nothing left in place to indicate its ghastly purpose.

Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibor were on Polish soil. The Mauthausen extermination camp was in Austria. The sole approach to it, nestled on top of a mountain, was through a quaint, prosperous Austrian village adjacent to one of Austria's major cities, Linz.

Since Mauthausen also had a few American airmen among its prisoners, the Germans were aware of the possibility of organized resistance based on military know-how. To forestall such, as conditions worsened, the number of SS guards was increased from 1,500 in 1943 to no less than 9,000 in 1944, surveillance became more rigid, and the turnover of prisoners increased substantially. Many were liquidated purely at random, with no substantive cause, to eliminate any possibility of conspiratorial organization.

Yet on February 2, 1945, some 500 Jewish prisoners staged a breakout. First, they stormed the watchtower with rocks and two fire extinguishers. Oblivious of casualties that littered the area of the attack, they overpowered the guards in the tower and turned the machine gun on the other German fortifications and on-rushing reinforcements. By throwing wet clothing on the electrified barbed wire fences, they short-circuited and disabled them.

However, despite the daring attack, only eight Jews got away. The rest were all recaptured and put to death.

In retaliation, over 200 prisoners were forced to stand outside in the freezing February night after cold water was poured over them. None of them survived the torture.

No, these weren't Jews behaving like sheep going to the slaughter!

In addition to revolts in concentration camps and resistance in the ghettos, about 25,000 Jews who escaped fought in partisan groups in the forests and cities.

The Bielsky brothers became a legend among the partisans. Although Jews made up less than 1% percent of the French population, an estimated 15-20% percent of the French underground, the Maquis, were Jews.

The only known deportation train that was attacked and stopped on the way to Auschwitz was the result of an act by Belgian Jewish resistance fighters on April 19, 1943. The train was on its way from the Malines transit camp to Auschwitz. Between 600 and 700 Jews jumped from the cars, and approximately half of them escaped.

Hundreds of similar acts of armed resistance are recorded in the local histories of now extinguished, or still-functioning Jewish communities on the blood-soaked European continent. And who knows how many such acts of utmost heroism, big and small, are entirely unknown to us because all the Jewish participants and witnesses were killed?

But resistance also has another side, no less glorious than reaching for a weapon in an attempt to fight one's way through watchtowers, minefields, electrified fences, and brigades of enemies armed to the teeth.

To paraphrase one survivor: The Nazi beast wanted not only our physical death. He wanted our death accompanied by humiliation, by our wriggling like a worm in the dust, begging for mercy, to see us tortured and dying demoralized, brutalized, and remembered in utter indignity, crawling at the feet of the master race and licking his Aryan boots.

The Jews lacked the weapons to stand up to the Nazis. But they had a strong sense of Jewish dignity and Jewish willpower. In the words of the late British historian, Martin Gilbert, they had "the superiority of refusing to allow the Germans their final wish to gloat over panic and despair... Even passivity was a form of resistance. To die with dignity was a form of resistance. To resist the demoralizing, brutalizing force of evil... to live through the torment, to outlive the tormentor, these, too, were acts of resistance. Merely to give witness of these events in testimony was, in the end, a contribution to victory. Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit."

Prisoners in Mauthausen, Sobibor and other death camps knew that they could actually triumph in only one way: by staying alive!

But the Jew not only stayed alive, he asserted the power of true Jewish spirit in the most difficult days, under the most trying circumstances. He organized educational, cultural, and religious activities – all illegal and punishable by death – because they instilled faith in life and a reason to look forward to a tomorrow. All those involved were engaged in a supreme expression of resistance. As historian Zelig Kalmanovich said in 1944 shortly before his death, these expressed “the clear victory of spirit.” The Jews demonstrated their refusal to have their spirit broken, even by the most horrible degradations.

Hundreds of Jewish schools functioned inside the ghettos and in some concentration camps, where children studied religious and secular subjects. Children knew to hide their books under their coats or in their trousers to and from school, aware of the danger of being caught. Libraries were established. The illegal library in Czestochowa had several thousand volumes serving more than 1,000 readers. Theresienstadt had a library of 60,000 volumes. Despite the horrendous circumstances, Jews found time to read.

Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum of Warsaw called this spirit *Kiddush Hachayim* – the sanctification of life.

Cultural activities bloomed. Unbelievably, even in Mauthausen, facing impossible odds, under conditions where all effort, energy, and willpower had to be focused on daily – no, hourly – survival, incredible as it sounds, music was created. In March 1944, Remy Gillis composed and performed for his inmates the Song of Hope – *Chant d’Espoir.* Gracian Guzinsky composed a "Concentration Camp Dance" to a humoristic score.

Hope and song and love of life could not be quenched. Apparently, they never die, even in the grip of death, wallowing in filth, drowning in blood. Not in Mauthausen, not in Vilna, and not in Bergen-Belsen.

In Bergen-Belsen – which earned itself the distinctive title "The Horror Camp" – the prisoners maintained cultural activities, including language courses, discussion groups, lectures, readings and religious observance.

It all sounds so normal, doesn’t it? Yet all of it was going on despite appalling overcrowding, terrible hunger, freezing cold, raging typhus (which took the life of Anne Frank a week before liberation), infestations of lice, constant diarrhea, and people wallowing in their own excrement.

All of it was going on despite death stalking the camp and people dying by the minute, despite fear of what the next hour might bring. The camp threw itself feverishly into the business of keeping alive. Its spirit was not broken. These Jews were not led to their death like a flock of sheep.

But perhaps the most sustained heroism was manifested in the care and protection of little children. Hanna Levy-Hass writes movingly of the efforts made by inmates to save and nurture the children incarcerated in Bergen-Belsen. The children, from 3 – 15 years old, were starved, and reacted wildly to the horror and chaos all around them. Yet the adults did their best to calm, control and even teach them despite the terrible conditions.

In Bergen-Belsen, in April 1945, 18,355 people died – 611 a day, or 26 each hour. Yet, *mir leben eybig*, we live on forever! We shall endure! We shall survive all our enemies!

*Mir Leben Eybig*

Words: Leyb Rozental; Music: traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZnvx3sRkOg

(Performed by Louisa Lyne and *di Yiddishe Kapelye*)

In Theresienstadt the children produced sketches, drawings, and paintings that mirrored their fears and dreams, the terror lurking in every uniform, their search for light, and joy, and peace – their thirst for love, their hunger for life. The children worked illegally, under the guidance of master artists interned in the camp. The preservation of those paintings and of the children's diaries and poetry was a defiant and dangerous form of resistance.

Some of the children's drawings were smuggled out of the camp and delivered to the Red Cross prior to its intended visit. When the visitors arrived at the camp, which was meticulously cleaned and decorated by the Nazis for the occasion, one of the visitors requested to see a place that he saw in one of the children's works. He thus unwittingly betrayed the ongoing illegal activity.

Within a few days, the Germans arrested several of the artists, who were subjected to cruel torture, to betray the hiding places of the children's works and the names of all participants. Some of the painters had their fingers chopped off one by one by the barbarians, yet none betrayed any adult or child in their joint work. Although the artists known to the Germans were then transported to Auschwitz, the work of the children resumed.

Hans Frank, the Governor-General of occupied Poland, decreed that the penalty for smuggling was death. Despite the ever-present danger, smuggling food into the starving ghettos was a necessity. Prominent among the smugglers were children.

Emanuel Ringelblum described food smuggling in Warsaw, how almost every day saw smugglers shot, particularly in the area guarded by a policeman dubbed Frankenstein. He looked and behaved like a monster − a bloodthirsty animal who kills one or two smugglers every day, and just can't eat his breakfast before spilling the blood of a Jew.

But according to Ringelblum, the numerous smugglers were undaunted. One smuggler told a friend that he would keep on smuggling to avoid starving, since it was better to die fast from a bullet than slowly from hunger.

Not only was smuggling prohibited, so was anything fostering intellectual stimulation. For that, too, could prolong life, offer hope, comfort, a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, classes were held for children. Holidays were celebrated. Several theaters carried on to the very end. There were courses in engraving, watchmaking, architectural drawing, and more. There were lectures and dramatic programs and reading circles. Serious articles were produced, clandestinely printed, and discussed. There were debates, contests, and even poems by little children about the goodness of man.

Amid all the misery and squalor, the Jews' human intellect, managed to function. Ringelblum declares triumphantly, barely a month before the final destruction of the ghetto began, "We did not lose our human characteristics. Our minds are as busy as they were before the war."

We stand amazed. There wasn't significant armed resistance to Nazi inhumanity because there couldn't be. The Jews were like a fly fighting an elephant. And yet they proclaimed in the ghettos and concentration camps:

*Un zol vi vayt*

*Noch zayn di tsayt*

*Fun libe un fun sholem,*

*Doch kumen vet,*

*Tsi fri tsi shpet,*

*Di tsait – es iz keyn cholem!*

The new song, one of peace and of love
Far though it be, as it would seem
Slow from below or fast from above
Will surely come -- this is no dream!

I hear the ode of love and joy:
A marvelous creation --
In every note, without a ploy,
The sun’s manifestation.

We shall arise, post this long night
To cheer and joy, and be alright.
I hear its echo in the air,
It's a voice that does declare:
No more hatred, no more strife!
Sing love and peace, to joy, to life!!!

*Dos Naye Lid (Un zol vi vayt)* -- The New Song.  Words: Avrom Reyzen

Shoah historian Yehuda Bauer wrote, "Taking circumstances into consideration, what is surprising is not how little resistance there was, but rather how much."

It is awesome to realize, with a sudden flash of recognition, that

- despite the gas that choked them,
- despite the fire that consumed them,
- despite the showers in sub-zero temperature that turned them into pillars of ice,
- despite their skulls being used as weights and decorations,
- despite their bodies broken in medical experiments –
    - no humiliation and no torture,
    - no thirst and no starvation,
    - no lice and no disease,
    - no death marches and no death trains,
    - no pain and no agony

could destroy the will of the Jewish People to live and to act on the stage of history.

Despite it all, We Are Here – *Mir Zainen Do* – back from the dead! Risen from the grave! Unbelievably, we are here – and will continue to march forward into a glorious future.

*Jewish Partisans' Song*; Words and music: Hirsch Glick

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs



(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc



(Performed by Paul Robeson)

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# The Horror Camp: Bergen-Belsen

*Originally designed as just a temporary way station, this concentration camp became one of the worst of them all*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

“It smells of forest, summer, freedom… There are pine trees, slender and motionless. There is a dark, safe, cozy little place between the small bushes on soft moss and pine needles. And it is so quiet there, so quiet…”

Thus wrote Renata Laqueur in her Diary of Bergen-Belsen. It sounds like an idyllic place, doesn’t it? Except that the description is about the other side, as she stared across the barbed wire fence and, in her imagination, smelled and felt the slender pine trees and soft moss, the blessed quiet and coziness. It was so near, yet so far, so very far, light-years away…

Contrast Renata’s wishful dream with stark reality. She writes, “There was my dear Paul, unable to move, bathing in his own and other people’s excrement, completely soiled, unwashed, full of lice, holding in his tight grip a turnip that he could not lift to his mouth for lack of strength.”

And again, “It has been terribly hot… In the evenings and at night the hut is an oven. A hundred and eighty people, one single toilet without a door… Laundry, clothes, and other items hang in the narrow space between the three-layered bunk beds and from the ceiling. Dust, dirt, heat, and stench.”

Only in a dream could one smell pine trees when the pungent smell of sweat and excrement filled every pore of one's body. Only in a dream could one conjure a safe, cozy place hidden between the bushes on soft moss, when one shared a room and a single toilet without a door with 180 people. Only in a dream – for daylight brought only deprivation; night brought no consolation; darkness brought no rest.

*Di Nacht* (In the Night)

*S'iz keyner mit mir in di nacht*
*Di nacht nor alein iz mit mir,*
*Di vegn farchmuret un shtum*
*Di shtilkeit alien vandert um.*

*Ich gei, s'iz a vaiter der veg,*
*farvolknt un toib iz di nacht.*
*Vuhin, vuhin, freg di ritm fun di trit*
*Zei gebn kein entfer mir nit.*

*S'iz keyner mit mir in di nacht*
*Di nacht nor alein iz mit mir*
*Vos vayter un vaiter ahin*
*Vuhin, shtile vegn, vuhin?*

There's no one with me in the night,
Darkness alone is with me.
On roads obscured by darkness dense,
Hollow stillness – all I sense.

I go on, long is my way,
The clouded night does not hear.
Where? Where? – ask my steps.
No answer comes to my ear.

There's no one with me in the night,
Darkness alone is with me.
On and on in lonely despair –
But where, silent roads, to where?

*Di Nacht*

Words: Aaron Domnits; Music: Mikhl Gelbart
https://tinyurl.com/4hr4fmh6 (Performed by June Tabor)

Alternative option: *Sounds of Silence* -- Simon & Garfunkel

Bergen-Belsen was intended to be a privileged place where only very fortunate Jews would be detained. This is how the unique creation of Bergen-Belsen came about.

There were thousands of Germans in various countries, including Palestine, whom the Nazis wanted back in Germany to serve the Fatherland under Hitler's flag. In order to get them back, the Nazis were ready to exchange Jews for them. Bergen-Belsen was established as a "detention camp" for those Jews who had visas, certificates of entry, or citizenship papers of foreign lands. They would serve as ideal exchange material.

The instructions of Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop were explicit: Everything was to be done "to obtain the return to their homeland of interned German citizens, in exchange for citizens of enemy states in our hands. For this purpose, we have at our disposal not only English and American, but also Dutch, Belgian, French, Norwegian, and Soviet citizens of the Jewish race… The Foreign Office therefore asks that about 30,000 Jews of the above-named nationalities who appear suitable for possible exchange be held available for this purpose... In case the above-mentioned exchange negotiations come to nothing, the deportation of those Jews can still take place later."

The proposal from the Foreign Office coincided with similar intentions of Himmler, head of the SS. Himmler issued the following order to his SS and Gestapo subordinates:

“Jews still present in France, as well as all those Hungarian and Romanian Jews who have influential relatives in America, must be assembled in a special camp. They are to work there but under such conditions that they remain healthy and alive. These types of Jews are valuable hostages for us.”

Thus did Bergen-Belsen come about. It was established in the spring of 1943 as a special camp for Jewish inmates who would be treated with silk gloves. They would not be forced to work in arms factories so they would have only glowing stories of good treatment to relate when exchanged for German nationals abroad. That sounded ideal – and a stroke of good luck for Jews holding documents of other lands.

However, by the spring of 1943, when Bergen-Belsen was established, Germany was already suffering from a chronic shortage of labor, especially in the armaments industry. The overriding purpose of German race policy – protection of the pure blood of the superior Aryan race and elimination of the inferior, contaminated Jewish race – did not change. But under the circumstances, Nazi policy-makers decided to squeeze Jewish labor power to its limit before its final destruction.

The functionaries of the concentration camp administration, who were originally entrusted with the outright liquidation of the Jewish race, now saw as their main task the full-scale mobilization of the labor power at their disposal for the German arms industry. Let there be no misunderstanding: The intention was not to spare the Jews for contributing their labor, or even to treat them better so as to get more work out of them – only to work them to death while laboring. Those who could no longer work as required were to be liquidated.

As long as the possibility of exchange remained, Bergen-Belsen inmates avoided most of the brutalities that characterized concentration camps. Bergen-Belsen was in a category all its own.

In fact, very few of the prisoners were exchanged: 222 Jews were freed in June 1944, in exchange for German Templars in Palestine; 1,683 inmates crossed the Swiss border between August and December of 1944; and 136 people reached Switzerland at the end of January 1945. A total of about 2,100 Jews benefited from the exchange.

Unfortunately, as opportunities for exchange declined, the SS made up in brutality a hundred-fold for their erstwhile relatively restrained, almost humane behavior.

In October 1943, 1,700 Jewish Bergen-Belsen inmates of Polish descent were ordered to prepare for transport, supposedly for liberty. When the train reached the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, the prisoners suddenly realized that they had been tricked. As Polish Jews, they knew the meaning of Auschwitz. One woman snatched a revolver from an SS man, shot him dead and severely wounded another. Other women attacked the SS men with their bare hands. The Germans called in reinforcements to deal with this rebellious transport. When they arrived, some of the prisoners were shot or killed by grenades, and the rest were sent to their death in the camp's gas chambers. All 1,700 members of this transport – without exception – were murdered. Yet their hopeless revolt was not in vain. It exemplified the grandeur of the Jewish spirit, the stubborn, yet proud will to live.

*Mir schmidn un schmiden*
*Bay tog un bay nacht,*
*Di ringen zei vern*
*On oifher gemacht*.

By day and by night
with no end in sight
we forge links of a chain
that unite peaks and plain.
The bitter today
merges a glorious tomorrow
and a golden yesterday.

*Mir Schmidn*; Words: Shmuel Wolman; Music: Michal Gelbert

https://www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=1249 (various versions)

The prisoners in Bergen-Belsen lived torn between hope of release and desperation, under conditions that became increasingly harsh. As hopes for exchange diminished, Bergen-Belsen was turned into a full-blown concentration camp. However, since initially it was meant to be but a short-range project of limited scope, it was not equipped for protracted stay. Lacking proper facilities, supplies of water, food, and medical equipment, conditions eventually turned out to be even worse than in a “regular” concentration camp.

At its peak, Bergen-Belsen incarcerated 60,000 prisoners at once. It was divided into several sub-camps whose inmates were treated with varying degrees of cruelty. Among them was the “prison camp” that housed the sick and those unfit for work, who were still forced to do hard labor until utterly, completely exhausted.

In the prison camp, desperate conditions prevailed as of spring 1944. This was the result of the decision of the SS High Command to select prisoners who were sick and completely exhausted from other concentration camps, for transport to Bergen-Belsen. Cynically, the SS called it a “recreation project.” The first such transport of 1,000 prisoners for the prison camp were all infected with tuberculosis, and not a single doctor was assigned to them. When the camp was liberated 10 months later, only 57 of the 1,000 were still alive.

The SS appointed Karl Rothe to serve as “senior nurse” in the camp. Instead of helping, he displayed barbaric cruelty. He personally murdered several hundred people by phenol injections. In September 1944, the prisoners organized a trial among themselves and sentenced Rothe to death. Soon after, the sentence was carried out and Rothe was lynched by the prisoners.

Despite the initial understanding that inmates at Bergen-Belsen would be free from labor, a year after the camp was formed, the majority were already compelled to work. Groups of “work commandos” were employed at excavation, sewage work, or clearing woodlands.

Repeatedly, transports ferried prisoners to armaments industries for forced slave labor.

The largest of the work commando groups was the “shoe commando.” Used shoes were transported to Bergen-Belsen from all over the Reich. They had to be unstitched, and the usable bits of leather cut away from them. The work was dirty and complicated and was made torturous by the brutalities of the SS supervisors.

One exhausted woman nodded off at her work for a minute. As punishment, after nine hours of back-breaking work, her whole group was made to stand up against the fence in the blazing sun, without food or water, for hours, until they were marched off to their next work shift again.

Something bothered the German guard, so he ordered a row of men to stand in the heat of a summer day bent over at the waist, hands touching the ground, for over an hour. The penalty for moving was a savage beating.

Else Freirmuth writes, “When I came round the kitchen, I saw an SS man beating a woman with the butt of his rifle until she no longer moved. Blood was pouring out of her mouth. It was a terrible picture that I will never forget. Another day, I saw an SS man shoot a little girl, driven to despair by hunger, for stealing a turnip. The child fell, bleeding. The mother came and took the girl to her block, where she died. The mother cried out, ‘Dear God, if you are almighty, then help us and do not allow these things to happen!’”

*Eli, Eli. Lama azavtani?* My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*Eli, Eli, Lama Azavtani*

Words and music: Jacob Sandler/traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE95WpTS3WI

(Performed by Eli Henig)

Before long, the roll calls conducted in extermination camps became a twice-daily occurrence in Bergen-Belsen. They took place before work and after work and could last for hours – until every person, or body, was accounted for – even in ice and snow. One day, the Germans had everyone line up for roll call in the central square for eight hours in the rain and mud.

The roll calls were a purely arbitrary punishment, since escape was virtually impossible. The environs were hostile. The camp was strongly guarded by numerous watchtowers. It was surrounded by no fewer than 10 rows of electrically charged barbed wire. Clearly, roll calls were superfluous and were used solely as a method of torture.

Other arbitrary punishments were not uncommon – among them withholding food from the starved prisoners for one or more days.

From mid-1944, hunger and illness dominated the lives of the prisoners. Hygienic conditions were dreadful. There was horrendous overcrowding and virtually no medical care. Disease spread rapidly out of control, and claimed more and more victims.

Among those who died of typhoid in Bergen-Belsen were Anne Frank and her older sister, Margot, just weeks before the camp was liberated.

One day during that period, half the prisoners were writhing in agony from excruciating stomach cramps as a result of two days' feeding on the same rotten spinach. The Germans were furious that the prisoners could not work, so despite the November weather, as punishment, they forbade men to wear jackets.

From the diary of Renata Laqueur: "For days on end, a little girl sat at the bedside of her mother. She was dreadfully dirty, her clothes torn, her hair infested with lice, her eyes sticky with nits, her legs swollen from edema. But there she sat, forcing the terminal patient to eat lukewarm bits of suede until, with a greedy, yet guilty glance, she swallowed the morsels herself. The gray blanket on the mother was crawling with lice. The child cried. She got up and said, 'Mother, I am going to find you some soup.' The mother did not reply. When the girl returned, the mother had died. For a long time, the little mite sat on the bed motionless. Finally, they spread the blanket over the body. Still holding the red soup bowl in her hand, she left. Now she was all alone."

Optional Reading: *Dremlen Feigl oif di Zweign*

Words: Leah Rudnitska (Rudnicky)

www.jewishfolksongs.com/en/dremlen-feygl

*Dremlen* Music: Leyb Yampolsky

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2i5EDlUEIFU

(Performed by *Mir Kumen On* Yiddish Choir)

Hanna Levy-Hass writes in her diary: “The fight for bread, a fierce fight over the tiniest crumb, the fear to lose it or have it stolen by thieves or by the Germans who from time to time amuse themselves by depriving us of our basic ration for several days – this fight for bread has now become the central problem, the most urgent problem to trouble every individual and all prisoners in general. The ration is getting smaller from week to week. Today the daily bread ration is only 3.5 cm long, measured with a tape measure (would you believe it?). One treasures this tiny piece like a piece of gold.”

Despite hunger, freezing cold, and fear, the prisoners attempt to maintain cultural activities, to use the sparse means at their disposal to add some sparkle to the festivals, and to remain true to their religious beliefs. The will to survive, the effort to protect one’s dignity and identity are evident in several diaries, drawings, lectures, poems, and songs that originated in the camp.

- A learned young man, Rozenperl, speaks on the last night of Hanukkah, on “Judaism and Hellenism against the background of the Hanukkah festival.”

- A group of 84 religious prisoners tries the impossible – to organize a kosher kitchen in a separate section of the washroom.

- Six language courses function simultaneously.

- A number of discussion sessions are organized, and many inmates participate.
- In the evenings, Zameczkowski reads the Book of Job.
- Hanna Levy-Hass speaks about the fate of the children in the Warsaw Ghetto.
- Women bless electric light bulbs or make Shabbat candles out of hollowed potato peelings filled with margarine…

Perhaps the most sustained heroism was manifested in the care and protection offered to little children. Levy-Hass writes: “Our hut contains 110 children of different ages, from 3-year-old toddlers to 15-year-old boys and girls. The children are wild, without inhibitions – and starved. They react brutally to the extraordinary chaos in their lives. Mistrust and fear and bad habits spread fast among the children and hold them in their grip. Yet we try to control them and teach them without books, without paper, without pencils, as best we can.”

Children tried to get paper and pencil for themselves. Some even sold their bread rations, entered into other business deals, or simply stole, sometimes from one another.

Despite the terrible conditions of overcrowding, disease, and starvation, despite death stalking and dozens dying by the hour, the camp threw itself feverishly into the challenge of staying alive. Its spirit was not broken.

*Es hot uns dos leben gerufen*
*Dos leben fun zunige teg*
*Tzu eins, tzvei, drei…*
*Du veist vo du geist un farvos!*

When summoned to life we were ready
in days that were sunny and gay,
and all that were there
seemed to walk as on air
by themselves, as they went on their way

To “1, 2, 3,” – “1, 2, 3,”
to work with spirits high.
Every step has its sound
on the echoing ground
when you know where you go and why!

*Tzu eins, tzvei, drei*

Words: Leyb Rozenthal (after Hans Eisler); Music: traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMNq_NigT74

(Performed by Henry Sapoznik)

The Allied invasion at Normandy and Allied victories on the battlefronts, west and east, indicated that the end of the war was approaching. But even then, Jewish suffering did not end. Just the opposite. At each concentration and extermination camp, the Germans and their cohorts were busy trying to cover up their foul deeds.

Although selections ceased, and gas chambers and crematoria were being dismantled, a policy of evacuation was put in force that brought untold suffering on the wretched inmates and killed many of them. Hundreds of thousands of people were set in motion, crisscrossing Germany under terrible conditions, in a deliberate execution policy – the last great Nazi mass murder – after the genocide of the gas chambers.

As the Allied armies approached Bergen-Belsen, the SS decided to move all prisoners to the interior of the Reich. For weeks, prisoners were on the move, on foot, in trains, in open wagons, during the freezing winter, without warm clothing, in paper-thin prisoners’ uniforms, without proper shoes, without food, marching or travelling for days on end without facilities, where living dead lay motionless in a sea of excrement. Tens of thousands froze to death, died of starvation, or collapsed and were shot by the SS.

The additional thousands who were left in Bergen-Belsen, already in a weakened condition, were completely neglected, their torment often unbearable. They had only polluted water, no food, suffered from constant diarrhea, spotted fever, lice, tuberculosis, and typhus, and wallowed in their own feces due to sheer exhaustion.

Conditions were made even more unbearable by the transports importing thousands of prisoners into Bergen-Belsen from other camps. With total incongruity, while attempts were being made to transport Bergen-Belsen inmates to other places, masses of humanity were brought from those very same places to Bergen-Belsen. This significantly increased the Jews' misery and suffering until the very end.

On December 2, 1944, there were 15,257 prisoners left in Bergen-Belsen, and the camp was crowded. On April 15, 1945, there were over 60,000 moving skeletons in the same barracks, many having survived the travesty of resettlement during the previous month.

The lack of water in Bergen-Belsen was so severe that prisoners died of thirst. The camp authorities deliberately refrained from easing the situation and made no attempt to draw on the reserves of food, clothing, and medical supplies stored at a nearby military base.

In March 1945, 18,168 people died in Bergen-Belsen, 605 a day – 25 each hour. Every 2.5 minutes a person expired. They were not mercifully shot. They died in agony. Often a loved one stood by, helpless.

In April 1945, 18,355 people died, 611 a day – 26 each hour − despite the camp's liberation by the British Army on April 15, 1945.

Upon liberation, many prisoners were in such desperate condition that they could no longer be saved. Thousands died as members of the Jewish Brigade and British Army looked on helplessly.

Entering the camp, advanced units of the British Army were met by an unbelievable sight: thousands of corpses strewn all over, limbs intertwined, in heaps. In the barracks, the living and the dead lying in embrace, almost indistinguishable one from the other.

And while British Army units made efforts to halt the rising spiral of death in the hour of freedom, three trains of Bergen-Belsen inmates – each with over 2,000 people – were

rolling aimlessly through the German countryside. They were phantom trains on a ghostly journey. They had no destination, and only one objective: to prolong the agony of the Jews on those miserable trains and postpone the hour of their liberation.

One such train reached Theresienstadt. The second was abandoned by the fleeing German guards near Magdeburg, where American soldiers took charge of the train. On the third train, which finally fell into Russian hands April 23, near the village of Trobitz, close to 600 of the 2,000 inmates had perished in agony. Among the survivors, miraculously, was a three-year-old named Elisheva. (She was adopted by her uncle and aunt and brought to Israel, and later married my brother, Michael Birnbaum. They have three wonderful children and five grandchildren.)

Detention camp Bergen-Belsen, which was to have favorable conditions for inmates awaiting exchange, earned itself the title of distinction: THE HORROR CAMP. Experienced inmates of numerous camps testified that of them all, Bergen-Belsen was by far the worst. It was the place where masses of people died slowly and painfully.

The Allies were helpless in combatting the disease and alarming mortality rate in the camp. Finally, they had recourse to a desperate measure: The inmates were evacuated to nearby hospitals and the camp was torched. Nowhere does fire burn better than in hell: the fires quickly destroyed the hell of Bergen-Belsen, and it was burned to the ground.

Today only the mounds remain. Marked: 1,300 1,500 – 1,100 – 1,800 – the number of bodies interred underneath, after suffering tortures that Satan himself could not have conceived. Only the mounds remain, an obelisk with the names of the lands where the prisoners of the horror camp came from, and a modest monument to the Jewish dead.

But something else also remains: A sudden flash of recognition that no humiliation and no torture, no thirst and no starvation, no lice and no disease, no death marches and no death trains, no pain and no agony – and no horror camps – could ever destroy the will of the Jewish People to live and act on the stage of history. In spite of it all, the Jewish People is here, and will continue to march forward into a glorious future.

WE SURVIVE

Oh, never say that you have reached the very end,
Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend,
Because the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: WE SURVIVE!

From the land of palm trees to the land of distant snow,
We are here, with our pain, with our woe,
And wherever our blood was shed in pain,
Our fighting spirits will resurrect again.

Tomorrow’s sun will gladden our today,
The past with bitter foe shall pass away.
But should the sun at dawn delay his coming,
Then let this clarion ring out the future dawning.

Not lead, but blood, inscribed this song we sing,
It’s not a caroling of birds upon the wing.
But ‘twas a people midst the crashing fires of hell
That sang this song, and fought courageous 'till it fell.

So never say that you have reached the very end,

Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend,

Because the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive,

And our marching steps will thunder: WE SURVIVE!

*Jewish Partisans' Song*;  Words and music: Hirsch Glick

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc

(Performed by Paul Robeson)

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# The Model Ghetto: Terezin

*Of Nazi deception and cruelty, and the Jews' heroism*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

One horrendous thing about Theresienstadt was that many Jews paid large sums, bribed Gestapo agents, and were ready to sign all their possessions over to the Third Reich for the privilege of being sent there. It was reputed to be the haven of safety, the preserver of life, the “Model Ghetto,” and "the city which the Führer has given the Jews.”

Yet, this “model ghetto” − the Führer’s gift − was in reality a “funnel with only one hole,” a way station to Auschwitz. It was the road to hell – the privileged way.

− "*Mischlinge*” (carriers of Jewish blood) were sent here, contaminators in disguise, married into – or born into – high-ranking German families, whose deportation had to be done in stages in order to soften the repercussions.

− Holders of the Iron Cross who fought for the Heimat (the homeland), whose patriotic contribution and sacrifice on behalf of the country was well known, were sent here.

− Prominent intellectuals, academicians, and artists, whose fate might attract world attention, were also sent here.

− And with them came tens of thousands, mainly Czech, German, and Austrian Jews.

It was a diabolical ruse:

− a smoke screen originally intended for the more sensitive element in the German population – as long as its sensitivity lasted;

− a showplace dressed up for the well-publicized visits of the Red Cross, whose representatives were ready to fix their gazes as the Nazis directed, without casting as much as a glance to the right or to the left;

− a veneer for those Jews who were ready to fall victim to their own gullibility.

Theresienstadt was Reinhard Heydrich's great contribution to the accomplishment of Nazism's noblest objective – making Europe *Judenrein* (free of Jews). Some 35 miles from Prague, in the idyllic Czech countryside, Heydrich, the chief of the SS, chanced upon this romantic fortress-town and instantly recognized its potential for the Nazi cause. No one would dream that a town with a medieval flavor, in such a tranquil setting, amid soft meadows and low, sloping hills, could be turned overnight into a transit point to eternity. What delighted Heydrich was that the town itself was rather grim, with high scarps, deep moats, and huge barracks, and – above all – that it was hermetically sealed by its huge, moss-covered fortress walls.

Before long, the Czech population of Terezin – as the town was locally known – was quietly evacuated. All 7,000 of them. Heydrich publicly announced the establishment of Theresienstadt as an "autonomous ghetto" intended especially for the elderly Jewish population. Czech Jews were greatly relieved, for it verified the claim that those who pose no threat to the Nazi Reich would, after all, be treated differently, more humanely. Upon German request, the Jewish community in Prague readily set up a work team of technicians who refurbished the decrepit, dilapidated houses and barracks of Terezin.

As the first transports arrived at the ghetto, they were forced to write reassuring letters to next of kin before the gates of stark reality shut behind them. Their illusions from their former world were quickly shattered under a hail of daily orders and prohibitions:

- It is forbidden to walk on the pavement.
- It is forbidden to whistle in the street.
- It is forbidden to pick field flowers.
- It is forbidden to separate from the work group.
- It is forbidden to smoke.
- It is forbidden to have contact with gentiles.
- It is forbidden to leave one's lodging after curfew.
- It is forbidden to collect horse chestnuts.
- It is forbidden to touch a chimney-sweep "for luck."
- And more…

- Seven prisoners were hanged for sending illegal messages to the outside world.

- Nine prisoners were hanged for engaging in furtive conversations.

Suspecting the presence of individuals in the ghetto who were not accounted for, the Germans called for a headcount in freezing weather. 48,000 Jews – infirm, emaciated, children, and the elderly – were all forced to stand in a nearby field from 5:00 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. without food and water. Only then, those who could, helped their distraught brethren back to their barracks, to collapse on a thin layer of straw that served as their bed.

− Elderly Jews who brought with them their top hats, tails, lace dresses and parasols, driven by hunger, soon began poking about piles of rotten potatoes for edible remains.

− Elderly Jews, once so dignified and proper, wandered the camp, begging for food.

On March 15, 1943, a 52-year-old woman died of hunger. She was one of 33,000 Jews to die of starvation in the “model ghetto.” The woman was Trude Neumann of Vienna, daughter of Theodore Herzl, founder of the Zionist Movement.

A dysentery epidemic broke out. With only two or three toilets for 100 inmates, people had to wait in line, writhing in pain and terribly ashamed if they could not hold out. Thousands were too weak to get up, and literally died in their own excrement.

Transports to the East became standard occurrences, a daily reminder of how precarious life was in Theresienstadt. The Germans continued to feed illusions, and the ghetto inmates kept receiving soothing postcards from deportees in the so-called "family camp" at Birkenau, written at Nazi orders. Nevertheless, the inmates were gripped by dread at the very mention of a transport, and directed all their thoughts and failing energies toward avoiding it. What happens to the transport?

*Di Nacht* (In the Night)
*S’iz keyner mit mir in di nacht*
*Di nacht nor alein iz mit mir,*
*Di vegn farchmuret un shtum*
*Di shtilkeit alien vandert um.*

*Ich gei, s’iz a vaiter der veg,*
*farvolknt un toib iz di nacht.*
*Vuhin, vuhin, freg di ritm fun di trit*
*Zei gebn kein entfer mir nit.*

*S’iz keyner mit mir in di nacht*
*Di nacht nor alein iz mit mir*
*Vos vayter un vaiter ahin*
*Vuhin, shtile vegn, vuhin?*

There's no one with me in the night,
Darkness alone is with me.
On roads obscured by darkness dense,
Hollow stillness − all I sense.

I go on, long is my way,
The clouded night does not hear.
Where? Where? − ask my steps.
No answer comes to my ear.

There's no one with me in the night,
Darkness alone is with me.
On and on in lonely despair –
But where, silent roads, to where?

*Di Nacht*

Words: Aaron Domnits;  Music: Mikhl Gelbart
https://tinyurl.com/4hr4fmh6 (Performed by June Tabor)

Alternative option: *Sounds of Silence* -- Simon & Garfunkel

Despite the abject, subhuman conditions at Theresienstadt, despite the mortal threat when caught in the slightest deviation, acts of nobility, self-sacrifice, defiance, and resistance were not lacking.

By SS order, it was prohibited to give birth to a child. The head of the *Judenrat*, Yakov Edelstein, was determined nevertheless to save some Jewish babies. He did that by first covering up for the expectant mothers, then by hiding the babies, and eventually by falsifying identity cards for them by using cards of people who had died.

He was caught by the SS, who went on a rampage. He was arrested with his family, including his wife and their young son, and they were sent to Auschwitz. There, Edelstein was kept in a punishment cell for six months without light, adequate food or water, without even room to stand. Then in the middle of June 1944 he was released to a barracks room and became buoyant with hope. A few days later, however, on June 20th, he was forced to watch while his wife and son were executed. Then he himself was shot.

An eyewitness, Yossl Rosensaft, recalled a year later: “Yakov was in the same barracks as I was − #13 – on that Monday morning. It was about 9:00 a.m. and he was saying his morning prayers, wrapped in his tallit. Suddenly the door burst open and SS Lieutenant Franz Hoessler strutted in, accompanied by three SS men. He called out Yakov’s name. Yakov did not move. Hoessler screamed, ‘I am waiting for you. Hurry up!’ Yakov turned around very slowly, faced Hoessler, and said quietly, ‘Of the last moments on this earth allotted me by the Almighty, I am the master, not you.’ Whereupon he turned back to the wall and finished his prayers. He then unhurriedly folded his tallit, handed it to one of the inmates, and said to Hoessler ‘I am now ready.’ Hoessler stood there all the while without uttering a word, and marched out when Edelstein was ready. Edelstein followed him and the three SS men made up the rear. We never saw Yakov Edelstein again.”

Edelstein’s removal left Theresienstadt with a deep sense of loss. A month after he was deported, a special “Hebrew Week” was held in his honor. With death howling around them, the inmates managed to pull together nightly programs in Hebrew, with certificates of honor and special pins awarded to those who made the most progress in speaking Hebrew. Such was the influence of Yakov Edelstein, a man who especially deserves to be remembered, along with all those who stood like him against Nazi terror in a heroic attempt to save their people.

Edelstein could have avoided deportation. As head of the Palestine Office in Prague, he had a valid set of emigration papers in hand. He decided, however, to forgo escape, hoping to save some of the Reich Protectorate Jews. Following the German occupation of

Prague in March 1939, Edelstein argued with his Zionist colleagues that it was their duty as leaders of the Jewish community not to desert their people. A year later he wrote in a letter: “Did I do right to drag my best friends into chaos and persecution? Our pioneer training taught us always to be on the spot where the fate of the Jewish people had become tragic. Who but we were destined to stand in the breach at the time of the greatest affliction and the most fateful moments in history?”

He was but an ordinary-looking man, with a phenomenal sense of dedication. His last prayer in barrack #13 no doubt stormed the very heavens on behalf of his people. No bitterness – only wonder. No harshness – only amazement. Wonder and amazement at an Almighty God who chooses not to answer the anguished cry, not to send relief, not to deliver. O Lord, why don’t You answer me?

*Eli, Eli, Lama Azavtani*

Words and music: Jacob Sandler/traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE95WpTS3WI

(Performed by Eli Henig)

Among the prisoners in the camp were prominent artists, painters, and musicians, who had strict orders to work only for the Nazis. The painters were to produce propaganda pictures, or reproductions of famous paintings for the Third Reich. Bedrich Taussig (known as Fritta in the ghetto), Professor Otto Unger, Leo Haas, Karel Fleischman, Felix Bloch, Malvina Schalkova, Moritz Nagel, Charlotte Buresova, and others, defied the orders and recorded – on canvas, cardboard, paper, or whatever material they could lay their hands on – the ugly reality of suffering, starvation, and torture that surrounded them. They managed to hide a collection of paintings and were in the process of preparing a second batch when they were discovered.

They were apprehended as a result of foolhardiness, stupidity, or sheer betrayal. This is the hair-raising story:

Some of the gruesome pictures were smuggled out and reached Switzerland, where the International Red Cross was planning an inspection visit at Theresienstadt.

In preparation for the visit, the Nazis quickly spruced up the exteriors of the buildings and deported many inmates to Auschwitz to decrease the chronic overcrowding that prevailed in the ghetto. During the inspection in June 1944, one Red Cross official, seeing the phony fronts of the immaculate streets and shops, pulled out some of the drawings he had been sent. He asked to see the scenes they depicted. The Germans easily persuaded him that these were figments of somebody's sick imagination.

Shortly after the Red Cross visit, the artists, their wives, and children, were arrested by the SS. During the interrogation conducted by Adolph Eichmann, who came to Terezin specially for this purpose, the artists were accused of spreading atrocity propaganda, and were reproached for ingratitude. At one point, Eichmann asked the artist Leo Haas, "How could you do it when Hitler gave you such a beautiful town?"

The artists and their families were placed in a prison called the "small fortress." There they were cruelly beaten and tortured. Professor Unger's fingers were chopped off. One of the female artists interrogated was beaten to a pulp and had to be carried by the others to the deportation train where she did not survive the journey. But the artists did not divulge the whereabouts of their hidden paintings. They were sent to die at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, but their work survived – an eloquent testimony to the inhumanity of the Nazis, and to the grandeur of the Jewish spirit in the face of adversity.

*Mir schmidn un schmidn*

*Bay tog un bay nacht,*

*Di ringen zey vern*

*On oifher gemacht.*

By day and by night

With no end in sight

They forge the links of the chain

uniting mountain peaks and plain.

The bitter today

They merge with a glorious tomorrow

And the golden yesterday.

*Mir Schmidn*;  Words: Shmuel Wolman;  Music: Michal Gelbert

https://www.zemereshet.co.il/m/song.asp?id=1249  (various versions)

It was the heartwarming influence of these noble souls in sub-zero, inhuman conditions, that resulted in the stunning productivity of the children in Theresienstadt. It was the selflessness of these wonderful individuals – artists like Fritta, Professor Unger and Leo Haas – that allowed the budding young artists, all under 16, a measure of emotional self-expression through art.

Helga Weissova-Hoskova was 12 when she was sent from Prague to Terezin with her parents. When her talent for drawing was discovered in the makeshift school, her father stole ink and paper from his clerical work in the ghetto and gave them to her with the strictest order to “Draw exactly what you see.” He told her that whatever happened to him or her mother, she was to record everything. He was discovered smuggling paper and deported to Auschwitz, where he perished.

The children produced drawings, sketches, and paintings that – even if lacking from an artistic perspective -- mirror their fears and dreams, the terror lurking in every uniform, their search for light and joy and peace – their thirst for love, their hunger for life.

*Un zol vi vayt*

*Noch zayn di tsayt*

*Fun libe un fun sholem,*

*Doch kumen vet,*

*Tsi fri tsi shpet,*

*Di tsait – es iz keyn cholem!*

The new song, one of peace and of love
Far though it be, as it would seem
Slow from below or fast from above
Will surely come -- this is no dream!

I hear the ode of love and joy:
A marvelous creation --
In every note, without a ploy,
The sun’s manifestation.

We shall arise, post this long night
To cheer and joy, and be alright.
I hear its echo in the air,
It's a voice that does declare:
No more hatred, no more strife!
Sing love and peace, to joy, to life!!!

*Dos Naye Lid (Un zol vi vayt)* -- The New Song. Words: Avrom Reyzen

The preservation of the paintings was a defiant and dangerous form of resistance. No less dangerous, however, was the preservation of children's diaries and poetry. Peter Fischel, age 15, wrote:

"We have got used to getting up at 7 o'clock in the morning, standing in a long line at midday, and at 7 o'clock in the evening holding a plate into which they pour some hot water tasting a trifle salty, or perhaps with a suggestion of coffee, or to get a small portion of potatoes. We have got used to sleeping without beds, to respectfully greeting any person wearing a uniform, to keeping off the footpaths. We have got used to having our faces slapped for no reason whatsoever, to getting hit, and to killings. We have got used to seeing people wallowing in their own excrement, to seeing coffins full of dead bodies, to seeing the sick lying in filth and stench and to seeing the doctors powerless."

Soon after jotting down his observations of Theresienstadt, Peter Fischel was taken to his death in Auschwitz.

From the diary of 14-year-old Helga Weissova-Hoskova, whose parents died in Auschwitz:

"Old people's transport, 10,000 ill, crippled, dying, all of them over 65 years old. I am too exhausted to stand the sight of misery and suffering again. The young cannot volunteer. Children have to let their old parents go off and can't help them. Why do they want to send these defenseless people away? If they want to be rid of us young people, I can understand that, maybe they are afraid of us and don't want us to give birth to any more Jewish children. But how can these old people be dangerous? If they had to come here to Terezin, isn't that enough? Can't they let them die in peace here? After all, these old people can't hope for anything else."

Of the poems of Theresienstadt, the best known may be Pavel Friedman's *The Butterfly*:

The last, the very last butterfly – carried lightly way up high.

It went away, I'm sure, because it wished to kiss the world goodbye.

He concludes ruefully:

Only I never saw another butterfly.
That butterfly was the last one.
Butterflies don't live in here,
in the ghetto.

How poignant is the dream of *The Garden*, by 13-year-old Franta Bass:

A little garden
fragrant, full of roses.
The path is narrow
and a little boy
walks along it.
A little boy,
a sweet boy
like that growing blossom.
When the blossom comes to bloom
the little boy will be no more.

There were 15,000 children in Theresienstadt. Only 100 survived. But of the 15,000 legacies of love and trust: All survived.

A triumphant gesture of defiance came from the Jewish musicians. By order of the SS, the "model ghetto" had to have its own orchestra and choir, which performed for German dignitaries, or for the Red Cross representatives, whose visits led to the reassuring reports of perfectly satisfactory conditions in the ghetto and concentration camps. On the occasion of a visit by Eichmann and his henchmen, the conductor, Rafi Schachter, chose to perform Verdi's Requiem. At first, Eichmann found it most amusing. He rolled in gales of laughter at the thought of the Jews singing a funeral piece, with no suspicion of what awaited them. "If they only knew, they would have hardly found it any singing matter!" − he declared.

Only at the very end of the performance did it begin to dawn on him that this was a musical testament of invincible faith and hope, that these Jews were, after all, defying his prison, his concentration camp, his hatred – they were defying death itself.

Optional music: Selection from Verdi's Requiem

As a result of their fine work, the camp commandant had previously promised the musicians that they would not be separated from their families. Now he kept his word. Together they ascended the first wagons of the very next transport to Auschwitz.

Have you ever heard of *Brundibar*? It is a children's opera produced and performed, amazingly, in Theresienstadt, despite the unspeakably wretched conditions! Brundibar is the name of an organ-grinder who does not allow poor children to sing for money in the area he arbitrarily claims as his own. The children suffer because of him until some animals advise the children to get together and fight off the wicked man. Eventually Brundibar is defeated. The opera ends with a joyful marching song, proclaiming triumphantly:

*Besiegt ist Brundibar*
*Er schamt sich, der Barbar.*
*Laut trommelt singt in Chor,*
*Haht stoltz hoich das Hauptempor …*

Defeated lies Brundibar.
Shame on the barbarian.
Beat your drum,
We have won.
We shall dare
And not give in
'Till we win.

Optional music: Finale, or other excerpt from *Brundibar*

A former inmate recalled 40 years later: “For us children, *Brundibar* was something wonderful; for a few hours we were in a completely different world, in a world of children, of comradeship, of solidarity, and we believed that good would triumph over evil.”

For the children, these performances were a type of resistance. Just as the brave children in the opera together conquered the evil organ grinder, the ghetto's children took heart against the wicked Nazis.

Although trampled on, humiliated, and tortured – their spirit soared, and in their own unique way, they triumphed over cruelty and hatred.

The Theresienstadt Ghetto was established with the arrival of the first transport of 340 souls on November 24, 1941. In three and a half years, until its liberation, nearly 150,000 Jews passed through it. Of them

98,700 perished in gas chambers
35,300 perished in the ghetto, of hunger and disease
520 perished under terrible torture at the hands of the Gestapo

14,000 inmates of Theresienstadt survived the war…14,000 out of 150,000.

✡ ✡ ✡ ✡ ✡ ✡

One monstrous thing about Theresienstadt was that Jews were so cruelly deluded, and were made to pay for the privilege of being accepted there.

The magnificent thing about Theresienstadt was that surrounded by the stench of death, the will to live nevertheless triumphed. We have the paintings. No fewer than 4,000 children's drawings survived! We have poems – an abundance of them. We have diaries. We have musical compositions – all saved at an awesome price, saved in stunning audacity, in small acts of heroic resistance. In them our martyrs survived. Each creation declares: *MIR ZAINEN DO! ANACHNU PO!* WE SURVIVE!

WE SURVIVE!

Oh, never say that you have reached the very end,
Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend,
Because the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: WE SURVIVE!

From the land of palm trees to the land of distant snow,
We are here, with our pain, with our woe,
And wherever our blood was shed in pain,
Our fighting spirits will resurrect again.

Tomorrow's sun will gladden our today,
The past with bitter foe shall pass away.
But should the sun at dawn delay his coming,
Then let this clarion ring out the future dawning.

Not lead, but blood, inscribed this song we sing,
It's not a caroling of birds upon the wing.
But 'twas a people midst the crashing fires of hell
That sang this song, and fought courageous 'till it fell.

So never say that you have reached the very end.
Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend,
Because the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: WE SURVIVE.

*Jewish Partisans' Song*; Words and music: Hirsch Glick

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc

(Performed by Paul Robeson)

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# The Beautiful Valley of Monsters: The Story of Babi Yar

*Eyewitness descriptions of the single worst massacre of the Holocaust*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

At an extraordinary meeting in Berlin on March 30, 1941, attended by 200 generals and senior officers of the German army, Hitler spoke for two and a half hours about the special nature of the forthcoming campaign in Russia.

“The war against Russia will be such that it cannot be conducted in a knightly fashion. This struggle is one of ideologies and racial differences and will have to be conducted with unprecedented, merciless, and unrelenting harshness. All officers will have to rid themselves of obsolete ideologies. I know that the necessity for such means of waging war is beyond the comprehension of you generals but... I insist absolutely that my orders be executed without contradiction.”

In subsequent operational orders, 11 categories of people were specifically marked “For Execution.” The top category: “ALL JEWS.” Ten categories of non-Jews were also listed, including “All important officials of the State and Party.” And “Agitators and fanatical Communists.” Certain “trustworthy” Russians and all non-Russians in the Soviet Union were to be spared, but there was to be no exception in the category “JEWS.”

While Hitler’s Germany prepared its onslaught toward the East, life in Stalin’s Russia continued as usual. Stalin had good reason to suspect that the Ribbentrop-Molotov Non-Aggression Pact between Germany and Russia would be broken. Intelligence services of the Great Powers warned of the German plans, and Stalin even constructed a belt of strong points, the so-called "Stalin Line," along the frontier.

Yet Stalin trusted in the well-known adage that thieves who rob the world blind will still keep their word to one another, and remained hopeful that a German attack would never materialize. Thus, when the showdown came, even the shrewd, cautious Stalin was caught by surprise. Rumors have it that he was so stunned that he lost his ability to speak for weeks.

The entire Russian frontier exploded on June 22, 1941, when the Germans unleashed "Operation Barbarossa" with lightning speed. Nine million fighting men joined battle along a 1,600 km front from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Superior German forces breached the Stalin Line in several places. The Russians fought valiantly, even in retreat.

There came, in quick succession, the battles of Smolensk, Kiev, Odessa, Leningrad, Dnepropetrovsk, and the Crimea. By December 1941, the German armies had advanced 900 km to within sight of Moscow. The first Russian counter-offensive was yet to come.

Prior to crossing the Russian frontier, four mobile Einsatzgruppen – Nazi death squads – named A, B, C, and D, were set up under the control of Gestapo headquarters. Each consisted of 500 to 900 men, supported by sizeable numbers of local Lithuanian, Ukrainian and Romanian auxiliaries in their respective areas of operation. The objective of the Einsatzgruppen was the liquidation of Jews and other undesirable elements in the conquered territories.

The Einsatzgruppen moved close on the heels of the advancing Wehrmacht at four different points on the front, with unlimited authority to attain their well-defined objectives.

The government-controlled Russian press and radio gave no warning regarding the treatment of Jews under Nazi occupation. Thus, Russian Jews had no inkling of German designs, and in some instances even welcomed the Germans as liberators from Communist rule. The fact that the Jews were unaware and unsuspecting immensely facilitated the work of the Einsatzgruppen. Under the circumstances, when the Nazis called on the Jews to present themselves for the purpose of “resettlement,” the Jews had no reason not to obey, and displayed no opposition.

Of the 5,000,000 Jews under Soviet Russian control in September 1939, 3,500,000 were trapped in the Nazi vise. The Germans celebrated their impressive victories with orgies of spilled Jewish blood.

No less impressive was the collusion of the Russian population which, despite being essentially anti-German, still readily shared in the frenzy of Jew-killing.

In three mass shootings, 27,000 Jews were murdered in the city of Riga, November 1941.

The infamous Ninth Fort near Kovno was referred to by the Germans as “the slaughtering ground.” Two days after the start of the invasion, on the night of June 25th, 1,500 Jews were killed there; the following night 2,300, and so on. All told, 70,000 Jews were murdered there over several months.

Many thousands were slaughtered within days in Zhitomir and Dwinsk, in Slonim, Kobrin, Pinsk, Baranovice, Minsk, and other places.

Soon after the invasion of Russia, the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, visited Minsk. The commanding officer of Einsatzgruppe B, which operated there, was Artur Nebe. Nebe shot 100 Jews in order to let Himmler see what a “liquidation” looked like. According to Nebe, Himmler was appalled at the sight. Yet, later that day, he made a speech admonishing the soldiers that they had to carry out orders unconditionally and were not to feel conscience-stricken. The operations against Jews were a necessity. As in nature, the bad and the verminous must be destroyed.

In seven nights of slaughter, 30,000 Jews of Vilna were shot in the nearby Ponar forest.

Poignant songs, songs of farewell, and even elegies of yearning for loved ones were dedicated to these places. Following is a song written by a talented 11-year-old, Alek Volkovisky, in the Vilna Ghetto. His father, Doctor Noah Volkovisky, wrote the lyrics of the first stanza. Like so many other talents, he was murdered soon thereafter.

*Shtiler, shtiler, lomir shveigen; kvorim vaksn do*

*S’hoben zei farflantzt di soinem; grinen zei tzum blo.*

Be silent, ever silent; not a word by night or day –

In God we trust, have faith, have hope; close your eyes and pray.

*Shtiler, Shtiler* -- Music: Alek Volkovisky

Words: Noah Volkovisky, Shmerke Kaczerginsky

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oyr0v-FHOXg

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

By December 1941 – in less than six months – 500,000 Jews were murdered by the Einsatzgruppen and their local collaborators.

The place that holds the record for one day's murder – even over ghastly places like Auschwitz and Treblinka – is Babi Yar. The area of Babi Yar contained deep ravines, gorges and a quarry on the outskirts of Kiev, and is today part of the urban, inhabited sector of the capital city of Ukraine.

After a siege lasting 45 days, the Germans marched into Kiev on September 19, 1941. On September 28, notices were posted all over walls, billboards, and fences: "All Jews of Kiev and its environs must appear at the corner of Melnikov and Dokhturov Streets (beside the cemetery) at 8 a.m. on September 29, 1941. They must bring their documents, money, valuables, and warm clothing… Jews who fail to obey this order and are found elsewhere will be shot."

The text was printed in three languages: Russian, Ukrainian, and German. Anatoly Kuznetsov, a young resident of Kiev, records: "Many Jews lived and worked in a cluster of clay huts, small barns, and cowsheds huddled around a kitchen garden two doors from our house. I peeped in and found them in the grip of a quiet panic, rushing from hovel to hovel, assembling their bundles."

The Jews were distressed and frightened. The streets mentioned in the posters were near the Russian and Jewish cemeteries in the Lukyanivka neighborhood and its train station. So they were probably going to be sent off by train. Where to?

The helplessness of the Jews was heightened by the absence of all able-bodied men, who were serving in the Russian army. Mothers had to care simultaneously for their children and their elders, often incapable of fending for themselves. They had to make sure documents were in order, secure valuables for a possible long trip and resettlement, prepare food for days, and – not knowing what climes they would be moved to – varied clothing for all family members. They felt desperately alone as the last night in their home descended upon them.

*S'iz keyner mit mir in di nacht*
*Di nacht alain iz mit mir*

Where will I wind up in the darkness of the night?
The night alone is within my sight.

*Vuhin?* Where? Where will I wind up in the darkness of the night?
I ask the rhythm of my steps, left and right.

*Zey gebn kein entfer mir nit.* They offer no answer, no clue.

*Di Nacht*

Words: Aaron Domnits; Music: Mikhl Gelbart

https://tinyurl.com/4hr4fmh6 (Performed by June Tabor)

Alternative option: *Sounds of Silence* -- Simon & Garfunkel

One thing is certain: No one, but no one, in their worst nightmares could have foreseen what the next 48 hours held in store for the Jews of Kiev; and if anyone had suggested the truth, they would have been considered out of their minds.

One group could say nothing but “A ghetto, a ghetto!” They were convinced that the Germans were going to isolate the Jews in a separate section of the city, or nearby, for reasons known only to them.

Some viewed the developments as the immediate consequence of the war: “They are going to evacuate us to a safer place.”

“But why only the Jews?”

An old woman offered an optimistic suggestion: “Because the Jews are kindred to the Germans. (Isn’t the Yiddish language similar to German?) That’s why they decided to evacuate us first.”

The few realists were rejected outright. Indeed, a distraught elderly woman approached: “Dear people, this means death!” and broke into wailing. The response was indignant. Why should anyone start a panic like that?

It soon became known that a Jewish mother had poisoned her children and herself rather than submit to evacuation. A Jewish girl had jumped from a window near the Opera House. Her body lay covered on the sidewalk.

Another young Jewish girl ran along the street with revolver in hand, shot and killed two German officers and then killed herself.

However, these were considered aberrations of unbalanced people who lost their nerve in a moment of crisis.

It was still dark on the morning of September 29, 1941, the day before Yom Kippur Eve, when the unsuspecting Jews began to leave their homes, hoping to be the first to board the trains and find seats. With their wailing children, the elderly and the sick, some crippled and limping, some virtually crawling, Jewish residents spilled out into the street carrying rope-tied bundles, battered wooden suitcases, patched carpetbags. They pushed

handcarts and baby carriages, often with several infants in them, helping and supporting one another. Some argued among themselves about the reason for this madness.

Kuznetsov writes: “I could not, of course, miss such an event as the deportation of the Jews from Kiev, and I ran out into the street... to follow the events. A great crowd was ascending toward *Lukyanivka*, the cemetery district, a sea of heads. Suddenly there was a great troubled stir. People were saying that one could go only forward, but the return is cut off. This frightened me. I was afraid I would not manage to get out of the crowds and would be driven off with them. I pushed hard against the people, and made my way home."

Kuznetsov continues: “When I came home, I saw Grandfather in the middle of the yard. He stood there with a finger raised, straining to hear the sound of firing far away."

“Do you know what they are doing?” he asked, shaken. “They are shooting them.”

“I heard it distinctly: the even, rat-a-tat-tat of a machine gun from Babi Yar. This was calm, unhurried firing, as on a shooting range. Our Babi Yar, adjoining the cemetery.

“Grandfather looked puzzled and frightened... Grandmother paused to listen, too. It seemed to me she was crying. I turned to look at her more closely. She was crossing herself, facing Babi Yar and muttering, 'Our Father who art in heaven…'

“The firing stopped after dark, but resumed in the morning. It was said that 35,000 had been shot on the first day and that the rest were waiting their turn.”

*Farvos iz der himl geven nechtn loiter*
*Fun fraid hot geshaint jede gass?*
*Farvos iz di zun aza lichtige, route,*
*Farchmuret haint, beiz un in kass?*

Yesterday's skies were so shiny and bright
Streets and homes had a joyous light.
O how the sun has turned red and mad –
In anger and fury are the heavens clad.

Dry the tear, forget your concerns,
It's not worth mourning anymore.
It is possible that already tomorrow – surely tomorrow –
The sun shall be radiant once more.

*Farvos iz der Himl*

Words: Leyb Opeskin*; Music: unknown

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DOTHgU3LtE

* Leyb Opeskin, co-founder of the Vilna partisans, was killed the day before its liberation.

Few survived Babi Yar. Dina Mironovna Pronicheva did. She was an actress in the Kiev Puppet Theater and mother of two children, with a set of elderly, feeble parents. Dina's husband was a Russian. Her surname was Russian, and she did not look at all Jewish.

Dina's family decided that she would see her parents to the train, return to her husband and children, and hope for the best... At six in the morning, the crowds were already huge. They moved in a slow, droning procession, and reached the cemetery only in the afternoon. German soldiers and Ukrainian police in black uniforms directed traffic.

As they approached the cemetery, crowding and cursing intensified. Everything became completely incomprehensible. Dina left her parents at the cemetery gates and went on ahead to see what was happening. Like many others, she still thought there was a train up ahead. She heard firing nearby, assuming that individuals who did not obey orders were being frightened into obedience.

But Dina became more and more alarmed. She pushed through the crowd and finally saw that those ahead of her were ordered to put down their bundles. Clothing, knapsacks, and suitcases were heaped on the left, and all food on the right.

The Germans then let the people through in groups of 10. They sent a group – waited a moment – counted anew – and let the next group pass – and so on, again and again.

The bewildered Jews argued. “Don’t you see? Our things will go by baggage car. We will sort them out at our destination.”

“How will we sort them out there, with so many things? We will simply have to divide them evenly among us.”

Dina’s flesh crawled. There was nothing like a station or a railroad in sight. Though she did not know what was happening, her heart told her this was no evacuation. Anything, but not an evacuation.

The bursts of machine gun fire nearby seemed strangest of all. She was still unable to imagine that they could be shooting people. In the first place, there were so many of them. Such things just don’t happen. And anyway – why?

At that moment, Dina felt only brute fear and dizziness, a state beyond compare. She noticed people being stripped of their warm clothes. On impulse she turned back, found her parents and told them what she had seen.

“Daughter, we don’t need your help any longer,” said her father. “Go now.”

But she was trapped. Despite all her pleas, the guards in charge would not let her through.

At this point she finally realized: This was an execution.

Fresh commands were shouted. A crazed, chaotic queue was formed. They stood waiting.

A husky German approached and said, “Come to bed with me and I’ll let you go.”

She eyed him as she would a madman, and he went away.

Finally, it was her group's turn. Talking subsided. They trudged on in silence, flanked by guards. Behind her, Dina heard someone moan:

"Help me, children. I am blind."

She put her arm around the old man and walked on at his side.

"Where could they be taking us, Father?" she asked.

"My child," he answered, "we are going to pay our final debt to God."

"Are we forsaken? Completely forsaken?" she asked.

"We have forsaken Him. He did not forsake us. Child, say with me *Sh'ma Yisroel*."

*Eli, eli lama azavtani?*

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*In fayer, in flamm host du unz gebrent –*

You roasted us in all-consuming fire – but we refuse to go under!

Like our *avos-avoisenu* – our ancestors of old

We shall not give up on You, and shall triumphantly declare:

*Shema Yisroel Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad!*

Hear O' Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!

*Eli, Eli, Lama Azavtani*

Words and music: Jacob Sandler/traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE95WpTS3WI

(Performed by Eli Henig)

The group entered a long, narrow corridor, about five feet wide, with soldiers on both sides standing shoulder to shoulder, sleeves rolled up, armed with rubber truncheons or big sticks, and dogs on leashes.

The soldiers rained blows upon the people running this gauntlet. It was impossible to hide. Furious blows, drawing blood at once, descended on heads, shoulders, backs, from right and left. "*Schnell, schnell*!" shouted the soldiers, laughing heartily, enjoying themselves.

Everyone screamed. Mothers tried to protect their babies. People fell. The dogs were set on them at once. The crowd was pressed forward, treading on the bodies, stamping them into the earth.

The crazed people emerged into a space cordoned off by the troops, littered everywhere with underwear, shoes, and clothing.

Ukrainian police shouted, “Undress! Fast! Faster!" while roughly beating the people with brass knuckles, in drunken viciousness and sadistic frenzy. Those who hesitated were forcibly stripped. The naked were in a paralytic daze, streaked with blood.

Incredibly, a mother somehow found the strength to coo to her child.

Optional Song: A lullaby of your choice

From the side where the naked were being led away, Dina heard her mother call, “Dina! You don’t look like one. Save yourself!”

Dina, summoning all her strength, determinedly turned to a policeman.

“I came to see someone off and by accident I got caught in the crowd. I demand to see the commandant!”

The policeman snatched her purse, checked it, found nothing to contradict her words. He pointed to a hill at the side, where a small group of people sat.

“Wait up there. We will shoot the Jews and let you go.”

The nightmare unfolded before their eyes. Dina said that some of the victims were laughing hysterically. She saw several people turn gray as they undressed and were marched off to be shot behind a high earth wall. Surprisingly, not one person threw himself at the feet of the Germans, begging for mercy.

Mothers clung to their children. Now and then, a German, or a Ukrainian policeman impatiently snatched a child from its mother, strode to the dirt wall, swung it in the air and hurled it over the top like a log of wood. He couldn’t wait for the child to go with the mother.

It began to grow dark. Suddenly an open car drove up, carrying a tall, elegant-looking officer who was obviously in command.

“Who are these?” he asked a Ukrainian policeman. There were close to 50 people on the hill now.

The policeman replied, “These are our people. We weren’t sure whether to release them.”

The officer raged, “Shoot them! Shoot them right away! If just one of them gets away and spreads the story, not a single Jew will show up tomorrow!”

“Get going! Move! Get up!” shouted the policeman. The people staggered to their feet as if they were drunk. Perhaps because it was late, perhaps because they were considered non-Jews, nothing was done to undress them. They were led directly to the other side of the dirt wall, in groups of 10.

Dina was in the second group. It was a ravine, a quarry, steep walls rising from both sides. On one wall a ledge was cut, so narrow that as the victims were led onto it, they instinctively leaned against the wall so as not to fall down.

Dina glanced down and grew dizzy. The quarry was fearfully deep. Below lay a sea of bloody bodies. She caught sight of machine guns strung out on the opposite side of the ravine, and German soldiers. They had a campfire and seemed to be cooking something.

When the file of victims had occupied the ledge, one of the Germans, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth, moved away from his food by the fire, took his place at a machine gun, and with total indifference began shooting.

Dina felt – rather than saw – the bodies fall as the line of fire rapidly approached. The thought flashed through her mind, “Now I... Now…” Without waiting for the bullet, she hurled herself from the ledge with her hands clenched.

She seemed to fall for an eternity. The ledge was really high. As she hit the bottom, she felt neither the impact nor the pain. Warm blood splashed over her, and blood covered her face. It was as if she had fallen into a bath of blood. She lay with her eyes closed; arms spread out.

There were muffled sounds all around and beneath her. Many of the victims were still alive. The entire mass of bodies was perceptibly stirring, settling deeper and tighter because of the motions of those being buried alive.

She became aware of footsteps, stepping directly on the bodies. The Germans had come down. They were bending over corpses, extracting gold teeth from their mouths, taking things from them and shooting at whatever moved.

Within minutes she heard a voice above: “Come on, shovel away!”

She heard the ringing of shovels and sand began descending on her. She dared not stir at first, even as it dribbled into her mouth. She lay face upward, inhaling sand and choking until, losing control, she began thrashing about in wild horror, ready to be shot rather than buried alive.

Choking, she began to dig her way out of the sand. Luckily, by then it was pitch dark and the men on the edge of the quarry had stopped shoveling, evidently satisfied that the bodies were sufficiently covered with sand. Dina’s eyes were full of sand and the stench was heavy.

Very slowly, cautiously, she moved toward the nearest sand wall. She inched her way up, every second in danger of falling. She crawled on all fours, for lack of strength and in fear of the killers. She had to get out and away. For the sake of her children who were waiting

for her back in the real world. And to tell of this new, bizarre, grotesque world that had suddenly replaced what had been before.

Braving indescribable perils, Dina got away and told her story. The unbelievable, appalling story of Babi Yar, in the beautiful city of Kiev, where the civilized Germans and their local minions murdered a record 38,000 people in just 36 hours – only because they were Jews.

In the course of the next few months, Babi Yar became the slaughter ground of 90,000 people. But not all the Jews of Kiev ended up there. Here is a story recorded by an eyewitness:

A German soldier came over to Ratuyev, an elderly school janitor, ordered him to take a shovel and follow him. They went to the Park of Culture, where another soldier was guarding a Jewish girl. The old man was ordered to dig a pit. When the pit was ready, the girl was shoved into it. She began to scream and tried to climb out. The soldier began to beat her on the head with the shovel and to pile dirt into the pit. But the girl kept getting up, so he beat her on the head again. They filled up the pit at last and stamped on it. The old man thought that the same would be done to him, but they let him go.

Early in 1942, the Einsatzgruppen commander, Paul Blobel, and the Gestapo expert on Church affairs, Albert Hartel, drove together near Kiev. As they approached the ravine, Hartel noticed small explosions which threw up columns of earth. The March thaw was releasing gases from thousands of bodies. “Here my Jews are buried,” boasted Blobel.

The last bizarre episode of Babi Yar began in August 1943. The fortunes of war had turned and the Germans hastened to erase the evidence of their brutality. Slave Brigades were formed for this purpose, housed in a strongly-guarded camp within the ravine. There were

- the diggers, exposing the layers of decomposing, intertwined corpses;

- the hookers, whose job was to rip the corpses apart with hooks and drag them to specially constructed furnaces;

- the gold-seekers, who examined each corpse to remove whatever gold was left by oversight in mouths or on fingers;
- the builders of the furnaces, that were to dispose of 2,000 bodies at a time;
- the stokers, who kept the fires burning, with oil and by stirring them with long pokers;
- the crushers, who were to pulverize any particles that survived the fires; and
- the gardeners, who carried away the human ashes to spread them over the gardens and meadows.

Exactly two years after the first execution at Babi Yar, one group of the Slave Brigades staged a daring, fantastic breakout. Against impossible odds, surrounded by thick barbed wire and machine gun stations, feet shackled with heavy iron chains, with no weapons in hand except for sundry tools, emaciated and starved, 50 of them flung themselves at the brutal German guards.

This was more a gesture of defiance, a singular expression of the will to live, a heroic statement in the face of inhumanity, than an actual aspiration to escape. Yet some did escape, and eventually Vladimir Davydov and others told the story.

In the distance, from across the Dnieper, came the muffled sound of cannons. The great Russian offensive was on, and the Germans were in full retreat. The Red Army was on the march, and the battle for Kiev had begun. By early November 1943, a badly-damaged Kiev was finally freed.

Kiev was liberated – and with it, Babi Yar, the once beautiful ravine with its colorful landscape, where families enjoyed holiday picnics, and children gleefully rode around in search of little adventures. That once beautiful ravine that monsters turned into a valley of carnage, where the flowers bloom red from Jewish blood, and the land yields a rich abundance of potato crops fertilized by Jewish ashes… Babi Yar.

In March 1966, the first memorial plaques were erected at Babi Yar, thanks to poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko, but none mentioned that the victims were Jews. Jews did not count.

The horrendous thing about Babi Yar, Ponar, Fort Nine, and other places of murder was that innocent people – women, children, infants, the elderly and the blind – were led to slaughter solely because they were Jews.

The magnificent thing about Babi Yar was that, surrounded by the stench of death, utterly humiliated, cruelly beaten, stripped of their clothing, the Jews were not stripped of their dignity. They had no weapons to resist with, except their pride. They had nothing to fling in the face of their foes, except their fierce will to live. And although brought up in a land where faith and trust were not fostered, they seemed to possess the faith, the hope, and the trust ingrained in the very fiber of their being that the Jewish People would endure, would survive, and would ultimately triumph over all its enemies. Indeed, 1,000 years hence, our marching steps through history will yet thunder: "We Survive! We Are Here! *Anachnu Po!*"

We Survive

Oh, never say that you have reached the very end,
Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend,
Because the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: We Survive!

From the land of palm trees to the land of distant snow,
We are here, with our pain, with our woe,
And wherever our blood was shed in pain,
Our fighting spirits will resurrect again.

Tomorrow's sun will gladden our today,
The past with bitter foe shall pass away.
But should the sun at dawn delay his coming,
Then let this clarion ring out the future dawning.

Not lead, but blood, inscribed this song we sing,
It's not a caroling of birds upon the wing.
But 'twas a people midst the crashing fires of hell
That sang this song, and fought courageous 'til it fell.

So never say that you have reached the very end,
Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend,
Because the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: We Survive!

*Jewish Partisans' Song* (Hebrew or Yiddish):

Words and music: Hirsch Glick

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc

(Performed by Paul Robeson)

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# A Fire Offering unto the Lord:
# The Destruction of Mielitz, Poland

*With hindsight, what happened in this town at the beginning of the war was a terrible omen of doom for the Jews of Europe.*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

The following is based on the records from the original archives of the town of Mielitz, Poland. The quotes in Yiddish are all original, and all names are authentic.

Upon entering Mielitz in September 1939, the German occupying forces at first behaved with aloof courtesy toward the Jewish population of the town. Wild, unbelievable rumors of German cruelty had reached the Jewish community from far and wide. Fearing repercussions at the hands of the Germans, the Jews kept their communal institutions, such as the synagogue, slaughterhouse, and *mikve* (ritual bath), closed. In light of their personal experience with the Germans so far, the Mielitzer Jews were baffled and perplexed. The devil, evidently, was not nearly as bad as had been rumored.

In any case, in the minds of the Mielitzer Jews, one had no need to question God's unfathomable ways. One merely needed to be thankful for God's grace. And how better to demonstrate gratitude than to dedicate oneself to the observance of *Rosh Hashana*, the New Year, due to begin the next day, with all possible ardor. On such a holy occasion, with nothing standing in the way of a full festive celebration of the sacred day, "One dare not neglect the observance of *Yiddishkeit*" *(Tor men nit dos Yiddishkeit lozn hefker).*

In honor of *Rosh Hashone*, "There has to be a hot *mikve*" *("Darf men machn a heise mikve").* "Let the Jews ritually bathe" *("Un zolen yiden zich toivlen").* "As a reward,

the Holy One Blessed Be He, will ensure peace on Israel, and the evil ones will have no power to do us harm." *("In dem zchus, vet Hakodosh Boruch Hu helfn az es vet zein sholem al Yisroel, un di reshoim vern nisht hobn kein shlite undz shlechts zu ton.")*

The Rebbe could find nothing wrong with the reasoning of the balebatim, the community leaders. "Certainly so. We must continue to observe Yiddishkeit, which has been lately so neglected." *("Avade azoi. M'darf veiter haltn dos Yiddishkeit, vos iz gevorn beshefel hamatzav.")*

"But why only the *mikve*?" spoke up Itche Nosn, the *gabbai* (beadle) of the synagogue. "In honor of *Yom Tov* (the holiday), shouldn't we have a slice of meat?"

*"Avade azoi."* "Certainly so," determined the *Red Dayon*, who was in the midst of unraveling a Talmudic passage with two other scholars.

Thereupon the Rebbe summoned the *shochtim* (butchers), Reb Yoshe Ber and Reb Chayml Kurz, and ordered them to prepare to slaughter chickens for the festive Rosh Hashana meal. The *shamess* (caretaker) proceeded to the mikve-keeper to make sure that he would heat the water for the holiday – as the records of the Jewish community read: "The gabbai now made sure that the whole Jewish community was duly informed about the availability of meat and of the *mikve*, so as to properly glorify God's Holy Name." *("Er zol lema'an Hashem machen a heisse mikveh. Dernoch hot der gabai a klap gegebn in shulchn un machriz un moidia geven farn oilem.")*

The leaders now began discussing some crucial questions of Jewish observance in time of war, and how to accommodate the numerous refugee arrivals to their community. Among the fugitives was the elderly, highly respected Reb Naftoli Melech Wassershtrum from Yastshomavke, who fled his town with a *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) in his arms. It was decided to honor him with leading the Rosh Hashana prayers the next morning.

Even as the rabbis debated issues of *halacha* (Jewish religious law) and organized the prayers, smoke began rising from the *mikve* chimney as its water was being heated, and the sounds of women taking their chickens to the slaughterhouse filled the streets.

*Rosh Hashana* was in the air, with its heartfelt supplications for forgiveness, its heartrending prayer for a safe tomorrow amid the vicissitudes of war, and its warm reaffirmation of the bond between God and His Chosen People.

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While the Jewish community thus made preparations to celebrate on the morning preceding Rosh Hashana, the mayor and his city council treated the German officers to a banquet at City Hall, the likes of which Mielitz had not seen since Roman times. They gorged themselves on food, and there was no end to hard drinks as glasses clinked to boastful calls of *"Deutschland über alles!"* and *"Heil Hitler!"*

From one of the City Hall windows, Mayor Gauleiter Zimmerman happened to glance outside. He noticed smoke rising from the chimney of the *mikve*. Realizing what it meant, he angrily called to his deputy, “Look what the Jews are doing!”

The deputy, who had not stopped drinking for a moment, became enraged*. “Zum toivl!"* "To the devil! That is the Jewish *mikve*!”

“We need to do something with those dirty Jews! They have to know that they are under German rule now!” called out one of the officers.

After a short-whispered consultation, they broke out into satanic laughter. Unbeknownst to the Jews, the German trap was laid.

Early that afternoon, when the *shochtim* were almost done, and use of the *mikve* was at its peak, a large contingent of German soldiers appeared with loaded rifles and machine guns in hand. They surrounded the *mikve* and the slaughterhouse and cordoned off the square that stretched between the two, so that no one could get in or out any more. They entered the *mikve*, drove everyone out, and ordered them into rows in the square. Next, the people in the slaughterhouse were ordered into the formation. The refugee, Reb Naftoli Melech, with the Sefer Torah in his hands, who was to lead the *Rosh Hashana* prayers the next morning, was in the trapped group and stood in the first row.

“What kind of amusement do the Germans derive from this?” the Jews wondered with increasing alarm. Suddenly a group of German officers arrived, swastikas on their arms, drawn revolvers in hand. *“Hende hodh!”* – "Hands up!" came the sharp, raspy command.

Stricken with fear, the Jews raised their hands – with the exception of Reb Naftoli, who did not know what to do with the Sefer Torah in his arms. All German eyes focused on the old man with the long gray beard and *payess* (sidecurls) who dared to disobey a German order. But Reb Naftoli just hugged the Torah that much tighter to himself. Within seconds, however, he lit on an idea. He quickly snatched his holiday *gartl* – a white silk cord – out of his pocket and tied it tightly several times around his body and the *Sefer Torah*. The Torah secure, he raised his hands.

Malevolent smiles crossed German faces at the accomplishment of the old man. In the meantime, Poles began gathering around the square to enjoy the ugly play of the Germans with the Jews. “Good for them; those *zsides* (dirty Jews) − they have it coming!”

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In Jewish homes throughout the town, no one had the faintest notion of the drama that was unfolding in the square. True, by this hour in the afternoon on Rosh Hashana Eve, the shochet, Reb Yoshe, would normally be home. His wife and daughters, busy in the kitchen with last-minute preparations for the holiday, attributed his absence to the many chickens brought by families to celebrate the holiday.

His father-in-law, Reb Shimen Dayen, was preoccupied with the Kabbalistic text of the Zohar, trying to make sense of why in a world where God created every detail to improve man’s lot – especially the lot of his *Mamleches Koihanim vegoy kodosh,* the kingdom of priests and the holy people – a new, big war is brought on man and potential danger on His people. Or perhaps this isn’t God’s doing? Perhaps, all of this is, Heaven-forbid, Satan's doing? *("Un efsher iz dos, nisht gedacht, ma’ase szotn?")*

Reb Yoshe’s son-in-law, Aaron Weinrib, who had narrowly escaped the clutches of the advancing Wehrmacht in Tarnov, was the first to react with disquiet and concern. It is, after all, *Erev Yontif*. By now Reb Yoshe should be here! Where is that God-fearing, pious *shoichet*? At this late hour, the strains of the solemn, festive, and joyous opening *Borchu*

prayer already reverberate in the air and in Jewish hearts. Aaron kept looking impatiently from the advancing clock to the door, and back. Finally, he decided to head for the slaughterhouse. As soon as he reached the square, however, he was detected by a German soldier and placed in line with the rest of the Jews, hands up.

The bewildered Jews stood there with hands raised for what seemed an interminably long time. Then one of the German officers stepped forward and, brandishing his revolver at them, shouted, “Empty your pockets! Now!”

With trembling hands, the Jews began removing handkerchiefs, cigarette lighters, snuff-tobacco boxes, and other articles from their pockets.

As old Naftole Melech, with the Torah tied to him, came upon the shofar (ritual ram's horn) in his inner pocket, he hesitated. Hand it over… or not? Quickly he decided not to hand it over. Tomorrow this shofar would summon God’s salvation for His people. How could he expose it now to the eyes of the arrogant and faithless? No, he would not allow its effect to be weakened with their smirks!

Reb Chayml, the shochet, had a similar dilemma: Relinquish the ritual knife, the *chalef,* or hold on to it? He felt as if all German eyes were focusing on him. If he doesn’t hand over the knife, all the Jews in the square might be punished because of him. Reluctantly, he removed the knife from his pocket, and it fell to the ground with a clank.

Like an infuriated wild beast, the leading German officer threw himself at the knife and, brandishing it in the air, shrieked, “I will slaughter you like calves! I will shoot you like dogs! Dirty Jewish vermin!" And he shouted to his soldiers: “Arms, ready!”

The click of steel. The ring of metal. No other sound in the air. An inaudible, but visible tremor went through the Jewish ranks, as – terrified – they stared into the barrels of hungry rifles and machine guns.

On the periphery, the mob of *goyim* had grown thicker, and they were rubbing their hands in delirious satisfaction. Their only reaction was an occasional triumphant shout: *“Smert zsidom!”* − "Death to the Jews!" in Polish, and then in German: *“Alle dershiesn!”* − "Shoot them all!"

Pale, scared, hands high, Aaron Weinrib, the *shoichet* Reb Yoshe's son-in-law, took a step forward from the ranks. He turned to the German commandant:

"Herr Hauptmann, these people are innocent! They did not do anyone any harm!"

He wanted to continue, but the officer cut him off:

*"Jawohl, jawohl!* We know you already, dirty Jews!... Three steps forward!"

Aaron turned even paler and took a few tentative steps forward. Suddenly a revolver barked. Blood running down his face, he fell to the ground, mortally wounded.

A painful, wailing moan rose from the terror-stricken, trembling Jewish ranks. Cold sweat covered everyone. A numb fear and ache settled in their bones. A wisp of the VIDUI prayer of the dying somehow carried among the rows. A quiet, desperate, aching murmur: *Min hametzar karati Yah!* Out of the depths do I call to you, O God! *ANENI!* Answer! Please − answer, now! Can't You see how badly we need You? *ANENI!*

In a brutal, loud, terrorizing voice, came the command*: "Juden Vagabundn!* Jews − Move it! On the run – into the slaughterhouse. NOW!"

Dozens of German guns began pressing against the Jews, beating them on all sides, hitting them on their heads, using bayonets, driving them relentlessly toward the doors. The Germans created a stampede, and added enthusiastic animal-like sounds, drunk on the smell of blood.

But now the victims didn't need any encouragement. They raced toward the slaughterhouse in a frenzy. Perhaps behind its walls God would provide some protection to His driven people against the insanity of the Germans and the maniacal lust of the onlookers. Perhaps there He would produce a miracle and save them.

The square was now empty, except for the body of Aaron Weinrib and the scattered articles from the Jews' emptied pockets. The German soldiers surrounded the slaughterhouse, their guns at the ready, pointing at the defenseless victims through the open doors and windows.

Old Reb Naftoli Melech suddenly remembered his precious *shofar*, that he was to sound at the *Rosh Hashana* service, secured in his pocket. He quickly untied the *Sefer Torah*, and with the Torah in one hand and the shofar in the other, he called out to the terrified, bludgeoned Jews, *"Yidden! Lomir nisht shweign!* Jews, let us not be silent! Let us pray to God! He will surely help!"

*"Ashrei ha'ish asher lo halach be'atzat reshaim.* Blessed be the man who does not walk in the council of the wicked…"

But the first stanza of *Tehilim* (Psalms), was interrupted by the henchman's cry: "Fire!" A salvo of machine guns, rifles, and revolvers filled the wild air. The Jews standing closest to the doors and windows buckled like felled trees, blood streaming from open wounds.

From an unfathomable source, from 1,000 throats came the cry *"Sh'ma Yisroel!"* Hands were raised to heaven from all sides in the fervent prayer of shattered hearts: *"Sh'ma kolenu, Gott, Eli, Eli, hob rachmones!"* "Hear us, dear God, have mercy!"

Then the sound of the *shofar* filled the room, filled space, filled every crevice, as Reb Naftoli made a desperate attempt to reach the heavens on *Erev Rosh Hashone*, to split the heavenly gates open to ever-so-humble and desperate Jewish prayers. *"Eli, Eli!"* – "My God, my God!"

As if the German soldiers were taken aback by the sound of the *shofar*, by the cries of despair, or by the calls of *Sh'ma Yisroel* – the shooting stopped. Perhaps it was just the first time that they shot innocent, defenseless civilians, and some vestige of conscience made them hesitate.

For what felt like an eternity, all that seemed to be audible within the walls of the slaughterhouse were the tear-filled, bitter, choking moans of Eliezer Gross's grandchildren: *"Mameh, oy, Mameh!"* Even as they breathed their last, and one by one their innocent souls took leave of this puzzling, horrific place, not knowing why, the children cried out for their mothers.

And then, once again, through the doors and windows came a second salvo of fire. Old Reb Naftoli was somehow still standing, *Sefer Torah* in hand, *shofar* glued to his lips, blood dripping down his pale face and white long beard, glazed eyes turned heavenward in his last prayer.

Until no one stood anymore, the only sounds -- the moans of the wounded and dying. Yet Satan still could not rest. The Germans and their cohorts poured gasoline over the walls of the building and set it on fire, burning the dead and the wounded in a modern Teutonic sacrificial rite.

Thus *Rosh Hashana* 1939 dawned upon the holy congregation of Mielitz.

A fire offering unto the Lord.

*Eli, Eli, Lama Azavtani*

Words and music: Jacob Sandler/traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE95WpTS3WI

(Performed by Eli Henig)

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Mielitz was a small shtetl in Poland. By the end of 1939, in the course of four months, 250,000 Jews died in Nazi-occupied Poland by torture, shooting, starvation, or disease… about 90 per hour around the grinding clock. Without comprehension. Not knowing why they had to die. Concentration and extermination camps, like Treblinka, Sobibor, Auschwitz, and Majdanek were not yet on the Nazi drawing boards. Babi Yar and Ponar were still light years away.

But it is precisely those first few weeks and months of the War – often neglected, because they are overshadowed by the monster-machine of extermination that developed in the years to come – that have a drama all their own. We can capture in them a reflection of the Jewish spirit in the shtetl, the last brilliant glow as it was about to be shattered and plunged into primordial darkness. We were "In the beginning," − when Satan began re-creating heaven and earth…

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Three years after the guns were silenced in Europe and the skeletons of our people emerged from the valley of death, we re-established an independent state in our ancient Homeland. Inspired by our millions of unsung and anonymous heroes, we accomplished the impossible dream. We closed a gap of 1,800 years; we bridged a span of 1,000 km; we spanned vast seas as if they were prairies. No power on earth could hold us back. No might in the high heavens could restrain us. Not anymore.

Although all these years after the Shoah, anti-Semitism is bourgeoning once again the world over, and although our foes are steadfastly holding on to their determination to wipe us off the face of the globe, the Jewish People is equally steadfast in its determination to carry on. We did it in a state of homelessness, with both hands tied behind our backs. We will do it all the more so today, when we are at home, free, in our own sovereign State.

The Eternal Jewish People and the Eternal Jewish Land are reunited once and for all, never to be parted again. We have returned home, to Zion and Jerusalem. Through floods of blood and fires of hell, we came home, to Medinat Yisrael, and we will never, ever, allow another Shoah to be perpetrated.

We shall remain tuned to the sounds of the past, but our hearts will beat to the drums of the future with hope and faith, with pride and confidence.

*ANACHNU PO* – We are here!

*LO NAZUZ MIPO* – We will not move from here!

*L'NETZACH NETZACHIM* – Forever and ever!

*AM YISRAEL CHAI!* – The People of Israel will live!

*Jewish Partisans' Song* (Hebrew or Yiddish):

Words and music: Hirsch Glick

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc

(Performed by Paul Robeson)

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# Out of the Ghetto: The Resistance of the Jews in Minsk

*Heroism of leaders and children, face-to-face with terror*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

Without warning, the German attack was unleashed along the entire Russian frontier on June 22, 1941. Four days later, Minsk was occupied by the *Wehrmacht*, immediately followed by the *Einsatzgruppen*, whose main purpose was to exterminate the Jews. Before their arrival, Jews who had attempted to escape the city had done so not for fear of the Germans, but because of the bombardments.

The Jews had no forewarning of Nazi intent. No negative reports about Nazi Germany were released for almost two years in Soviet Russia. Stalin had remained faithful to his Friendship and Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler dating from August 1939. The wild rumors that occasionally reached Minsk about brutal German treatment of Jews were considered precisely that − wild rumors with not an ounce of credence attached to them. As a matter of fact, the elder generation remembered German occupation during World War I with nostalgia, and expected a recurrence of a warm and cordial relationship. But it did not take long for these illusions to be devastatingly shattered.

Three weeks after the German occupation came the order establishing the Minsk Ghetto. Under penalty of death, the Jews were given five days to move into the designated area. Wearing the yellow patch became compulsory. An enormous levy in gold was imposed on the Jewish population, ostensibly to defray the expenses incurred in the transfer of non-Jews from one district to another.

In the initial phase of the ghetto organization, all intellectuals were ordered to report. Writes an eyewitness:

“Many came who did not belong to that group, naïvely believing that intellectuals, whom we held in such great esteem, would be equally respected by the Nazis. Hundreds − no, thousands − of the most cultured and educated were led out to the woods and, in a matter of minutes, the clatter of machine guns announced to the people what intellectuals, and especially Jews, could expect from the Nazis.”

This was the first *aktion* (slaughter) organized by the German superman, the scion of Goethe and Schiller, of Kant and Hegel, of Beethoven and Johann Sebastian Bach.

Unceremoniously, the Germans got hold of a Jew by the name of Elihu Mushkin and appointed him the head of the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council), responsible henceforth for the orderly administration of the ghetto. He was an unknown entity to everyone. What was important to the Germans was that he spoke German and could transmit their orders.

An ominous quiet settled over the ghetto. Labor battalions were organized to offer the much-needed slave-power for the Wehrmacht’s supply depot, warehouses, factories, and workshops. This was the sole reason for the ghetto’s survival − as the victorious German army continued its relentless drive eastward. Amid incredible overcrowding, the ghetto subsisted on starvation rations. A typhus epidemic broke out, a calamity that had to be kept secret at all costs from the ever-watchful eyes of the Germans, for they would have liquidated the ghetto at once.

Suddenly, early in November 1941, two ghetto streets were sealed off by the Germans. In one day, 12,000 Jews were brutally loaded onto trucks and driven to Tutshinka, three miles away. There, gaping pits were ready and waiting...

As evening descended, the stunned ghetto was like a ghost town. Not a soul in the streets, as if all 100,000 residents had perished that day. Nothing moved. Not a whisper, not a rustle, not a ray of light. Only isolated shots by the German and Ukrainian guards violated the stillness of death.

Yet in a hiding place, Nahum Friedman rose to his feet and turned to the young people assembled there:

“I am not a speaker, nor are words of any avail now. We must not sit shiva (mourn), for sitting around is not in order. We must instead act. We must quench our burning spirits and see our enemy trodden under our feet.”

*Es hot uns dos leben gerufen*

*Dos leben fun zunige teg*

*Tzu eins, tzvei, drei…*

When summoned to life we were ready
in days that were sunny and gay,
and all that were there
seemed to walk as on air
by themselves, as they went on their way.
To “1, 2, 3,” − “1, 2, 3,”
to work while their spirits were high.
Every step has its sound
on the echoing ground
when you know where you're going and why!

*Du veist vo du geist un farvos!*

*Tzu Eins, Tzvei, Drei*

Words: Leyb Rozenthal (after Hans Eisler); Music: traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMNq_NigT74

(Performed by Henry Sapoznik)

Resistance had begun to organize in the ghetto by the end of August, in response to the intolerable living conditions. The slaughter of 12,000 Jews gave it added incentive.

To make resistance feasible, it was important to establish links with the outside world: to get information, smuggle in food, medicine, and kindling wood for cooking and heating, and to establish contact with the Russian underground in Christian Minsk and with partisan units in the forest. It was equally important to build hiding places within the ghetto, to devise escape routes, to procure arms, to work out an organizational structure of command for the transmission of orders. But above all, it was necessary to determine the objectives of resistance.

From the outset, it was decided that the goal of resistance must be to get as many Jews as possible out to the forest where they could join partisan units. The motto of the fledgling resistance movement became “Out of the ghetto!” Overt acts of resistance inside the ghetto itself were suicidal and futile: they would save no one and would barely inflict a scratch on the enemy. True, it would have allowed meeting death with greater dignity, but priority was given to survival.

The choice thus fell on promoting escape from the ghetto, and on arming the escapees for resistance in the forest. This decision had crucial implications. The ghetto resistance relegated itself to holding action. Hiding places known as *“malinas”* were feverishly constructed. An underground press began functioning to provide information and false papers. Organizational channels were established. Resistance within the confines of the ghetto was not entirely discouraged, but arms could not be consigned for that purpose. Every rifle, pistol, and grenade were desperately needed to facilitate breakouts, to arm the groups in the forests, to allow for revenge, to guarantee continuity, to assure survival.

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| *Mir leben eybig* | − | We shall continue to endure |
| *Es brent di velt* | − | Though the world be on fire and we be left penniless. |
| | | Despite our foes who crave our destruction |
| *Mir leben eybig!* | − | We are eternal! |
| *Mir zaynen do!* | − | We will endure! |

*Mir Leben Eybig*

Words: Leyb Rozental; Music: traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZnvx3sRkOg

(Performed by Louisa Lyne & *di Yiddishe Kapelye*)

The resistance movement in the Minsk Ghetto was greatly helped by the cooperation of the *Judenrat*. Elihu Mushkin, risking his life, supplied information and assistance. Indeed, he was apprehended by the Nazi hounds when he attempted to bribe a German officer in order to free a member of the resistance from prison. He was summarily shot.

Mushkin's death was a serious blow to rescue operations. Although the new head of the *Judenrat*, Moshe Yoffe, was also inclined to assist the resistance movement, it became evident that the suspicion of the Nazis had been aroused and they planted spies within the *Judenrat*. Activities had to be carried on henceforth with extreme caution. This slowed the process of rescue at a time when life was measured in units of hours and often minutes.

Scarcely two weeks passed since the massacre of early November. With the same suddenness, the Nazis surrounded and penetrated the ghetto once more. The extermination vans began cruising between the ghetto and Tutshinka again. The elderly and the ill were murdered on the spot. Writes an eyewitness:

“Children’s blood glowed red in the sun against a background of freshly fallen snow.”

On Zamkov Street, a mother slipped while cradling a baby in her arms and her other child held on to her skirt. She shouted, “Shoot me here, on the spot. What’s the use of dragging us from one place to another!?”

She was promptly obliged. Mother, child, and infant. In this *aktion* of mid-November 1941, 5,000 Jews were killed.

The ghetto agonized, but its spirit was not broken. The German Satan saw − to his amazement − that although the Jew be tortured and murdered, burned and gassed, he was not defeated. This infuriated the Nazis no end. To eradicate the Jew physically, but to leave his spirit unbroken, caused them immense frustration. They therefore used all their ingenuity to devise gruesome and diabolical methods to break the spirit of that proud Jewish creature.

With great cunning, they picked the holiday of *Purim* − a holiday that for Jews has held a ray of hope for unexpected salvation under dire threat. The *Judenrat* received orders that on Purim Eve, March 2, 1942, 5,000 Jews not engaged in German enterprises were to be ready for transfer to labor camps.

The resistance movement ordered that on the appointed day, all Jews join available work brigades that would allow them out of the ghetto, or take all possible steps for self-protection and for hiding.

Purim was approaching. Only scant preparations were made to welcome the festival. How could one make hamantaschen cookies surrounded by evil Hamans? How can one wear a festive Purim mask when the whole world hides behind masks? How can one arrange a comical Purim shpiel (skit) when one's real life becomes a tragic game, a toy in the cruel hands of murderers?

And yet, there was something of the spirit of *Purim*, some spark, some dim light, a ray of hope that this time, too, as in the days of Esther and Mordechai, a miracle would happen. That this time, too, Jews would awaken from a nightmare. That this time, too, the gallows and the pits, the fires and the gas chambers would serve the enemy who prepared them for the innocent, just as the gallows served Haman and not his intended victim, Mordechai.

Thus, hope did not die in the Minsk Ghetto as *Purim* approached. Eight grueling months under Nazi rule did not blot out yearning for a miracle, despite the earnest attempts of the Nazis to dehumanize the Jews completely.

Eyewitness Hersh Smoliar describes events:

“On that bloody March 2nd, everything proceeded in accordance with usual German precision. Large labor battalions departed for work as usual. Soon after, officials of the Gestapo arrived with their demand for the 5,000 people, urging haste 'because the trains were ready and waiting.' When the *Judenrat* declined the request, the Germans fell upon the officials in a rage and dispatched the militia to gather up the people.

“Furious and frustrated, the Gestapo invaded the ghetto. They rained bullets on all sides, but did not succeed in rounding up many victims. They surrounded a nursery, beat the children, and then forced them into a column headed by the supervisor Fleisher and Dr. Chernis, who carried the youngest in their arms. Near 35 Ratomsky Street, the murderers began throwing the children into a sand pit for live burial.

“The people in hiding shuddered at the horrible shrieks that were heard throughout the ghetto. Soon the chief executioner of White Russia, the Gauleiter Wilhelm Kube, arrived on the scene to throw candy to the children being buried alive.”

Another eyewitness, Yaakov Grinstein, tells the following ghastly tale:

“The Jewish police chief, Blumenstock, led me and other men into a *malina.* We left the women and children at the *Judenrat* building, thinking they would be safest there. By noon, the Gestapo had not succeeded in its mission, since all men had disappeared. The murderers now began an orgy of mass slaughter. Whoever was in the street or in the house was shot. Streets and houses were strewn with corpses. Then they turned on the Jews in the *Judenrat* building. Police Chief Blumenstock was shot in cold blood. People began escaping, and the Gestapo opened machine gun fire at the fleeing crowd. As night began to fall, they set several houses adjacent to the *Judenrat* ablaze and withdrew from the ghetto.”

Grinstein continues:

“At seven in the evening, the men emerged from the *malina* and were shocked by the sight that met their unbelieving eyes: torsos halved, skulls crushed, faces smashed beyond recognition, bodies mangled. I found my wife in a heap of corpses as she was frantically searching for our child. We turned over hundreds of little children’s bodies, searching their faces. We desperately wished to find and recognize our little daughter.”

No illusions remained after that bloody Purim of March 2, 1942: Everybody in the ghetto was condemned to die, and it was only a question of how quickly the deathly grinder would reach them. The Jewish resistance movement intensified efforts to get Jews out of the ghetto, now drenched in blood and fire.

It became clear that coordination with the general Russian resistance and dependence on their guides, to lead the way to the partisan units and to family camps in the forests, greatly impeded the escape process. The clock was ticking.

It was decided to establish Jewish partisan units based on manpower supplied by the Minsk Ghetto, no matter how great the risk of falling into enemy hands due to lack of experience, lack of knowledge of the topography, and lack of weapons and other supplies. The risk was particularly great because Russian partisan units were often saturated with anti-Jewish hatred, and Jews who finally managed to make it to the forest would often find themselves caught in a crossfire between the Germans chasing them and the Russians denying them even temporary shelter in their camps.

In this heroic chapter of the Minsk Ghetto, its children aged 10-14 played a particularly crucial role. They became more than runners, the connecting links, and smugglers of food and other essential supplies. They learned the escape routes. Hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of adults owed them their lives. They displayed stunning courage, mature responsibility, and limitless Jewish loyalty.

Under duress and the impact of the Shoah, their soft hands quickly learned how to grasp a gun and use it in self-defense and the defense of their comrades. How, while still so young, they managed to accumulate such vast experience, wisdom, and understanding of life, remains a mystery. And where they garnered the strength and willpower to withstand the excruciating pain of torture when some of them fell into the hands of the enemy − who wanted so badly to extract information from them − also remains a mystery.

Twelve-year-old Bunia Hammer knew every trail and bush. In the darkness of the night, he could find his way from the ghetto to the camps in the forest. Once he led a group of armed people, but barely were they out of the ghetto when they heard volleys of shots from a distance. Panic-stricken, they began dropping their guns and fleeing back to the ghetto. Bunia rushed to block their way with his own little body and whispered fiercely, “Aren’t you ashamed? What are you doing? Tomorrow the whole ghetto may be slaughtered because of you!” He did not succeed in stopping them. When he remained alone, he collected the guns and carried them back to the bunker. Nevertheless, the following night he led the group out of the ghetto to safety. He made the trip more than 10 times, until he fell fighting in an encounter with the enemy.

Eleven-year-old Sima Peterson returned to the ghetto for a mission. The Gestapo learned of her arrival, and in the attempt to capture her, they murdered her mother and two young brothers while she hid with a gun in her hands. She might have killed the murderers, but as a disciplined partisan she had to carry out her orders to conduct people out of the ghetto into the forest.

Twelve-year-old Pradek fell with gun in hand, fighting the Germans, after having freed hundreds of ghetto inmates. Little David Kliansky made 12 trips to the forest and back, each time taking 25 people. Tonitschka Gimpel, Rachele Frikler, Ruzshicska Rubentshik and others were heroes in the struggle to defy the enemy and guarantee the survival of a remnant... Just children, Jewish children of the Minsk Ghetto.

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|---|---|
| *Frimorgen*… | In the early hours every morning, |
| | People gather at the gate |
| *A plats a royshender* | A busy, bustling place where |
| *Arbaiter toyznter* | Thousands of workers gather to march out… |
| | Suddenly, an enterprising woman cries out: |
| *Kupi!* | Buy! |
| *Koift ghetto begelech* | Please buy a ghetto *beygele* for just a mark |
| | So my only *Meydele* may survive. You see: |
| *Meyn Tateh and Mamele* | My Dad and Mom |
| *Meyn bruder Zhamele* | My brother Zhamele |
| *Meyn kind Nechamele* | My child Nechamele |
| *Zaynen nito* | They are no more. |

*Di broyt-farkoyferin* – The Woman Bread Vendor

Consider any sad song, perhaps: Tears in Heaven -- Eric Clapton

www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxPj3GAYYZ0

Because of frequent raids, women going to work were afraid to leave their little ones in the ghetto. They would hide the children in sacks and carry them to work on their backs – as if a bundle of their belongings. The Germans soon discovered this and, to keep themselves amused, would playfully twist the sacks on the women's backs until the children were choked to death.

Every Sunday morning the ghetto residents had to report for Appell (roll call) at Jubilee Square. Each Appell had its musical interlude in which ghetto artists would perform Jewish songs. Inevitably, Gorelik would sing songs of sweet yearning, bitter longing for home, for *tateh* and *mameh*, festivals and holidays, *Kol Nidre*, childhood dreams. One of the favorites that brought audible waves of sighs and tears (*ziftzn und trern*) to the otherwise stolid, silent, proud and defiant people, was *A Brivele Der Mamen* (A Letter for Mom).

*Mayn kind, mayn treyst,*
*Du forst avek.*
You are leaving, my child, for distant lands
How I shall miss you, my precious one.
But when you reach your destination
Do not forget your Mother.
Each week write *A Brivele der Mamen*
A short letter to your Mother.
This will be her consolation.
It will ease her pain, her heavy heart
And relieve her feeling of utter desolation.

*A Brivele Der Mamen*

Words & music: Solomon Smulewitz

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUnEiqM0oKY

(Performed by The Barry Sisters)

A non-Jewish woman relates:

“The cruelest slaughter in the history of the ghetto began July 28, 1942. By noon the Nazis had herded thousands of Jews together in Jubilee Square. They forced the head of the *Judenrat*, the composer Moshe Yoffe, to talk to the people. He managed to calm down those assembled and promised them that this time the Germans would not inflict evil on them.

“Yoffe sensed that the Germans were deceiving him, but he still held on to a shred of hope that perhaps many of the group could be saved by procrastination and good behavior. However, even as he was talking, he noticed the appearance of gas vans in the corner of the square. Suddenly he lifted a clenched fist to the sky and started shouting, ‘*Chaverim*, I misled you. I deceived you. They plan to kill us all, those cursed Germans!’

“A shout escaped from thousands of lips. The crowd started waving, then broke and burst out running in all directions. Armored trucks opened fire with all their guns. Yoffe was cruelly butchered right there on the spot. Hundreds were killed and the rest were forced to line up in columns.

“Children were separated from their elders and compelled to get down onto their knees with their hands up. They were incapable of holding on to that position for long and eventually began lowering their weakened arms. The beasts were only waiting for that. They grabbed the children, smashed their heads against the pavement, and slaughtered others with their knives. The mothers emitted blood-curdling screams. In cold blood, the Nazis beat the shrieking mothers into unconsciousness. An artist, Zorov, attacked the Nazis with his bare fists, but they easily overpowered him and threw him into a gas van.

“The massacre lasted for four days. On the fourth day, the Nazis brought bloodhounds to search every house for anyone left alive. After a four-day absence, the labor columns returned that evening to the ghetto. Quietly, as in mourning, people entered their homes. Soon their sobs resounded through the streets, and gradually grew into one continuous wail. For the first time, the ghetto people did not conceal their grief and pain. Curses flew from lips tightly shut until then, because those who returned were left completely alone in the world.”

After the bloodbath, 9,000 Jews remained in the ghetto − 9,000 out of 100,000. Their escape to the forest proceeded ever faster. The Germans were aware of this and, while increasing their surveillance over the ghetto, more than 8,000 Nazi soldiers were dispatched to put the partisan region under siege. The blockade lasted six weeks. Still, groups escaped from the ghetto. A group of more than 30 Jews from Minsk made it to the village of Skirmontovo. The Nazis surrounded the village, rounded up the Jews, locked them in a barn and set fire to it, roasting them alive.

Despite such losses, resistance by Minsk Jews in the forests gained in strength from day to day. Under the capable leadership of Israel Lapidus, Nachum Feldman, Boris Chaimovich, Sholem Zorin, Chaim Alexandrovitch and others − all of them resistance organizers from the Minsk Ghetto − their partisan detachments took action and inflicted heavy casualties upon the Nazis.

Lapidus's men killed 74 Germans in hand-to-hand combat, and took many prisoners and an enormous amount of booty. Using the ghetto as a base, Nachum Goldsack's wrecking crew repeatedly destroyed the main rail lines of the Wehrmacht. On one occasion, they derailed 40 cars loaded with tanks. Another time, they succeeded in killing the chief executioner, Wilhelm Kube. At great pain, untold suffering, humiliation and anguish, exercising superhuman restraint and self-discipline, thousands of Jews from the Minsk Ghetto reaped a rich harvest of vengeance from the diabolical enemy.

When Reuben was about to leave the ghetto with a small detachment of five armed men, he tore the photograph of his six-year-old daughter from the wall and wrote on the back:

"This is my farewell to you, my only one. Never again shall we set eyes upon one another. It is three months now that they took you from me to be murdered. When the murderers took your mother away, you remained my only solace. Now I am alone in the world. What use can such a life be? But I shall live; in fact, I want to live to taste revenge for your mother, for you, my precious one, and for all our dear friends. Farewell, my darling daughter. Your father."

Many of those who managed to escape from the ghetto did not live to see the day of victory. Those who did, gathered at the first opportunity, soon after liberation, and took an oath: "If we ever forget our fallen, tortured, and destroyed, let the very memory of us be erased forever."

The survivors of Minsk will never forget. The Jewish People will never forget. The world should not forget. We hear the voices, rising in crescendo, mightily declaring: "Despite our enemy, despite our woe, 'We are here*, Inz zemmer do!*'"

*Jewish Partisans' Song*; Words and music: Hirsch Glick

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc

(Performed by Paul Robeson)

The most remarkable thing about the Jews of Minsk was that in the darkest, most horrendous days, when their children were butchered like lambs, buried alive, or choked to death on their mothers' backs, they were sustained by an unwavering faith that somehow the Jewish People will survive. Drowning in bitter anguish and steeped in excruciating pain, each of them acted in the belief of a better day to come. *Ani ma'amin b'emuna shleima.* And although the coming of that day may be delayed − and so often may seem an eternity away − nevertheless, we will not despair. We will continue to believe.

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# The Most Effective Resistance to Nazi Terror: Sobibor

*The terrible concentration camp*
*in which members of the author's family were murdered*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

In the beginning of 1942, the Nazis requested that President Jozef Tiso of Slovakia, a close ally of Germany, ship 1,000 young Jews to Germany for slave labor.

The Slovak Government responded quickly but made the shipment of Jews conditional: The forced laborers must take their families with them to Germany − “in the spirit of Christian charity."

Germany accepted the condition, provided that Slovakia would cover the expenses and pay 500 Deutsch Marks (DM) for every family member.

President Tiso, a Catholic Priest, and Sano Mach, the head of the Hlinka Guard, a leading political party in the Slovak government, signed the agreement − with the additional proviso that not one of the Jews deported would be allowed to return to Slovakia.

Thus, Slovakia eagerly paid 45,000,000 DM to rid itself of its Jews and to make sure they would never return to their homes. Slovakia was the only country that paid Germany to take its Jews and dispose of them, despite the fact that its Jews were undoubtedly the most productive element of Slovak society.

The deportation of Jews from Slovakia began in mid-March 1942. Shortly after midnight there was a knock on the doors of Jewish residences in the Slovak town of Lipiany, where my maternal grandparents, some of my relatives, and my best friends lived. The inhabitants were told that they had half an hour to collect their most important clothing and valuables, and three days' worth of food, and report to the yard of the big synagogue for a trip. It was implied that those who failed to do so would be severely punished.

The semi-courteous admonition about a trip changed abruptly in the synagogue's yard. "Jews, you see in the middle of the yard a big blue box. You are hereby ordered to put all your valuables – jewelry and watches – into that box. Next to it is a yellow box where you will place all your cash. Where you are going you will be amply supplied. Anyone caught contravening these orders will be subject to the most severe punishment." Obviously, the villains knew that at the group's destination, the people would be deprived of their valuables. This way they made sure to keep them for themselves.

Some people in the middle of the group, or those close to the fence, hidden from the eyes of the Nazi collaborators, began to dig frantically to hide their valuables in the ground. No doubt they hoped that upon their eventual return, they would reclaim their precious property. They did not know of Slovakian President Tiso's agreement with the Nazis never to allow the Jews to return!

An hour later, the march to the train began. Like the walk to the synagogue, the walk to the train was difficult for the elderly. There were no young people around to help. They had been siphoned off over the previous few weeks to the compulsory slave-labor battalions serving the Germans on the Russian front. Most of the women were busy with their children or grandchildren, and so the elders were left to cope on their own, dragging their valises or sacks, in addition to dragging themselves.

When they finally reached the train – actually, the cattle cars – one of the policemen opened the latch, but they had to haul themselves up onto the wagons by themselves. The wagons were completely empty except for a pail, the use of which became clear as the train rattled towards its unknown destination for three days.

A middle-aged man, an acquaintance of ours, managed to escape the bedlam around the train unnoticed. By the next day he succeeded in crossing the border into Hungary and reached our town, Kosice, the city closest to the border. He met my eldest brother, Franz, by coincidence, and told him the whole story.

That is how we learned how Lipiany, the home of our grandparents, family members and friends, had been made *Judenrein* (free of Jews).

There were eight wagons in the transport, each with 70-100 people. There were no windows. The doors could be opened only from the outside. The train made frequent stops, its human cargo often lurching forward. The travelers had no idea how long they would be locked in that incredibly tight space, and tried to make themselves as comfortable as possible. There wasn't room for everyone to lie down. Some barely managed to sit part of the time. Since they were ordered to bring food for three days, they realized that they might be locked in for three days. Day turned into night, night into day, and then again. Conditions in the cattle cars were horrendous! Some people got sick, and some died. The train rattled on. No help could be sought from the outside.

The locomotive whistled several times and began slowing down. A lot of noise could be heard from the outside. Then the train came to a dead stop. The latches on the wagons were opened from the outside. Those closest to the doors were picked up unceremoniously and dropped to the ground by Jewish slave laborers. If they had earthly possessions left behind, they usually allowed them to be kicked forward by those next in line. From the moment of their arrival, the terrible confusion reigning on the platform was surrealistically accompanied by the beautiful music of a Strauss waltz.

In his memoir, a Sobibor survivor, Philip Bialowitz, writes: “I helped Jews out of the trains with all their luggage… My heart was bleeding knowing that in half an hour they would be reduced to ashes. I couldn’t tell them. I wasn’t allowed to speak. Even if I told them, they would not believe they were going to die.”

When the arrivals were on the platform, an SS Commandant addressed them: “You will be divided into two groups, just temporarily. You are about to receive postcards to write your relatives or friends about how well you are being treated here. We are good to you, but know and do not forget: there is no escape from Sobibor; only death for any who try.”

Some time later, my family received a postcard from my wise, wonderful grandfather from Lipiany. He wrote in the postcard that his dear wife left for a visit to Aunt Malcsi. The Germans, of course, had no way of knowing that the aunt mentioned had died several years before. Thus, our family learned that my beloved grandmother was dead.

Within seconds, another SS commander took over. “Any goldsmith, carpenter, tailor, shoemaker” – these were shunted to the side. Most of the others were placed in a column that was marched off to the other end of the camp where continual smoke hovered in the sky. The new arrivals had no way of guessing that those were their last minutes on earth. They were at that very moment trudging down the path to the “showers” and crematoria.

*Final Journey – A Holocaust Song*

Words and music: Aiton Birnbaum

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za_c3F8wnlo

(Performed by Sheer Birnbaum)

One elderly man remained standing in the train car, next to his dead wife. The SS officer who checked the wagons after they were emptied of their human cargo shouted at him to get out. The man did not move, so the SS pulled out his gun and shot him in the head. He fell dead next to his wife. Minutes later, members of a special Jewish prisoner detail removed them, together with their valises and sacks. The dead couple was unceremoniously undressed and dropped off at the crematoria. Less than an hour after the train’s arrival, they were turned into smoke and ashes.

Sobibor was a deadly camp. The railroad tracks ended there. The trains had nowhere to go from there, except to return for new cargo. But things did not always work perfectly. It emerged in a German court in August 1950 that on one occasion the gas production machinery in Sobibor broke down for three days in a row, during which time an entire transport had to wait, packed like sardines in the “showers.” Before being gassed, many died of hunger and thirst, exhaustion or suffocation, covered by the sweat and excrement of dozens of people.

Some of Holland's Jews were sent to Sobibor. By July 1943, 34,313 Jews from Holland arrived at the death camp. Only 16 women and three men returned to Holland from Sobibor after the war. The chance of avoiding immediate death in the gas chambers was less than 1 in 40.

A young mother was assigned upon arrival to the tailoring department to fix the damaged clothing of the SS. A few days later, an SS commander came to the department to supervise. About to leave, he heard the faint cry of a baby. He followed the sound and came upon the infant. He pulled the baby out from underneath a pile of rags. He turned to the women who were frozen in place and declared – holding the baby up in one hand – "This is illegal and illegitimate." He pulled out his gun and shot the little one wriggling in his upheld hand. The young mother couldn't be restrained. She emitted a supernatural cry, "You animal!" – and spat at the soldier between his eyes. The SS man calmly turned his gun on the young mother, shot her in the head, and walked out without another word.

*Va'ani Tefilati* (My Prayer) Words: Psalm 69:14:

As for me -- my prayer to you, Adonai, may this be a time of grace; Oh God,
in Your abundant loving-kindness, answer me in truth with Your salvation.

https://tinyurl.com/559j6p9x

(Performed by Nitzan Birnbaum)

The camp inmates received one bowl of soup and a nibble of potatoes at noontime, just one meal a day. Inmates spooned out the meal from one side of the tables at express speed, with the people holding out their empty bowl on the other side, moving with enormous speed. An SS commandant noticed that one of the workers had glanced up from the multitude of plates for a fraction of a second at a woman passing by, an unusual sight in the camp − by chance, the wife of one of the Gestapo chiefs. Within seconds he pulled his gun, shot the worker who dared to cast a glance at a German woman and, in enormous fury, kicked the serving table, causing all the food to spill on the ground. The Jews who had not yet gotten their meager ration went hungry that day.

The death camp was continually inhabited by 600 people who performed essential services for the Nazis. Nevertheless, the Nazis did not hesitate to turn their guns on them for the slightest reason − or for no reason. No slave in the camp was irreplaceable, could not be eliminated, or beaten to a pulp. Escape seemed impossible. Yet, on occasion, some daring young men took their chances, cut through the wire fence and attempted to outrun the machine-gun fire from the German watchtowers – like two men who died in their attempt. But this was not the end of the story.

The two were part of a work group of 15. The 13 who were left were assembled in the yard. Opposite them, the Nazis placed dozens of workers. The Nazi commander announced that the 13 of the party guilty of the attempted escape of the two would each be so kind to pick a partner from the innocent group to accompany them into death. Should they refuse to choose, the Nazis would pick 30 of the innocent group to be shot now. The 13 had no choice. To save 30, they walked over to the innocent group and hesitantly picked their partner in death. When the 26 were assembled, the Nazi officer unhurriedly gave his commands for the machine gun to be readied and to open fire… God, O' God, the angels in heaven must have spilled barrels of bitter tears at that horrific sight.

Under the circumstances, the inmates realized they had nothing to lose in preparing for a breakout. Leon Feldhendler, a cool-headed man but untrained in war, became their leader.

Soon after the episode of the 26, a contingent of Russian Jewish prisoners of war arrived at the camp, led by a high-ranking Jewish military officer, Alexander Petcharsky. He asked his fellow prisoners to call him Sasha, and quickly learned of their precarious situation. He saw that no matter the important work they were doing in the camp, they were terribly uncertain of their next hour or even next minute. The Nazis and their Ukrainian and Polish lackeys were drunk on Jewish blood and no amount could satisfy their appetites and lust.

He learned, to his surprise, that Sobibor was one of four camps established purely for the murder and complete annihilation of the Jews. This was in retaliation for the daring assassination of the arch-Nazi Reinhardt Heydrich in the Czech capital of Prague, by two non-Jewish Czechs who were parachuted into Czechoslovakia by the British in June 1942. The four murder camps created by the Germans were Belzec, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Sobibor. Sasha instantly set to work on an escape plan for all the prisoners, since it was clear that any left behind would be murdered by the Nazis in the cruelest manner.

The leaders' plan for October 14, 1943, consisted of two parts. The first: dispatching SS officers and their henchmen individually. When they inspected the Jews in their barracks or at their work, they would be overwhelmed by prisoners equipped with knives and axes obtained in advance. The bodies would be hidden so as not to forewarn their colleagues. Twelve SS and some Ukrainian and Polish minions were eliminated that morning.

In the second phase, all 600 prisoners assembled for the evening roll call were to make a break for freedom through the front gate. The second part of the plan misfired. An SS officer entered one of the Jewish barracks, and before the prisoners could overwhelm him, he noticed numerous blood spots on the ground where the Jews had dragged a victim to be hidden. He drew his gun and fired several warning shots through the window. This produced absolute bedlam.

Somewhat prematurely, but without hesitation, the second phase of the plan went into operation. All 600 Jews in the camp attacked every Nazi they could reach and then hurled themselves at the barbed wire fences and gates to run to the forest three kilometers away. From the watchtowers, the German guards opened machine gun fire at the fleeing Jews. By then, the Jews had some guns from the Germans they had killed and used them to attack the watchtowers.

Soon the prisoners reached a second obstacle: mines. The Nazis had surrounded Sobibor with a 50-foot-wide mine field, and dozens fell victim to the hidden mines.

The remaining escapees reached the outskirts of the forest. According to Petcharsky's instructions, they sought contact with Russian partisan units. Most of these units were not without anti-Semites; nevertheless, they behaved courteously, with respect and even admiration for the Jews who escaped from Sobibor.

About 300 prisoners who revolted and escaped – half of the 600 -- made it to the forest alive, and 58 of them survived the war. Some wrote books and memoirs, including Thomas Blatt's *From the Ashes of Sobibor*, and Stanislav Samajaner's *Inferno in Sobibor*.

Sobibor operated from May 1942 until the revolt on October 14, 1943. In just 18 months, 300,000 Jews from all over Europe were gassed in Sobibor, and 300 more fell in the uprising. Never before – and never again – did prisoners succeed in organizing so large an escape from a Nazi facility, much less a death camp, where they were under constant

watch. There were revolts in Treblinka on August 2, 1943 (all 100 escapees were caught), and in Auschwitz-Birkenau on October 7, 1944, from which two escapees brought detailed plans of its operational facilities. But their success was far below that of Sobibor.

On October 19, 1943, one week after the revolt, SS Chief Himmler ordered that Sobibor be demolished. The gas chambers and most camp buildings were bulldozed, and pine trees planted over all of Sobibor. All the Jews brought from Treblinka to do the dirty work of obliterating the traces of the death camp were shot so no witness to Sobibor would remain.

For years, Sobibor was perhaps the least-known camp, a well-hidden secret of Nazi Germany. The information my family had received about our Lipiany family led us to believe for 75 years that they had been killed in Auschwitz. Only in 2019 did we receive, to our astonishment, a page from the Lipiany Notary Public, evidently an extract from authentic Sobibor records, listing the names of our relatives, person by person. Thus we discovered that they were actually transported to Sobibor and murdered there, completing their earthly voyage in its crematoria. We assume that they were too old to take part in the glorious uprising, but we are proud that in the memories of our children and future generations they will remain linked to the greatest revolt against the Nazis in any death camp. Their memories will endure forever.

*Jewish Partisans' Song*. Words and music: Hirsch Glick
www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs
(Performed by Chava Alberstein)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc
(Performed by Paul Robeson)

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# Superb Heroism and Terrible Tragedy: Vilna

*Destruction and resistance of a venerated Jewish community*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

The change came swiftly and dramatically. Shabbat in Vilna was celebrated in an atmosphere that was solemn and joyful, quiet and holy − and unsuspecting. The next day, Sunday, all hell broke loose. Without warning, on June 22, 1941, 160 German divisions launched a concerted attack along the entire Soviet frontier. “Operation Barbarossa” was on. The Wehrmacht advanced with lightning speed. In total chaos, the Russian army, civil service, and commissars fled Vilna for their lives. In their wake, groups of Jews − dozens, or even hundreds − tried to escape eastward.

Owing to the speed of the German advance, however, the fleeing Jews were often trapped. In many cases Lithuanian peasants fell upon the hapless refugees with axes and pitchforks – an ominous precursor of what the Jews could expect at the hands of their countrymen. Writes an eyewitness: “Many who fled from German wrath found their death at the hands of these peasants.” Only a few stragglers managed to get back to Vilna -- over which the swastika fluttered victoriously in the wind.

The proud city that was referred to as *Yerushalayim de Lita* (the Jerusalem of Lithuania), the great city of the Vilna Gaon, its industrious Jewish shtetl teeming with great Jewish scholars, artists, poets and writers, tried desperately to sustain its image of distinction. Its past reflected Jewish splendor. Its present spoke of brilliant Jewish creativity. “Ich bin a Yid fun Vilna” (I am a Jew from Vilna) hinted at special quality and would elicit respect. Jewish Vilna was a city one could sing about in joy and pride, unequaled by any other city.

*Vilna: City of Spirit and Innocence*

Words: A. L. Wolfson; Music: Alexander Olshanetsky

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jALheE1KMMQ

(Performed by Yelena Shmulenson)

Two days after Vilna was conquered, Jews were already dragged off to forced labor and compelled to wear the identifying sign − *"shand-zeichen"* − as the Germans called it, the mark of shame. Announcements on the public billboards, addressed to the Jews, appeared virtually daily, in rapid, dazzling succession, often contradicting one another. Now Jews are forbidden on certain streets; then the mark of shame is to be moved from the chest to the arm, and then again to the back – with altered size and color. Now curfew regulations are changed – then traveling restrictions are capriciously modified. Now Jews are forced to hand over vehicles, horses, and livestock; then they must deliver certain tools and furniture.

Thus the Germans kept the Jewish population constantly busy and off balance, draining its energy and initiative, increasing tension and uncertainty to a breaking point – while allowing hope to flicker ever so feebly by issuing work permits, passports to life.

Overnight the Jews found themselves in a new city, a haunted city, stalked by the ghost of fear. The transformation was so radical and swift that it left people breathless. In the words of one of its popular poets and singers, Leyb Opeskin:

*Der Himl Geven Nechtn Loiter*

*Farvos iz der himl geven nechtn loiter*

*Fun fraid hot geshaint jede gass?*

*Farvos iz di zun aza lichtige, route,*

*Farchmuret haint, beiz un in kass?*

Yesterday's skies were so shiny and bright

Streets and homes had a joyous light.

O how the sun has turned red and mad –

In anger and fury are the heavens clad.

Dry the tear, forget your concerns,

It's not worth mourning anymore.

It is possible that already tomorrow – surely tomorrow –

The sun shall be radiant once more.

*Farvos iz der Himl*

Words: Leyb Opeskin*; Music: unknown

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DOTHgU3LtE

* Leyb Opeskin, co-founder of the Vilna partisans, was killed the day before its liberation.

Three weeks passed under German occupation. Every day the forced labor contingent left for work in the morning and returned in the evening. Now another "first" landed on the Jews. A labor contingent of 2,000 was taken − and did not return. They disappeared without a trace. The Germans did not find it necessary to forewarn nor to explain.

It was known that most of those who vanished were taken by trucks under heavy Lithuanian guard in the direction of Ponar, a railroad station about seven miles (10 kilometers) from Vilna. The Jews assumed that this was the station from which they would be transported to a new, more distant, work destination.

Another week passed. It was only a month since the Wehrmacht had conquered Vilna, but it already seemed like an eternity. And now the Germans ordered the establishment of a Jewish Council − a *Judenrat* − of 24 members. Its very first task landed on it like a hammer blow out of the blue.

It was ordered to extract 5,000,000 rubles from the Jewish community as a contribution to the Reich. The amount itself was forbidding, but the timing was even more so. The task had to be accomplished overnight, to be exact, by 9:00 the next morning. Jews were not allowed to use any vehicle, telephone contacts were not available, and they were forbidden to be in the street on pain of death after 6:00 p.m., so this was an impossible task − even from a purely technical point of view.

At 9:00 the next morning, a delegation of three *Judenrat* members reported to German headquarters carrying money, gold, gold watches, and assorted jewelry. The Gestapo made a quick estimate: The amount submitted was lacking. Two of the delegates were shot on the spot; the third was dispatched with a warning to the *Judenrat* to deliver the required amount by 11:00.

The Germans turned the *Judenrat* into their tool. Having used them to drain the Jewish community economically, they now imposed on the *Judenrat* the daily duty of delivering the work battalions. Since some of the labor battalions had repeatedly disappeared without a trace, *Judenrat* member and leader of the Jewish community, Dr. Yakov Vigodsky, objected. He was immediately detained and a short while later it was reported that he died in prison.

Two months after German occupation, the Jewish population was still scattered around the city, although forbidden to step onto designated main streets. Now, by German calculation, the moment for creating a special ghetto had arrived. In the middle of the night, again without forewarning, the Lithuanians drove the Jews out of their homes. Everyone carried what they could on their backs and in their arms. Thirty thousand Jews were put into a ghetto consisting of six streets.

Every room held 10-15 individuals. To settle into the new quarters and survive under such circumstances required everyone’s full cooperation. It was September, already cold in the Baltic states. Yet there was no fuel. No soap. Not a spot of green. No toilets. No bathtubs.

No garbage collection. No garbage dump. There were swarms of flies. And children crying, *"Ich bin hungering, Mame"* (I am hungry, Mommy). This was "Ghetto A."

"Ghetto B" was created soon after, for 11,000 people in an area consisting of three and a half streets. Both ghettos were sealed off. Outsiders were kept away with the frightening warning that these were plague-infested areas. Insiders were warned that any smuggler would be shot on the spot. Only work battalions under special German or Lithuanian guard could move through the gates. It was under these circumstances that Katriel Broide jotted down his emotional reactions to the ghetto in a touching ghetto song:

By these walls we stand

hearts can't understand

arms dangling in despair

willows weeping, mid-air.

Ghetto!

I'll never forget you or let go:

Your anguish, your sad song

lament and tears,flowing long

Your prayerful plea:

What shall be? What shall be?

all so tight and closed every part −

every street and this my heart…

Though I can't fathom, I surely know

My fondness for you amid such woe,

Yet shall I never forget you − Ghetto!

Ghetto! *Dich Fargesn vel ich Keinmol Nit!*

Words: Katriel Broide; Music: unknown

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdQ7rRGVgxk

(Performed by the *Kolot HaLev* Choir)

The creation of two ghettos was ingenious. A week after settling in the ghetto, 3,550 Jews were moved from Ghetto “A” to Ghetto “B.” Few Nazi hands were needed for that action. It seemed only a technical shift in populations. However, of the 3,550 Jews, only 600 reached the ghetto because 2,950 were taken to a different destination... As yet no one knew where.

Amid these abject, dehumanizing conditions and such shattering uncertainty, the Jews, unbelievably, built themselves a semblance of society. Each everyday act that facilitated physical or spiritual survival was a courageous act of resistance. The Nazis had decreed death, but the Jews struggled to live.

In the cramped ghetto, a teacher by the name of Moshe Olicky organized a school where the children spent most of the daytime hours. A community kitchen was organized where hot soup was distributed once a day. There was an organized, unabated sanitation campaign. The festivals and holidays were observed as much as possible. There were song, poetry, and music contests. Amazingly, a library of close to 100,000 books was assembled and kept in operation. Over 13,000 books were circulated monthly, according to a 1942 register.

There was organized smuggling of food, at the risk of many young lives, to get the bare minimum of calories needed for survival. There were organized attempts to breach the isolation and establish contact with other ghettos − with the loss of more precious lives. There were weddings, and natural childbirths in the underground bunkers, where the mother could not scream, and the first cry of the baby was smothered in a cloth. A stunning cleaving to life, even while the monster with the swastika on his arm reaped an increasingly rich harvest.

Two events must be recorded that deserve to be especially remembered by future generations: One pertains to Lyuba. The other concerns Lisa.

Lyuba Levitsky was a well-known opera and radio star in Vilna who played a significant role in the ghetto. When partisan brigades began to be formed in 1942, cultural life took on new vitality. The popular, beloved Lyuba became an active participant. The first concert in the ghetto took place on the night following a mass slaughter of 1,500 Jews. The hall was charged with dread and despair. The walls reverberated with fear. The asphalt was still stained with blood.

That night Lyuba Levitsky sang *Tsvay Teibelech* (Two Doves):

*In di piskelech hobn zey zich gekusht,*

*Farsholten zol vern yener mentsch*

*Vos hot zich in undzer libe, oy, araingemisht.*

Two loving doves met kissing warmly above.

Cursed be that wicked man,

who came to disturb our love.

Optional: One stanza of *Tsvey Teibelech*

www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfUDmFD-cQg

(Performed by Ruth Rubin)

A year later, Lyuba was imprisoned and tortured by the Germans, but at the first opportunity she continued singing to those condemned to death. Her mother got sick in the ghetto, and in a desperate attempt to help her, Lyuba attempted to smuggle in some cooked peas, but was caught and sentenced to death. She was ordered to undress and

walk naked to her execution. It is recorded that Lyuba Levitsky walked erect, head high, fearless, singing *Tsvey Teibelech,* the song that the Jews of the Vilna Ghetto will always remember together with the heroic Lyuba.

Optional: Another stanza of *Tsvey Teibelech*

Lisa's story is no less poignant. She was a sparkling, beautiful, Aryan-looking young woman of about 20 who fearlessly ventured on underground missions − one of the angels who maintained vital contact between Jewish communities. Partisan headquarters in Vilna sent Lisa to warn the Jewish community of Oshmiana, about 20 miles from Vilna, that their liquidation was imminent. The community had altogether 200 families. Lisa led a hundred to join the partisans in the forest.

When Lisa returned to take out another group, she was caught by the Nazis. They set up a cross by the *Aron Hakodesh*, the Holy Ark, in the synagogue. The Germans then forced the whole Jewish community into the synagogue to watch as they crucified Lisa, to die in long, drawn-out torture. Finally, the Nazis set the synagogue on fire with all the people locked inside.

Henceforth, the newly formed UPO − United Partisan Organization − that took its fledgling steps in Vilna, used as its password *Lisa ruft* − Lisa calls.

With exceptional dread, the Jewish community of Vilna faced its first Yom Kippur under the heels of the Germans.

Post-Yom Kippur, the ghetto was surrounded by German forces and their Lithuanian minions. They demanded 8,000 Jews for resettlement that very night − evidently to prove to the Jews that Yom Kippur, prayers, and hopes, were of no avail. The head of the Jewish Ghetto Police, Yacov Gens, negotiated with the Germans and proposed that, should they be satisfied with 2,000, the Jewish Police itself would put together the transport. A compromise was reached: 3,000 to be handed over by the Jewish police that very night.

The Jews of the ghetto cursed Gens for the deportation of 3,000. Gens prided himself on saving 5,000.

A rabbinic delegation informed Gens that he was in contravention of Jewish law − which states, in the words of Maimonides, “When the idolater shall say to you: ‘Deliver unto us one of your people that we may slay him, but if you refuse, we will slay you’ − then let all consent to perish and let no single Jewish soul be delivered freely to the idolater.”

Gens, however, firmly maintained that, contrary to the days of Maimonides, the prevailing situation justified the surrender of some in order to save others.

“When they ask me for 1,000 Jews − he declared − I hand them over, for if we Jews will not give on our own, the Germans will come and take them by force. Then they will take not one thousand, but thousands, and the whole ghetto will be at their mercy. With hundreds, I save a thousand. With the thousands that I hand over, I save 10,000... I did everything to save as many Jews as possible... To ensure that at least a remnant of Jews survives, I, myself, had to lead Jews to death, and in order to have people emerge with a clear conscience, I had to befoul myself and act without a conscience.”

Events followed in quick succession. A group of 2,000 Jews from Ghetto “B” refused to obey a German order for evacuation. They sat down on the ground and would not budge even in the face of threats and rifle fire. Soon thereafter, the special passes that were issued to Jews in certain occupations were rescinded. Ghetto “B” in its totality was then systematically and speedily liquidated.

And the Jews still didn’t know where their family and friends were taken. They could only guess − but these guesses were pushed aside by the fervent hope that causes all wholesome beings to cling to life.

Until the unexpected breakthrough came. Tema Katz, a teacher – provided first-hand evidence. She was taken with a transport to Ponar and managed to escape, finding her way back to the ghetto. She told a harrowing tale of gigantic pits in the forests of Ponar, where Jews were lined up and machine-gunned to death. She, too, was in the lineup, but the bullet only grazed her. Pretending to be dead in the pile of mangled, twisted Jewish bodies, she escaped from the pit under cover of darkness, bringing the horrible truth back to the ghetto.

At first her listeners considered her deranged and disoriented. Her tale, delivered in a state of hysteria and delirium, in bits and pieces, sounded incredible. But eventually it received support from other sources, like Sara Menkes, a girl of 19, who told an identical story. It became clear that most transports leaving the ghetto were destined for Ponar − and that Ponar meant certain death.

*Shtiler, Shtiler, Lomir Shveign*

Quiet, quiet, let's keep silent,
Graves are growing here.
Secretly planted by our foes,
To the very heavens rise our woes,
To Ponar leads our way
Yesterday, tomorrow, every day.

Quiet, my child. Cry not, darling.
All the weeping is of no avail.
The foe makes no effort to perceive
The depth of our tragic tale.

Shores enclose the seas,
There are limits to tragedies.
Only our pain − without end −
None is here to mend.

*Shtiler, Shtiler*

Words: Shmerke Kaczerginsky; Music: Alek Volkovisky

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYr0v-FHOXg

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

In the truly awesome and splendid Jewish spirit, the dreadful reality of Ponar produced an outburst of literary expression, somehow helping our people to face its fate with heads held high. Here is one more song about the terrible journey from Vilna to Ponar − from the epicenter of immortal Jewish creativity to the bottomless abyss of nameless death − pits and mass graves in a dark forest hidden from human eyes.

*S'iz geven a zumertog vi shtendik zunig sheyn…*

It was a lovely summer day, just as sunny as could be −

When we were led to Ponar where the earth would cover us eternally.

*S'iz Geven a Zumertog* (It Was a Summer's Day)

Words: Rikle Glezer; Music based on Yiddish Theater *"Papirosn"*

https://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/ghettos/vilna/siz-geven-zumertog/

Once the true meaning of Ponar became known, active Jewish resistance in the ghetto began to play a prominent role. Active resistance, as opposed to the passive resistance whose goal was survival, did not come easily.

The day after the first Jewish work contingent failed to return, Jewish women attacked a group of armed Lithuanians who were assembling a Jewish transport. For lack of other weapons, the women tore bricks from walls and stones from the pavement to be used as their weapons, hurling them at the snatchers of our people.

German and Lithuanian retaliation was immediate. They broke into Jewish homes and destroyed them. Their Jewish inhabitants were dragged into the street, tortured, and sadistically mutilated, producing a slow, agonizing death. After hours of savagery in retaliation for the stone-throwing, the streets were red and slippery from Jewish blood.

As the Germans left the scene of their debauchery, they dragged with them 500 Jews who were never heard from again.

At one point, three Germans were reported killed or wounded by resisting Jews. The center of the Jewish Quarter, where the Vilna Gaon once lived, was surrounded; 300 Jews were shot, and 5,000 deported to an unknown destination.

There was no doubting the swiftness of Nazi retaliation, nor the cheapness of Jewish life in their eyes. The Germans relished the Jews' pain and anguish, even before the true meaning of Ponar became known.

Yet, despite the story of Ponar, the average Jew in the ghetto wanted to believe that as long as he could contribute by his occupation, skill, and training, the Germans would have to be insane to shoot him into a pit, like a sick dog. The realization that this was, in fact, an insane and unreal world, a world of sadistic caprice, still failed to sink in.

But the resistance movement, the United Partisan Organization (UPO), stood firm in its resolve and issued a "Summons to Resistance":

"Jewish youth! In a time of unparalleled national misfortune, we appeal to you. We do not yet have the words to express the whole tragic struggle which transpires before our eyes... It is still too hard to find the proper definition for the state in which we find ourselves, for the extraordinary cruelty with which the annihilation of the local Jewish population has been carried out. The community of Jerusalem of Lithuania numbered 75,000 souls. On entering the ghetto, 25,000 were already missing, and today (half a year later) only 12,000 remain. All the rest have been killed. Death stalks our streets; in our tents − helplessness.

“...The German officials [will] prolong the existence of the ghettos for a short time. But annihilation is a systematic process that will sooner or later reach every one of us... Wherever there is a Jewish settlement under Hitler, there will be a Ponar. Jews! Organize yourselves! Take up arms!

"...Don’t stand by with arms folded. Bridelech! Let us not throw our arms up in despondence, dejection, and despair!

"Brothers, the hour has struck! *Es shlogt di schoh!*

*Mir zeinen do!* We are here!

*Mir kuken in di weitn* − We look at the far-away horizon.

We see new times emerging when the sky shall be blue again.

Although today we are enveloped by deep, impenetrable darkness,

We patiently wait for the day to dawn when evil shall fall

And our patience and courage shall be rewarded."

*Es Shlogt Di Sho!* Words and music: Kasriel Broydo

www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRI7QIVdJR8

(Performed by *WanDeRer Quartett*)

The resistance movement in the Vilna Ghetto received unexpected support from a nearby Benedictine cloister. The Mother Superior of the Cloister visited the ghetto several times on mercy missions, and under her billowing gown brought priceless pistols and grenades to the budding fighting organization. A bag of gunpowder was brought in, disguised as a bag of salt; it was used to prepare 800 grenades made out of electric bulbs. Crude, homemade “Molotov cocktails” were feverishly prepared in hidden bunkers.

In May 1942, the UPO executed their first important act of sabotage, killing 200 German soldiers and wounding many more by sabotaging a troop train near Vilna. Henceforth, Vilna Ghetto resistance units operated outside the ghetto almost every night. They tested escape routes and learned to move quickly and quietly.

They learned other things too − where to slide the knife so the dying man cannot scream, how to set an ambush, where to stand to cut down the men who pour out of the length of a dynamited train. They were hard lessons, learned at a heavy price − 10% of the ghetto fighters were killed in the raids of those first few weeks. But the Vilna resistance was rapidly turning into a very effective armed organization − the first and the best of the ghetto resistance groups, under the dynamic leadership of Itzik Vitenberg... until tragedy struck.

On July 15, 1943, Itzik Vitenberg was betrayed and arrested by the Germans. In a daring attack, his fighters rescued him and returned him to the headquarters of the resistance movement. It was clear that a showdown was inevitable. Partisan mobilization in the ghetto was ordered. The Germans, however, shrewdly refrained from a direct attack and search. The following morning, they delivered their ultimatum: Either Vitenberg will be handed over to them, or the entire ghetto will be subjected to a devastating fire.

Yacov Gens, head of the *Judenrat,* turned to the ghetto population with an urgent appeal:

“The Germans are demanding one person, just one: Vitenberg. If they get him − everything returns to the way it was yesterday. If they don’t get him − they will destroy all of you, the entire ghetto! Because of one person trying to save himself, your children and wives will perish. Because of a handful of crazed fanatics who are not concerned with the ghetto at all − all of us will perish. Help us to deliver Vitenberg, and save your children and wives!”

The leaders of the Resistance pleaded with the people:

“Don’t trust them (the *Judenrat*)! They are deceiving you! Vitenberg is only a pretext. They want to destroy the whole fighters’ group to get ready for the final liquidation. Don’t believe that by handing over Vitenberg, the ghetto will return to normal. Vitenberg wants to protect your life and honor. They, by delivering Vitenberg into Gestapo hands, are saving their own skins and it doesn’t matter to them that the ghetto is on the brink of total liquidation. There can be only one answer: Armed resistance against the enemy!”

It was a question of life or death − either way. The Gestapo issued its ultimatum − 6:00 p.m.− for Vitenberg to be surrendered, alive. The masses wanted to gain time − another month, another week, another day − and were ready to hand over the leader of the resistance. The fighters faced a terrible dilemma. The very people whom they wanted to save, to lead out into the forest, their neighbors and friends, suddenly saw them as enemies, betrayers of the ghetto, provocateurs!

The Resistance Movement was ready to fight. But this war wasn’t going to be against the Germans. Between the Germans and the Resistance stood the crowds of the ghetto. Before fighting the enemy, brother would have to fight brother. The arms acquired at such a heavy cost would now be used inside the ghetto itself! It became clear that should the Germans penetrate the ghetto, the crowds would fight with them against their own

Resistance Movement; they would blame their own fighters for the deaths of thousands of Jews and for the destruction of the Vilna Ghetto!

The fighters' command was in an agitated state. They met with Vitenberg in his safe hideout. The meeting had very few parallels in its all-encompassing feelings of rage, impotence, humiliation, and tragedy. Vitenberg decides for himself, by himself: “I will die by my own hand. The ghetto will calm down. The Germans will get Vitenberg − the corpse.”

Feverish, last-minute negotiations. The Germans insist: they demand Vitenberg − alive. Once again, Vitenberg decides. His last decision. His last instructions. He is determined to deliver himself personally -- without bloodshed among Jews. He instructs his followers not to lose faith, not to give up, and he appoints Abba Kovner to take command.

Vitenberg sets out. Alone. Back straight. His last walk through the ghetto streets. His fighters salute him, consumed by shame, and a sense of despondent helplessness. A fighter of the truest kind, a comrade-in-arms, their commander, walks to his certain death. Dried-up eyes that have no tears left, burn in fury. The crowds now cheer the hero whose death will buy them that additional day, week, or month in the wretched ghetto that will never be the same again. Never!

Vitenberg perished in this tragic drama Al Kiddush Hashem, a martyr's death. It was the evening of July 16, 1943. Everything was in deep shadows as the legend of Itzik Vitenberg was born.

Who can judge right or wrong under such unspeakable circumstances? Can we put ourselves in the place of the Jews of the ghetto, the last remnant of the once-great community of the Vilna Gaon, the Jerusalem of Lithuania? Should they have fought bravely to the last rather than allow Vitenberg to walk into the lion’s den? Was Yacov Gens a traitor, and the *Judenrat* with him? Or, by the sacrifice of one, were many indeed saved, to emerge alive from the fires of hell? Who can judge? Who can tell?

Led by their new commander, Abba Kovner, the fighters chose to abandon the ghetto. They left for the forests by the hundreds. Once there, they recovered their spirit. Although their gallant plans for the defense of the ghetto were shattered, they continued their heroic exploits, blowing up enemy trains, dynamiting bridges, attacking enemy installations and sending thousands of Germans to their deaths. *Nekama* − Revenge! − burned in their

hearts. Revenge for the destruction of their shtetl, and the manner in which it was done; for the cruel death of their commander, Vitenberg; and for the millions of Jews who perished under the Nazis − only because they were Jews − while the world stood idly by.

They fought, took revenge, and a few even survived. They were the witnesses who recounted the events, who told this story of horror and hell, but also of courage and *Kiddush Hashem*. A story of pain and woe, but also one of indomitable will, to echo through the ages the Jewish People's determination to survive. In the face of hopelessness, and against incredible odds: We Survive!

We Survive

Oh, never say that you have reached the very end,
Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend,
Because the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: We Survive!

From the land of palm trees to the land of distant snow,
We are here, with our pain, with our woe,
And wherever our blood was shed in pain,
Our fighting spirits will resurrect again.

Tomorrow’s sun will gladden our today,
The past with bitter foe shall pass away.
But should the sun at dawn delay his coming,
Then let this clarion ring out the future dawning.

Not lead, but blood, inscribed this song we sing,
It's not a caroling of birds upon the wing.
But 'twas a people midst the crashing fires of hell
That sang this song, and fought courageous until it fell.

So never say that you have reached the very end,
Though leaden skies a bitter future may portend,
Because the hour for which we yearned will yet arrive,
And our marching steps will thunder: We Survive!

*Jewish Partisans' Song*; Words and music: Hirsch Glick
www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs
(Performed by Chava Alberstein)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc
(Performed by Paul Robeson)

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# Against Incredible Odds:
# The Last Stand of the Warsaw Ghetto

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

The establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto was officially declared by order of the Chief of the Gestapo, Reinhardt Heydrich, on October 3, 1940, coinciding with the Jewish Rosh Hashana, 5701. Almost overnight, 445,000 Jews were crammed into a space of 100 city blocks; one-third of the city's total population was allotted 2.5% of the city's area.

"In the ghetto there was appalling chaos," writes an eyewitness. "Thousands of people were rushing around trying to find a place to stay. Everything was already filled up, but still they kept coming and somehow more room was found. The narrow, crooked streets of the most dilapidated section of Warsaw were crowded with pushcarts, their owners going from house to house asking the inevitable question: Have you room? The sidewalks were covered with their belongings. Children wandered, lost and crying... their cries drowned in the tremendous hubbub of 500,000 uprooted people."

By these walls we stand

hearts can't understand

arms dangling in despair

willows weeping, mid-air.

Ghetto!

I'll never forget you or let go:

Your anguish, your sad song

lament and tears, flowing long

Your prayerful plea:

What shall be? What shall be?

all so tight and closed every part −

every street and this my heart…

Though I can't fathom, I surely know

My fondness for you amid such woe,

Yet shall I never forget you − Ghetto!

*Ghetto! Dich Fargesn vel ich Keinmol Nit!*

Words: Katriel Broide; Music: unknown

www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdQ7rRGVgxk

(Performed by the *Kolot HaLev* Choir)



Emanuel Ringelblum, the famed archivist of the Warsaw Ghetto, notes in his diary that, ironically, in the initial stages the Jews found some relief in the ghetto from the harassment of German soldiers. They had no way of knowing that in the German "master plan" the ghettos would be little more than transit stations toward ultimate destruction.

The first killer in the ghetto was disease. With six people per room, the maintenance of even the most elementary hygiene was impossible. Water pipes froze in winter and toilets became unusable. Human excrement had to be discarded in the streets. Before long, typhus raged in epidemic proportions. In 1941 alone, 15,000 people in the ghetto died of the disease. Whatever hospital facilities the ghetto had, were forced by Nazi orders to put three individuals in one bed, thus aggravating rather than helping the desperate situation.

According to Dr. Israel Milajkowski, Director of the Ghetto Health Department, hospitals became “places of execution,” records Emanuel Ringelblum.

The second killer was starvation. The Nazis provided the Poles sufficient food for subsistence, but the Jews were given barely enough to hover between life and death. For example, a Pole would receive 62 decagrams of bread a week, but a Jew 14 decagrams − less than 1/4 of the Pole's allowance. Rationing was strictly controlled and paid for at every step. Many Jews were so destitute that they became totally dependent on the community kitchen, which doled out a single bowl of watery soup, once a day.

Crazed by hunger, an eight-year-old boy screams sadly, “I want to steal, I want to rob, I want to eat. I want to be a German!”

At a funeral for small children from the Wolska Street Orphanage, the children from the home placed a wreath at the graves with the inscription: “To the children who have died from hunger − from the children who are hungry.”

Let us listen to the song about little Motele from the Warsaw Ghetto.

*Motele*;  Words: Reuven Lifshutz; Music: unknown

www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXGtl9XtzFA

(Performed by the *Mir Kumen On* Yiddish Choir and *SKIF* choir)

Over 90,000 people died of starvation in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941 alone.

To appreciate the meaning of that figure − more than 10 individuals died every hour, around the clock, 365 days of the year, from starvation.

Ringelblum notes that over time, people became accustomed to the sight of death. They could walk among dead bodies without undue distress. Even children no longer feared death, and in a courtyard, might play a game involving tickling a corpse. As the number of deaths increased, solemn individual funerals were rapidly replaced by mass funerals and mass graves. The skeleton-like, starved corpses were delivered by wagon and dumped in heaps into the pit. It became rare for any family to turn up, and when they did, it was for the shirt of the deceased.

Yet despite the terrible conditions of overcrowding, disease, and starvation, despite the constant peril of forced labor battalions, the ghetto flung itself feverishly into the struggle of keeping alive. Its spirit was not broken.

The enterprise of staying alive in the ghetto involved illegal activity with extremely high risks. Desperately hungry, people were forced to smuggle in food. Hans Michael Frank, the Governor-General of occupied Poland, decreed that the penalty for smuggling was death.

Despite the ever-present danger, smuggling food into the ghetto became a favorite and obsessive occupation. Prominent among the smugglers were children.

Emanuel Ringelblum described food smuggling in Warsaw, how almost every day saw smugglers shot, particularly in the area guarded by a policeman dubbed Frankenstein. He looked and behaved like a monster − a bloodthirsty animal who kills one or two smugglers every day, who just can't eat his breakfast before spilling the blood of a Jew.

But according to Ringelblum, the numerous smugglers were undaunted. One smuggler told a friend that he would keep on smuggling to avoid starving, since it was better to die fast from a bullet than slowly from hunger.

Not only was smuggling prohibited, so was anything fostering intellectual stimulation. For that, too, could prolong life. It could offer hope, comfort, or a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, classes were held for children. Holidays were celebrated. Several theaters carried on until the very end. There were courses in engineering, watch-making, architectural drawing, and others. There were lectures and dramatic programs and reading circles. Serious articles were produced, clandestinely printed and discussed. There were debates and contests and poems by little children about the essential goodness of man. Amid all the misery and squalor, Ringelblum triumphantly declares barely a month before the final destruction of the ghetto began that the Jews' humanity and intellect somehow remained intact, with minds as active as they were before the War!

Let us now listen to the song "The Street Singer of the Warsaw Ghetto."

*Der Hoyfzinger* -- The Street Singer

Words: Reuven Lifshutz;  Music: folk tune.

Yiddish: https://tinyurl.com/393c6yj3

English: https://tinyurl.com/5n7cusw8

Unbeknownst to the inhabitants of the ghetto, the end was rapidly approaching. The first mention of Treblinka is found in Ringelblum's diary entry of April 10, 1942. He records that: "164 of the German Jews who came to Warsaw a few days ago, the cream of the young people, including a large number of *chalutzim* (pioneers) preparing to emigrate to Palestine, were sent to the penal camp of Treblinki… where most of them were exterminated within a short time."

On Tisha b'Av, July 23, 1942, the first transport of 6,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto was deported to the Treblinka extermination camp, and there consigned to gas chambers and crematoria. The Nazis were determined to send a train a day with 6,000 Jews from Warsaw to Treblinka in a campaign termed *Aktion Reinhardt* until cleansing Warsaw of Jews was complete. The operation was intended to commemorate the assassination of the Arch-Nazi Reinhardt Heydrich in Prague at the hands of two non-Jewish Czechoslovakian nationals. Mass deportations of Jews had begun. The destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto was at hand. The Germans needed no real excuse to liquidate Jews.

On the second day of mass deportations, the President of the *Judenrat*, Adam Czerniakow, who was expected to implement the diabolical German design for them, committed suicide rather than lend a hand in attaining the German objective of what they termed "resettlement."  One of the secret Warsaw Ghetto diarists, Chayim Kaplan, writes: "There are those who earn immortality in a single hour. President Adam Czerniakow earned his immortality in a single instant."

By the end of July 1942, 59,000 Jews from the ghetto had been deported. The Jews were promised resettlement and were lured by the gift of 5 kg of bread and 3 kg of marmalade − if they showed up voluntarily at the *Umschlagplatz* (the deportation point). However, soon rumors of the real purpose of the resettlement began circulating.

Jewish police were ordered to find five victims a day or else members of their own family would have to fill the quota and be deported. The ghetto became a veritable hunting ground. As people resisted, roundups became street massacres.

The *Umschlagplatz* was a large yard adjacent to railroad tracks, 30 x 50 meters, surrounded by a high brick wall with a few shacks built against it.

Scenes from the *Umschlagplatz* were recorded by a journalist who survived the inferno: “Night is falling. The glare of the fire flashes from the ghetto. One hears rifle shots. The halls of the *Umschlagplatz* are not lighted. We are sitting in darkness. Somewhere nearby a child is crying. The whining gets on our nerves. The mother gets up from the floor and walks toward the door. She passes a window. At the same moment, a shot cracks from behind the window. The mother slowly slips down onto the filthy, spittle-covered floor. She is dead.”

Further, from a handwritten diary recently discovered in the area of the former *Umschlagplatz*: “With surprisingly clear awareness, I feel, or rather understand, that I will cease to live before long. Maybe it will happen in the next quarter of an hour. It is strange that I am by no means stunned. My brain is functioning normally… I note in my memory the literary aspects of the tragedy of which I am one of the objects. I am becoming aware of the wildly widened pupils of the eyes of the girl who is standing near me. I hear her halting breath. And then I see the face of the Latvian guard who is biting his dirty nails while watching us.”

The diarist regrets not escaping with his wife, who only yesterday smuggled herself out of the ghetto through the sewers into the Aryan section of the city. She is probably calling him this very moment by phone, worried sick about him. But he could not leave because of his ailing mother, whom he hid in a subterranean storage room just before he was caught by the Germans. Alas, he is fairly certain that by now she has been discovered by the Nazis, and shot on the spot.

The diarist continues: “The air is dreadfully sticky, the stench unbearable. I lean against the wall in a state of numbness. I haven’t eaten for 24 hours, but I don’t feel hungry. I am plagued by thirst. There is no water. I press my cheek against the wall. On the dirty, gray wall the design of a heart pierced by the cupid’s arrow has been carved awkwardly with a pocket knife. The inscription says, 'Blima and Chilek, August 1942.'

“Somebody is reaching for poison. He swallows it, washing it down with a little water carefully saved, well-hidden and undiscovered in the body check. The man takes poison in front of all the people. Nobody interferes. He is passing away. Now he is delivered…”

An 18-year-old girl holds on to her mother. Records a diarist: “The mother is unconsciously stroking the head of her daughter. Handtke (the guard) is watching the scene with the smile of an expert. Presently he apparently decides that it has attained its highest point. He raises his revolver, aims it and fires the shot. It does not miss its target. The girl falls down. On the lips of the mother a strange smile appears, already coming from beyond this world, while the SS man pushes her ahead, lashing her with a long whip."

Now, for the first time, Ringelblum questions, “Why didn’t we resist when they began to resettle 300,000 Jews from Warsaw? Why did we allow ourselves to be led like sheep to slaughter? Why did everything come so easily to the enemy?” Our questions, the eternal Jewish questions, well up from the depth of anguished hearts. Is this the way, O God, that we are to serve as a light unto the nations? *In fayer, in flamm?* − engulfed in fire, in flames?! My God, You turned Your children into living torches! *In fayer, in flamm host du unz gebrent* − You seared us, scorched us, devoured us … Is this the reward for being chosen? *Eli, Eli − lama azavtani?* My God, my God, why did You forsake us?

*Eli, Eli, Lama Azavtani*

Words and music: Jacob Sandler/traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE95WpTS3WI

(Performed by Eli Henig)

It was in August 1942 that the Jews in Warsaw received the first eyewitness report of the death factory of Treblinka. The dreaded news was brought by an escapee from the final train stop at the murder center. It was confirmed by a second successful escapee who worked on the disposal of the gassed corpses. Unbelievable as the accounts of Azriel Wallach and Yankl Wernik seemed, the stark truth could no longer be easily denied.

As the rumors received increasing credibility and were soon confirmed, the will to resist hardened. Two resistance organizations formed. The Jewish Fighting Organization headed by 24-year-old Mordechai Anielewicz of the left-wing *Hashomer Hatzair* party; and The Jewish Military Organization headed by Pawel Frenkel, also in his early twenties, of the Revisionist right-wing Beitar party.

By the time the two resistance groups became active, only 120,000 Jews were left in the ghetto, and numbers were rapidly dwindling. But the resistance groups were becoming a vibrant force in the ghetto. Their immediate aim was to secure arms and − for lack of them − to prepare crude home-made, primitive explosives, and train fighters to use them.

By the end of September 1942, only 65,000 Jews were still alive. Since *Tisha b'Av* (mid-July), in two and a half months, 300,000 Jews had been deported and reduced to cinders in Treblinka.

Early in October 1942, during a lull in the deportations, Jan Karski, a liaison officer between the Polish Government-in-Exile in London and the Polish underground, was smuggled into the ghetto. He described what he saw:

"To pass that wall was to enter a new world utterly unlike anything that had ever been imagined. A cemetery? No, for these bodies were still moving, were indeed often violently agitated. These were still living people, if you could call them such. For apart from their skin, eyes, and voice, there was nothing human left in these palpitating figures. Everywhere there was hunger, the atrocious stench of decomposing bodies, the pitiful moans of dying children.

"The entire population of the ghetto seemed to be living in the street… Everyone and everything seemed to vibrate with unnatural intensity, to be in constant motion, enveloped in a haze of disease and death through which their bodies appeared to be throbbing in disintegration…"

The Jewish leaders pleaded with Karski: "The Germans are not trying to enslave us as they have other people. We are being systematically murdered. Our entire people will be destroyed. Three million Polish Jews are doomed. Place this responsibility on the shoulders of the Allies. Let no leader of the Allies be able to say that they did not know that we were being murdered in Poland and could not be helped except from the outside."

Five weeks later, Karski reported his experiences to senior leaders of the British and American governments and to Jewish leaders on both continents. The answer was… deafening silence.

The first confrontation between the Jewish resistance groups and the Wehrmacht took place in January 1943. The Jewish fighters killed 20 Germans and wounded 50. At the time, they had only a pitiful supply of 143 revolvers, 1 submachine gun, and 7 rounds of ammunition per weapon. The fighters dug in and hid in bunkers and fortified attics. In one of them, even as German boots thudded on the steps, Yitzhak Katzenelson spoke the following farewell:

“We must be happy because we are about to meet the enemy with ammunition, though it be to die… We will fight not for ourselves, but for future generations. Let us have courage... The Germans could kill a million Jews but they will not overpower us. The Jewish nation lives and it will always live.”

The emaciated, dried-up skeletons suddenly came to life. Jewish backs straightened; Jewish hearts beat with pride. It didn’t matter how many Jews fell in action. Their fate was sealed anyway. What mattered was that they were no longer butchered like sheep. They were finally standing up to the cultured Satan, face to face, fighting, with guns against tanks, with bare hands, fighting for the dawning of a tomorrow for the Jewish People.

The Warsaw Ghetto Revolt blasted the message to the world, loud and clear, a triumphant message of courage and resolve: From the gutters, from the lowest depths, from the fires of hell, we are letting you know, o cruel, silent, and inhuman world, that we, the Jewish People, will survive. Yes, we will survive, against incredible odds, against all the combined powers of evil: *Mir zenen do* – *Anachnu po* – We are here!

*Jewish Partisans' Song*;  Words: Hirsch Glick.  Music: Demitri and Daniel Pokras

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc

(Performed by Paul Robeson)

The full-scale revolt did not explode until April 19, 1943, when the remnants of the Warsaw Ghetto rose in total revolt against the bestial tyrant. It was *Erev Pesach*, Passover Eve!

On that *Erev Pesach*, Nazi troops marching into the ghetto were met by a barrage of Molotov cocktails, bullets, and hand grenades. The unexpected attack sent the Germans fleeing in panic, leaving behind their dead and wounded. The Jewish fighters then leaped out of their hiding places and opened fire at the fleeing Germans. Despite the armored vehicles that the Germans threw into the ensuing battle, their forces were expelled from the ghetto. The SS General-in-Command, Jurgen von Stroop, wrote to Himmler:

“At our first penetration into the ghetto, the Jews and the Polish bandits succeeded with arms in hand in repulsing our attacking forces, including the tanks and panzers.”

The Germans quickly reorganized and sent in a wave of tanks. A report of the Jewish Fighting Organization described the scene as follows:

“The well-aimed bottles hit the tank. The flames spread quickly. The blast of the explosion is heard. The machine stands motionless. The crew is burned alive. The other two tanks turn around and withdraw. The Germans who took cover behind them withdraw in panic. We take leave of them with a few well-aimed shots and grenades.”

And a Jewish eyewitness describes the pinnacle of jubilation reached by the Jews who are now crawling out of their hiding places:

“The faces that only yesterday reflected terror and despair now shone with an unusual joy which is difficult to describe. This was joy free from all personal motives, a joy imbued with the pride that the ghetto was fighting.”

Every house became a fortress. Every living person became a soldier. Men were battling, women were fighting, children hurled themselves in front of armed vehicles.

They fought the bombers and tanks with homemade rifles and bare fists. They fought from street to street, from house to house, from bunker to bunker. They fought with teeth and nails. They took life for life. They fought on the rooftops and in the sewers... The starved and emaciated remnant of our people rose from the dust and turned into a towering giant.

The Germans introduced airplanes into the battle. Yet, as night fell, Stroop was compelled to again withdraw his troops from the ghetto. Among the Jews, the mood was one of pride and tension. On that fantastic *Pesach* night, Jews sat down in the bunkers to celebrate the traditional Seder of our ancestors' miraculous liberation from slavery. Thus passed the first day of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. On several strategic buildings, blue and white flags, torn and tattered, were proudly fluttering in the wind.

Over the next few days, the German Wehrmacht, 10,000 strong, supported by tanks, heavy artillery and fighter planes, made only minor inroads into the ghetto. On the fourth day of the uprising, Stroop decided to avoid any further confrontations with the Jewish fighters as much as possible. Instead, he set the ghetto aflame in several places. Huge fires raged in the ghetto, the likes of which had not been perpetrated since Nero burned Rome. This gruesome change in the ghetto situation was described as follows in a communiqué issued by the Jewish Fighting Organization:

“Thursday large-scale fires engulfed our streets. The fires were started by the demolition and incendiary detachments of the German artillery. Columns of smoke are hanging over the ghetto and are growing larger by the hour. The force with which the fire is raging is indescribably fierce. The ghetto streets are enveloped in a thick, corroding smoke... Realizing that in armed combat they will not crush the resistance of the Jewish fighters, the Germans decided to destroy them by fire. Thousands of women and children are being burned alive in these houses. Horrible cries and calls for help are heard from the flaming buildings. People, enveloped in flames, leap from the windows like live torches.”

On the fifth day, Stroop reported to his superiors: “The operation will be completed this very day.”

He was wrong.

That same day, Mordechai Anielewicz sent the following letter to *Antek* (*nom de guerre* of Yitzhak Zuckerman), his representative on the Aryan side of the city:

“I wish to express my own feelings and the feelings of my comrades. What we have lived through here is entirely beyond description. All we know is that what has happened has surpassed our most daring expectations... What we have undertaken is of tremendous significance.”

On the 12th day of the fighting, an observer on the Aryan side noted in his secret diary: “It seems that the heroic struggle is nearing its end. The fires continue to rage and the armed resistance grows weaker, owing to exhaustion and the enemy’s superior forces.”

But surprisingly, on that very same day, new fighting broke out in the ghetto. Jewish fighting groups suddenly appeared in places where nothing had happened before. On Priejard Street, a group set fire to a Wehrmacht warehouse. The area resounded with the thunder of shooting.

Obviously, both enemy and observer proved wrong again. This time, as long as the Jews had arms, they were going to fight.

On the 20th day of the uprising, the Germans came upon the headquarters of the Jewish Fighting Organization, a large bunker on Mila 18. The fighters offered stiff resistance. They all preferred death to falling into the hands of the Nazis. Among the fallen was the leader, Mordechai Anielewicz, undaunted to the end.

The fall of Mila 18 and the death of the commander did not bring the uprising to an end. On the 25th day, when the ghetto had been razed to the ground and the Jewish Fighting Organization no longer had a high command, SS General Stroop was compelled to note in his report that new fighting had flared up with fierce stubbornness around Muranski Street.

After four weeks of continuous fighting, the ghetto, burned out and bled white, had still not capitulated. Nevertheless, Stroop sent an official report to his superiors claiming that “the former Jewish residential district no longer exists.”

Two weeks later, SS General Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger of the Ministry of Security was forced to report about new Jewish fighting units that apparently emerged from deep

bunkers wearing German uniforms, armed with pistols and hand grenades, who are “continuing their attacks and assassinations.”

As mentioned earlier, a considerable fighting unit was organized by the militant right-wing Revisionist Movement and its youth faction, Beitar, under the leadership of Pawel Frenkel, and his deputies, men with military experience: David Apfelbaum and Leon Rodal.

The headquarters of this group was at 7 Muranski Street. Above the building, two flags fluttered proudly, as SS General Stroop reported: “On the roof of the concrete building, the criminals raised the Jewish flag and the Polish flag as a signal of war against us.”

After the war, Stroop related to his cellmates in the Warsaw Mokotow Prison, where he awaited trial: “The matter of the flags was of great political and moral importance. It reminded hundreds of thousands of the possibility of revolt. It excited people and united them. Flags and national colors are instruments of combat exactly as a rapid-fire weapon, as thousands of rapid-fire weapons are.”

Reichsführer Himmler angrily shouted at him on the phone, “Stroop, you must at all costs bring down those flags.”

In the fierce battles around Muranski Street, the leading figures of the Revisionist-Beitar group fell. When Stroop was questioned in prison about which of the locations in the ghetto were most threatening to the Germans, without hesitation he singled out Muranski Street and its environs.

Yet for over 60 years, students and historians were aware only of Mila Street and Mila 18, made famous by the book by Leon Uris. Another reason for this was that the most important leaders of the Muranski Street group were all killed in battle. The time has come to pay tribute to Pawel Frenkel’s heroic group for its contribution to the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt. They finally received belated recognition through the tireless work of Moshe Arens and his book, *Flags Over the Warsaw Ghetto*.

The story of Muranski Street and the right-wing's part in the revolt had to be reconstructed from surviving eyewitnesses on the Aryan side, and from non-Jewish diaries, such as that of Alicia Katzinska, who in 1993 published her book *At the Gates of Hell*.

The non-Jewish Polish underground reported that an armed Jewish group patrolling the ghetto in June 1943 attacked a detachment of Nazi gendarmes that entered the ghetto area in broad daylight, killing three. Other reports documented sporadic Jewish attacks continuing into October 1943, six months after the momentous Passover Seder night.

One cannot help but recall:

- Nazi Germany brought Poland to its knees in 21 days.
- Within five days, Holland capitulated to the German onslaught.
- Belgium resisted 18 days.
- France − 41 days.
- It took the German Wehrmacht months to overwhelm the emaciated remnant of the Warsaw Ghetto.
- The remnant did not pretend to fight for life.
- It was a last stand for dignity and self-respect.
- They faced artillery, tanks, warplanes, and flamethrowers practically with bare hands..

Thus, the legend of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was born, on Passover 1943.

The Warsaw Ghetto lay in ruins. Only a handful of the fighters managed to escape through the sewers. But Mordechai Anielewicz was right when he said, “What we have undertaken is of tremendous significance.” For the epic fight of the ghetto fighters who defied the Nazi beast helped us to restore our self-esteem, our trust in ourselves, and our faith that the sun will rise yet again, shedding its wondrous light on the Jewish People.

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*See appendix for suggested concluding sections.*

# Tune in to the Sounds of the Past: Echoes of Last Words

*Remembering parting words of parents, fighters, leaders and inmates in the ghettos and concentration camps*

*See appendix for suggested introductory section.*

In June 1944, the Allied Expeditionary Forces landed on the shores of Normandy. The great Allied invasion of Nazi Europe had begun − and with it, a race against death for the remaining Jews under Nazi rule.

In face of stiff resistance, the Anglo-American forces were advancing in the West. The Russians were pushing forward in the East. The collapse of the Nazi Reich was imminent. Yet the ovens in the extermination camps kept burning day and night, night and day.

As the Western and Eastern fronts closed in on the Reich with increasing speed, the Nazi SS began blowing up the crematoria and destroying concentration camp records. Horrendous death marches increased in scope. The Nazis drove their victims in sub-zero weather away from the advancing Allied forces to the interior. Those who had no strength left to walk were shot on the spot.

In the last weeks of the war, ghoulish trains crossed the railway network of the crumbling Reich from one camp to another: from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, from Buchenwald to Dachau, from Dachau to Bergen-Belsen. They had but one goal: to deny their human cargo a last chance of survival.

And then came the moment of liberation, the unbelievable moment... Morning dawned, and suddenly there were no more SS, no vicious dogs, no Ukrainian guards.

For many of the remnant who had managed to survive until then, liberation came too late. For weeks after the liberation, thousands of prisoners continued to die. Starved and riddled with disease, many were beyond help. Others, learning of the fate of their loved ones, no longer had any desire to live, or the strength to begin again.

Not until it was too late for some did the Allied doctors make the terrible discovery that many had died whose lives could have been saved. They had been too weak to call out or to lift an arm, and so had been left to lie unnoticed under piles of corpses.

Liberation − the End of the War in Europe − May 8, 1945

Listen! Listen!

Across the oceans of time, across the distance of years
comes the echo of the deafening roar:

Walls tumbling,
Trains rattling,
Bones splitting in the heat of fire…

Deafening echoes of a deafening roar…

And, from the eye of the storm, a voice

Not like that of a person.
A voice of a people.
A voice of incomprehension.

At first muted, then rising to a crescendo

Rising heavenward…
Rising, rising,
Yet beating at the eardrums of those yet on earth.
The whole world that was full of God's glory
Is now full of the voice.
Imploring, pleading, begging
In horrendous disbelief:

My God! My God!
Why did You forsake me?... Why are You so far from saving me?...
Why so deaf to my outcry?

My God! I call You during the day, but You answer not;
I call You at night, but You offer no rest.

Yet, You are considered holy... enshrined amidst the praises of Israel.

Our ancestors trusted in You, and You did deliver them.

They cried unto You and You saved them.
You did not allow them to be put to shame.

But me: I am turned into a worm, no longer human: an object despised.

They scorn me, they mock me –
yes, they mock my very trust in You,
the great God, Helper and Deliverer.

...So where are You when distress abounds and there is none to help me?

Where are You when dogs have encompassed me, lions beset me, and throngs of the wicked have closed in all about me?

Where are You when my strength is gone, when my heart is made to melt like wax, when the dust of death begins covering me?

Where are You when my skin has become transparent and my bones can be counted: when my possessions are divided, and for my garment they cast lots?

Where are You? O my God!

*Eli, Eli, Lama Azavtani*

Words and music: Jacob Sandler/traditional

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE95WpTS3WI

(Performed by Eli Henig)

Listen! Listen!

Across the oceans of time
comes yet another, stranger sound − the echo of deafening silence!

Jews are made homeless by the millions
and the world's response − deafening silence!

Jews are dehumanized
and the world's response − deafening silence!

Jews are gassed in moving vans and specially constructed gas chambers
and the world's response − deafening silence!
Men, women, and children are burned alive only because they are Jews
and the world's response − once again, deafening silence!

The world doesn't wish to hear.
The world doesn't wish to see.
On the day of our trouble, the world is hiding.
*Briedelech*, Brothers,
In the face of this callous, apathetic, indifferent, and hostile world,
Let us not collapse,
Let us not lose courage,
Let us not throw our arms up in despair,
Let us not fold our hands in dejection and despondence!

Listen! Listen!…
Across the oceans of time,
Across the distance of years comes the echo of sweetness and trust.
Amidst a world spewing fire and brimstone
Innocent voices sang of beauty, harmony, and love.

What wondrous trust!
What splendid faith!

...When the Creator of the Universe chose to disregard
the odor of burning flesh
and the sight of human torches –

His children − incredulous of evil −
Sang songs of praise to God's world, beautiful and wondrous.

*Eli, Eli,*
My God, My God,
*Shelo yigamer l'olam,*
May this beautiful world never end,
Not the sea,
Not the sand,
Not the murmuring waters,
Not the flash in the sky,
Not the prayer of man!

Thus mused the innocents
even as their world was collapsing
and the very flash they so admired in the flaming skies,
over sea and sand and murmuring waters
Seared them
tortured them
burnt them to cinders
and devoured them…

*Halicha b'Kesarya -- Eli, Eli, Shelo Yigamer Le'olam*

Words: Hannah Senesh; Music: David Zehavi

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipo7923nFU0

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

Many summers and many winters have passed.

Many years of wandering in the wilderness and eventual homecoming, of attempting to settle back into our three-dimensional existence and allowing the fourth − incomprehensible dimension − to fade.

Who could live with that fourth dimension?

Who could live with a dimension of Planet Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, Majdanek

and Treblinka, Sobibor and Chelmno −

where time-spans are skewed

where space is measured differently

and the breathing apparatus has to be adapted to the

suffocating, clinging odor of burning flesh?

Q: Do you know how one says “never” in camp slang?
A: *“Morgen fruh”* − tomorrow morning…

Many times, the meadows have bloomed with precious flowers, and many times, migratory birds on the wing have made their roundtrip journeys to suitable climes.

And we −
We would so love to give our spirit rest
after such a long stretch of time living with that fourth dimension.
Just to sit back, comfortably,
to enjoy the burst of color on the landscape or on the screen,
delighting in the caroling of birds,
in the waves of the ocean as they playfully crash, foaming,
against the rocks on the shore…

Perhaps, after so many years, there is no contradiction,
and there is no shame if we enjoy life.
And there is no reason for guilt
If we do enjoy life,
If we are exuberant about life
While remaining tuned to the sounds of the past…

Listen! Listen!...
Across the oceans of time,
Across the distance of years
Comes the echo of Last Words.

Last words whispered,
Last words written.
Last words proclaimed,
Last words sung.

Last words. The last testament. A legacy.

## LAST WORDS IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

The ghetto was established by the ingenious Germans on Rosh Hashana 1940. Half a million Jews were sealed within walls. A third of the city's population was crammed into less than three percent of the total area of the city. Within a year and a half, 80,000 of the Jews in the ghetto died of starvation and typhus. The Germans were not satisfied; the Jews were dying too slowly.

On July 20, 1942, Dr. Adam Czerniakow, President of the *Judenrat*, was informed that mass expulsions from the ghetto would begin in two days. On July 22, Tisha b'Av, at 9:00 in the morning, several trucks with Ukrainian guards drove up to the *Judenrat* office. Lithuanian, Latvian, and German guards had cordoned off the entire ghetto. Captain Hermann Hoefle of the Extermination Division addressed Czerniakow and the members of the Council:

> Today begins the evacuation of the Jews from Warsaw. You know that there are too many Jews. To you, the *Judenrat*, I entrust carrying out this task. Should you neglect to acquit yourselves satisfactorily, you will all hang from the same rope.

The next day, Adam Czerniakow took his own life. He left a few words on a slip of paper on his desk: "Ten thousand are demanded for tomorrow, and then seven thousand each time…" And a cryptic note: "To the Last."

The last words of Adam Czerniakow in the Warsaw Ghetto. The last words of a noble spirit who preferred to die rather than send his fellow Jews to their deaths.

## LAST WORDS OF GHETTO FIGHTERS AND PARTISANS

The last words of those who had a chance to organize themselves and resist this colossal inhumanity of humankind in the twentieth century.

The last words that rang forth from buildings besieged and aflame, from trapped bunkers and hiding places.

The last words of the free who faced death without cringing:

*Anachnu po!* We are here! *Inz zemmer do!*

Never, never say that you have reached the very end…

*Jewish Partisans' Song*; Words and music: Hirsch Glick

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wgYnYSg3Zs

(Performed by Chava Alberstein)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzPShrawxLc

(Performed by Paul Robeson)

Listen and affix in your heart, these last words:

The last words of the doomed who were expected to be drained of the last drop of hope − but who defied the world with their incredible hope.

The last words of those who were to be led as if sheep to the slaughter: submissive and meek, helpless and utterly broken in spirit − but who stunned the world with their invincible spirit.

The last words of those who had no weapon at their disposal and could not hit or claw or shoot back with bullets − but who shot back with the fire of faith.

## LAST WORDS FROM THE GALLOWS

On October 7, 1944, a tremendous explosion shook Auschwitz-Birkenau. Crematorium #4 was demolished by its workers, members of the so-called "Sonderkommando." Eight hundred people broke out of the compound, heading for the forest and the nearby Vistula River. Within a day they were all hunted down by the Germans and shot. The suspected leaders and accomplices were horribly tortured and hung on the gallows in the roll call square. Among them were four young women − Esther, Ella, Regina, and Rosa − who painstakingly smuggled minute quantities of dynamite in the course of the months to the Sonderkommando. Rosa Robota was the main link. In the face of the most sadistic torture employed by the German inquisitors, she betrayed no one.

Her last message to her comrades was *Chazak v'ematz!* − Be strong and of good courage! She hoped for the early liberation of her people as the Allied forces were approaching. And she hoped to be the last one to be hanged in Auschwitz.

Indeed, there was just one more hanging to take place, also linked to the revolt of the Sonderkommando. Here is an eyewitness account:

Night. We are marched out into the roll call square. All the prisoners. All the inmates. In the crude glare of the searchlight, we see the well-known profile of the gallows. Music from the band. The *kapos* report presence. Everybody is accounted for. Finally, the condemned man is brought out into the blaze of the searchlight.

Last month, one of the crematoria at Birkenau was blown up. None of us knows exactly how it was done. The fact remains that a few hundred men at Birkenau, helpless and exhausted slaves like us, found in themselves the strength to act, to express their hatred.

The man who is to die in front of us today in some way took part in the revolt. They say he had contacts with the rebels of Birkenau, that he carried arms into our camp. He is to die today before our very eyes, and perhaps the Germans do not understand that this solitary death, this man's death which has been reserved for him, will bring him glory, not infamy.

A German speaks angrily into the dark and hostile air for a long time.

*“Habt ihr verstanden?* − Have you understood?” − he barks.

Who answered *“Jawohl?”*

Everybody and nobody; it was as if our cursed resignation took body by itself, as if it turned into a collective voice above our heads.

But everyone heard the cry of the doomed man; it pierced through the old thick barriers of inertia and submissiveness, and it struck the living core of man in each of us:

*“Kamaraden, ich bin der Letzte!* − Comrades, I am the last one!"

The last one, who from the gallows, with the noose around his neck, wished to extend comfort to his doomed brethren…

The last one, who from the gallows, flung a challenge at us:

> Let me be the last one!
>
> *“Ich bin der Letzte!”*

Be men! Be strong! Do not break!

The last one -- with the last words from the gallows of Auschwitz.

**LAST WORDS AT “SELECTION”**

In the camp, all knew what “selection" meant.

It was the Great Divide between the known and the unknown, between the evanescent, fleeting moment and eternity, between life and death.

FROM THE DIARY OF AN AUSCHWITZ INMATE: "One feels the selections arriving. *Selekoja*: the hybrid Latin and Polish word is heard once, twice, many times, in Polish, Italian, French, Hungarian, Yiddish, Russian, Greek conversations. At first, we cannot distinguish it, then it forces itself on our attention, and in the end, it persecutes us.

"The arrival of winter always signals the arrival of *selekoja*. When we saw the first flakes of snow, we thought that if at the same time last year, they had told us that we would have seen another winter in *Lager*, we would have gone and touched the electric wire fence; even now we would go if we were logical, were it not for this last, senseless, crazy residue of unavoidable hope.

"Nobody knows anything definite, but all speak about it. The atmosphere of the *Lager* is filled with *selekoja*. The fight against hunger, cold, and work leaves little margin for thought, but everyone in his own way tries to find a way out. Comrades reassure one another: 'You'll be all right. It will certainly not be your turn this time... *du bist kein Muselmann...* (You are not a Muselmann, someone who has given up); more likely it will be my turn.'

"Everybody expects it. Everyone knows it is coming. But then the bell is heard, and at that moment we realize it has arrived. We are up for selection."

Many other fathers, mothers, and grandparents crossed that great divide at "selection" between life and death. And they went, with hundreds, thousands, millions of others. The road to God in Heaven in 1944 led through the disinfection room, the shower, and the long funnel discharging ashes and smoke heavenward from the crematoria.

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Father and son at the selection are arraigned in judgment before the omnipotent German judges: Son − to the right! Father − to the left! Son: For the known, for life, to continue the evanescent twilight existence that holds out hope for yet another moment. Father: For eternity, the great unknown of death.

As the father crosses the great divide, he leans over to his son and whispers:

"My son, say *Kaddish* for me. *Mein zun, zug Kaddish far mir."*

The last words. The legacy.

The voice of the father, multiplied six million-fold, echoing through space and time:

Our sons, our children, say *Kaddish* for us!

*Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabbah…*

Mourner's *KADDISH*

*Ani ma'amin b'emuna sheleima b'viyat hamashi'ach*

"I believe in perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah. Even though he be delayed in his coming, nevertheless, I shall continue to believe."

These words were written by the great Jewish scholar, Moses Maimonides, over 800 years ago. However, what made the words immortal is the melody attached to them.

The melody was born in a cattle car on the way from Warsaw to Treblinka. Packed in the wagon at the *Umschlagsplatz* of the Warsaw Ghetto, in a standing position, a mass of living flesh was squeezed tightly together. It was hard to breathe. Everyone was bathed in sweat. In the darkness, despair gripped everyone's heart. Gloom reigned supreme. And then a barely audible voice began humming a melody*: "A..ni ma'a...min, ani ma'amin..."* Before long, others picked it up, and then more voices joined in, and more, and more. The melody developed and spread throughout the wagon, carried on wings of suffering and pain, overcoming despair.

The composer of the melody was a little-known chazan (cantor) from Warsaw who, upon arrival at Treblinka, marched with the rest of the group to the gas chambers. Within an hour, their bodies were consigned to the flames, but his melody, which the group triumphantly sang on the path the Germans called *Himmelstrasse* − Heaven's Street in Treblinka − endured. One person of the group survived, and the melody of hope, born in the lowest depths of hell, was bequeathed to us as a final testament of a wagonload of Jews who carried their faith to the very end − or who were carried by their faith to the very end – faith that better days are in store for our people and our world. *Ani Ma'amin.*

*Ani Ma'amin* Words based on the Rambam. Music: Azriel David Fastag

www.zemereshet.co.il/song.asp?id=524 (various versions)



*Hatikvah* -- Israeli National Anthem

Words: Naphtali Herz Imber; Music: Samuel Cohen (based on Smetana)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQCu9kl68Tg (IDF)



*See appendix for additional suggested concluding sections.*

# Appendices

**APPENDIX A:** Suggested Guide

**APPENDIX B:** Suggested Introductory Sections

**APPENDIX C:** Suggested Concluding Sections

**APPENDIX D:** Possible Anniversary Topics in this Volume

**APPENDIX E:** Selected Bibliography

**APPENDIX A:** Suggested Guide

As mentioned in the Introduction, all programs in this anthology were successfully presented at Congregation Bet Israel in Netanya. This is how the programs were run:

Six to ten capable volunteer readers were recruited to recite different parts of the programs. In some cases, entire paragraphs or sections dealing with a specific topic were read by one reader. At other points in the programs, readers alternated from line to line, to heighten the drama. Here and there, a song was introduced. (We used live performers, but you might choose otherwise. Since most of the songs we used − like many songs of the Shoah − are in Yiddish, consider our songs as strictly optional.)

Copies of the program were made for all readers with parts divided among them, and they met with the leader for at least one full rehearsal. The rehearsal allowed each reader to know where they come in, and where they should be seated on the podium in order to reach their microphone without delay in the flow of the program.

**OUTLINE OF THE GENERAL SUGGESTED STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMS:**

Responsive reading and opening song

Body of the specific thematic program

"We salute," and the special *Kaddish*

Lighting of six candles

The memorial prayers (Yizkor)

*Ani Ma'amin* and *Hatikvah*

1. Each program opens with an introductory responsive reading that invites audience participation. The reading is best copied and distributed to attendees. The program leader announces: “Welcome. We will begin our program with the responsive reading in your hands. Please respond loud and clear after me.”

2. As described above, the body of the program is best subdivided among various readers. The programs include optional songs, with links to one possible version as currently available on the internet. A singer or singers in Yiddish and Hebrew would be ideal to perform the recommended songs, although other songs that fit the theme can be substituted.

3. Each program ends with a special Kaddish for the Six Million. This requires two participants, one to chant the Kaddish phrase by phrase (the melody of the *Yom Kippur “Ne'ilah” Kaddish* is recommended), the other to call out the corresponding names of the ghettos, cities, and extermination camps. The last phrase can mention the specific place or theme of the program. (From this point, participants can be asked to rise.)

4. Lighting of six memorial candles: Ideally, each candle should be lit by a survivor or someone from the second or third generation, chosen and prepared in advance (good to prepare back-ups as well); they had best be ready and near at hand from the start of the program. For the candle-lighting, turn off all lights, call each person by name − one at a time − and briefly give basic information on their connection to the Shoah (e.g., relatives' place of origin, deportation details, ultimate fate, etc.). After lighting their candle, they stand behind them until the end of the program.

5. Special Yizkor memorial prayers should be recited at this point in Hebrew and in your local language, preferably by two different people. Ideally, the lights are still dimmed and the readers are equipped with small flashlights.

6. Lights back on, conclude with the singing of *Ani Ma’amin* and *Hatikvah.*

The above is the suggested framework for the programs.

**APPENDIX B:** Suggested Introductory Sections

Responsive Reading for the Six Million murdered in the Holocaust

*Es Brent*

# Responsive Reading
# for the Six Million murdered in the Holocaust

**LEADER:** We gather here today to commemorate and honor the Six Million.

**ALL:** Six million innocent men, women and children murdered in the Shoah.

**L:** The Nazis killed them for only one reason: because they were Jews.

**A:** The perverted Nazi mind declared the Jew a threat to the purity of humanity, a threat to humankind.

**L:** The people who gave the world the Ten Commandments and the moral laws − a threat to the purity of humanity?

**A:** They who gave the world some of its greatest thinkers − a threat to humankind?

**L:** As a subhuman species, they were to be eliminated: Shot, hanged, drowned or choked to death by Zyklon-B gas.

**A:** By torture, slow starvation, by fire or by being buried alive − the stain of the Jew was to be wiped off the face of the earth.

**L:** But here we are; remembering with sadness and pride: ghetto fighters and partisans, and martyrs who marched to their deaths with heads held high.

**A:** We will never forget their sacrifice, heroism, devotion, and dedication.

**L:** They wanted to live as Jews. But if this was not granted them, let them know that thanks to them and despite the Nazis – Israel, Judaism and the Jewish People live on.

**TOGETHER:** REMEMBER, NOW AND FOREVER, PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AND PEOPLE OF GOOD-WILL EVERYWHERE!

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***ES BRENT***

Can't you see, dear brothers,
Our village is aflame,
Billowing smoke equally smothers
Rich and poor, fit and lame.

Stones are cracking, walls are splitting −
Listen to the deafening roar.
Pleading, trembling, shaking, falling,
Our warm homes are no more.

On the streets, tender ones roam
Gripped by despair, loss and trouble,
Bereft of food, bereft of home
Searching 'midst piles of rubble.

Devoured by the raging fire
We seem ready for the butcher's knife.
No, brother! Do not tire!
Rise to hope! Rise to life!

*Es Brent* (Our Village is Burning)
Words and music: Mordecai Gebirtig
www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XFQxLLEYvg
(Performed by Dudu Fisher)



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**APPENDIX C:** Suggested Concluding Section

With pride we salute…

Mourner's *Kaddish*

Lighting of six candles

Yizkor memorial prayers

*Ani Ma'amin*

*Hatikvah*

With pride we salute – *YITGADAL*,

With gratitude we remember – *YITKADASH*,

The victims who were murdered because they were Jews,

In _____ and many other sites of genocidal massacres.

The men and women of the slave labor camps,

The old and the young of the ghettos and shtetls,

The tortured in the camps of extermination,

Those who died fighting in the forests and cities and undergrounds.

They left us a legacy entwined in eternity,

Made more fertile by their pain,

Made richer by their blood…

Destined to endure as long as God on high shall endure…

*YITGADAL VEYITKADASH SH'MEI RABAH…*

Mourner's *KADDISH*

*Yitgadal* – Dachau

*V'yitkadash* – Theresienstadt

*Sh'mei rabah* – Sobibor

*B'olma divra chir'utei* – Treblinka

*V'yamlich malchutei* – Majdanek

*B'chayechon* – Fort Nine, Kovno

*U'vyomechon* – Belzec

*U'vechayei d'chol Beit Yisrael* – Chelmno

*Ba'agala u'vizman kariv* – Bergen-Belsen

*V'imru, Amen* – Auschwitz

*Y'hei shmei rabah m'vorach l'olam u'leolmei olmaya.*

*Yitbarach v'yishtabach* – Babi Yar, Kiev

*V'yitpa'ar v'yitromam v'yitnaseh* – Mauthausen

*V'yithadar* – Buchenwald

*V'yitaleh v'yithalal* – Warsaw

*Sh'mei d'kudesha, b'rich hu* – Kamenetz-Podolsk

*L'eilah* – Drancy

*Mikol birchata v'shirata* – Minsk

*Tushbechata v'nechemata* – Ponar, Vilna

*Da'amiran b'olma* – Birkenau

*V'imru, Amen* – Ravensbruck / exchange with one of the above

**Lighting of Six Candles**

***YIZKOR AM YISRAEL***

O People of Israel! Remember the holy congregations in the lands of our dispersion, that were uprooted and destroyed; our slain brothers and sisters who were tormented with all possible tortures of body and soul, in the concentration camps; who were maimed in public, on streets and in marketplaces; who were led to slaughter on death trains, buried alive, burned in holy sanctuaries with Scrolls of the *Torah*; who were butchered, drowned, shot, gassed, or hung; whose honor was profaned, and whose blood was spilled by unclean hands. Remember – they died *Al Kiddush Hashem*, for the sanctification of God's Name!

O People of Israel! Remember your beloved children, pure and innocent, torn from the bosoms of their mothers by savages, and led like lambs to the slaughter; who were put to death by a variety of means conceived by evil minds; who were left lying naked, in heaps along ghetto streets… infants and sucklings who, in front of their parents, were smashed against stone walls, cast out of windows, or tied in sacks and thrown alive from bridges into rivers – whose lives were nipped in the bud by cruel hands. Remember them! They died *Al Kiddush Hashem*, for the sanctification of God's Name!

## יזכור

יִזְכּוֹר עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת קְהִילוֹת הַקּוֹדֶשׁ בְּאַרְצוֹת הַגּוֹלָה שֶׁנֶּעֱקְרוּ, שֶׁנֶּחְרְבוּ וְשֶׁנִּמְחֲקוּ... אֶת בָּנָיו וּבְנוֹתָיו הַמּוּמָתִים, קָרְבְּנוֹת מַמְלֶכֶת הָרֶשַׁע, שֶׁעֻנּוּ עִנּוּיֵי גּוּף וְנֶפֶשׁ בְּמַחֲנוֹת הָהֶסְגֵּר, שֶׁגֹּרְשׁוּ לְאֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה וְלֹא נוֹדְעוּ עִקְבוֹתֵיהֶם, שֶׁנִּרְצְחוּ בְּהָמוֹן בַּשְּׁוָקִים וּבַרְחוֹבוֹת, שֶׁהוּבְלוּ לָטֶבַח בְּקִרוֹנוֹת-מָוֶת, שֶׁנִּקְבְּרוּ חַיִּים, שֶׁנִּשְׂרְפוּ בְּהֵיכְלֵי הַקּוֹדֶשׁ עַל גְּוִילֵי הַתּוֹרָה, שֶׁנִּשְׁחֲטוּ, שֶׁנּוֹרוּ וְשֶׁנֶּחְנְקוּ, שֶׁחֻלַּל כְּבוֹדָם וְשֶׁפַךְ דָּמָם בְּיָדַיִם טְמֵאוֹת ־ וְשֶׁמָּסְרוּ נַפְשָׁם עַל קִידּוּשׁ ה׳.

יִזְכּוֹר עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת יַלְדֵי מַחְמַדָּיו, טְהוֹרִים בְּנֵי טְהוֹרִים, שֶׁנִּגְזְלוּ מֵחֵיק הוֹרֵיהֶם בִּידֵי חַיּוֹת-אָדָם, וְהוּבְלוּ לָטֶבַח... שֶׁנֶּעֶרְפוּ וְהוּמְתוּ בְּמִיתוֹת מְשֻׁנּוֹת, וְנֶעֶרְמוּ עֲרֵמוֹת-עֲרֵמוֹת בִּרְאֹשׁ חוּצוֹת... עוֹלָלִים וְיוֹנְקִים שֶׁנֶּפְצוּ אֶלֵי-קִיר, שֶׁשֻּׁמְּטוּ מֵחוֹמוֹת, נִזְרְקוּ בְּעַד חַלּוֹנוֹת, אוֹ הֻשְׁלְכוּ חַיִּים בְּשַׂקִּים לְמִצּוּלוֹת נְהָרוֹת, שֶׁחַיֵּיהֶם נִקְטְפוּ בְּאִבָּם בְּיָדַיִם אַכְזָרִיוֹת - עַל קִידּוּשׁ ה׳.

*Ani Ma'amin*

I believe in perfect faith

In the coming of the Messiah

And even if his coming be delayed

Nevertheless, I shall continue to believe!

*Ani Ma'amin*

Words based on the Rambam. Suggested music: Azriel David Fastag

www.zemereshet.co.il/song.asp?id=524 (various versions)



*Hatikvah*: Israeli National Anthem

Words: Naphtali Herz Imber; Music: Samuel Cohen (based on Smetana)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQCu9kl68Tg (IDF)



**APPENDIX D:** Possible Anniversary Topics in This Volume

If you are looking for a program to commemorate an anniversary of specific events during the Holocaust, the following lists the programs in this volume according to the years in which major events described therein took place:

**1939:** Mielitz, Warsaw

**1940:** Warsaw, Last Words

**1941:** Resistance*, Babi Yar, Terezin, Minsk, Vilna, Warsaw

**1942:** Resistance*, Minsk, Sobibor, Vilna, Warsaw

**1943:** Resistance*, Bergen Belsen, Sobibor, Vilna, Warsaw

**1944:** Resistance*, Bergen Belsen, Terezin, Last Words

**1945:** Resistance*, Bergen-Belsen, Last Words

** Resistance refers to the program "Like Sheep to Slaughter"*

Similarly, for programs in Volume 2:

**1938:** Mauthausen, God and Shoah

**1939:** Mauthausen, Looking Back

**1940:** Denmark, Mauthausen

**1941:** Fort Nine, Mauthausen, Looking Back

**1942:** Looking Back, God and Shoah, Wannsee, Spirit and Soul

**1943:** Denmark, Fort Nine, Mauthausen

**1944:** Chana Szenesh, Mauthausen

**1945:** Anniversary of Liberation, Mauthausen, Looking Back

**APPENDIX E:** Selected Bibliography

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Jozef Garlinski (1975). *Fighting Auschwitz.* Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications.

Yisrael Gutman & Chaim Schatzker (1984). *The Holocaust and Its Significance.* Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center.

Raul Hilberg (1961). *The Destruction of the European Jews.* Chicago: Quadrangle Books.

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Gerald Reitlinger (1961). *The Final Solution.* New York: Perpetua/A.S. Barnes & Co.

Lucy Y. Steinitz & David M. Szonyi, Eds. (1975). *Living After the Holocaust: Reflections by Children of Survivors in America* (2nd ed.) New York: Bloch Publishing Company.

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Irene Tomaszewski & Tecia Werbowski (2010). *Code Name: Zegota. Rescuing Jews in Occupied Poland 1942-1945.* Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

# Acknowledgments

This anthology would not have materialized without the dedication of my son, Dr. Aiton Birnbaum, the strong support of his mother, Hadassa, and his brothers Liel Biran and Daniel Birnbaum. (Though Aiton is a clinical psychologist and an expert in the treatment of trauma, I hope that he was not overly traumatized by the months of exposure to the material.) My wife, Hadassa, was first to suggest publishing the programs, provided the impetus, and put in the initial effort to collect them. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Sincere thanks also go to Janice Gaines, who insisted that these programs reach a wider audience; to Natalie Guerin, who, by typing all the programs, actually got the project off the ground; to Elisheva Lahav, our excellent professional editor; to Gali Achituv for expert help with the Hebrew Yizkor; to my beloved granddaughter Meshi for designing the book's website; to Batya Fonda and Naomi Kailisch, who sang with such feeling; to Nadia Fridkovsky on the keyboard; to all the talented volunteer readers from Congregation Bet Israel in Netanya, who presented these and other programs so ably, and to all the Bet Israel members who attended our Holocaust Memorial Day Programs and enthusiastically endorsed publishing them. My heartfelt appreciation to you all, and I apologize if I neglected to mention anyone else who helped during the 30-odd years of this endeavor. I believe that together we made a contribution to our community, which can now help others commemorate the Shoah and remember the Six Million, thus helping to ensure, hopefully, that such horrors will never again be repeated.

# About the Author

Ervin Birnbaum was born in 1929 in the city of Kosice, Czechoslovakia. He was the youngest of three boys, and the extended family was strongly connected. The family home adjoined that of his paternal grandparents, and he spent the happy summers and vacations of his childhood with his maternal grandparents in the village of Lipiany. When WWII broke out, his father helped many Jewish refugees, especially from Poland, to obtain false papers and avoid capture.

Tragically, the Nazis deported and murdered Ervin's grandparents and many other relatives. His parents were determined to do all they could to save their children. Ervin and his brother Miki hid with other Jews in an attic above the Kosice theater; their father made a financial arrangement with a friendly non-Jewish woman to supply them with food and water. But within days, the group received a note threatening that their location would be revealed to the Gestapo unless they deposited a large sum of money at a certain location.

Realizing that there would be no end to the blackmail, Ervin, Miki, and their cousin Shlomi risked the train ride to Budapest, hoping to hide there under assumed, non-Jewish identities. Shlomi was caught on the train, taken away, and never heard from again, but Ervin and Miki reached Budapest safely and hid out there. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, young Ervin found work at a Budapest sanatorium. Eventually he got his older brothers, Franz and Miki, jobs there too. Since their assumed identities used different surnames, they had to hide the fact that they were related, at peril of their lives. Their parents hid out in Budapest as well, separately and alone, also using false identities. Miraculously, despite several harrowing and extremely close calls, the entire nuclear family survived the Shoah, a rare achievement indeed.

After liberation, Ervin was determined to leave the blood-soaked continent of Europe behind and reach the Land of Israel, then under British control. In this effort, he led a group of young people from the Zionist *Hashomer Hatza'ir* youth movement on the "illegal" immigration ship *Exodus 1947*, attempting to breach the British blockade.

*The Exodus* was intercepted and forcibly boarded by British Navy forces after a fight at sea, resulting in several Jews being killed and many wounded. Nevertheless, the *Exodus* had a significant impact on world opinion and on the UN's decision of November 29, 1947, to partition Palestine and create a sovereign Jewish State once again, after 2,000 years of exile. Ervin tells the story here: https://tinyurl.com/54trfrkf

The British deported the passengers of the Exodus back to Germany, and Ervin ended up emigrating with his family to the USA. There he married Helen (Hadassa) Halperin, and after making up the lost war years of high school, he eventually earned a Ph.D. in Public Law and Government from Columbia University. He also studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and was ordained a Conservative rabbi, going on to serve as rabbi in Danville, Illinois, and in Rosedale, New York.

In 1970, Ervin, Hadassa, and their three boys made Aliyah to Israel; Ervin became a teacher and then principal of the English-Language High School (*Netiv Angli*) at Midreshet Sde Boker, in line with Ben Gurion's vision of a "Cambridge in the Negev." He later served as national supervisor of foreign language programs for Youth Aliyah, and Rabbi of the Bet Israel Masorti Congregation in Netanya. He also served as Director of the World Council of Conservative Judaism, and was National Supervisor for the Israel Conversion Institute. In 1989 he founded a unique NGO, *"She'arim Netanya,"* which offers multiple programs to assist the absorption of new immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union; he served as its chairman until the end, when his wife Hadassa took over to continue its good work. As an associate professor in academia, he taught courses at CUNY as well as Haifa and Moscow Universities. Along with many articles, he has published *The Islamic State of Pakistan* (Pakistani Historical Society, 1957), *The Politics of Compromise: State and Religion in Israel* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), and on the history of modern Israel − *In the Shadow of the Struggle* (Gefen Publishing House, 1990).

Ervin Birnbaum's autobiography, *Turning Obstacles into Stepping Stones* (2019), is available on Kindle. His grandson Nitzan has composed a musical reflection on his dramatic life story which can be heard here: https://nanadisc.lnk.to/SabaProject

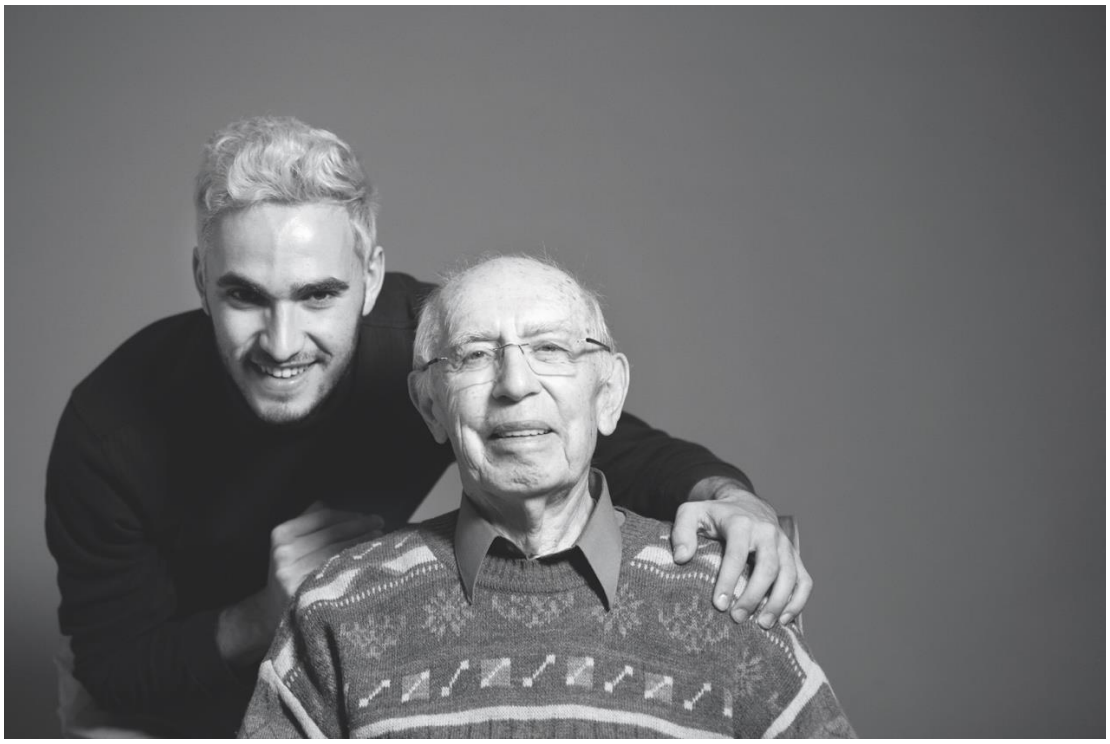


Photo with grandson Nitzan, from his "Saba Project"

In this volume, Holocaust survivor **Ervin Birnbaum** presents 10 original Holocaust Memorial programs. The book provides a resource for community leaders and educators seeking an accessible, ready-made format with compelling content for moving presentations. Fair warning: Much of the material is powerful and apt to elicit strong emotional responses in both program leaders and participants. Each program deals with a specific place or issue: Did the Jews go like sheep to the slaughter, or did they resist? Eye-witness testimonies reveal striking details of what actually happened in the major cities and ghettos of Vilna, Minsk, and Warsaw, in the towns of Terezin and Mielitz, and in the concentration camps and killing zones of Sobibor, Bergen Belsen and Babi Yar. In these programs, the actions and last words of leaders and heroes, laypersons and authors, Jews and non-Jews in the Shoah echo through time to touch our hearts and minds today.