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The Myth of Jewish Non-Resistance During the Holocaust Abraham Sutzkever: A Model of Resistance, Revenge and the Discourse Of Consolation

Barbara Wind Morcheles

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THE MYTH OF JEWISH NON-RESISTANCE
DURING THE HOLOCAUST

ABRAHAM SUTZKEVER: A MODEL OF RESISTANCE, REVENGE
and
THE DISCOURSE OF CONSOLATION

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts from the Department of Jewish-Christian Studies College of Arts and Sciences Seton Hall University South Orange, New Jersey

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DEFINITION of TERMS

According to Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary:

“Revenge comes from Old French revengier, to avenge, revenge. Its Latin root is vindicare, to lay claim, to defend, to avenge. These are the meanings of revenge: ‘To inflict harm or injury in return for; exact satisfaction for; avenge, as I will revenge the murder of my comrades . . .’

‘To avenge is to inflict punishment, either in behalf of one’s self or of others, for the sake of vindication or just retribution; to revenge is to inflict pain or injury in resentful or malicious retaliation; as to avenge the injuries of the helpless; Plato held that revenge is wrong.’”

Vengeance is “1. Punishment inflicted in return for an injury or offense; retribution; often also passionate or unrestrained revenge. 2. Harm; mischief, evil, Obs.”

Blockowa: Female Barracks commander.

Mischlinge: Someone of Aryan-Jewish “blood”.

Judenrat: Jewish Council.

Musselmänner: Muslims. In concentration camps, the word used for people who had given up the will to survive.

O.S.E., (F., Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants Israelites; Society for the Rescue of Jewish Children.) A Jewish welfare organization in France, incorporated in March, 1942, under Vichy. It became part of U.G.I.F., (F. Union General des Israelites de France, Union of French Jews) established November 29, 1941. U.G.I.F. helped Jews escape to Italy and was also a welfare organization which operated in hospitals, orphanages, old age homes and in the French concentration camps.

F.P.O., (Y., Fareynitke Partisaner Organzatsye; United Partisan organization). Vilna Ghetto Fighters’ organization established on January 21, 1942. (Vilna was occupied by the German army on June 24, 1941 and ghettoized on September 6, 1942.)

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1 Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam, 1927
Transliteration causes variants in the spelling of many words. For example, Sutzkever is sometimes spelled Sutzkever; Narocz is sometimes spelled Naroz, Narotch or Narotsch, etc. This is true, also, for other words translated from Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian and Polish.
Preface

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the following:

Firstly, my parents Sonia and Naphtali Wind who gave me life, abiding love and sustenance. Their enormous resilience and courage to endure the horrors of the Holocaust without losing hope and faith in God and in His world was, and continues to be, an inspiration.

My beloved grandmother, Hannah Tabak, the joy of my childhood, whose talent as a storyteller entertained and sustained me and who always encouraged me to “Write it down.” It took a while but I’m writing.

Father Lawrence E. Frizzell, who has been such a wonderful influence on my life and on my family. His patience and kindness are saintly in nature. For all he has given me, I owe a debt I shall never be able to repay.

Rabbi Asher Finkel, a master teacher, who makes learning the most joyous, exciting and inspiring experience imaginable.

Dr. David M. Bossman, my beloved teacher and friend whose belief in me has been such a source of comfort and strength.

Dr. Eugene Korn, a teacher who taught me so much.

Sister Rose E. Thering, my teacher, my mentor, my “sister” and “other mother” who came into my life at a God-given moment and without whom all this surely would have been impossible. An inspiring woman of valor, her unstinting support and friendship, have taken me on a journey that has enriched my life beyond measure. The only gift I can give in return is to attempt to continue her life’s work. To this, I pledge my energies.

Without what Rabbi Finkel calls “the two wings of the dove” the Sister Rose Thering Endowment and the Suzanne M. Jobert Foundation, my studies, this thesis and the work I now engage in to better Jewish-Christian relations would not have gotten off the ground.

The Holocaust survivors who shared their painful stories with me; some whose stories have been told, others who rely on me to do the telling.

Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein who, in the past two decades, taught me more than he can imagine.

Seton Hall University and its support staff, particularly its Department of Jewish-Christian Studies.

All my teachers, rabbis, colleagues, librarians.
Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher, who sparked the interest and desire to continue formal studies in the Holocaust. May his memory be for a blessing.

My friends for their understanding and affirmation.

And my husband Bernard and our children, Hillary and Brian, Amanda, Elisabeth and Drew whose continuous support and encouragement allow me devote myself to this work,

To all these I am most grateful. I feel truly blessed in health and love and I thank God for these gifts.
INTRODUCTION

Why didn’t more Jews fight? Why did so many fight?
— Elie Wiesel

I was of the generation raised on movie monsters such as Frankenstein, Godzilla, and aliens from outer space. In the war films we watched the “Krauts”, as they were called, were always beaten. On our television screens, Adolf Eichmann did not appear to be a particularly menacing figure. Balding, bespectacled, he gave the appearance of a dyspeptic accountant. If Nazis looked like that and couldn’t win the war, why hadn’t more Jews resisted? Unfortunately, that is still a question intelligent, if uninformed, people ask.

A common perception is that Jews offered little, if any, resistance to the Nazis. This is due, in great part, to how the story of the Holocaust was told. Soon after the war, the leaders of the ghetto uprisings who emigrated to Israel: Zivia Lubetkin and Abba Kovner of Vilna and Itzhak Cukierman and Ruzia Korchak of Warsaw became the voices of authority on resistance. They criticized ghetto Judenrat functionaries saying they offered passive resistance at best, and in some cases, outright complicity; also religious leaders who had counseled only (!) spiritual resistance and/or monetary arrangements to redeem their brethren. These young people, who had fought for survival when still in their teens, believed that Jews should have taken a proactive approach toward their persecutors. They accused them of having gone like “sheep to slaughter.” What gave their arguments added weight was the 1948 victory in Israel’s War of Independence. If, against all odds, so many of the Jews who survived the Holocaust, could win the that war, why hadn’t they fought the Nazis in 1939-45? Added to this argument were the misunderstandings that came out of Hannah Arendt’s phrase “the banality of evil” and Raul Hilberg’s accounts of the complicity of the Judenrats. Despite the many debates and rebuttals that sprang from their searing accusations, their words had a long-lasting effect, an effect that is still with us.

Given Israel’s emergence as a state after the War of Independence—a war which lasted a year and a half and cost the country one percent of its
population, including many Holocaust survivors— the concept of a nation of heroic fighters gave the new nation a certain cachet and galvanized Jews abroad. It also provided its citizens with a psychological boost that allowed them to think of themselves as able defenders of their hard-won land. They claimed that if they were ever again attacked they would go down fighting.

Unfortunately, the narrow view of resistance that was espoused and adopted by militants led to rejection of other forms of resistance offered during the Holocaust. It also caused many survivors, already plagued with the guilt of surviving when so many others died, to feel even guiltier for not having put up more of a fight. The ghetto fighters were considered great heroes and the day for commemorating the Holocaust became known as “Yom Ha Shoah v’ G’vurah,” the Day of the Holocaust and Heroism.

Some witnesses to the revolts in the ghettos and camps were of the opinion that much of the resistance shown was a case of “too little, too late” or a vain and usually suicidal effort, heroic but hollow. While the Warsaw Ghetto fighters did manage to keep the Germans at bay for a remarkable period of 45 days, few Jews actually survived the uprisings. The small minority who walked out of the ghettos were immediately arrested and, if not summarily killed, sent to the camps and their deaths. The few who escaped from concentration or death camps had a similarly poor chance of surviving.

In fact, survivor testimonies reveal that those who chose to fight or escape saw their actions as suicide missions whose goal was, not life, but death on their own terms. Whether active resistance would have had a significant impact on the German war machine in terms of saving Jewish lives is a moot question in view of the German stance on Stalingrad. For Hitler, using trains to send Jews to their death was a higher priority than using those trains to supply his own troops mired on the eastern front. Even when the war was irretrievably lost, Germans forced Jews out of the concentration camps and onto the death marches. In their defeat, they fervently retained the conviction that every dead Jew was a victory for Germany and the world, and squandered their depleted resources to act on it.

The “sheep like slaughter” accusation does not take into account much of Europe’s acquiescence to Hitler. German troops met little opposition when they entered Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and France. They conquered Poland in days. Other European countries with armies also fell to the Germans. Jews had no army. They were part of the occupied populaces,
often at the mercy of those in that populace who collaborated with the Nazis. Yet, the prevailing opinion in the two decades that followed the Holocaust, was that Jews had been too passive.

Ironically, the accusation hurled by the ghetto fighters was an echo of the rhetoric Hitler used in the wake of the defeat of Germany in the World War I. Richard A. Koeningsberg theorizes that the Germans saw Hitler as a liberator who could free them from the hardships and shame they suffered as a result of their defeat in W.W.I.² He writes, "The struggle against passivity is a central theme in Hitler’s ideology." Koeningsberg deems the following passages the classic language of revolutionary liberation: "The world must know that the time is past when the German people could be oppressed, subjugated, and dishonored, and further, that the time will never return. "³ and "Come what may, Germany will stand firm, she will not bow, she will never again submit."⁴ and "The state . . . on November 9, 1918, unconditionally crawled on its belly before Marxism."⁵

Another possible factor in strengthening the impression that Jews were passive during the Holocaust was the relatively few acts of vengeance that took place after liberation. There were avengers and they did hunt down and kill individuals who had been responsible for torturing them or killing their loved ones. Some even concocted grand schemes of vengeance which included an attempt at poisoning Berlin’s water supply. In Dachau, nearly two thousand German former soldiers were poisoned as an act of revenge. But these were the exceptions to the rule. Had Jews committed more massive acts of violent retaliation, the charge that Jews were meek as lambs before the slaughterer might not have stuck.

The charge of Jewish passivity is a classic case of the "damned if you do, damned if you don’t" approach to the problem of the Holocaust that arose to serve several purposes. One of them was the psychological convenience of blaming the victim. Shifting responsibility eases a perpetrator’s conscience. It also relieves the guilt of fellow-victims who organized resistance organizations after much damage had already been done. Certainly, the

³ Ibid., (Baynes, p.1150).
⁵ Carol Rittner, editor, Anne Frank In The World, New York: M.E. Sharp, 1998. (Leo Goldberg, Psychological Reflections on Courage, p. 64.)
Judenrats smoothed the way for annihilating the Jews but this was hardly collaboration as it is normally defined; they were pawns in an incremental assault. In a time when armed nations willingly appeased Hitler, it is unfair and unjust to accuse even the most misguided of these leaders of betrayal. Certainly, treachery and corruption existed in the ghettos (as it did, and continues to exist, everywhere,) and the charge addressed the rage of the victims. However, even Chaim Rumkowski, "King Chaim", the corrupt and megalomaniacal chairman of the Lodz Ghetto, retained the hope of being able to save a remnant of his people. In terms of armed resistance, the uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto in April, 1943 was the first mass open rebellion against Nazi Germany in all Europe.

The Old Testament includes the military history of pre-Rabbinic Judaism. Jews, then, did not shy away from battle. On the contrary, after the Exodus from Egypt, they are portrayed as valiant soldiers, entering the promised land as a conquering army. (Centuries later, Israelites were employed as foreign mercenaries.) Many attribute the destruction of both the first and second Temples to the armed resistance of Jews to Greek and Roman rule. In the first century of the common era, after the devastating Bar Kochba Wars, the rabbis drafted an edict forbidding Jews to engage in warfare. This they may have paved the way for the stereotype of the Jew as timid. But the intent of the edict was to insure survival of future generations and despite the Crusades, the Inquisition and numerous pogroms, Judaism did survive. As a minority living in Christendom (or under Muslim rule) its adherents were burdened by what Jules Isaac terms the "teaching of contempt" and treated as a sub-class. A Jew who raised a sword or gun against a Christian or Muslim, either in his own defense or in retaliation, rarely survived.

The Yiddish writer Mendel Mocher Seforim published a spoof on Don Quixote, Travels and Adventure of Benjamin III, in which two shtetl Jews set out to find the lost tribes of Israel. They get drafted into the Czar's Army, try to escape, get caught and are put on trial. In their own defense they say: "We want to tell you that we don't know a thing about waging war, that we never did know, and never want to know. We are, praised be the Lord, married men; our thoughts are devoted to other things; we haven't the least interest

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6 Babylonian Talmud: Ketuboth.
in anything to do with war." Conditioned to multiplicities of passive resistance for nearly two millennia, it is little wonder that more Jews did not fight the Nazis.

In the context of its time, it is not surprising that so few Jews resisted active combat. In the past they had survived, by emigrating or offering concessions to their persecutors, including wearing defining items of clothing, living in restricted areas, engaging in a limited number of occupations and paying the special taxes imposed on Jews. History taught that survival was possible under this system. In fact, although Jews were considered a sub-caste, they usually fared better than the peasant class and often thrived.

At the beginning of Nazi rule it seemed, as indicated in Hitler's rhetoric, that their social position and economic survival were severely threatened. The passage of the Nuremberg Laws was painful and costly to the assimilated Jews, some of whose families had lived in Germany for nearly a millennium. However, as Anti-Semitism had always existed in Europe, it wasn't a revolutionary event. Hitler had initially received little more than a third of the vote in a democratic election. Few expected he would remain in power; fewer expected that his ideology would subvert rationality and that he really intended genocide. The word, "genocide" had not yet entered popular parlance. (It was coined by Dr. Raphael Lemkin, an attorney who emigrated to the United States.) In June, 1939, the 906 passengers of the St. Louis voted, overwhelmingly, to return to Germany when faced with the option of sailing to Japan, the only country that offered them sanctuary. Dr. Manfred Hecht, a psychoanalyst who fled Vienna, says, "At the beginning of the War, to have believed that the Germans actually intended to exterminate all the Jews would have been considered a form of psychosis." The war ostensibly began as the German quest for the restoration of her honor, which was contingent on territorial and ethnic sovereignty.

Nevertheless, organized Jewish resistance groups sprang up everywhere. To survive in the ghettos, the forests, "underground" and especially in the concentration and death camps was to endure torture – in one form or another – on a daily basis. All who survived resisted death at the hands of the murderers. Their struggle was to continue after liberation. In the aftermath of the war, all survivors were mourners and displaced people. Poor health was an additional handicap. All suffered some form of Post
Traumatic Stress Syndrome. (Most survivors still do.) Yet their
determination to live remained.

What bears emphasis is that many prisoners, even those who had been
in the camps for a length of time, who had seen and smelled the smoke, did
not or could not realize that they were slated for death. The instinct to
survive, even in the face of imminent death, is extremely powerful and
prepares victims to cling to the slimmest possibilities that they will live. Lies
were told to incoming prisoners to assure that they would be lulled into
tractability. Nazis considered deception a vital element in the annihilation
process and went to great trouble to further the ruse, including: the infamous
slogan on the gates of the camps; signs warning of the consequences of poor
hygiene and insurgents; camp orchestras. Prisoners, charged with herding the
arrivals off the trains and into specified areas for processing were forbidden to
reveal the truth of the situation.

Jews were also determined to resist the "silent" denial of the Holocaust.
(In the earliest documentary films, made by the U.S. Army of the DP camps,
the word Jew is not even mentioned.) It took years of persistent effort before
survivors' voices would be heard by the world at large. The reasons for this
are varied, complex and almost unbelievable in view of the subsequent
interest in all phases of World War II. However, the fact remains: Elie Wiesel
and Primo Levi endured rejection of their memoirs by publishers. It took
them – and many other survivors – years to get their books published.

Section I of the thesis deals with resistance and the myth that Jews did
not attempt to resist annihilation by the Nazis. Section II is an analysis of
vengeance and the transmutation of it into a discourse of consolation. Section

III focuses on the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever, a model of both
resistance during the war and afterwards, in terms of resuscitating the
language and culture of the murdered Jews, as well as an exemplar who
sublimated his desire for vengeance into a discourse of consolation.
SECTION

II

RESISTANCE
CHAPTER

1

RESIST WHAT?

"They expect the worst–they do not expect the unthinkable."
– Charlotte Delbo 7

The law of averages leads to the expectation that any given society will contain a number of sociopaths. One cannot conceive that an entire society – the archetype of Western culture – would behave as a nation of sociopaths. More than thirty-two thousand Jews were killed in two days at Babi Yar. Not by bombs or gassing or fire but by bullets. Bullets fired by individuals in Einsatzgruppe C which later came under the efficient command of Ernst Biberstein. Biberstein had been a Protestant pastor until he joined the S.S. in 1936.

LIES

Kill every Jew?
Propaganda, lies
Everyone knows
The Germans are civilized. 8

Germans had earned a reputation as cultured, hard-working, practical and efficient. Precisely because the Holocaust was so fundamentally different from any persecution in the past and yet committed by neither monsters nor aliens from outer space but by a nation Stalin called "a solid, reliable, sober people who could be trusted." 9 left most people unprepared to deal with the ensuing events.

"The engine that took them away (to Auschwitz)" Mechanicus tell us "had painted on the engine in white paint: 'victory first-then travel.' and on the other side, 'wheels turning for victory.'" 10 Prisoners arriving at the Treblinka railroad station saw a clock. After their horrific journey, few had

8 Barbara Wind, Weaving The Remnants, unpublished manuscript.
the time or the presence-of-mind to notice that the hands on that clock never moved. They never had. They were merely there to deceive and disable the captives.

Simply put, resistance was impeded by a lack of imagination. The only precedent for the complete\textsuperscript{11} destruction of the Jews was the Purim story, "... wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasueros..."\textsuperscript{12} But this was a foiled attempt (and pertained only to the Jews within the empire.) God’s covenantal relationship seems to have been known even to Haman’s wife and his wise men who warned him. “If Mordecai, before whom thou hast begun to fall, be of the seed of the Jews, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shall surely fall before him.”\textsuperscript{13} Oppressors of Jews had, indeed, arisen throughout the generations. Few Jews could imagine that a Haman would arise in Germany’s intellectual and cultural atmosphere in the midst of the forward thinking twentieth century.

Many Jews had read the Purim story as myth rather than history, as little more than an excuse for a Mardi Gras type holiday replete with merrymaking. Even for those who believed the phrase recited at the Seder: “... but in all ages they rise up against us to destroy us.”\textsuperscript{14} it was difficult, if not altogether impossible, to grasp the concept that in modern times Jews were doomed, regardless of their religious beliefs or actions. In the past, religious and/or political conversion had served to avert the fatal decree. (Even in the Purim story, it is Mordecai’s refusal to bow and show deference to Haman that is the provocation.) This unprecedented annihilation proved to be the first time willingness to submit to religious or political authority did not avail. Even Edith Stein, who had converted to Catholicism, becoming Sister Benedicta Teresia a Cruci in 1922, long before Hitler came to power was not immune to persecution.

For as long as the trains ran to the Death Camps, the Nazis maintained the lie, “\textit{Arbeit Macht Frei}.” Jews could not imagine that they would become

\textsuperscript{11} In fact, this attempted destruction, however widespread, pertained to all Jews in the Persian empire. Previous and later attempts, from Pharaoh’s decree in Exodus to the twentieth century Russian pogroms were also demographically contained. Hitler’s Final Solution targeted all Jewry.

\textsuperscript{12} Megillat Esther, 3: 6.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 6: 13.

the victims of what Franklin Littell calls, "Technologically competent barbarians."\textsuperscript{15} Mass murder implemented by modern technology that resembled an efficient factory production line was unheard of prior to World War II. Moreover, it was totally irrational in terms of the German war effort.\textsuperscript{16} The Germans were considered cultured, rational and extremely pragmatic. German enslavement of Jews was logical under the circumstances. The draft resulted in a severe shortage of workers; German industry was dependent on foreign workers. Why pay for something they could get for free? Throughout history, people had gone to war to acquire free labor in the form of slaves. Live Jews could be enslaved; Jewish corpses could not. In view of this, it was difficult, if not altogether impossible, for Jews to grasp the concept that they were doomed, regardless of their beliefs or actions.

Elie Wiesel has spoken on many occasions of his family's missed opportunity of avoiding Auschwitz by taking their housekeeper up on her offer to hide them in her hut in the country. He relates the shock at arrival and his initial refusal to accept a prisoner's explanation for the fire and smoke. If, as late in the war as April, 1944, Hungarian Jews, were unaware of the existence of Auschwitz, one can understand the importance of the deception in the Nazi policy of annihilation.

\textbf{Incremental Assault}

Gerda Weissmann Klein writes of acclimating to Nazi rule:

During the ensuing weeks, the town's Jews waited for the other shoe to drop, but when no further excesses took place, they lulled themselves into a false sense of security that let them rationalize that perhaps the worst of the revolution had passed, that as law-abiding citizens who had lived in those surroundings for generations, they would be spared any further anguish.\textsuperscript{17}

The ability to accommodate to the new order comes through in numerous testimonies. "It's strange how much you can bear, if your doom is parcelled out to you in small doses. It's just like poison: if you start taking it

\textsuperscript{15} Heard at his lecture at the 30th Annual Holocaust Scholars' Conference, Philadelphia, March 7, 1999.
\textsuperscript{16} Unless one believed that the primary goal of the war was the annihilation of Jews.
very gradually, increasing the quantity drop by drop, then your body will eventually get used to it.\footnote{18} Because prohibitions against Jews came in very small increments designed to lull the population into compliance, the general understanding, fostered by the Germans and their puppets, was that one could survive if one obeyed the laws.

In many ghettos, the Nazis shrewdly fostered a sense of self-determination and even complacency by setting up Jewish councils to govern. The entire communal administration lies in their hands.....When deficiencies occur, the Jews direct their resentment against the Jewish administrations and not against the German supervisors. Added to that is the widest freedom accorded to the Jews until now in so-called cultural activities. They have theatres, variety shows, coffee houses, etc. The Jews have opened public schools and to a considerable extent developed the trade school system. All of these measures have produced a certain reassurance which is necessary if their economic capacity is to be exploited for our purposes.\footnote{19}

Not only were schools and other cultural institutions often permitted to function, work was compensated, “In the beginning they paid, very little, but something. You could bring home bread. Then they required people to work and didn’t pay. They took people away and shot them. One day they took all the fur coats. If you didn’t give up your fur coat they would shoot you. One day they said no more butter on the ration cards, just bread. Then they said half the amount of bread. Every day there was something.”\footnote{20}

Punishment for non-compliance was extreme and, too often, collective in nature. The Kristallnacht pogrom was ostensibly a retaliatory measure for the assassination of Ernst vom Rath by Herschel Grynszpan. Every consequent act of insubordination or resistance was swiftly and severely punished. Jews quickly concluded that it was in the individual’s, as well as in the community’s, best interest to follow even the harshest and most arbitrary orders.

Raoul Hilberg writes, “It was my statement that administratively the Germans had relied on the Jews to follow directives, that the Jews had cooperated in their own destruction.”\footnote{21} While his charge may rankle, it cannot be refuted. However, the stance of the Judenrats may be better understood by studying the complex reasons behind their apparent

\footnote{19} James E. Young, \textit{Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust}, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 36.  
complicity. As late into the war as March, 1944, Eichmann made a convincing argument to Jewish leaders gathered in his office suite located in the apartment complex, the Majestic, Budapest:

"I am not an advocate of violence because I value manpower. But any opposition will be broken. If you think of joining the partisans or employing their methods, I shall have you mercilessly slaughtered. ... After the war the Jews will be free. All the Jewish measures will be abandoned and the Germans will again be good-natured as before." When confronted with reports that Jews in other countries had been killed, he admitted to that but assured them that things would be different in Hungary. "You tell me if anyone harms you and I will protect you. You can trust me and talk freely to me - as I am quite frank with you." When reports of the deportations of Jews from the provinces came in, he again reassured the leaders that they were merely false rumors, that the living conditions were no worse than those for soldiers on maneuvers.\textsuperscript{22}

By that point in time, the crematoria were functioning night and day and, unable to keep up with the demand. But this had not always been the case. Hilberg writes,

The destruction of the Jews was not centralized. All four of Neumann's hierarchies were involved in this operation. I called this bureaucratic aggregate the machinery of destruction. As I read on, I discovered my second hypothesis in an affidavit by Rudolf Kastner, a Jewish leader in Budapest, who had observed the fate of the European Jewish communities before the Hungarian Jews were inundated in the catastrophe. In one sentence of his description of events he noted that "The plan of operation was almost identical in all countries: at first the Jews were marked, then separated, divested of all property, deported and gassed." It appeared, therefore, that the Jews were destroyed in a progression of steps and that everywhere the sequence was the same. Considering, however, that the machinery was not unified and that it did not follow a basic blueprint from the beginning, such patterned action was remarkable. The Germans did not know in 1933 what they were going to do in 1935 or 1938.\textsuperscript{23}

If Hilberg's assessment - that the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews was not long in the planning - is correct, how in fact could Jews be expected to know? Little wonder more of them did not uproot themselves and their families in order to save their lives.

The ultimate goal of annihilation, which in German correspondence was called the 'Final Solution', was not even formulated until 1941. There was, however, a direction that was characterized by ever more intensive, more drastic anti-Jewish activities. Along this path, the logic of the development emerged, for the simple


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., Hilberg, p. 66.
reason that earlier, more harmless measures were always the administrative prerequisites for later, more harmful ones. 24

Although the Crusades began in Germany and Jews had suffered in various ways throughout their long residency there, they had persevered. In fact, the quality of life for German Jews was better than in most of Europe. As Anti-Semitism had always existed in Germany, Hitler's election in 1933 and the subsequent promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 did not shock the community into as much action as it should have. Ironically, some Jews who had emigrated returned to Germany after 1935, believing that the Nuremberg Laws would have a stabilizing effect on the nation.

Surprise is a constant in survivor memoirs. Even events of and immediately after Kristallnacht did not prepare Jews for what was to follow. "We knew something about Germany before the bombing started, because a lot of Polish Jews living in Germany were sent back to Poland from 1935 on. We didn't know how bad it was going to be." 25 And, later, after suffering and witnessing heinous acts of brutality, they still could not believe. "We knew the first transport had died. We paid Poles who worked on the train to find out. They said nobody comes out from there. We didn't believe them. We said the Poles are anti-Semites, that's why they tell us these things." 26

Even after the horror of the transports, amid the sights and smells of the actual death camps, disbelief reigned:

"Now said the blokowa in German, "you will form a line and pull up your left sleeve so that your number shows. Slowly, one by one, you will walk around the table and show your number."

Without a word of protest we lined up and moved in the direction of the table. Today, as I think of it all, I understand the questions sometimes put to me: "Why did the Jews go so quietly? Why did they let themselves be taken to the gas chambers without protest?" There were about five hundred women on the block whose numbers appeared on the death list. Why didn't they pounce on Bubi, Cyla, the blokowa, and the rest of the attendants to send their tormentors to death before they themselves died? What did they have to lose? In Auschwitz I was witness to many such quiet expeditions to the gas chambers. At the time I always asked those painful questions of myself: Why are they silent? Why don't they cry out? We had already discussed this in Auschwitz. And for those of us who went through that Hell, the affair was completely clear: When the Jews marched off to the gas chambers after they arrived in

24 ibid., p. 67.
25 ibid., Ehrlich, p. 156.
26 ibid., p. 162.
Auschwitz, they simply did not know where they were going, and when we told them they did not believe us. 27

In the summer of 1944, when massive transports of Jews arrived from all over Europe, they went straight to the gas chambers. The resistance delegated a comrade to the kommando working on the ramp who took packages from the arriving Jews. A young, energetic Austrian was assigned to work there; he was to tell the unsuspecting victims where they were headed. They absolutely refused to believe him. Some of them went to the SS men who were stationed at the unloading of the wagons and asked: "Is it true that we are going to the showers to be gassed?"

That is how it was with the new arrivals who still felt like human beings with human rights. 28

Wiesel recounts a similar story. He, too, thought the prisoners were playing a cruel joke on the new arrivals when they revealed that human beings were the source of the flames and smoke.

There are numerous tales of eyewitnesses who survived mass executions and later escaped from the forests, or the pits of Babi Yar or Ponar, or who escaped from the trains or even the camps to return to the ghettos and reveal what they had seen. In nearly all cases, they were deemed to be mad or hysterical. Physicians sedated them or attempted to convince them that they had only dreamed the event.

A woman, Pessia Aronovitch wounded during an Aktion, climbed out of the pits of Ponary and made her way to the home of a gentile who washed and dressed her and allowed her to spend the night. The next morning the peasant gave her a large bunch of wildflowers to hide her wound and sent her back to the ghetto. When she arrived and told her story, she was brought to a physician, who addressed the bullet wound but simply could not believe her tale. He attributed her condition to hysteria. "Pessia Aronovitch had found employment in the ghetto as a dressmaker. The doctor went to see her again and asked if she had related her experiences to her companions. She had not. She was afraid that the Gestapo would get wind of the affair and try to shoot her again, and do the job properly this time."29


28 Ibid., p. 33.

Miriam Ehrlich tells another variant of the tale, “In 1942, somebody came back from Treblinka. His name was Spivak, he escaped by hiding in a wagon full of clothing. He described what was going on there, and said he got crazy from what he had seen. We didn’t believe him, we didn’t believe in the crematoria. We though he was a madman telling an unbelievable tale. How could such a thing be happening in our world, our modern world.”

In hindsight, one wonders why people refused to believe the witnesses. At the time, however, their stories seemed utterly surreal. In addition to living in denial, Jews felt too vulnerable to offer the kind of resistance that would save their lives. To believe was to despair of ever surviving.

Because there was such great reluctance to believe even eyewitnesses, one can understand why people were reluctant to join Resistance organizations. Leaders of these groups had to go to great efforts to get support, from within and outside their communities. As in every aspect of the Holocaust, the reasons for this were quite complex, but included: fear of betrayal, lack of respect for the leadership – some of whom had formed questionable alliances to acquire weapons – and lack of confidence in their military prowess.

Implicit in the accusation that Jews did not resist is the notion that the Jews of Europe were a monolithic entity. Within communities, even within families, religious and political heterogeneity existed. Most of the concentration camps were composed of more than local Jews (also converts, and in some cases gentiles married to Jews.) They were a Babel of languages and cultures. Vast differences existed in terms of culture, class, religious observance and political affiliations. This was true even within ghettos. Many armed resistance groups were affiliated with communists or other left-leaning groups. The Yeshiva students in the Vilna Ghetto, while awaiting their Rabbi’s decision to fight back, continued to study and pray in their well-equipped bunker believing they were resisting the Nazis as effectively as members of the F. P. O.

During the 1930’s even those who had read Mein Kampf; even those who knew that Cardinal Pacelli had signed a Concordat with Nazi Germany, even those who had been victimized on Kristallnacht could not imagine that

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30 Ibid., Ehrich, p. 163.
within a few years Germany would be using state of the art assembly-line methods for killing millions of Jews. Expectations are built on assumptions and assumptions are founded on memories of previous events. History books contain chapters on the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Jews; the Crusades, in which Jews were the first victims; the Inquisition; pogroms; blood libel trials and many other incidents where Jews were the victims of pagan or Christian intolerance. None of these past events prepared people to believe that Germany, one of the most respected and admired countries in the world, would carry out a massacre of unprecedented scale. There is the well-known story of a man coming to Rabbi Stephen Wise during the war. Having escaped from a concentration camp, he wanted to publicize what he had witnessed, certain if the facts were broadcast the Allied governments would compel Germany to stop the atrocities against innocent people. After hearing his story Rabbi Wise shook his head in disbelief. The man was astounded and utterly demoralized; how could the rabbi doubt his earnestness? The rabbi replied that he wasn’t accusing the witness of lying, he simply could not believe him. This same Rabbi, according to Marvin Tokayer, threw out the Japanese consul who, after the Evian conference, came offering refuge in Japan to all Jews who wanted to emigrate from Europe. Wise’s trust in German civility coupled with his lack of imagination for the horrors that were being committed by the Nazis, made it impossible for him to conceive the urgency of the situation.

Imagination is an extension of reality and is, therefore a synthesis, founded on previous events, memories or experiences, whether actual or imagined. Even a dream or hallucination is a synthesis of previous visions. Samuel Pisar writes, “The more life deteriorated, the more people tended to say that things could not get much worse. If only they knew. But how could they? What lay ahead had never been done to human beings before. Who could have imagined the unimaginable?”31

Even if they had known how it would end, many were helpless to do anything about it. The old, the ill and infirm were easy targets.32 So were the poor. In the film, The Children of Chabannes, Lisa Gossels relates that her grandmother, Charlotte, who was able to get her two young sons transported


32 In Germany, the Euthanasia Program had successfully eliminated the majority of its targeted population before protests, by the Church and German citizens, put an end to it.
to France with the help of a Jewish rescue group, the O.S.E., *Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants Israelites*, simply could not come up with the $100 that she needed to acquire the visa she needed to emigrate to the United States. Eventually, she was killed in Auschwitz.33

Between 1939-41, the notion of leaving their native lands was implausible for most Jews. By then the only place to go, the Soviet Union seemed far riskier than staying where they were. “We couldn’t get out anyway. We could only go to Russia. A lot of young people went there. My uncle went there, to Pinsk, when we got back to our village, October 1939. He came back for his sisters, my mother and my aunts, but no one wanted to go. We didn’t want to leave what we had. We weren’t Communists. So he went back by himself.”34

What Miriam Ehrlich’s family “had” at that point, was an empty house. It had been looted by Poles who took everything but the radio – radios were now forbidden; punishment for owning one was death. Nevertheless, within a few weeks of the invasion, the situation seemed stable. The family was determined to rebuild their restaurant. They did, but were eventually forced out, ghettoized and eventually shipped to camps.

Earlier, when emigration was possible – and for most, it was not – it made no sense. Jews had lived in Europe for more than two thousand years. If Anti-Semitism existed on the continent, it existed also in America (and among Russians, despite Communist rhetoric.) Jews remembered the anti-German propaganda that had proliferated during World War I, with its vicious depictions of German soldiers as barbarians and cannibals. But this wasn’t the experience of the veterans who served the Kaiser during the war. Nor was it the experience of some of the eastern European Jews who had been liberated from the Cossacks by German soldiers. History had taught them to distinguish truth from propaganda, and they thought that this was a case of World War I propaganda being recirculated. For many, to believe that Hitler was a prophet and not a raving maniac who had cunningly achieved enormous power was to abandon faith in what they deemed “advanced civilization” and view the world with utter cynicism.

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34 Ibid., Ehrlich, p. 164.
SLAUGHTER

To kill without resistance is not slaughter.
— Chinese proverb

I
Perhaps you would not call this slaughter.
Drafted for labor, these men dig the trench. A trench
Intended as their grave. None of them know this yet.
Simon, an accountant, soon has cuts and blisters. He
Worries about infection, the cost of medicine . . .
Like food, it’s been skyrocketing since ’39. He
Remembers that honey is a kind of antiseptic
And wonders if his wife has any left.

II
The line to the showers moves efficiently
Each man holds a marker to redeem his shoes.
Signs warn of the need to prevent disease
Rumors to the contrary, there is reason for hope.
After the train ride, soap and water are a blessing.

III
And who among them should resist separation
The mother who’s assured her baby will be safe?
The anxious husband whose wife is thin and frail?
Women, he is told, won’t be assigned hard labor.
The old, the ill, the children
Who can only fight with tears?

Their cries disappear like bleats in a sheepfold.\(^{35}\)

It was difficult, if not altogether impossible, for Jews to grasp the
concept that they were doomed, regardless of their beliefs or actions. This
unprecedented annihilation proved to be the first time willingness to convert
did not avail. In her diary, Etty Hillesum speaks of the “remarkable sight of
Jewish Catholics” arriving in Westerbork with yellow stars on their habits.

The passage of the Nuremberg Laws on September 15, 1935 was the first
legislation Nazis took against Jews. These numerous restrictions were later
applied in conquered territories, where Jews were soon segregated from the

\(^{35}\) Ibid., Wind, Weaving The Remnants.
non-Jewish populace and concentrated into ghettos. At first, ghettos afforded the Jews a measure of security by providing a place they could live in without fear of random attacks by anti-Semitic hooligans. Though subject to enclosure enforced by armed guards, curfews, and other restrictions and harassments, ghettos were not quite prisons. Documents — work papers — were required and curfews were strictly imposed but Jews had some freedom of movement within these limitations. Even when the situation became increasingly precarious, some Jews who were living with false papers on the Aryan side, chose to return to their families in the ghettos. There was a belief that their strength lay in unity. Many who had the opportunity to escape from the ghettos, chose not to. The world outside the ghetto was more hostile to those without “Aryan papers” and/or the means to provide for themselves.

Throughout the Diaspora, Jewish neighborhoods predated Christianity. The Third Lateran Council forbade Christians to live next to Jews. Ghettos came into existence in the Middle Ages after the Papal Bull of November 30th, 1215 put the decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council into effect. But the first actual ghetto may not have been set up until 1516, in Venice. By the time the Nazis forced Jews into ghettos — for the ostensible purpose of controlling the spread of disease to the gentile populace — Jews were accustomed to, though not pleased by, the idea. They didn’t realize that the ghettos were part of the “process of destruction” expressly devised to cause death by starvation and disease.

Jews had managed to survive, even thrive in such quarters. Conditions, unsettling and unpleasant as they became in the ghettos did not, in the beginning of the occupation seem life-threatening to those who accepted the imposed rules and regulations. “Law and order” was a concept synonymous with Nazi rule and the understanding was that as long as German edicts, however harsh and unjust, were obeyed, Jews could survive the war in relative safety. Dr. William Glicksman tells, “We got used to the abnormal conditions and went on living. My place of work was outside the ghetto so I had a special permit to come and go. I went to work every day —

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36 Jewish converts to Christianity were also forced into ghettos. The Warsaw Ghetto contained at least one church.

37 There were, by then, already Jewish streets and neighborhoods under the protection of Dukes and Bishops.
shoveling work, slave labor work. I came home. I ate dinner. I found I could live without an apple or an orange."

Because the war unfolded incrementally, people grew accustomed to the increasing deprivations; accustomed to the sight of poor and destitute refugees crowding into the overcrowded ghettos; accustomed to the countless random brutalities; accustomed to being accosted by ever-increasing numbers of beggars; and accustomed to the sight of corpses in the street. All rational arguments pointed to the fact that if Jews proved themselves useful to the German war effort they could survive.

Poland’s textile industry was centered in Lodz and the city’s factories became major suppliers of uniforms for the Nazis. Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Jewish Council in the Lodz Ghetto, believed “Work is our only way.” He knew that Nazis considered Jewish children useless mouths to feed and hoped to protect them by making them productive.

**KINDERGARTEN TAILORS**

Even the very young must have a trade.
Rumkowski believes they can
Become tailors. If they sew
For the Reich, their lives may be saved.

A row of sewing machines, black and shiny
The teacher opens a colorful book
Points at a picture, then the machine.
The hungry children stare and repeat

*Bobbin, needle, treadle, thread...*

After a lunch of soup and bread
They’ll cut patterns out of newspapers
These little tailors are learning to read.

Rumkowski’s “tailors” were not the only ones engaged in learning. When Jews in Germany were no longer permitted to attend German public or private schools, Jewish schools sprang up to fill the vacuum. There were at least forty schools in the Warsaw Ghetto. Even when schooling was expressly forbidden, study continued, clandestinely. Many Jews recalled Rabbi Akiba

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39 Ibid., Wind, *Weaving The Remnants*, (inspired by learning of the event.)
who, two thousand years ago, held his classes in caves outside the city when
the Romans forbade the study of Torah. Rome had fallen; Torah survived.
They firmly believed that Germany, the new Rome, would eventually fall
and they, God’s covenanted people, would survive.

William Glicksman states, “Meanwhile Jewish culture was
strengthened a thousand times. We had secret schools, secret minyans for
praying. The libraries were burned down so we shared out private books. The
older people were studying Gemara. The secular people got together to
strengthen their spiritual life by discussing Zionism, socialism, literature,
anything to save us from falling into despair.”

Despair was a most powerful enemy. Even after Jews were ghettoized,
and despite the terrible conditions there: martial rule, slave labor factories,
forced deportations, the rumors of the existence of death camps – many still
believed that going east meant slave labor for adults and a better life for old
people and children. They discounted rumors that these transports ended in
death, partially because the idea was so illogical and partially because to
believe them would be to live in despair. Jacob Wiernik took part in the
Treblinka uprising wrote of being caught in a round-up and forced onto a
train. He was upset that he didn’t have the backpack he had packed for just
such a possibility because “there were rumors that we would be sent to the
Ukraine for work.”

UKRAINE

Blood-stained pillow feathers
Are memories.

New owners
Are intent on order

The Ukraine
Overcrowded trains

Jews hold valises
Heading east

floating toward the sky
Cossacks have been unhorsed

cruel but civilized
– note the lists and regulations –
is the new promised land.
leave overcrowded Ghettos

bread to marmalade
plant and sow

(stanza break)

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40 Ibid., Rothchild, p. 238.

41 Ibid., Arad, Gutman, Margaliot, p. 354.
Rumors, truths, lies it’s impossible to know
This is not the first exile why give up hope? 42

For the destitute, swelling with hunger, there was the promise of bread and marmalade for all who volunteered to go on the transports. Helene Frankle testified, "It was very easy to get people to volunteer for the camps. The German government promised them fresh air, an area without sickness, and two pounds of bread and lots of marmalade and other goodies. The first trains were filled with hungry people who thought they were going to improve their lives. And then in 1942 we began to hear stories about people being gassed, killed, done away with... Of course, it was very hard to believe." 43

Chaim Kaplan, in August of 1942, attests to the willingness of some to be deported, "By four in the afternoon the quota was filled: 13,000 people had been seized and sent off, among them 5,000 who came to the transfer of their own free will. They had had their fill of Ghetto life, which is a life of hunger and fear of death. They escaped from the trap." Conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto were so unbearable, he adds, "Would that I could allow myself to do the same." 44

The surrealism of the Holocaust – which was led victims to dismiss the stories of eyewitnesses – is responsible, in part, for the increase in Holocaust denial. When even survivors voice amazement that they bore the unbearable and survived near-death experiences, it makes perfect sense that those who didn’t live through the war would be hard put to believe that such events really did happen. Luna Kaufman speaks of keeping her striped prison dress after the war, knowing that if she did not have some tangible evidence of her time in the camps, an object which still holds traces of her own cells, she would doubt her own memory.

Not only were victims aware of the surreal quality of life in the camps, guards were cognizant of it, as well. Primo Levi writes of a guard telling him:

However the war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There

42 Ibid., Wind, (inspired by Helen Frankle’s testimony.)
43 Ibid., Rothchild, p. 231
will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no
certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some
proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you
describe are too monstrous to be believed... We will be the ones to dictate the history of
the Lagers.⁴⁵

That there is a growing body of Holocaust denial and revisionism
underscores the prophecies of both the survivors and the perpetrators. Recent
court cases against deniers, or in the case of the Irving-Lipstadt Trial against
those who deny the deniers, emphasize the absurdity of the situation. The use
of the Eichmann trial transcripts as evidence in Irving vs. Lipstadt points to
the surrealism of the Holocaust event and all that proceeds from it. However,
the consequences of these trials have fundamental bearing on the future.
How will history be taught? How do gentiles perceive Jews in the aftermath
of the Holocaust? Will the commandment that came forth from Auschwitz
be heard? Is “Never Again!” a promise to work toward world peace or simply
disposable rhetoric?

pp. 11-12).
Chapter

2

IMPEDEMENTS TO RESISTANCE

Is there no balm in Gilead?
— Jer 8:22

Precisely because the Final Solution was an incremental process, awareness of the realization of the Nazi intent was not only limited to Jews, Slavs and other gentiles under occupation, but to the Nazi leadership, itself. Prior to the summer of 1941 when Göring ordered a resolution to the “Jewish Question”, three fundamental impediments hampered Jewish resistance: (1) lack of support from non-Jews (2) fear of reprisal, particularly collective punishment for individual acts and, (3) general apathy.

Intolerance and Indifference

The large majority was apathetic, uncaring, indifferent.
— Elie Wiesel

Emanuel Tanay, a survivor, was hidden in a monastery. He was forced to leave his place of refuge when the Gestapo came looking for him and spent the remainder of the war in hiding and with the partisans. Interviewed for the film, The Courage to Care he says “One needed a tremendous will, a resourcefulness, and people to help you.” He came across a number of such people in the course of his years as a fugitive.

Avoiding the mass deportations greatly enhanced the odds as the Germans lost interest in searching out Jews in areas they had made Judenrein. Most Jews who survived found refuge or rescue prior to 1941. From then until the possibility liberation survival decreased dramatically.

Nearly all who survived in that period survived because of individual rescuers. Not all Gentiles were Righteous Gentiles. Not all were Gentiles — Jewish organizations were heavily involved in smuggling other Jews out of dangerous territories. The motives of rescuers varied. Some did it at great

46 Elie Wiesel, narrator, film: The Courage to Care.
risks to themselves and their families. Others acted passively, e.g. turning a blind eye to an escapee. Some may have had only one moment of grace in an otherwise murderous career.

Because becoming a rescuer demanded courage, since the punishment for rescuing Jews was execution – in Poland, the death of the entire family – it was much easier to shrug off involvement. Being a bystander was not illegal. It didn’t even seem immoral, for those who were unaware of what was happening to the Jews.

The Nazi propaganda machine and its policies of misinformation and disinformation sought to hide the realities of the situation. Talk was risky, radios were forbidden, euphemisms were in use. Many made a concerted effort to avoid learning or facing the truth. The fact that gentiles didn’t protect the Jews must be seen in relation to how they protected their own countrymen. Hundreds of thousand of Germans were killed in the euthanasia program or because they were homosexuals, Roma, or Jehovah’s Witnesses. Millions of Poles were sent to concentration camps. Even the clergy was not exempt from murder by the Nazis. On the contrary! 2640 Polish priests were executed.

Anti-Semitism

They had been harboring a hatred for us which we had grown accustomed to calling "prejudice." What a gentle word that was!

– Edith Hahn Beer

Of all the obstacles to resistance the greatest was the indifference of the gentile community, which resulted in a lack of support for Jews trying to survive. This indifference was primarily based on the inherent Anti-Semitism of the majority of gentiles. It severely compromised emigration abroad and imposed fatal limitations within Europe.

The first stage in the destruction of the Jews was in marking them. The wearing of the armbands or the yellow stars immediately identified Jews. Without them, most Jews could blend into the local populace. But the

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48 In terms of appearance, few Germans could distinguish between local gentiles and those Jews who didn’t dress as traditional Jews or wear beards, sidelocks (or wigs or head coverings, in the case of women.)
punishment for not wearing these markers was severe, compounded by fear of betrayal.

Nearly two thousand years of anti-Judaic preaching by the Churches had conditioned Christians to associate Jews with the Devil and thus dehumanize them. “The missionaries of Christianity said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed had complained: You have no right to live among us. The German Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live.”

The Nuremberg Laws were evolutionary, not revolutionary. In his seminal work, The Destruction of the Jews, Raul Hilberg charts the strong parallels between canonical and Nazi-Anti-Jewish measures. Anti-Judaism, a defensible – if less than generous – theological stance, turned into Anti-Semitism.

Talmage writes, “As medieval Jewish polemicists complain, all prophecies of redemption were applied to Christians; all prophecies of chastisement to the Jews. The Jews were entitled only to divine wrath, but not to divine love. . . . The theology of rejection was elaborated in many ways.”

One way in which the theology of rejection manifested itself during World War II was through indifference or outright hostility toward Jews. By the time the Nazis broadcast their pseudo-scientific racial theories and coupled them with graphic images, their audiences were well-prepared to accept them.

Throughout European history, Jews were portrayed as ugly, Satanic, lecherous, profiteers, degenerates, molesters, vermin or spiders. This increased dramatically with the rise of Nazism. By infusing the social construct of race with pseudo-scientific theory, and integrating it with prejudice, nationalism, romanticism. Social Darwinism, and the modern awareness that rats and vermin carried plague, it was not a great leap for Hitler to convince his constituents that Jews needed to be exterminated.

For many Gentiles, sophisticated enough to recognize rhetoric and disregard the stereotypical image of Jews as less than human, the problem of their ideological differences remained. Jews were identified with Communism and Freemasonry; a not altogether unjustified claim. Some of

49 Ibid., Agamben, p. 24.
Communism’s major proponents – Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky – didn’t consider themselves Jews or had been baptized, yet were Jewish as defined by Nazi race laws. Communism also appealed to a portion of the Jewish proletariat who were secularists and viewed Communism as a Utopian system for righting all the wrongs of the world and making a decent quality of life available to themselves and all impoverished workers.

Although the co-founder of Communism was the German philosopher, Friedrich Engels (who outlived Karl Marx by twelve years), Hitler considered Communism and Judaism intertwined. In Mein Kampf he wrote, “Slowly fear and the Marxist weapon of Jewry descend like a nightmare on the mind and soul of decent people.”

In the 1930’s, Communism was seen as a powerful international movement and a serious threat to all governments. With Hitler’s election, the intelligentsia, often left-leaning, were the first sector of society to be interned in concentration camps or killed. This effectively eliminated most of the leadership that would have organized resistance to the Nazis.

Even Jews were reluctant to associate with Resistance organizations precisely because many were led by secular Zionists, Jewish Socialists and Communists. Most Jews, particularly the leaders, were traditional and politically conservative. Before the Nazi intent was clear, when there was still the means and energy to spearhead organized resistance, they considered secular or left-wing movements as threatening as Nazism and sought to distance themselves from both groups.

On March 14, 1937, Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical Mit Brennender Sorge (With Burning Concern) discrediting the Nazi racist theory of Blut and Boden (Blood and Soil). It also repudiated the claim that faith in Germany was equal to religious faith in God. Although this document constitutes proof that Nazism was – as the Church is attempting to emphasize – a neo-pagan movement that had divorced itself from Christianity, it grew and gained momentum in a land and on a continent that was predominantly Christian.

On July 20, 1933, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the nuncio to Berlin who later became Pope Pius XII, signed a Concordat with Nazi Germany on behalf of Pope Pius XI. While one cannot fault the Concordat’s intention to preserve the rights of the Church under the Nazis, it’s implicit message of laissez-faire worked against Jews. By September 6, 1938, when Pope Pius XI stated, “Anti-Semitism is unacceptable. Spiritually, we are all Semites.”, Germans had been
subjected to five years of virulently anti-Semitic propaganda. Pope Pius XII, in his first encyclical, *Summi Pontificus*, October 20, 1939, affirmed the unity of the human race and spoke out against any theories that differed from this view but made no specific reference to Jews. More than a thousand years of anti-Semitic teachings and preachings had left their marks. Poland had been conquered, concentrations camps already existed and many more would soon be built.

Few Church officials (Catholic or Protestant) opposed the Nazis from their pulpits.\(^{52}\) This matter does not constitute proof of their complicity. Millions of Christians were tortured and killed by Nazis. However none, but Jehovah's Witnesses, were automatically doomed because of their faith, a faith they could renounce. Rudolf Höss writes, "They hoped that by suffering in captivity for Jehovah's sake, they would soon be given good positions in His kingdom, which they expected to enter very soon." Their persecution did not, however, make them compassionate to the suffering of Jews. On the contrary, they deemed it just punishment in view of the deicide charge. Polish peasants filmed outside a church in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, reveal that they had the same opinion on the subject of Jewish destiny as the Jehovah's Witnesses (during the Holocaust.)

Christian distrust of Jews, based on their opposing religious and political affiliations, too often resulted in refusal to admit them into partisan groups or even to supply Jewish partisans with weapons. "Officially the Nazi Party was not Christian. They had no organized religion unless you counted their fanatical veneration of Adolph Hitler. However, not everyone was a member of the Nazi party, and the enlisted Wehrmacht soldiers, in particular were determined to continue their old Christmas traditions."\(^{53}\) Despite their contempt for the invaders, as Christians most felt they had more in common with the Germans than with their Jewish compatriots. Many Christians believed that the Germans, whose ancestors were the original Crusaders, had

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52 Members of the Lutheran Church actually voiced support of Hitler. (The Protestant Churches, with the exception of Bonhoeffer's Confessional Church were Nazified.) By way of contrast, Denmark, which was occupied in 1940, was able to retain much of its autonomy – because the Danes were Nordic – and "pursued a policy of negotiation with the Nazis which broke down August 1943... On October 3, 1943 a joint pastoral letter was read from all the pulpits demanding Danes aid Jews" Out of a total population of 7,800 Jews, nearly 7,000 were smuggled into Sweden and another 400 were hidden in Christian homes.

finally become courageous enough to act on what the Churches had preached for nearly two thousand years. Jehovah's Witnesses were not alone in their belief that "it was right that the Jews should now suffer and die, since their forefathers had betrayed Jehovah."54

The Nazis took full advantage of the anti-Semitic attitudes of the local populations in the subjugated territories. In Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia local partisans, particularly those whose families had been victimized by the Soviets, were armed and encouraged to take part in "Selbstreinigungsaktionen, (self-cleansing actions)" i.e. killing the areas' Jews. Mass murders took place in the first days of occupation. (Thereafter, the Germans disarmed their collaborators to stifle future attempts at regaining their independence.) The Nazis also found willing accomplices among the Croats and Ukrainians.

Excuses often given for the (Catholic) Church’s "neutral position" is that it was, itself, in a perilous situation and could not risk compromising itself and its members. Indeed, religious institutions and their leaders were subject to searches and questioning by the Gestapo. Thousands of nuns and priests were tortured and killed (some for participating in Resistance organizations or helping Jews.) But these martyrs were the exceptions. Basically, the Churches enjoyed the same status as they did before the war. Though they felt justifiably threatened they were never forced to close their doors.

The fact is that some clergy were active in their support of Hitler. Others supported him passively. Many did not believe that their loyalty belonged anywhere but to their own constituency. And millions of Catholics were members of the armed forces.

Rabbis teach that people are not responsible for their sinful thoughts but for their actions. Unfortunately, negative attitudes often turn into evil deeds unless one is committed to an ethical life based on absolute values in imitatio dei. Rabbis also teach that to watch an evil deed committed without trying to stop it, is to participate in it. When Jews repent they repent for both deeds committed and omitted. It may be unfair to apply those rules to Christians, particularly after the fact, but in recent years the Churches themselves have recognized their role as enablers in the Holocaust and have apologized.

Neo-Paganism vs. Christianity

Hence today I believe that I am acting, in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.

-Adolf Hitler

Germany was the acknowledged center of Christian theological studies. Cathedrals, churches, chapels abounded throughout. Children in public schools were obliged to attend religion classes thrice weekly. When the Nazis ordered the removal of crucifixes from classrooms the Church protested and their protests were heard and respected. As the French bishops acknowledged in their Declaration of Repentance, "... the church did in fact have considerable power and influence." Presumably, the Vatican, as a stockholder, could have wielded economic influence. Some German companies that employed slave labor were publicly held corporations.

Emil Fackenheim states, "Nazi Anti-Semitism, while anti-Christian would have been impossible without centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism." The connection is clear. Although the Church did not hesitate to excommunicate communists, it never excommunicated Nazis who sent both lay Polish Catholics and religious such as Edith Stein and Father Bernard Lichtenberg to their tortured deaths. When Hitler and Himmler died, they were still on the church tax rolls. Franz Stangl, commandant of Sobibor (1942) and later Treblinka (1942-1943) officially left the Church to further his career but went to Mass daily on vacations from the camps. He was later helped to escape to Brazil via Syria with the help of Bishop Alois Hudal and the Ratline.

Despite its increasingly antagonistic stance toward the churches and its persecution of so many of its members, Nazism never totally disassociated itself from Christianity. Would it have become a popular movement had the Church labeled it "neo-paganism" in the 1930's? Martin Luther's virulent denunciation, On The Jews and Their Lies, published in 1543, was incorporated into Nazi propaganda. The belt buckles of Nazi army officers

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55 Ibid., Hitler, p. 60.
56 Ibid., Talmage, p. 306.
bore the inscription, *Gott mit Uns* (God with Us) above an eagle and a swastika. The swastika itself is a cross; its identity with Christianity is evident in Germany where it is called, a *Hakenkreuz*, or broken cross. The medal a woman who lost her sons in combat was given was the *Mutterkreuz*, a cross with a swastika in its center. The cross itself, enameled in blue, was suspended on a blue and white grosgrain ribbon. The use of that color, always identified in art with the Virgin Mary, would appear a deliberate attempt to further the Nazis connection to Christianity.

Hitler's victory in the election was hardly based purely on his anti-Semitic ravings, though in them he heaped blame on Jews for Germany's defeat in World War I, her abysmally depressed economy, the threat of communism, the apparent rise of sexual immorality and the general state of demoralization. Eliminating the contaminating cause of Germany's - and all the world's problems - was seen as the first necessary step in restoring the nation to its past glories and creating a nation whose natural "genetic" superiority predisposed them to the conviction that their destiny was to rule the world.

In the past, expulsion of Jews had proved viable, at least in the short term. Perfectly justifiable in light of the legend of the "Wandering Jew", expulsion was seen as a way of helping God in his work. If the threat of expulsion couldn't convince Jews to become Christian, at least the area in which they lived would be free of what they perceived as a living - and violent, in the case of host desecration - refutation of Christianity. In addition, it would eliminate the possibility of Jewish influence on political issues. It would also keep Christians from being influenced to adopt the Jewish faith. If rulers were aware that the economy suffered when Jews were expelled, they probably deemed it better to live in poverty, a Christian virtue, than in the pocket of the Jew. For a fervent Christian, expulsion was a "win-win" situation. In addition, there were great economic advantages to be gotten through expulsion: the cancellation of debts to Jews and the attachment of their property.

The Nazis took the Christian rhetoric of expulsion and put a secular, pseudo-scientific spin on it. Unfortunately, most of the world was also

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57 This motto was used earlier in World War I.
predisposed to believe this libel and Jews were left without a choice but to remain in Europe. This eventually precipitated the “Final Solution.” Elie Wiesel has said, “Not all victims were Jews but all Jews were victims.” To this Robert McAfee Brown responds, “If not all Christians were killers, all killers were Christians.”58 That is, they were only nominally Christian, nearly all having been baptized. Some had forsaken Christianity, altogether. Of course, the Holocaust was not the creation of Christianity and the Church did not create Nazism. Nazis did. Anti-Christian influences such as Communism and Secularism helped Nazism take root. Scientific and technological advances helped to nourish it, as did economic forces. The Holocaust was fed and fertilized by a host of elements but the soil in which it grew had been tilled by the churches for century after century; and the soil was rife with Anti-Semitism.

**Opportunism**

There is no greater disaster than greed.  
_Lao-Tzu_

In addition to its ability to galvanize moribund industries, war always provides opportunities for risk-takers, the greedy, and the corruptible. The greatest opportunist was the Reich. They not only appropriated Jewish businesses and assets, Jews became objects to be sold to either ransomers (e.g. the “Jews for lorries” negotiations) or to industry, as slave laborers. In fact, a healthy, pure (i.e. _Judenrein_) Germany and the use of Slavs as slaves was to be the ultimate reward for the victors.

Once the Nuremberg Laws were legislated, a host of benefits presented themselves to Germans and, later, to gentiles in occupied territories. These included: new educational and professional opportunities; the acquisition of homes and businesses of Jews at a fraction of their net worth; the acquisition of their assets; the use of Jews as slave laborers; the sale of forged documents; hiding Jews for money; betraying Jews for money; and black market merchandising. Oskar Schindler, who became an exemplary rescuer of Jews, began as a not very ethical businessman who saw an opportunity to make a lot of money quickly.

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Smuggling began as soon as the Ghettos were set up. The allotted food ration for Jews provided only a tenth of normal dietary requirements. Peasants supplied the rest, at greatly inflated prices. Those who met trains that arrived in Treblinka had the chance to earn “100 zloty for a bottle of water, 500 zloty for a kilogram of black bread.”\(^{59}\) Trains that transported Jews to the camps also proved lucrative for Ukrainian and German guards who intimidated new arrivals into giving them their valuables. Although all goods were, by law, property of the Reich, this law was routinely broken by pirateers: “Croats killed Jews themselves so they could avoid sharing the plunder with the Reich.”\(^{60}\)

Some gentiles were willing to hide Jews in exchange for money or valuables. In all fairness, supporting extra people was often an impossibility for workers or peasants, particularly those who had to resort to ration coupons for their own basic needs. Jews often paid for “boarding privileges” and this was more than a fair exchange as these rescuers would have been killed if caught. These courageous people would certainly fit into the category of Righteous Gentiles, although Yad Vashem is careful to reserve that honor for those who received no monetary compensation for their noble efforts.

As in any business, some of these “businessmen” were honorable and kept their side of the bargain. Others took the money and turned their charges into the authorities. Some became heroes, keeping their charges, past the agreed time period and long after the money ran out. Some became “hunters.” There were rewards for turning in Jews or those who hid them. In Holland a hunter could earn FL 7.50 (about $4) per head. In Poland, pay consisted of two kilos of sugar, a bottle of brandy or other consumables.

Some Christians saw this as an opportunity to ‘save souls’ and would not admit Jews unless they agreed to convert. Archbishop Kametko of Nitra warned the Nitra Rebbe, who had come to plead for his intervention on behalf of Slovakian Jews, “It is not just a matter of deportation. You will not die there of hunger and disease. They will slaughter all of you there, old and young alike, women and children, at once – it is the punishment you deserve

\(^{59}\) Ibid., Arad, Gutman, Margaliot, p. 354.
\(^{60}\) Prof. Israel Bartal, Rutgers University, March 30, 2000.
for the death of our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ – you have only one solution. Come over to our religion and I will work to annul this decree.”\textsuperscript{61}

The charge is often made that Jews helped the German war effort by manufacturing military uniforms, bullets and other necessities. There is a great deal of truth to this. However, one should understand the complexity behind this apparent complicity. In the ghettos, work cards were the basis of life. Without one, one could not receive any rations. While those with money could buy smuggled food, the poor were doomed to imminent starvation without these cards. Moreover, one immediately became eligible for deportation to the camps.

It’s a given that slaves are not motivated to work any harder than is absolutely necessary. And sabotage certainly occurred where situations were favorable to it, but workers labored under guards. Irene Gut Opdyke speaks of her time in an ammunition factory. “Any idea we had of thwarting our captors was defeated from the start: Our speed and efficiency were checked repeatedly, and the punishment for sabotaging the ammunition was death. There was no appeal.”\textsuperscript{62} She, as a Pole, was afraid to do anything to frustrate the Germans. Jews, having more to fear, were ever more careful to appear industrious.

**Missed Opportunities**

Ironically, some sabotaged their own chances to survive by their inability or refusal to allow themselves to live lies. A well-to-do, middle-aged Jewish Hungarian woman refused the opportunity to live as an Aryan. She prided herself on always having been an honest and upright person. Because lying offended her sense of dignity she refused the forged documents and ultimately was killed in Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{63} She was not alone in this refusal to deny herself and her people.

Schifra Z. was twelve when German troops invaded Vilna. As she did not look Jewish, some members of the Wehrmacht encouraged her to flee:

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 91.
\textsuperscript{63} Film: Daring to Resist.
“Just walk away. Keep walking westward.” “I couldn’t do that on my own,” she tells us. “I could not beg, I could not steal, I could not take from anyone anything. I could not go under a false name.”

Margaret Artman, also, refused to lie to save herself. She arrived in Auschwitz from Hungary with her family. Her parents were sent to the gas chambers but she and her two sisters were left to work in the camps. When she got to the undressing area, a guard pulled her toward him, She did not look Jewish. “He told me I should get lost. Get away from where the others were going.” She refused, saying:

“Ich bin Jude.” He hit me, and yells, ‘Du bist kein Jude.’ I repeated, ‘Ich bin Jude.’ Again he hit. Again, I said ‘I’m not Volksdeutsch. I’m Jewish.’ The more I said I’m Jewish, the more he hit. Finally, he let me go mit (sic) my sisters.”

Both Schifra Z. and Margaret Artman survived despite their missed opportunities. Or, because of them; most survivors credit their survival to sheer luck. Survival depended on so many contingencies, it was impossible to determine what the best survival strategies were for those who could not emigrate. In the cases of the two young women, it may well have been their strength of character, their decision to resist the enemy’s offer to help, that ultimately enabled them to survive.

**Gratuitous Assault**

The conditions foisted upon Jews in ghettos and concentration camps virtually ensured that they would become loathsome to themselves and others as a result of the unspeakable conditions: famine to the point of death by starvation, intense overcrowding, lack of hygienic facilities or proper clothing, and unrelenting abuse, printed, verbal and physical. Fear of death was a constant. Rage, turned inwards, added to feelings of frustration and total inadequacy to create depression.

In *Excremental Assault*, Terence Des Pres speaks of the sulfurous odor of the camps.

It wasn’t merely the smell of burning hair and flesh that assaulted the nostrils but the smell of excrement; as if the camps had been designed to smell

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like the age-old concept of hell; as if the foetum judeae, the medieval notion of a smell particular to Jews, had finally been realized. With dysentery rampant and the opportunity of using the latrines regulated to the point of irrelevance, how could it smell otherwise? ... Yet we have not reached the heart of the matter. The essential or ideal goal was not murder or self-destruction as such. It was to ensure that the Jews would destroy themselves through self-loathing.66

Toward this goal, German film and print media portrayed the Jew as an ugly, greedy, abhorrent creature on par with rats, vermin, swine. To retain a positive self-image in the face of this constant barrage of taunts and insults required an enormous amount of stamina. Most affected, of course, were Jewish children. Many spoke about having a “good face”, that is, a face with “Aryan” features, as opposed to a “bad face” with its Semitic features.67 Hair was bleached, even the hair of young children. For males, the situation was more complex. There is a harrowing scene in the film, Europa, Europa in which a teen-age boy tries to undo the scar of his circumcision. The film is based on the true story of Solomon Perel.

Traditional Jews, particularly whose distinct appearance and compromised facility with local vernaculars (Yiddish was their primary language.) had already aroused prejudice and suspicion among gentiles in pre-war years. Their appearance, much worsened by their situation, eventually confirmed the propaganda that had been spread. Under the unhygienic conditions of the ghettos and camps, where lice and contagious diseases were rampant, most eventually did become ugly, stinking, disease-carrying creatures.

It must have been extremely difficult for normal individuals who had contact with these prisoners – guards, non-prisoners who were fellow-workers in labor camps, Germans or local citizens they encountered on the way to work outside camps and ghettos – to extend themselves by coming to the aid of these frightening apparitions; particularly as helping Jews was against the law and punishments were extreme.

To survive in these circumstances required not only a strong constitution and a vast amount of luck but a healthy self-image that could admit that despite the horror, the victim though severely compromised on a


physical level, retained the higher moral ground. Though Jews were forced to live in their excrement – sometimes forced to eat it or lick urine off the floor; and were cursed by their guards for being nothing more than excrement, once they made the initial decision to survive and not become the doomed “Musselmänner,” they needed to make every effort to retain as much dignity as they could under the circumstances.68

Donat writes of the failure to wash, which required sacrificing part of one’s ersatz coffee ration, as “...the first step to the grave. It was almost an iron law: those who failed to wash every day soon died. Whether this was the cause of or effect of an inner breakdown, I don’t know; but it was an infallible symptom.”69

Primo Levi also addresses this, “In this place it is practically pointless to wash every day in the turbid water of the filthy wash-basins for purposes of cleanliness or; but it is most important as a symptom of remaining vital, and necessary as an instrument of moral survival.”70

**Fear of Reprisal**

*All that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*

– Mark 26:52

With occupation came deprivation. Polish patriots – and many Jews were patriotic – resisted German subjugation in many ways. As slaughtering animals was forbidden to the populace, slaughtering a pig was seen as an act of resistance. Insurgency is always a problem for an occupying army and the Germans went to great lengths to quell it. Irene Gut Opdyke writes,

> Things in Radom grew harsher. The Polish people were not submitting to the occupation like sheep: There were acts of sabotage against the Germans all the time, but these rebellions were met with reprisals as swift, arbitrary and deadly as lightning ... Rapid gunfire was the metronome that kept time to our lives.71

If Poles lived by this “metronome” how much more did Jews, at a far greater disadvantage because of the racial laws, fear reprisals? The general understanding, fostered by the Germans and their cohorts, was that one could

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68 “The lesson of the commandment to live is the key to their hope.” – Rabbi Asher Finkel.
71 Ibid., Opdyke, p. 87.
survive if one obeyed the laws whereas, punishment for non-compliance was extreme and collective in nature. Therefore, the understanding was that it was in the individual’s as well as the community’s best interest to follow even the harshest and most arbitrary orders. In view of this, it is easy to understand why the Judenrats sought to maintain order in the ghettos and why, also, most Jews, despite their philosophical differences regarding the policies their Judenrats promoted, supported them. The chaos that would resulted from anarchy may have served all Jews better, but they didn’t know it at the time.

On May 15, 1943, Jacob Gens, the chairman of the Vilna Ghetto, called a meeting of labor leaders, supervisors and policemen to inform them that a man had been arrested for purchasing a revolver. Gens had just come from a meeting with the Gestapo and had been warned of possible repercussions. Thus, he urged the leaders to order their constituents to stop the trade in arms. “As long as a ghetto remains a ghetto those who have the responsibility will do everything we can so that nothing shall happen to the ghetto. Nowadays, a Jew’s whole family is responsible for him. If that is not enough . . . .” He went on to widen the circle of responsibility and concluded, “If they (the Germans) do not provoke us, then we must not do it to ourselves. Because it is we alone who pay!”

No one knows exactly how many people lost their lives because of the actions of one distraught young man. More than twenty thousand people paid with their lives for the assassination of SS Lieutenant General Reinhard Heydrich (in Prague, May 27, 1942). As a reprisal, the Nazis destroyed the village of Lidice on June 9, ostensibly because Czech partisans had been helped by the villagers. Of the villagers, 1,999 men and boys were shot, 195 women were sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, and 90 children with Aryan features were sent to German families in Poland. When the Warsaw Ghetto was cleared of more than five hundred thousand Jews in the summer of 1942, the SS dubbed the action "Aktion Reinhard" in honor of Heydrich.

When resistance organizers tried to gather support the ghetto their arguments were weighed against the possible reprisals the intended uprisings would incur. Always the question of responsibility surfaced. At a meeting in

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72 Ibid., Arad, Gutman, Margaliot, pp. 444-445.
Vilna of the Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair in December, 1941, the leader of a youth organization that had opposing political views argued with Abba Kovner against armed resistance:

Once we begin our action, will we not be endangering the entire ghetto? Do we have the right to assume responsibility for all Jews, to endanger their lives and hasten their destruction if we fail? None of the Ghetto Jews will stand with us; no one will understand us. They may even curse us and turn against us, for they will think that we are the source of the disaster that is befalling them. ... Collective responsibility hangs over our heads like a sword of Damocles.  

In fact, countless lives were lost in the uprisings. Whether those who were killed would have perished anyway is a moot question. Would active resistance have averted the “Final Solution”? The Nazis conquered countries with well-armed trained armies. It is doubtful that they would have allowed small, ragtag bands of rebels – street gangs in common vernacular – to prevail, particularly in view of the fact that they considered the annihilation of the Jews a priority, particularly once the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” was set in motion. (Death by attrition through starvation and other deprivations and degradations was increasingly galvanizing Jews to resist.) Nazis found that the best way to maintain order was through a system of collective brutal punishment. Naturally, this intimidated would-be rebels.

Luna K. reminds us that under the Nazi system, resistance was virtually always allied to the threat of reprisal. Not all former victims would agree that the ensuing dilemma was as conscious and deliberate as she makes it sound; but few would deny its portentous role in the demise of the so-called heroic self:

“The one very, very important part ... it’s a question of the whole idea of rebellion and understanding. What was it, and what were the repercussions for rebellion? When you talk about rebellion and resistance and so forth, every single individual who felt that he wanted to perform an act of resistance was an individual who had to make a conscious choice right then and there, that he not only will commit the rebellious act, but he along with himself will take with him scores of people. So it was not a question, ‘I’m not going to obey it, therefore you can shoot me,’ but it was ‘I’m not going to obey it, you can shoot me and another hundred people.’ And who wanted this kind of responsibility?”

That reprisals were certain, brutal, and swift was the first lesson Nazis taught the people they conquered. Prisoners had witnessed enough sadism and brutality to fear incurring the executioner’s wrath, if not for themselves then for others. “Once a woman on her way to her death managed to throw a

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73 Ibid.
74 Accurate figures are impossible as not all inhabitants of ghettos were legally registered.
75 Ibid., Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p. 181.
heavy bottle at the Deputy Commandant SS-Untersturmführer Neimann and cut his scalp. As punishment, the entire transport was gassed slowly and perished in a long agonizing death."76 One is left to wonder: had the woman realized the consequences of her action, would she have thrown that bottle? Was a cut on a Nazi’s head worth the torture the entire transport, including all the infants and children, had to endure?

In January 1943, the Gestapo demanded that Rabbi Yechezkel of Ostrowiec be surrendered to them, warning that the entire community would suffer if they didn’t comply. The Rabbi made the ritual preparations for his own death.

Literally minutes before the deadline, some Jews, at the risk of their own lives, offered to help the rabbi escape to the "Aryan" side of the city. But the rabbi would not hear of it. "Far be it from me," he said, "to endanger the lives of the 30,000 Jews who are still living in this city. If I were to run away, the Nazis would take their revenge on these innocent people. It is better that I should be sacrificed for my community than my community should perish on my account."77

Isaac Wittenberg was the leader of the Vilna Ghetto Fighters organization. When the Nazis demanded that he turn himself in, he went into hiding. Unrelenting pressure was put on the ghetto community by the Germans. The Jews, themselves, feared becoming scapegoats and put pressure on him and his wife. He was willing to commit suicide, but the Nazis would not be satisfied. Witnesses in the film, Partisans of Vilna, speak of Wittenberg’s anguish at making what Lawrence Langer terms a “choiceless choice.” Abba Kovner, the next in command was at a loss as to what to do and left it to Wittenberg to decide the course of action, vowing his support regardless of the decision. It is clear that Wittenberg did not harbor a death wish. However, in the end, he surrendered and was executed. (Thereafter, the ghetto was liquidated.)

Besides the fear of spurring collective punishment, was the natural reluctance, by those who realized they were cornered, to provoke their own and their families’ gratuitous suffering. Filip Müller related several incidents which point to this:


"If you are sensible, you can spare yourselves and your children a great deal of distress. A great deal," Voss warned the Jews. "Everything will be much easier if you get undressed quickly and move on to the next room. Or do you want to make your children’s last moments needlessly distressing?" 78

When new inmates, suspicious, ignored orders to undress, the Germans grew ever-more menacing and finally began to beat them with sticks.

Anyone offering resistance was mercilessly beaten to a pulp. To be allowed to die together was the only comfort left to these people... By now many people were bleeding profusely from blows they had received. And at long last the rest realized that resistance was useless. There was no way out. They began to undress, whereupon the SS men stopped beating them. 79

Apathy

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he could not open his mouth: as a lamb which is brought to slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearsers is dumb, so he could not open his mouth."

– Isaiah 53:7

The Nazis owed a great deal of their success in exterminating the Jews to the apathy they fostered among their victims. Their vicious propaganda campaign and systematic reprisals against anyone hiding Jews had a paralyzing effect on possible rescuers among gentiles. The mental and physical torments Jews underwent during the war galvanized some but immobilized most.

The most powerful weapon the Nazis had was its control of the food supply. They determined the daily rations. Germans were entitled to 2300 calories, Poles to 650, and Jews to 180, a figure incapable of sustaining life. This deprivation not only caused a gruelingly painful death, it produced a host of related problems. Death by starvation is an agonizing process to undergo and the tensions it produced in those forced to watch their loved ones suffer is inestimable. It also caused enormous personal stress – even those who had access to enough food were plagued with guilt – and contributed to the spread


79 Ibid., p. 84.
of disease as immunity to germs in the overcrowded conditions declined precipitously. It also advanced social upheaval. Because the *Judenrats* were given the unhappy responsibility of distributing food, there was much internecine strife as they were left to field the blame for a situation that was really beyond their control. Suicide and smuggling (a precarious business) became common. Betrayal and theft, even among members of the same family, further undermined the social structure as people grew increasingly desperate. Throughout this, the policy of deception continued. As death by starvation took more and more lives, it became easier to lure volunteers for deportation to “work camps in the east” with the promise of bread and marmalade (or, in some cases, margarine or sugar).

The starving who remained in the ghettos, could think of little else but food. As a survivor in the film, “Warsaw Ghetto Uprising”, produced by the Ghetto Fighter’s House states, “A person who lives on nothing but a slice of bread and a bowl of soup, for months or even years, cannot think of anything but bread and soup.” In their debilitated state, the idea of fighting a well-fed army of trained soldiers seemed quite impossible. In the labor camps, where the situation was worse than in the ghettos, the idea of rebellion seemed even more far-fetched.

Those who had already gone through a few weeks of school in beatings, hunger, maltreatment, and the loss of feeling and humanity were incapable of resisting. A wild beast, before pouncing on his victim, will roar so piercingly that the victim will become paralyzed with fright and will be incapable of running away. The victim just crouches and waits for the end.80

An additional cause for apathy was the steeply climbing death toll in all Jewish communities. Psychologists and others in helping professions acknowledge the vulnerability and emotional fragility of mourners. With the passage of the Nuremberg laws and the incremental reign of terror, suicide and death impacted heavily on everyone making Jews a people in mourning. To expect mourners to have the physical stamina, the emotional stability, and presence of mind to resist severe oppression is unfair.

With these circumstances in mind, it makes the uprisings that did occur seem all the more heroic. But it must be emphasized that those who took part in them were, in a peculiar way, philosophically like the

80 Ibid., Nomers-Przytyk, p. 33.
Musselmänner. They, too, had given up hope of surviving and sought death on their own terms. And, just as camp inmates tended to distance themselves from the "Walking Dead", the Musselmänner, many who still retained the hope that they would and could outlive the Nazis, either through their own determination and/or with God's help, wanted no dealings with these would-be heroes.

Paradoxically, Victor Frankl speaks of apathy - in terms of deliberately blunting feelings in order to become desensitized to the humiliations, beatings, and surroundings - as a form of resistance. He considers shock the primary phase of adjustment of new prisoners. "Apathy, the main symptom of the second phase, was a necessary mechanism of self-defense. Reality dimmed, and all efforts and all emotions were centered on one task: preserving one's life (and that of the other fellow)."  

CHAPTER

3

FLIGHT AND RESCUE

The emigration of the Jews from Germany is to be furthered by all possible means.

– Göring, January 24, 1939

Flight

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary, and they shall walk, and not be faint.

– Isaiah 40:31

Those who took Mein Kampf as a warning that Jewish life in Europe was in grave danger emigrated; if they had the wherewithal to do so. In fact, waves of emigrants left Germany after Hitler’s ascension to power. Some of them returned after the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws, under the assumption that the new legislation, however restrictive, would stabilize the volatile political and economic situation and hasten normalization. Most German Jews, however, saw the Nuremberg Laws as a harbinger of worse things to come and continued to make every attempt to emigrate.

German Jews who did not have German passports were deported to Poland (or their other countries of origin.) Most Jews could have survived had they left Europe, altogether. But this was difficult, and in many cases impossible to accomplish. As Edith Frank wrote in 1937 to friends who had emigrated to Argentina, “I think every German Jew must be combing the world in search of refuge and not finding one.”

After Kristallnacht there was a marked increase in emigration. Once the Nazi invasions began, Jews in the occupied lands sought to leave. Some were successful, most were not. A lack of money, visas, affidavits and host countries impeded their departure. For those who were “stuck”, the only viable option was to go underground, to a life in hiding. This took many forms: life as a fugitive; camouflage: assumption of new (Aryan) identities

82 Ibid., Arad, Gutman, Margaliot, p. 125.
83 Ibid., p. 91.
with forged papers and/or baptismal certificates; living in forest bunkers, not necessarily as partisans; or living in a self-imposed containment.

For Jews trying to leave Germany, and, eventually, other countries where they were in danger it was not a question of “If?” but “Where?” Once they had a destination they went, leaving behind language, property, professions, friends and even family members unable to emigrate. Many left without knowing their destination, convinced that the farther from Germany the safer they would be, even as homeless refugees. Enormous expansion and contraction of populations within worldwide Jewish communities occurred between Hitler’s rise to power and the liberation. After 1941, emigration became all but impossible.  

The oft-repeated phrase “like sheep to slaughter”, first recorded in Isaiah (53:7) and Psalm 44:12, has assumed mythic proportions in connection with Jews and the Holocaust. No doubt, the association of lambs brought to the Temple for ritual sacrifice and Jews killed and burned is partly responsible. Those who still blame Jews for the death of Jesus may see the mass slaughter as a chapter in the expiation of that sin. Others, theorize that Hitler sabotaged the success of his “Thousand Year Reich” by making the Jews his enemy, basing their argument on “And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee.” (Gen: 12:3)

THE BLESSING

They could have said

Stay! The Fatherland needs you
Yes, even you, with your noses, your greed.
Your Talmudic ways may prove useful to us.

Enjoy our park benches
Beer gardens, spas, cabarets . . .
Stay, bitte. Bleiben Sie hier!

(stanza break)

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84 The White Paper, a law passed by Great Britain in 1939 limited Jewish immigration to Palestine to 1,500 persons per year for five years. It was promulgated to appease Arabs and remained in effect until 1948 and created the Arab state in 1949.

85 Some Christian Fundamentalists draw a theological parallel in which Jews become the eventually destroyed the Roman Empire.
You may keep your homes, your factories
We'll not shave your wives' dark hair
Nor hurl your infants into fires.

They could have said, Stay.86

However one relates to the Holocaust theologically, the historical perception of all too many is that Jews sat calmly as the Nazis invaded and set about leading them to their deaths. In Sefer ha-Zeva’ot, Book of Abominations, a Yizkor Book of Warsaw, edited by B. Mintz and I. Klausner in Jerusalem in 1945 one finds an utter refutation of this idea:

From the day the war broke out people escaped, panic-stricken. Tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands escaped. Main roads and side roads were crowded with refugees. Men and women, old men and youths, all escaped, most of them on foot, because it was impossible to obtain a cart, to say nothing of an automobile.87

One can well-imagine the confusion and sense of displacement as families became separated from one another in this mass exodus. Not all the refugees were Jews, of course. The majority were, however, as gentiles felt less threatened by the invaders; they were not targeted by the Nazis as were Jews. With bombs raining down and roads clogged, “Tens of thousands died on the road.”88

Miriam Ehrlich’s family fled their home in Poland within days of the Nazi invasion.

My father said we have to get away. The whole family left, my parents, my aunts with their children, my Aunt Sesha, the uncles, my grandparents, the other grandmother. We left at night. We took nothing but mattresses and bedding piled high on a wagon... We were going to a town forty kilometers away, where we knew somebody. It took two, three, four nights— who remembers?...

We came there until (sic) September 12 or 17 (1939). I don’t remember when the Germans came in. We hid my father and my grandfather, but the other men they took away. They held them a few weeks, starved them, beat them, shot some of them, and then released the others. They were sleeping outside. The rains started then, people got sick. Some died of sickness. Some they shot.89

86 Barbara Wind, Walking on Ash, unpublished manuscript.
87 Ibid., Zucker, p. 188.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., Ehrlich, p. 157.
Hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews did flee to the Soviet Union. There, many of them were arrested as (German) spies and subjected to harsh treatment; sometimes they were executed. The majority of the refugees were single males, then considered the most vulnerable segment of the population. Some were forced into Soviet labor camp where living conditions were not necessarily better than in German concentration camps (non-extermination camps). Fleeing toward the east was viewed by many Jews as “jumping from the frying pan into the fire.” Not only was the Soviet Union economically and culturally backwards compared to western and central Europe, the journey itself, often on foot, was fraught with hardship and danger.

It was even more prohibitive for women; unchaperoned travel was considered unseemly in the era when the double standard was the norm. Women were seen (and saw themselves) as the weaker sex and a hindrance to a fugitive existence. Single men did not welcome a female as a traveling companion. They viewed it as a physical burden as well as a tremendous responsibility – the woman’s reputation might be compromised. Saving their own lives would be difficult enough without the worry of having to defend the honor and life of a sister or even a wife. It was believed women would be safer at home, particularly in view of the race laws that forbade sexual congress between Aryans and Jews. Once it became obvious that women and children were targeted for destruction, it was too late to flee. In hindsight, these ideas seem ludicrous, but in context of the time, they seemed perfectly sensible.

Rescuers, Enablers, Neutral Bystanders

What becomes manifest in the stories of survival through flight is the critical importance of rescuers. In many instances, enablers became rescuers. Neutral bystanders, who neither helped the Germans nor betrayed Jews also saved countless fugitives. Even the most brutal soldiers and guards could occasionally become “neutral bystanders” in the sense that they would allow an infraction to pass unnoticed or slack off in their duties. Sometimes they would extend a kindness. Nearly all survivors tell of some instance in which

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90 Once it became clear that women and children, were indeed, targeted for destruction, it was too late for (most) to flee.
such a moment of grace saved their lives. In the film *One Survivor Remembers*, Gerda Weissman Klein recounts the tale of her *blockowa*, forcing her to go on the Death March. At that point in her struggle to survive, Klein was fully prepared to give up. The *blockowa*, hardly a paragon of kindness and good-will, forced her off the bunk and actually bent down to tie Klein's shoes. Had Klein remained in the camp, she would have been shot.

In Chabannes, the entire village supported the school in which the O.S.E. housed hundreds of children (as a refuge and transit point until escape to a neutral country could be achieved). But the compliance of the entire populace, the efforts of Felix Chevrier, the heroic director of the school, and the brave and stalwart teachers would have been useless if a police chief of the region hadn't been persuaded to warn of impending raids. He was not asked to do anymore than make a phone call, yet the policeman risked his life and career to do this. (He also avoided fastidiousness in his subsequent search of the chateau.) His act saved hundreds of children.

Edith Velmans describes an incident in which a kind gesture saved her: She had gone to visit her father, who was hiding in another town. Edith missed the train home and was stranded but she (and a friend) found a church; they were admitted to the rectory and allowed to stay the night. The following morning, "Father Josephus walked us to the door and handed us a package containing fresh bacon, butter, eggs and a loaf of bread hot from the oven. 'For your parents,' he said." She was unaware that the priest had immediately seen through her lie and realized that she was Jewish. As a man of God and a member of the Resistance, he gave her complete support. While she was utterly grateful to him at the time, she didn't realize how perilous her situation had actually been. She was to eventually learn that her false papers were such blatant forgeries, they would have given her away had any official asked to see them.

Even having the saintliest enabler didn't guarantee survival. Stanislaw Sobczak hid twelve Jews from Frampol and Goray in a cellar beneath his barn. For more than a year, despite constant fear and physical hardships, he devoted himself to caring for them.

When the front neared us and the Germans began burning everything, I was afraid that those hiding in the cellar would be destroyed. . . . I told them

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91 Ibid., Velmans, p. 153.
to go through my field in one direction but they chose another route instead. There they encountered Polish partisans who killed some of them and robbed them of everything they had. Some AK (Armia Krajowa, Home Army) partisans came later came to me and announced that I was to be punished for the crime of hiding Jews.²²

The partisans beat him so severely, he ended up confined to bed for two weeks. The thugs also looted the farm, taking his pigs, horse, wagon and all they could carry. His testimony appears in Sefer Frampol (Frampol Memorial Book.)

Every survivor who found refuge, whether in a cellar, a palace or as an emigrant in a host country, began by fleeing the enemy. There are numerous stories of flight and practically all involve enablers, some on the scale of Father Josephus others on such scales as those of Sugihara and Wallenberg. Of course, the Danes were the most remarkable rescuers in terms of saving nearly their entire Jewish population. They worked in concert with the Swedes to achieve this.

In recent months, documents have appeared revealing that Sweden's reputation as a neutral country during World War II is overblown; she was commercially allied to Germany. The Swedish involvement in the German war effort is far from unblemished. However, in terms of enabling Denmark’s Jews to survive by providing sanctuary, Sweden cannot be faulted.

**U-Boats or Divers**

I won’t find my name on the official list of those “invited” to proceed to the railroad station for a trip to a concentration camp. If we stay here and forget about going legal, we may have a better chance to escape being deported and to hold out until it’s all over.²³

For some Jews, flight took the form of descent in that they went "underground." The Gestapo referred to them as "U-Boats" or "Divers." Jews who could acquire baptismal certificates or “Aryan” passports could live in the open. They could accomplish this only in an area where they were unknown, as recognition by a former neighbor or schoolmate often led to

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²³ Ibid., Zuker, p. 127.
betrayal and arrest. This way of life also required enormous courage, talent, resourcefulness and a gambling streak.

CHAMELEON

Pool, poker, you've become quite a player
Learning how to win and when to lose.

A sale can keep you going for months
And diamonds are the best commodity
Easy to carry and always a market—
Plenty of cash in Berlin these days
Looking for a safe investment.

You depend on certain curious connections
Sure, it's a risk but they're not all Nazis.
You'll manage this way until the war ends
Or your luck runs out.
No one lives forever, anyhow
Even in the best of times.

The efforts respectability requires!
Shined shoes, pressed pants
A bath, a shave become a luxuries
When you have no roof.

But you must maintain the masquerade
So you act a successful businessman
Or a dull civil servant, secure in his job.

Being a gigolo can mean survival;
You've learned to excel at that game, too.
When the lady's questions become intense
Or endearments take on the tenor of truth
It's time to pack your leather briefcase.
If she threatens you lie, assure you'll return
As soon as "this business" is concluded.
If she cries, you kiss her and swear sincerity
But wartime romances have their own rules.
You vow, come armistice, to make her your bride
If she's still willing to do you that honor.

Now, the morning of departure
Carrying all you own in one hand.
You leave the warm flat, her downy arms
To lose yourself in the anonymous crowd.
Despite the good breakfast she rose to prepare
Gall and wormwood line your mouth.

You’ve new papers in your pocket
This time you’re Dutch, born in ’22.
A quick mimic, you’ve perfected several accents,
A stammer, a lame gait . . .
What an actor you’ve become!
You’ve memorized the catechism
In German, Polish, French . . .
Genuflect like one born into the faith

Who could have guessed you had such talents.  

Some Jews managed to survive the war in their own native cities or hometowns, hidden by Christians. This lifestyle, while presumably safer than life out in the open, was fraught with its own host of problems, not the least of which was getting caught when one surfaced to acquire necessities such as medical care, or luxuries such as an outing. Many of the "illegals" did not consider outings luxuries but breaks from the sanity-threatening self-imprisonment. The stress of living in silence, often in reclusive darkness, took its toll and some broke under the stress. Others made sorties that cost them their lives.

CONCERT FOR U-BOATS

Peek through the blinds
Sunlight glints off ripening apples
Lovers stroll in the park
As though nothing’s amiss.

Perhaps they dream of a bed
Soft as this. Our prison,
Yet how many
Wish such a cell.

There’s a concert tonight.
We can blend into the crowd
Your blond hair, my blue eyes . . .
We always did. Don’t you remember?  

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94 Ibid., Wind, Weaving The Remnants. (inspired by Larry Ohrbach.)
Beethoven, Brahms would be so soothing
We need a break from this whispery hell.
We'll act carefree, none will suspect.
Let's dress, the sun will soon go down.

But, what was that terrible sound
Has yet another Jew been shot
Or was it merely a clap of thunder?
Tell me, will it rain tonight?95

The Gestapo would send Greifers (catchers) out to find and arrest
hidden Jews. In Berlin, where many Jews were U-Boats, Jews would often be
trapped at a concert, opera, or cafe. Stella Goldachlag was a beautiful twenty-
year old Gestapo-sponsored Jewish Griefer. Her parents were sent to
Theresienstadt and perished. She survived the war, converted, and remained
in Germany.

STELLA

A couple of hours till the opera begins
Stella enters her latest account:
3 U-Boats = 1 kilo of butter . . .

Thanks to her courage
Mutti, Vati are alive.
Just yesterday, a letter

From Theresienstadt
Her father, still composing
Soon, his Leider will be heard.

La Traviata, this evening
The catch should be good.
She must decide what to wear . . .

Gaily humming Sempre libera
She chooses black silk
And combs her blond hair.

Sempre libera. ever free. an aria from La Traviata.

95 ibid.
Resisters in the Attics

While some might argue that those in hiding, chose to follow the instinctive pattern of flight over fight and therefore do not conform to the traditional definition of resisters, flight was particularly perilous for Jews under the Nazi occupation. Yet, given the occupation of fleeing or remaining to face the enemy, many fled.

There were spy networks among the Jews, that was obvious. In spite of brutal security, reports did pass between the Arbeitslager and the ghetto; some of the prisoners in the Arbeitslager were allowed to visit family in the ghetto. When we knew of a planned Aktion, some people escaped to live in the forests, or hid before the raid.96

“Courage is revealed in many disparate behaviors but is by no means limited to overt actions as such. For example the attitude of hope in the face of adversity – illness, war, injustice, and hatred. Does that not bespeak of bravery and courage? Anne Frank clearly typifies this point.”97 Although it is inherent, one aspect of Anne Frank’s diary that is rarely stressed is that it testifies to the resistance of the Franks, the other occupants of the attic and, by extension, to others in similar circumstances. (Of course, it is also a testament to their enablers. In Holland, members of the Dutch Resistance helped roughly two thirds of the 25,000 hidden Jews survive the war.)

“We Germans have not come to subjugate this country and its people, nor do we seek to impose our political system on them,” Arthur Seyss-Inquart, an Austrian whom Hitler had appointed Reich commissioner for the occupied Netherlands, said in his inaugural speech on May 29, 1940. Gas chambers and crematoria intended for mass murder had not been built. If the “Final Solution” existed, it was only as a thought in the minds of individual Nazis. The massacre at Babi Yar would take place in the distant future (September 29-30, 1941). Westerbork had opened the previous October (1939) as an internment and transit camp for 750 German Jews who entered Holland illegally.

96 Ibid., Opdyke, p. 126.
On October 22, 1940, a decree was passed ordering all business with 25% or more Jewish interest to register with the Bureau of Economic Investigation. As Melissa Mueller states:

Otto’s quick response suggests that he had already made plans for such an eventuality. He realized that the decree was only the first step in ‘dejudicication of commerce’ and that it would be followed by matters similar to those by which Jewish property had been ‘Aryanized’ in Germany. He had watched his wife’s family lose everything and was determined that the same thing not happen to him. . . . the day after the decree was announced, Victor Kugler and Jan Gies founded, on Otto’s behalf, La Synthèse N.V., a firm whose purpose was ‘to manufacture and trade chemical and pharmaceutical products, foodstuffs, and table luxuries, as well as to participate in similar undertakings, all in the broadest sense.’ Victor Kugler was named managing director and Jan Gies, Miep’s husband and by now a trusted friend of the Frank’s, supervisory director. They also put up the necessary initial capital, supplied of course by Otto. So there it was: a purely ‘Aryan’ enterprise, totally legal and ready to take over the conduct of Opekta’s business if and when that became necessary, which it did, a little less than a year later, when the Bureau of Economic Investigation ordered the liquidation of Opekta. They had scored a victory over the Nazis, if only a minor one.98

On July 5, 1942, Margot was called to appear for deportation to a labor camp. Although some young people drafted for labor did not see this as anything more than an unpleasant hardship, the Franks considered the situation life-threatening, and moved to the attic the day after the notice arrived. They were evading the law on many counts; if caught in the process of fleeing, their punishment, they knew, would be severe, and possibly fatal. Even the bicycle, Margot’s method of transportation to the hiding place, implicated her. It violated the Nazi order requiring every Jew to turn in his or her bicycle. Moreover, she was committing another crime by not wearing her yellow star. Unlike the Franks’ emigration from Germany which was legal and a practical solution to a problem, these acts certainly required courage.

Hiding was the basic form of resistance for Dutch Jews under German occupation. By May 10, 1940, when Germany attacked Holland, Jews eager to leave Holland for any destination found themselves trapped at ferry ports and train stations and were forced to return to their homes. From that point, the only viable option lay in hiding. The requirement for that was a rescuer.

The Dutch had an active underground and Jews did fare better in Holland than in countries such as Poland and Hungary. Nevertheless, there was a good deal of Anti-Semitism, due in part to the Nazi campaign to win

98 Ibid., p. 67.
the "hearts and minds" of the people in occupied lands. Many in Holland collaborated with the Nazis; armed resistance on the part of the Jews would have proved valiant but vain. Even the ammonia-spraying of Dutch police who came to spy on patrons at Koko, an ice cream parlor frequented by German Jews, turned into an excuse for brutal retaliation. This, in turn, had a sobering effect on many would-be resisters.

As there was a considerable amount of support from the anti-Nazi population, going into hiding seemed the best, if not the only option. "There was no obvious escape hatch for the 140,000 Jews living there — other than going into hiding as the Franks did, at least for a while. The special restrictive laws for the Dutch Jews were implemented in gradual stages, leading ultimately to social isolation, beginning with the wearing of the yellow Star of David."99 The Jew, in essence, became an untouchable, or in Leo Goldberg’s words, "a person to be shunned."100

One result of this shunning was internalization by the Jew that he was less worthy or ultimately "unworthy of life." Resisting self-condemnation was in and of itself an act of resistance. Not all did, and these feelings, no doubt, contributed to the high rate of suicide among European Jews, particularly those in Germany who had considered themselves thoroughly assimilated. Fortunately, for all of Anne Frank’s self-doubts and imagined shortcomings, including complaints in her diary which would make it seem that she was the designated scapegoat, deserving of criticism from all the adults in the attic, she retained a sense of her own worth. This was bolstered by the care and attention she received from family and friends, most especially from her loving and ever-indulgent father.

Anne’s diary attests not merely to Anne’s emotional and spiritual resistance, but the resistance of the Franks and other occupants of Het Achterhuis (The House Behind). The complicated preparations that were involved in making this a temporary hiding place — intended for several months use rather than two years — indicate that people like the Franks who did, indeed, see the Nazis as a threat to their very lives reacted proactively. They were quite willing to go to great extremes to resist, detaching themselves

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99 Ibid., Rittner, {Leo Goldberg, Psychological Reflections on Courage}, p. 72.

100 Ibid.
from their homes, material possessions, friends and family. What must be emphasized is that they were not only more perceptive and courageous than others; they had the means to act on their beliefs and fears.

Few Jews were as advantaged as the Franks, the van Pels and Fritz Pfeffer. Although, they were, of course, dependent on the kindness and courage of Miep Gies and many others, the “attic people” were well-connected to Aryans willing to help. They were also financially independent and were, in effect, able to escape to “their own turf.” In addition, the Franks and van Pels could remain together as intact families.

In contrast, Barbara Ledermann Rodbell, a friend of Margot Frank, left her family (with their blessing) to disappear into the Dutch population, eventually acquiring false identity papers. Her “Aryan” appearance: blond hair and blue eyes was no doubt a factor in this decision; many survivors attribute their successful escape from the Nazis to their ability to “blend in” because of their looks. (Itzhak Cukierman (Zuckerman), the Warsaw Ghetto hero, who “looked Aryan” was actually outside the ghetto at the time of the uprising, on a mission to acquire arms for the ghetto fighters). Of course, this form of hiding was riskier; people who went “underground” always lived in fear of getting caught. While quite a few survivors owe their lives to false identity cards and “passing” it was, obviously, a perilous situation.

Ms. Rodbell was born in Berlin. She and her family, like the Franks, emigrated to Amsterdam in 1933. The following statement regarding the response in 1942 to a German announcement ordering all Jews to prepare for transfer to Westerbork is from an interview printed in a newspaper: “All the Jews just came down the stairs and climbed on the trucks,’ Rodbell said. ‘It’s very tempting to follow suit if everybody does what they are told.”101

Unfortunately, when statements such as Ms. Rodbell’s are taken at face value perpetuate the myth that Jews went “like sheep to the slaughter.” When one understands the complexities involved in the opportunities and decisions to resist, one begins to realize that the level of resistance was far greater than the commonly-held perception that Jews simply acceded to Nazi orders and demands. And when one reads descriptions of German soldiers mired in Stalingrad, one is made aware of how weak and docile even seasoned soldiers can become when faced with cold, hunger and the barrel of

a gun. In this light, why should have unarmed civilians, which included the elderly, children, the ill and disabled, pregnant women and mothers with babies, be castigated for failure to resist?

Anne’s diary reveals just how difficult life in hiding was for the Franks, the van Pels and Dr. Fritz Pfeffer. First and foremost among the hardships was the constant fear of discovery or betrayal. For all their precautions there were occasional slips. That they were so few in number is a credit to the strategic planning, discipline and perseverance of the inhabitants (and their enablers). Those who have been to the hiding place comment on how small it is and this is certainly addressed by Anne in her physical description of the “attic.” The cramped quarters led to numerous conflicts and confrontations, exacerbated by the emotional stress that afflicted the inhabitants, especially Pfeffer. The dentist was separated from his son Peter, whom he had sent to safety in England. Pfeffer then emigrated to Holland with his fiancée, Charlotte Kaletta, who was able to remain free because she was not Jewish. This “odd man out”, a sportsman before the war, must have found confinement extremely trying. Sharing a tiny bedroom with a moody teen-age girl, who had taken a particular dislike to him, was surely both frustrating and demoralizing.

The inhabitants were, in effect, prisoners. In fact, prisoners in the United States would be appalled by the conditions in which the occupants of the attic were forced to dwell: isolation, silence during the day, restricted use of toilet facilities, limited diet, lack of fresh air and yard exercise, etc. Yet, the Franks were extremely grateful for their haven, aware that most of their co-religionists had it much worse.

How fortunate we are here, so well-cared for and undisturbed. We wouldn’t have to worry about all this misery were it not that we are so anxious about all those dear to us whom we can no longer help. I feel wicked sleeping in a warm bed while my dearest friends have been knocked down or fallen into a gutter somewhere out in the cold night. 102

The Frank’s hiding place was luxurious compared to that of others. Josef Kogan spent thirteen months in an abandoned outhouse. (The self-discipline required to remain in this version of solitary confinement must

102 Ibid., Mueller, p. 316.
have been considerable for a man who had previously lived a cosmopolitan existence.) His wife, Lora, was living as a Christian, with forged papers. She worked as a nurse. When she was able to acquire a set of documents for her husband, he left the outhouse and moved into the furnished room she was renting. He spent the next two years pretending he was mute\footnote{Holocaust Historian Israel Gutman, also, pretended to be a deaf-mute in Vilna between 1941-42, when he entered the Ghetto.} because his accent would have given him away.\footnote{Heard in a personal interview, Israel, April 21, 1967.} Others lived in equally appalling circumstances, particularly those who hid in sewers. A group of Jews survived by hiding for fourteen months in the sewers of Lvov.\footnote{Their experiences are recounted in, \textit{The Sewers of Lvov} by Robert Marshall, New York: Scribners, 1991.} Their lengthy endurance under those deplorable conditions that drove others to madness or to surface and face arrest, was made possible only through the heroic efforts of Leopold Socha. A Catholic whose work familiarized him with the waterworks beneath the city, he repeatedly risked his life to sustain his adopted “family.”

Within the ghettos, people built bunkers and passageways that connected house to house. They made them as inconspicuous as possible:

> It is situated beneath a bombed-out building of which little has remained on the surface except a pile of rubble. What is left of the gate and walls has been fenced in with barbed wire. No one would think that human beings could be living in relative comfort beneath this mess.\footnote{Ibid., Zuker. p. 121.}

For those determined to resist annihilation, no hiding place – however repulsive, threatening or demeaning – was overlooked. To escape a German patrol that was chasing her, Yehudis Pshentise ran into a cemetery and jumped into a mass grave.\footnote{Ibid., p. 179.} Surrounded by corpses, animals and worms, she forced herself to remain there until she was sure the patrol had gone. Mothers in undressing rooms sought to protect their children by hiding them beneath piles of clothing. The guards were wise to this and ferreted them out. Wolfie Blumenreich, one of the six boys captured in Chabannes was sent to thirteen concentration camps where his physical condition steadily deteriorated. He wound up in Auschwitz where there weekly selections for the gas chambers. His physical state had so deteriorated
that he realized he was marked for death chambers but fought against this by hiding inside the latrines, "I hid myself under the excrement for the entire time of the selections. Thirteen selections."¹⁰⁸

Paradoxically, awareness of the Franks' relatively-fortunate circumstances became an additional source of discomfort to Anne and, one would assume, the others in the attic. Concern and guilt often threatened to overwhelm her. To maintain their mental and physical health and counter depression, the occupants resorted to a rigid schedule. To ensure the safety of their hiding place during business hours, time was regulated with military precision. Everyone woke to an alarm clock and was given a specific amount of time for personal hygiene. Mealtimes were set, as were duties surrounding these and other housekeeping activities. Work designed to improve the minds and skills of the young occupants was also regulated. Home-schooling went into effect. Lessons in algebra, Latin, English and shorthand using textbooks and correspondence courses helped the three teen-agers pass the long days. Making productive use of their time not only kept adults like Mr. Frank usefully occupied, it offered assurance to the younger generation that life would continue as normally as possible so that when the war ended they could resume their studies without being far-behind other youngsters their age. This encouraged a sense of fulfillment and hope. In fact, just days before their arrest, when they learned of the D-Day invasion, Margot was elated with the possibility of returning to school in September.

The occupants of the attic sought to adhere as closely as possible to pre-wartime life. Personal hygiene, difficult under the circumstances, was rigorously maintained. Birthdays and holidays were celebrated with special treats and gifts. Books (borrowed from the library by Miep Gies) were read. Living within company headquarters provided the Franks and van Pels an opportunity to "keep their hands in the business" both figuratively and literally. Office work was done when the office was closed on Saturdays. Canning of seasonal fruits took place. Vitamins were consumed as well as Valerian, an herbal remedy to ward off depression. The general rule was to strive to make the best of a bad situation and hope for a quick end to the war.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., Gossels.
Otto Heinrich Frank, a veteran of World War I, who had served as a lieutenant in the Army Reserve, felt the Nazi threat earlier than most. After Hitler came to power in April 1933, he left Germany for Amsterdam. He might have chosen to take a “wait and see” attitude as did the majority of German Jews but the Nazi victory coincided with the dissolution of the family-owned bank. In March of that year, Otto and Edith and their two daughters had moved in with Otto’s mother and he was, one may surmise, in search of a new business and domestic independence. Although quite a few German Jews emigrated that year, it’s impossible to say that the Franks would have chosen to leave at that time had the bank remained fiscally viable. Frank was a conservative risk-taker.

As a young man, Otto Frank had traveled a great deal and spent a year in the United States. He could have opted to emigrate there but chose Holland instead. It seemed preferable for several reasons: it had remained neutral in the first world war; the language and culture were European, therefore familiar; Otto knew Amsterdam well and had friends and acquaintances there; and a business opportunity existed in the form of a franchise of Opekta-Werk, a German pectin-marketing concern. It was also close to Aachen, where his wife’s family, the Holländers, lived.

Establishing his new business was no easy feat, yet Frank persevered. Within months he brought his wife and Margot to join him and once they had settled into the apartment he rented for them, Anne, who had been staying with her grandmother, came to live with them in March 1934. (This separation of several months may have contributed to her feelings of being an outsider who was less loved than Margot.) From December of 1933 until July 1942, when they moved into the rooms of the Opekta warehouse, life for the Franks was relatively pleasant. They lived in an area with many other German-Jewish émigrés, Anne and Margot attended school and had many friends, the Franks enjoyed life with other refugees and the business was becoming self-sustaining.

Miep Gies says109 she warned Otto Frank that emigrating to the United States would be wise but he dismissed her suggestion saying he was convinced it was unnecessary; Holland, he believed, would remain neutral. After the Nazi occupation and the October 22, 1940 decree, calling for the

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109 Jon Blair, Film: *Anne Frank Remembered*, 1996.
registration of Jewish-owned businesses, Frank arranged for the business to be delivered into the "Aryan hands" of Kleiman and Mr. Dunselman, Frank's attorney. (Ownership was eventually transferred to Gies & Co.)

As the Nazi threat became more pervasive, the Franks (in January, 1942) applied for emigration certificates and, in the meantime, secretly set up a hiding place which they sought to make as secure and comfortable as possible. Although the Soviet Union, despite its heavy losses, was proving a formidable enemy for Germany and there was hope that the war would end quickly, the family did not put all their trust in this prospect. From a diary entry dated, July 5, 1942:

Daddy has been at home a lot lately, as there is nothing for him to do at business, it must be rotten to feel so superfluous. Mr. Kleiman has taken over Opelka and Mr. Kugler Gies & Co. which deals in (substitute) spices and was only founded in 1941. When we walked across the square together a few days ago Daddy began to talk of us going into hiding, he is very worried that it will be very difficult for us to live completely cut off from the world. I asked him why he was beginning to talk of that already "Yes Anne," he said "you know we have been taking food, clothes, furniture to other people for more than a year now, we don't want our belongings to be seized by the Germans, but we most certainly don't want to fall into their clutches ourselves. So we shall disappear of our own accord and not wait until they come and fetch us."110

Who can read this and accuse the Franks of not resisting?

The hunt for Jews went on constantly. "Evening after evening the green and gray army lorries trundle past and ring at every front door to inquire if there are any Jews living in the house, if there are, then the whole family has to go at once. No one has a chance of evading them, unless one goes into hiding."111 The hunt had become not only a mission, but a business as for these bounty hunters, who could often be bribed. Yet, even those with means, knew that valuables were no guarantee of survival and sought to go into hiding or underground, using false papers and moving from place to place to cover their tracks.

110 Ibid., Mueller, p. 204.
111 Ibid.
The Franks were not the only Jews who spent the war in hiding. 25,000 of Holland’s 140,000 Jews hid. Yet, one has only to read Anne’s diary to realize that what the Franks were able to do was what many others, with fewer resources or with limited entrepreneurial skills could only dream of doing. When Rodbell speaks of seeing the lines of people being herded out of homes and toward their eventual death she speaks of those failed to find sanctuary. Acquiring false papers was not only expensive, it was dangerous. While Jewish females could more easily blend into the population (as they lacked the scar of circumcision) they required not only “Aryan looks” as Rodbell claimed to have, they also needed to be courageous, resourceful and independent, traits which their culture had not encouraged. People, such as the Ledermans, who had not secured a hiding place, had little choice except to stay and face the enemy, all the while hoping that tales of annihilation (heard on the illicit B.B.C. broadcasts) were nothing more than propaganda.

After the war, clinical psychologist and author Bruno Bettelheim criticized the Franks for their failure to separate and go into hiding. Perhaps their chance of surviving was compromised by their remaining together but there is certainly nothing to confirm that separation would have guaranteed survival. In fact survivors who knew them in Bergen-Belsen  Anne and Margot’s belief that both her parents were dead, may have hastened their own deaths.

Unfortunately, the point at which the psychologist made those critical remarks coincided with widespread criticism that Jews had been too passive. Recent writings on Bettelheim present a picture of him as tyrannical and overbearing with a tendency to blame parents for their children’s psychological problems. This calls into question his criticism of the Frank’s position; especially in light of the fact that he had been interned in Dachau prior to emigrating to the United States in 1939. One is left to wonder if his criticism of Jewish passivity (in his book, The Informed Heart) isn’t displacement of self-directed guilt and anger over his own docility during incarceration. Had Bettelheim, as a prisoner, raised his hands against his Nazi guards, he would not have lived to criticize other Jews for not fighting back.

Beyond emigration to a neutral country, there was no sure formula for survival. The documentary film, Voices In The Attic, an account of a Jewish family in Poland who spent the war years in a neighbor’s attic, points to the
danger of going into hiding. They lived in an unheated attic in a barn for several years. Their landlord became hostile when their money ran out. The circumstances of the family's existence were so tenuous they believed they were doomed and encouraged one member, a young bachelor to leave, convinced that he was the only one among them who could survive. He followed their advice. Paradoxically, they survived the war, he did not.

Generally speaking, families then were more closely knit than they became in the postwar years. The family was a self-contained support, learning and entertainment center; separating from it was seen as an unfortunate situation to be avoided, if possible. In addition, mothers played a more active role in raising their children and families were more dependent on the woman of the house as the provider of meals, clothing and emotional sustenance. Whereas Americans today encourage babies to feed themselves as soon as they can sit in a high chair, the common practice in Europe was to lap feed children for several years. That generation often considered their offspring children until they were well into their teens.

When one observes the reaction of contemporary parents to ordinary milestones in their children's lives, e.g. going off to college, one can gain a glimmer of the impact that separation in time of war must have had. For most children and young adults who went into hiding this was their first experience away from home; many were ill-equipped to care for themselves. Although the war forced children to assume adult responsibilities, it did not make them feel less vulnerable. Separation often implied permanent separation, a thought many found unbearable. Thus, many chose to stay together for better or worse. Death, in the context of their experiences, had lost much of its terror.

In one incident at Bergen-Belsen where mothers with young children were selected to be gassed, but given the chance to survive by separating from their children, only two of approximately 600 women separated themselves. And the parent-child bond was often reciprocal. As Etty Hillesum reports in a diary entry dated December 18, 1942: "There were children who would not accept a sandwich before their parents had had one."¹¹²

"One important reason for tarrying in Germany was family, my maternal grandparents and my great-grandmother. My mother feared that we

might never see them again, and she wanted my sister and me to visit for a
long time with Opa, Oma, and Oma Mayer in Frankfurt.”113 These two
sentences point to the reasons some families never emigrated. Reluctance to
separate from parents and other loved ones became, in many cases, a death
sentence. However most parents encouraged their children and
grandchildren to emigrate and most, who could, did.

The Anschluss occurred during Manfred Hecht’s second year of
medical school. Soon after that, his parents arranged for him to leave Vienna.
Emigrants were allowed to take with them personal property “and a
maximum equivalent of four U.S. dollars. To be caught with more money
while crossing the border could mean the risk of sever punishment, possibly
death.”114 They outfitted him with seventeen tailored suits and seventy
letters of recommendation, including one from King Ferdinand of Bulgaria.
Parting with their only child was difficult and meant only to be temporary.
But because of quotas and bureaucratic red tape, they were unable to emigrate.
They died in Auschwitz.

In 1939, Ilse Weber, a German writer and poet and her husband sent
their eight year-old son, Hanush, to live with friends in Sweden. Soon after,
she and her younger son were sent to Theresienstadt while the husband was
sent to another concentration camp. The separation was painful for all and
for the rest of her life Ilse was plagued with guilt for having forced her child
to board the train. Ill with longing and concern but relieved that he was out of
harm’s way, she wrote a poem describing her ambivalence. Its last stanza’s
addresses the unbearable anguish of separation. “I wish that I could see you
for one moment. /But dearest son, I can only write to you/letters of longing
that will not get through.”115 She and her younger son were eventually
deported to Auschwitz where they were killed.

A child whose parents were interned at Rivesaltes, requested that he be
returned to them. They believed the situation, however dreadful, had
stabilized and felt that their son would be better off with them than in an
orphanage. At the time, Rolf Rothschild was nine years old and living in
Chabannes. In the only successful raid the police made on the Chateau, he

p. 45.
was removed. The youngest of the dozen boys and two O.S.E instructors
arrested, he was sent directly to Auschwitz and gassed. That was an instance
in which his age could have saved him, but for his parents' request.

The Kindertransports, and other rescue operations run by such Jewish
relief organizations such as the O.S.E. enabled parents to send their children
to safety. The O.S.E rescued more than 5,000 children, sending them to fifteen
safe-houses in France. Individuals, schools, convents and monasteries
which opened their doors to hide Jewish children found parents eager to take
advantage of their courageous hospitality. If there had been more refuges, one
and a half million children would not have been killed.

Infants and children were the most vulnerable victims of the Nazis. In
traditional Jewish families children are considered wealth; the Yiddish words
for "life", "soul" and "treasure" are also common appellations for one's
offspring. To bear and raise a child during a war is especially trying and the
harder one has worked to achieve something the more reluctant one is to
abandon it. What strength must it have required to give up a child to help it
survive.

**KING SOLOMON'S TEST**

It must begin today
Rationing kisses
Squelching smiles and
Endearments . . .

Parting, less than a week away
Death might be kinder
Usually coming by surprise
But this . . .

This terrible torture
To insure a smooth exchange . . .
But they have sworn to be resolute.
The mother in the Solomon tale

(stanza break)

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116 These safe-houses were only temporary refuges, after 1942. By then the O.S.E. had organized a circuit,
to get the children out of Europe.
Proved herself true
Denying her infant to give it life.
A childless couple will arrive.
Hana’s parents tell how nice

The Schmitts are. How much
They love little children.
They’ll take Hana
To their gingerbread house

Filled with toys, a calico cat
And right nearby a beautiful park.
No reason to tell the three year old
It will become her home

No use trying to explain
Why they can’t come along.¹¹⁷

Of course, the war had a profound effect on children in these situations. Ruth*** says it took her twenty-one nights of crying to adjust to her new life as one of the children of Chabonnes.¹¹⁸ Other children lived in fear of being sent away from their parents. During the war, Samuel Pisar’s father found employment as an automobile mechanic for the Nazi governor. His job allowed him to move, with relative freedom back and forth from the ghetto. He used this opportunity to spirit Jewish children into hiding with Polish families.

One day my mother told me they had thought of giving my sister away. “I hope,” I said, “you weren’t thinking of giving me away, too?”
“No,” she said, “with a boy it’s more difficult,” but her look was strained.

I recalled that conversation only recently, after I had begun writing this book. I woke up in the night with a start.

My God, my parents were willing to give me away! But only, I argued with myself, to save me. Yes, but . . .

The realization stunned me. Such memories have an unimaginable power to hurt.¹¹⁹

That many saw the unity of the family as its strength and refused – as best and for as long as they could – to be rent apart is an explanation for why more Jews didn’t go into hiding. Another important factor is the family as an economic unit. Most families were dependent on the man of the house as their source of support. Certainly mothers with infants or young children

¹¹⁷ Ibid., Wind, Weaving The Remnants, (inspired by a videotaped testimony, USHMM)
¹¹⁸ Ibid., Gossels.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., Pisar, p. 17.
would have needed, in addition to forged documents and willing rescuers, either financial resources to support themselves or the generosity of strangers. And altruistic generosity was a very rare commodity in wartime; black market purchases were necessary to feed the hidden and there were those who were able and willing to pay for the privilege of being hidden. Out of pocket expenses were not required of Miep Gies and the other "attic" rescuers; those in hiding paid their own way. This in no way negates the vast amount of courage and work of those caring and generous people who risked their own lives to save the hidden Jews but it does help explain why so few rescuers can be counted "Righteous Among the Nations."

What Otto Frank had in common with others who spent part or all of the war years in hiding were entrepreneurial skills. These include: the ability to take calculated risks; resourcefulness; facility in several European languages; the ability to negotiate; the ability to adapt rapidly to change; belief in oneself; and a general sense of optimism. Foremost among these is the first. To be a successful entrepreneur one must be ever ready to assess and take risks and this Frank did. Where others were consumed by despair to the extent that they committed suicide, he and his fellow-fugitives quickly, though with varying degrees of success, adjusted to their changed circumstances. That does not diminish the traumatic effect the move to the attic had on them but the fact is that they did not allow themselves to become utterly debilitated by their new status. Some people were unable or unwilling to become proactive in managing their future but the Franks conceived and carried out a carefully-wrought plan. They made it appear that they had fled in a hurry and left clues that implied that they were on their way to Otto's family in Switzerland. It is a tribute to Otto Frank's magnanimity that he allowed Pfeffer to join their enclave telling Miep Gies, when she approached him about the dentist's need for a hiding place, "Where seven can eat, eight can also eat." 120

The Bambergers, like the Franks, were Jews whose families had lived in Germany for centuries. Hugo Bamberger, who owned a small chemical factory in Germany, had business connections in Holland, Spain and Belgium. When attempts to settle in Spain and Italy failed, Hugo arrived in Belgium in 1937. His wife and daughters joined him on April 1, 1938. Belgium turned out to be relatively safe compared to Holland; anti-Semitism was less prevalent there.

Two years after the Bambergers' arrival, Germany invaded Belgium. Mr. Bamberger was arrested, sent to France and eventually made his way to the United States. Mrs. Bamberger and her two daughters went into hiding in Brussels. Gaby, the younger daughter, became a foster child to a couple eager for extra income as well as the opportunity to do a good deed. They also hoped to convert the child to Christianity. Mrs. Bamberger lived under an

120 Ibid., Blair.
assumed identity as did twelve-year old Suzanne, who became a mother's helper for the Wiames, a family she very much admired.

Nelly Altorfer Wiame had a brother, Emile, who was a commander in the Armées Belge des Partisans. Though twice her age and married, Emile became the object of Suzanne's romantic fantasy, a fantasy that sustained her through the very harsh conditions she endured while in hiding. Because Emile's eventual arrest cast the Wiame family under suspicion, Suzanne was forced to seek other employment. Some of her subsequent employers were kind, others not. The teen-ager suffered from malnutrition, loneliness and had on several occasions to fend off sexual advances.

Like Anne, she was outspoken and somewhat rebellious. She dyed her black hair red but still looked "too Jewish" to realize her dream of working with the Resistance. Nevertheless, Suzanne was encouraged by the fact that the Belgians, unable to engage in open resistance, harassed the Germans, whom they hated for their World War I exploits. "Burning their uniforms with cigarettes on crowded streetcars was a favorite sport."121 On one occasion, Suzanne led a German platoon astray by offering them directions in pidgin German. She came out unscathed, as they attributed her act to ignorance rather than hostility. Had she been asked to show her identity card, a common occurrence, they might have seen through the forged document and sent her to a concentration camp.

Although Suzanne was forced to live apart from her family and had to bear the loneliness and responsibility of being on her own, she also enjoyed the personal freedom and the freedom of moving around the city that Anne so desperately longed for. Her diary describes her difficulties and hopes. She didn't keep it as religiously as Anne. In exchange for a place to live she worked as a mother's helper and most of her time was spent taking care of children and performing household duties. Paradoxically, Suzanne who planned to become a chemist and take over her father's business, became, instead, a professional writer who has written many books, including At The Mercy of Strangers, which includes excerpts from her wartime diary.

Escape to a neutral or allied zone or to a hiding place was a fervent wish and a goal that few were able to fulfill. The elderly, the ill or handicapped, and children - were dependent on others and were unable to escape on their own. Many didn't have the will or ability to adjust to new circumstances. And of course, those who were neither professionals nor successful businessmen (few women owned and operated their own business) were without the financial resources to emigrate or go into hiding. Trapped, they had one of two choices: remain where they were and hope to avoid arrest or risk escape without legal documents or a specific destination. Neither option was viable.

Few had the Franks' or the Bamberger's options. Most people in professions such as education, medicine or law had skills and licenses that were not easily transferable. Many of them hadn't had the need to acquire

121 Ibid., Loebl, p. 45.
business skills. Consequently, some who could emigrate, were reluctant to do so; reluctant, one might say, to leave materialistically comfortable surroundings for a life of disenfranchisement and penury.

Whereas, in recent years, the media with its talk of Jewish money in Swiss banks would make it appear that Jews enjoyed a high standard of living, the vast majority of European Jews were far from rich. One has only to read Chaim Grade and I.B. Singer or peruse the photographs of Roman Vishniac to confirm the level of extreme poverty of the average Jew in Poland, Lithuania and the Soviet Union. Even in families who enjoyed a reasonable standard of living, and where emigration was a possibility, the costs associated with a move were often prohibitive. The average Jewish family in eastern Europe did not consist of parents and one or two children as in the case of the van Pels, the Franks and the Bambergers. Large, often extended, families, were more the norm than the exception. Few could afford to provide every family member with emigration certificates, false passports, or bribes to those willing to hide Jews. And few were willing to separate.

Families found it difficult, if not altogether impossible, to leave their elderly and other dependents behind. The easiest and most equitable thing to do was to do nothing and hope for the best. And in its context “the best” (which relied heavily on the “disbelief factor”) allowed that male civilians might be mistreated, perhaps even killed. No army of a western civilized nation had ever deliberately set off to kill old and infirm people, women and children. The Germans, who had behaved civilly towards Jews during World War I seemed, despite Nazi rhetoric, the least likely candidates to commit barbarous acts.

Nevertheless, many took Hitler’s threats seriously enough to relocate to any place that afforded refuge. The problem, of course, was that so few countries were open to refugees. Not only did would-be-emigrés need to go through seemingly endless bureaucratic red tape and give up nearly all their material possessions — to enter a new homeland practically destitute — they needed to find a host country to admit them as well as a host family to sponsor them. Those who could not leave Europe sought sanctuary within it. With few exceptions, neutral countries closed their borders to Jews. In Nazi-occupied territories, hiding Jews was a crime punishable by death and few Gentiles were willing to take that risk.

In all fairness, Gentile themselves were at risk. There is a Polish proverb. "Don't weep for the roses when the forests burn." The Teaching of Contempt and Nazi propaganda ensured that Gentiles would not consider Jews "roses." But even if this were not the case, Jews as Nazi targets, would not have been considered a priority in war-torn Europe.
CHAPTER

4

VECTORS OF RESISTANCE

Jewish armed resistance and revenge are facts. I have been a witness to the magnificent, heroic fighting of Jewish men of battle.
– M. Anielewicz, Ghetto, April 23, 1943"\textsuperscript{122}

It is human nature to recall the good and heroic deeds one commits and forget painful and shameful ones. One would, therefore, tend to assume that Holocaust survivors' tales of resistance are inflated tales of courage and discounted tales of corruption: and, perhaps, even collaboration. From my own talks and interviews with survivors, this has not been the case. I have never heard survivors speak of their own courage. Rather, in response to a question of courage or heroism on their part, they voice amazement that they were capable of a particular act which seems far beyond their postwar capability. Words such as "stupid" or "naive" often accompany these testimonies. Their sense is that any act which we would call "courageous" or "heroic" was propelled by desperation and committed without much, if any, thought. They attribute its success to luck or destiny (faith in God, implied) rather than to their personal efforts. Lawrence L. Langer confirms this:

Suffering is not ennobling. And one thing to bear in mind is that all survivors resisted death and there is a human tendency in some to boast/brag about their courage. Most testimony, however focuses more on guilt about the failure, to save others (as if this were possible), than it does on personal heroics. The overall theme is sheer luck, rather than courage. Hagiography more often is the way the dead are depicted, a tendency not to speak ill of the them."\textsuperscript{123}

The most conclusive argument that Jews did not go "like sheep to slaughter" comes from the Germans themselves. The following excerpts from various reports written by the Einsatzgruppen make it perfectly clear that in Jews attempted to resist Nazi efforts to subjugate them:

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., Arad, Gutman, Margaliot. pp. 315-316.
\textsuperscript{123} Lawrence L. Langer, Preempting The Holocaust, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 36.
Because Jews had attacked a member of the auxiliary police and had repeatedly destroyed German Army sign-posts, a new special action was carried out against the Jews of Minsk in which 214 persons were shot.\textsuperscript{124}

The Vorkommando Moscow was forced to execute another 46 persons, among them 38 intellectual Jews who had tried to create unrest and discontent in the newly established ghetto of Smolensk.\textsuperscript{125}

In Borisov, 176 more Jews were liquidated because they opposed the establishment of a ghetto.\textsuperscript{126}

The Jews resisted somewhat turning the village of Boloschina into a ghetto for the Jews of Sadrububs (Starodubs). Consequently, 272 Jews and Jewesses were liquidated.\textsuperscript{127}

In some places – especially in Kovno – the Jews had armed themselves and took an active part in sniping and arson. In addition the Jews of Lithuania cooperated most closely with the Soviets.

In Latvia, too, Jews took part in acts of sabotage and arson after the entry of the German \textit{Wehrmacht}. In Dunaburg so many fires were started by Jews that a large part of the city was destroyed. The electric power station was burned out completely. Streets inhabited by mainly by Jews remained untouched.\textsuperscript{128}

Rudolf Höss, writes of making refinements in the processing of the prisoners in order to permit the operation to run smoothly. "With subsequent transports the difficult individuals were picked out early and most carefully supervised. At the first sign of unrest, those responsible were unobtrusively led behind the building and killed by a small-caliber gun, that was inaudible to others."\textsuperscript{129} He adds that the goal was to maintain an atmosphere of calm and reassurance. This was not done to ease the suffering of the victims but simply to make the final solution efficient and problem-free.

Deception, Germany's fatal weapon, was far easier to maintain in the death camps than in the labor camps and ghettos. Vilna was captured by Germany on June 24, 1941 and ghettoized in September. When it became apparent that even "productive" workers were doomed, active resistance


\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p. 151.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., p. 204.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., Arad, Gutman, Margalit, p. 391.

\textsuperscript{129} (Extracts from a Report by Einsatzgruppe A in the Baltic Countries, 1941).

\textsuperscript{129} Rudolf Höss, Pery Broad, Johann Paul Kremer, \textit{KL Auschwitz Seen By The SS}, Oswiecim: The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1997, p. 73.
groups burgeoned. In December, 1941, Abba Kovner called for organized armed resistance:

Jewish youth, do not believe those who are trying to deceive you. Those who were taken out of the gates of the ghetto will never return. All the Gestapo’s roads lead to Ponary, and Ponary means death.
Comrades! Let us defend ourselves! Even if we are deprived of the possibility of an armed defense in this unequal contest of strength, we nevertheless can still defend ourselves! Convey your hatred of the foe in every place and at every moment! Better to fall in the fight for human dignity than to live at the mercy of the murderer.130

Given the huge gap in resources and training between Hitler’s army and Jewish fighters, every act of resistance required courage and fortitude. While sufficient arms were nearly impossible for Jews to obtain, armed resistance did occur. In addition to the numerous partisan actions, there were well-documented uprisings in the camps and ghettos. They took place in Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz and in the Warsaw, Vilna and Bialystok Ghettos; also in a host of smaller camps and ghettos. In addition, numerous small groups or individuals attacked their oppressors, sometimes even killing them. But they were quickly shot or beaten to death. Sometimes the witnesses were forced to watch – or participate in – these executions. As one would expect, this kind of intimidation proved useful in staving off resistance.

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Having nothing to lose strengthened the resolve to fight. Whereas, in the early days of the occupation people were reluctant to become involved in activities that would put family and friends at risk, the situation in the ghetto had deteriorated to the point that most former residents had been starved or deported for gassing. Few old people and children remained; almost everyone had become orphaned and was no longer responsible to anyone but his or her peers, who were also taking part in the revolt.

The Jewish Fighting Organization, composed of approximately 600 youths, urged ghetto residents to resist. The entire arsenal consisted of 143

revolvers, one machine gun and 7 rounds of ammunition. Walls of the
ghetto had been plastered with reports about Treblinka and Jews began to go
into hiding. Prior to this last effort, they had organized resistance by rioting
during Aktion. Factories were burned, warehouse windows smashed,
soldiers ambushed. In December, 1942 a ghetto prison break was organized
and 100 Jews were freed. Earlier, in January, 1942, a fight ensued and 20
Germans were killed. Another clash in February resulted in an order to
destroy the Ghetto.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began on April 19, 1943, in response to
the final phase of "voluntary resettlement" of the remaining Jews in Warsaw
(approximately 56,000.) By then, ninety percent of the residents had already
been "resettled." To accomplish this, General Juergen Stroop sent 2009
armed SS soldiers, three detachments of the Wehrmacht, including artillery,
tanks, flame-throwers, armored cars and mine-sappers, 234 soldiers and
officers of the Polish police; 35 members of the Security Police; 337 Ukrainian
and Lithuanian Nazis, including enlisted men and officers.

The ghetto fighters met the troops with grenades and Molotov
cocktails. Mordecai Anielewicz, the Socialist Zionist commander of Ha
Shomer ha-Tzair (The Young Guardians) wrote on April 27, 1943: "This is the
eighth day of our life and death struggle. It is impossible to describe the
conditions under which the Jews in the ghetto are living today. . . We are
nearing our last days, but so long as we have weapons in our hands we shall
continue to fight and resist."131

It took the Nazis longer to subdue the Warsaw Ghetto than to overrun
all of Poland. Goebles wrote of the revolt in his diary: "The Jews have actually
succeeded in putting the ghetto in a condition to defend itself. Some very
hard battles are taking place there. . . it shows what one can expect of the Jews
if they have arms."132

UPRISING, WARSAW GHETTO

Aryan noses smell the scent of defeat
As their pure blood stains our poor streets.

A wonder! A miracle!
These soldiers fear Jews

(stanza break)

131 Ibid., p. 24.
132 Ibid., Arad, Krakowski, Spector, p. 319.
We wouldn’t have believed it
Till there was nothing to lose.  

The Warsaw Ghetto uprising, “the first major civilian revolt against the German forces in all of occupied Europe lasted until August.  

It preceded by a year and a half the general uprising in Warsaw in August, 1944.”  

This valiant effort, no doubt, inspired revolts in other ghettos such as Bialystok, Tuczyn and Czestochowa. Those who escaped from the ghettos often ended up joining partisan units.

**Partisans**

More Jews could have and would have joined partisan units had they believed it would ensure their survival. The prevailing opinion was that it was too dangerous. It was. Generally speaking, partisans were hostile to Jews; some actually killed them. Unfortunately, Anti-Semitism, as well as anti-Communism, was rampant and fugitive Jews proved easy targets.

When Jews were admitted to Polish and Lithuanian units, they did not fare well, generally. They were subject to great discrimination. In some cases, they were simply mocked and called disparaging names such as “Abramchick.”  

Accused of cowardice and warned that they would die as soon as the fighting began because “Jews shoot at the ground,” they were often forced to perform the subservient domestic tasks of shoemaking, tailoring, and cooking instead of being allowed to fight. They were also given the job of organizing food, which was a more dangerous activity than planting mines. One former partisan reminisces in the film:

> Planting mines was done in secret. Several people went out, hid the mine, ran off and waited for the train, to pull the switch and set it off. This was often done under cover of darkness. Organizing food, however required

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133 Ibid., *Wind, Weaving The Remnants*.
134 Historian Israel Bartal said: “Shooting from the ghetto was heard as late as October.”  
(1943) Rutgers University, March 30, 2000.
136 Film: *Partisans of Vilna*
137 Ibid.
confrontational contact with irate peasants, only too happy to denounce the robbers to the Germans.\textsuperscript{138}

One F.P.O. fighter who had escaped from the ghetto to join the partisans speaks of Jews being forced to relinquish their weapons. This order was particularly galling as their guns had been paid for with blood or bread. To add insult to injury, these guns were then given to young gentiles who had joined the partisans not to escape certain death but to avoid working for the Germans. They were often simply thieves, drunkards, or malingerers.\textsuperscript{139}

In order to function as partisans, some Jews established their own units. Among these were the Bielski Brigade, led by Alexander Bielski and his four brothers. This band operated in the Naliboki Forest (Byelorussia). They served as a support task for other partisan groups but also engaged in rescue of Jewish women and children, whom they secretly housed in villages. They made each village collectively responsible for “its” Jews, warning them that they would burn the entire village if a single Jew was given up to the Germans. They succeeded in rescuing 1,300 Jews.

Proximity to forests or wooded areas was necessary to reach partisan units. Only under such topographical conditions could partisans exist. (Not all Poland was wooded and making one’s way to the woods left Jews exposed to danger.) It was also helpful to be near the Soviet border as Soviets considered these groups allies. Because their own military was inadequate, they could not be generous in terms of supplying arms. Captured weapons and ammunition provided much of the resisters’ and partisans’ armaments. Some groups demanded that all new members bring their own weapons, a tremendous problem for Jews in light of the limited number that belonged to the organized fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto.

In any case, the goal of Jewish partisans was survival. To fight – a battle between such hugely mismatched opponents – seemed folly. The partisans engaged in sabotage and retaliations, when and wherever possible. Their chief aim was to keep themselves alive under the most primitive conditions and to rescue other Jews if possible.

“Revenge” was the name of the partisan unit led by Abba Kovner in the Narocz Forest, outside Vilna. Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
Kaczerginski were members. The two became the official historians of the region.

**Resistance in the Camps**

On a smaller, but no less heroic, scale were the individual instances of resistance. Fania Fenelon wrote of new arrivals at Auschwitz, “Some women shriek and fight. I saw one woman throw herself at an S.S. man, nails clawing his face; he clubbed her down, and everyone was forced to walk over her body, still living, just one mass of red . . .”

There are stories of a dancer who pulled the gun from a German and shot him. It has become mythical because it exists in many versions. One has her wearing a bathing suit. Another has her as French dancer. There is a version in which she is beckoned by the German who calls her “beautiful” and commands her to dance. Whoever she was will remain a mystery but one courageous resister whose identity is known is Rosa Robota.

Robota, was an active member of Ha Shomer ha Tzair in Ciechanow, Poland, before she was sent to Auschwitz in 1942. There she joined the underground and smuggled gunpowder from the Union Werke factory to Sonderkommandos in Birkenau. It was used in the October 1944 revolt to blow up crematoria. Robota was tortured and hanged. Her last word was “Nekhama!” (Revenge!)

“Remember, there will come a time and we will be avenged,” yelled Josef Podchlebnik to the Germans . . . “Hurrah!” yelled Leon as he threw his ax at the Nazis.”

There are numerous stories of the condemned, who on the brink of death, physically or verbally attacked their killers. However, not all witnesses to these assaults survived to tell of them. To prevent any future insurrections, those present when Nazis were threatened, were often summarily executed.

Before the Sobibor Uprising, there were a number of armed actions there. These smaller incidents may have encouraged the larger revolt. Blatt tells of 2000 Jews deported to Wlodawa. “Upon their arrival at Sobibor a

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140 Ibid., Fenelon, p. 59.
141 Ibid., p. 64.
142 Ibid., p. 65.
group of young men from the transport attacked the SS with their bare hands. They were all machine-gunned. 143

BREAKING OUT OF SOBIBOR

I
Their own days are precisely numbered.
A few months of labor, then the gas

Then a new Sonderkommando is installed.
Barely seventeen, Rivka, asserts

They'll have to waste a bullet
If they want me that much.

II
Each thrust of the knife, a dedication
For my mother, my father

My sister, brother . . . The list is long
It could take all night but he is already

Bloody as a butcher's apron.
Time now to leave, head for the forest

It's possible Chaim might survive.
Perhaps the stains can be washed away.

Perhaps the boy who wouldn't swat a fly
Can forgive them for turning him into a killer.

III
A huge clearing to pass through
Before they reach the stand of pines.

Bullets whistle overhead. Jews
Who aren't dead are dying

Blood blackens the uncut grass
The moon refuses to stop shining. (stanza break)

143 Ibid., Blatt p. 57.
IV
Rivka has acquired papers.
Wears a silver cross, has learned to repeat

The catechism at breakneck speed.
Wake her in the middle of the night

She will tell you she is Maria Rostowski
Born in a tiny hamlet near Łódź.

She will name the priest who taught and
Confirmed her. She will not reveal

That this Maria died last year.
The Polish girl haunts her dreams

And promises to steal her Jewish soul
Unless she gives herself up or converts.

V
The partisans welcome the tall, burly youth
Not suspecting that Chaim is Jewish.

He's renamed himself Jerzy
Shies from bathing in the river

Won't unbutton his fly if anyone's near.
They call themselves soldiers

Boast of exploits. Plan to blow up bridges
Buy bullets and guns.

Their only battles up to now: nightly raids
On local farmers to make off with

Potatoes, vodka, pigs.
It's unlikely Chaim will have to kill again.

VI
No going back. Home, a charred ruin
Everyone dead, or in places unknown.

Sobibor closed, though the war still rages
Rivka's come too far to give up. (stanza break)
A rainbow arches across the sky
Symbol of God's promise to Noah.

She plans to make her way to the forest.
Dangerous, but she'll manage, somehow.

She's heard that Chaim is with the partisans.
They used to speak of getting married

Rivka polishes the boots he gave her
Completely convinced they saved her life.

The day she held them up and swore,
I'll walk out of here in these.

Fellow-prisoners laughed. But Sobibor is ash
And today a rainbow arcs the sky.

VII
Under a canopy of pine needles and stars
Chaim intones the Hariat.

No guests will dance at this wedding
The two scarred bodies will make their own bliss.

At night, when one of them cries out in sleep
The other will be there to still the terror

Repeating that Sobibor is mere memory now
And the moon shines almost as it did before.\(^{144}\)

Hariat. The wedding vow.

(Deciding to live as a Christian was problematic for religious Jews. Most had been brought up fearful and superstitious of anything concerning Christianity. Christmas week and Holy Week were often accompanied by pogroms; generally, Jews were advised to stay as far away from Christians as possible. Also, as it was younger women who could more easily acquire these false documents; draft-age men were at particular risk. As many Jews were orphaned by the war, they were burdened by the guilt of "praying" to -- what they considered -- the root cause of all their suffering. Often they left

\(^{144}\) Ibid., Wind, Weaving The Remnants. (inspired by videotaped testimony, USHMM).
relatively safe situations to join Jewish partisan groups so that they could be re-united with their co-religionists.)

Jewish Soldiers

Where Jews could, they joined armed forces, as resistance fighters and partisans in the occupied territories or, for those who escaped before or during the war, in unoccupied zones or free countries. “When the Germans came into Pinsk in 1941, my uncle went with the partisans. They sent him to school in Moscow. He became a parachutist in the Russian army. Later they took the Poles out from the Russian army to fight the Germans. My uncle was in that.”145 Kurt Weissman is only one of numerous German Jews who had come here in the 1930’s and joined the U.S. when war broke out. Peter Schweifert joined DeGaulle’s forces. Hannah Senesh, who had emigrated to Palestine to work in animal husbandry, became a soldier.

In the 1930’s the British outlawed the Haganah, the Jewish self-defense force, but didn’t hesitate to seek its help when the Nazis tank divisions were sent to the Middle East and their Afrika Korps began in 1941 to infiltrate Syria and later in 1942, pressed toward the Suez Canal. That’s when the Palmach, the striking unit of the Haganah, received increased support from the British. Senesh wrote, “I thought, that as I was a girl who didn’t have family obligations, I should join the army.”146

After basic training and parachute training, Senesh was sent to Cairo to learn the skills of sabotage, infiltration and spying. She was one of three women among 240 youths accepted for the mission. She reports in her diary that she “learned unarmed fighting, based on judo, armed fighting using a knife, club, tommy gun, sten gun, German Schmeisser and .45 Colt automatic. Also to assemble and disassemble weapons quickly, silently and blindfolded.”

In March, 1944, Senesh was flown to Europe to begin her spy mission for the British. At this same time, she hoped to rescue Jews and help them get to Israel, following Ben Gurion’s advice to fight the war as if there were no White Paper and to fight the White Paper as if there were no war. “While the

145 Ibid., Ehrlich, p. 201.
146 Ibid., Senesh.
allied forces were landing in Normandy, my little group and I were making
our way to the Hungarian side of the Yugoslav border.”

Jean Améry, born in Vienna to a Catholic mother and Jewish father
fled to Belgium in 1938, where he joined the Resistance. Captured by the
Gestapo in 1943, he was sent to camps, including Auschwitz and Bergen-
Belsen from which he was liberated in ’45. In addition to the partisan units
and organized resistance groups in the Ghettos and camps, Jews in the free
zones were active in resistance groups and in armed forces.

In December 1940, I was taken on for the duration of the war as a
foreign volunteer with General de Gaulle’s Free French Forces—that army,
which was tiny at the time, which rejected the armistice and went on with the
war side by side with the English. After my acceptance, plus several months of
waiting, I was sent at the end of March, 1941 to Egypt where I became a
soldier.147

Unarmed Fighters

Within the broad definition of resistance are those forms that fall
somewhere between proactive and passive resistance. When the result of not
resisting, survival demands attention and action. Such mundane acts of
working to preserve one’s health and sanity, under the conditions of
incarceration or hiding required heroic stamina and courage. Small acts of
subversion or sabotage: “organizing” goods, situations and services to enable
armed resisters, become enormously meaningful in the light of punishment
for such offenses.

Some survived by distancing themselves from their religion, either as
camouflage or because Christianity afforded them the answers and spiritual
comfort that Judaism did not. Unfortunately, it turned out that conversion
was no guarantee of protection. The Nazis considered race, not religion, the
decisive factor in determining who should live or die; and the Church,
unable to save its own members of the clergy – twenty percent of Catholic
clergy in Poland was killed – was not always successful in saving the lives of
converts.

Some Jews distanced themselves from their own bodies in order to
survive. “Twice a day, I stand immobile, sometimes for hours, in icy winds or

147Ibid., Schwiefert, p. 121.
freezing cold that can drop to 15 degrees below zero, numbing my limbs and sense. What day is it, what month, what year? Nothing that happens, happens to me. Only the number tattooed on my left arm reminds me that I exist. 148 Resistance by detachment falls into this category. Taken to the extreme, however, this resulted in death. Often survival depended on encouragement by a colleague. "A few weeks later, the English people came in and bombed the concentration camp (Mauthausen). And I said, 'Yankel, get up, get up, it's no good lying here, you'll be a piece of gornsht (nothing at all).' "149

This form of help wasn't restricted merely to words. Prisoners propped up the faint and dying during roll-calls and selections. They hid them in the barracks, shared their food rations with them, helped them gain admittance to hospitals to improve the chances they would survive. Taking responsibility to help others resist the daily physical, emotional and mental onslaughts often became the impetus for one's own survival.

There were those who resisted their own consuming hunger, actually starving themselves, to feed their children.

MAMA'S MANNA

How can it be that Mama's not hungry
Here, talk is always of hunger.
There are those who would beat you
For a piece of bread
But Mama?
My mother is never hungry.

She watches as I drain my red bowl
Then offers me her meager ration
Watery soup, a few potato peels...
Ess, kind, ess.
Outlive my bones.

And you, Mameshee?
I'm almost afraid to ask.
The soup is so delicious
She might eat it herself.

(stanza break)

148 Ibid., Pisar, p. 59.

149 Ibid., Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p. 117.
She looks into my eyes
And fills my empty bowl
A look at your sweet face
And I am sated.
Shayfahle, don't you see
How fat I have become!\textsuperscript{150}

\textit{Shayfahle}. Little lamb.
\textit{Ess, kind, ess}. Eat, child, eat.

There were stringent laws against Aryans engaging in sexual relations with Jews but laws were broken. As in all wars, some desperate women sought the protection of men and willingly traded their bodies in exchange for this. Generally, Jewish women were not used to staff the officers’ brothels although, occasionally, Jewish women were raped. A few Jewish women survived as mistresses or wives of German soldiers, or other gentiles. One, Edith Hahn Beer, an Austrian lawyer living in Germany with forged documents, actually married an SS officer. Also, some boys or men, survived as male prostitutes despite the fact that homosexuality was illegal.

\textbf{PUFFKOMANDO}

\textit{for Liana Millu}

\textit{Amo, Amas, Amat} . . .
All those hours of studying Latin
Never prepared her for this type of work

Though some soldiers
Swear she's born to it.
\textit{Scheiss egal!} Who gives a shit?

Her only goal now: to survive
She will not become part of the soot
That darkens rose petals in the garden.

Even in Auschwitz flowers grow.
If you squint hard, it
Appears an ordinary village

\textit{(stanza break)}

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., Wind, Moies.
The Paper Brigade "liberated" part of these shipments for use in the ghetto to supplement the rationed fuel.

In June '42 Kruk, who kept a diary, wrote "The Jewish porters occupied with this task are literally in tears." In early July he added: "YIVO is dying: its mass grave is in the paper mill. . . . Kalmanovich and I don't know if we're gravediggers or survivors." YIVO's dying, however, kept the members of the Paper Brigade alive.

Because it was engaged in labor for the Reich, the detail had certain privileges; the primary one was exemption from deportations. Among the privileges was the ability to drag the work out, since its nature was not quantifiable by the Nazis. This allowed time to engage in resistance work and time, also, to study. Sutzkever read and recited his favorite Yiddish poets: Leivick, Leyele, Yehoash, Glatstein. Sutzkever and Kaczerginski wrote most of their ghetto poems within YIVO's walls at Niwolskiego 18. Sutzkever also delivered Polish books to members of the Polish underground. Because the gathering centers were outside the ghetto, it provided the workers with opportunities to make contact with Poles and with Lithuanians who could supply the F.P.O. with arms. Poles and Lithuanians also helped by taking some of the most valuable documents into their safekeeping.

"Sutzkever was the most active and ingenious rescuer of materials in the group."177 He discovered a hidden attic in YIVO. As Virbiles, the Polish guard in charge of the detail, was ambitious, two members of the work group gave him lessons in Math, Latin and German during the lunch break - Sutzkever used this time to move materials to the attic.

Among Sutzkever's rescued items were drawings by Marc Chagall, a manuscript by the Vilna Gaon, and sculptures by Antokolski. These and other precious books and objects were hidden in ten different locations including a bunker sixty feet underground built by a young construction engineer, Gershom Abramovitch. Perhaps the most sophisticated ghetto bunker, it contained its own ventilation system, electricity and a tunnel leading to a well in the Aryan side.

Kruk established a library (Hevrah Mefitse Haskalah) in the ghetto. "It included all the normal library functions: cataloguing, preservation and restoration, and attendance."178 There was even a special program held to

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177 Ibid.
178 Ibid., Abramowicz, p. 4.
mark the 100,000th book lent out. According to Dina Abramowicz, who worked in the library, Kruk attributed the library's great popularity to the narcotic effect of books. She recalls some of the signs posted on the library walls: “Your only comfort in the ghetto is a book,” and “The book can still your hunger when you have nothing to eat.” There was also a companion Reading Room, headed by Haykl Lunski, the former librarian of the Strashun Library.

Reading also served to keep the social fabric intact. When “each ghetto resident had only two square meters of space at his disposal,” and the concomitant problems that go along with such overcrowding, books provided a neutral topic of conversation. Sharing the stories in them or critiquing them transported Jews out of their sad realities.

**Education**

Jews responded quickly when their children's education was threatened. In Germany, Jewish schools were hastily established when German public and private schools dismissed Jews after the Nuremberg Laws went into effect. In the ghettos, schools were also set up, in some cases openly (e.g. Janusz Korczak ran a school in his orphanage in Warsaw,) but often clandestinely. The Paper Brigade and the library supplied books to the schools in Vilna. Yeshiva learning continued in bunkers.

Learning continued even in the camps, even without books. Because rote learning was always emphasized in Yeshivas, many Jews had memorized long tracts of sacred and secular works. Elie Wiesel tells of being assigned to work beside an older man in Auschwitz. A scholar, he asked the young boy how far along he had come in his studies. When Wiesel told him, the two were able to resume learning while they worked. Of course, this was a risky act of defiance. Engaging in this kind of activity was strictly forbidden and the penalty for this “crime” was severe. Yet, the risk was taken daily. Doubtless, Elie was not the only Talmud student who continued his studies in the camps.

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179 Ibid.
180 This is addressed in the section, "Incremental Assault."
181 Ibid.
In Chabannes, George Loinger, a physical education instructor who worked for the O.S.E., taught his students more than calisthenics. "We knew times will be hard. We must prepare the children... I didn't just teach them physical education. I told them, 'Maybe one day you'll have to run to save your life.'"\(^{182}\) He gave them quasi boot-camp training to prepare for that eventuality. At one point, the director of the O.S.E. put him in charge of organizing a "Circuit" to Switzerland. Loinger later shepherded more than a thousand children to Switzerland.

Protest

In many cases, *Judenrats* protested against new imposition. Occasionally the leaders were treated with formal politeness. Sometimes they were able to make deals that improved the situation because the Germans were interest in quelling opposition. Through the pretense that the *Judenrats* could really effect policy, the Nazis made promises, which they soon broke.

Resistance groups urged non-compliance with Nazi or *Judenrat* requests. (In Vilna, Abraham Sutzkever was involved in "organizing" lead font from the Rom Printing Works for this purpose.) Flyers were written, printed, distributed and posted to ghetto walls. Although this was illegal, the fact that they were written in Yiddish, a language few Nazis could read, mitigated the risk. Betrayal presented problems. Despite the danger, clandestine meetings of resistance groups were held.

Ultimate Resistance

Suicide is considered a crime in most states. Failed suicides are locked up in mental institutions. In some countries, e.g. Great Britain, a suicide's property cannot be inherited. It directly becomes property of the Crown. Not only is the taking of one's own life against Judaeo-Christian teachings, it is seen as an affront to society. Therefore, many psychologists and psychiatrists regard it as an act of aggression, turned inward.

The suicide rate rose astoundingly in Germany during the 1930's. In the Jewish community one of five people killed himself or herself. Self-murder, a

\(^{182}\) Ibid., Gossels.
path that many lovers take when they are prevented from living together, has an interesting parallel here. Many German Jews, in love with German culture, felt spurned. Patriotic German-Jewish war veterans, in particular, considered themselves betrayed.

SUICIDE FOR HEIMAT

Easier to leave altogether and forever
Than to go knowing you’ve left your home behind.

How can you survive the shame of exile
How can you live anywhere but here?

Better a plot, 6 x 3
Than an entire country far away from your heart.¹⁸³

Scientists note that suicide spurs additional suicides. Jews mourning loved ones, who had died by their own hands or in the camps, were at added risk. Many who had quashed their Jewish identity, often becoming self-hating Jews, felt stripped of all identity. House searches, which further depersonalized victims and left them feeling additionally violated, were often followed by suicide.

In a diary entry of April 1942 Victor Klemperer wrote, “It has by now become a firm rule: “On the day after a house search there are suicides.” These searches were devastating assaults. Klemperer, despite his relatively privileged position of being a convert married to an Aryan, was subjected to frequent searches in addition to an increasing host of regulated encumbrances. In Germany these searches consisted of:

Vilest abuse, pushing, blows. Frau Naumann was boxed on the ears five times. They rummaged through everything, stole indiscriminately: candles, soap, an electric fire, a suitcase, books, half a pound of margarine (legitimately bought with ration coupons) writing paper, all kinds of tobacco, umbrella, his military decorations (“You won’t be needing them anymore . . . “Why do you all get so old? – Go on and string yourselves up, turn on the gas.”¹⁸⁴

Deciding when and how one is going to die does not appear to be an act of resistance. Yet, there were many Jews who chose to deprive the Nazis of

¹⁸³ ibid., Wind, Weaving The Remnants.
that power. Veronal, cyanide, and other poisons were readily available in the ghettos. Having poison on hand to use as a "last resort" empowered some Jews to continue the struggle to survive, knowing they could end their lives if they chose to do so.

For many Jews the choice was not "if" but "when" to resort to this ultimate act of self-determination. For German Jews the "when" came in the 1930's. The many factors responsible for their enormous increase in suicide included: distress at social and/or professional displacement; arrest and incarceration of loved ones; the loss of property; fear of becoming a burden and an obstacle to family members who wanted to emigrate; and the inability to conceive that life was worthwhile anywhere but in their beloved homeland. The fact that many of them had no religious compunction against taking their own lives, increased the chances that they would choose to do so.

A PERSIAN RUG FOR VERONAL

Parting not the difficulty
She would have imagined
Buying it had been hard, so many
Rugs to choose from
An exotic array of patterns
And the price, far more than
Anticipated, though the Turk had assured
It was a fine investment and
Would give its owners a lifetime of pleasure.

But, Charlotte is in a forgiving mood.
The man was merely a merchant
No prophet or measurer of lives.

The first night it lay unrolled
On the parlor floor, she and Karl
Made love on its field of silky jewels.

It's been months now.
He returned from Buchenwald
Mute, a vacant look in his eyes.

(stanza break)
Elke, her best friend
Who suddenly found God in Marx
Had always despised the rug
_Show me the beauty_
_In an object that cost a child its sight!_
_Don’t you realize the proletariat is_
_Forced to sell themselves for bread!_

Charlotte couldn’t make love
On it again, but wouldn’t
Abjure her delight in its beauty.
_In a market glutted with carpets, art . . ._
_She must accept far less than what it cost._

It brings enough to purchase the pills.
Again, she recalls that night of love.
_How well they both slept, afterwards._185

Veronal. A barbiturate, popular in the 1930’s; often used to commit suicide.

Suicide was quite prevalent in the ghettos, in some cases out of despondency, in others to avoid being killed by the Germans. This was particularly true during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Germans set fire to the buildings to smoke out remaining inhabitants and to eliminate places to hid. Many jumped from windows to avoid being captured or burned. Both Sutzkever’s, “Beneath The Whiteness of Your Stars” and Hirsch Glik’s, “Zog Nit Keyn Mol Ahs Du Gehst Dem Letsten Veyg” (Never Say Your Going The Last Way) address the theme and offer an alternative to despair. They were quickly set to music and became the two most popular songs of Jews in camps and ghettos.

Ghetto fighters saw resistance as a suicidal. Most didn’t expect to survive and most did not. However, unlike the Japanese Kamikaze pilots, Jews were prepared but not necessarily determined to die. Their mission was to avenge themselves and die with honor, if or when escape proved impossible. If they could avoid death by escaping the liquidated ghettos, they did. Partisans had better chances of surviving. In one of Kaczer Ginski’s songs there is a line that roughly translates: “No, we will never be ‘The Last of the Mohicans (Mohicaner)’/ We are and we will live as Jewish partisans (partizaner.)”

185 Ibid., _Wind, Moses_.

In the camps, people also committed suicide. Some invited death by acting out their rage through an attack on a guard. Others walked to the electrified barbed-wire fence. And some took a more passive approach by simply giving up the struggle to resist. Food was rationed to promote death. When people lost a third of their body weight they became *Musselmänner*, based on the idea that Islam is a religion of submission to God’s will.

In Majdanek, the word was unknown. The living dead there were termed, ‘donkeys’; in Dachau there were ‘cretins,’ in Stutthof ‘cripples,’ in Mauthausen ‘swimmers,’ in Neuengamme ‘camels,’ in Buchenwald ‘tired sheikhs,’ and in the women’s camp known as Ravensbruck, *Muselweiber* (female Muslims) or ‘trinkets’ (Sofsky 1997: 329n5). . . . In any case, it is certain that, with a kind of ferocious irony, the Jews knew that they would not die at Auschwitz as Jews.¹⁸⁶

Thoroughly exhausted, these individuals could no longer summon the energy to resist the daily assaults to body, mind and spirit.

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PILLARS OF FIRE, PILLARS OF CLOUD

We come to You as You came to us
When You led us from the realm
Of our first oppression.

The promised milk and honey
Was rarely tasted
Some never knew it, not even in dreams.

And yet, You can hear the sound of rejoicing
Your faithful chant Psalms
Amidst gunshots and screams.

Pillars of fire, pillars of cloud
We rise to You
As You descended to us.

Only grant this
An end to our suffering
We have wandered long and ache, now, to rest.¹⁸⁷


CHAPTER

5

THE ART OF RESISTANCE

Guile is the revenge of the weak.
-Fania Fenelon

Because art has the power to subvert the status quo, artists, in totalitarian regimes are often at great risk. In the ghettos and concentration camps, artists often engaged in these forms of resistance, which did not produce quantifiable substantive results in the way armed defensive organizations or even smugglers did, but inspired a spirit of resistance among the inmates. Remarkably, three poets were resistance leaders in the Vilna Ghetto: Kovner, Kaczerginski and Sutzkever. All three joined the partisans when the ghetto was liquidated, survived, and continued to fight postwar attempts at annihilation of the memory of Jewish life before and during the Shoah.

Music

In the account of her experience in Auschwitz, Fania Fenelon tells of the orchestra’s resistance to Nazi-imposed rules concerning music: They played (forbidden) Jewish melodies for the women to march off to work with. The SS were unaware of this but the prisoners knew and enjoyed the subversion. At an SS concert, the musicians included a piece by Mendelssohn, calling it “Violin Concerto.” Fenelon writes “None of them is bright enough to notice.”188 Her orchestra also included Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in their programs. The first movement was the signature tune of the Free French broadcasts on the BBC. If the Germans were aware of this they chose to let it pass. The musicians were elated by these small acts of sabotage. “It was amusing to be able to sing a song of hope under their noses.” 189

Whistling was often used as a method of signaling. Many whistled Glik’s Partisan Hymn to urge fellow-prisoners to resist. The Internationale,

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189 Ibid.
was more risky – it wasn’t “a Jewish song” and was familiar to the guards – but it too was furtively whistled and sung. One survivor tells of being outside the camp as part of a labor detail. A German, passing by whistled the Communist song to him. The prisoner found this enormously comforting; the realization that not all Germans were Nazis, and that some were actively engaged in opposing the rulers encouraged him to continue his own struggle to survive.

Songs were an important part of resistance and countless ones were produced in that time. Often they were simply new lyrics set to familiar tunes. Beneath The Whiteness of Your Stars and Glik’s Partisan Hymn became synonymous with resistance. Other songs honored resisters, particularly the songs of Kaczerinski, who wrote at least half a dozen songs that became popular instantly and have since become part of the Holocaust (musical) canon. His lively Yugn Lied, Youth Hymn, urged unilateral participation in Resistance organizations, which consisted primarily of young people. Kaczerinski’s rousing song proclaims that youth is a state of mind and everyone can join the fight. He also wrote Itsik Vittenberg, a ballad in honor of the F.P.O commander, the martyr who had turned himself in to the Germans rather than provoke an act of collective punishment.

Other songs were written in honor of ghetto and partisan heroes, including Motele, about a brave and resourceful boy who is killed before he reaches the age of Bar Mitzvah. Silence and a Starry Night, written by Hirsch Glik commemorates the blowing up of a German munitions train by the F.P.O. in the summer of 1942, six months after the organization was organized. Some songs addressed the unbearable situation of ghetto life. Itke a rewording of a popular song from the theatre (Papirossen) recounts the woes of a young woman in the ghetto reduced to selling “schlotkes”, a type of roll or pastry, in order to support her starving siblings. She has changed so much, no one recognizes the beautiful and vibrant girl she used to be. In fact, her appearance is so shocking, people avoid her, destroying every chance of avoiding starvation. Yisrolik is another song of an orphan determined to survive. Despite all his troubles as a child of the streets, he keeps up a brave front, whistling and singing. He refuses to dwell on his sorrows, “Besser az meh reht nisht, (Better not to speak of them).” Despite the pathos, these songs
have an aggressive quality. They compel the listener to face up to the horror and do something to change it.

Many lullabies were written and sung. Not only did the war leave babies and children orphaned; the writers themselves, barely in their second decade, were also orphans. The songs were written apparently to comfort them all. Often a lullaby was the only thing one had to offer a starving child.

Composers in the ghettos and camps such as Theresienstadt composed both serious and popular music. Although numerous Jewish singers and musicians had previously played in the greatest concert halls and opera houses--and, in the case of cantors, sung in the greatest synagogues of Europe—they now performed before steadily smaller audiences as the populations were shipped "east". Still, they continued to perform. Concerts were held, both formerly and informally, to help people keep their spirits up.

**Cabaret**

The word ‘Theresienstadt’ has had a magnetic effect on people’s minds, like Wengenrode or the Isle of Wight or Capri. Fantastic tales were going the rounds. It was said that life there was so good that the residents were not imprisoned behind barbed wire, but could move freely though the little old fortress town...\(^{190}\)

The unfortunates who were interned in Theresienstadt quickly learned that life there was not good; in fact, it was horrible. However, compared to the other concentration camps, it was paradise. Set up as a model camp this haven for artists and other "privileged persons," did allow creativity to prevail. It produced a lasting legacy of musical compositions, art and writing, even as it sent most of its inmates to their deaths in Auschwitz.

Odd as it may seem, camps such as Theresienstadt and Westerbork and also certain ghettos had cabarets. The Warsaw Ghetto had four theaters. Some prisoners refused to patronize entertainments as they found the concept, given the situation, utterly repugnant and morally offensive. Others enjoyed the reprieves from the harsh realities. Even Auschwitz had its cabarets, available to those with good positions in camp. Victor Frankl relates, "A kind of cabaret was improvised from time to time. A hut was cleared temporarily, a few wooden benches were pushed or nailed together and a program was

\(^{190}\) Ibid., Mechanicus, p. 230.
drawn up. . . There were songs, poems, some jokes, some with underlying satire regarding the camp."\textsuperscript{191}

Theatrical productions also took place, designed to keep actors employed and allow audiences to forget their troubles as they entered a world of make-believe. There they could spend a few carefree hours before returning to their own surreal lives. In ghettos and camps, the hope of the \textit{Judenrats} was to be able to keep these miniature cities functional despite the multitude of deprivations, humiliations, and deportations.

Writing for audiences was only a small fraction of the writing that went on during the war. Keeping diaries and journals, most of which have been lost, were an important part of peoples' lives. Edith Velmans writes, "I wanted to take my diary too, but Father cautioned me to leave it behind. 'You must not keep a diary while you're in hiding,' he said. 'It could give you away. It would reveal who you really are, and that would endanger not only you, but these kind people who are offering to shelter you as well.'\textsuperscript{192}

Abraham Sutzkever was only one of many poets in the Holocaust to keep writing. Because he had made his reputation before the war, he was empowered by the knowledge that if he survived, his work would be published and read; if he died, his poems would serve as witness. But countless others, who had never been published, turned to poetry to express their feelings and achieve catharsis and strength. Gerda Weissman Klein speaks of writing a poem to bolster her own and others' morale in the camp on the occasion of Hanukkah. In it she expresses a simple, childlike faith that, just as the Maccabees had prevailed over a much stronger enemy, so she and her companions would in the end overcome their suffering at the hands of their adversaries.\textsuperscript{193}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Humor}
\end{center}

Survivors use of humor – at first glance entirely out of place during the Holocaust– is best understood as a grotesque form of resistance. Humor is a weapon of the downtrodden. Fania Fenelon writes that on arrival at Auschwitz, and after selection at the ramp, she told another new arrival, "1

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., Frankl, pp. 64-65.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., Velmans, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., Klein, p. 54.
would actually come here for a Christmas holiday. Of course," I said jokingly. 'The staff haven't quite licked this into shape yet; they're not what you'd call considerate.'\textsuperscript{194}

Deflating the image of the oppressor it can cheer and empower the oppressed. Shimon Huberbrand, a rabbi and religious Zionist, "became Ringleblum's most valuable collaborator in the chronicling of the Warsaw ghetto."\textsuperscript{195} He collected Ghetto jokes and folklore to add to the archives. Among the jokes he recorded, "The Jewish Legion refused to fight against the Germans. Why? Because they're afraid they might be seized for forced labor."\textsuperscript{196} The message is clear: to refuse to fight the Germans is absurd.

Recent scientific studies have shown that laughter is quite effective as medication: apparently certain hormones, including dopamine, are released when one laughs. At least one individual talks about making the rounds at night to tell jokes and cheer his fellow-prisoners up.\textsuperscript{197} The likelihood is that he was only one of many. Humor is often born of pain and sorrow and even in Auschwitz people occasionally found something to laugh about. Jokes made the rounds through ghettos and camps.

Humor, as a tool to deflect aggression, was created and used in the camps. Parodies were composed. To the tune of the popular "Loh Mir Zech Ibberbetten" (Let's Make-Up), Jews sang "Mir Vellen Zey Ibberleben" (We Will Outlive Them.) The "them" were, of course, the Nazis. Like many other survivors, Joseph Bukiet has retained a wonderful sense of humor. His talks (about his experience in Auschwitz) are filled with witticisms and jokes. For example, he tells of quickly coming to the realization that Nazis weren't invincible because they were finite in number and required sleep. In contrast, lice, the allies who had attached themselves to the prisoners, were seemingly infinite and worked day and night.\textsuperscript{198} No doubt humor and an irreverent attitude toward authority served him well in the camps.

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., p. 401.
\textsuperscript{197} Heard in videotaped testimony at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.
\textsuperscript{198} Heard at the College of St. Elizabeth, Morristown, New Jersey, April, 1997.
Painting and Drawing

Art directly saved some. Their talents as artists and craftsmen were engaged by camp commandments for mundane purposes such as sign painting. Nazis also took advantage of these prisoners for their own personal use, commissioning family portraits and decorative artwork for their homes. Many of these prisoners, including Samuel Bak, Bedrich Fritta and Joseph Bau furtively used their spare time to draw scenes of camp life.

These paintings and drawings along with the poems and chronicles written by poets, journalists and writers, were a form of resistance against the sense of stupor that was so prevalent in the camps. They also provided documentary evidence for those on the outside. So many prisoners believed that once the world was informed of the reality of the situation they would come to their aid. (Some of these works were smuggled out.) The artwork and writings expressed hope for the future: even if those who produced it couldn’t survive, the war would eventually end. The world would learn what really happened.

Jewish photographers, too were employed to help the Germans. Many took advantage of their privileged positions to document Nazi atrocities. Their talents were of great use to the resistance. Along with the artists, they helped in the production of forged documents and passports. One of these photographers, a woman who eventually escaped and joined the partisans, is featured in Martha Lubell’s film, *Daring To Resist.*
CHAPTER

5

SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

_Die Gedanken sind frei._
—German folk song

Man may be able to exert control over peoples’ bodies; he cannot control their thoughts and emotions. Numerous testimonies abound with stories of spiritual resistance during the Holocaust. One could say that every act of resistance was conceived in the spirit. Much of this was centered on faith in God and/or bolstered by religious observance.

In _Night_, when Wiesel’s father acknowledges that “mad” Madame Schachter’s recurring dream of flames is the reality of Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel says, “I’m going to run to the electric wire. That would be better than slow agony in the flames.” But he doesn’t. At the very moment his faith in God is shaken, he surprises himself by reciting _Kaddish._

Faith in God was so completely ingrained in so many Jews that nothing could prevent them from continuing to live according to Jewish tradition. Some considered the Holocaust as a fulfillment of prophecies that would end with the coming of Messiah. Others were well-prepared—through their studies of Holy writings—to find the strength to bear the unbearable. Because memorization of text is intrinsic to the traditional way Jews learn, they could summon up a host of Biblical texts to guide and comfort them. Many survivors directly attribute their survival to faith in God.

Right until the last day in Auschwitz... I stayed alive through spiritual strength. We never forgot for a minute that we were Jews. We didn’t need the religion. We didn’t need the Hebrew school. We kept the calendar in ourselves. How did we express it? On a Friday night we sang quietly _“Lecha Nerannenah,”_ not loud, we sang quietly while sitting at our benches. We knew the prayers by heart like we knew our own names. On the twentieth day of _Tammuz, 1944_, right under the eyes of the German supervisor, we said _Kaddish_ for Herzl’s _Yorzeit_. We talked about Bialik and Achad Ha-am and the subjects we studied in Gymnasium. This is how we lasted until the evacuation on January 18.\(^{199}\)

\(^{199}\) Ibid., Rothchild. (Glicksman)p. 239.
In addition to the spiritual resistance of victimized Jews (and Christians), the act of rescue was, for many, an act of spiritual resistance. More than half of the 7,000 testimonies of Righteous Gentiles at Yad Vashem credit their religious beliefs for their willingness to help Jews. They sought to live according to Christ’s teachings.

Gerda Weissman-Klein said in a lecture that one could not survive Auschwitz if one did not have imagination. Yehuda Amitai, a secular Jew who had religious training as a child told an interviewer from The Paris Review that Bible study is invaluable as a wellspring of imagination. Both the Bible and Jewish liturgy contains the recurrent theme of being freed from slavery in Egypt. The reason that the Israelites were freed is that God heard their call, saw their oppression and remembered the promise he had made to Abraham.

Observant Jews were mindful of this promise, even in the depths of Auschwitz, and put their trust in God. But even non-observant Jews found solace in the story as metaphor. Egypt’s great empire, the greatest empire in its time, was reduced to what is essentially a museum. The same holds true for other empires. Judaism, and its offshoots: Christianity and Islam, are alive and well. Many secular Jews who did not pray themselves, found prayer a source of comfort and saw it as a form of resistance. They lent support to those who did pray.

THE SABBATH QUEEN VISITS THE BOXCAR

The Sabbath is a taste of Paradise.
— Ancient Jewish saying.

Through a narrow crack in the wooden slat
A Jewess notes the approach of night.
When she asks for a match, there are loud protests
They have no water, the car is sealed
A sudden jolt, would engulf them in flames.

The woman has not missed Sabbath in seventy years
And calmly insists candles will be lit.
She sways as she recites her prayers.
Voices are hushed, a magic descends.
No one hears the wheels grind toward Treblinka.

(stance break)

Parched throats taste sweet wine, peppery fish,
Golden broth with dillweed and finely-cut noodles
This feast has no earthly parallel.
Passengers sing psalms they thought they forgot
Wax drips and melts in a crown of tears
But the flames cast a healing light.

The Sabbath Queen is in their midst.
She cradles every bitter heart
Fires up their waning hopes
Lifts their swollen, blistered feet
Dances them through fetid air
Her kisses smooth fear-furrowed brows
She rocks children in supple arms
And hums lullabies that bring on sleep.

The candles burn, wicks curl, turn black
Too soon shadows swallow the light
But peace prevails this sacred night
As travelers sample Paradise.201

Simon Grubman speaks of welcoming the Sabbath with song in the camps; others speak of observing Passover and the Yom Kippur fast. These fasts were incredibly demanding; not only was it strenuous for the starving to resist food, it was mortally dangerous. Camp conditions so compromised the bodies of prisoners that missing even one meal could result in death. With the exception of committing idolatry, adultery or murder, Pekuach nefesh (saving the soul), permits the breaking of Torah laws in order to save a life. Therefore, there was no religious obligation for the starving inmates of the ghettos or camps to observe fast days. Yet, because of their great beliefs, they took the risk to spite the enemy and as proof of their own ability to resist the most trying tests. To endure such a fast was empowering. To celebrate the Sabbath or Jewish holidays required courage but was also enormously encouraging.

Harry Reicher, in “Der Stropkov Rebe z’t”l: Tsu Der Ershter Yohrzeit Fun Zein P’tira (The Rebbe of Stropkov ob”m: On the First Anniversary of

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His Passing)" tells of the Rabbi of Stropkov. During his imprisonment in Auschwitz, he traded bread for pencils and matchbooks. Because people were dying of starvation, there were those who considered the rabbi's actions sheer folly. Yet the rabbi retained his resolve to continue in this trade.

The purpose of the Rabbi's life-threatening venture was his unwavering faith which fostered the belief that the war would eventually end – with the return of God's presence. Therefore, he needed the pencils and the matchbook paper in order to record the names of the men who died in the camp. In this way, he sought to assure that their widows would not become agunoth, but would be able to remarry and recreate families. Aside from the necessity of Halakhically insuring and promoting continuity for the Jewish people, his action was, no doubt, motivated by his need to uphold the Biblical teaching, "And he is a witness whether he has seen or known of it; if he does not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity." (Lev. 5:1) and Talmud (Sanhedrin 30a) concerning the importance and legal requirement of reporting an unjust act. It was also an affirmation that even within the confines of Auschwitz, God's laws prevailed. That the Rabbi was willing to risk his life to fulfill the law is a testament to both his courage and his faith.

The Stropkover Rabbi also continuously flaunted authority to gather minyanim in order to say Kaddish for deceased inmates. Of course, prayers were prohibited. To engage in this illegal activity required the cooperation of others. The Jews who joined the quorum engaged in a form of active spiritual resistance. Within the confines of the barrack, not all were believers or even Jewish. The discovery that laws were being broken could implicate them and cost them their lives. Yet the Rabbi was able to garner enough respect and support to continue to thwart the Nazis, honor the dead, and broadcast his faith in God and his allegiance to his fellow-Jews.

Although the Stropkover exemplified stalwart faith, he was not alone in following the teaching to behave honorably in the midst of dishonor. Nor was he the only rabbi to gather a quorum for prayer. Clandestine religious services were actually quite common in the camps and many survivors refer to them. Elie Wiesel tells of a Beth Din where God was called as the defendant. He was tried and judged guilty of neglect. However, after the

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203 Agunoth are women whose missing husbands are unaccounted for; without testimony they remain "Chained." An agunah who marries is considered an adulteress.
(rabbinical) court adjourned, prosecutors, judge and jury gathered to say the evening prayers. Pisar writes:

The High Holidays arrived after we had been in the camp (Blizin, a labor camp) several months. Our barrack became an eerie synagogue. In the darkness, after work, without a Torah, without prayerbooks, without candles, with prison caps for yarmulkes, every man stood in front of his bunk, facing Jerusalem. Without the chants of a cantor to guide him, every man, believer or not, mumbled softly, lest we be heard by the roaming guards and their vicious dogs outside, whatever prayers he could remember.²⁰⁴

The sight of a religious authority such as the Stropkover Rebbe, going to quixotic extremes to preserve law and tradition with the complete assurance that he was engaging in necessary work, would surely have been an inspiration to his followers. Optimism, like despair, is contagious and it would be safe to conjecture that the Stropkover's belief in a Jewish future had a wide-range effect on others who were aware of his activities. At the least, those who didn't betray him had the satisfaction of being engaged in a form of passive resistance.

Even the non-religious admired their pious brethren for their strength of conviction. In 1961 Dr. Herman Krusk, a self-declared atheist, published the diary he kept while in the Vilna ghetto. In the entry dated April 24, 1942, he makes mention of the activities of the Orthodox during that period: "I want to add that the Orthodox in the ghetto were not idle. There are two yeshivot - one, an academy for higher Talmudic studies, the other, a day school for young boys."²⁰⁵

Most European Jews came from traditional homes. Even communists, and assimilationists were only a few generations removed from orthodox religious practices. (The Jewish Reform Movement, began in 1832 with the introduction of reforms in Weisbaden by Abraham Geiger, who published Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie, (1835-1947.) Study, both secular and religious, was always highly respected and many scholars were part of the camp population. The injustices all prisoners were now subjected to, regardless of their ties to Judaism and simply because of their "Jewish" blood, produced, among some, a sense of solidarity. Many supported those who still clung to what they considered an antiquated belief system. They were impressed by the level of scholarship and admired the discipline of

²⁰⁴ Ibid. Pisar, p. 51.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., Zuker, p. 110.
these orthodox Jews, particularly those who severely restricted their meager diets to observe Kashruth.

During the Holocaust, many non-observant Jews came to a great understanding and appreciation of their traditions. In her diary, Anne Frank, whose family was not devoutly religious, speaks of reciting bedtime prayers. Peter Schweifert, a Berlin Mischlinge, whose mother was highly assimilated, came to embrace his Judaism and recommended that she own up to her Jewishness:

Listen, I want to tell you something from the bottom of my heart; don't disown or condemn your and your own children's Jewishness. It's your whole strength. That doesn't mean that you have to prepare yourself for martyrdom. All you have to do is to love what has been given you as an honour. Because that's what it is. A grave responsibility. Don't forget that you can escape from everything, but never from yourself.

With my most fervent prayers for all of you, Your Peter. 207

Not only were religious services conducted in every ghetto, work camp and even in the death camps, rabbis also continued to counsel Jews on a variety of matters. In the Warsaw Ghetto, Rabbi Zembas worked vigorously to support the resistance organizations, despite his increased pastoral duties. "As the mood of suspense and apprehension mounted in the ghetto, the home of my uncle, Rabbi Menahem Zembas, became a source of solace and new hope for thousands of Jews who flocked there to seek the rabbi's counsel." 208

Within the camps, many rabbis maintained their authority among the Jews. There are numerous stories of Jews marching toward the gas chambers reciting the Sh'ma or saying Kaddish or singing Ani Ma'amin, I Believe (in the coming of the Messiah). Felix Müller, who had been a Sonderkommando, writes of witnessing such an event:

After the group undresses a man begins to shout the Viddui (the last confession before death). The crowd (about 2000 people) repeated his words. Unusually, the SS did not intervene in their religious experience. Then they recited the Kaddish and walked into the gas chamber. 209

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206 I don't mean to imply that this was widespread. Just as many, perhaps more, observant and non-observant, lost or abandoned their faith.


208 Ibid., Zuker, p. 79.

209 Ibid., Müller, p. 70.
There were numerous incidents in which religious leaders, realizing they and their followers could not escape, insisted on making a final testament to their faith.\textsuperscript{210} The Nazis usually permitted this for a number of reasons: it tended to produce less resistance and make the killing process smoother; some found amusement in watching this act of faith and docility; some took the passivity as proof that these people were sub-human, therefore deserving of extermination; and, in some cases, there was probably an element of superstitious fear that prevented them from interfering in these last rites.

As an assault on spirituality and to humiliate and further demoralize Jews, the Nazis often chose to carry out their killings on Jewish holidays. Some Jews refused to allow the killers the full joy of victory by offering themselves up as religious martyrs. This occurred in Baranowicz.

\textbf{WHEN THE LILY BLOOMED IN BARANOWICZ}

Reb Nissan Scheinberg reminds them it’s Purim
When Jews are advised to be merry and drink
Until they can’t tell Haman from Mordechai.

The rabbi pours a cupful of wine, shouts \textit{L’Chayim!}
Begins to dance. His followers join, forming a circle
And sing to honor the holiday.

\textit{Shoshanas Yakov} is the hymn they intone.
The enemy is mystified. Don’t these wild Creatures know they are doomed?

They carry on as if this were a wedding
And death, welcome as a rosy bride.
Hasidim whirl, faces grow flushed

Women wipe tears and clap their hands.
If God wants their souls now, He has their consent.
These soldiers might be angels in green uniforms.

Snowflakes glisten on earlocks and beards
Bullets fly. Blood falls like rain.
And the lily of Jacob breaks into bloom.\textsuperscript{211}

\textsuperscript{210} All Jehovah’s Witnesses in the camps were martyrs as were many Christians such as Father Bernard Lichtenberg.

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., Wind, \textit{Weaving The Remnants}. 
Kiddush Hashem. lit. Sanctification of the name. Martyrdom.
L’Chayim! To life! traditional Jewish toast.
Shoshanas Yakov. The lily of Jacob (Israel), a metaphor for the Jewish people. A hymn sung at Purim. The first line reads, The lily of Jacob broke forth in rejoicing. . . .

People who had always lived a devout life and retained their faith did not see the war as an excuse to abandon religious practices and responsibilities. As Reb Nokhem Yanishker, a leader of the Musar Movement, reasoned:

The distinction between sanctification of the Name and desecration of the Name is a very small one. In a material transaction, the richer the customer, the cheaper the relative price of the merchandise. Here it is precisely the opposite. The poorer a man is in learning and good deeds, the less he has to pay for sanctification of the Name. For such a person, the agonies themselves suffice, even if he regrets not belonging to the evil nation. But a man must pay dearly for the purchase of sanctification of the Name. One small mistake, a foolish thought, or even asking for the mercy of the evil-doers, and the sanctification is replaced by desecration. And for nothing has such a person a bargain in my entire life. I have toiled with myself, sought with my effort, to earn the world to come, like my father, the water carrier of Yanishke, sought to earn his bread through his own effort. And I would be most happy if Heaven would not demand from me a dear price for sanctification of the Name.212

Reb Nokhem, whose initial reaction to reports of German atrocities had been to advise his disciples to raise their levels of spirituality as an example to and against the evil of the world, later counseled them to save their bodies as well as their souls. “. . . it is now that your body must be privileged.” The living always have the opportunity to engage in good deeds and seek forgiveness for their sins. “But if you do not love the body, how great can love for your soul be?”213 In the ghettos, many Jews shaved their beards and removed their traditional garb to avoid being targeted by the Germans for blows and added humiliation.

Among religious (and secular, but superstitious) Jews were those who were convinced “that the Messiah and his redemption would come in the year 5700, because there were numerous allusions to that effect in the holy books printed hundreds of years ago,” writes Shimon Huberbrand.214 War

212 Ibid., Zunker, p. 163.
213 Ibid.
214 Ibid., Roskies, p. 403.
had broken out on 17 Elul 5699, September 1, 1939. They were confident that the sufferings would end within the year.

Some religious extremists saw Hitler as God’s punishing rod. They considered the Enlightenment and the assimilation that followed in its wake more destructive to the Jewish community than Nazism. Prior to the war they (and many Rabbis whose position were less extreme) had opposed Zionism, thereby discouraging emigration to Palestine.\textsuperscript{215} They now blamed secular Jews for the woes that had befallen them all and saw this war as the Third Churban (Destruction). As in the previous destructions of the Temple, God would allow a remnant to remain. They intended to be part of that remnant and addressed the war as yet another brutal test of faith.

Even today, those given to far more moderate views consider Auschwitz a challenge that must be answered by affirming Judaism. In God’s Presence in History, Emil Fackenheim takes the position that the commanding God of Sinai was present in Auschwitz. He hears a “commanding voice from Auschwitz.” The voice reveals an eleventh commandment, “Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories.”

The stereotypical image of Hasidim as physically weak creatures, incapable of being anything other than timid rabbis, scholars, or merchants does not always jibe with reality.

When World War II broke out, R. Shmuel Shelomo Leiner left his home town and settled in nearby Vladova. In the summer of 1942, when the news of the mass murder of Jews in the death camps first leaked out, the young rebbe called a meeting of his friends and disciples. From that meeting, the word went forth to the villages, ghettos and labor camps that the rebbe did not wish his Jews to go to their death like so many sheep to the slaughterhouse. Instead, he urged them to take to the woods and join the partisans in their fight against the Germans.\textsuperscript{216}

Religious observance may have led to an increased ability to survive. The praxis of Judaism, with adherence to its many commandments, requires a great deal of self-discipline. Those accustomed to exercising self-discipline before the war were undoubtedly better able to do so during the war. To resist eating one’s entire bread ration at one time was, for many, the key to

\textsuperscript{215} Because of their religious convictions, they opposed Zionism as forcing history. They also opposed it for its secular, socialist, and communist influences and/or associations.

\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., p. 19.
survival. Saving a bit was a form of insurance. One never knew if and when there would be another meal.

LEFTOVERS

Because you never know
when a uniform will stop you
force you into a freight car

packed with other Jews
you always carry cookies,
an apple, a piece of bread

wrapped in a hankie
or the paper napkin
left from lunch.

Your purse is lined with crumbs
each a tiny sphere of hope
you pray you’ll never swallow.217

DREAMING OF BREAD

All her people are sighing, searching for bread...  
— Lamentations 1:1

She can smell them
soft white, light as mist
moist, dark loaves
poppy-seeded rolls
chewy bagels
onion-flaked bialys
crusty, caraway rye
egg-rich challah...

Loaves float on motes of dust
they are cobblestones
beneath frost-bitten feet
scales of a prize herring
leaves on pollarded lindens
empty nests on ice-glazed oaks
the mammoth breasts

(continued)

of the fat redhead who wept
all the way to the showers.

Mud is dough
soil, sifted flour
rain is water
breath is yeast
sun, the oven in mid-July.

She becomes a master baker
baking during roll call
during work in the factory
during beatings, hangings
even while asleep.

She kneads and bakes
all day, all night
wondering why
she can be so famished
when all she does
is bake and eat.218

Food, especially bread, took on the most enormous importance, an
almost religious significance still evidenced by many survivors. In some
camps the bread ration was given as a loaf to be divided among several
inmates. Survivors speak of the meticulous efforts they took to make sure
that the portions were equal. They also speak of sharing bread. Sometimes a
prisoner's ration would be snatched away before he or she could eat it.
Sometimes he or she was detained and therefore was deprived of the daily
ration. At this point others would donate – it was a sacrifice under those
conditions – a share of their portion to prevent the unfortunate individual
from starving. This "sacrificial" bread became more than mere bread. It
became a symbol of love and compassion that strengthened one's will to
resist despair and death.

218 Ibid., *Wind, Weaving the Remnants*. 
A QUESTION OF BREAD

Always the same question

Is this someone who would share the ration
Or a windfall piece – from the dying, the dead –
Meting it out fairly, gram by precious gram
When the only scale is kindness?

This is how you greet others. Those
Who were not there cannot understand
Words that float unsaid between
Handshakes and phrases of etiquette.
The vision of you both in that land of ash
Destitute, bellies swelling with hunger
Where bread is the greatest luxury, save trust.
You do not invite such morbidity

But the question nags and gnaws for reply.
You have come to dread meeting strangers
Each unfamiliar face forces appraisal
And few, far too few, pass the test.

You were taught, in childhood, not to judge blindly.
You were taught many things
That never served you well.
What you learned later you would choose to forget.

Bread remains the question, first and last.\textsuperscript{219}

Many saw prayer, itself, as a viable form of resistance. Throughout
Jewish history Jews escaped destruction. Those religiously oriented believed
this was accomplished with God’s help. They fervently believed that He
would intervene again on their behalf, fulfilling the lines in the prayer, Al
Hannisim, said at Hannukah: “Meting out retribution Thou hast delivered
the strong into the hand of the weak, many into the hand of the few, the
impure into the hand of the pure, the wicked into the hand of the righteous,
and tyrants into the hands of the devotees of Torah.”\textsuperscript{220} To continue their
immersion in Torah, when the Nazis forbade it, yeshivas were set up in
underground bunkers.

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., Wind, Walking on Ash.
\textsuperscript{220} David de Sola pool, editor, Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath Festivals and Holidays, New York:
Behrman House, 1960, p. 20.
The bunker of the Hasidim is, in fact, a complete apartment with all the amenities of a home—electric light, water, gas and toilet facilities. The food supply closet is amply stocked with flour, vegetables, ersatz honey, zwieback and canned goods. I could only marvel at the resourcefulness of the men who set up this bunker.\textsuperscript{221}

Judaism is not merely a contemplative religion; both prayer and action are necessary to the fulfillment God’s commandments. The body is said to be an image of God, and as such must be respected. Hence, care for its maintenance is not considered a frivolity but a requirement; and every possibility of preserving life must be taken.

Preserving life was an enormous, and often futile challenge during the Shoah. Pregnancy was forbidden to Jews; women were required to undergo abortions. Those who refused put both themselves and their babies in mortal danger. Jewish newborns were poisoned by Nazis in ghetto hospitals. Often, babies were smothered to prevent them from crying and endangering others by revealing the hiding place. In concentration camps, when a woman clandestinely gave birth, her infant was killed immediately by those assisting in the birth. Because pregnancy and childbirth were death warrants for Jewish women, this “choiceless choice” was an effort to save the mother and also to protect those involved in helping her conceal her pregnancy and labor. Despite this situation there are individual cases of babies being born and surviving the camps.

One of the most remarkable stories of combined spiritual and active resistance is that of Miriam Rosenthal, a Hungarian Jewess deported to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944. It required enormous stamina, determination, and the assistance of other women, to survive the numerous selections and bring the baby to term. On Purim, 1945, she gave birth to a son. Word had been sent to the men’s barracks that she had gone into labor and Jewish inmates recited \textit{Tehillim} (psalms) for mother and child. Although the defeated German army was in retreat, the war against Jews was going into its final, most painfully devastating mode as Nazis forced the prisoners on a Death March. Miraculously, both Rosenthal and her son survived. \textsuperscript{222}

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., Zuker, p.19.
Binyomin Orenshtayn tells of being lifted out of feelings of despair after more than a year as a prisoner in a labor camp and in the sixth year of his struggle to survive the war:

Yisroel-Yosef Kutner, the cantor, a deeply religious Jew who has survived all these troubles together with me and withstood various religious temptations without allowing his spirit to be broken for a minute, comes to my bunk. But this time he is unable to break off even a small bit of matzoh for me, as he did the previous year. He hungers like everyone else, and has just the meager bit of risen bread that he receives in the concentration camp. He brings me a different gift, in the form of comfort and hope, saying to me: “Don’t lose hope. It is expressly written that one is a slave for six years and in the seventh year one is set free. We have been under Hitler’s tyranny and enslavement for six Passovers now. Soon we will be redeemed, and next Passover we will celebrate properly the season of our redemption.”

The following year proved even more trying than the previous ones had. Eventually the two friends were evacuated to Bergen-Belsen. However, Kutner’s prophecy was realized. Liberation did indeed come in April, in “the season of our redemption”.

Not all spiritual comfort came from traditional religion. For committed Communists, their ideology was a substitute faith and a source of solace. “The Internationale” sustained them as “Hatikvah” and other national anthems and hymns inspired others. Sutzkever’s belief that “somewhere the greenness of being resides” was also a non-traditional belief in continuity. Whatever path faith took, it proved a fortifier to believers and helped them endure those terrible times.

One way or the other, in the decisive moments their political or religious belief was an inestimable help to them, while we skeptical and humanistic intellectuals took recourse, in vain, to our literary, philosophical, and altruistic household gods... their belief or their ideology gave them a firm foothold in the world from which they spiritually unhinged the SS state... They survived better or died with more dignity than their irreligious or unpolitical intellectual comrades, who often were infinitely better educated and more practiced in exact thinking.

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223 Ibid., Zuker, p. 189.
SECTION II

VENGEANCE

The idea of revenge was very central to many people's thoughts. In fact, the Soviet propaganda machine used it to motivate its troops. For the average Jew, vengeance was also something to look forward to as part of liberation. Certainly, it was the last word on many a victim's lip.

In this section I plan to show the forms that vengeance took. In most cases, vengeance was benign, even altruistic. Survivors who testify about their experience, often speak of the need to make sure that another Holocaust doesn't happen. The fact that other genocides have occurred since 1945 motivates them to sensitize others to the real effects of planned destruction, particularly in an age of advanced weaponry with its capability to destroy the entire planet.

Paradoxically, the mostly circumspect acts of revenge furthered the image of the timid Jew who went willingly to the gas chambers. It wasn't until June of 1967 that there was a change in the stereotype. With the victory of the Six-Day War, the Jews (Israelis) took on the image of valiant fighters. But by late 1973, Anti-Semitism once, again, kicked in and Jews became the "oppressors" when they sought to maintain the land they had won. In fact, they were even termed, "Nazis."
Chapter

7

VENGEANCE AND THE DISCOURSE OF CONSOLATION

Fit vengeance for the spilt blood of a child
The Devil has not yet invented . . .
– Hayim Nahman Bialik

Alexander Donat writes of seeing German children at play when he was a slave laborer. “Their fathers and brothers had murdered our children, but as I walked through the streets of their town and saw those trusting, defenseless little ones, I became acutely conscious of the effect that we could never bring ourselves to murder them when the hour of revenge came.”

Although written and oral testimonies contain numerous references to acts of vengeance, particularly rape, against German women – and even young girls – committed by Russian soldiers (some of whom may have been Jewish) there are few references to acts of violence committed against civilians by Jewish survivors. It would appear that Jews limited their acts of revenge to the actual perpetrators. Most of these took place immediately after liberation and were often instigated and/or approved by the liberators, themselves.

Vengeance took several forms during and following the Holocaust. The most perverse was the vengeance that kapos and blockowas directed at their fellow-prisoners. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk describes such a person, calling her a “monster” and “a degenerate.” Her little room was located in Block 25, the infamous anteroom to the gas chambers.

Cyla, a degenerate, who had a little room in Block 25. “You probably know that I put my own mother in the car that took her to the gas. You should understand that there remains for nothing so terrible that I could not do it. The world is a terrible place. That is how I take my revenge on it.”

The Nazis specifically sought out criminals and sadists to function as camp guards. Was Cyla a sociopath before the war? Did the war arouse a

\[225\] Ibid., Donat, pp. 272-273.
\[226\] Ibid., Nomberg-Przytyk, p. 56.
latent predisposition towards sadism? Or was she the victim of a complete mental and moral break-down?

While she was atypical, she was not the only prisoner to fall into the category of abusers. The tendency of power to corrupt is known and during the Holocaust many – including victims of the Nazis – who found themselves in positions of power became corrupted. The most infamous of these, aside from the Nazis and their cohorts, is Chaim Rumkowski, the chairman of the Lodz Ghetto.

During the Holocaust many Jews were so traumatized by the constant onslaught of horrors they gave up hope. In an interview, Alexander Donat says that survival was two-pronged. First one needed the desire to survive, then the stamina. For him, and for others, vengeance was the motivation for survival, “What kept me alive was the wish for revenge. That gave me the will to live . . . They sent me to work in the coal mines and then somewhere to build a synthetic rubber factory and I thought, “If I work I will survive and if I survive I will take my revenge.” Desire for vengeance as motivation to persevere through the worst afflictions is a common theme in survivor testimonies, that one may deduce that it was a strong motivation for survival.

The most benign form of revenge was the satisfaction of having survived the war with one’s faith, morals and ethics intact. Seeing the enemy defeated, starving in the midst of their bombed-out cities, and deferential to those they had oppressed, comforted those with a stronger need for revenge. Eliahu Shimon Hifka describes a last minute uprising in Schwerin of transported prisoners from Auschwitz. Realizing they would be shot by the retreating Germans (by now, on the other side of the divide) a self-defense operation is organized by the Russian P.O.W.’s who are among them:

The entire night of the first and second of May we didn’t close our eyes . . .
When daylight came, we found that there were some among us who weren’t prisoners because they had hair on their heads . . . Turning to each one who had hair, we removed his pack of food and frisked him to see if he was carrying weapons. We knew that they were German soldiers but they were suddenly so weak we could do anything we wanted with them . . . And still the SS men didn’t move from one side to the other. They stood in place but it was obvious they had nowhere to go. They trembled like little fish and their terror stilled our hunger.227

In a speech given on receiving The B’nai Brith Literary Award, Abraham Sutzkever talked about his immediate postwar experience:

During the course of these wanderings I had passed over tens of thousands of slaughtered, decaying bodies of Germans. The odious smell of the dead, over 1000 kilometers from Moscow to Vilne (sic). This stench was for me, a sweet revenge of odor. I had never been so pleased. I don’t think I ever will be again.228

The graphic description is something of a surprise, coming as it does from a poet whose use of language is highly disciplined. Yet, to deny him the right to his very visceral response, as well as the right to proclaim it, would be unfair. In Jewish law, people are accountable for their deeds and not their thoughts. Why shouldn’t someone who was forced to experience the horrors of war through all his senses, be allowed to express the pleasure that came with the realization that the stench of death was not the sole provenance of the victims, alone? The murderers, too, now reeked of it.

Violence that results in death is the utmost profanity. Jews commanded to be a Holy People, have conditioned themselves to seek vengeance for wrongs through peaceful resolutions, usually through legal means. However, some, particularly those who had joined Resistance Groups or national militias, dreamt of exacting direct and uncompromising revenge. By November, 1944 the Allied victory was at hand. From a tent in the middle of French woods, Peter Schweifert, a soldier with the Free French Forces, writes:

The first large German city, Aachen, is in our hands. Our air attacks grow stronger... Yes, they will be crushed, they will be extinguished, if necessary... justice will be done. Mankind will have its revenge, it will recover its rights. And the Nazis shall suffer as they have made others suffer, and those who aren’t Nazis shall suffer, too. For they are all responsible, they are all guilty, except for a few, except a tiny minority who chose exile and the struggle for a just cause, or who were unable to flee yet never played the wretched game but resisted all temptation and kept their hands clean... And what I want most of all: to enter Berlin! For my satisfaction, for my vengeance, so that they can see that I was right!... I don’t know whether this will be possible, perhaps not, but I want to be there at the precise hour, at the precise moment when the reckoning is made... It demands the most terrible vengeance. Those responsible for these atrocities will be judged. But who is responsible? The nation

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228 Program printed for the B’nai Brith Commission on Adult Jewish Education, B’nai Brith Literary Award to Abraham Sutzkever, New York, February 18, 1979.
whence such creatures emerged; the spirit and blood of this nation; the human community which allowed such things to exist, to live, to grow, to act, to flourish.229

As Schweifert's thoughts continue to spill onto paper, it becomes evident that his desire for vengeance will never be fully consummated. The responsibility is not only the Nazis but "the human community" within all of Germany. At this point, he is on the brink of battle. Enemy troops are stationed on the other side of the woods, and he is preparing himself to deal decisively with them. His ferocious hostility towards all Germans will serve him when he comes face-to-face with people who were his compatriots just a few years ago.

Schweifert was killed in shellfire in January, 1945. Had he been given time to reflect – an advantage that survivors had – he would have realized that Germany was not solely responsible. She could not have caused such destruction if her early offensives had been met with swift opposition from the rest of the world. David Wyman quotes Zygielblum who tried, in June, 1942, to alert the world to the annihilation of Jews:

The responsibility for this crime of murdering the entire Jewish population of Poland falls in the first instance to the perpetrators, but indirectly it is also a burden on the whole of humanity, the people and the governments of the Allied States which thus far have made no effort to concrete action for the purpose of curtailing this crime.

By the passive observation of the murder of defenseless millions and of the maltreatment of children, women, and old men, these countries have become the criminals' accomplices.230

Because by extension, the world was responsible for the Holocaust, aside from a catastrophe of Noachide proportions, the only viable form vengeance could take once the war ended was through justice. When Gerda Weissman-Klein considered the concept of vengeance, she concluded, "It was with bitterness that I realized how futile my personal feelings of vengeance would be if I were allowed to cross the bounds of humanitarian behavior – and that none of that would ever bring back my parents, or anyone else."231

229 Ibid., Schweifert, p. 224.
231 Ibid., Klein and Klein, p. 37.
Who cries Revenge! Revenge! – accursed be he!
Fit vengeance for the spilt blood of a child
The Devil has not yet invented . . .

These lines, a response to the Kishinev Pogrom were written by Hayim Nahman Bialik in his poem, “Upon The Slaughter”. Sutzkever, who was well-acquainted with Bialik’s work echoed the theme in a single line, “Too little, not enough.” Cynthia Ozick, in concert with this idea, writes:

Vengeance does not require evil with evil; vengeance cannot requite, repay, even out, equate, redress. If it could, vengeance on a mass murderer would mean killing all the members of his family and a great fraction of his nation; and still his victims would not come alive. What we call “vengeance” is the act of bringing public justice to evil – not by repeating evil, not by imitating the evil, not by iniating a new evil, but by making certain never to condone the old one; never even appearing to condone it.

“Public” justice? Yes. While the evil was going on, to turn aside from it, to avoid noticing it, became complicity. And in the same way, after three or four decades have passed and the evil has entered history, to turn aside from it – to forget – again becomes complicity. Allowing the evil to slip into the collective amnesia of its own generation, or of the next generation is tantamount to condoning it.

Some survivors were impatient for the wheels of justice to grind and wanted immediate response to the charges of the dead. An anonymous letter, found in the postwar rubble of Bialystok reads, “We’ll kill our slaughterers, they will have to fall together with us . . . We call you to vengeance, revenge without remorse or mercy . . . Vengeance! This is our challenge to you, who have not suffered in Hitler’s hell.”

Nekome nemer (Revenge takers, Avengers) was a group of Jewish partisans who sought revenge on Nazi persecutors after the liberation. DIN, Justice was an offshoot organization. Posing as German soldiers, members of these groups (Abba Kovner was one) would infiltrate POW camps to search those who had killed Jews, and executed them. “Plan A in late 1945 was to poison the German Water supply. The poison was detected by the British. Plan B, in 1946, had some success; bread in Dachau’s prison camp, then in the British Zone of Occupation, was poisoned by Avengers . . .”

219 Ibid., Roskies, p. 219.


Lest it be misunderstood, whatever revenge fantasies Jews had – and these were no doubt as grotesque and sadistic as the acts of the perpetrators – with few exceptions, these fantasies remained unrealized. In the first place, the opportunities for such actions was limited. Most prisoners who remained in the camps when the Nazis forced the prisoners on the Death Marches, were too debilitated to do anything but continue to try to survive. A great many of these were too weak to manage even that. Many who did died soon after liberation. Those who survived the Death Marches were also in a precarious state of health. Nonetheless, in addition to the above-mentioned acts, there were other numerous instances when revenge killings did take place:

Some former inmates wrought immediate, summary justice against their persecutors, and there was little the military could do to stop them. Both liberators and the liberated sought to punish those responsible for the atrocities in the concentration camps, and for the first few days after liberation, some ex-prisoners and Allied soldiers engaged in spontaneous acts of revenge. A number of SS guards, staff, and their collaborators were clubbed, stoned, knifed, shot, beaten, or otherwise molested. The freed prisoners wanted retribution; many Allied soldiers agreed that the guards deserved whatever spontaneous punishment they received.

The Allies had anticipated the need for punishing those responsible for war crimes, and formal procedures were pursued in apprehending and jailing individuals suspected of war crimes.235

One of victims was the camp commandant, whose battered body was put on display at the camp entrance. In some instances, prisoners’ committees oversaw the administration of summary "justice" which could still be remarkably brutal.

The only documented example of large scale participation of Allied troops in revenge killings occurred at Dachau following the liberation of the camp by troops of the U.S. 45th Infantry Division on April 29, 1945. Infuriated by the discovery of a "death train" – 39 railway boxcars containing the bodies of thousands of prisoners – and provoked by the initial armed resistance of some SS guards, GIs engaged in an orgy of killing, including lining up SS men and mowing them down with machine-gun fire.236

For the vast majority of survivors, revenge has not meant killing or even hurting others. Whatever the violent imaginings of the victims in the throes of their agonies, most of these dissipated with Germany’s defeat. (Of course, this applies only to those who saw liberation. Many who were not saved, died calling for revenge.) While some survivors, particularly among the partisans, did take a decidedly active hand in killing perpetrators, most


had no interest in actively pursuing revenge. The war had given Jews a heightened sense of justice, a great distaste for violence and sympathy for those who suffer. One of these is Yala Korwin, who expresses it in her poem, "Vengeance". She also makes a distinction, a distinction many avengers made, between the guards and accomplices and those who actually committed murder.

Vengeance

We'll slap their faces for every insult, each prohibition, every pound of crates loaded with metallic venom we carried, blisters on our hands. For frostbites on bare feet clad in wooden gear. For each thrust in our ribs when eyes wouldn't stay open wide enough at the machines, during Nachtstichte. For our constant craving for food. On their side of the dining-hall the soup was savory, thick, nicht-wahr? For their swelled pride, arrogance, disdain for us, the subhumans. For murders, slapping wouldn't be enough. This we'll leave to another justice.

We went and saw them all in a row, on a bench, in front of the plant, waiting to render their devil-accounts to the victorious power. We beheld their meek carriage, hunched shoulders, cast-down eyes. Herr Hase with all his stooges? Could they have been our valiant masters?

We didn't soil our hands.237

How has this transformation of vengeance into a discourse of consolation, through written and spoken testimony; the creation of memorials and museums; films and television programs; conferences and

formal dialogues; and through courses taught in schools, colleges and universities, changed the world? Can it serve as a paradigm for peaceful resolutions to issues that become excuses for genocide?

**Vectors of Vengeance**

Raizale, who had been in the Tremblova Ghetto, was shot while jumping from the third story in an attempt to escape from the ‘actzions’ (sic) and as she fell, she yelled, ‘Munio will revenge my blood’.

— Yemima Besner 238

Alexander Donat wrote, “For us the prospect of liberation was a heady brew. Not that we expected to see it personally, but this was our war with Hitler and we wanted to survive to spite him, to feast our eyes and spirits on the spectacle of his downfall, to witness the whole evil power of the Reich in a heap of rubble.”239

In some memoirs there are mentions of survivors returning to their homes to find them occupied by neighbors. Verbal assaults often followed and in some instances threats of hauling the usurpers before the military courts were made (and carried out) by survivors intent on reclaiming their property. But these were rare case; most who returned to their former homes tell tales of defeat. It was the Jews, particularly in Poland and Lithuania, who were met with verbal assaults and hostile threats. Outnumbered by the locals (some of them armed) who had proven themselves capable and willing to kill Jews after liberation, Jews usually retreated. Having lost so many and so much they were unwilling to risk their lives to regain material possessions.

**Reluctant Avengers**

Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

— Deut. 32:35, 41

Sam Goldstein, a mere adolescent when the Germans invaded his native Poland, was aged and wise by the time the war ended. He tells of an event that occurred a few months after liberation.240 He recognized a man

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238 Ibid., Elbaum, {Yemima Besner, p. 134}.
who had been a kapo. Shaken, he pointed to him when he entered the room, and said, "I know you!" Immediately, other survivors, who sensed what lay beneath this accusative remark, formed a circle around the former kapo.

Sam had already witnessed vigilante justice, in one case the hanging of a man who had been, as it turned out, wrongly accused. Although Sam was certain that this man was, beyond doubt, the kapo who had brutalized and killed Jews, he refused to be responsible for his murder. He quickly relented, saying, "No, I made a mistake."

Asked if he ever regretted his action, he replies, "Never. God forbid. After what I lived through, should I have let him make a killer out of me and let me make killers out of the others? God will know better what to do with him." And with his sardonic sense of humor, adds "I hope."

Had he, during the war, given thought to vengeance? "Of course. We all did. We dreamed of it all the time. But thinking and dreaming is one thing; doing is something else. A whole other thing."

This is not to say that Jews did not take revenge. Immediately after liberation, most Jewish kapos were killed by Jews. This occurred, in some cases, even during the war. The most sadistic ones were "assassinated" within the camps and their bodies dumped into cesspools. Chaim Rumkowski, the corrupt leader of the Lodz Ghetto, was beaten to death, presumably by Jews bent on vengeance, soon after his arrival in Auschwitz.

Many perpetrators eluded Jewish avengers by disappearing just before the Allies liberated the camps. On the Death Marches, as it became increasingly apparent to the soldiers and camp guards that the war was lost, they abandoned the prisoners, often changing into civilian clothing to better their chances of escape. (Escape proved easier than it had for Jews, for several reasons. They were, generally, in far better physical condition than the prisoners since their diets and privileges, even when compromised, were superior to those of the inmates. Also, in Poland where most of the camps were located, the world beyond the camps was not hostile to gentiles as to Jews. Most of the perpetrators had families and homes where they could find welcome.)

Even when Jews killed in self-defense, the result could be a lifetime of psychic suffering. The case of A. Z. is one such example. He had escaped from the ghetto and was living as an Aryan. One day, returning from his job as a
carpenter, he was recognized by a Pole from his hometown. The Pole threatened to denounce him. A.Z. offered him a bribe which the Pole accepted. He followed A.Z. home to collect. A.Z. had hoped that once they got away from the village, he would be able to shake his assailant and make an escape. But this proved impossible. The man, a vicious anti-Semite before the war, had not made an idle threat. A.Z.’s life was in grave danger. The gold he had promised the blackmailer was non-existent; he, himself, was barely able to sustain himself.

He also knew that had he had money with which to bribe this treacherous Pole, bribery might, at best, buy him time; it would not provide security. Even if he escaped and resettled in some far-off city or town – an extremely risky thing to do under the circumstances – wouldn’t the extortionist be on the lookout for other Jews to victimize? Faced with this danger, A.Z. took a hammer from his toolbox and killed the Pole. Although A.Z. survived the war, married and had a family, he never overcame the guilt of having murdered another man.

The few intimates who knew his story and understood the circumstances tried to convince him that he had only defended himself, at worst. Some lauded him as a hero. He had killed an enemy. He had probably saved other Jews from being victimized by the sadist. And he had avenged the murder of countless Jews who had been betrayed by gentiles, often after they had been divested of all their possessions.

Despite all these rationalizations, A.Z. couldn’t bear to think of himself as a murderer, or even as an avenger. He became a workaholic. Physical exhaustion often resulted in temper tantrums waged against his wife and children. In his remorse for these abuses, he turned to alcohol. As only a few people knew of his past, the community assumed he was an irrational, ill-tempered drunk. This reputation became an additional burden for him and his family. Eventually he had a breakdown and died relatively young.

No doubt, had he been a Catholic, he would have benefited from being able to confess his “crime” to a priest. Had he been a man of greater means and sophistication, he could have sought psychiatric help; or asked for it through a social welfare agency. But in that era, many associated psychiatry with insanity. He was sane enough to understand the root cause of his problems and too responsible a provider to engage in what he considered the
frivolity of psychoanalysis. How could he adequately explain his past to someone who had not been in the Holocaust and was therefore unaware of the true terror of the situation he had faced? Language may have posed an additional problem; his English was very poor and how many psychiatrists spoke Yiddish well? Fear of possible prosecution and subsequent deportation, was another issue. And money was a consideration. As the owner of a small business, he fell between the cracks. He was too "rich" for charity; too poor to afford to pay for his own treatment and, at the same time, support his family who lived quite modestly by American standards. There was also the matter of pride. Most survivors had gotten through the most terrible times with little or no help from outsiders. Often their pleas for help had fallen on deaf ears. Unwilling to beggar themselves again, they were not about to seek help after the war. The best way to attain respect was to quickly become independent.

Perhaps, like Sam Goldstein, survivors intuited that the act of seeking vengeance would demand much more than it would return. Most were pragmatists. Although, the war was not a classic case of survival of the fittest — "pure chance" being the most likely element in every survivor's explanation of how she or he survived — a practical approach to solving problems served people well when the opportunity to reconstruct their lives finally came.

Being quick-witted, observant of one's surroundings and actively maximizing every potential was helpful in the struggle to survive. Only in the rarest cases did impractical, utterly dependent people manage to live through the war. Even when war came late, as to the Hungarian Jewish population, it was the young, the energetic and resourceful who had the best chance for survival. Given this how could people rationalize the displacement of energy for idealistic purposes (i.e. becoming avengers to honor the charge of the dying) when those energies were required to rebuild their lives. Creating the State of Israel, and for those in the diaspora, establishing themselves on foreign soil and raising a new generation demanded all their resources.

In postwar Europe, the living arrangements in which Jews found themselves were not conducive to vigilantism. The D.P. camps were in some ways like concentration camps; some were former concentration camps. Many were surrounded by barbed wire. Curfews, travel and many other
restrictions were imposed on the refugees. Owning weapons was out of the question.

Life, itself, particularly the creation of new lives, seemed the best form of revenge. And this was within the capability of most survivors. Of course, many had been so severely compromised physically through scientific experiments or other war-related diseases or infirmities, they were unable to conceive children. And many were left so emotionally scarred they were either unable or unwilling to have children. For these people, the struggle to remain functional members of society was, in itself, a great challenge. To plan and carry out acts of vengeance was simply beyond their abilities.

Gabriel Sedelis, one of the Vilna Partisans, tells of being asked to guard a German soldier who had been taken prisoner. The man was young, not much older than Sedelis. They spent the whole night talking, and he found, much to his surprise, that they had much in common. The next morning he was told by his commandant that the unit had decided to shoot the prisoner and he was to perform the execution.

"It's easy to shoot the enemy without hesitance (sic)." 241 Sedelis says in the film. But the conversation he and the prisoner had engaged in no longer made the two enemies. He found himself unable and unwilling to shoot. For his refusal to follow orders, he was locked up in a chicken coop.

After the German was shot, Sedelis was released. He and the only other Jewish partisan in his unit were told to bury the corpse. "We shoveled a grave." Then seeing a fence nearby, they took a couple of planks, found a nail and hammered a cross which they then planted on the grave. Afterwards, "We looked at each other and wondered why we had done it. " In hindsight, he attributes this to an act of rebellion. "We were rebelling against the tactics the Germans used, after all we're fighting for a new world. " 242

But was it merely rebellion? This young man was well-acquainted with the mass graves in Ponar. It is likely that the pits on that ignominious hillside contain members of his own family, victims of the mass killings. Yet, when faced with the opportunity, he declined, "And I was glad I didn't do it."

Furthermore, he and the other Jewish partisan took the trouble to give the German the dignity of a cross on his grave. Part of this was, as Sedelis said, an

241 Ibid., Film: Partisans of Vilna.
242 Ibid.
act of rebellion against their oppressors, the anti-Semitic partisans who forced
them to this unpleasant and difficult duty, work none of them wanted to do.
But, the other aspect of this is that the nightlong conversation became an
epiphany. It allowed Sedelis to see beyond the stereotype to the person inside
the uniform; a young man whose problems and aspirations were not that
much different from his own; a fellow-human-being who, because of the
circumstances of his birth, found himself in an unenviable position.
Vengeance and Justice

If you want peace, work for justice.
— Pope Paul VI

Simon Wiesenthal firmly believes in individual and not communal responsibility. An architect before the war, he could have returned to his profession but chose, instead, to turn his need for vengeance into becoming a Nazi hunter. He and his wife lost eighty-nine family members in the Holocaust. But vigilante justice is not what he sought. The only kind of justice that is meaningful to him is justice through a court of law. This despite the knowledge that immediately after the war “I asked the US War Crimes Commission to let me work for them. I needed a few years to find out, though, that the name was a mistake because the crimes of the Nazis had nothing to do with the war. Bombings of the cities and its civilian population were war crimes. But the Nazi Crime was different.”243

Apparently, many survivors agreed that the Nazis had gone far beyond the realm of war crimes. They didn’t see the need or even the desirability of giving Nazis court trials. The Nuremberg Laws — which Eric Goldhagen says turned Jews into “social lepers” — was proof that law and justice are not always in accord. Some survivors also considered it nothing more than “a show trial”, a quick and simple way of restoring Germany’s place among the nations.

In part, fear that justice would not be meted out was a response to the treatment of Jewish survivors by the Allies immediately after the war. Anti-Semitism had not died out. Germany had been defeated, many of its cities lay in ruins, its population was hungry. Still, they were given preferential treatment over the Jews. Some Displaced Persons camps were surrounded by barbed wire; some contained former guards or gentile prisoners who were unrepentantly anti-Semitic. DP’s were bound to curfews and other regulations while Germans enjoyed freedom of movement.

Eventually – after protests by the survivors, the American Jewish Committee, General Eisenhower, and others – these inequities were addressed. Survivors understood the anti-Semitic component behind Nazism. The hostile reception many received from their former neighbors —

243 Ibid., Tokudome, p. 43.
epitomized by the massacre of Kielce, led by an ax-wielding priest – convinced
them that prejudice was still very much alive and that their opportunity for
equal treatment under the law was not guaranteed in Christian Europe. For
them the priority was to get away from the blood-stained continent as quickly
as they could.

However, outside the camps, Britain was restricting emigration to
Palestine and punishing illegal emigrants. After sailing toward Palestine
many refugees wound up in internment camps in Cyprus, where living
conditions resembled those of the concentration camps. Journalist Ruth
Gruber who visited Cyprus speaks of the squalor there, “I would get back to
the hotel and shower for an hour but I could not wash away the stench that
clung to me.” 244

Given this state of affairs, survivors were not encouraged that justice
would be done. Some, seeking to avenge the death of their loved ones, came
to Simon Wiesenthal for help. Rabbi Simon Cooper, of the Wiesenthal
Center, says:

He knew they wanted to kill those on the list, and refused to give the
list. Wiesenthal understood then that we could not live our life only through
anger, even if it’s righteous anger. Justice had to be restored by bringing those
who had committed the crimes to the court, not by revenge. He understood that
Cambodia was going to happen and Rwanda was going to happen unless the
society would take a certain step. He knew we had to build bridges. I don’t
know how he could draw this lesson in 1945. I consider it to be a miracle. But
that kind of humanity and a commitment, an incredible commitment to
reconstitute the idea of justice ... that is unbelievable to me. 245

Wiesenthal’s insistence on justice is all the greater in that he
understands that there never can be justice. He mourns the fact that he has
neither a photograph nor even a grave by which to remember his murdered
mother and recalls in The Sunflower, his feelings of despair when as a slave
laborer he passed a military cemetery. “Suddenly I envied the dead soldiers.
Each had a sunflower to connect him with the living world, and butterflies to
visit his grave. For me there would be no sunflower. I would be buried in a
mass grave. ... Even in death they were superior to us.” 246
Liberation lessened the despair and anger, but left him profoundly changed. Wiesenthal gave up his profession as an architect to follow a calling to pursue justice.

I could not go back to a normal life. My wife used to tell me, ‘You were an architect before the war and you can go back to your profession.’ The last conversation we had was twelve years ago. She said, ‘Isn’t it enough what you have done? We can go to Israel where our daughter and our grandchildren live.’ I said to her, ‘Maybe you are right. We can do that. But then I would feel like a traitor. Can you live with a traitor?’ And that was our last talk about our work.”

One can argue that Wiesenthal’s choice had nothing to do with altruism; that in this situation, feeling “like a traitor” is an irrational, self-imposed judgment. However, the obligation to remember and avenge was a dying wish that many heard. How does one refute such a charge, especially when it comes from the lips of family and friends?

On the other hand, if one chooses to honor that charge, one must decide on the extent and the purpose of that charge. For Wiesenthal – as for Serge (and Beate) Klarsfeld – that charge is limited to following a strict protocol of finding the perpetrators and bringing them to justice. This emotionally trying, time-consuming, and costly work serves the dual function of punishing the perpetrators and publicizing the long reach of the law. Wiesenthal draws a distinction between meeting the charge to remember and avenge with the obligation of forgiveness. According to Jewish thought, only victims can forgive the perpetrators. Remembrance is in the realm of all, forgiveness belongs only to the victims, and most of those are dead.

Whether one agrees that the Nuremberg trials brought justice or one concurs with Langer does that, “... the trials were conducted not so much to understand Germany’s history as to conclude unfinished business in order that Germany might be reconstituted with a clean slate in the North Atlantic community of nations confronted with the threat of communism.” What is manifest is that those trials were a turning point in world history, the catalyst for the Human Rights Movement.

The Charter of the United Nations, of 1945, which was really the central instrument which lays the foundations for the post-World War II legal

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247 Ibid., Tokudome, p. 67.
248 Ibid., Langer, Politics of Memory, p. 69.
order, proclaimed in the second paragraph of its Preamble, the inherent dignity and worth of every human being, and the centrality of that notion at the heart of the legal system that was to be built on the ashes of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Likewise, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in 1948, set the scene for the rights which were enumerated therein by devoting its opening line to the idea that every human being is born with inherent dignity, simply by virtue of being born a human being.249

In terms of International Law, prior to the Holocaust, "... the individual had virtually no individual status at all. He or she was no more than a mere appendage of his/her state."250 Ironically, the Nuremberg Laws became a blueprint for the creation of antithetical laws to guarantee the rights of all human beings:

One can literally go down the list of rights proclaimed to be human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the seminal document of the post-World War human rights movement – indeed, the constitution of that movement – and see in its provisions a reaction to specific components of the legal dimensions of the Holocaust. In fact, one almost gets the sense that the framers of the Universal Declaration started by examining the provisions of the Nazi legal system, then took those rights of which the Nazis sought to deprive their victims, and then proclaimed those very rights to be the subject of the protection of international human rights law.251

The promulgation of International Rights Law has changed society. Individual rights are irrevocably linked to individual responsibility. Persons can no longer claim immunity for savage acts because they were simply "following orders."

Rebirth

Can these bones live?
– Ezekiel 37:33

Liberation saw an intense effort, among survivors, to rebuild their lives. People who had been no more than skeletal creatures regained their health, married and gave birth to children. They were acquainted with the assertion, "I have set before thee life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." (Deut. 30:19)

250 Ibid., p. 2.
251 Ibid., p. 4.
Many Jews considered the choice to proceed with life a duty, as well as a form of revenge against the enemy who sought so assiduously to annihilate them. Uzi Lior, a son of survivors says, “The greatest revenge is knowing that my children and my brother’s children represent everything the Germans tried to destroy.”

On the whole, nearly all Jews channeled their vastly depleted energies into rebuilding their lives. Although, very few knew George Herbert’s dictum, “Living well is the best revenge.” many lived those words. The disproportionate rate of success on the part of survivors, their children and grandchildren attests to it.

People such as Simon Wiesenthal, who made it their life’s mission after the war to seek vengeance through justice, were anomalies. Most wanted to regain their severely compromised health, find relatives and friends, create new families, resume their education or professional careers, and seek employment. In short, they wanted to regain a semblance of normality and knew that concentrating on the past – in an attempt to set things right– would preclude this.

The British, despite their awareness of the atrocities of the Holocaust, still maintained quotas, leaving Jews stranded in Displaced Persons camps. *Bricha*, flight or escape, was an organized Movement for (illegal) emigration to Palestine. Many survivors devoted themselves to this organization, which later helped in the establishment in the State of Israel. Its members included Abba Kovner, who gave up his work in DIN toward a more peaceable resolution to the question of vengeance.

For Zionists, the focus was to settle in Israel and build a nation out of swamps, desert, and hostile, well-armed neighbors who were intent on destroying the remnant of Jews. They wanted no reminders of their weakness. Israel was a symbol of their victory and they strove to emphasize the courageous resistance of the European Jews. Socialists and Communists chose to emphasize the Utopian nature of their systems and channeled their energies toward those ideals. Religious Jews gave their all to creating places of scholarship and worship. And the common goal was to survive and thrive. In Israel – and some European countries – food and consumer goods were

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252 Ibid., Elbaum, {Uzi Lior, p. 161}. 
rationed and there was a severe housing shortage. All felt the need to become economically self-sufficient.

To allow the need for vengeance to consume energy would have been counter-productive. Searching for family that survived consumed a lot of emotional energy. Finding that most had not survive consumed even more. Most Jews were left completely destitute and the international and Jewish relief agencies offered them little more than moral support and material subsistence. Nearly all European Jews had been acculturated to a strong work ethic and a welfare existence didn’t mesh well with this. Many had known a high standard of living prior to the war and didn’t want less than that after all they had lived through. Many had lived in poverty before the war. Surviving had empowered them to continue the struggle to achieve their dreams.

The bureaucratic tangles of emigration also consumed much energy. Listening to the tales of fellow-survivors was cathartic but this, too, demanded energy. Dwelling on the past was counterproductive. It interfered with the ability to focus on the present and the future. It also increased nightmares and was physically, emotionally and mentally debilitating.

The Nuremberg Trials had put a modicum of closure on the war. Many of the living Nazi hierarchy had been brought to trial. Hitler was dead. Others had assumed new identities and fled to countries, aided and abetted by some of their own countrymen, certain people in the Vatican such as Bishop Alois Hudal, and their host countries. Finding these criminals and bringing them to justice required time, courage, resources and stamina. Most Jews wanted to reserve these for the business of living.

A New Museum

In July, 1944, Sutzkever and Kaczerginski returned to Vilna with the Soviet army as members of the Jewish partisan brigade "nekome - nemer" (Avengers.) YIVO was a pile of rubble, its attic burnt. Kruk’s hiding place in the ghetto library at Strashun was gone but the Abramovitch bunker was intact.253 For Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski, the rebirth of

253 "The finger" in Sutzkever’s poem, Voices From the Swamps belonged to a (Jewish)corpse that had been buried in the Abramovitch bunker shortly before liberation.
Jewish Vilna was a priority and they set about establishing a museum for the many artifacts they had buried when they were in the Paper Brigade.

July 26, 1944, thirteen days after Vilna's liberation, Sutzkever and Kaczerginski established the Museum of Art and Culture (as an affiliate of the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture.) It became a center for Jewish community, and Sutzkever became the museum's director. Unfortunately, as the Soviets and Lithuanians were not forthcoming with support for the Museum, Sutzkever became increasingly convinced that Jewish treasures in Vilna remained at risk. In September, 1944 he returned to Moscow. A year later Kaczerginski, Sutzkever's successor as museum director, reached the same conclusion. He traveled to Moscow to complain to the Central Committee of the Communist Party, but received no satisfaction. Eventually, he concluded that another rescue operation was necessary, this time to keep the valuable materials out of Soviet hands. In November, 1945 he resigned as Museum Director.

Kaczerginski and Sutzkever were in Poland in the summer of 1946. By 1948 the Jewish Museum had been liquidated by the KGB. The books were sent to the Lithuanian National Book Chamber which was housed in a former church. Its director, Dr. Antanas Ulpis, risked his life to disobey Stalinist orders to have them destroyed. He catalogued and kept them until 1988 when he publicized his effort. The archives arrived in YIVO headquarters in New York in 1995-6.

Vengeance and Witness

When an injustice occurs it must be reported.
—Talmud Sanhedrin 30a

Many survivors attribute their survival to the charge to bear witness. Filip Müller, a Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, tells of three incidents in which he was prepared to die. The first time occurred in a gas chamber. Disgusted by all he had seen and encountered, he was reluctant to leave the chamber, into which he had helped force the latest batch of victims. Some Czech girls pushed him out. One admonished him:

We must die, but you still have a chance to save your life. You have to return to the camp and tell everyone about our last hours. You have to explain to
them that they must free themselves of any illusions. They ought to fight, that’s better than dying here helplessly. It’ll be easier for them since they have no children. As for you, perhaps you’ll survive this terrible tragedy and then you must tell everybody what happened to you.  

Twice after that experience – the third time occurred on the Death March – Müller was ready to give up trying to survive but the memory of those girls gave him the strength and the will to continue the struggle.

Dora Hauptman, a survivor of a death march that ended in Yantarny, on the Baltic coast in January 26, 1945, gave her testimony at Yad Vashem in 1994. Dressed in thin rags and wearing wooden clogs, she – of approximately 20,000 concentration camp inmates from the Stutthof (Poland) area who were moved away from the advancing Soviet forces – survived a twenty-five mile march through snow, fierce wind and cold. Of the 7, 000 who were marched out of Königsberg, those still alive after the two-day northwest-bound march to Palmnnicken were imprisoned in an abandoned lock factory. They remained there for three or four days and were then marched five abreast to the seashore (some were taken to an open amber crater) and there they were shot.

Of the estimated 7,000 there were 13 known survivors. One of them, Ms. Hauptman, had dived into the sea after a man had told her that ‘someone must survive to describe their barbarity.’ Shot once in the hand, she crawled ashore and was taken in by a heroic German woman, Bertha Pulver, who hid her until the Red Army arrived on April 15.  

Out of Ms. Hauptmann’s compulsion to become a witness, comes an understanding that to imperil one’s life after the fierce struggle to survive is a wanton disregard of the charge to survive in order to witness. So too is acting impulsively to satisfy the lust for vengeance. Sutzkever’s dictum, “too little, not enough” carries the sense that any act of revenge is too fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying. Moreover it serves to undermine the avenger’s credibility as a witness and subverts the charge of the dying.

Yala Korwin, a poet considers the need to witness as the motivation for her own survival. Helped by two gentiles who organized forged papers for her and a sister, she worked as a slave laborer. Her sister, Noemi “Stefania”

254 Ibid., Müller, p.113.
Meisels, was killed, as were her parents. She and her other sister survived. Korwin addresses the issue of survival for the purpose of witnessing in the last stanza of her poem, “Noemi”:

I escaped to be your witness,  
to testify: you were.  
I live to carve your name  
in all the silent stones  
of the world.\(^{256}\)

\(^{256}\)Ibid., Korwin, p. 16.
CHAPTER

8

WITNESS

The dead have a power over the living. There are rituals to placate them and prayers to succor them.\textsuperscript{257}

Memorial Books

The Book of Lamentations is the earliest example of Jewish mourning literature. More than 400 Yizkor Books, \textit{Yizker} - bikher (memorial books) devoted to the lives and deaths of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe were produced after the war, some in DP camps. Almost invariably, this was the work of volunteers: survivors (and in some cases) émigrés of \textit{Landsmanshaftin}, independently and without government urging and support, they vary in size from slim booklets to multi-volumes. They were published in small editions, usually less than 1,000 copies and for select audiences: the individual town’s survivors and émigrés. They are separated into four categories:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Yizker} – substitute for a traditional memorial service
\item \textit{sefer} – holy text
\item \textit{pinkes} – substitute for the lost town; a chronicle
\item \textit{le - kedoshei} – dedication to the town’s Holocaust martyrs.
\end{itemize}

Jews follow specific customs of burial and mourning. Efforts were made to provide the dead (or whatever parts of them remained) a proper Jewish burial. "Leybish Herblum took upon himself the holy task of gathering the bones of the martyrs and setting them in the common grave."\textsuperscript{258} As Holocaust survivors were unable to bury their dead, they turned to Yizkor books “as symbolic memorials. Over and over again, introductions to the

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., Kugelmass and Boyarin, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., p. 13 {Simkhe Mintsberg, "Nokh der befrayung" ("Afer Liberation"), SeferVyerzhbanik - Starakovts (Wierzbink-Starachowice). pp. 345-48).
memorial books assert: “We have now finally fulfilled our last obligation to the dead.”\textsuperscript{259} These books also preserve and serve to pass along glimmers of a lost heritage.

Holocaust survivors mourn the dead. They also mourn the cultural legacy that was destroyed. Not only were ordinary people murdered but brilliant scholars, artists, writers and musicians – along with much of their work – were consumed in the flames of the Holocaust. Victor Frankl speaks of the pain at realizing that his years of research and writing were destroyed in the camp. In the shower area, he hopes that one of the prisoners will help him save his manuscript and furtively confesses its importance, “... it is my life’s work. I must keep it at all costs.”\textsuperscript{260} The seasoned prisoner Frankl appealed to for help simply laughed and cursed. Variations of this cruel and wanton disregard for Jewish books and objects were the norm; there is no way of estimating how much Jewish culture was lost.

\textbf{BIBLIOPHILE, AUSCHWITZ}

Not that there’s a free moment And without his eyeglasses he couldn’t see To read, but he misses books desperately.

The countless volumes on the train Kafka, Heine, Bibles, psalters ... Could they all have disappeared?

Some say they’re being saved for a museum To display the extinct culture of Jews. A seasoned katzeinik points to the chimneys

Cinders fall, an alphabet of dreams.\textsuperscript{261}

Vengeance in the form of witnessing was a necessity for many survivors, even for those unfamiliar with the Talmudic decree. Scholars, of course, understood the importance. Reb Nokhem Yanisker advised his followers,

\begin{quote}
I beg you and command you to remember people who will die at the murderers’ hands. It is not for man to decide who is a martyr and who is not.
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[259]{Ibid., p. 11.}
\footnotetext[260]{Ibid., Frankl, p. 15.}
\footnotetext[261]{Ibid., Wind, Weaving The Remnants.}
\end{footnotes}
And if peace will return to the world, you should continuously tell of the
greatness and wisdom of Lithuania, what a fine and honorable life the Jews led
here. But don’t dissolve into tears and mourning. Tell it peacefully and calmly
as our Holy Tanaim did in their midrash *Eykho Rabosi*, about the destruction
of the Holy Temple. And like them, the holy wise men, you should repeat your
speech in letters. That will be the greatest revenge you can take on the evil
ones.262

This “speech in letters” often found their way into *Yizkor* Books. The
books were also an attempt to salvage as much of the culture as could be
salvaged using memory. Many were written in Yiddish and relatively few
people know Yiddish. Most of these books still remain untranslated. When
all the books are translated, they will, no doubt, prove an invaluable source to
a more nuanced understanding of a vanished world.

**Oral Witness**

In the wake of World War II, particularly after the Nuremberg Trials
had ended, survivors, plagued by memories and nightmares, were told to
forget what had happened and get on with living. Stunned and hurt by this
assault on their integrity by reluctant listeners, their own preoccupation with
the necessity to work to support themselves and their new families and the
desire to protect their children from exposure to the horrors to which
survivors had been subjected most fell into silence. Most did, however, speak
among themselves. It provided catharsis and it also kept the memories alive.
Few realized that the time would come when they would be able to share
them with the world.

Many have since given videotaped testimony; there are now more
than 50,000 taped testimonies on file at the Shoah Foundation. Other
institutions, including the Yale Fortunoff Archives and Yad Vashem have
also amassed great quantities of testimonies, as have private individuals. It
will take years before all of these taped documents are translated, transcribed,
referenced and checked for historical accuracy.

Gerry Gerard, who was saved as a child of Chaboness, believed, “God
was hovering over me, as if to protect me. Maybe to tell the story so it
wouldn’t happen again.”263 For more than three decades, survivors have

262 Ibid., Ibid., Kugelmass and Boyarin, p. 165.
263 Ibid., Gossels.
been invited to schools, colleges and other institutions to speak of their experiences during the Holocaust. Although it poses an increasing hardship for many – because of advanced age, impaired health and the emotional stress of giving testimony – they continue to accept invitations to act as witnesses. Many consider witnessing an absolute imperative. Martha Rich, who survived Birkenau, is one of a worldwide group of volunteers who goes to schools to talk about her experience with the hope that her story will teach the lesson of the terrible effects of intolerance. For her, as for most, this witnessing is a painful experience. It brings back the horrors of the war and often results in nightmares Yet she remains determined to do this, “I just take a Valium and get on with the work.”

The Literature of Witness

After the war, a sealed container was unearthed in Auschwitz. Inside was an unsigned note that read:

Dear Finder, search everywhere, in every inch of ground. Dozens of documents are buried beneath, mine and those of other persons, which will throw light on everything that happened here. Great quantities of teeth are also buried here. It was we, the commando workers, who deliberately strewed them all over the ground, as many as we could, so the world would find material traces of the millions of murdered people. We ourselves have lost hope of being able to see the moment of liberation.

Although archeological teams have not excavated concentration camps, eyewitness accounts have been found. Sutzkever and Kaczerginski unearthed much of the material buried by the Paper Brigade. Ringleblum’s O(yneg) S(habbes) archives were also found. Chaim Kaplan’s Diary, which consisted of thousands of pages, remains only in part. He had refused to give his manuscript to Ringelblum for the O.S. archives. The manuscript was subsequently lost during Kaplan’s deportation. Moishe Flinker’s and Anne Frank’s diaries were found and published. Survivors, motivated to report what they had seen, wrote books and memoirs.

For some survivors, publishing these eyewitness accounts was seen as a fulfillment of an obligation to the dead, the only way to honor them: the efforts they made and the risks they took to provide written testimony. It is a

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254 Personal conversation, October 11, 1999, Whippany, New Jersey.
265 Heard this at the “Jews, Germany and Memory Conference”, Princeton, NJ, April, 1999.
way of granting them eternal life among the living; and also a way of creating a memorial for those deprived of a proper burial.

Many survivors felt compelled to write their own testimonies. The reasons for this vary. For some it was a moral or religious obligation. Others sought to achieve catharsis. For some it as a way of giving form to a jumble of memories they wanted preserved for their children and grandchildren.

Many survivors are unable to speak about their experience to their children. Writing provides a distancing that oral testimony does not. Once a book is completed, no one need know if, when or how many times the writer had to break to cry, or to fumble for the right words to describe the indescribable. Or suffer the nightmares or other physical discomforts that often follow talking about the Holocaust.

Some recorded their experiences for the historical record and/or as a protest against revisionism. Peter Gay writes of a conversation in Berlin with a German whom he knows. The man is well-educated, with a good knowledge of history, and holds an influential position in civil service.

One evening, he asked me, evidently ill at ease, why German Jews had gone like lambs to the slaughter. This made it plain to me that even among well-informed Germans there must be many who had not an inkling of how Jews had lived in Nazi Germany, how little such Germans knew about their former fellow citizens, and how the world outside the German dictatorship looked to the German Jews; it was for them a world that was reluctant to accept as immigrants lawyers and businessmen who, for the most part, knew only German. One reason why I wrote My German Question was that I wanted to do my part to reduce naiveté about the history of the 1930's.  

A large body of Holocaust literature, in the form of novels and poems already exists and continues to grow. S. Niger believes that the Holocaust produced a profound change in literature written by Jews.

Insofar as Yiddish writers are conscientious—and they are—they no longer want to be reckoned with as artists, or "only" artists. It is as if they feel guilty that their people's, and their own, tragedy has become "a theme" for their poems or stories. . . . For this reason, H. Leivik, the most sensitive poet of Jewish sorrow, who published a collection of poems bearing the characteristic title "I was NOT in Treblinka" (New York, 1945) opened his book with these two lines: "One, who on the steps of Treblinka's paths/ will forgive me the sins of song."  

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Leivik's line parallels the prayer of the Bal T'filah, (Master of Prayer) on Yom Kippur, who also begins with a disclaimer. This acknowledges any arrogance on the part of the one who seeks to approach God to intercede on behalf of his congregation. Not only is there recognition that he is flawed, his words and actions may also be flawed.

Because language is a human construct, and therefore imperfect, communion with God compels profound silence. The Holocaust also compels silence yet it is human nature to respond to it with words. Yiddish poets, as Niger says, feel "that what happened to their people should indeed force them to hang up their harps on the willows by the rivers of Poland or America". He quotes Aaron Zeitlin, "Poets are human and must unburden themselves." despite the "impotence of the human word to express superhuman sorrows".

Yet the need to unburden continues. "Thus every Yiddish poet who even mentions the gas chambers and the crematorium - and there is no poet who has the courage to avoid mentioning them - points up in his writing, this contradiction: First, that is indeed a time for silence and second that silence at this time is impossible."

This impossible silence does not pertain only to Yiddish poets, but to poets in all languages. In fact, some of the most moving literature comes from non-Jews. In terms of percentages, Jews were the greatest victims of the Holocaust. However, it was not a Jewish event, but a world event, one that affected and continues to affect all people. Those who have studied the Holocaust and heard the testimonies of survivors and liberators know that nothing, neither words nor pictures nor actual artifacts, can adequately portray the horror and the anguish. Yet, the Holocaust begs portrayal and demands dialogue. Are diaries, testimonies, memoirs and histories adequate to this task? Is art? Is anything?

Is silence the only appropriate response? After the war, there were some who believed it was. Theodor W. Adorno's dictum, "no poetry after Auschwitz" is often quoted. In fact his words, as they appeared in Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life, are "Nach Auschwitz, ein Gedicht".

268 Ibid.  
269 Ibid.  
270 Ibid.
zu schreiben ist barbarisch.. (After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric.)" But he later recanted, "It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it." Perhaps, as Adorno says, only art, which engages both the intellect and emotions can lead us to understand the Holocaust as it demands to be understood.

Cathartic as the unburdening of the past may be, it is impossible for words to express the immense and profound sorrow the Holocaust evokes. The oft-repeated charges of the dying to write down, memorialize, immortalize the event have been addressed. Yet, this event eludes closure. The problem of closure was indirectly addressed during a conference at Princeton University in April, 1999, "Germany, Jews, and the Future of Memory".

S. Niger had written, "We must brand it, like the sign of Cain, on the forehead of the collective murderer." 271 In fact, the Germans have been branded. Michael Naumann, Germany’s Minister of Culture, spoke of the "branding" of his teen-age son. The boy spent a year in a Connecticut High School as an exchange student. Although the school’s population was predominantly gentile, Naumann’s son was scorned and called a "Nazi". This is both unfortunate and preposterous in view of the fact that both father and son were born after the Holocaust.

Prof. Karin Doerr, a linguist at Concordia University, Montreal has studied the negativity that has come to surround German as a language. In postwar North America, there has been a marked decrease in the study of German language and literature. Germany is trying to remove “the brand.” Mandatory Holocaust education, reparations payments, and the new Jewish Museum in Berlin are part of these efforts. The irony of the Holocaust is that Hitler’s obsession with severing all Jewish connections to German life has, instead, increased the connectedness between Germans and Jews. Germany may be practically Judenrein, but the Jewish presence remains.

Which form should art take? "Before 1939 imagination was always in advance of reality, but after 1945 reality had outdistanced the imagination so

271 Ibid.
that nothing the artist conjured could equal in intensity or scope the improbability of l’univers concentrationaire”\(^{272}\). Artists have addressed the Holocaust in every known medium and the response arose long before the war had ended. Theresienstadt, the unfortunate destination of so many talented artists, writers, musicians and composers was, contained an art colony. So did the ghettos whose inhabitants included famed artists of all disciplines. Sutzkever and Celan wrote some of their best-known poems during the war. And even in the most brutal concentration camps, space was set aside for musicians, artists and craftsmen to practice their art (solely for the benefit of the oppressors). Is the work of those artists and witnesses to be the only valid art of the Holocaust? Perhaps. That, however, would constitute a form of censorship and censorship is too reminiscent of Nazism. After all, the Holocaust began with the burning of books.

**Extending Witness**

I call heaven and earth to witness.
—Deuteronomy 4:26

Miles Lerman, a survivor instrumental in building the U.S. Holocaust Museum, was asked whether he wanted to forget his past and put it behind him. He spoke not only for himself, but for many survivors, when he replied:

I did not feel that I could put it behind me. I felt that the impact of this period was of such enormous magnitude that it could not be put behind. I felt that we owed it to those who had perished to make sure that the world remember them. I personally believed that it was necessary that the world understands what human beings are capable of doing under certain circumstances. Of course we came here with nothing. I had to work for our family; by then our daughter was born. But things gradually started improving and I became much more interested in public life because I felt that by the mere fact that I had survived I owed something to those who didn’t.

I must tell you that most people were reluctant to talk about it. There were even survivors who had psychological difficulties dealing with that period. They were hoping they would be able too brush it under the carpet and it would go away. But these memories were so bitter, so shocking and so devastating that they didn’t go away. They were suppressed. It was a way of

psychological denial. But I and my wife, I must give her a lot of credit, strongly felt that we owed it to those who perished that they should be remembered. As we started to talk about it, more and more survivors began to come out and talk about it.\textsuperscript{273}

With Elie Wiesel as the chairman of the President’s (Jimmy Carter) Commission on the Holocaust, the decision was made to build a museum rather than a monument. “We wanted a museum that would be a living and teaching museum, a museum that would teach and sensitize visitors as to what could happen to mankind if they let their guard down.”\textsuperscript{274} The commission was also convinced of the necessity to gather genuine archival material, so that the historicity of the event become irrefutable. This proved difficult, time-consuming and costly. Yaffa Eliach describes trading everything from bluejeans to Nike sneakers to V.C.R.’s for photographs of Eyshishok, her hometown. She wanted to use them to create a memorial tower to the town, as a symbol of all destroyed Jewish communities. Eliach deemed it necessary for the Museum to exhibit photographs both of the destruction and also what was destroyed: people in their natural habitat rather than a pile of Jewish corpses.

To build a memorial is to put closure on a painful event. To build a teaching museum is to open a discourse. Is consolation and reconciliation the result of this discourse? Possibly. Having a museum dedicated to the Holocaust has certainly had a positive effect on survivors, encouraging those whose voices were stifled when they arrived as refugees to finally speak. It has done this also for those who refused to speak of the event and for those who came as refugees prior to the outbreak of war. Because most of the latter didn’t experience the camps, they refused (or were refused the label), “survivor”. What they didn’t realize was that their narrow escape was, indeed, a traumatizing event.

The museum also allows the children (and future generations) of survivors an opportunity to address a situation that informed their own lives. Growing up as second-generation survivors was fraught with a set of difficulties and traumas that were not part of the average baby-boomer’s life. It is no accident that so many 2 G’s, as they are sometimes called, have gone into “the helping professions.” Sensitivity to victims of catastrophes has made

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., Tokudome, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
them choose to devote themselves to repairing the world, becoming messengers of peace and healing.

For the “People of the Book”, words are significant and eternal. They outlast stone. Stone monuments, beginning with the one erected by Jacob at Beth El are not portable, except in the telling of their creation. Consequently, Yizkor Books also known as “Black Books” that listed the inhabitants of the destroyed Jewish communities and contained stories about them quickly emerged after the war, as did countless memoirs and other writings. They preceded Holocaust monuments, memorials and museums and probably helped spur their creation.

As the world becomes increasingly attuned to visual and experiential learning, film has become a tool for memorializing the Shoah as have museums which incorporate all mediums to tell the story. But these require funding well in excess of publishing and are nearly always dependent on a consortium of business interests, philanthropists and politicians to set them in motion. The Holocaust affected the entire world in its time and has enormous implications for future generations: an event that happened and can, therefore, happen again, is a very real threat. It would seem, therefore, that the responsibility to keep this memory alive should be a universal responsibility. However, it has been Jews, particularly survivors, who have taken the initiative to draw attention to that catastrophe and educate the world. When Yad Vashem opened it was not only a museum which housed documents and artifacts; it contained an educational center staffed with eminent scholars. Germany’s decision to turn the Wannsee Villa – where the documents pertaining to the Final Solution were signed – follows this pattern, as do other centers for Holocaust education, including Auschwitz. Even the recent debates of the German government over how to best memorialize the Holocaust in Berlin exhibit a sensitivity to the needs of both Germans and Jews for handling the building of a monument/museum in a most effective way that will not only commemorate but result in reconciliation.

Isn’t this considered response to the question of vengeance and memory a response that most Jews, killed in Ponar and Auschwitz, Babi-Yar and Belzec would give if they could speak? Their call to be remembered and avenged was the desperate hope that they were not dying in vain. Had they known that Israel would come into existence and prosper; that their own
martyrdom and heroism would be noted with respect and admiration; their words found and translated into a multitude of languages to be read by people all over the world; their songs sung; their photographs and paintings viewed; their symphonies played; their operas and plays performed; their recipes recalled and published in cookbook form; and that monuments and museums would be dedicated to their memory, their last anguished moments would surely have been eased and (for religious Jews) their call to become a “nation of priests” realized.

PASSING THE TORCH

When you meet a witness, you become a witness.
— Elie Wiesel

How and with what will you fill
Your cup on the day you’re free?
— Abraham Sutzkever

In his poem, How? written in the Vilna Ghetto, February 14, 1943, Sutzkever prophesies that liberation will not bring freedom to the survivors. They will always be prisoners to memory, paradoxically condemned by and sustained by their intangible jailers, the dead. And the survivors will become furtive, suspicious, unwelcome, living like a mole, underground among the dead. Years later, he addresses this idea in a poem, "My Daughter Searches For The Secrets Of Masada". The last stanza reads:

My daughter, you are more familiar with every shard,
with every hidden piece of parchment
and the secrets of Masada, than with the secrets of your father.

So it is with survivors and the second generation. Not only can the children never enter their parents’ world, they don’t necessarily want to. It’s easier to study ancient history, and live with the heroes who are out of reach than to confront the suffering (and heroism) of those close by.
THE SOWER

My father wafts through air in May. 
The lilac outside my window 
brings him.

The one who sowed 
but rarely reaped 
owns all the lilacs in the world.

Each tiny blossom holds a secret 
There is too much he never told me 
or anyone.

Burdens that should remain 
in his coffin often rise to 
weigh me down.

Mild days, wind becomes 
his laughter, warm nights 
the moon reveals his face.

This ungainly tree 
is the one I cherish most 
its brief bloom, exuberant.

Heart-shaped leaves lift me. 
Its swaggering perfume 
takes me in embrace.

In fact, no child of survivors can fully fathom the minds and hearts of those who survived. And perhaps this is a good thing. Perhaps the survivors' unspoken intention was to allow their children to grow up unembittered. Yitzhak Zukerman says in Claude Lanzmann's Shoah, "If you could lick my heart, it would poison you."

Even in survivor families where the Holocaust is discussed there is a gap that can never be breached. Yet in some ways, the second generation consider themselves survivors. In certain cases, they are the "replacement children" for children, or young sisters or brothers, killed in the Holocaust, an enormously difficult burden to bear.

Others have been charged by their parents to carry on the witness. Michael Rubell and his sister established a foundation to take children from
New Jersey schools on visits to the U.S. Memorial Holocaust Museum. Their father, Morris, would go into schools to speak of his experience. On one occasion, when his son was in the audience, he turned to him and charged him to continue the witnessing. Morris died the following day, but his son now carries the torch. On a trip to the museum last January, Michael had brought along his own son, as a way of extending the charge.

At the Solomon Schechter Day School of Essex and Union, Steven and Judy Elbaum established the Sala Elbaum Annual Lecture in memory of his mother and Judy’s father. Sherry Izak has funded an annual Holocaust lecture to honor her father, Siggi Wilzig. There are numerous other events, lectures, and university chairs funded by the children of survivors to memorialize their parents by teaching the Holocaust.

That there are organizations of children of survivors (as well as those for children of perpetrators) is evidence that the Holocaust-event had and continues to have repercussions for the second, and third generation.

HATING SHAKESPEARE

Because he always scowled
At the mention of Shakespeare
I thought my father didn’t
Understand English literature.

In his youth, he’d read translations
But considered the bard a “thief”
Who used others’ stories
And moreover an ”anti-Semite.”

I argued the beauty of the words
How Shakespeare made Shylock human.
Daddy fiercely disagreed. He had lost all
His family in the war against the Jews

And believed the playwright deserved some
Of the blame. Now, I, named for his
Pious mother who read Goethe and Schiller
On Sabbath afternoons, was being seduced

By the same false world.
It took years until I understood.
His father had worn the Austrian uniform.
The decorated jacket (stanza break)
Still hung in the wardrobe the day the Nazis
Sent a bill for his cremation.
Postmarked, Auschwitz, it included
A little envelope filled with ash.275

In an address given at the Life Reborn Conference, January, 16, 2000,
Menachem Rosensaft said:

"For the great part of the liberated Jews of Bergen-Belsen, my mother
recalled, 'there was no ecstasy, no joy at our liberation. We had lost our
families, our homes. We had no place to go, nobody to hug, nobody who was
waiting for us, anywhere. We had been liberated from death and from the fear
of death, but we were not free of the fear of life."

His father, Josef Rosensaft, who had survived months of torture and
solitary confinement in Block 11 of Bergen-Belsen, was elected to head the
first Displaced Persons Committee. From this position, he strove to improve
the conditions of fellow-survivors, even to the point of ignoring British
military orders.

The British authorities, outraged by his defiance (preventing a
transport of Jews from leaving Belsen for Lingen, in which worse living
standards prevailed), put him on trial before a military tribunal that
eventually acquitted him. ... In her excellent Belsen: The Liberation of a
Concentration Camp (London, 1998) historian Jo Ralilly cites official British
Foreign Office document in which my father is referred to as an 'extreme
Zionist,' 'a dangerous troublemaker' and 'clearly the chief nigger in the
woodpile.'

"The common depiction of European Jewry, including the survivors, as
passive victims requires the history of the Holocaust to end in the spring of
1945. Extending the historiography of the Holocaust to include the DP period
forces historian to give the survivors names, faces, voices. And the Jewish DPs'\nsuccess story of Allied military authorities over issues of principle, their
creation of schools, newspapers, religious institutions and theatre companies in
the DP camps, their determination to create new families and reclaim lives
that had been torn from them, shatter the convenient stereotypes that have
become commonplace.

Those of us whose parents spent months or years in DP camps see the
Holocaust as a whole through a prism that sets our parents' suffering in the
context of their postwar accomplishments. And we understand that the resolve
and resilience they demonstrated in the DP camps is the same physical and

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275 Barbara Wind, The Coda of Desire.
spiritual strength that had enabled them to survive with their values and their humanity intact.\textsuperscript{276}

\textsuperscript{276} Menachem Rosensaft, \textit{New Jersey Jewish News}, February 3, 2000, p. 6.
SECTION III

SUTZKEVER: A MODEL OF RESISTANCE

I first became acquainted with the work of Abraham Sutzkever several years ago at a conference at The Yiddish Book Center, held at Mt. Holyoke College. After learning about his life and reading his poetry, I realized that he is a model resister who used all his strengths and talents to fight not merely for his own survival but for the survival of Jewish culture. When the opportunity for vengeance came, he sought it through justice and words and deeds of witness. He inspired me to write the following poem:

PARTISAN POET

to Abraham Sutzkever

You, who finger paper and pen
Cast them away, pick up a gun

Do you believe your words will find readers?
They’re murdering readers, one by one

The killers will not decipher your writings
Your thoughts are less than nothing to them

Yet you persist, hour by hour
Solemnly marrying paper and pen.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ Ibid., Wind, Weaving The Remnants, (inspired by a lecture given by David Roskies, Yiddish Book Center, Hadley MA, March, 1993)
In fact, Sutzkever’s words have found readers. His abiding faith in the “greenness of things” and his confidence in his own abilities as a writer and an editor assured that Yiddish words would take root and flourish in the ashes of the Holocaust. Yiddish may be a dying language. Years ago Yiddish books were being thrown away for lack of readers. But Aaron Lansky, a young American Jew learned Yiddish in college and began collecting these orphaned books. The collection eventually filled a warehouse. It is now gathered into a beautiful, recently built institution, The Yiddish Book Center, in Amherst, Massachusetts. The “fled Yiddish words” Sutzkever wrote of are coming out of their caves. They have much to tell and wait, patiently, to speak.
CHAPTER

9

The Life and Work of Abraham Sutzkever

When Abraham Sutzkever, the famed Yiddish poet and a partisan of Vilna, was called to testify at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial, he nursed the fantasy of bringing his revolver along to shoot Göring from the witness box. "I still had with me the revolver I had used in the forest, and I had six bullets. The thought entered my mind like a Dybbuk, and in Moscow there was no Rabbi who could exorcise it. I worked out in my mind an exact plan, with every detail, how to fire one of my bullets into Göring."278

What made him change his mind? How did he and other Holocaust survivors transform their desire for vengeance — a desire voiced as an imperative by many of the dying — into what Lawrence L. Langer calls a "Discourse of Consolation"?

Sutzkever wrote, "With my poems I was even in the ghetto a free man. I wouldn’t have changed places with my tormentors."279 The feeling of freedom from becoming one of the murderers allowed him to forgo postwar thoughts of vengeance. He was thus able to channel his energies and talent toward creating a new sensibility.

The Man, The Poet

"The world is in flames; everything is being destroyed, and I sit writing poetry." These are the words of Abraham Sutzkever. Born into a rabbinical family in 1913 in Smorgon, near Vilna, he spent his early years in Siberia, to which his family and other Lithuanian Jews were exiled during the First World War because the Russians feared they would collaborate with the Germans. In 1920, after the death of his father, the family returned to Lithuania and lived there, moving to Vilna where he eventually joined a group of artists and writers: Yung Vilne (Young Vilna.) By the time the Nazis

279 Ibid.
invaded and began their reign of terror and death, the poet had already
acquired affirmation from his peers and even a modicum of fame.

But Sutzkever did more than write amidst flames and destruction. He
joined the F.P.O., the United Partisan Organization. On numerous occasions
he escaped the Germans and their Lithuanian henchmen. He managed to
avoid death in the pits of Ponar which claimed 100,000 Jews.280 When he and
Vilna’s remaining Jewish population of 20,000 (out of the 57,000 pre-war
populace) were herded into the Ghetto, he was assigned to various slave-labor
details. He eventually became one of the twenty281 “experts” selected to work
on the Rosenberg Project, culling scores of thousands of books and documents
from the vast libraries of Vilna’s Jewish libraries, schools and institutions for
Alfred Rosenberg’s282 planned Einsatzstab. He worked in the “Paper Brigade”
after hours and at mortal risk, to keep the most valuable materials from being
shipped to Germany. They were secretly buried to be unearthed after the war.
This rescue operation was not only an act of rebellion against a seemingly
invincible force, it was also an affirmation of continuity, an act of hope in the
midst of great despair. His poem, “Grains of Wheat” describes this,
poignantly:

Caves, gape open,
Split open under my ax!
Before the bullet hits me
I bring you gifts in sacks.

... And I dig and plant manuscripts,
And if by despair I’m beat,
My mind recalls: Egypt,
A tale about grains of wheat.

... Perhaps these words will endure,
And live to see the light loom –
And in the destined hour
Will unexpectedly bloom?

And like the primeval grain
That turned into a stalk –

(continued)

280 The figures vary. Epstein and Rosen list the number at 70,000 in their Dictionary of the
Holocaust, p. 234. They refer to the site as “Ponary.”
281 There were also twenty porters assigned to the detail.
273 Chief Nazi ideologist and promulgator of the Nuremberg Laws.
The words will nourish,
The words will belong
To the people, in its eternal walk.

Although much of the beauty of the poem is lost in this translation, the sense of it remains. Paradoxically, as Ruth Wisse points out, the books and objects shipped to Germany were far better-preserved than those that were buried. But the “rescuers” had no way of knowing this.\textsuperscript{283}

In addition to keeping valuable materials out of the clutches of Nazis — many valuables destined for the Reich were intercepted by greedy individuals — their actions fueled flagging spirits. They were not standing by “with folded hands”\textsuperscript{284} as a popular song of the time warned against but were actively engaged in resisting the enemy. The F.P.O. — Sutzkever and his wife, Freda, were members — did not believe they would survive the war. Their mission was death with honor and the satisfaction of knowing that although they couldn’t win the war, they could destroy some, albeit few, of their enemies. To risk lives in order to save Jewish books and artifacts was to believe that some Jews could survive and unearth these irreplaceable treasures.

In addition to this work, Sutzkever was an active member of a group that ran a secret printing press “which published news, proclamations and also literary material to give heart to the Ghetto Jews and stiffen their endurance and resistance.”\textsuperscript{285} At one point, this group raided the Yiddish Rom Printing Press to seize lead font which could be melted down for the manufacture of bullets. For a writer, dependent on font for the dissemination of his work, the implications of this act must have been agonizing and tantamount to sacrilege. Symbols of civilization were being transformed into objects intent on destroying the creators of civilization, in this case Germans who epitomized the height of Western culture. Additionally, the fact that these were Hebrew letters, the letters with which both the sacred and secular life of Jews is written, made the resisters quasi-collaborators with the Germans in Hitler’s attempts to annihilate both Jews and Judaism. Sutzkever responded to this experience with the following reflection:

\textsuperscript{283} Ruth Wisse, \textit{Abraham Sutzkever: The Uncrowned Jewish Poet Laureate}, a series of three lectures given at the Yiddish Book Center, March 1994.

\textsuperscript{284} This phrase is from a line in the (protest) song, \textit{“Es Brent”} written in the Krakow Ghetto by Mordechai Gebirtig (1877-1942).

\textsuperscript{285} Ibid., Leftwich, p.124.
The lead glowed in our casting of bullets.  
Thoughts melted, line after line –  
A line from Babylon, a line from Poland  
Flowed into one bullet, became one sign.  
Those who saw in the Ghetto  
Jewish bullets and cannon balls  
Saw Jerusalem struggling  
Saw the fall of granite walls.  
They grasped the sense of words molten into lead.  
– from “The Leaden Plates of Rome’s Printing Works”

The idea that the people of the Vilna Ghetto, so utterly consumed by the struggle to exist under such arduous circumstances, would read resistance leaflets, recall their history and be able to grasp the sense of desecrated, looted, or hidden books and religious scrolls reformulated into bullets and cannon balls is a stretch of the imagination of a luftmensch, an idealist who lives mostly in the world of ideas rather than realities.286 The population consisted of more than the intelligentsia and scholars. (Of course, unlike his friend, the folk-poet Shmerke Kaczerginski, Sutzkever’s intent was highly literary. He wrote for himself and for a cerebral audience.) Another conceit in the poem is the idea that the demoralized inhabitants of the Ghetto would retain their belief in God and interpret their experiences as the fulfillment of the prophecies.

Itzik Manger, the Yiddish poet, who met Sutzkever when he visited Vilna before the war, wrote of him: “A thin slim youngster, tripping along the narrow twisted Vilna streets. His steps are light. He does not walk. He floats. He floats over all the humps and bumps of the town. In his imagination, everything is symmetrically arranged. Created anew. Not for nothing does he tell himself to learn from the Creator of all how to create poems.” Manger called Sutzkever the “Ariel of Vilna” (a spirit in cabalistic angelology – from Isaiah 29:1 – as well as the character in Shakespeare’s The Tempest. ) Sutzkever is the Jew who has been raised not to despair in the face of despair, the boy who survived the Siberian exile, the death of his father and sister. Who has enjoyed a mystical experience. He is the eternal optimist who looks at this catastrophic destruction and concludes:
If there is a wind there is a harbor
Somewhere the secret of greenness resides:
To always create and create.

This "secret of greenness" was, in many ways his defense against
despair and the key to his optimism. He had witnessed seemingly-endless
Siberian winters give way to spring and realized that Nature was resolute.
When he and his family contracted typhus – the result of his contact
(harvesting for valuables?) with the corpse of a soldier – not all died. Death,
he knew, does not entirely prevail; the mercy of regeneration, proves
obdurate. Not only was Nature impervious to Nazi onslaughts, history
proved that even conquerors are eventually vanquished. The destruction of
both Temples, the subsequent Crusades, Inquisitions and pogroms had
decimated but not destroyed the Jewish people. Why, in view of history and
the force of the Allied armies, should Hitler prove invincible?

On a personal level, creativity became for Sutzkever a talisman; he
believed that if he proved a worthy poet, he would survive. "When I was in
the Vilna Ghetto, I believed as an observant Jew believes in the coming of
Messiah, that as long as I was writing, was able to be a poet, I would have
a weapon against death." 287 To this end, he worked diligently. Although it
would appear that his poems – which he produced prolifically even under
the greatest duress – came to him whole, gifts of the muse, this is not the case.
Sutzkever carefully crafted them, word by word. What seems plain and
simple, particularly in translation, is not. Jacob Glatstein, a Yiddish poet and
Sutzkever's contemporary, said of him:

He can take a verse, artify it, weave into it allusive meanings, so that one
meaning becomes a box within which is concealed a second and in the second a
third, and all three embrace with Sholem Aleichems (greetings) such rhymes
as Yiddish had kept hidden till the day Abraham Sutzkever appeared and
had the privilege of revealing these marvels. 288

After 1941, Vilna's remaining Jews lived in severely compromised
circumstances, in constant jeopardy and mortal danger. However, for
Sutzkever, more important than life itself was the desire to experience it in
all its facets:

288 Ibid., Leftwich, p. 44.
It's living more,
more freely, more deeply.
Even my fingernails should feel the great desire.

This heightened awareness was, if not directly situational, certainly enhanced by an ever-increasing familiarity with mortality. When each day contained the very real possibility of death, many found strength in Rabbi Eliezer’s admonition to “Repent one day before your death... Let him repent each day, lest he die on the morrow...”289 They (as others before them in compelling situations) extended the idea of repentance to living with honor and courage at all times since the day of one’s death is hardly ever revealed before it occurs.

Thus, Sutzkever was not only able to enter into every threat, experiencing it in all its nuances, but he could, with a writer’s eye and mind, detach himself from it as an (almost) objective observer. And, in the interest of his art, he allowed his imagination free reign. He could escape, even when confined. At one point, fleeing from Germans, he ran into the building that housed the Jewish Burial Society and hid himself in a coffin.

I lie in a coffin
As in wooden clothes
Or let it be a boat
On stormy waves.
Let it be a cradle,
I still sing my song.
-from “I Am Lying in This Coffin”290

Allowing his imagination to transform the coffin into a boat or a cradle forces him to calm himself and lie still until the danger passes. Putting his thoughts, which were surely running wild at the time, into ordered words and lines allows Sutzkever to exorcise the terror of the memory, if not of the actual event. Furthermore, it helps assure that this incident will be memorialized. Ending as it does with the comforting last line proves that he has mastered at least one horror that produces nightmares for many: the fear of confinement and being buried alive. And for those who read or hear the

289 Pirke Aboth (2:15)
poem, it offers encouragement: one can emerge whole from dreadful circumstances by guiding one’s imagination to view negative events in a positive way. For Sutzkever, “My language, my poetry were a magic armor against which the arrows of death rebounded.” David Roskies writes, “What sustained him was an almost mystical faith that the poetic word itself would rescue him from death.”

The song he sings is both a comforting lullaby (Singing children to sleep was ubiquitous among European Jews of that era.) and the poem of the experience, resonant with hope for continuity. Even secular Jews were familiar with the Passover narrative. The image of a cradle riding stormy waves evokes the story of Moses afloat on the Nile, rescued and raised, to later lead the Exodus. As the descendant of rabbis and scholars, Sutzkever would also have been familiar with the story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai (c.70 c.e.) who escaped in shrouds from war-torn Jerusalem to found the school in Jabneh/Jamnia where Rabbinical Judaism was born.

Although cultural events such as literary contests, concerts and theatre were an important part of Ghetto life, for the majority of the population the primary consideration was the daily struggle to avoid starvation, disease, getting caught for deportation (to concentration camps), beaten or killed by the Germans or their Lithuanian cohorts. Throughout his time in the Ghetto, Sutzkever wrote. And when he escaped to the forest, he continued to “indulge” himself in what some viewed as a superfluous and inconsequential pastime. Some maintained Sutzkever made a better poet than a partisan.

Generally speaking, Jewish partisans didn’t welcome anyone who would compromise their image as soldiers; an image – against stereotype – they had fought to acquire. Although Sutzkever’s words inspired courage and he came to the forest carrying a gun he had presumably used as a ghetto fighter, some saw his pen as a symbol of weakness. As partisans, action and overt displays of courage were wanted.

Also, partisans in Lithuania (and other parts of Soviet bordered Poland) were, if not leftists themselves, supported by the communists. Sutzkever had been reluctant to affiliate with any political group. When his

fellow-poet, Shmerke Kaczerginski, a Socialist, was hanging red banners and calling people to the barricades before the Nazi invasion, Sutzkever’s stance was apolitical. He was aware of this “failing” and berated himself for not being more of an activist, more of a revolutionary. He wrote in “Faces in the Mire”, Part IV: 292

Because I made my heart deaf, as one makes a young bull deaf,
Not joining its struggle when the slaughterer comes near,
Therefore words crawl out of my apple-joy,
And former laughter like the brand of Cain turns to fear.

Certainly, Sutzkever was well-acquainted with fear. He had numerous close brushes with death, two of which turned out to be attempts to humiliate him and other Jews. At one point he was forced to undress and dance around a bonfire, holding a Torah in his arms. At another, he and a group of men were arrested by Lithuanian policemen and marched past a cabbage field to a pit. He saw a bird, heard a shot and fell. Then he heard laughter, “The murderers had not murdered us. This was their idea of a joke. They had fired over our heads, and gone away and left us.” 293

Paradoxically, this chilling event encouraged him. The men had been given spades with which to dig graves. Sutzkever’s spade cut into a worm. He noticed, with amazement, that both halves still wiggled and thought, “If a worm doesn’t succumb to this cut, am I less than a worm?”294 He also drew a philosophical conclusion, which he articulated three decades after the incident, “This gives you an idea of feeling that life is greater than death and that even death can create life.” 295

Sutzkever is mentioned only briefly in the film, Partisans of Vilna. But it would be unjust to portray Sutzkever as an ineffective intellectual. His approach to life was both contemplative and proactive. Although he could have remained in hiding with a Righteous Gentile— she offered to help his wife escape and join him – he made his way back to the Ghetto to be with his

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292 Lawrence L. Langer and David Roskies have both translated this cycle of poems differently. Langer calls it “Faces in the Swamps” and his version of section IV is quite different from Roskies’.
293 Ibid., Leftwich, p. 50.
294 Ibid., Berger.
295 Ibid.
family. Another time, while trying to avoid Nazi stormtroopers, he hid in a recess of his mother’s kitchen holding an ax he was determined to use, if flushed out. One would assume that any member of the F.P. O. would have used the ax.

In 1943, the Vilna Ghetto was nearly defunct and few of its Jews still alive, yet Sutzkever kept on writing: “... when the enemy destroyed the last Jews of my holy Jerusalem in Lithuania, I wrote on its smoldering ruins, on the eve of my flight to the partisans in the forests, one of my last songs of the Ghetto. I called it, “Song of Consolation” I ended it with a call to my Jewish People:

You unroll your narrow streets into battlefields.
You burn like the sun through a storm,
And burning you are freed.
You will strengthen your friend with your blessing.
You will destroy the foe with your curse.
And you will melt into your form and image
Time not yet born.

Twenty-five years later, at a reception in his honor at Hebrew University, he said, “‘Time not yet born’ has been born. ... Here on the mountains of Jerusalem it is being molten into our people's new form. And it is a great privilege for the poet of Jerusalem in Lithuania that the eternal Jerusalem has taken up his song.”

On September 12, 1943, just before the final liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, Sutzkever and his wife, with a group of partisans, broke through a ghetto wall and made their way to the Narocz Forest to join the Jewish partisan unit, “Revenge”. They remained in Narocz until March 1944.

Partisan life has been sufficiently documented to provide an understanding of the extreme deprivations; people lived like animals in underground bunkers, famished, louse-bitten and in a state of constant terror. Not only did they fear getting caught, tortured, and killed, they feared fellow-partisans: Many of their political allies were, because of their Anti-Semitism, adversaries. Jews were victimized by them and often killed “accidentally”, if not blatantly.

Although the partisans were organized in quasi-military fashion, in reality

296 Ibid., Leftwich, p. 17.
anarchy often reigned and justice, particularly in regard to Jews, was compromised. Yet Jews who could, fled the dying ghettos to join partisans, because in the forests they could live in relative freedom and take an active role in resisting the Nazis, thereby gaining a measure of control over their destiny and an opportunity to avenge the dead. In *Secret Town*, a book-length poem inspired by his life in the sewers beneath Vilna, Sutzkever writes:

> Clutching fingers out of the grave grow,  
> And tell me to fight for them — “our hope is with you!  
> Pay them back for what they did to us. Repay!”  
> What can I answer the dead? — I must say,  
> I am going to the forest, to fight, as I said,  
> My life is not my own — it belongs to the dead.

As a partisan, Sutzkever was presumably prepared to give his life to exact vengeance for his dead comrades. But he could not abandon poetry. Despite the harshness of life in the forest, the poet continued to write. When he ran out of ink he squeezed blueberries and wrote with the juice. The autographs of these “blueberry ink” poems still exist and constitute a worthy testament to Sutzkever’s relentless energy, creativity, and urgency to chronicle what he witnessed.297

297 Sutzkever’s testimonies also include the harsh treatment of the Jews by the partisans. Benjamin Harshav, in *A. Sutzkever, Selected Poetry and Prose*, describes “a murderous guide” who led Sutzkever and his wife part way to their rescue by seaplane, then abandoned them, p. 21.
BLUEBERRY INK

His fellow partisans are annoyed
Vilna is dying, the world at war

and that luftmensh spouts poetry!
He ignores their taunts and insults

Words, he is certain, are powerful weapons.
If only he hadn’t run out of ink.

Ninety miles east of the city, Narocz
is bereft of stores and kiosks

No peddlers with trinkets and wares.
He has read of jailed writers

using their blood
imagines putting a knife to his flesh

dipping the nib of a pen in the redness,
willing the wound not to infect.

What was once so cheap and plentiful
is a commodity he would pay for in gold.

Though shouldn’t his first purchase be food
Bread, eggs . . . a warm coat for his wife . . .

His stomach rumbles, empty all day
he wanders the woods for something to eat.

Through a clearing he sees a blueberry bush
back-lit by sunset, laden with fruit.

Tongue, lips, teeth are stained
but Sutzkever sings as he heads to his bunker

holding the treasure in purpled hands
to squeeze, strain, continue the fight.\textsuperscript{298}

\textsuperscript{298} Ibid., Wind, Weaving The Remnants.
Not only was poetry Sutzkever’s “shield” against death, it was his weapon, as he wrote in the poem “Narotsch Forest” on October 9, 1943:

I know this:
I am a wolf and a poet in one,
And I release from the gun
Poem after poem.

By the time Jews joined partisan units and were prepared to shoot, the idea of killing another human being had obtained a palatability it didn’t previously have. They had been so degraded; had witnessed so much wanton brutality and killing that they had come to see the enemy as less than human. To some, killing the foe had even assumed a nobility.

Sutzkever addresses this subject in “Narotsch Forest”, describing his metamorphosis: he has become a combination wolf and poet releasing “poem after poem” from his gun. The gun must now substitute for the pen, creating order and beauty out of chaos and ugliness. He describes the experience of lying in wait for the enemy. He has not turned into a seasoned soldier. After he shoots, he is awash with sweat, “The dew from the trees/ sprinkles my brow/ with gilded fear.” But he sees the sweat as an anointing. The wolf in him compels him to transform words into bullets. For the poet, however, killing is not an instinctive act; it is an awe experience. The wolf in him has killed; the poet/prophet reflects on the taking of another’s life and seeks to make sense of it. He realizes he has committed a terrible sin and he is not Esau to hide from God. How then to rationalize the killing of another human being? Ironically, he resorts to his enemy’s own method: dehumanization. But he allows himself an imprimatur: “And I hear a Heavenly voice (bat kol)/ say to me:/ You’ve wiped a blemish/ off the Earth.”

There is no sense of triumph in this poem. Sutzkever understands that his role as a gun-toting partisan has reduced him to a less than human state. Scientists have discovered that despite their reputation for being abject and vicious, wolves are actually quite altruistic. This quality, of course, was unknown until quite recently and the idea of identifying with a wolf was, in Sutzkever’s time, self-deprecatory. If he had wanted to portray himself as courageous he would have substituted the word “lion”; particularly as the lion is a symbol of Israel. But his choice of the word “wolf” is telling. It is the wolf, not the lion, who will dwell with the lamb in Isaiah’s vision (11: 6).
The end – helping God restore the earth to the beauty of “new-grown grass” and “unspoiled dawn” – is compromised by the continual “dark footsteps.” As he lies in the ditch, Sutzkever remembers Vilna before the occupation and its dissolution after the Ghetto and the killings in Ponar. “With Vilna in my heart/life a bullet that cannot be removed”. The memory of his beloved city, the “Jerusalem of the West” as it was called, makes this event less a military exercise and more of a religious quest.

There is a tendency to read this poem as a personal confession, particularly as it written in the first person. However, the gun (as metaphor) may actually be his assertion that his pen is a deadly weapon. Whether Sutzkever ever killed anyone is open to argument. Partisans, as a rule, did not engage in combat. Their objectives were group-sustenance, self-defense, and, whenever possible, sabotage. Their armaments were, at best, paltry; their training minimal. It is difficult to imagine a poet who can write as prolifically, as tightly and as formally as Sutzkever soldiering. Nevertheless, a photograph of him, wearing eyeglasses and holding a rifle does exist. If it was not he, himself, lying in ambush, but a fellow-partisan more adept at warfare, he has painted an incisive portrait and the rationale of partisan life.

His self-appointed mission was to ensure that the people and events would not be forgotten and he worked relentlessly to memorialize life in the Ghetto. When he arrived in the forest, he and Kaczerginski were appointed regional historians by Markov, the area commander in charge of the partisan units. Sutzkever’s other aim was to keep Yiddish alive.

Apparently, Sutzkever, the detached observer, was also a man who endeared himself to others and gained their respect and loyalty. The commander of the Lithuanian Partisan Movement, known as “Jurgis” (Henoch Zeman) got word to the Soviets that Sutzkever was in Narocz. As Leftwich relates the event, “... the moving force behind the Soviet plane sent to bring him to Moscow was the Lithuanian (non-Jewish) poet, Justas Paleckis, who was in Moscow the Shadow-President of Lithuania. Paleckis had known Sutzkever in Vilna before the war, and having a good knowledge of Yiddish had read his poems and translated some into Lithuanian.”299 In April, 1944, the Soviets sent a plane that landed on a lake in Hushetsh (about

299 Ibid., Leftwich, p. 67.
150 km. from the "Revenge" base.) It took the poet and his wife to Moscow, and was a great coup for Soviet propaganda purposes.

The Sutzkevers enjoyed a much improved standard of living in the Soviet Union. Of course, enjoyment was highly compromised by the worry for and guilt over those they left behind, as well as nightmare memories. These Sutzkever transformed into hundreds of pages of written work, many of them about the Vilna Ghetto for a project Ilya Ehrenburg, an influential Soviet-Jewish journalist and writer called the “Black Book,” which Ehrenburg planned as an act of indictment against Germany for her mass murder of millions of Jews. It was to have appeared in three volumes in a dozen languages.

In Moscow, Sutzkever met many Russian writers and his work was translated into Russian. He knew and believed in the power of words and this may have prompted his eagerness to return to Vilna once the war had ended. He was well aware of Soviet censorship and the precarious position of poets and writers under the regime. “I knew Ehrenburg in his good years, when his words ran like flaming foxes over the battlefields and roused fury and a demand for vengeance against the Germans. His powerful articles against Germany and the Germans did much during the Second World War to bring victory over the enemy.”

FIGHTING WORDS

Poetry as a Form of Resistance During the Shoah

There are stars whose radiance is visible on earth though they have been extinct. There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world though they are no longer among the living. These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark. They light the way for humankind.

– Hannah Senesh

Sutzkever is best known for his poem, Unter Dyne Vayse Shteren (Beneath the Whiteness of Your Stars.) Written in Vilna and set to music by May 22, 1943 by Avreml Brudno, it quickly spread from ghetto to ghetto and through the forests. For Jews during the Holocaust, it and Herschl (Hirsch)

300 Ibid., Leftwich, p. 82.

(In fact, Russians gained notoriety for their postwar acts of revenge. As liberators, they looted, murdered and raped on a grand scale.)
Glik’s “Zog Keyn Mol Nit Az Du Geyst Dem Letzten Veyg” (Never Say You’re Going Your Last Way) and set to a Russian melody, became songs hope.  
Both may be read as arguments against suicide. Sutzkever wrote his poem three and half years into the war, after witnessing the suffering and death of so many, including his newborn son who was poisoned by Nazi hospital personnel immediately after birth. It addresses the value of struggling to continue to live in the face of such destruction. And yet, even suicide is difficult. The speaker doesn’t have a quiet corner in which to carry out this act. Privacy (a necessity for most poets) was a luxury few, if any, enjoyed in the overcrowded Ghetto. This factor may have dissuaded some people from committing suicide. However, it was certainly not a preventative.

Was Sutzkever suicidal? There is at least one other poem in which he considers the possibility. It is part of the cycle, *Faces In The Swamps*  

My hand gropes: a piece of glass, the moon
Trembles imprisoned like me in the vise
Of the iron night. I grow tense:
“This was created by a human hand!”

In the glass edge I stroke the moon:
You want? – I give you my life as a gift!”
But life is hot and the glass is cold
And it’s a shame to put it to my throat . . .

After contemplating suicide he opts to live. He is fascinated by the piece of glass, an object of sand and fire, inspired by and made by man. It can be used to kill or as a shield, a lens, a vessel for wine. The war, too, is made by a human hand, turned against humanity. Thus, why deny God and the spirit of life? The glass with which he might cut his wrists is ice cold but his blood still runs hot.

Sutzkever’s desire to live in the fullness of living is strong. He is aware that he has a calling; it has been well-affirmed and acclaimed by his colleagues as well as the general population. His wife is still alive. The Germans have proven vulnerable on the eastern front. America has entered the war. There is hope because of this and because Jews hope and tend to trust that God, even when he seems to have slunk off, will, in the end, not abandon them.

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301 Of the two songs, Glik’s, set to a Russian melody, is the more popular; Sutzkever’s the more poetic.
Sutzkever may have been sympathetic to Communism or socialism, as many of the F.P.O. and partisans were, though his decision to leave the Soviet Union seems to refute this and there is nothing in his writing that indicates an affinity to politics. He appears to find spiritual fulfillment in nature and in art - his deep founts of creativity and continuity. Yet he continues to maintain a relationship with God, the original creator, the eternal.

In “Beneath the Whiteness of Your Stars” he addresses God. Surely this is not an atheist considering the possibility of suicide but a believer who desires God’s response. He pleads for comfort, for strength, for purification. Shrouds may be white but white is also the totality of all colors of the rainbow and the rainbow is the promise of continued life.

Robert Frost said that when a poem is translated what’s lost is the poetry. Nevertheless, most poets would prefer that their poems be translated than not read at all. Below is my own literal translation of the poem (see between the stanzas.) Although it allows a more accurate understanding of the poem’s meaning, the meter and rhythm are lost. Stanza 3 illustrates a case in which the intimacy of Yiddish is lost: “dear God”, becomes “O, God”; “bequeath” becomes “leave you”; “begs” becomes “burns”; “urgent” is added for meter. Slight changes are almost impossible to avoid but changes can have a profound influence on the meaning of the poem. For poets who tend to worry over every word, every punctuation mark, every change is significant.

BENEATH THE WHITENESS OF YOUR STARS

Beneath the whiteness of your stars
Stretch out to me your white hand;
All my words are turned to tears—
They long to rest within your hand.

Under your white stars/ stretch out your white hand to me/ my words are tears/ they want to rest in your hand.

See, their brilliant light goes darker
In my eyes, grown cellar-dim;
And I lack a quiet corner
From which to send them back again.

See, it’s glittering very dimly/ in my cellar-darkened sight/ and I haven’t even a small corner/ to gift them back to you.

(stanza break)
Yet, O Lord, all my desire—
To leave you with my wealth of tears.
In me there burns an urgent fire,
And in the fire, there burn my days.

And yet I want, dear God/ to bequeath my wealth to you/ for (because, while)
within me begs a fire/ and in the fire, (all) my days (my life, my future)

Rest, in every hole and cellar
Weeps, as might a murderer
I run the rooftops, even higher,
And I search—where are you? Where?

Only (But because) in cellars and holes/ the murderous rest weeps/ I run
higher, over rooftops/ And I search: where are you, where?

Past stairs and courtyards I go running,
Chased by howling enemies.
I hang at last, a broken bowstring,
And I sing to you — like this:

Strange footsteps begin to chase me/ and howl with daring/I hang a broken
bowstring/ and I sing to you like this

Beneath the whiteness of your stars
Stretch out to me your white hand;
All my words are turned to tears—
They long to rest within your hand.

What comes through, in all the translated versions of this poem, is the
tremendous longing for communion with God, a longing keenly felt by Jews
who thought themselves abandoned in the violent chaos their universe had
become, the *Tohu va Bohu* that existed before creation. The God who said:
“Let there be. . .” and found the order he had created “good” seems to be, or
already has, vanished out of sight. Yet his people want and need to talk to
him, pray to him. In the end, despite the fruitless search, despite the
despondency, feeling like “a broken bowstring,” they continue to sing to God,
asking Him for comfort and redemption.

*Secret Town* contains a consideration of vengeance. Bomke, a
prototype for Sutzkever, is being hanged but the rope breaks and a razor falls
from his pocket. The hangman is astounded and engages Bomke as his barber.
At one point, while he is shaving him he asks:
"You’d like to cut my throat, eh?"
"I don’t deny it."
"Then why don’t you? Are you afraid?"
"No! But such vengeance is no vengeance. Too little. Not enough."

"Too little. Not enough." This was the conclusion of most survivors. Of what use was another death, even the death of a hated hangman? Was this the charge of the dying? Unlike the Horst Wessel song sung by Germans, the songs of Jewish partisans and their poems did not speak of German blood “spurting/flowing from our knives.” For vengeance and memory to be meaningful it had to transcend flesh and blood, which, after all, is merely organic and therefore transient.

In addition, there was a profound collective understanding that even the flesh and blood of their arch enemies was made of the same stuff as their own and that it, too, contained the divine spark. Don Pagis poem, Written In Pencil In The Sealed Railway-Car draws its strength from the Cain and Abel story. Eve is the mother of both and Adam their father. Hundreds of generations that had celebrated Seders by spilling wine from their cups to lessen any joy they might feel over the victory of the drowned Egyptians were averse to spilling blood, aware that God has compassion even for murderers.

In Sutzkever’s long poem, "Kol Nidrei" the story of the German assault is told in brutal detail. It is also a revision of the Akedah story. Here, a father who must look at his son, “Too weak and full of wounds to rise”, accuses God of having made a pact with the devil, in this case the Nazis. The German who is terrorizing the synagogue filled with Jews declares his near admiration for “A Jew who dares defy me!” He then promises to let the father go free if he agrees to kill his son. The father looks at the dagger and although he doesn’t want to give the soldier satisfaction by obeying his order, decides that it is preferable to kill his son rather than allow the soldier the pleasure of executing him through prolonged torture. To his shock, the earth does not come to an end after the killing.

During the war, some parents killed their own children. Sometimes they were poisoned to spare them a more tortured death at the hands of the enemy. It is said that Janusz Korczak, either sedated or killed “his” children from the orphanage on the train that was taking them all to Treblinka. And there are numerous stories of babies or children being killed in bunkers to
prevent their cries from being heard by guards. Of all the choiceless choices victims were forced to make, that certainly must have been the worst. Yet, which parent forced to watch his or her child thrown alive into flames or smashed against a wall, wouldn't have wished to have given it an easier, quicker death?

Kol Nidrei (All Vows) is the prayer that is chanted three times – giving it an almost magical connotation – as a preface to the Yom Kippur service when Jews ask God to forgive all their sins, their own and those of the community. It is a formula that originated in Spain when Jews were forced, on pain of death, to abjure Judaism. The prayer, an affirmation of faith is also intended to expiate Jews for the sin of lying. They repent and ask that any vows they made but were unable to keep be nullified.

After a year, the father, whom Sutzkever called, “This Job-like Jew” is still alive. He commemorates Kol Nidrei by retelling this haunting tale. Is he seeking forgiveness or have all vows – going back to the covenant between Abraham and God, and perhaps to his previous covenant with Noah – indeed, been broken? God sent a ram in recognition of Abraham’s absolute faith. But in the absence of a ram, the father found himself compelled to follow the German’s command, thereby breaking God’s sixth commandment.

How much of Sutzkever is in the father? Did the poet consider himself guilty, if not for the murder of his infant son, than for his part in bringing the baby into a world intent on his death? A world, which, in fact, issued an edict for it – a covenant between Hitler and his followers – but was not destroyed.

Taking the moral high ground gave him a sense of freedom that would stay with him his entire life – a freedom Sutzkever understood when he said, “I wouldn’t have changed places with my tormentors.” Sutzkever’s sense of freedom was, no doubt dependent on poetry. “I didn’t just sing. It was a must/ To howl the sewer out of me!” Poetry afforded him the opportunity to give vent to his emotions, a purging, followed by the reward of endorphic release that makes the creative process pleasurable. Writing also encouraged a certain detachment. It allowed him to step away from the horrors he was constantly forced to confront and transcend them, finding freedom in the world of the imagination.

303 Ibid., Leftwich, p. 111.
There was, however, an enormous price for this freedom which he
tells of in *Secret Town*:

But I tell you, I hate my arm since the day
I came here and threw my weapon away.
Clutching fingers out of the grave grow,
And tell me to fight for them — “Our hope is with you!
Pay them back for what they did to us, Repay!”
What can I answer the dead? I must say,
I am going to the forest, to fight, as I said.
My life is not my own — it belongs to the dead.

It’s a price Sutzkever has continuously paid. “I had to write. I was
living through so much, seeing and feeling so much — if I live a thousand
years I could not tell all I experienced in the Ghetto.”

**Avenging Angel**

How much visceral vengeance Sutzkever wreaked before he left the
Ghetto and forest remains an unanswered question. After the war, while he
was still in Moscow, he was invited to appear as a witness at the Nuremberg
trials. His intuition that he and his People were destined for more than
ignominious death was thus affirmed. Moscow provided him with a suit and
flew him to Germany. He says he considered taking his revolver and
shooting Göring but was talked out of this fantasy by Ehrenburg who advised
him that it would not be interpreted as an act of personal initiative. Instead, it
would result in political accusations on the part of both the Russians and
Americans; in the end, it would subvert the intent and intensity of the
judicial proceedings. It was not only his friend’s sage advice that influenced
Sutzkever but the understanding that killing Göring could not provide
satisfaction. In the final analysis, what would the death of one German or
even thousands amount to in the wake of the vast destruction they caused?
His answer was, finally a line from his poem *Secret Town*. In it, when the
victim, as barber, has an opportunity, almost an open invitation, to slit his
enemy’s throat he refrains, realizing, “Such vengeance is no vengeance. Too
little. Not enough.”

Unable to sleep for two nights before his appearance at the trial
Sutzkever was tormented by visions of his mother running naked through
snowy fields and of blood from her bullet wounds dripping and staining the floor of the room he was staying in. On Feb. 27, 1946 he offered his testimony. The trial’s first Jewish witness, Sutzkever spoke for 38 minutes. Later, he called it “the most powerful experience in all my thirty years of life.” He added, “It is still hard for me to measure my feelings, to say which is stronger, my grief or my desire for vengeance. I think that stronger than either is the feeling that our People lives, has outlived its hangmen, that no dark Powers can destroy us.”

Sutzkever found great vindication in the fact that the words of a Yiddish poet should influence the judgment of murderers like Rosenberg and Franck.

I refused to sit down in the witness box. I spoke standing up, as though I was saying a Kaddish for the dead. I spoke only about Vilna, only about what I myself had seen and experienced. I told the Court about the German system of mass murder. I told the court about the ‘Takers,’ the people who spent all their time trying to ferret out Jews, to discover Jews in hiding, to take them and hand them over to the Gestapo, because the Gestapo paid them ten rubles for each Jew they brought in. I told the Court how the Germans had forced me to dance naked round a bonfire with a Torah in my arms. I told them how the Germans slew Dr. Jacob Wygodsky, the President of the Vilna Jewish Community, and others. I told them how I recognized my mother’s shoe in a heap of shoes taken from freshly-murdered people. I told them how my new-born baby had been murdered in the Ghetto hospital.

Sutzkever named names; those of the perpetrators but also those of the heroes and victims to assure as he wrote in Secret Town, “You shall not be blown about as chaff in the wind.” He had, armed only with words, heeded the whisper of the dead, “Go in peace, as messenger go/Of all who with earthly chains are bound.” The satisfaction of testifying was certainly equal to if not greater than what he found in his work in the F.P.O. and later as a partisan. His words, this time, were active weapons. Translated and recorded for all time, they remain an act of remembering and of revenge, because they helped mete out justice. But was this enough?

They say it’s retribution I demand.
That till eternity there will be this hour.  

(continued)

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304 Ibid. pp. 89-90.
305 Ibid.
306 From Sutzkever’s poem, Secret Town.
But the millions are no more.  
So what retribution can I command?

I need to be a thousand times a Shylock Jew.  
To cut the evil out of this world.  
My people! You will still forge such a sword,  
If God weakens in demanding what is due.

They stretch, rows, files, companies.  
I see no one anymore, only feel they are here –  
Like birds on the wing behind a cloud.  
Shape after shape, each a special sound in the air.

Through me, through my mind they all pass.  
And each finds himself and his dream in it.  
In the light of my blindness I begin to see  
Out of how many souls I am knit.  
– from “Faces in the Swamps”

One of the souls with which he was knit was that of his beloved mother. Her death, coming as it did on the heels of the death of his newborn son, 307 was particularly hard on Sutzkever. He wrote of that terrible time:

I went to see my mother. She told me the glad news that my wife had given birth to a child in the Ghetto Hospital. My mother had forgotten Murer’s decree that children born in the Ghetto must be killed. The next day the child was gone. Murer’s orders had been obeyed. Unable to compose myself after this calamity with my child another tragedy followed. I went to my mother’s home and my mother was gone. I discovered it was the work of the German agent Oberhardt. He came at night to my home in Spital Street, where my mother lived, and took away everybody in the house. 308

Seeing a cart of shoes gathered to be sent to Germany he recognized his mother’s shoes and wrote this response:

The wheels keep turning, turning.  
What do they bring for me?  
A cartload of shoes  
Full of agony.  
– from “A Load of Shoes”

307 The newborn was poisoned by the hospital staff.  
308 Ibid., Leftwich, p.48.
These are his mother's good shoes – worn shoes would not have been sent for distribution to Germans. It is likely they are the very ones she wore to his own wedding because he uses images of the shoes dancing at a wedding. "With her prayer book in her hand," Sutzkever says elsewhere, "my mother was taken to her death in Ponar, where thousands of Vilna Jews were murdered." 309

With this statement we become aware of a devout woman going to her death as a martyr. "She wore these only on Sabbaths." There is such pain in this line. Shoes were expensive and most people had no more than two pairs. Religious Jews denied themselves the pleasure of wearing their good shoes everyday as a way of glorifying the Sabbath. When Sutzkever sees these symbols of self-constraint and piety, he realizes that not only is his mother dead but her personal possessions have become war booty of the murders. An unspoken question arises. Hasn't God failed her?

I shouldn't ask questions.
But my heart misses a beat.
"Tell me," I ask the shoes,
"Where are the feet."

The line "I shouldn't ask questions" may be interpreted several ways: 1) One did not question the Germans about their actions or intents. 2) There was no point in dwelling on the bitter and unavoidable truth. 3) It is not only impious for man to question God's ways, it is fruitless.

With the shoes as the objective correlative, Sutzkever is able in just a few verses to 1) Accuse the Germans of ignoring the bylaws of the Geneva convention by waging murder on civilians; in fact, murdering helpless women, children, as well as the elderly. 2) Inform us that while the Jewish people were considered worthless, their shoes, used shoes, were valuable enough to be carted all the way from Vilna to Berlin. From this we can deduce how much else was stolen from the victims. 3) Write an elegy for his mother. The sardonic tone of this poem avoids sentimentality and adds to its power. 4) Question the value of religion by asking God why, echoing the line later quoted by Primo Levi, "Hier ist kein varum." ("Here there is no 'why?'")

309 Ibid., Leftwich, p.49.
5) Question the value of a civilization that is deaf to the “din” that only Jews seem capable of hearing.

The heels tap, keep tapping.
They make a clatter, a din.
“We go from the Vilna streets,”
They cry “to Berlin!”

Yet, despite his anger and despair, Sutzkever could still, while in the ghetto, write:

Stronger than revenge on your mother’s murderers
be your love for your mother’s heart
whose seeds waft like Spring aromas
and will at your desert threshold,
from bony sands blossom forth
a faith!

His own (non-traditional) faith remains. In his poem, “After the Holocaust” written in Warsaw in 1946, he talks to God:

Creator, You’ve come to find me
in the abyss.
I am Your thought gone astray.
In Your existence I am searching for a meaning here,
but all my words are frail.

I don’t know which of us two is more earthly,
and who is whose Man and whose God.
There is no third person to decide
and pass judgment on my actions now.

Creator, remember me with joy.

Hope for renewal abounds in his work. His elegy for the wife of Arkady (Alexander) Kremer, “Patti Kremer” written in 1945, insists, “Let pine trees remain pine trees, not green gallows.” Perfectly aware of the indelible stain the War has made on the world, he refuses to let that stain spread and cover what remains innocent and pure.
Where does vengeance begin and where should it end? Most people agree that the Nazis deserve to be punished as war criminals, but what of their helpers, the prisoners who were given positions of authority in the camps? What of betasers and bystanders? Jews understood that most of the world was guilty. But who and how could one punish the world? The sad truth was that those in power were—even when sympathetic to the plight of Jews—still infected with Anti-Semitism. There was a postwar massacre in Kielce in which forty-two Jews, including children, were killed and fifty were wounded. Britain still maintained its quota for Jewish emigration to Palestine. Other countries also had quotas limiting Jewish immigration. At the same time, many, if not most, war criminals were afforded protection and helped to find safe harbor. Hitler had nearly achieved his goal: most of Europe had become Judenrein. Survivors who returned home found themselves homeless. Neighbors had usurped their homes, possessions and businesses. Only in rare exceptions were they able to reclaim what they had left behind. How, then, could they expect justice in a world where, generally speaking, crime certainly did pay?

For Sutzkever, the answer is that it is only God who should demand retribution. A covenant is a bi-lateral agreement. If God fails then His people must take up the work. But His people are also obliged to remind him of His duty. As he says in his poem, “A Prayer”:

Dear God, let’s exchange our memories—
I shall remember the beginning
And You will remember the end.

On February 14, 1943, Sutzkever contemplated in his poem, “How?” the idea of revenge: “How and with what will you fill/ Your cup on the day you’re free?” When he had the opportunity to fill it with the enemy’s blood, he resisted. He had listened to the voice of reason and finally allowed discourse to overcome vengeance. His appearance at the Nuremberg Trial as both an avenging angel and a messenger of peace confirmed what Martin Gilbert wrote, “To resist the dehumanizing, brutalizing force of evil, to refuse to be abased to the level of animals, to live through the torment, to outlive

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310 According to eyewitness reports, the pogrom was led by an ax-wielding priest. Prof. Sandy Gilman confirmed this fact at the U.S. Holocaust Museum’s “Life Reborn” Conference, January, 2000. He added that Pope John Paul II was a priest in Kielce during that time.

311 Ibid., Roskies, p. 497.
the tormentors, these too were resistance. 312 Those who had resisted becoming dehumanized victims and survived to see the Germans conquered and humiliated, found enough satisfaction in the sorry status of their former enemy to prevent themselves from becoming dehumanizing avengers.

Vengeance is one of the themes in the dramatic poem "The Grave Child." The Jew (a grave-digger) says:

It is growing bright! Soon the east will redden.
And with the grave-night goes my fear!
Now I no longer need a spade.
It will take vengeance itself
Against the whole world.
And what a privilege is mine
To see such a birth.

But what form will this vengeance take? Is it to be a virtual variant of "eye-for-an-eye" syndrome in an effort to exact equality? Will it be a multiplication of victims in the manner in which the Nazis responded to the murder of their own? Or, will it be the kind of revenge God took for the murder of Abel: marking Cain and forcing him to (wander as a fugitive) and serve as a living witness to the crime he committed.

No doubt, the Communists interpreted the reddening as the victory of Communism. But those familiar with Sutzkever's rapturous love of nature and his affinity and attachment to traditional Judaism, as the grandson and son of rabbis, read this as a simple description of dawn and also as a metaphor for peace, when spades will become unnecessary. Death will be vanquished, graves no longer needed.

In the cemetery, Mother Rachel gives birth to a child, a messiah, assisted by Zalman-Ber, the gravedigger. This is a twentieth century Jewish retelling of The Nativity. Toward the end, The Jew wonders,

Does the sound of his voice heal their dream?
Do they hear him, swear by him
Breathe with the sound of his cries?

Sutzkever asserts that the birth of this grave-child heralds a new world, a world that even a lowly gravedigger can recognize. But this is a world

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linked to the old. The dead are resurrected to enjoy this vision. What better revenge!

He is full with grasses from under the ground  
And sucklings see how the sword is crowned.  
And the heart of a star, sinless and clear.  
And I, the gravedigger Zalman-Ber.  
And all who from under the stones arise.\footnote{A reference to Ezekiel 37.}  

_The Grave Child_, a dramatic poem, won the first award of the Ghetto Literary Prize. Twenty-seven years later it won the Itzik Manger Literary prize, a prize that is given in Israel. This confirmed that a generation after the war, his work was still lauded. Language had provided him “magic armor.” Perhaps others could also fashion such “armor.” Perhaps his words, read or heard, might allow a new sensibility to enter minds long-inured to violence and brutality. Perhaps they would become a beacon to light a path toward peace.

**The Discourse of Consolation**

The Sutzkevers could have settled permanently in Moscow but realized that Communism created no Utopias and Jews remained in peril, subject to Anti-Semitism and suspicion. Even an esteemed figure such as Ehrenburg was subject to the Totalitarian state. “In the end it worked against him. The Russian writers were jealous of his relations with Stalin, the people and the army.” Sutzkever last saw Ehrenburg in May 1946, before he and his wife departed for Poland. The Russian writer wanted to give him the materials for his planned _Black Book_, saying, “I’m afraid it will get lost here.”\footnote{He was present. An article in Pravda criticized Ehrenburg for eliminating the difference between German Fascists and German Democrats. The Jewish world later accused Ehrenburg of collaborating in the arrest and the purges – on August 12, 1952 – of Soviet-Yiddish writers (Peretz Markish, David Bergelson, Leib Quiiko, Itzik Feffer, etc.). Sutzkever, however, believed there was no basis for this accusation.}

Europe’s liberation did not end the Jewish struggle to survive. Europe, particularly Poland and Lithuania, continued to prove hostile to Jews.
Sutzkever and his wife emigrated to Israel on a ship that was so unseaworthy it nearly sank. They wound up in an interment camp on Cyprus.\footnote{Ruth Gruber, a photojournalist for the Herald Tribune, visited Cyprus and described the utterly appalling conditions of the camps in a talk at the U.S. Holocaust Museum’s “Life Reborn” Conference, January, 2000.} In 1947, they finally reached Israel and his struggle to keep Yiddish alive began. To this end, – unlike other writers who emigrated and adopted Hebrew as the language they wrote in – he continued to write in Yiddish. In 1949, Sutzkever founded a literary magazine, Die Goldene Keyt (The Golden Chain). Its name evidences a desire for continuity. His generation is a link in the chain of a language that is nearly a thousand years old.\footnote{In his poem, “For My Child” he writes, “You reproduce yourself like a ring/and the rings fit into chains.”} Although the victory of Hebrew spells the demise of Yiddish, a chain is always open to added links. “The very act of writing is an opposition to the danger of the destruction of Yiddish. Just as the Jewish people experienced survival from a skeleton, you can say the same thing for Yiddish, itself.”\footnote{Ibid., Berger.}

And how should Sutzkever continue to remember the dead if not in the words they spoke? Even dead, they continue to haunt him. In his poem “Frozen Jews” he writes:

\begin{quote}
But now, overcome in the mid-July heat  
By a frost, like madness, right in the street 

They come toward me, blue bones in a row  
Frozen Jews over plains of snow.
\end{quote}

What language do they speak, these Jews who were never privileged to live in the State of Israel? To abandon Yiddish is to abandon them. But how can he? He has become the channel for their voices, their words. And, they depend on him. His poem “Elegiacally”, written in 1978, addresses this:

\begin{quote}
The corpses live in another place  
and I am their Time. 

I say: \textit{It's raining}, and it rains.  
I say: \textit{Snow}, and a thin snow starts to fall.  
They love to hear my poems, so I read them.
\end{quote}

(continued)
I say: There is no Death, and I hear a lament:
Death is our life— is there, then, no longer any life either?

I say: We are as one – enough of being separate.
They love to hear my poems, so I read on.

Sutzkever has become dependent on the dead; he owes his very identity to them. In his poem, "Yiddish Poet", written in 1958 when Hebrew had become well-integrated and even the survivors of children were not engaged in learning Yiddish, he avers that he will not play his "Stradivarius/in Hebrew." He advises, "It’s long past time for you to remember/that a Yiddish poet must not die."³¹⁸

In her Columbia University thesis, Ruth Wisse, now a professor at Harvard, says that his prose poems, Green Aquarium, printed in Ode to the Dove, 1958, is "reminiscent of Orpheus' pact with Pluto – in return for their years of collaboration the poet’s words permit him to revisit the dead, whom he sees only through the impenetrable glass of the aquarium. He cannot enter. The dead cannot emerge."³¹⁹

Poetry is an art that circumscribes and describes an experience and transforms it into an event that can be remembered and retold. It does this by using fixed symbols to make words that can be variable. The Bible, as well as other scriptural and canonical writings are not only read and enjoyed by people of faith but by others; faith seekers or those who simply want to read or hear a well-written story. Visual images (and music) serve the same purpose.³²⁰ It is therefore not surprising that monuments by artists such as Natan Rappaport and Museums that feature both artifacts and art (often parts of the artifacts) have been chosen by survivors themselves to record and represent their experience for posterity.

There are easier ways to learn about the Holocaust than by reading a poem. Touring a Holocaust museum is a painful experience. Yet, it can have an element of sociability. At a conference, someone told of going through the U.S. Holocaust Museum and ending up in the screening room, sitting next to a stranger. When she began to cry, the woman reached over “and handed me

³¹⁸ Abraham Sutzkever, Laughter In The Forest, New York, KTAV, 1989, p. 64.
³¹⁹ Ibid., Leftwich, p. 113-114
³²⁰ For example, Rapaport’s sculpture at Liberty State Park, Samuel Bak’s paintings and John Williams’ score for “Schindler’s List” harness the chaos of the Holocaust and evoke emotion and memory, which is both intellectual and sentimental in content.
a clean but crumpled tissue. Very grandmotherly."321 The two women never spoke but social contact had been established, an affirmation that each was a human being worthy of the other’s acknowledgment. This doesn’t occur in the solitary act of reading. Reading poetry, particularly Holocaust poetry, is far more demanding an activity, especially when one is reading translations.

Yet Yiddish poetry is precisely what Sutzkever, driven to give voice to and for the victims, has devoted his life to writing and publishing. In an article about the assimilated Jew, Franz Kafka and his embrace of Yiddish, Matthew Goodman writes:

Language, of course, is one of the most important vessels for the transmission and preservation of culture, and in the ‘great migrations’ that have moved through Yiddish (Kafka cites its derivation from not just German, but also Hebrew, French, English, Russian, Dutch, Rumanian, and even Latin) the language is a living repository of modern Jewish history. Idiomatic, in constant flux, without centralized rules about grammar and spelling (it is, Kafka notes in a highly suggestive phrase, a medley of law and arbitrariness”), Yiddish embodies the lively spirit of the Jewish people.322

Goodman notes that Kafka concluded that assimilation did not serve Jews well. Their passion for the world at large, a Christian world for European Jews, would always remain unrequited. Abba Kovner – successor to the martyred Itsik Vittenberg – drew that same conclusion when he moved into the Rudnicki Forests. Jurgis had, by then, issued the order that no more Jews should be brought to the Narocz Forest; an order that the woman who would become Kovner’s wife ignored. Kovner realized that even when Jews were willing to lay down their lives to fight the common enemy, they remained the enemy to their fellow (gentile) partisans. Therefore, in his unit, Yiddish was used to conduct all matters. This decision made Yiddish the language of fighters and heroes, not merely the oppressed.

Sutzkever was one of the few poets who believed that to write in a language other than his mother tongue – as survivors Dan Pagis (Hebrew), Paul Celan (German) and Elie Wiesel (French) did – would not only negate history and insure a posthumous victory for Hitler, it would rob his own poetry of nuances, an intimacy and a power it could not otherwise have. In Yiddish, as Kafka and Kovner discovered, there is a Judaism that is uncompromised and unambivalent. Is his poem, “The Tree of Songs”

321 Recorded in a conversation, Houston, October, 1999.
322 Matthew Goodman, Der Paan Treger, Fall 1999, Volume 31, p. 19.
Sutzkever alludes not only to the Exodus experience, but to subsequent expulsions, the Promised Land, and to the Rosenberg Project in which he and others involved themselves in the rescue of Yiddish documents with the hope and conviction that the intrinsic value of those buried documents would be found and realized. The Prophet may well be Messiah. Or, with the understanding that every generation of Jews has its enemies, the time may come yet again when the experience of the Ashkenazic Jews, written in Yiddish, will become messages of hope, perseverance and solace. The Diaspora will end with a new Exodus, told in the language of the European exile.

Here manna still falls in the morning,
And the bright branches are sunny.
A shepherd-boy gathers it in his basket
It still tastes like a bun with honey.
Here a language still lives that needs no lips.
Here is a rock giving water where you have struck.
And I have come to join myself to this—
To quench my call with water from this rock.

Fled Yiddish words in the ancient
Hebrew footprint! In these caves you dwell!
One day a Prophet may come to hide here,
And he will hear what the caves have to tell.

There is a strong possibility that Sutzkever was never completely comfortable in any language except Yiddish. While most Jews in Eastern Europe were multi-lingual and some spoke several languages perfectly and without accent, Sutzkever, who despite a childhood in Siberia claimed, "My Russian was bad enough. . . " When in Moscow, he was asked by Mikhoels to tell Kaganovitch about the heroism of the Vilna partisans, he got so emotionally caught up in the story he reverted to Yiddish without even realizing it. He excused himself and returned to Russian but Kaganovitch told him to continue in Yiddish, as he could understand it.\textsuperscript{323}

For Sutzkever, poetry was not a profession but a calling and a shield. Despite his strong conviction, he felt somewhat uneasy about engaging in art, "Strange, everything around you is on fire, everything crashes, and you sit and write poetry." Yet the "strangeness" had a mystical quality; there was a

\textsuperscript{323} Ibid., Leftwich, p. 99.
sense that the Creator had provided opportunities for him to continue his work. Even before affirmation from the literary establishment in Moscow that his poetry made him worthy of rescue, he had enough close encounters with death to convince him that he was singled out to survive. A particular one was the chance response by a Gentile who saved him. He wrote a poem in her memory, (in 1980) “On The Death of Yanova Bartoshevich Who Saved My Life.”

At the time this occurred, he was being pursued by the Gestapo. He knocked on a door, that of a complete stranger. An old woman opened it, let him in and assured him to stay calm. She then told him she would hide him until the war ended, made a straw bed for him in her cellar and brought him not only food, but a book. Her husband and son helped her in her efforts to save him and bring him news of his family in the Ghetto. She became a courier taking messages back and forth to his wife. Yanova also brought Freydke Sutzkever bread and made plans to help her escape from the ghetto. Despite the enormous love and self-sacrifice she and her family showered on the Sutzkevers, he was too consumed by guilt and worry and chose to return to the Ghetto. But he remembered Yanova with love and enormous gratitude:

But for you I would have never, never
Seen Jerusalem.
My poems would be under snow,
Crying like Zachariah’s blood to the stars,
And the stars would not have heard.
...
But for you I would myself have had
To cut my life, which is full of lives.
...

(stanza break)

\[324\] I would hazard a guess that he saw in Yanova’s acts of righteousness, the hand of God, leading him forward, urging him to choose life in the face of death, to take perilous risks, and retain an abiding hope in humanity in the face of gross inhumanity. I would further conjecture that this experience of finding help in the most unexpected circumstances, even when that help was a momentary anomaly, figured in the lives of all “successful” survivors and gave them the stamina to survive and lead fruitful lives. Of course, not all survivors were “successful.” Those who were unable to pick up the threads of their life, sickened and died or required institutionalization. Others became outwardly functional but lived in misery or committed suicide.
Now is the time of rains,
And I am in the mountains up to my neck.
And many hands are clinging to me,
Who want me to carry them over the deeps.

Are those deeps the hands of his wife and children who depend on him for support? Yiddish writers? Certainly, as he was the editor of Die Goldene Keyt, many Yiddish writers and poets depended on him for their sustenance. Readers, too, drew sustenance from that publication. Or, is he (also) saying that his words, the words of the murdered Jews, are bridges to understanding the Holocaust; they are still capable of providing a lifeline to the drowning.

There is, in the poem a reference to reincarnation when his daughter, his “comfort” asks “this wonderful question—/How many years old was I before I was born.” It would also appear that he sees a future for the words written by and in the language of the dying.

Was the memory of Yanova’s self-sacrifice and the risks she and her husband and son, poor, ordinary people who had shown extraordinary courage and righteousness, one of the factors that kept him from complete despair when he was most suicidal? He alludes to this in the poem’s very beautiful closing lines:

You have rained in Jerusalem.
A rainbow has lighted up for your soul.

The rainbow, a sign of God’s covenant with Noah, the symbol of the promise that God will never destroy the world, is not there in his “suicide poems” but light is; and a rainbow is a phenomena of refracted light. Yanova Bartshevich, who saved him from death at the hands of his pursuers, may also have unknowingly prevented Sutzkever’s suicide by discounting the paranoiac thought that the entire world was intent on murdering Jews, an idea that drove many into inescapable despair.

The concept of a God-ordained ultimate destiny was part of the Jewish collective consciousness even among assimilated Jews such as Theodor Herzl. The insistence on return to the land of Israel, rather than in a more politically neutral setting such as Uganda, no doubt played a significant part in that

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325 “Beneath The Whiteness of Your Stars” and Section II of “Faces In The Swamps” contain references to thoughts of suicide.
determination. Israel (Palestine, then) was both a homeland and a holy land for Jews. Zionism without the physical Zion was meaningless despite the opposition of fundamentalists who insisted that Israel could only be established after the coming of the Messiah.

Although Sutzkever is not a traditionally observant Jew, there is no question that God plays an integral role in his thoughts. His poems are filled with Biblical allusions. Many are actually built on them. The poet sees his talent as a (religious) calling to be the voices of those who had no voice. In his 1954 poem, "Preordained Circle" he writes:

When I flee from the white sheet of paper to myself,  
As Jonah did to Tarsus . . .

No matter where he runs, backward or forward, there is no escape from the past, from the sorrow. "Such is my preordained circle." Writing, witnessing to extend the Jonah metaphor, is the only recourse.

I look back to the white sheet of paper  
and see my face engraved on the Russian landscape—  
my face that demands: Avenge me, Avenge!

Many survivors saw their survival, the result of fortuitous circumstances, as not merely arbitrary, but as part of God’s divine plan to bring about the heavenly kingdom. This is not to say that all survivors saw this as a sacred kingdom. Some deliberately separated themselves from their religious community or joined another. Some became communists or socialists; some atheists. Others remained or became observant Jews out of belief or simply the desire to remain bonded to their Yeshiva-trained children, who had grown into committed Jews. Nevertheless, whatever their personal stance on religion or God, most came to be the conviction that they were obliged to do whatever was in their means to testify to what they had witnessed.

They became intent on alerting the world to the alternative to peace in a nuclear age. What had once been inconceivable had become a reality and yet people were still oblivious. Two decades after the Holocaust, the My Lai Massacre and the famine in Biafra brought back painful reminders that hatred was still widespread. Survivors, who had been gathering in small groups to
commemorate the Shoah, looked at these events and realized that as former victims they had the right, the knowledge, and the moral obligation to avoid becoming silent bystanders. How best to avert another Holocaust and memorialize their loved ones than by publicizing their experiences on a large scale? Through a complex series of confluences – particularly the change on the position of the Church toward Jews wrought by Vatican II – and through great donations of time and money (much of it from Holocaust survivors and other Jews) memorials have been erected, museums built and lessons on the Holocaust and genocide are being taught in schools, synagogues and churches.

For Sutzkever, the belief that he was destined to be a messenger of peace was affirmed for him in July, 1968. Although Yiddish was being read and spoken in increasingly smaller circles, an organization of survivors from Bergen-Belsen published Songs From The Sea of Death, an anthology of his poems about the Ghetto and the Holocaust. Like many survivors, the Bergen-Belsen group believed that Sutzkever, more than any writer, captured the nightmarish experience and gave it expression that merited recognition and remembrance. Was this their way of meeting the charge to remember? Culled from all his published work, it is 480 pages long and in Yiddish. In an article in The Forward he wrote,

Between the covers of Songs From The Sea of Death, are gathered my days and nights there, transformed into poems. They were written in the Vilna Ghetto, in the Forest, in my wanderings. Wandering not only in place. From 1948 all the poems in the book were written in Israel. But it was simultaneously a wandering through the hell of my memory, a wandering through a world of skeletons.

In a copy of that book, he wrote the following inscription to his biographer: “My dear Joseph Leftwich, Many miracles have happened to me, but the greatest miracle is that the Sea of Death gave birth to my songs.”

[326] Recounting their experiences has proved cathartic for many because of the very positive response they receive from their audiences. However, this is not always the case. On occasion, some survivors have been heckled and even insulted. Some find speaking on the subject too emotionally draining. They either get off the "lecture circuit" altogether (in the case of J.A.) or rely on medications to help them continue in their work.
CONCLUSION

In *The Informed Heart*, Bruno Bettelheim wrote, "... these prisoners knew they were destined to die and still made almost no effort to revolt. The few exceptions, less than a handful among millions, I shall ignore for the moment, since they represent the behavior of such a tiny minority."\(^{327}\) Bettelheim, a former concentration camp inmate, should have realized that rebellious behavior, most of which had been subverted through physical, mental, emotional, and even spiritual exhaustion almost inevitably resulted in death.\(^{328}\)

His phrase, "tiny minority" has a pejorative connotation that tends to obscure the heroism of the resisters as well as their enablers. Certainly, there were those who urged would-be-insurgents to desist because such acts were sure to result in collective punishment. Some of these prisoners even went so far as to betray would-be-resisters. But others, who did not actively support resisters, did not necessarily interfere with their attempts at escape or sabotage.

Blaming the victims by heaping a good deal of the responsibility on them, rather than on the actual perpetrators, rankles many survivors who consider Bettelheim’s statements slanderous. The concentration camp he was interned was, for all its horrors, quite different from the death camps which went into operation after the Wannsee Conference to implement the Final Solution. Survivors question the motives that allowed Bettelheim to make that accusation.

Feelings of anger and guilt are common in mourners. This anger is directed both at the dead and the survivor. Emotions, however, are not rational responses. Bettelheim’s accusation of "docility" and "inflating the terrible image of the SS"\(^{329}\) certainly do not apply to Abraham Sutzkever who exhibited enormous courage and determination in his life and in his work. His descriptions of the SS, whom he refers to by words such as: plague, noose, boot, are not inflated. Their vicious and gratuitous brutality is well beyond inflation.

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\(^{328}\) Or, perhaps Bettelheim didn’t. He had been interned in Dachau, one of the Class I (least harsh) camps. The difference between Dachau in the 1930’s and Auschwitz-Birkenau in the 1940’s may have been incomprehensible to anyone who didn’t experience it.

\(^{329}\) Ibid., p. 37.
His accusation can be countered by survivors like Symma Prawer who lived through the war by becoming a docile slave - cleaning house for one of the camp officials and doing it in such a manner that he respected her unceasing efforts and her quiet, artificially cheerful demeanor. Because of her “good” job, Prawer was able to help less fortunate inmates by smuggling them the food or clothing she “organized.” Her docility was like the smile Maya Angelou describes in her poem about how Negroes (She writes of the era when they were called “Negroes” or “colored”) deflected aggression. Like the Negro smile, Symma Prawer’s hard work and docility were ploys to help her survive. They were her only weapons. Mrs. Prawer didn’t need to be convinced that she was dealing with monsters. She had seen, during an appel, a sadistic guard lop off the breast of a beautiful Jewish girl and throw it to his dog with the excuse, “Er hat hunger. He is hungry,”330 She witnessed countless other atrocities and did not need to inflate “the terrible image of the SS.”

She was determined to survive and help as many others to survive as she could. She succeeded on both counts by resisting the urge to throw herself at the guard. Is she sorry she didn’t? “Yes, sometimes. Even I know it wouldn’t help her or me.” Is she glad she survived? “I have three wonderful kinder (children), Boruch Ha Shem. (Blessed is God.) What should I say?”331

In every ghetto, in every deportation train, in every labor camp, even in the death camps, the will to resist was strong, and took many forms: fighting with those few weapons that could be found, fighting with sticks and knives, individual acts of defiance and protest, the courage of obtaining food under the threat of death, the nobility of refusing to allow the Germans their final wish to go to panic and despair. Even passivity was a form of resistance. “Not to act,” Emanuel (sic) Ringelblum wrote in the aftermath of one particular savage reprisal, “not to lift a hand against the Germans, has become the quiet passive heroism of the common Jew.” To die with dignity was a form of resistance. To resist the dehumanizing, brutalizing force of evil, to refuse to be abased to the level of animals, to live through the torment, to outlive the tormentors, these too were resistance. Merely to give witness by one’s own testimony was, in the end, to contribute to a moral victory. Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit.332

330 Heard in a personal interview, Miami Beach, April 18, 1988.
331 Ibid.
332 Ibid., Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, p.163.
The Sweetest Revenge

In April, 1998, I attended an Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration at the Morrow Memorial United Methodist Church in Maplewood, New Jersey. At the conclusion a woman who had been to Seton Hall’s Yom Hashoah Observance came up to me and introduced herself. She told me how much she enjoyed the poetry reading I gave that day and I thanked her. She said she is a survivor and we talked about the wonderful service we had just witnessed. It had included the two choirs – which included men and women, Blacks and Whites, Christians and Jews – who sang for the Evening of Roses, the annual fund-raiser for the Sister Rose Thering Endowment at Seton Hall University. The Endowment provides scholarships for educators to learn about the Holocaust and Genocide so that they can better teach prejudice reduction. As at the Evening of Roses, Shmerke Kaczerginski’s song, Zol Shoyn Kumen die Geulah, (Let the Redemption Come) was movingly sung by both choirs. It was sung in Yiddish, a once-vibrant language that is dying; another victim of the Holocaust. One of the lines in the song includes the Yiddish word, “revenge.” The woman voiced objection, saying, “I don’t like that word.”

Kaczerginski had not written that song to arouse vigilantism but to comfort survivors. Redemption presupposes the end of violence. Redemption is a time of peace, reconciliation, consolation. Why was this woman so bothered by this word?

I had been to a Holocaust observance at the State House in Trenton that morning where the names of victims were read during a commemorative vigil and where a high school choir of young men and women of mixed ethnic and religious backgrounds sang Hebrew and Yiddish songs. I told her this and added, “I think, for Jews, this is what revenge is all about. The dead are not forgotten. Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, a rainbow of skin and hair gather in a church and in our State House for such an observance and sing songs in Yiddish and Hebrew. Isn’t this the best revenge? Isn’t this the kind of revenge Jews want?”

We both wiped tears from our eyes and she said, “Yes. I hadn’t thought of it that way. This is the greatest revenge.”
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