



The IMMORTAL
WARSAW GHETTO

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KINDERBUCH PUBLICATIONS

In the brief span of twenty years the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising has become an immortal and inspiring legend. Throughout the world the Jewish people and all partisans of democracy commemorate the Uprising with a solemn renewal of abiding faith and hope in man's everlasting struggle for freedom and dignity.

The Warsaw Ghetto is like a great flame which for all time shall light the path for men of good will in their unending struggle to achieve brotherhood, equality, freedom, peace. Let us never forget that it was the Jews of Warsaw, - from the horror and terror and rubble of the Ghetto, - who rose up against the military might of history's most savage barbarians - the Nazis of Hitler Germany and their Quislings - and struck the blow which for all time stands as one of the most inspiring, instructive and imperishable monuments to Man's fight against the tyranny of fascism in whatever form and from wherever it may rise.

Together the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto forged a unity at once inspiring and so important in its meaning for us today. From the streets and house-tops, from the bunkers and rubble, from the stinking sewers of Warsaw, they, all of them - Zionists, religious Jews, Bundists, Socialists and Communists - struck back at bestial Nazism and suffered it a mighty blow. For the Jewish fighters of the Ghetto were a unique extension of the tradition of resistance to the death against the worst tyranny known to man: - fascism. A tradition so eloquently expressed elsewhere in the global struggle which defeated Nazi Germany and the Fascist Axis. You can not say 'Warsaw Ghetto!' without adding: Stalingrad: The Battle of Britain! El Alamein! Tarawa! D-Day! The Fall of Berlin!

We renew our eternal pledge: "Never to forget! Never to Forgive!", keeping in mind the basic meaning of the April Uprising of twenty years ago:

"(The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising) was not a struggle in defense of one's earth, because (by April of 1943) there really was no expectation of holding back the enemy" (wrote the world-famous historian and fighter of the Ghetto, Professor Ber Mark). "The struggle was not calculated to save the lives of near and dear ones, because they had already been murdered. This was not a struggle to save one's own life, because one's life was difficult to endure in any case. The struggle was generated by driving moral forces on a much higher plane. This was a struggle for the honor of a people, for its future. The irresistible urge came from their determination to uphold the honor of the Jewish people. This was the main goal of the Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in April of 1943." ("Strategy for Survival" by Ber Mark) translated from the Yiddish, Jewish Life, April, 1947, p. 9)

One must add: that by so doing, the Jews of Warsaw upheld finally the honor of man himself...

The Uprising of April 1943 did not just suddenly happen. Before this final ordeal, the Jews of Warsaw had to go through four years of hell. How did it all start?

NAZI GERMANY INVADES POLAND

The first Jewish victims...The first Jewish fighters...

On September 1, 1939, a wing of Nazi Stuka dive-bombers roared in over Warsaw, the capital of Poland, and, at a signal from their Luftwaffe leader, peeled off to bomb and strafe the ancient city, home of the largest Jewish community in Europe, the center of Jewish cultural, social and political life in Poland. For the ravencous anti-Semites of Hitler Germany, this was a most symbolic criminal act. A survivor of the Ghetto tells us:

"On the very first day of the war, the first innocent victims fell - Jewish children in Warsaw. The murderous bombs demolished the Children's Home of the Jewish society Centos, and killed ten little Jewish children and seriously wounded their educator, the well-known Jewish poet, Kalman Liss..."

(Yerahmiel Weingarten: A World Afire; pp. 13-14)

World War II was criminally launched by Adolf Hitler. The war's first victims these tiny innocents. Poland was soon occupied. Of the three and a half amillion Jews living within the boundaries of pre-war Poland, the Nazis would murder 3,200,000! The Nazis set out deliberately and systematically to slaughter every-last Jew in Poland. Poland's Jews were to be the prototypes of the Nazi plan for the "final solution of the Jewish question" in the Nazi invasions and occupation of all of Europe and the Soviet Union. Before this monstrous chapter in the annals of fascism was finished, six and one-half million Jewish men, women and children would be murdered.

Yet from the first, the Jews were in the forefront of those fighting back, as a Polish survivor himself tells us:

"...Among the defenders of Warsaw, - among the regular soldiers, in the ranks of the volunteer workers' battalions, and among the tens of thousands of civilian heroes, the Jewish masses of Warsaw found their place. On the eve of Rosh-Hashanah, which fell on the eighth day of the defense of Warsaw, the German air force decided on the greatest air raid on the city, and they deliberately chose the Jewish quarters for this onslaught..."

(Zygelboim Buch, ed.by J.S. Hertz; New York, 1947 p. 111)

WARSAW FALLS

The Jew-baiting begins...The Nazis first acts...

The brutal segregation of the Jews from the rest of the Polish people, by imposing on them the 'duty' of wearing special white arm bands with the blue Star of David printed on it, was the first step in the carefully planned preparation for the extermination of the Jews. Jews were forbidden to use any 'Aryan' facilities of any kind. The next stage was the concentration of all the Jews of Poland into the larger urban centers.

In October of 1939, the first ghetto was established in Piotrkow. Then followed the ghetto in Lodz. And on October 2, 1940, the largest ghetto in the history of anti-Semitism was established in Warsaw where eventually 650,000 Jews were jammed under inhuman conditions. 287,000 people were compressed into each square mile. The planning came on direct orders from Hitler and Himmler which were carried out on a scheme worked out in meticulous detail by Adolf Eichman.

"Immediately after the Feast of Tabernacles, the Gestapo appointed a new community executive, or, as it was called, a Council of Elders of the Jewish Community in Warsaw", an eye-witness tells us in his account of the Warsaw Ghetto. It consisted of 24 members and 24 delegates. All (Nazi) orders about the Jews of Warsaw were to be carried out by the Council and its members..."

Thus was the notorious Judenrat set up deliberately by the Nazis.

"The first task imposed upon (the Judenrat) was to conduct a census of Warsaw's Jewish population," a former member of the Judenrat writes. "Although there were hundreds of thousands of persons to register, the Nazis set a deadline a few days ahead. But we finished in time, and the Gestapo expressed itself as satisfied..."

(A. Weiss: "In Nazi Warsaw," Contemporary Jewish Record, Vol. III, #5 (New York, 1940. Weiss himself was a member of the first Warsaw Judenrat. He escaped in 1940 to the U.S.)

Of course the Gestapo was "satisfied" with the quick work of the Judenrat! They were hastening the Ghettoization, the murder process itself for the Nazis. Another useful source, written also by a Ghetto survivor, puts it squarely:

"...the Judenrat was to become an instrument of anti-Jewish policy...The blows of the Nazis were struck at the Jews through the Judenrat which acted as the (Nazi) agent of the occupation in the Jewish community."

(Bernard Goldstein: The Stars Bear Witness; New York; Viking Press; 1949; p.36.)

Three weeks later, the Nazis officially proclaimed the establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto. It was before the Judenrat itself that the Gestapo appeared, and issued their orders: "You Jews, listen to me carefully!" a Gestapo chief excoriated the members of the Community Council. "All Jews in Warsaw must leave their apartments...and move to the streets which are designated as the ghetto for the Jews!"

With that, the Gestapo agent produced a map of Warsaw showing the area of the Ghetto. The Judenrat complied quickly, and moved to set up a ghetto where the Jews of Warsaw were to be driven.

But not without resistance, and not without a willingness to fight which required only a militant leadership to make the fascists pay dearly from the very beginnings.

When the news of the Judenrat's agreement to go along with the Nazi's Ghetto order got out, "a terrible commotion" was stirred up among the Jews:

"Thousands of people gathered in front of the Community Council building (offices of the Judenrat)...the panic reached such a point that it was feared they would demolish the building. Then the representative of the workers, Zygelboim, undertook a hazardous step. He addressed the crowds...stood up in the middle of the street and harangued the more than ten thousand Jews gathered there with words of comfort and hope. He appealed to their sense of dignity, called on them to stay in their homes until they were driven out by force, and pleaded that nobody go into the ghetto voluntarily."

(op. cit.: Zygelboim, pp.131-135)

It is a historic fact that as a consequence of even this limited display of resistance, "...The evil of a ghetto in Warsaw, at least in the form mentioned, was forestalled for the moment."

(Ibid.)

Even as late as April of 1940, there was ample evidence that the Jews of Warsaw would, if properly lead, have fought.

"Early in April, 1940, just before Easter...an old religious Jew in Warsaw was attacked by a Polish hooligan...Comrade Friedman, a husky, well-built slaughterhouse worker, happened by. He came to the defense of the old man and gave the Pole a thorough beating.

"A crowd gathered quickly, and a street battle broke out between Jews and Poles. German police arrested Friedman and shot him...The Jews waited in terror...

"But the pogrom that followed had obviously been organized long before this incident. Groups of hooligans stormed through the Jewish sections of Warsaw...'Kill the Jews!'

"...The Germans did not intervene. They neither helped nor hindered the pogromists. We saw many smiling German camera men recording the scenes with relish. We later learned that the pictures appeared in (Nazi) magazines...(and) in movie theatres as graphic evidence that the Poles were winning their freedom from Jewish domination...

"...We decided to fight back with 'cold weapons' - iron pipes and brass knuckles, but not with knives or firearms.

"Every fighting contingent was mobilized - slaughterhouse workers, transport workers, party members. We organized them into three groups...When the pogromists appeared...they were surprised to find our comrades waiting for them. A bloody battle broke out immediately. Ambulances rushed to carry off wounded pogromists. Our own wounded were hidden and cared for in private homes to avoid arrest...The fight lasted

several hours against many waves of hooligans and raged throughout the (Ghetto)."

(Goldstein, op.cit., pp. 51-53.)

Thus the Jews fought, literally, with their bare hands and fists. But there was no unified, militant leadership; the Judenrat was working as "the instrument of the anti-Jewish policies" of the Nazis. And so the Ghetto became a terrible fact...

THE GHETTO: "NO WAY OUT!"

The walled enclosure...Down to the lowest level of existence...

On October 16, 1940, the Nazis officially established the Ghetto. October 31 was the deadline for the completion of the segregation of the Jews. "The last week of October 1940 was a nightmare of confusion and disorder," a survivor recounted. "Try to picture six hundred thousand people, moving through the streets in an endless stream, pushing, wheeling, dragging, carrying all their miserable belongings from every part of the city to one small section, crowding one another more and more as they converged. No cars, no horses, no help of any sort was available to us...Pushcarts were about the only method of conveyance... these were piled high with household goods, furnishing the Nazis with much delight in overturning the carts and seeing us scramble for our affects..."

(Tosia Bialer in Collier's, Feb. 2, 1943)

"Within less than two weeks, the Nazis erected The Wall - a ten foot high enclosure, about eleven miles long, which twisted and turned, surrounding the Ghetto and shutting it off from the "Aryan" city on the "other side."

To add insolence to this inhuman measure, "...The wall of the Ghetto had to be erected with Jewish money. The Judenrat had to pay a German construction firm for the work and material. ...the wall of bricks was covered with plaster and finished with built-in broken glass, with the sharp edges on the outside in order to prevent climbing over the wall..."

(J. Turkow: Thus It Happened; N.Y.; 1949; p. 106.)

To be caught outside of the wall on the "Aryan" side meant certain death. Special permits were required of anyone who entered or left the Ghetto. For 600,000 Jews, there was the anguished realization that there was "no way out."

For the vast majority of the 600,000 Jews, it was no longer possible to make a living normally. Jews were forbidden to make over a certain amount of money for their labor, regardless of their skills, trade, or profession. The Nazis immediately imposed severe rations on the people so that the basic food stuffs were denied them. And yet - as a consequence of the smuggling which promptly began upon the completion of the wall - there was the unseemly spectacle of a few rich Jews enjoying limitless luxuries and commodities only available at exorbitant blackmarket prices.

"The Warsaw Ghetto had a formidable upper class composed of bureaucrats, traders and speculators. These privileged groups were large enough to be conspicuous. They frequented night-clubs, ate in expensive restaurants, and rode man-drawn rikshas...the crowded and starving masses had to fight fiercely for every bit of space and piece of bread."

(Hilberg: The Destruction of the European Jews; Chicago 1961; p. 167)

The smuggling - of necessity - eventually grew into a vast, organized and common way of life for the Jews. Indeed, it was their primary way of getting the food just to live. The children were early introduced to this dangerous existence. They would steal over to the Aryan side where they would beg for scraps of bread or a few potatoes. "With their hard-earned treasure, the little ones would crawl back through breaks...in the ghetto barrier. Parents would sit home all day nervously awaiting the return of the family's only bread-winner. In tears they would gulp down the food brought at such great risk."

(Goldstein: op.cit, p. 75-76.)

For the risk was indeed great:

"Once, walking along the wall, I ran across a smuggling 'Action' carried out by the children. The 'Action' seemed to have virtually finished. Only one thing remained to be done, the little Jewish boy, who was still on the other side, had to slip through the hole...Half of the boy's tiny body was already visible, when he suddenly started screaming... a roaring German snarl from the 'aryan' side was heard. I ran to the child, anxious to help him...Unfortunately the boy's hips were caught...With all my force, I tried to pull him...he kept screaming in a terrible way. From the other side came the sound of the heavy blows...When I finally managed to pull the boy out, he was already dying. His spine was crushed."

(E. Szpilman: The Death of a City; Warsaw; 1946;)

Gangs of orphaned children soon began to wander the Ghetto. They lived, literally, off whatever they could get hold of: "A new 'profession' appeared, the so-called 'catchers'. Boys, or rather shadows of former boys, would snatch packages from pedestrians and immediately, while still running, devour the contents. In their haste, sometimes they stuffed themselves full of soap..."

(M. Edelman: The Ghetto Fights; N.Y.: 1946; p. 6)

Conditions quickly went from bad to worse. Typhus soon raged in the enormous slum. "Conditions in the Ghetto are dreadful," a Polish Underground report of the times stated. "Thousands, covered in pitiful rags, were slowly dying of starvation, "eagerly waiting to be delivered by death."

The Ghetto soon turned into a vast pit of sordid, miserable death; it was just as the Nazis had intended:

"The Jews will disappear from hunger and need", the Nazi governor of the Warsaw district told his henchmen, "and nothing will remain of the Jewish question but a cemetery."

(The Black Book, p. 180)

THE TRAITORS

The Judenrat...the Jewish police...the '13'...the collaborators...

The mentality of the Judenrat consisted of the craven rationalizations common to traitors anywhere. They often described themselves as the "saviors" of the Jewish people. Their "reason" for appeasing the Nazis: by sacrificing a few Jews now, the bulk of the Jews will survive later. One chairman of the Judenrat said: "I stand in a cage before a hungry and angry tiger. I stuff his mouth with meat, the flesh of my brothers and sisters, to keep him in his cage lest he break loose and tear us all to bits..."

(R. Hilberg: op. cit.; p.316)

More to the point: the Judenrat served the interests of the rich, the privileged bureaucrats, the speculators, the upper classes. "It was in Warsaw," a survivor of the Ghetto writes, "that the true nature of the Judenrat was revealed in its entire and obvious significance. It was hated by the masses of the people." Eventually, the Judenrat, along with the informers and other collaborators, were hunted down by the Jews themselves in the growing organization of resistance inside the Ghetto.

The same writer continues:

"...the Judenrat bears, before the judgment of history, the burden of responsibility for...its failures...It is responsible for the activities of the Jewish Police which was subordinated to it and which (became) a band of gangsters. It is likewise responsible for the corruption...But above all the Judenrat in Warsaw is to be despised for having been indifferent to the atrocious sufferings of the masses and for failing to apply the necessary measures...at their disposal to alleviate to some extent the misery of the most wretched people in the ghetto..."

(M. Mazor: "The Engulfed City," Jewish World, Oct. 1950; Paris.)

All of the Judenrat's activities were designed to further the Nazi policy of starving and murdering the Jews. A Polish underground report of March 23, 1942 states that "The price of the ration cards established by the Judenrat is steadily rising...The poor people cannot afford to take them."

The Judenrat not only rounded up Jews for deportation to labor camps and death centers, but made every effort to protect the class they served:

"(The Judenrat) enrolled only the poor people (for the labor camps), while the young men from well-to-do families work in

the police...or ransom themselves from the labor camps...
Because of this, the resentment of the Jewish people against
the Judenrat was exceedingly strong..."

(Mazor, Ibid)

Jonas Turkow, a celebrated Yiddish actor in Warsaw and
a prominent member of the Resistance, gives this description of
the hated Jewish Police, in his memoirs.

"There was a whole army of Jewish police, or, as they were
called, 'public safety men'... (by) July 1942, their number
had grown to 2,500. All of them wore the same uniform and
large wide caps with a blue band around them...only men from
the liberal professions...or a person with a high school diplo-
ma was admitted to the rank of an officer.

"Leikin, the chief of the Jewish Police...became the horror
of the Warsaw Ghetto...In thankful recognition for his de-
voted work, after his death (he was sentenced and killed by
the Jewish Fighting Organization), the Germans shot his wife
and their new-born child..."

(Turkow: ibid, pp 134-154)

One of the founders of the magnificent Jewish Fighters Organ-
ization (JFO), in his memoirs, tells of the interrelationship of
the Judenrat, the Police and the infamous "13":

"...(objectively) all the institutions which collaborated with
the Germans became a tool of treachery, since they were help-
ful to the Germans in deporting Jews to concentration camps
where death awaited...The chief of the collaborators was the
Judenrat, which carried out all of the orders of the Germans
and issued some on its own initiative. The Jewish police, as
its executive organ, made raids on Jews and dragged them to
work, pushed the Jews into trains which would carry them to
death, and generally helped in the liquidation of the Ghetto..."

"The 'Thirteen' was the name of an institution which came in-
to existence in Warsaw in 1940. Its seat was 13 Leszno Street,
whence its name. At its head was Gancwajch, a Jew who had been
a Zionist...(He) was before the war very active in the anti-
fascist movement...an intellectual and journalist by profession..."

"In 1933 this man became an agent of the Gestapo. In the
Ghetto (the 13)...was supposedly fighting profiteers and keep-
ing the Ghetto clean...every week (Gancwajch) sends a report
to the Gestapo. We have unmasked the villain."

(Cukierman(pseud. Antek) Nasze Slowo; Warsaw;1948;Vol.III#17)

By the crafty use of the Judenrat, the Jewish Police, the "13"
and many petty informers, speculators, and by playing off ele-
ments of the already divided Jewish people against each other,
the Nazis, along with the undisguised use of physical savagery
and violent death, set up the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto for their
"final solution," the beginnings of the massive "deportations" of
the Jews to death...

THE FASCIST GENOCIDES - 1942

The "deportations"...the "Actions"...the butcheries...

By the middle of 1942, an estimated 100,000 Jews had died, mostly the victims of starvation and disease. From July 22 until October 3, 1942, was the period of the "deportations." The following description of a "deportation" was penned by Dr. Israel Milejowski, himself a victim of the second wave of the journey without return:

"This was the expulsion into the unknown of the people driven from the streets and their homes, from cellars and attics, accompanied by the whistle of whips and the crackle of rifles.

"This was the loading into cattle cars of children torn from their parents, wives from their husbands - huge, congested groups left without water or bread in wild chaos and confusion; this huddled mass of humanity - the young and the old, the healthy and the sick - were taken off on a journey to an unknown address, never to return."

(Famine; Warsaw; 1946; report American Joint Distribution Committee, p.11.)

In a letter of July 19, 1942, Himmler, the head of the SS, had ordered that the "deportation" of the Jews in Warsaw's Ghetto be finished by December 31, 1942. On July 22, 1942, the Judenrat issued its Order of Deportation in which "all Jews, living in Warsaw, without regard to sex or age, are to be deported to the East." The mass genocide had begun. And while driving 310,000 Jews to their deaths at Treblinka, the daily atrocities in the Ghetto never stopped.

"The Germans, Ukrainians and Jewish Police cooperate nicely. The roles are meticulously and precisely divided. The gendarms surround the streets; the Ukrainians surround the houses closely; the Jewish Police walk into the courtyards and summon all the inhabitants: 'All Jews! Down! 30 kilograms of baggage allowed. Those remaining inside will be shot! ... People run...nervously, on the run, clothe themselves in whatever is handy...Trembling, they form groups...Now the deserted houses, the apartment entrances ajar according to regulations, are given a quick once over by the Ukrainians. They open closed apartments with a single kick of their heavy boots, with a single blow of a rifle butt. Two, three shots signify the death of those who did not heed the call...The 'blockade' is finished..."

(Edelman: op.cit., p.21)

No mercy was ever shown, of course:

"An 18 year-old girl, separated from her mother, clutches to the henchman, drops to her knees, kisses his boots..."Mutter! Mutter!' - she calls desperately.

"This single word, embracing all the love, the love and sacredness of all humanity, is the strongest supplication. But the (Nazi) has a German mother, and the word does not move him. He kicks the girl, pushes her away.

"Bewildered and crazed by despair, the girl runs after her mother. She grasps her skirt. The mother is unconsciously stroking the head of her daughter.

"(The Nazi) is watching the scene with the smile of an expert. Presently he apparently decides that it has attained its highest point. He raises his revolver, aims and fires... The girl falls... On the lips of the mother a strange smile appears, already coming from beyond this world, while the SS pushes her ahead, lashing her with a long whip. The selection is over. We are marching towards the cars..."

(J. Kermisz, ed.: *Actions and Deportations*; Warsaw: 1946 pp. 315-322)

"Don't cry, Mother..."

"Zosia was a little girl... During an 'action' one of the Germans became aware of her beautiful diamondlike dark eyes.

"I could make two rings out of them, one for myself and one for my wife. Let's see if they are really so beautiful..."

"Among the (Nazis) exuberant gaiety... One of the wittiest proposes to take the eyes out. A shrill screaming... penetrates our brains, pierces our hearts, the laughter hurts like the edge of a knife plunged into our body. The screaming and laughter are growing, mingling and soaring to heaven. O, God, whom will You hear first?

"...the child is lying on the floor... Instead of two eyes two bloody wounds are staring. The mother, driven mad, is held by the women.

"Two weeks later I met the girl by chance. It was a quiet day, the girl was lying in her bed. A handkerchief was tied around her eyes. The girl was stroking her mother's hand and comforting her:

"Don't cry, Mother dear, it probably had to happen this way. It is still better that they took my eyes instead of killing me. After the war, I will wander from town to town, from one country to another, and will tell everybody how the Germans tortured us, so that everybody will understand that revenge must be taken on the Hitlerites, and when I take the bandage off my eyes, nobody will have pity on the Germans any more..."

"At one of the next 'actions', little Zosia was taken away. It was, of course, necessary to annihilate the blind child..."

(N. Szac-Wajnkranc: Gone with the Fire; Lodz: 1947)

And so it went for more than six long months. Himmler himself arrived in the Ghetto in early January, 1943, to inspect his Nazi handiwork. He was outraged when he saw that the deportations had not yet been completed. He promptly ordered the utter physical liquidation of the Ghetto and all remaining Jews by February 15th.

RESISTANCE!

The will of the people to fight, to live...The fight for unity and organization...The achievement of unity...April 19, 1943...

When Himmler ordered the final liquidation of the Ghetto, the time had come for one of the most glorious chapters in the annals of heroism - not merely of the Jewish people but of man himself.

Moreover, those of us who are removed by some 20 years from the great event must always remember that, as Ber Mark, the historian and Ghetto fighter and now the director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, put it: "The uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto did not come like a bolt from out of the blue":

"...It was the inevitable product of the spirit which permeated the Ghetto. The Uprising (of April 1943) was the result of definite planning and action, of definite internal developments achieved through long, drawn-out preparations as well as from outside technical preparations. These developments had prepared the people psychologically for resistance."

(Ber Mark; The Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto)

We have already seen that the Jews of Warsaw basically were fighters, not cowards or meek lambs waiting to be lead to the slaughter. What they lacked from the beginning was a unified and militant organizational leadership.

This is a most important thing to understand: the absence of organized, unified, militant leadership; and the absence of any tangible material substance of organization.

As a consequence, it has become quite fashionable these days among certain circles of writers - especially among certain Americans - to belittle the armed resistance of the Ghetto and, indeed, by extension, to discount entirely the resistance of the Jews throughout the period of fascist genocide.

To these latter-day critics, the April Uprising was "an act of desperation" or "an armed encounter without consequence" as far as the Nazi killings of the Jews were concerned.

This position flies in the face of the known facts of the Ghetto Uprisings and the role of Jews elsewhere in the Resistance against Hitler Germany; its slanderous falsehoods often go beyond deliberate distortions and omissions. It defames the heroism of our people and distorts its history.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF RESISTANCE

The House Committees...Morale of the Ghetto...Cultural vitality...

In addition to the incidents and points already noted of the basic spirit of resistance by the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, there were other - more basic - elements which went toward making up the fabric of full scale resistance which lead to a unified, organized armed resistance and the April 19th Uprising...

Consider the institution of the House Committees:

"One of the greatest achievements in the Ghetto was the creation of the House Committees. This work...produced the most admirable effect, so much so that every house in the Ghetto was a 'town' in itself, with thousands of inhabitants which carried on a brisk life under the supervision of the Self-Help (public, communal kitchens, ed. note)..."

(Turkow: op. cit, pp. 69-70)

Even more important, the eye-witness recounts in his memoirs, was the political consciousness of the House Committees:

"This (the House Committees effectiveness) created a strange situation where the Judenrat, which had at its disposal its executive organs, the police and its whole administrative apparatus, was in various fields compelled to seek the cooperation and aid of the social groups gathered around (them)... But in spite of great efforts to penetrate the 'fortress' which the House Committees represented...the Judenrat did not succeed in exercising any basic influence on the House Committees."

(ibid)

Moreover, despite the horror of the Nazi's brutal occupation, there were significantly few suicides among the Jews of the Ghetto. This was especially true among the working class masses. The martyred historian, Dr. Emanuel Ringelblum, remarked on this meaningful point in his historic memoirs:

"It is interesting to note that there were almost no suicides in the Ghetto...Why were there only a few hundred cases of suicide among the 300,000 victims? Because the bulk of the population put up a passive resistance as long as they could. To the question of why the Jews did not defend themselves, it must be answered that psychologically from the beginning a strong and effective resistance was offered. No other nation in the world would have been able to hold together spiritually so tightly and to endure its sufferings so long. The best proof is...the small number of suicides among Warsaw Jews..."

(Ringelblum: Notes, op cit., pp.294-96)

Another survivor of the Ghetto who is now an archivist in Paris, noted the same positive sign: "...there were almost no suicides in the Ghetto," wrote M. Mazur in the August 1950 issue of Jewish World. "The Nazis apparently could not understand why the Jews in the Ghetto clung so tenaciously to their lives, in the hope of contributing to the defeat of nazism and of seeing the dawn of a new and just world."

Moreover, until the outbreak of full-scale fighting, the cultural life of the Jews never for a moment ceased behind the Wall. There were organized and continued schools for the children, a central library for study and the circulation of the beloved books and works of scholarship; public lectures, symphonies, chamber music concerts, choirs and readings of verse and literature were always going on. The urge for a full creative life was always present, as Dr. Ringelblum records:

"It so happened that several times I was a lecturer at the Hashomer seminars. Lecturing before a youth that held high the banner of idealism in the surrounding sea of Nazi barbarism was one of my most profound experiences. When I peered into the glowing faces of this eager youth, I forgot that there was a war on in the world."

(Ringelblum: "Comrade Mordecai" (on Mordecai Anilevitch) First English translation of this part of Ringelblum archives by Yuri Suhl.) - Jewish Currents, April, 1962.

Moreover, many of these seminars had a most practical purpose: political instruction and organization. The Hashomer-Hatzair (Young Guards of the Socialist-Zionist movement) was led by the legendary young Mordecai Anilevitch, the 25 year-old Commander-in-Chief of the 1943 Uprising. He and his comrades conducted such seminars right under the nose of the Germans, dancing horas and singing revolutionary songs at their headquarters directly opposite the Nazi gates to the Ghetto! It was here that 'Comrade Mordecai', in league with other young socialists, Zionists and Communists came to learn the basic meaning of the Ghetto struggle, as Dr. Ringelblum recorded in his memoirs:

"The young but quickly maturing Comrade Mordecai understood that at present there was but one question: What kind of death will the Polish Jews select for themselves? Will it be the death of sheep led to the slaughter without resistance, or of people with honor who want the enemy to pay for their death with his own blood? Comrade Mordecai wanted the slaughter of the Polish Jews not to come easy for the enemy; he must be made to bleed for it.

"...Comrade Mordecai lamented...(that) We should have trained the youth in the use of live and cold ammunition. We should have raised them in the spirit of revenge against the greatest enemy of the Jews, of all mankind and of all times!"

(Ringelblum: op. cit.)

Dr. Ringelblum wrote that it was "The youth - the best, the most beautiful, the finest that the Jewish people possessed - spoke and thought only about an honorable death. They did not think about surviving the war. They did not procure for themselves 'Aryan' papers. They had no dwellings on the "other side". Their only concern was to discover the most dignified, most honorable death, as befits an ancient people with a history of several thousand years."

This was the stuff of which Resistance was made...

EFFORTS AT ORGANIZATION AND UNITY

In early 1942, no semblance of unified Resistance existed. Then in February several conferences took place among the militant groups: the PPR (Polish Workers Party, Communist), Right and Left Labor Zionists, Hashomer Hatzair and Hechalutz (the Bund at first refused to join).

The onset of the Nazi program to exterminate the Ghetto's Jews entirely began in July of 1942, and the Anti-Fascist Bloc broke apart. The various self-defense groups split off by themselves.

By October 1942, however, through the daily, persistent and heroic determination of the Resistance, even the Bund was induced to join a unified group which would lay aside all ideological differences and unite in the common struggle. From this unity came the Jewish Fighting Organization, the military arm of the Resistance with young Comrade Mordecai at its head. (The Jewish Fighting Organization was known in Yiddish as the 'Yiddishe Kamf Organizatsie'. In Polish as the ŻOB - Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa.)

What this unification meant can be seen from the following Bund report:

"Our Party (the Bund) was a member of the Jewish Armed Resistance Organization (JFO) for more than six months (from October, 1942, until May, 1943). We joined hands with all Jewish, Zionist underground organizations. Our comrades lived and worked with the others just as members of a close family. A mutual aim united us. During this entire period...there were no quarrels or (internal) struggles, which are common among adherents of different ideologies. All overworked themselves in organizing the mutual defense of our dignity, all fought equally in this historic life and death struggle. There was no difference between the members of our Party and the others in regard to sacrificing themselves or performing their soldiers' duty until the very last..."

(Report B. of the Bund: Warsaw; 1945, p. 60)

It was out of this concrete unification that the slogan: "We are all brothers and children of one family!" emerged which advanced the basis for battle unity in the Warsaw Ghetto.

ARMED RESISTANCE:

Eliminating the traitors...Securing and manufacturing arms...
the first encounters with Nazi Elite SS...Judenrat admits
Himmler orders liquidation of Warsaw Ghetto...

Yet the Jewish Fighting Organization was not yet ready to take on the Elite SS and wehrmacht. There remained some preliminary chores...

"The Jewish Fighting Organization was set on the liquidation of all Jewish Gestapo men and traitors," Jonas Turkow, a Ghetto fighter himself, notes in his memoirs. There now began a concentrated and highly successful effort by the Jews to eliminate the traitors in their midst, as a December 5, 1942 entry of Dr. Ringelblum attests:

"...the time has now arrived to settle accounts...to take vengeance on the guilty. A secret hand felled Leikin (Chief of the Jewish Police), who was one of the primary promoters of the deportations. Now the Jewish Police... are persecuted in every possible way. Not only the Jews, but the Poles, show their hostile attitude toward them. The Jewish Police...are subject to constant molestations on the part of the Polish workers...in the factories...all former policemen are excluded from shop personnel...the former policemen are hunted down and chased wherever they show up..."

(Ringelblum: Notes, op. cit. pp. 270-74)

And the hand of the JFO is true: Jewish Police leaders, the rich speculators and collaborators, the "millionaires of the ghetto", the industrialists who exploited their fellow Jews throughout the Nazi terror are, along with key informers of "The 13" and the Judenrat, knocked off, one by one or in groups, at night, in the morning as they go to work, or in broad daylight at high noon - before the startled eyes of their very Nazi masters. The JFO strikes!

The JFO then turns to the task of arming themselves. The task is both gigantic and subtle, as can be seen from the following reports by participants in the Uprising:

"Once again we built a large organization, not alone this time, but by common efforts, and once again the major problem of weapons...There were almost none in the ghetto. It must be taken into account that the time was 1942. The resistance movement of the Poles was just beginning at the time, and only vague stories were being circulated about Partisans in the woods. It must be remembered that the first organized acts of armed resistance on the part of the Poles did not take place until March, 1943. Therefore, there was nothing unusual in the fact that efforts to obtain arms...encountered major difficulties...We were able to obtain a few pistols from the People's Army...only ten pistols from the Home Army..."

"Arms are smuggled into the Ghetto in precisely the same manner as other contraband. Bribed Polish police close their eyes to heavy parcels thrown over the Wall at designated spots...active liaison with the 'Aryan' side...for large scale purchase of explosives, incendiaries (e.g. 2000 litres of gasoline)..."

(Edelman: op. cit. pp. 29-33)

Then this crucial development:

"An encouraging turning point has occurred in our life!" a member of the underground records of the JFO drive for weapons. "We ourselves are producing our arms!" The Jews themselves learn how to produce hand grenades, bombs, bullets, "Molotov Cocktails. They conduct firing tests, refine and correct the quality of the manufacture of weapons. Basements become veritable 'Molotov Cocktail' plants.

The Jewish Fighting Organization then developed their own secret communication system high above the streets of the Ghetto: the attics. In the walls of the attics in each house and apartment holes were cut which served as passages. In this way, it was possible to move from one street to another, from one end of the ghetto to another without detection by the Nazis:

"The attics were particularly noted for the part they played in the uprisings in the ghetto. They were the only routes through which it was possible to move fighting groups from one point to another. The battle tactics applied required holding a position for as long as possible...and then withdrawal in the last minute through the attics to another position...In the attics we also set up observation-points...essential for the conduct of our fight..."

(T. Borzykowski: Between Falling Walls: Warsaw:1949:pp.56-57)

The armed Jews of Warsaw - lead by a 24 year-old - turned, and though hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, faced the full might of Hitler's Elite SS and the Wehrmacht...

"On January 18, 1943, the Ghetto was surrounded once again and the 'second liquidation' began. This time, however, the Germans were not able to carry out their plans unchallenged. Four barricaded battle groups offered the first armed resistance in the Ghetto..."

(Edelman: op. cit., p. 30)

The JFO in its initial baptism of fire routed the SS sent to round up Jews for liquidation. Throughout Warsaw, Edelman reports, "legends about the 'hundreds' of German dead and the 'tremendous' power of the JFO" circulated. "The entire Polish Underground was full of praise for us..."

The best evidence of the effectiveness of the JFO was attested to by the Judenrat itself:

"(The Germans) addressed themselves to the Judenrat, asking it to carry out the Aktion. The Judenrat...invited the Jewish Fighting Organization to a conference. This invitation was of course rejected with indignation, whereupon the notorious chairman of the Judenrat, Marc Lichtenbaum, gave the Germans the following reply: 'I have no power in the ghetto; another Government rules here!' The German plans ended in complete failure..."

(Cukierman: op. cit., p. 15)

Following another display of determination by the JFO in a battle in early February when Jewish units drove an SS group out of the Ghetto, Himmler himself came to inspect the situation personally. The Hangman was outraged and directed on February 16, 1943 "that the Warsaw Ghetto be destroyed...and that its remaining subhumans should be completely wiped out."

APRIL 19, 1943: The Immortal Warsaw Ghetto!

Here is the report of a fighter at the scene:

"...On April 19, 1943 at 2:00 a.m. the first message concerning the Germans' approach arrived from our outermost observation posts...(the Nazis) were encircling the Ghetto at 30-yard intervals...in 15 minutes all (our) groups were at their battle stations. We informed the entire population of the ghetto (40,000 inhabitants) of the danger...A deathly silence enveloped the Ghetto...We were not taken by surprise."
(Edelman: op.cit., pp. 34-35)

The Jews engaged the startled Nazis - in company strength, full battle dress with the most advanced mechanized weaponry, tanks, bazookas, cannon, flame throwers - on Mila Street;

"The Germans attempted a retreat, but their path was cut. German dead soon littered the street...The 'glorious' SS... called up tanks...even the tanks were affected...The first was burned out by one of our Molotov Cocktails...The fate of the Germans caught on Mila Street trap was settled. Not a single German left the area alive..."
(ibid)

April 20, 1943, another fighter's report:

"...at 3:00 in the afternoon...300 Germans (Wehrmacht) turn into our area...I grab the fuse...I press down...a terrific detonation...bodies flying in the air, hands and feet separately. 80 to 100 German dead...The rest are withdrawing in great disorder...The Germans...are goose-stepping...frightened, they clutch their rifles...I hurl my hand-grenade into the bunch. There is an explosion...Germans are in flames...We withdraw to prepared positions...Suddenly all becomes quiet. The Nazis have fled..."
(Neustadt: op. cit., pp. 273-74)

The Nazis then demand that the JFO capitulate! The fighting Jews laugh in their faces and, according to a Polish Underground report: "reject the German ultimatum."

The Nazis then seize the entire Judenrat. These "saviours" of the Jews who always counselled a policy of calculated appeasement and collusion with the fascists, are summarily shot. According to a JFO bulletin circulated quickly through the Ghetto: "Their bodies were thrown into a garbage pit."

By April 24th, the Jewish fighters are forced to abandon open warfare on the streets and to adopt the tactics of Partisan warfare from the bunkers. In the first three days of fighting, the Polish Underground reports more than 200 Germans killed and twice that number wounded. Despite their employment of Partisan warfare at this point, the JFO still is unified, under an overall High Command, lead by the daring Comrade Mordecai.

The vaunted "Supermen" of the Nazi SS and Wehrmacht are forced to call up even more men and arms! SS General Jurgen Stroop has already failed in his orders from Himmler to clear out the Ghetto in three days. He has already thrown in more than 3000 SS and Wehrmacht equipped with the most modern military weapons against the home-made weaponry of the starved, ragged band of 1500 Jewish men, women and children.

The SS now calls up armored cars, tanks and planes. They proceed to fire endless rounds of shells point-blank into the Ghetto. Dive-bombers peel off and rain incendiaries down upon the dwindling JFO forces. Stroop's own reports tell how the Jews hiding in the rubble and dugouts "become insane from the heat, the smoke, and the explosions."

(Nazi Conspiracy & Aggression: Wash. D.C.; 1947; Vol.III, 'Stroop Report', pp. 723 et seq.)

The Ghetto is one vast pyre. Smoke and flame billow up from its innards. Yet the fighting goes on. The Jews are now fighting in the rubble itself. They have lost all semblance of command. For most of the fighters, the end is approaching fast. On May 9th the dugout holding the JFO central command post is besieged by the Nazis as the black-booted SS for six hours pour round-after-round of shells into the bunker holding Commander Mordecai Anilevitch and his comrades:

"...the Germans called out to surrender, but none of our fighters (did). The call was repeated...Finally, the Germans sent gas into the bunker. They let in a small quantity...trying to break the spirit of the 120 fighters.

"...Let's not fall into their hands alive!' (the fighters swear). The suicides begin. pistols jammed and the owners beg their friends to kill them...no one dares to take the life of a comrade...someone discovered a hidden exit, but only a few succeeded in getting out...The others slowly suffocated...Thus the best of the Jewish fighters met death...among them Mordecai Anilevich, our handsome commander whom we had all loved."

(Lubetkin; op.cit., p.407)

Still the fighting went on. Some fighters managed to escape through the hell of the stinking, suffocating sewers of Warsaw. On May 16th SS General Stroop bragged to his superiors that "the Jewish section of Warsaw no longer exists." But it is a fact that skirmishing went on through the middle of July! Survivors of the Ghetto fought their way out, and some joined the Partisans in the forests to continue the fight. The Polish Underground saluted the Ghetto, declaring in a report that the Jewish fighters had "pointed the way to escape extermination for the Polish people - by Resistance...

From out of the rubble, the farewell letter of Mordecai Anilevich, written on April 23, 1943, comes and reaches out across the ruin of the Warsaw Ghetto!

"Now it is quite clear for us - what happened has by far surpassed all our expectations...Now...we stand at the brink of the abyss...we attacked the Germans and inflicted heavy losses on them. Our losses, on the contrary, were, on the whole, light. Even this is an achievement...I feel that great things are in the offing. What we have succeeded in creating here will be of enormous value and importance.

"I am not able to describe to you the conditions in which the Jews in the Ghetto 'live' now...Our fate is sealed... We bid you farewell, you on the 'outside'. Perhaps a miracle will happen, and we will see each other one day. Still I doubt it very much...The last wish of my life has come true. Jewish self-defense has become a reality, Jewish resistance and vengeance have been transformed into acts. I am happy to have found myself among the first fighting Jews in the Ghetto! Farewell..."

(P. Friedman: Martyrs and Fighters;
N.Y.: Lancer Books, 1954; p.221)

What can one add to this incredible testimony of this incredible young genius and hero of the Warsaw Ghetto. What a frightful price he and his comrades paid for the knowledge they gained in how fascism finally must be fought. We owe it not merely to ourselves and future generations, but we owe a deep, irreparable debt to Mordecai Anilevich and all of the martyred Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto to apply to our own days the lessons of that unforgettable chapter in Jewish history, that imperishable page in the heroism of the global war to defeat fascism.

Fascism and Nazism are by no means wiped out. Let us clearly recognize that they still flourish: in the Adenauer government under control of the old Nazis; in the resurgence of Nazism, anti-semitism and racism throughout the world, including the United States. Efforts are being made to organize a Nazi Internation by the Rockwells and his counterparts in other countries. All these realities give the vow of the ghetto-fighters "Never to Forget, never to Forgive" a special urgency.

We need the Warsaw Ghetto and the lessons it holds for us, yes, even after 20 years. The fighting Jews of Warsaw thought only of the honor of Resistance - despite the odds and in the face of certain death.

We dare not do less - We shall honor the eternal tradition of the immortal Warsaw Ghetto! *****