

Spiritual Resistance during the Holocaust

“To smuggle a loaf of bread – was to resist.

To teach in secret – was to resist.

To gather information and distribute an underground newsletter – was to resist.

To cry out warning and shatter illusions – was to resist.

To rescue a Torah scroll – was to resist.

To forge documents – was to resist.

To smuggle people across borders – was to resist.

To chronicle events and conceal the records – was to resist.

To extend a helping hand to those in need – was to resist.

To dare to speak out, at the risk of one's life – was to resist.

To stand empty-handed against the killers – was to resist.”

This is a translated excerpt from a poem by Hebrew poets Chaim Guri and Monia Avrahami, which for me epitomises spiritual and cultural resistance during the Shoah – the Holocaust.

Resistance of all types, in many ways, was near impossible for Jews in occupied Nazi countries. There was fear of the Nazis' superior power, little access to weapons and almost no ability to move about freely. However, it would be a grave mistake to believe that all Jews went to their death like “sheep to the slaughter.” as is often perceived. Despite the odds, many Jews practiced some form of resistance, whether it was armed and active or cultural and spiritual, . For most Jews, acts of cultural and spiritual resistance were the only possible means to oppose Nazi tyranny. Such acts undermined Nazi power and inspired Jewish hope. However, the risks of resisting Nazi policies were grave; often an act of resistance by one person would mean the death of many others. Resistance of any kind during the Holocaust required great courage.

In Holocaust terminology, “spiritual resistance” refers to attempts by individuals to maintain their humanity and core values in spite of Nazi dehumanization and degradation. Such unarmed resistance came in many forms, religious and non-religious, cultural, and educational. It proved that physical survival was not the only decisive quality of a person and it certainly was not the only matter of importance even to people in the most dire conditions.

Slide 2 Finding food, staying warm, providing a roof over their heads, and taking care of their families were difficult challenges that they had to meet on a daily basis. Nazi restrictions and modes of degradation were definitely aimed to physically destroy.

In ghettos and camps, Jews struggled for humanity, for culture, for normalcy, and for life.

To quote from the diary of Chaim Kaplan in the Warsaw ghetto:

“Everything is forbidden to us but we do everything”

Slide 3. A diary is a form of spiritual resistance. Written from within the walls of a ghetto or the barbed wire of a concentration camp, a diary is a testimony and reflects the desire to leave a legacy for future generations. One example of such a diary is that of David Sierakowiak, interned in the Lodz Ghetto and later deported and murdered in Auschwitz. He left a legacy of seven journals, five of which were recovered after the war. In one entry, David, aged 12, writes, “Tomorrow is the first day of school. Who knows how our dear school has been. Damn the times when I complained about getting up in the morning and tests. If only I could have them back.”

The mere fact that David kept a journal is significant, though it is of course fascinating to notice what he wrote and valued. While starving and tired and even after his mother had been taken away, he longed for

school and for normal life. In later entries he expresses hope for the future though realizes that it “seems just another pipe dream.”

Slide 4. The best known documentation was in the Warsaw Ghetto, code-named *Oyeg Shabbat* ("Joy of the Sabbath") also known by its Yiddish name *Oyeg Shabes* and founded by historian Emanuel Ringelblum (1900-1944). Some of the containers holding the archives were dug up from the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto after the war. The papers found inside have provided valuable documentation of life and death inside the ghetto.

Members of the *Oyeg Shabes* wrote because they believed that while it was unlikely that **they** would survive the war, their words, their descriptions of European Jewish life, would survive.

They wrote to leave as accurate as possible, a record of the destruction of European Jewry and its continued resistance to that destruction. They wrote in order to make the Jews, a people of destiny who would chronicle their own experience and lay claim to that experience.

Slide 5. Education was a form of resistance. In his diary, Yitzkhok Rudashevski writes about the library in the Vilna Ghetto. The Jewish community of Vilna was known for tremendous study and Jewish learning. Therefore, it is not surprising, in light of our knowledge on spiritual resistance, that when confined to the ghetto, Jews built a library.

Yitzkhok writes, “Hundreds of people read in the ghetto. The book unites us with the future. The book unites us with the world. .” The establishment of the library itself was an act of spiritual resistance, as all forms of education and culture were strictly forbidden, but Yitzchok’s diary entry also highlights the fact that he was still thinking about the future. All hope was not lost and Jews in the Vilna Ghetto wanted to maintain their dignity as human beings.

Slide 6. In addition to libraries, schools were created, plays and poems were written and performed and underground newspapers were printed and distributed in the ghettos.

The Jews' most basic form of resistance was to refuse to do what the Nazis wanted them to do, which was simply to die. The instinct for physical survival was strong, as well as being a religious imperative; the **Slide 7.** smuggling of food and countless other minor subterfuges evidenced the determination of the Jewish people to remain alive. In all the ghettos, neighbourhood mutual-aid societies and house committees were set up to procure and share what little food there was, and most people resisted the impulse to think only of themselves. In many small but important ways most Jews in the ghettos maintained their moral dignity until the end.

Slide 8. In another example of spiritual resistance in the camp of Terezin near Prague in Czechoslovakia, several teenage boys compiled a secret magazine titled *Vedem*, which printed prose, poetry, and editorials that provided an outlet for their emotions. In a touching letter, one of the teenagers wrote, "We no longer want to be an accidental group of boys, passively succumbing to the fate meted out to us. We want to create an active, mature society and through work and discipline, transform that fate into a joyful, proud reality." This statement is an act of resistance. The boys in Home Number One were not only fighting for their right to live, but for their right to exist as educated, valued individuals.

Slide 9 Also in Terezin an art teacher, Friedel Dicker Brandeis encouraged children to draw, not to describe their misery but to express their optimism and hope for a better life.

Slide 10. Religious observance was a potent form of defiance. It was not enough to keep one's body physically alive. In many instances, Jews in

ghettos and camps continued observing religious traditions, using their creative skills, and maintaining communal life. Jews participated in clandestine prayer services inside barracks while others stood watch outside as all religious rituals were strictly forbidden, punishable by death. Barmitzva'hs and weddings were celebrated, Shabbat candles were lit and Kiddush was recited in basements.

Some Jews in the camps even continued to observe the Holy Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, with its traditional fast, even though this meant further depriving their already-starved bodies of the miniscule daily food rations.

A survivor I met at Yad Vashem, Ruth Brand tells how she fasted on Yom Kippur at Auschwitz. When the Germans found out she was fasting they made her life very difficult with extreme physical labour all day. When she finally got back to her barracks at the end of the day, the soup she had managed to save from lunch had gone sour. She says – they could break my body but not my soul.

There are many stories from both the ghettos and the camps of spiritual resistance , all life-endangering– people celebrating Purim, making matzot for Passover, saving scraps of paper to write a machzor, prayerbook for the Jewish New Year and chanukiot, candle holders, for Channukah out of whatever material was available , even potatoes which they would save instead of eating. Many Orthodox Jews who opposed the use of physical force viewed prayer and religious observances as the truest form of resistance. As the Warsaw ghetto was being surrounded to be liquidated on the eve of Passover 1943, religious Jews held sederim – the traditional Passover meal, for most of them their last.

Music was central to Jewish life in the ghettos and camps just as it had been in Jewish cultural life before the Holocaust. Music brought into and written in the ghettos and camps helped to bring some normality to the new , unfamiliar environment that Jews found themselves in, yet also

served as an expression of hope, protest and spiritual resistance. Often the words of the songs contained hidden messages of hope that helped the prisoners to fight to retain their humanity in spite of the misery surrounding them

There are many examples of musical performances in the ghettos and camps which were used to defy the Nazis. Sometimes the Nazis detected the double meaning and banned the performance but many others were performed and gave hope to the performers as well as the audience. There were orchestras in the ghettos and camps but music of astonishing beauty and power was composed and performed by some of Europe's most gifted musicians and composers in the most unlikely of places.

Slide 11. On November 24, 1941, the Germans established a Jewish ghetto/ camp in the fortress town of Terezin, Czechoslovakia. Known by its German name, Theresienstadt, until its liberation on May 8, 1945, it functioned as a ghetto and transit camp on the route to Auschwitz. A large proportion of Jewish artists, musicians and intellectuals were amongst those imprisoned there due to the Nazis portraying this camp as a model ghetto. It was a cover up of the deportations and deaths, especially when the Red Cross made an official visit there in 1944. The Camp leadership, after a short initial prohibition, officially allowed prisoners to possess musical instruments, thereby enabling a broad spectrum of musical as well as other cultural and artistic activities. Though in the final analysis this occurred for the purpose of propaganda, it created the essential conditions for the extraordinary possibility of cultural production for prisoners by prisoners.

One survivor of Terezín described the prisoners' enduring spirit as "a creation from inside to cover up the hunger, the terrible time and the deprivation of our humanity and dignity. There was a force to create, to do something, and it helped us to forget for several hours what was

happening.” For the prisoners of Terezín, music played the vital role of voicing resistance and the will to survive and ultimately of giving expression to hope. Music was a way to forget, to leave the horror —a way to survive another day. Singing songs brought our minds back home.

Slide 12. Among the prisoners brought to Terezin was 36-year old Rafael Schaechter, a pianist, conductor and chorus master, who quickly established himself as a leader of the imprisoned artist community. He formed a theatre ensemble; commissioned works from the four very eminent composers imprisoned in the camp and engaged musicians in his programs.

However his most striking achievement at Terezin was Verdi’s Requiem. Beginning in July 1943 with only 4 soloists and a 150 member chorus as well as a legless piano, he conducted 16 performances of the opera. As vocalists and musicians were deported to the “east”, a euphemism for Auschwitz, he replaced and retrained new members. Miraculously all learnt their lines by rote.

The Nazis found it ironic that Jewish singers were voicing a catholic mass that symbolised their own destruction – But Schaechter and his performers knew it was actually the opposite as they provided a clandestine opportunity to direct guilt and shame back at their oppressors. He told his performers- We can sing to them what we cannot say to them.

For them the Requiem was not a commentary about death but about the beauty and importance of life.

Slide 13. Also in Terezin , children performed an opera called Brundibar, composed before the war by a Czech Jew named Han Krasa but not performed until he and many of the original performers had been deported to Terezin. A set was designed, pieces were rewritten to include the instruments available in the ghetto, and artists in the camp designed posters to advertise the performance. Furthermore, the very subject of the opera was easy to relate to. The opera tells the story of children who

sing in the marketplace to raise much-needed money for their sick mother. The organ player Brundibar chases them away, but with the help of some outsiders, the children defeat Brundibar and continue to sing in the square. All those watching and performing the opera understood that Brundibar represented Hitler and were uplifted, even if only briefly, by the fact that good could triumph over evil. Singing became not only a temporary escape from reality, but a means to overcome feelings of helplessness. It was light in the darkness. Brundibar was performed 55 times at Terezin, with many changes of cast as the children were deported to Auschwitz but the morale remained high as it was such an uplifting and empowering work.

Slide 14. Here is the finale from Brundibar – the Victory Song. It is the translated English libretto and you can see why this opera gave people hope – the message even resonates today.

Brundibar Finale – Victory song
Trombone and kettle drums
The villain's overcome
Strum it on your guitar
Farewell to Brundibar!
And what's the cause of it? Well-
Listen up – we wont submit!
Just listen –we never quit!
The bully's overthrown
For you were not alone
That's the whole point of it!
Ladies and gentlemen
And mostly children
Thank you etcetera
Thus ends our opera!
That's all the tale to tell

We two had best bestir
Mommy's not feeling well
And we have milk for her!
For help is everywhere
Below and in the air
Sometimes it's all around
Sometimes it must be found
But if you ask for help, well
Listen up we're here to say
Don't worry - help's on the way!

And when you take a stand
Someone will lend a hand
That's the whole point of it!
When a bully's near
Tell him you're not afraid
You'll see him fade away
Friends will volunteer
And bullies disappear!

BRUNDIBAR:

They believe they've won the fight
They believe I'm gone - not quite!
Nothing ever works out neatly
Bullies don't give up completely
One departs, the next appears
And we shall meet again, my dears!
Though I go, I won't go far!
I'll be back - love BRUNDIBAR!

EVERYONE:

Tyrants come along
But you just wait and see
They topple one - two - three

Our friends make us strong

And so we end our song!

Slide 15. Viktor Ullmann (1898 – 1944) came to Terezin with a reputation as an outstanding conductor, art critic and composer. He produced more compositions there than any other musician.

His impressive list of original works included piano sonatas, a string quartet, several dozen choral and orchestral works and an opera, *Der Kaiser Von Atlantis – The Emperor of Atlantis*, which was a thinly veiled satire of the Holocaust and Adolf Hitler. (It was performed by a Perth theatre group in this synagogue last year).

The production in Terezin reached dress-rehearsal stage, at which point it was banned by the SS, who understood its meaning.

To quote Victor Ullman: “It must be emphasized that Terezin has served to enhance, not to impede, my musical activities and that our endeavour with respect to Arts was commensurate with our will to live”.

Slide 16. The age old song *Ani Ma’amin*, written in the twelfth century, is by Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon, the Maimonides, who was a great religious philosopher. The words of the song come from the Thirteen Principles of Faith and means “I Believe with perfect faith in the coming of Mashiach and though he is delayed I will continue to wait for him.” It was later sung by many Jews during the Holocaust, even as they entered the gas chambers. Desperate Jews clung to his words for hope for the future and for humankind.

The words of the song were well known but the most well-known tune was actually composed during the Holocaust. It happened during the nightmarish journey on a cattle wagon from Warsaw to Treblinka. A follower of the Moditser rebbe, named Reb Azriel David Fastag who had a beautiful singing voice, was trying to transform himself to happier times in his mind. Suddenly, there appeared before his eyes the words of the twelfth of the Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith: Closing his eyes, he

meditated on these words and it was not long before he began to hum a quiet tune to these words.

There, amidst the death and despair on the train to Treblinka, he was transformed into a pillar of song, bringing forth the song of the eternity of the Jewish People.

He was unaware of the silence in the cattle car, and of the hundreds of ears listening attentively in amazement. He also didn't hear the voices as they gradually joined his song, at first quietly, but soon growing louder and louder.

Somehow this melody must be preserved, he thought. This moment must be remembered.

"Do you have a pencil, a piece of paper?" Reb Azriel Dovid asked his fellow passengers? Someone had managed to hang on to a pencil. Someone else had held on to a scrap of paper. They were silently passed to Reb Azriel Dovid, who began to write down the notes of the melody he had just composed.

Then he asked for silence.

"I need a volunteer," he told the hushed group. "This piece of paper must reach the Modzhitzer Rebbe who has fled to America. Is anyone willing to try to escape?" Two young men immediately accepted the challenge. One of them took the paper and carefully hid it inside his pocket. They climbed one upon the other, and finding a small crack of the train's roof broke out a hole from which to escape. One of the young men survived. After the war, the man made his way to the Modhziter Rebbe. He told the Rebbe of all that had happened on that fateful day, how Reb Azriel Dovid's song had rekindled the faith of his dispirited companions.

And then the young man began to sing. "Ani Ma'amin." After singing just a few words, the tears welled up in his eyes. Painful memories of years of torture and starvation threatened to overcome him and choke off his voice. But then the sound of Reb Azriel Dovid's sweet voice came back to him and seemed to echo in his ear. The young man was no longer singing

alone. Six million voices were now singing with him. "Ani Ma'amin," he sang to the Rebbe, "still, in spite of everything, Ani Ma'amin- I believe." [The Song "Ani Ma'amin" was sung immediately following the address.].

In conclusion:

When thinking about resistance during the Holocaust one should not dwell on how little or ineffectual it might appear to have been, given the sheer enormity of the genocide. Rather, given the circumstances that Jews and other targeted groups faced, it was amazing that any act of defiance occurred at all.

These spiritual and cultural acts of resistance demonstrated the resolve of the Jewish people. The songs, music and stories, written and collected, not only preserve and document life during that time, but bear witness and commemorate the strong will, spirit and creativity of the Jews during this darkest of times and remind us never to forget,

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9 November 2016