

Women in the Jewish Resistance to Nazi Occupation

Part I

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In December 1941, a manifesto was distributed in the ghetto of Vilna, written by Abba Kovner, a young youth movement member of Hashomer Hatz'ir, calling Jews to resist Nazi deportations and "let us not be led like sheep to the slaughter!"

Independently, this very phrase was repeated by other individuals in occupied Europe.

In January 1943, in Jerusalem, the prominent Polish Zionist leader Yitzhak Grünbaum, head of the rescue committee for European Jewry, asked in grief how it was possible for Jews of Poland, the paradigms of Jewish self defense, whose sophisticated political methods had ensured their rights in Poland, were led like sheep to the slaughter.

This image of the Jews became dominant during the 1950s to describe Jewish passivity vis-a-vis Nazi mass killing operations. In Raul Hilberg's standard work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, published in 1961, he described, the modes of Jewish reaction to Nazis: When confronted by force, a group can react in five ways: by resistance, by an attempt to alleviate or nullify the threat (the undoing reaction), by evasion, by paralysis, characterized by almost complete lack of resistance.

Jews were not oriented toward resistance.

Now in the late 1990s the naivete of this evaluation is self evident. The streams of refugees in Kosovo in the last few weeks, the escapes and killing in Bosnia and in Africa have once again shown us that a civilian population confronted with such a vigorous onslaught - if it was not paralyzed - was trying to escape.

The responses to Jewish reactions to Nazi persecution seem similar at the first glance, yet Kovner in Vilna, for example, expressed a unique understanding that what was happening in Vilna was part of a plan for total destruction of the Jews. He had come to this conclusion after witnessing the first wave of mass killings in Lithuania perpetrated by Lithuanians and, Germans together. Only a few people were able to conceptualize or emotionally accept such a threatening conclusion. Therefore, Kovner called on the Jews to take the only choice left - to select the way they would die - since he had concluded that death was inescapable under the circumstances. He wished to live his last months or weeks in active preparation for an an-ned resistance that would express a Jewish Zionist response to Nazism, that would make life difficult for the Germans, and provide a legacy for the future of the Jewish people.

Gruenbaum, however, lived outside occupied Europe, and his judgmental approach shows that he did not comprehend the true European Jewish reality. He mourned. the lack of Jewish reaction and was ashamed of his fellow Jews. Hilberg's topological assessment was not based on careful analysis of the sort evolved in his examination of the Nazis themselves. Resistance, for Hilberg, meant using force against the Germans. A genuine true reconstruction of Jewish resistance, however, involves other considerations. Both Hilberg and Gruenbaum expressed a hidden assumption that had the Jews themselves reacted in a

different way, they could have change their fate. This assumption was absent in Kovner's understanding as well as among Jews who called for armed resistance overall. For them, death was the reality: only the way of dying and the price the Nazis would pay for their death could be changed.

Hilberg studied the Nazi bureaucracy of annihilation, and the work of other historians and social scientists has demonstrated how comprehensive and well-prepared was the Final Solution. Military historians established that the destruction of the Jewish race was a major Nazi war aim, and that they were ready to make a great investment in carrying it out. And, the analysis of Hitler's Weltanschauung demonstrated how his opposition to liberalism, democracy, universalism, and the equality of mankind, was crystallized in antisemitism, which was an essential element of Nazism. Therefore, the meaning of Jewish resistance should refer to the particular fate of the Jews during this war, and to the nature, motivations, and character of the Jewish response to Nazism.

Another definition of resistance was offered by Prof. Yehuda Bauer of the Hebrew University: "any group action consciously taken in opposition to known or surmised laws, actions, or intentions directed against the Jews by the Germans and their supporters." This definition opposes Hilberg who confined resistance to the use of force. For Bauer, only paralysis, and in some cases the collaboration of Jewish leaders, is non-resistance. All actions should be examined in reference to the motivation and intention. The Jewish Councils, the self-help organizations, the Jewish youth movements, and the political parties were among those who affirmed Jewish life.

Although in general I agree with Bauer's definition, I would like to take issue with his notion that only a group action would fall into the definition of Jewish resistance. True, from a national point of view it is the constructed collective who may oppose an oppressor. However, in the case of the Holocaust, when the very definition of who was a Jew was that of the oppressor, and his main goal was to kill all people who fell into that category, many manifestations of unorganized responses by individuals demonstrated a conscientious resistance to Nazi policy. In addition, I think that a gender perspective to the description and interpretation of resistance demonstrates this beyond doubt.

I would like to present a story of one family which represents a form of resistance in a different perspective.

A woman interviewed at length by Slepak was Mrs. R3, the wife of an independent printer from Warsaw and the mother of two unmarried sons. Until the outbreak of war, Mrs. R3 had run the home and had taken care of her sons' education. At first, her husband was able to continue his printing business, albeit on a reduced scale. On July 8, 1940, all of the Jewish printing plants in Warsaw were closed down. A gang of German policemen burst onto the premises, where Mr. R3 was working alone, beat him badly and confiscated the business. As with Mr. F., it took months for Mr. R3 to recover from the injuries he sustained.

Part II

Like many other middle-class Jewish women, Mrs. R3 began to sell family possessions such as jewelry and, household items. When they were forced out of their home and into the ghetto, the family's situation deteriorated. still further. At this point, Mrs. R3 became determined to find a job; as she explained to Slepak, she felt unable to remain inactive.

Her goal was to become superintendent of one of the apartment buildings on Leszno Street - a position that commanded a monthly salary of fifty zloty a month, paid by the Judenrat. At first, despite various connections with the Judenrat, Mrs. R3 failed to gain the post. It went instead to a middle-aged musician, who lived with his son's family. Mrs. R3 refused to accept this situation. Capitalizing on the fact that many thefts were taking place in the building, she organized a petition to replace the superintendent and eventually succeeded in gaining the position for herself

Mrs. R3's organizing abilities now became even more apparent. She proved to be extremely hard-working in her new job, working each day from 5:30 a.m. until late in the evening. She maintained a clean and well-run building, and kept beggars, thieves and other intruders far away -- assisted in all these tasks by her two sons and, occasionally, by her husband. Her sons, for instance, developed a system (based. on the brief time tag between the knocking on the building's entrance door and its opening) to warn young male tenants of upcoming nighttime raids, which became more frequent in the spring of 1942. In these raids, conducted mostly by the SS but sometimes assisted by Jewish police or informers, people were either murdered, arrested or seized for forced labor. Mrs. R3 also cultivated a good working relationship with the Jewish police who periodically came to check the building's level of cleanliness and efficiency. By serving as the tenants' intermediary, Mrs. R3 spared the people in her building from excess harassment and the need to pay bribes.

Mrs. R3's many connections, resulting both from her job and from the location of her building, enabled her and her sons to become middlemen in various business transactions between residents of the ghetto and Poles. As such, they received a percentage of all goods or money that changed hands. Mrs. R3 also showed an altruistic side, helping to trace the relatives of Jewish children who were sent from other ghettos to Warsaw after their families had been deported.

Are we witnessing in this story a form of resistance that was typical to many other women of middle and lower middle class? The answer of research is positive. The most significant changes in family relations came about in consequence of women's working outside the house and the resultant declining position of the husband as chief provider. For some, this was a shift that occurred at the beginning of the war when many family businesses were destroyed or badly damaged. Husbands lost their source of income for the weeks and months it took to make the necessary repairs -- and by that time, many of the ghettos were already being set up. Barred from their former places of business, Jewish men were now at risk whenever they walked on the streets - fair play for harassment, or for being seized and taken away for forced labor. Sometimes they were taken for local work, but they could also be sent outside the city, returning home weeks or months later, often broken physically or in spirit. Fearing the consequences of being seized, many Jewish men stayed off the streets during daylight hours. In one way or another, a sizable number of ghetto families found themselves without an adult male provider.

Thus women, in particular, were forced to take the initiative. Some took their husbands' place in selling merchandise or else leased equipment or vehicles such as a horse and cart, which were then hired out. Before the ghettos were established, they petitioned the authorities for permission to reopen or start new businesses, and pleaded for the right to send clothing and medicine to husbands who had been arrested or deported. They took care of home repairs and, when necessary, found new temporary quarters for their families. All of these tasks were unfamiliar to women, and were part of the initial confrontation with the violence and chaos of the occupation. Children, who were out of school for months at a time, helped. as well, holding a place in lines for food and water or taking care of younger siblings. In the ghetto, many of them became smugglers.

From here I would like to move to the better-known phenomenon of armed resistance.

Henri Michel the French historian identified a number of necessary conditions for a resistance movement to develop and survive. Among them were: the availability of arms and experienced military personnel; support of a government inside or outside the occupied territory to supply means and information; an authoritative chain of command; and the support of the population to provide shelter and cover for the resistance members at risk. It was of utmost importance for the resistance to become part of a general plan to fight the enemy (Germans). These essential elements help to explain why the resistance movements in Europe began in the last two years of the war, when the signs the victory of the democracies were clear.

Jews, however, lacked almost all of the requirements for launching an armed. resistance, while at the same time, they were the only group intended for complete annihilation. In spite of this, the first major uprising against the Germans was in the ghetto of Warsaw. In smaller ghettos in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union many other attempts to fight the Nazis took place earlier, in 1941 and the beginning of 1942.

What was the nature of the Jewish armed resistance? It consisted mostly of young people who were part of the Zionist, Bundist, and Communist youth movements. Armed resistance emerged in the last stages just before or after the community experienced mass deportations. A long process of realization of the true meaning of Nazi policy had preceded it. One of the first preparatory stages for resistance was the establishment of communication lines between the isolated ghettos through which information, decisions, and arms were exchanged. These lines of communications were formed from the beginning of the occupation when the Jews were confined to the ghettos and barred from using trains and other means of transportation.

Even when armed revolts took place only in a few of the ghettos, with only a very small group of young people being involved, in the eyes of the resistance leaders the meaning of the revolt embraced the total Jewish community. The chance of being rescued and surviving after an armed resistance were very slim. The motivation of the resistance members did not result from any hope of rescue, but rather was a decision of how best to die. It was a rejection of being captive in the Nazi death plan for the Jews. And an added value was to kill as many Germans as possible in the process of dying.

It is in this spirit that we should read Mordechai Anielewicz's last letter of April 23, 1943:

It is impossible to put into words what we have been through. One thing is clear, what happened exceeded our boldest dreams. The Germans ran twice from the ghetto. One of our companies held out for 40 minutes and another - for more than 6 hours. The mine set in the "brushmakers" area exploded. Several of our companies attacked the dispersing Germans. Our losses in manpower are minimal. That is also an achievement. Yechiel fell. He fell a hero at the machine gun. Great things are happening and what we dared do is of great and enormous importance. The dream of my life has risen to become fact. Self-defense in the ghetto will have been a reality . Jewish armed resistance and Revenge are facts. I have been a witness to the magnificent heroic fighting of Jewish men of battle."

Part III

Armed resistance did not represent nihilism or a total despair for the future of the Jewish people. On the contrary, the young fighters aimed to transcend the reality of destruction and provide a legacy and symbol for future generations. The armed revolt was the culmination of a long process; if it had not come to fruition the members of the resistance movement would have considered it a great failure.

In the mind of Anielewicz, men and women had an equal role in the fighting. Next to him in the leadership of the rebellion was Zivia Lubetkin, who was fighting with him in the bunker and who managed to escape with the last fighters through the sewers of Warsaw to the Aryan side after the Nazis exploded the bunker. However, in order to reach this final phase many preparations had to be taken, in which women played a major role.

Playing down the preparatory steps before an armed resistance occurred, was the reaction of the public in the European countries occupied by the Nazis. They were desperately looking for their anti-Nazi resistance movements. For them the superior act in the fight for freedom was to take part in military operations to drive the Nazis out of their countries. This was not the situation of the Jews.

I mentioned before the importance of the communication lines between the Jewish ghettos. The role of women as couriers was crucial in the operation of this system of communication. Women capitalized on the fact that, unlike men, they were not instantly recognizable as Jews. Many women looked "Aryan," or they dyed their hair, and were able to "pass" on the Aryan side. Thus, they had greater freedom of movement and were able to establish contacts with other underground forces. They were able to transmit money, arms and ammunition, and information to the ghettos.

However, the crucial question to be asked is, how could these women establish contacts and build relationships that would allow them to become so involved, for example, in trades they knew nothing about, and with people with whom they had had no previous contact.

The question becomes even more puzzling if we think of the traditional role of young Jewish girls in their families and social environment before the war. They were not mature enough to have established working or professional relationships with many non-Jews. They were unfamiliar with the social manners of the classes with whom they had to make contacts, and they did not necessarily have an extrovert temperament needed to approach an unknown society. How did such women have the hutzpah and daring to pretend to be what they were not?

Lisa Chapnik, who headed the anti-fascist committee in Bialystock, was 19 years old in 1941 when the Nazis invaded her home town of Grodno. She had just graduated from high school and was thinking of the nice summer coming up. She was short and very skinny and looked younger of her age. Without any experience in handling perilous situations, she took advantage of her childish looks, and acting like a stubborn insatiable little girl, she managed to rescue her brother from a German prisoners' camp in the first weeks of the occupation. Chapnik was ready to utilize any and all means to gain information and a better understanding of German intentions and their Jewish policy. Thus, she used her sweet mannerisms and played as a cute little girl in order to get the support of a Russian woman to lead her to the nearby city of Slonim in order to find out what had happened to the Jews there. She got in touch with a friend of her brother who could help her make contacts and obtain information, and was ready to return to Grodno. She quickly learned Christian prayers and curses, so that her journeys to Slonim and back to Grodno would be less risky.

Her expedition had taught her how cruel was the fate of the Jews. She saw the empty Jewish quarter and was told about the massacre of the Jews in Slonim. She thought to pass the information to her fellow Jews in Grodno and to conceive some schemes of rescue.

I told my friends, relatives, and neighbors in Grodno about the Slonim massacre and everything I had heard and seen. People didn't believe me. Each person hoped that the tragedy wouldn't touch him or her personally. But I wrote down what had happened in Slonim, and my brother prepared some leaflets 'in order to expose the truth about what the nazis had done.'" (Women in the Holocaust, 112).

What can we learn from these events? Chapnik had the advantage of being a girl, but her character and courage were of critical importance. The daring and courage first expressed in the rescue of a family member was perhaps an instinctive reaction. However, Chapnik demonstrated a quick learning process and an ability to project from one situation to another. Thus, she was structuring a strategy of behavior for life outside the ghetto and with non-Jews. Devotion and alliances were extremely important, and the next step that Chapnik took was to create a team with her brother and a few other friends. Cooperation with others was crucial for success, along with the realization that soon they would all have to escape the coming deportations by producing false papers giving them non-Jewish identities so that they could leave the ghetto for the Aryan side.

Their preparations not only served to save them, but were a means of establishing anti-Nazi organizations. The deportations from Grodno in the fall of 1942 left few choices to Chapnik and her friends, and they escaped to the Aryan side.

Chapnik with a group of other young women from Grodno and Bialystok - Chasia Bielcka, Bronia Vinicka, Ania Rud, Chajka Grossman - then began their careers as couriers on the Aryan side. They all moved to Bialystok and played a dominant role in organizing the underground and assisting in the partisans' warfare. Chapnik tells us in her account:

During the day we couriers carried rifles in pipes, parts of machine guns and explosives. We passed members of the Gestapo, SS, and police. I should say that each step of the Jewish women on the Aryan side was extremely risky and dangerous. We seem to have lived on the verge of disaster - to have walked on the edge of a blade. We all assumed that none of us would survive, but it was our moral duty to fight the Nazis, to avenge our parents and our people. (Women in the Holocaust, 118)

When we follow their stories and the accounts of their work with a gender perspective, we learn that on the one hand these young girls (aged 17-20) felt no shortcomings in comparison to their male partners, and considered themselves completely equal to the male members of the resistance. Neither they nor their friends thought that their work was less important in preparing the assault on the Nazis. They thought of their advantages as women, being able to stay more confidentially and to hide their Jewishness on the Aryan side and being able to capitalize on the "gentlemanly" feelings of men towards the "beautiful and weak race." They did not hesitate to use flattering feminine mannerisms in order to avoid searches, and in gaining the protection of a high-ranking Nazi in order to transfer ammunition to the city and then to the ghetto. They never thought that using these such "female wiles" was wrong, although they also realized the risk of sexual harassment. Let's hear Chapnik again:

Until August 1943, when the Bialystok ghetto was liquidated, we were 'in close contact with the ghetto and carried the messages of its organizations. Between the destruction of the ghetto and April 1944, we supported the Jewish detachment Foroj. We provided them with medicines, compasses, maps, data, and some weapons. Foroj and the other Jewish partisan detachments took in all the people we managed to bring them-those who escaped from the ghetto transports. (Women in the Holocaust, 117.)

We can imagine these young women in their activities. Working with the constant risk that their true identity might be revealed. Spending long lonely hours on the trains traveling from towns and villages and

finding them without Jews. Longing for their families who had perished, and constantly worrying about their friends 'in the ghetto. They were pretending all the time to be what they were not, and were constantly hearing the slanders heaped on the murdered Jews along with joyous comments on their disappearance, and they were forced to smile quietly or join the laughter with a broken heart.

In conclusion, from the cases I presented, the definition of resistance given at the beginning of my talk cannot stand. Both individual and collective acts of resistance were often a matter of continuation rather than two different levels of action. We can understand why contemporaries viewed the armed revolt as the culmination of resistance. However, as historians, we read their version critically. We understand that in the overall representation of resistance, the preliminary steps were as essential as the final action of revolt, and that in any event neither could change the fate of the Jews as conceived by the Nazi Final Solution.

Author's Biography

Dalia Ofer is married and has four children.
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List of some of Dr. Ofer's many publications:

Edited books:

"Women in the Holocaust." ed. With Lenore L. Weizman (Yale University) Press, 1998) Nominated Jewish Book award 1999 (For annotation see website's bibliography page.)

"Editor, Vatikim ve'Olim ba-`Aliyah Hagdolah 1948-1951" (Veterans and New Immigrants during Mass Immigration, 1948-1951, (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1996).

Books:

"Derech Baiam, Asliyah Bet Bitkufot Hashoah" (Illegal Immigration to Palestine 1939-. (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1988) BenZvi award 1992)

"Escaping the Holocaust, Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939-1944". (New Oxford University Press, 1990) Jewish Book Award 1992.

"Parashat Kladovo-Sabac: Hamas 'a Shelohelo Higi 'a Shelo Higi`a 1939-1942" (The Uncompleted Voyage: Jewish Refugees in Yugoslavia. 1939-1942) (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 1992.) With Hannah Wiener.

Articles: (Two of her many articles)

"Israel Reacts to the Holocaust" in The World Reacts to the Holocaust", ed. David Wyman (Johns Hopkins University, 1996) 939-923.

"Every Day Life in the Ghettos and Camps in Transnistria" (in Hebrew and English) Yad Vashem Studies 25, (1996): 175-208