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Refuse to go Quietly:  
Jewish Survival Tactics During the Holocaust

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of History  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree  
Master of Arts in History

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by  
John David Caraveo,  
May 2016

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## ABSTRACT

Refuse to go Quietly:

Jewish Survival Tactics During the Holocaust

by

John David Caraveo

During World War Two, the European Jewish population was faced with this during Shoah (the Holocaust). From Kristallnacht in November 1938 to the collapse of the Nazi Regime in May 1945, they relied heavily on each other and their instincts to discover ways to survive while in the ghettos, labor camps, and partisan units, if they managed to escape and head for the forests. Even with some Jews turning on their own to help the Nazis, the vast majority stuck together and did everything they could to persist and survive. While only two uprisings were viewed as successes, the ghetto and camp revolts that failed still showed the Jewish people were not going to lie down to the Germans and that they were never going to give up. This thesis details some of the ways Jews fought for survival in the ghettos, concentration/extermination camps, and as partisan fighters.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Violence is like a weed – it does not die even in the greatest drought.”

- Simon Wiesenthal, Holocaust Survivor and Nazi Hunter

Germany has always had a rich history: Charlemagne (or Charles the Great, King of the Franks) had been crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 A.D., Gregory V became the first German Pope in 996, the Great Famine and Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation in 1517, the Napoleonic Wars in the early parts of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Otto von Bismarck overseeing the unification of Germany in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. It is a centuries old history, but today Germany is known primarily for twelve-years. 1933-1945 were difficult years for the whole of Europe. With Adolf Hitler becoming Chancellor of Germany and eventual leader of the National Socialist German Worker’s Party, these years brought on, what this author believes, a new dark age to German, European and most importantly, Jewish history.

Hitler took the remnants of a broken population in the reverberations of the Great War and mended them back to being a proud European nation. In doing so, he was aware that a scapegoat was needed, what better choice than the Jewish population that was allegedly in control of the German banking system and economy. What would follow were the years of a megalomaniac focused on creating the most powerful country in the world comprised of the “perfect race”.

The Holocaust (1933-1945) was the horrific event, master-minded by Hitler and his legion of Nazi personnel, which led to the deaths of over six million Jewish lives in Europe. A

great level of methodology and planning went into devising the best possible way to exterminate the European Jewish population while at the same time keeping the mass of German civilians in the dark. In the early stages, Hitler authorized the use of the euthanasia hospitals, gas vans, and, after the start of Operation Barbarossa, the deployment of Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing squads). But after seeing the emotional and psychological toll face-to-face killing was taking on the perpetrators, extermination camps that housed gassing chambers, with some capable of killing two thousand people in thirty minutes, were introduced.<sup>1</sup> Once all of Europe was embled in war, Hitler and the Nazis were able to begin killing the Jews on a mass scale because the majority of the continent was focused on the events surrounding them and not of the systematic elimination of the Jewish population. In 1939, Hitler was quoted as saying that after the war was won and Lebensraum (living space) was achieved, no one would ask about German actions: “Who,” he allegedly asked rhetorically, “after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”<sup>2</sup> In historical context, the man was correct.

Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass) on the night of 9-10 November 1938 took even the people of Germany by surprise when Nazi SA paramilitary units attacked Jewish businesses, synagogues and people. The day after Kristallnacht, Hermann Göring told a conference audience, "The Jewish problem will reach its solution if, in any time soon, we will be drawn into war beyond our border—then it is obvious that we will have to manage a final account with the Jews."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Niewyk, *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Paul Lochner, *What About Germany?* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1942), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 23.

Holocaust history is about who killed the Jews, how and why it was done,<sup>4</sup> but also the largely little known ways the Jewish people fought to survive. Historians have largely glossed over the subject with the exception of a few: Allan Levine, for instance, has written extensively on Jewish partisans in the forests of Eastern Europe. Overall, the historical accounts of survival tactics taken by the European Jewish population have come largely through personal recollections from those involved. With these personal accounts, historians and readers have garnered a greater understanding of how the Jews put forth such a valiant effort to demonstrate to their German oppressors that they would not go quietly into the night.

The actions that the Jews took to undermine their German oppressors' went mostly unnoticed until the end of the war, and even then the majority of what they performed was unknown for years after. It was much more difficult to have a fighting chance for survival in the early years of the war when the Einsatzgruppen were rounding up entire villages and executing their inhabitants in the forests outside towns because at that point, the European Jewish population was unaware of the German's motives. It was in the ghettos, where the Germans had first consolidated the Jewish population of Poland beginning in late 1939, and other conquered areas in the summer of 1942, where Jewish resisters could form underground units and begin to explore ways to take the fight to the Germans on their own terms.

In the ghettos Jews suffered extreme malnutrition given the crush of people in such a confined location mixed with the already crippling lack of food available. With a typhus epidemic in 1941 that spread through many of the ghettos, and which wiped out scores of people every day, the hospitals could not do much more than just stand idly by. The director of ghetto

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<sup>4</sup> Helmut Walser Smith, *The Holocaust and Other Genocides: History, Representation, Ethics* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 1.

health in the Warsaw Ghetto believed the patients had two options: they could either die from starvation or from typhus.<sup>5</sup> When the living conditions became too much to endure, and with the help of the various underground organizations in the ghettos, uprisings began to break out during and following German liquidations. Even in locations where uprisings did not occur, thousands continued to find ways to survive their time in the ghettos and either break out and join partisan groups (or be transported to the next staging area: the concentration camps).

In *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, Nechama Tec illustrates how many individuals and small groups of Jews refused to be labeled as passive victims but rather joined forces both with each other and Soviet partisans in order to strike back at the Germans. She gives the reader a fuller understanding on the subject of the partisans but does not touch much on the experience in the ghettos, as is portrayed in Avraham Tory's *Kovno Diary*, which gives a personal account of the everyday life fighting to survive. Shlomo Venezia's *Eight Months in the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz* again gives the personal account of a Jewish special unit worker at Auschwitz but does not cover the other two subjects. Taken together, these works give an insightful look into the actions taken by so many different people with the same goal in mind: survival at all costs.

What made the Jewish resistance unique compared to national resistance groups active in each German occupied country in Europe was precisely the fact that the national resistance groups represented nations whose country had been occupied, while the Jewish resisters were without one. The French and Dutch Undergrounds worked tirelessly to strike back at the Germans whenever they saw an opportunity, but they had the backing of their governments that

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<sup>5</sup> Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), 158.

were in exile. The Jewish population knew there was no one else they would have been able to count on. This was their fight, and theirs alone.

In the years following the defeat of Nazi Germany, many of the European Jews who survived the atrocities began moving to Israel and the United States. Haunted by their experiences during the war, the majority did not talk of what they had seen or endured. Over time, however, survivors began recounting the events they witnessed: events such as being separated from their families, seeing people starving in the ghetto streets, and being selected for work details to burn the bodies after they came out of the gas chambers. It is through these accounts that we are able to get the best possible insight into what they went through, how they managed to survive, and eventually how they learned to cope with it and any possible survivor's guilt that grew over the years. For several survivors, like Richard Glazar, survivor's guilt became so overwhelming that they would eventually take their own lives. But it is through books written by Glazar and Primo Levi, as well as documentaries like Shoah, directed by Claude Lanzmann, that the world has received a much needed boost in Holocaust understanding.

In the last thirty to forty years, there have been numerous books and articles written on the subject of Jewish experience during the Holocaust but not so many based solely on the survival tactics taken by the Jewish population. With that being said, I took on the task of writing this thesis with the use of primary documents in diaries and journals and secondary sources from other authors writing on any one of the three chapters talked about here. Through these sources, this author has compiled a concise overview on the subject of survival in the ghettos, the labor and extermination camps and fighting in the Eastern European forests as part of partisan fighting units.

The different tactics the Jews used to hone their survival skills depended on what situation they were in. They fought against the Germans in any way they could think of all in the hopes of living or seeing tomorrow's sun. Through their fortitude, thousands of European Jews survived the war and attempt to rebuild their lives as best they could.

## CHAPTER 2

### LIVING IN A GUARDED CITY, 1939-1944

Death from a lasting hunger is like a candle burning out slowly.<sup>6</sup>

- Dr. Emil Apfelbaum-Kowalski, Cardiologist

Specific groups of people through history have typically stuck together of their own accord. It could be to stay close to those they know, to be with those they feel comfortable around, or simply a matter of not wanting to mix with other people whether because of race, creed, wealth or religion. From the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Morocco, it was very common for Jewish populations to live in *mellahs* (a walled off Jewish quarter) either near rich areas of town or sometimes away from towns completely separated from society.<sup>7</sup> It was more common that they lived near the richer parts of town because it helped them receive protection easier, whereas if they lived outside of town, the occupants would have to protect themselves from any anti-Semitic mobs.

The first ghetto created was done so by the Venetian Republic in 1516 after the ruling council decided to let the Jews continue in the city.<sup>8</sup> As the centuries passed, and the hatred for European Jewry failed to cease, a new form of mellah, the ghetto, was soon to be on the rise. At the beginning of the Second World War, the Nazi regime initiated the concentration of the Jewish population of Poland into enclosed areas of cities to keep better track of and further

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Emil Apfelbaum-Kowalski, *Hunger Disease: Studies by the Jewish Physicians in the Warsaw Ghetto*, trans. Martha Osnos (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), 127.

<sup>7</sup> Doreen Carvajal, "Marco Polo: Is a Rivalry Just Fiction?", *New York Times*, December 9, 1997, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/09/world/marco-polo-is-a-rivalry-just-fiction.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Weiner, "Virtual Jewish World: Venice, Italy," *Virtual Jewish Library*, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Venice.html>.

exploit the inhabitants. With the first ghetto created in Piotrków, Poland, it did not take long before hundreds were set up all over Eastern Europe, predominately throughout Poland. With the creation of the ghettos in Eastern Europe and filling them with Jews, the Nazis were able to keep them centralized and put them to work in the military production facilities.

The ghettos were set up to be self-sufficient, they had their own market places, bakeries, shops, theaters, and their own (albeit puppet) government known as the Judenräte (Jewish Council). While they did what most local governments do, such as issue birth/death certificates, hand out ration cards, and collect taxes, they were required to do exactly what the Germans ordered them to do. In Łódź Ghetto, Isaiah Trunk points out that “although Nazi propaganda attempted to portray the imposed ghettos and Jewish Councils to the outside world as a return to the former Jewish autonomy in medieval Europe, the Nazi ghetto was planned with entirely different goals.”<sup>9</sup> With zero access to the world outside the walls of their “city,” things quickly turned poor for the Jewish inhabitants. This chapter will cover how the Jewish people fought to survive the conditions within the ghetto walls, while dealing with the cruel living quarters, typhus, extreme lack of food, the Jewish Councils, and how some people had enough and joined underground movements, which in some cases led to eventual uprisings.

Immediately after Kristallnacht on 9-10 November 1938, most Germans had mixed emotions concerning the night’s events towards the Jewish population within Germany’s borders. This was not exactly what Adolf Hitler had in mind so he had to taper off his antiJewish offense and for a better time. That time came with the invasion and eventual occupation of Poland, when a new place for the Jews to be held became available. They would be out of sight, out of mind of the German civilian population. The ghettos were typically formed in the existing Jewish sectors

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<sup>9</sup> Isaiah Trunk, *Łódź Ghetto* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 9.

that were located towards the city center and which housed thousands of Jews, making it the ideal place to erect the ghettos.<sup>10</sup> The first ghetto opened in Poland was Piotrków on 8 October 1939, just over a month after the initial invasion. Almost immediately, some 25,000 Jews from surrounding towns filled the ghetto. In a strange show of “compassion” at Piotrków, Martin Gilbert notes that “the only Jews who were later allowed to live outside the ghetto were Dr. Shanster, who had converted to Christianity sixty years earlier, Jacob Witorz, who held Turkish citizenship, along with his wife and two sons, Beniiek and Shimek, and an Egyptian Jew, Kem, with his wife and twelve-year-old son Jerzyk.”<sup>11</sup> Between 1939 and 1941, the Germans constructed over a thousand ghettos in city centers surrounded by barbed wire, brick walls and patrolling guards making sure neither Jews nor non-Jews got through to the other side. All of the ghettos had horrendous conditions for the occupants, but they varied depending on their size. As stated earlier, each of the ghettos was set up to be self-sustaining, but they would also work for the Germans as well.

Of all the ghettos, the two largest were located at Łódź and Warsaw. In Warsaw alone, the Jewish population was 30% of the city, but they were enclosed in a ghetto that only comprised 2.4% of the total municipal area.<sup>12</sup> Author Raul Hilberg points out, “Warsaw had free enterprise involving both Jewish and German firms, controlled commodity exchanges with the outside world, deficit spending by the Jewish Council, as well as considerable food

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<sup>10</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Ahva Press, 1980), 101.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1985), 96.

<sup>12</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Warsaw.” ushmm.org. Last modified January 29, 2016. Accessed February 1, 2016. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005069>.

smuggling.”<sup>13</sup> Smuggling and thievery played a pivotal role in the Jewish fight for survival while locked behind the ghetto walls. Ultimately, the Jewish Councils and Jewish police in the ghettos would take matters into their own hands when dealing with criminals, which typically did not end well since they were working under direct order from the Germans who were truly in charge of the ghetto. Nonetheless, the Jews fought back in any way they could whether it be from thievery, the Jewish Councils working to slow down the Germans, or, in some cases, all-out war against their oppressors.

The conditions in each of the ghettos were deplorable to say the least, ranging from inadequate clothing, to lack of proper living conditions and food rationing. It could be said that, intentionally or not, this was a step along the twisted road to the final solution. In addition to the large numbers who would die in the ghettos, Jewish spirits would be broken, then they would be even easier to dispose of when they arrived at the extermination camps, if they even made it that far. Hunger was the ultimate problem in each of the ghettos. Charles Roland notes that hunger “was one that almost every Jew came to know well and to struggle with at length, a gnawing, endless torment only worsened by remembering happier times or by encountering those more fortunate.”<sup>14</sup> Regardless of how fortunate someone was, he or she still lived in the same cramped, atrocious conditions as everyone else around them.

Like the Warsaw Ghetto, all ghettos were located in large cities locked in tight areas near the rail stations, in order to make it easier to extract the Jews and load them on trains bound for the camps. As with every ghetto, the Łódź Ghetto suffered from serious overcrowding, with

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<sup>13</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Documents of Destruction: Germany and Jewry 1933-1945* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Roland, *Courage Under Siege* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 98.

205,000 people crammed into a 3.82 square kilometer area<sup>15</sup> and was split into three separate sections designated Ghettos A, B, and C, each connected with a bridge constructed at the expense of the Jews. Each person required shelter, but with the limited space for so many people, on average 3.5 people occupied each livable room, with only 3.95 square meters (43 square feet) per person.<sup>16</sup>

During the bitter winters in the early years of the war, many Jewish occupants, in an effort to not freeze to death, would use anything they could from inside their living quarters to destroy and set on fire. Eventually, there were no wooden fences to be found because they were used for kindling. Along with keeping warm with fires, adequate clothing was another way to keep warm. The only problem with this was that many people inside the ghetto lacked the proper clothing since they did not bring a lot with them. Many would eventually rely on the black market to buy proper clothing. There was something else throughout the ghetto that was just as important as adequate shelter, heat and clothing, something that was in plain sight. Down every street people would walk, they would see people of all ages holding their stomachs, especially young children, wishing and wanting more food.

Typically, the amount of food one was issued each day would depend on if the individual worked in a factory for the Germans or if they did not. In the Minsk Ghetto, the Jews who worked for the Germans received 200 grams of bread or 200 grams of flour a day, but those unable to work for various reasons (age, infirmity or cared for young children) would only

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<sup>15</sup> Trunk, 294.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 297.

receive half of that amount.<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that the Germans themselves handed the food out, but rather it was the responsibility of the Jewish Councils. All able bodied people were given ration cards so they would receive their allotted amount of food each day, depending on their job. For those individuals who did not work, the amount of food they were given each day was not enough to keep them alive. Many thus relied on risking their lives in search of food, either stealing it from inside the ghettos, bartering on the ghetto's black market, or sneaking out of the ghetto to secure it on the other side. In all actuality, none of these were real viable options since each resulted in dire personal consequences if caught in the act. Exchanging clothes for food at the gate or leaving the ghetto without German permission to bring food back in had become a necessity, worth the danger of being caught bringing food into the ghetto and being beaten or shot.<sup>18</sup> This became a common trend amongst the Jews since taking no action resulted in certain death. Survival in these conditions was bleak at best, but a limited group of Jews within the ghettos had it better than most.

A Jewish Council was selected by the occupying Nazis to serve as the governing body of each ghetto, but were in all actuality a puppet government. The Nazis did not consider the Jewish council to be a body to organize life in the ghettos in order to strengthen the ghetto socially and make it capable of resistance, but just the opposite.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish Councils were in charge of many things: dealing with rations, combating criminal activity within the ghetto, assigning Jews to daily labor squads, and, ultimately, selecting Jews for transport. They were

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto, 1941-1942: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008), 87-88.

<sup>18</sup> Epstein, 89.

<sup>19</sup> Truck, 32.

also responsible for alerting the Nazis to any resistance movements inside the ghetto in an attempt to deal with potential insurrections before they could fully materialize. Any failure in the job was met with strict punishment. Even though the Jewish Councils was meant to do exactly as the Germans ordered them to do, many did still impose small types of resistance to make the German job just that much harder. According to Yehuda Bauer, “so long as the food ration did not exceed the amount allowed for; so long as the quantity of forced labor was delivered as required; and so long as the Jews obeyed the German’s orders, the latter were not, in principle, interested in what went on inside the Jewish community.”<sup>20</sup>

The ghettos were not simply a walled off part of town where the Jews lived, but manufacturing facilities were also instilled so the Jews could make items for the German military. Author Saul Friedlander notes, “In the larger ghettos the councils assumed that productivity was the only path to survival; if at all possible the ghetto should work for the Wehrmacht.”<sup>21</sup> This was something the majority of Jewish council leaders pushed for including Rumkowski in the Łódź Ghetto, Barash in Bialystok and Gens in the Vilna Ghetto. They selected those assigned to work details each day, allocated housing placements, carried out their own form of punishment to anyone within the ghetto who broke the law, and, when the liquidations began, selected those to be sent to the extermination camps. Even though they were doing their job their job the best they could to keep from disobeying the Germans, which might result in either being shot or sent on the next deportation trains, many Jews labeled the Jewish

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Robert Marrus, *The Nazi Holocaust. Part 6: The Victims of the Holocaust. Volume 1* (London: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 166.

<sup>21</sup> Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 246.

council members as accomplices to the Germans.<sup>22</sup> The members of the Jewish Councils were definitely caught in a dilemma, but in a very real sense, theirs was a legitimate attempt at surviving the nightmarish hell in which they were trapped.

The Jewish Council in the Kovno Ghetto, for example, received an order from the local Gestapo deputy chief, Captain Schmitz, decreeing that in order to enable a larger output of production for the Reich, members of the Jewish labor force and their families would receive larger ration amounts. This would allow them to work better and create a larger quantity of products for the German military machine. Those who did not, or could not, work were to be moved to the smaller ghetto, leaving more room for those left behind. In enforcing the Gestapo order, the Council then issued the following official decree to the ghetto inmates, one which occasioned severe disruption in the lives of many:

All inmates of the Ghetto, without exception, including children and the sick, are to leave their homes on Tuesday, October 28, 1941, at 6 A.M., and assemble in the square between the big blocks and the Demokratu Street, and to line up in accordance with police instructions.

The Ghetto inmates are required to report by families, each family being headed by the worker who is the head of the family.

It is forbidden to lock apartments, wardrobe, cupboards, desks, etc...

After 6 A.M. nobody may remain in his apartment.

Anyone found in the apartments after 6 A.M. will be shot on sight.<sup>23</sup>

In the Kovno Ghetto, at least, the working Jews were given a little better provisions, even if it was so they would be able to produce more products for the German military. Still, with this decree, the Jewish Councils did attempt to get as many able-bodied Jews within the ghetto to

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<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report On the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 117-18.

<sup>23</sup> Avraham Tory, *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 47-48.

work so they would be able to survive longer. When the time came to start deporting the Jews living in the ghettos, the Jewish Councils had to think of a new way to keep as many of their own alive as they could. The Jewish Councils also confronted a moral dilemma: carry out the orders of their German oppressors against their own people or find a way to stall as long as they could. The Kovno Ghetto Council members, for example, “proposed to disobey the Gestapo and not publish the orders, even if this would mean putting the lives of the Council members at risk.”<sup>24</sup>

When the mass deportations to extermination camps began in 1942, it did not take long for people, especially members of the Jewish Councils to realize what was going on. Trains were leaving the ghettos each day filled with people selected by the councils and within a matter of hours, the trains would return with empty cars. While the majority of the Council leaders knew what was going on, they kept the matter to themselves and simply disowned any responsibility. The reason for this was if they questioned the Germans or refused to carry out an order, they would be on the next train out. While the majority did quietly carry out the orders, some Council leaders did what they could and responded with schemes designed to stall for time and drag out the deportation process. One such method was on display on September 4, 1942 when Rumkowski, the leader of the Łódź Ghetto Jewish Council, was tasked with handing over a list of 15,000 names to be sent to the Chełmno Extermination Camp. He had tried in vain to get the number lowered in the previous months but the Germans would never listen to his pleas. Rumkowski tried his hand at a compromise, which the Germans eventually accepted, one that would send the weak and helpless out of the ghetto, but safeguard, at least temporarily, those able to work. Rumkowski read the compromise to the gathered Jews who were completely mortified at what they were hearing. Rumkowski proclaimed:

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<sup>24</sup> Tory, 44.

A grievous blow has struck the ghetto. They [the Germans] are asking us to give up the best we possess – the children and the elderly. I was unworthy of having a child of my own, so I gave the best years of my life to children. I've lived and breathed with children, I never imagined I would be forced to deliver this sacrifice to the altar with my own hands. In my old age, I must stretch out my hands and beg: Brothers and sisters! Hand them over to me! Fathers and mothers: Give me your children!<sup>25</sup>

In the blink of an eye, 15,000 elderly and children under the age of ten were loaded into the railcars destined for Chełmno. When the train returned, it was empty. Rumkowski was not a very likable figure within the Łódź Ghetto, many saw him as an accomplice to the Germans because it seemed like he carried out their orders without giving them a second thought. He apparently was a ruthless administrator, confiscating any Jewish property of those who defied him, but he also tried to look out for “his” Jews as well as he could. He set up schools for the children, created a health system, provided housing for everyone, and set up a theater. Really anything to try to make the best of their situation. Even as their time in the Łódź Ghetto persisted much longer than those living in other ghettos, the inmates began to throw all of the blame for their predicament on Rumkowski.

When the final liquidation of the Łódź Ghetto took place in August 1944, months after the liquidation of the other major ghettos, Rumkowski boarded a train heading for Auschwitz, but he never made it to the gas chambers. There are mixed reports as to his fate, with one claiming that the Łódź Jews killed him when he arrived at Auschwitz. Another, though, asserts that the Łódź Jews asked the Sonderkommando Jews, those responsible for herding victims into the gas chambers, to eradicate him for what he had done to them while he was head of the Jewish

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<sup>25</sup> Chaim Rumkowski, “Transcript for 'Give Me Your Children': Voices from the Łódź Ghetto,” ushmm.org, January 29, 2016, accessed February 10, 2016, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007282>.

Council at Łódź.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of who killed him, Rumkowski did not make it to the gas chambers. He did accomplish one thing while in charge of the ghetto, and that was buying the Jews within the ghetto walls more time, whether they realized it or not. The ultimate tragedy, though, lay in the fact that the time gained did not result in rescue but simply more hardship and work on behalf of the Germans.

The Jewish Councils in other ghettos had different results to their types of tactics. In both the Minsk and Łachwa Ghettos, the councils put up a façade to their German oppressors when they were around, but when they were not, the council members worked side by side with the armed resistance groups that had infiltrated the Ghetto walls.<sup>27</sup>

As Operation Reinhardt progressed, more ghetto liquidations took place, underground organizations began to work their way through the ghettos and plot attempts to take the fight back to the occupying Germans. With the constant lack of food and never knowing if one was going to make it to the next day, many Jews within the ghettos turned to smuggling food and, with the help of the Polish Underground, weapons. Smuggling eventually became a full-time job for many people even though being caught resulted in almost certain death.<sup>28</sup> Then again, the same fate awaited those who did nothing to change their situation. Eventually not only food and weapons were being smuggled, but also winter clothing and, most importantly, medicine found its way to the black markets of the ghettos. Again, the threat of being caught was always present, so the underground had to network to discover who was trustworthy, or at the very least, find who they thought they could trust enough on the outside. One diarist who perished in the

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<sup>26</sup> Michal Unger, *Reassessment of the Image of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski* (Gottingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2008), 51.

<sup>27</sup> Yuri Suhl, *They Fought Back* (New York: Paperback Library Inc, 1967), 181-83.

<sup>28</sup> Roland, 37.

1942 liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, Chaim Kaplan recorded:

Smuggling was carried out through all the holes and cracks in the walls, through connecting tunnels in the cellars of buildings on the border, and through all the hidden places unfamiliar to the conqueror's foreign eyes. The conductors on the Aryan trolleys in particular made fortunes... Aryan trolleys make no stops inside the ghetto, but that's not a handicap. The smuggled sack is thrown out at an appointed spot and caught by trustworthy hands. This is the way they smuggled in pork fat, in particular, which the religious leaders have permitted us to use in the time of destruction.<sup>29</sup>

Smuggling was common in every ghetto, regardless of size, and in many cases, the guards and Jewish Ghetto Police would take part in the act. While it was not condoned, “for the most part, smuggling was tolerated, and the measures taken against it were meant only to restrict the magnitude.”<sup>30</sup> The Jewish Councils understood that if people in the ghetto were to have any chance of survival, smuggling had to occur in some capacity. Aside from the partisans who operated in the forests of Eastern Europe throughout the war, the Holocaust also brought with it the creation of three Jewish fighting organizations: the United Partisan Organization (FPO), which was present within the Vilna Ghetto, the Jewish Combat Organization (ZOB) and the Jewish Military Union (ZZW) both of which were in the Warsaw Ghetto. The United Partisan Organization consisted of “a leadership body representing left Zionists, right Zionists and Communists.”<sup>31</sup> Vilna's resistance movement became the first Jewish organized resistance

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<sup>29</sup> Abraham Katsh, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 245.

<sup>30</sup> Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 71.

<sup>31</sup> Epstein, 262.

group of the Holocaust. Unfortunately, the head of the Jewish Council there captured one of the FPO's leaders, Yitzhak Wittenberg and handed him over to the Gestapo for fear of what would happen to the rest of the ghetto inmates. Over time, many members of the FPO fled from Vilna for the forests to join partisan units because they lacked the direly needed support from many of the ghetto's older members.

On 22 July 1942, the Warsaw Jewish council was informed that "all Jewish persons living in the Warsaw Ghetto, regardless of age and gender, would be resettled in the East"<sup>32</sup> and it did not take long for the people within the Ghetto to realize what this decree meant. Treblinka Extermination Camp was close and when trains were leaving full and returning empty, it was clear to the Jews what was going on. Soon after the decree, members of the Jewish community in Warsaw began devising plans to fight back and expel the Germans from completing the liquidation order. Mordechai Anielewicz created and headed the ZOB. During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the ZOB was instrumental with working alongside the ZZW attempting to push the Germans out and save as many Jews as they could.

The ZZW was created in November 1939 almost immediately after the fall of Poland and consisted almost entirely of Polish military officers. Even though their organization was throughout all of Poland, their headquarters was stationed at Warsaw where they took part in both the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. Their personal contacts with Polish military officers would prove essential as they armed for battle with the Germans.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Gunnar Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 73.

<sup>33</sup> Marshe Arens, "The Jewish Military Organization (ZZW) in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Holocaust Genocide Studies* 19, no. 2 (2005): 201.

By 1942, Jews within the ghetto walls knew there was only one way to potentially preserve their lives: waging war against their German oppressors. Obviously, this was not going to be as simple as grabbing a few guns and starting to fight back in the hope that it all went well. A massive amount of planning was needed, especially on the part of the FPO, ZOB and ZZW in each of the ghettos. The notable ghettos where uprisings took place were the first, Lackwa and the largest, Warsaw. A small uprising took place in Bialystok on the morning of 16 August 1943 between pockets of Jewish resistance and Germans along with their auxiliary forces that entered the ghetto for a final liquidation. Their reason for the fight was not of any military significance but that it would be better to die fighting rather than to die in a camp.

At the Latvian capital, the Riga Ghetto became home to some 30,000 Jews for a short time. In mid-November 1941, it was announced that the Germans would be relocating the Latvian Jews further east as they pushed further into the Russian interior. However, “on November 30 and December 8-9, at least 26,000 Riga Jews were shot by German Einsatzgruppen squads and Latvian auxiliaries in the Rumbula Forest, five miles southeast of Riga along the Riga-Dvinsk railway.”<sup>34</sup> Over time, the Germans began bringing in Jews from Germany and Bohemia and Moravia, many of whom suffered the same fate as the Latvian Jews. The majority of Latvian Jewish Order Service members were from Riga and “since most of them had lost their families at Rumbula, they no longer had to take into consideration personal ties...and could plan with some degree of freedom.”<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately for the Riga Jews, nothing

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<sup>34</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Riga,” ushmm.org, January 29, 2016, accessed February 17, 2016, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005463>.

<sup>35</sup> Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, *The “Final Solution” in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941-1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 351.

was to come of their proposed uprising since the murder rate in the ghetto was extremely high. At the same time, many (mostly the German Jews) believed they were truly being relocated further east so they went on with their business. According to author Gertrude Schneider, “as for the inmates of the German ghetto, they did not know that one-fourth of their number had already been exterminated.” To them it was clear that they had been "resettled" as forced laborers, and they were able to live with that idea. Accordingly, they hoped that their strength would last until the war was over; they settled down in the ghetto and began to regard it as their home.”<sup>36</sup>

In September 1943, the Germans informed the Łachwa Ghetto Jewish Council that they would begin the final liquidation and promised to spare their lives if they cooperated. The Council leader, Dov Lopatyn rejected the German offer and was said to proclaim, “Either we all live, or we all die.”<sup>37</sup> As the Germans commenced their push into the ghetto, Lopatyn set the Jewish Council’s headquarters ablaze signaling the start of the uprising. The Jewish fighters came at the Germans with everything they had. Everything, that is, but weapons, although they put up a valiant fight. The resistance managed to kill six German and eight Belorussian policemen and injure others. In just a couple hours, the fighting within the ghetto was finished, although “approximately 1,000 Jews broke out of the ghetto, but hundreds were killed by German machine gun fire and only 600 managed to reach the Pripyet River. Others died in the flames, which enveloped the ghetto and those who did not escape in the flight from the ghetto

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<sup>36</sup> Gertrude Schneider, *Journey into Terror: Story of the Riga Ghetto* (New York: Ark House, 1979), 26-27.

<sup>37</sup> Suhl, 181.

were brought to the pits and shot.”<sup>38</sup> It is estimated that only about 90 survived the entirety of the war with partisan groups that they were able to join.<sup>39</sup>

From 19 April to 16 May 1943, the remaining occupants of the Warsaw Ghetto held together in fortified strongpoints and rose up against their Nazi tormentors. With the Germans arriving in Warsaw on the eve of Passover to execute their final liquidation of the ghetto, some one thousand men and women of the ZOB and the ZZW decided that was the time to orchestrate their uprising, knowing full well they would not survive. Though poorly armed and supplied, they were able to prove one thing: the Germans were not invincible as previously thought. The men and women in the ghetto produced the single largest uprising in a Jewish community against their Nazi oppressors of the entire war. Immediately following the end of Grossaktion Warsaw (mass extermination of Warsaw Jews) in September 1942, some of the remaining Jews, led by Marek Edelman, began meeting and discussing plans for an organized uprising against the Germans. With all in attendance lacking adequate military training, possessing a pitiful supply of weapons, and next to no fortifications, leaders quickly set out to try to make contact with members of the Polish Home Army and dig tunnels between apartment buildings across the whole ghetto.

On the eve of Passover, 19 April 1943, von Sammern-Frankenegg’s men entered the ghetto in column formation along with tanks and trucks. Little did they know that members of the ZZW and ZOB were set up in attics and by windows waiting for the right moment to strike.

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Pallavicini and Avinoam Patt, “Łachwa,” ushmm.org, January 29, 2016, accessed February 17, 2016, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007233>.

<sup>39</sup> Suhl, 183.

As German columns, singing heartily, moved into the intersection of Nalewki, Gesia and Franciszkańska streets, Jewish resisters suddenly barraged them with Molotov cocktails, grenades, bombs and bullets.<sup>40</sup> The Germans were taken by such surprise at the ferocity of their attackers that they retreated, leaving their dead and wounded writhing in the streets. Attempts to retrieve their comrades later proved to be futile as the Jewish fighters used them as bait to lure the Germans back in. Additional German soldiers were sent to reinforce the retreating column, but for a second time, they were locked in a heated exchange of fire with Jewish forces that did not end in the German's favor. Thanks to the organized set up of the resistance, the Germans suffered losses while the Jewish resisters did not receive a single casualty.

Later that day, von Sammern-Frankeneg called for SS-Brigadeführer Jürgen Stroop to meet him in his hotel where he informed Stroop that he wanted to call to Kraków and have artillery and aircraft destroy the ghetto. Stroop was able to dissuade him and completely took over command of the German and auxiliary forces taking part in the suppressing the uprising. Stroop became an instant inspiration to his men, standing in the heat of battle to lead them to victory. An even more defiant act was to take place before the first day was even over that inspired and lifted the Jewish fighters more than anything. Two fighters climbed to the top of a building in the ghetto's square and raised the Polish flag and ZZW banner, where they remained for four days. Immediately after noticing the flags had been raised, Stroop gave orders that the group must be wiped out by the next day.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ber Mark, *Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 21.

<sup>41</sup> Leonard Tushnet, *To Die with Honor: The Uprising of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Citadel Press, 1965), 78.

The Germans were dumbfounded and caught completely off guard by the Jewish fighters' ability to appear and simply disappear through the windows in each of the buildings. They would wait for a squad to come down a street or alleyway, rain down small arms fire, grenades and Molotov cocktails on the Germans. Then before they knew what hit them, the Jews were gone only to appear again immediately elsewhere. Fortunately, for Stroop and his men, most of their forces killed by the Jewish resisters were their auxiliary forces rather than true Germans sent in to suppress the uprising, even though the numbers in the Stroop Report say otherwise. On 22 April, Stroop issued an ultimatum to the ZZW and ZOB in an attempt to end the fighting before it got worse. To Stroop's surprise, the resisters rejected his ultimatum, resulting in Stroop calling in flame-throwers to begin systematically burning the ghetto down block-by-block and blowing up sewers and basements in order to flush out the remaining resisters. Recounted by Edelman after World War II had ended, he claimed, "[they] were beaten by the flames, not the Germans; there was no air, only black, choking smoke and heavy burning heat radiating from the red-hot walls, from the glowing stone stairs."<sup>42</sup> From here until the end of the fighting, the battle for the Warsaw Ghetto was an extremely slow and arduous task for the Germans to complete.

With the fire war now in full swing, Stroop knew this was the only way to win against the resisters. By this point, the Germans had shifted their forces to the areas they now knew were the more centralized locations for the Jewish fighters employing heavy machine guns at key road crossings. Warsaw citizens on the outside of the ghetto still attempted to help those inside whenever possible by throwing weapons over the wall for the fighters to use against the

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<sup>42</sup> "Warsaw Jews Mark Uprising," BBC News, April 20, 2003, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2961767.stm>.

Germans. Unfortunately, a group led by the quartermaster in the People's Guard was caught in the act by a German patrol and were killed by the ensuing firefight. Stroop would not stand for any of this nonsense and ordered one hundred and fifty Poles to be rounded up and taken from the Pawiak Prison and shot on Zamenhof Street.<sup>43</sup> The ghetto fighters were holding out for as long as they could, but the smoke from the burning buildings was beginning to become too much as the bunkers they had been occupying were being discovered by the German onslaught. With no intentions of giving up, men and women alike continued fighting for as long as they could hold out.

Members of the ZZW attempted to breach the ghetto walls to make for a large exodus by the remaining Jews, but were unsuccessful in their efforts. By the end of April 1943, all commanders of the ZZW had been killed by the Germans, leaving the group with no leadership. However, on 29 April, the remaining members were able to flee the ghetto through a tunnel and make their way to the Michalin forest, which signified the end of most resistance efforts. On 8 May, the Germans discovered a large bunker that served as the command post of the ZOB, in which they found the leadership and scores of others had committed suicide through cyanide. From this point on, the fighting was very sporadic from resisters still held up in bunkers throughout the ghetto. The Germans began flushing the remaining Jews out of the bunkers with smoke bombs and tear gas. Not all survivors went peacefully, though, as women were reported hurling 0grenades at the Germans they had hidden in their clothes. On 16 May 1943, the uprising was put to a conclusion when Stroop ordered the Warsaw Synagogue rigged with explosives and personally pressed the detonation button. Despite their valiant efforts, the resisters had not succeeded in liberating the Warsaw Ghetto.

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<sup>43</sup> Tushnet, 86.

In the aftermath of the uprising, thirteen thousand Jewish men, women and children had been killed in the fighting, with about half of this number coming from those burned alive in the fires that raged across the buildings. In a carefully detailed report, Stroop gave the results of his work: 56,065 Jews were captured, of whom 7000 were killed at once and 6929 at Treblinka, plus about five or six thousand more by being blown up or burned.<sup>44</sup> To add insult to injury, Stroop also wanted to have a concentration camp erected in the ghetto ruins, a request that was granted. Pockets of isolated resistance held out and attacked the Germans until June 1943, but there was no connection between them and the members of the Warsaw Uprising. The occupants of the concentration camp were tasked with clearing the rubble, bricks, scrap metal and anything that could be used to aid the German war effort back home. Thousands of people at the Warsaw Concentration Camp were executed in the ghetto's ruins or died under the harsh conditions of the camp.

The Jewish experience in the ghettos across continental Europe was one full of despair, torture and utter disillusionment. The Germans and their auxiliary forces had thrown as much at the Jews who took it in stride as well as they could, finding ways to survive at all costs. As the next steps in the German's "Final Solution" to European Jewry were coming into place, the Jewish experience in their living hell was only beginning. Many who were "lucky" enough to survive the ghettos and make it to the camps, whether they be concentration, labor or extermination, they had to find a new way to survive. Unfortunately, many of them found that their best hope for survival would be to align themselves with the German torturers in some capacity, much to the horror of the Jews around them.

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<sup>44</sup> Jürgen Stroop, *Stroop Report* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 137.

## CHAPTER 3

### WORKING BEHIND THE BARBED WIRE, 1939-1945

“Sometimes I am asked if I know 'the response to Auschwitz'; I answer that not only do I not know it, but that I don't even know if a tragedy of this magnitude has a response.”

- Elie Wiesel, Auschwitz Survivor

They were viewed by some as a place to wait out the war, others as a place to work, but for thousands of others, it was the final stop on their journey. The Nazi concentration camps of World War Two became the final resting place for millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and physically disabled, but for many, entering the gates did not take away their sense of doing everything within their power to survive. Throughout occupied Poland “the Nazis built a network of concentration camps, the number of which, together with sub-camps established chiefly in the vicinity of munitions plants, amounted to over one thousand in 1944. The biggest among them was the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Besides concentration camps, extermination camps existed at Treblinka, Belzec, Chelmno and Sobibór.”<sup>45</sup> Depending on what camp they were sent to and what kind of job they may have been drafted into would help determine what the likelihood of survival would be.

Being sent to a labor camp seemed to be the best option, if there were a good option for anyone in that situation. In the labor camps, Jews would be assigned to work details where they would perform back breaking work for more than twelve hours a day where many of them would eventually perish from exhaustion and starvation. As Raul Hilberg notes in *The Destruction of the European Jews*, “the primary reason for keeping up an inmate population was labor utilization, although the use of Jews for construction projects, maintenance, or industry was

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<sup>45</sup> Kazimierz Smolen, *Auschwitz 1940-1945* (n.p.: Panstwowe Muzeum W Oswiecimiu, 1961), 13.

merely an intermediary step to be followed by killing.”<sup>46</sup> The chance of survival were much slimmer for those sent to the extermination camps. If they were in good physical shape or possessed a specific trade, they would have typically been assigned to work details (until they were not needed further), whereas those that did not were sent straight to the gas chambers. Once in the labor camps, there were numerous ways to try and gain an advantage on other Jews, some more acceptable than others. Nonetheless, for most, surviving was all that mattered.

While a large number of Jews worked to help the Germans produce munitions, others worked within the camps acting as the Germans’ guard dog. These prisoners were known as Kapos. Kapos were typically Jews with criminal pasts assigned by the Germans to serve as prisoner supervisors.<sup>47</sup> Because of their function and actions, these prisoner-supervisors were, more often than not, hated by the Jewish inmates just as much, if not more, than the Germans. If Jewish prisoners were not willing to sell-out their Jewish brethren in order to survive, they often turned to befriending either German or auxiliary guards (usually Ukrainian or Lithuanian), using any pre-war occupation (physician, dentist or barber) they may have had to get a job in the camps, trying to make contact with Allied prisoners of war, sabotaging their production in labor facilities, or, in the extreme cases, executing revolts in the camps. Prisoners of war on both sides knew that just because they were captured, it did not mean that their war was over and that they should give up. The vast majority of Jews felt the same obligation.

After being assigned to work details, the prisoners were able to get into a sort of routine:

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<sup>46</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 983.

<sup>47</sup> Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 370.

wake up at sun-up, have a non-nutritious breakfast, stand for roll call, go to work for sometimes twelve hours, roll call again, dinner, then bed. By far, though, roll call could be seen as the worst part of the day because it could last for hours on end, regardless of the weather.

Oftentimes the initial count of prisoners would decrease from the start to finish of roll call. The Jewish prisoners knew what the consequences were for failing to be present for roll call but for some, it was a chance they were willing to take. A former Auschwitz prisoner recalls one such time:

One roll call I remember very well. Despite repeated counting and recovery of several dead prisoners, the numbers refused to tally. Finally, it turned out that one woman, a Czech, had hid in the blocks. She was so exhausted and her spirit so broken that she no longer cared what would happen to her. She was pulled out of her hiding place and dragged in front of the block. SS man Taube beat her. The beating was so savage that I can still hear the sound of blows. Paralyzed with fear we stood ramrod straight in rows.<sup>48</sup>

This was not the only account of such events, they were happening across the vast majority of the camps. The Jews within the camps, regardless of their job, had to begin discovering new ways to make ends meet so they would survive.

Those chosen to work in the labor camps, or typically any form of labor, were usually in good health (or better off) than the majority of prisoners were when they arrived at the camps. Their “reward” for this was assignment to forced hard labor until they dropped dead from exhaustion, or were sent to extermination sites, or were simply shot by a guard. For those working in the labor facilities, “incessant hunger was also a source of ceaseless torment and

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<sup>48</sup> Yisrael Gutman, Raul Hilberg, and Franciszel Piper, eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 402-403.

anguish.”<sup>49</sup> The ration “such as it was, varied widely: in 1945 there was often one ladleful of thin rutabaga soup and ‘five’s bread’ (a single ration of bread for five persons), and sometimes ‘six’s bread’ or ‘seven’s bread.’ During the final days the soup was replaced by a ‘demimargarine’ (a piece of margarine the size of a large sugar cube); in the mornings the prisoners also received a ladle of foul black liquid of no nutritional value, unsugared of course, but at least hot,”<sup>50</sup> remembered one survivor of the women’s camp, Ravensbrück.

Death by starvation happened every day and the inmates knew they had to do something out of the ordinary if they were going to survive until Allied personnel arrived to free them. Their determination led to a variety of means by which to receive extra food when the opportunities arrived. Extra rations or additional clothing could be “bought” with gold taken from prisoner’s teeth (more will be covered below). When it comes to human nature, it is common for the strong to take advantage when available of the weak. Being confined in the camps with a minute amount of food, stronger prisoners and Kapos would outmuscle smaller prisoners for an extra bite of food. Sometimes it did not take the desperation of the prisoners to get extra rations but the Germans saw that by giving those working in hard labor would get more work done with the extra energy that came with higher rations. “To increase productivity, the workers received additional bread rations; intervention of the Wehrmacht offices interested in the inmates’ contribution to war production was clearly successful.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), 142.

<sup>51</sup> Wolf Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor Under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial Aims, 1938-1944* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 190.

Other inmates unfortunately turned to the more desperate measures to receive anything extra that could help them live another day. Historian Nikolaus Wachsmann explains “most common was probably sex for survival, with prisoners making pragmatic decisions to become intimate with privileged inmates, mostly non-Jews, in exchange for essential goods like food and clothing.”<sup>52</sup> This was clearly one of the more extreme measures, but if it worked and they received extra, they could not really be blamed for it. Eventually, sex became just another way to pay for things while imprisoned in the camps.

Not all would go to these extreme methods in the hope of getting a little extra. In very rare cases, German guards who were sympathetic towards their Jewish inmates would put their lives at risk by helping when they could. In an interview, a former Auschwitz guard simply named W. to keep his identity safe was asked if he ever felt remorse for what he did during his time stationed there. He responded, “No, I don't have that feeling. We gave the Jews what was left of our bread, which otherwise would have been thrown away. We set it on their toolboxes near the place where they got water. I never did harm to any Jew. But I also wasn't able to help any of them.”<sup>53</sup> In most cases, others were required to turn to their prewar profession in an attempt to help them get in “good” with the Germans.

For the Jewish prisoners that made the journey from the ghettos to the concentration camps, being selected for a labor detail could be seen as a way to delay the inevitable. However, possessing the correct pre-war occupation could really serve as a saving grace if the Germans

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<sup>52</sup> Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 355.

<sup>53</sup> Felix Bohr, Cordula Meyer, and Klaus Wigrefe, “Interview with an Auschwitz Guard: 'I Do Not Feel Like a Criminal',” *Spiegel Online International*, August 28, 2014, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/spiegel-interview-with-a-91-year-old-former-auschwitz-guarda988127.html>.

found out. Two occupations that were exceptionally valuable to possess were dentistry (for pulling out gold teeth from the dead) and being a barber (for shearing everyone's hair, which was used for pillow stuffing sent back to Germany). Abraham Bomba, a Treblinka survivor recalls being chosen for one of these jobs.

They chose some people from the working people over there, and they asked who was a barber, who was not a barber. I was a barber for quite a number of years, and some of them knew me – people from Czestochowa and other places. So naturally, they chose me and I selected some more barbers who I knew, and we got together... They [the Germans] decided we cut the women's hair in the undressing barrack. One of the kapos came in and said: 'Barbers, you have to do a job to make all those women coming in believe that they are just taking a haircut and going to take a shower, and from there they go out from this place.'<sup>54</sup>

As awful a job as this was, and knowing full well what they were actually cutting their hair for, at least this was a way to keep Bomba and many like him alive for the time being. The main ruse stressed to the barbers was that they were not to tell the prisoner's whose hair they were cutting what was about to happen to them. One day, a group of women were funneled into the gas chamber where a number of barbers were waiting for them. One barber recognized a woman in the crowd, explained to her what was about to happen, which she spread to everyone around her. After panic set in and the Germans seized the Jewish barber who had leaked the truth, they had him thrown, alive, into the furnace.<sup>55</sup> The hair was not being shorn off to make the cremation process easier, but "it was collected and dried in rooms above the crematoria, and

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<sup>54</sup> *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann (Criterion Collection, 1985), DVD 2013.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

later used for the production of felt and threads.”<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, hair was not the only bodily item being taken by the Germans before or after they Jews were murdered.

After the doctoral dissertation entitled *On the Possibilities of Recycling Gold from the Mouths of the Dead* was submitted by Victor Scholz in 1940, Himmler set forth to have all gold removed from the mouths of prisoners that perished while in the concentration camps. It was not until at Auschwitz in 1943 when “the work was done in camp sick bays, morgues, and crematoria by imprisoned [Jewish] dentists known as gold workers (Goldarbeiter).”<sup>57</sup> The gold and other precious metals were thrown to an acidic cleaning solution to remove all scraps of bone and tissue before it was melted down into one to two pound pieces and shipped off to Germany. Again, working in these Arbeitjuden (worker Jews) details was a way to stay alive for as long as they were needed. These positions, much like that of the Sonderkommando (special unit) work details had a high turnover rate. However, they were only needed as long as the Germans felt they were. While in relation to the total number, the skilled workers and forced laborers made up a small amount, the Jewish prisoners put in charge of their Jewish brothers were just a fraction of that.

The Kapos were typically prisoners that possessed a criminal background and were “employed” by the Germans to work as overseers in the camps. While a large number of Kapos had criminal backgrounds, not all were like this. Criminals were marked with a green triangle, political prisoners with a red one, and Jews marked with the Star of David in yellow. To the non-Kapo prisoners, the “green” Kapos, as they were called, were by far the worst of all. Whenever they got into a leading Kapo position, they brought sexual abuse, torture and murder,

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<sup>56</sup> Wachsmann, 377.

<sup>57</sup> Gutman, Berenbaum and Piper, 258-259.

among other things, with them. However, the “red” Kapos (political) were seen as the saving grace to the remainder of the camp’s prisoners because they were seen as the only ones that could stand up to the green Kapos.<sup>58</sup>

As historian Christopher Browning notes, “long before Jews constituted a significant portion of the camp population, the Nazis had already perfected an insidious mechanism of prisoner manipulation through ‘divide and control’ ... The two key institutions for internal prisoner control were the camp council or Lagerat on the one hand and the camp police or Lagerpolizei on the other.”<sup>59</sup> Kapos were a part of the camp hierarchy which meant the Germans and auxiliary forces at the camps did not have to interact too much with the prisoners. These Kapos were exceptionally brutal too, knowing full well that they could be replaced by the Germans at a moment’s notice which meant their purpose at the camp was over. As everyone knew, “there were plenty of prisoners eager to increase their chances to survive by accepting positions of privilege within the camp.”<sup>60</sup> While everyone was jumping to take a position if they became available, once appointed, Kapos became the most hated people in the camp by many prisoners.

Present twenty-four hours a day, it was difficult to go unnoticed by the Kapos. Unabashedly exploiting the power given to them by the Germans on their fellow prisoners, they were rarely corrected because they were nothing more than a tool<sup>61</sup> that the Germans used to

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<sup>58</sup> Wachsmann, 522.

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 116-17.

<sup>60</sup> Doris Bergen, *War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 189.

<sup>61</sup> Yahil, 370.

keep the camps under control. While not all Kapos were terrible people who carried out sadistic torture on their fellow inmates, unfortunately the faults of a few blanketed over all whom had the title. At the same time, Sobibór's "Kapo Berliner" was notorious for taking prisoners he did not like to the German guards, falsify a story and have them killed. At war's end, the Kapos were tried for their complicity during the war and their own crimes against the Jewish inmates. The final group of laborers that used their skills (or lack thereof) were the Sonderkommandos.

As the trains pulled up to the platforms at each of the camps (whether labor or extermination) and the doors were opened, the dreaded selection process began. Once in their assigned groups, prisoners were told to strip down for examination. Those told to get dressed again were the lucky ones, they were chosen to join the Sonderkommandos<sup>62</sup> to be put to work with whatever task the Germans had in store for them. The systematic "involvement of Jewish inmates in various 'gray zone' occupations or commandos that included sorting deportees' luggage after arrival at the camps, and working in Sonderkommando units in the crematoria."<sup>63</sup> Aside from luggage separation, they were put to work sorting clothing after the new arrivals went to the gas chambers, working in rock quarries, performing physical labor, or working in factories, just to name a few functions. Personal accounts from those who were a member of the Sonderkommando varied, but it can be said the worst were those that worked in or near the crematoriums at extermination camps. Shlomo Venezia was a part of a Sonderkommando unit

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<sup>62</sup> *Escape from a Nazi Death Camp*, directed by Jonathan Davenport (Public Broadcasting Station, 2014), DVD

<sup>63</sup> Simone Gigliotti, *The Train Journey: Transit, Captivity, and Witnessing in the Holocaust* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 44.

in Auschwitz tasked with picking weeds next to Crematoria I. After his curiosity got the best of him, he snuck a glance inside via a window and was horrified with that he saw.

When I got close enough to catch a glimpse, I was left paralyzed by what I saw. Bodies heaped up, thrown on top of one another, were just lying there. These were the corpses of people who were still young. I came back to my companions and told them what I'd seen. They in turn slipped over to see, without the Kapo noticing. They came back ashen-faced, disbelieving. We didn't care think about what happened. It was only later that I realized the corpses were 'leftovers' from an earlier convoy. They hadn't had time to burn them before the new convoy arrived, and these bodies were piled there to leave room on the gas chamber.<sup>64</sup>

Working in these units caused an enormous amount of strain on its members, even more so when those sorting clothes found familiar sets. Philip Bialowitz of Izbica, Poland who was sent to the Sobibór Extermination Camp and worked sorting clothing found the blouses that his sisters wore on the day they were separated. No matter what, he knew if he stopped working, he would be sent to the gas chambers with the next group.

While these units were working constantly with whatever task they Germans put on them, again, it was keeping them alive and in some cases, they were given better treatment than the vast majority of prisoners that came through the gates. Those working in the crematoria at Auschwitz lived separately from the rest of the labor force where each person received their own bed which was a true luxury compared to the rest who lived in punishingly cramped barracks.<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, in the end, with the exception of those that successfully escaped during camp

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<sup>64</sup> Shlomo Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 56.

<sup>65</sup> Venezia, 93.

uprisings or those present when the Allies arrived, the men of the Sonderkommandos were killed when the Germans decided their worth was over.<sup>66</sup>

Defiance can be something as simple as doing work at a slower pace (but this can end fatally if caught), poorly assembling equipment in factories (easier since it would be more difficult to find who did it) or participating in an outright revolt. Depending on a prisoner's situation, they would choose which option, if any, best suited their desire for getting back at their German captors. If they wanted a chance at survival, striking back would be the best option.

At the labor camps outside the Polish town of Skarzysko Kamienna, the women who worked in the munitions factory repeatedly (when the foreman was not around) would not screw on the explosive charges on anti-aircraft shells, resulting in them not bursting once they were fired.<sup>67</sup> Participating in acts like these, if caught, would result in almost certain death. However, this did not hinder their desire to disable the Germans from conducting their military operations. Sabotaged winter clothing that was bound for the Eastern Front was a major setback for the German soldiers suffering from frost bite in the sub-zero temperatures they were hoping to avoid during the German retreat from Operation Barbarossa.

Over time, as even the Jews who were in Sonderkommando units or working in the labor camps realized, their fate was inevitable, there was one chance for survival. It was imperative that they devise a plan to try and take the camps back from their captors, or at least attempt to break out of their hell. There were multiple camp uprisings throughout the Second World War, but only two of which can be seen as 'successful:' Treblinka (August 1943) and Sobibór

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<sup>66</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1985), 309.

<sup>67</sup> Reuben Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974), 821.

(October 1943).

The leader of the Treblinka Underground was Julian Chorążycki, a former officer in the Polish Army and physician prior to the German invasion. He organized the other leaders of the underground based on the position they held within the camp. Those in charge of certain buildings or areas, such as sick bay and the infirmary, held higher positions closer to him. Chorążycki worked at a small infirmary in charge of taking care of SS personnel who may have gotten injured for one reason or another, which allowed him to get closer than most to the guards and attempt to befriend one. In his time working within the infirmary, he was able to get his hands on a large sum of German Reichsmarks so he would have money to bribe Polish citizens once he escaped. Unfortunately, he was sold out by a prisoner and he “committed suicide by poison on 19 April 1943 when faced with imminent capture”<sup>68</sup> and subsequent torture by the German guards. After Chorążycki’s suicide, the underground put off any further ideas of a revolt until they could decide on a new leader of their group.

His death was a heavy blow to the Underground. “By virtue of his character and his stature in the camp as the SS personnel’s physician, he had been the central figure of the Organizing Committee.”<sup>69</sup> Soon a man by the name of Berek Lajcher was to become that new leader and plans to continue with the idea of revolution were soon back underway. Like Chorążycki, Lajcher was a physician and soldier in the Polish Army before the outbreak of war. Along with Lajcher, Alfred Galewski was also chosen to be a sort of co-leader so that in case

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<sup>68</sup> Samuel Rajzman, “Uprising in Treblinka,” Internet Archive Wayback Machine, March 10, 2009, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://web.archive.org/web/20130603181612/http://holocausthistory.org/operationreinhard/uprising-in-treblinka.shtml>.

<sup>69</sup> Alexander Donat, *Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 139.

another situation like Chorążycki's happened again, the underground would not have to put off further preparations that could hamper their ultimate goal of successfully breaking out of Treblinka. Galewski too, was a former soldier in the Polish Army, and an engineer by trade. Since these two men had both served in the military and possessed more experience than the others, they had better qualifications for carrying out this daring escape attempt, whose organization and implementation now rested on their shoulders. As time pressed on, the Underground realized they did not have much time left. Organization needed to start happening quickly so they would have a chance to succeed. They had the people, now they needed a plan.

The camp was operated by twenty-five SS guards and around one hundred Ukrainian auxiliary forces that had been trained at a special SS facility in the region. Plans for the revolt were now underway, and with each of the Jewish Sonderkommandos having their own job within the camp, they now were given jobs within the Underground in the camp to help guarantee the success of the mission. The prisoners knew they had their work cut out for them. During this time, prisoners started to survey Treblinka, looking for weak areas or guards while taking note of the time the guards usually kept to on making their rounds around the facility. Over time, the Underground decided on three main phases that must be adhered to at specific times during the uprising to guarantee success:

- Phase I: Acquire weapons through covert and quiet action; 2:30 – 4:30 p.m. The putzer (cleaner) boys would remove the weapons from the storeroom and distribute them among the fighting squads at their workplaces. Those Germans who came or were lured to the workshops would be quietly eliminated.
- Phase II: Takeover by force and destruction of the camp; 4:30 – 5:30

(approximate). An exploding grenade would signal the start of the uprising. Camp headquarters would be attacked, as would the SS men and Ukrainians scattered about the camp at their workplaces; the camp telephone line would be cut, and the buildings set on fire. In the extermination area the SS men and Ukrainians would be eliminated and the gas chambers destroyed.

- Phase III: Abandoning the camp and departure for the forests. This phase was not planned in detail, but the main idea was that after the camp was destroyed and the prisoners were armed with the captured weapons, and organized departure to the forests, mainly under cover of night, would follow.<sup>70</sup>

The morning of 2 August 1943 was a sizzling hot day. Survivor Yankel Wiernik recalled, “We were sick of our miserable existence, and all that mattered was to take revenge on our tormentors and to escape.”<sup>71</sup> The day started like any other day: roll call, breakfast (if it can be called that), and reporting to work detail. On this day, though, there was a certain buzz about the camp, unlike any other day. Not all the prisoners were a part of the Underground, though they knew of its existence and with the buzz around the camp knew something must be coming. 2 August was chosen for an important reason, it was a Monday. Mondays were the “lazy” day of each week because that was the one day of the week that there were no gassings taking place. Since no gassings took place on this day, the work details in the Extermination Area spent the majority of their day burning the bodies from the previous week. Early in the afternoon, a group

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<sup>70</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 284.

<sup>71</sup> Yankel Wiernik, “A Year in Treblinka,” Zchor, August 20, 2007, accessed February 23, 2016, <http://www.zchor.org/treblink/wiernik.htm#chapter14>.

of four SS guards and sixteen Ukrainians left the camp for a swim in the nearby Bug River to enjoy a relaxing afternoon. “This depleted the ranks of the camp’s security force considerably and worked in the rebels’ favor.”<sup>72</sup> With the number of guards at Treblinka now notably reduced, Galewski ordered the members of the Underground to start collecting their weapons and get into position for what was coming next.

During the first phase of the uprising, the prisoners quietly began collecting and distributing the weapons throughout the Underground units. Since there were only a handful of rifles and about twenty each of grenades and pistols, many of the members had to resort to knives and axes they had collected from their work stations. They could only hope that enough guards were killed quickly that they would be able to take their weapons to finish carrying out the uprising successfully. A few pairs of wire cutters were extracted as well so the phone lines would be cut so the Germans would not be able to call for reinforcements to help put down the revolt. As zero-hour drew closer, everything was going as planned. Unfortunately, a German guard had remained in one of the barracks located right next to the weapons storage room, making it extremely difficult for the putzer boys to sneak in and gather the weapons for distribution.

Some resistors reported to one of the leaders of the Underground, Sadovitz, who quickly thought of a story to tell the guard, that he was needed in the potato worker’s area. After Sadovitz and the guard left, the putzer boys continued retrieving the weapons, but now they were behind schedule. The weapons were wrapped into small sacks and passed through a window facing the back side of the camp so as not to be noticed. Once out of the weapons building, they were loaded on carts, hidden under construction materials, so they could be freely run through

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<sup>72</sup> Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 238.

the camp and distributed amongst the workers. Marian Platkiewicz, who was working as part of a potato team recalled, “Like every other day, we were working at a pile of potatoes. Then, a handcart, pushed by two men from the construction group, passed by. Swiftly, they handed over to us some grenades and detonators. We put them into the buckets we used for potatoes.”<sup>73</sup>

While the weapons were being unloaded, preparations were being made to set the camp on fire. The prisoner in charge of this step was the camp decontaminator since the guards would not find anything wrong with him walking around “disinfecting” weeds around the buildings. He set out to do his job in the early afternoon, making sure to spray the barracks, shops and storerooms which were all made of wood ensuring that they would burn. Preparations were going well even with the lost time caused by the incident with the guard and Sadovitz. Things were going a little too well. One of the barrack elders, Kuba, invited one of the German guards into his barracks which was occupied by a number of the revolutionaries. The two men began talking in a tone that no one else could hear or understand, but since he was a known “mole”, they could only assume he was telling the guard about the possible uprising. It was then decided that the guard needed to be done away with, even though not everyone was in position nor were all the weapons distributed. A member of the Underground, Wallabanczik, was then tasked with eliminating the guard before he could possibly tell the rest of the camp of the plans. Wallabanczik walked up behind the guard, drew a pistol and shot the guard who dropped dead. The shot that rang out, though, unintentionally set the resulting uprising in motion.

No one was ready, as the majority of the weapons had not been distributed yet, but the entirety of the camp heard the shot and now everyone was doing what they could to implement the escape plan. The prisoners in the potato workers team hurled grenades towards the camp

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<sup>73</sup> Arad, 288.

headquarters, destroying the building but not hurting any of the SS personnel inside. “Rudek Lubrenitski and a comrade set fire to the gasoline store, causing explosions and a huge blaze, which spread to the surround area. They were both shot and killed by Ukrainian guards.”<sup>74</sup> The prisoners in the workshop overseen by the informer Kuba killed him and set fire to the shops. One of the fighters in the Sorting Area described his task dealing with the guard in a watchtower, “[The Ukrainian] sat on the tower sunning himself. When he heard the first shots from the Lower Camp and realized there was trouble, he jumped down. I ran up to him and said: ‘Hey, the Russians are coming.’ I grabbed his rifle; he offered no resistance. ‘Get out of here,’ I told him, and he took off.”<sup>75</sup> It did not take long, though, before the Germans and Ukrainians were able to compose themselves and realize what was truly going on. They quickly started fighting back from their watchtowers with rifle and machine gun fire, injuring or killing large groups of Jewish fighters. The majority of the combatants that were still in their work details were only guarded by one Ukrainian each and when the uprising began, were able to overpower the guard easily.

Seven hundred of the camp’s prisoners took part in the uprising. Many more did not because they were taken by surprise as much as the guards when the uprising took place. Many of them ran back to their barracks, others hid, and many more started running towards the areas of the camp that were now open after the barriers had been broken through. Most did not take part in the uprising even after it began for fear of being killed by the guards, and hoped by not taking part they would potentially be saved. As the prisoners taking part in the uprising got through the first layer of fence surrounding the gate and were working on cutting the outer ring

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<sup>74</sup> Samuel Willenberg, *Surviving Treblinka* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 164.

<sup>75</sup> Sereny, 241-242.

of fencing, machine gun fire opened up from the watchtowers striking down many of them. Of the original seven hundred Jewish fighters that were involved in the uprising, only about three hundred were successful in breaking through the two layers of fencing surrounding Treblinka II. As the prisoners made their way through the fences or out the main gate, they forgot one crucial job. The telephone wire had not been cut.

German reinforcements from the surrounding villages were called into action and quickly made their way after the escaped prisoners. “The shots, grenade explosions, and billowing smoke rising from the camp could be heard and seen easily from Treblinka penal camp (Treblinka I) and other locations in the region.”<sup>76</sup> The Germans and Ukrainians who had been enjoying their lazy day swimming at the Bug River also returned quickly and helped bring order to the uprising. Other men who came to join the hunt for the escaped prisoners were firefighters who put out the fire that had by now consumed many of the buildings in the camp. Once the fires were contained, they joined the other guards in pursuit. The Germans attacked on horseback and in cars and since the uprising took place earlier than expected, the Germans had more daylight to help them look for the escaped prisoners. “The fugitives’ initial goal was to get as far away from Treblinka as possible. At first they ran in large groups; these scattered and shrank in size the further they ran.”<sup>77</sup> As they ran, the more physically capable continued as quickly as they could. Others, however, went as long as they could but eventually collapsed from exhaustion, no matter how much danger they were in.

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<sup>76</sup> Chris Webb, *The Treblinka Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2014), 264.

<sup>77</sup> Arad, 296.

As night fell, many of the prisoners were still unaccounted for by the Germans. They had been able to escape into the surrounding forests and evade the Germans and Ukrainians for the time being. One of the men who managed to escape was the Underground's leader, Galewski. He was in a group of survivors that managed to get a few kilometers away from Treblinka II but became unable to carry on. According to a prisoner who was with him, "He took a vial of poison from his pocket, swallowed the contents, and died on the spot."<sup>78</sup> The rest of the uprising leaders fell in either the uprising itself or over the course of the following days. The only reported leader who did manage to survive the uprising and the war was Berek Lajcher. For the remaining prisoners who managed to escape from Treblinka II, surviving the night became the next objective.

Many ran through the forests, trying to stay as far from the roads and villages as they could for fear of being spotted. Others, who attempted to make contact with villagers, received a mixture of results. Some villagers provided food and shelter to the escaped prisoners, others turned the prisoners back over to the Germans for fear of retribution, while others simply killed the Jews on their own since so many Poles despised the Jewish population more so than the Germans did. Overall, of the original seven hundred prisoners to take part in the uprising, historians have concluded that only about sixty were successful in surviving the war. Sixty out of seven hundred is definitely not good odds, but the fact that even that many succeeded is extraordinary.

Seen as the most successful camp revolt based on the number of Jewish escapees that survived the event and the remainder of the war, the Sobibór Extermination Camp revolt took place on 14 October 1943. With the combined efforts of Soviet prisoners of war and members

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<sup>78</sup> Donat, 236.

of the Sonderkommando, they successfully killed eleven German SS soldiers and several Ukrainian auxiliary forces before tearing down the barbed-wire fencing surrounding the camp, traversing the mine field and making their way to the forest five hundred meters away. By the end of the day, around 300 Jews escaped from Sobibór and were either killed by the trailing Germans or joined partisan units that were living in the forests. By war's end, only an estimated 50 were still alive.<sup>79</sup> The majority still died, but they died free.

Not all revolts were camp-wide events that led to crematoriums being destroyed and fences smashed by hundreds of Jewish inmates. A small "revolt" took place at Birkenau in 1943 when a group of women were undressing in a room with two German guards. During this process, a Warsaw dancer named Horowitz, threw her shoe at one of the guards, grabbed his revolver and shot him in the stomach. The other women converged on the second guard ripping his nose off and scalping him. Both men died, but the action alerted the remainder of the camp, so that a small force of guards surrounded the building the women were in and killed them all.<sup>80</sup> Their fate was not much different than that of those who took part in the Treblinka and Sobibór revolts, but they at least took two Germans with them. In 1944, the Auschwitz Sonderkommandos were successful in destroying one of the crematoriums before they too were all killed by the Germans.<sup>81</sup>

While yes, these did not have the same impact as the full camp revolts, they certainly made those participating feel they were not going to die in vain. Once the ghettos were

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<sup>79</sup> *Escape from a Nazi Death Camp*, directed by Jonathan Davenport (Public Broadcasting Station, 2014), DVD

<sup>80</sup> Gilbert, 621.

<sup>81</sup> Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987), 147.

liquidated and the Jews were sent to their respective camps, many did not give up hope of surviving the ordeal they were in the middle of. Whether they were working for the Germans as a Sonderkommando or the most hated Kapo, using their pre-war expertise to get a job that would at the very least, allow them to live a while longer, to sabotaging the German war machine or taking part in a full scale revolt against their assailants, they refused to let their desire for survival die. When put in an unordinary situation, they reacted in an extraordinary way they could be proud of.

## CHAPTER 4

### TAKING THE FIGHT BACK TO THE GERMANS IN THE FORESTS OF EASTERN EUROPE, 1941-1944

"We had no firearms; the only thing we had was the will and the courage."<sup>82</sup>

- Frank Blaichman, Jewish Partisan in Naliboki Forest

Throughout history, there have always been groups of people that have been persecuted for a multitude of reasons. It could typically be ideological, racial, political or religious differences, but in some instances it is simply for existing in the wrong place at the wrong time. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler wrote “peoples who can sneak their way into the rest of mankind like drones, to make other men work for them under all sorts of pretexts, can form states even without any definitely delimited living space of their own. This applies first and foremost to a people under whose parasitism the whole of honest humanity is suffering, today more than ever: the Jew.”<sup>83</sup> This should seem as a warning for all who read it that something awful was on the way and they should leave before the storm gets to be too strong. Unfortunately, millions stayed and experienced one of, if not the most heinous acts, that man can do to his fellow man. While millions were led to the slaughter, not everyone went quietly, or went at all. There were thousands of men, women and children that fled to the forests of Eastern Europe to wait out as long as they could and take the fight back to the Germans, who were attempting to eradicate their complete existence.

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<sup>82</sup> "Profile of a Jewish Partisan." Aish.com. April 12, 2004. Accessed October 19, 2015. <http://www.aish.com/ho/p/48945496.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Adolf Hitler and James Vincent Murphy, *Mein Kampf*. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1981), 150.

In Allan Levine's *Fugitives of the Forest: The Heroic Story of Jewish Resistance and Survival During the Second World War*, he writes that "[b]y about early 1942, the forest emerged as the Jews' final haven, their last chance for survival."<sup>84</sup> For the Jews who managed to escape the grasp of their German captors, surviving in the forests was going to be a new and extremely daunting task. Those who were lucky enough to make it this far were going to learn how to survive off the land, find the supplies they needed and take the fight back to the enemy that had tormented their lives and taken their families.

The Hague Conference of 1907, Article IV, on the Laws and Customs of War on Land attempted to define the status of legitimate belligerents and included in them guerillas, militia, and volunteer troops provided they (a) were properly commanded, (b) wore a fixed emblem recognizable at a distance, (c) carried arms openly, and (d) conducted their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war.<sup>85</sup> Relatively small partisan units immobilized large enemy concentrations, disrupted transportation lines, and hampered free enemy action over widespread areas.<sup>86</sup> Everything in the Jewish experience during the war gave great emotional force to the creation of a separate Jewish partisan movement, but many factors – some external, some internal – made this impossible.<sup>87</sup> This chapter will analyze the creation of these Jewish partisan units, how they eluded the surrounding Germans, what they did to survive even in the

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<sup>84</sup> Allan Gerald Levine, *Fugitives of the Forest: The Heroic Story of Jewish Resistance and Survival During the Second World War*. (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>85</sup> Kenneth Macksey, *The Partisans of Europe in the Second World War*, (New York: Stein and Day, 1975),

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

<sup>87</sup> Nora Levin, *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry 1933-1945*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), 364.

harshes of times and conditions, formation of unlikely allies and how the family camps succeeded in protecting hundreds of terrified Jews in the forests of Eastern Europe.

During the years of the Holocaust, there were an estimated 5,000 Jewish fighters. Of these about 1,000 fought in the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion of April 1943, 1,000 in the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, and the rest as partisans in forests where there were some 1.5 million Jews in the area in 1939, so one gets a ratio of resisters of 0.33 percent.<sup>88</sup> This is an extremely small amount, but compared to the .0125 percent of the twenty million Poles that formed resistance groups<sup>89</sup>, this was an extremely impressive and telling figure. Their aim was not to march on Berlin, their aim was not to defeat the German army. They had a limited amount of simple weapons and they went on the most dangerous missions. The majority of the Jewish partisans came from escaping their villages or shtetls before the advancing Einsatzgruppen units could arrive and wipe them out. Once they had been able to link up with other partisans, many returned to locations near the ghettos to attempt to help those inside escape and join their forces in the forests. But how were they going to achieve a breakout of an effective number of Jews within the ghettos to help fight back against the Nazis?

In the Polish town of Karelitz, Holocaust survivor Berl Kagan recounted the first massacre to take place in his town in July 1941. The Rabbi, Vernik, was accompanied by two members of the Schutzstaffel (SS) and ordered to read out the names of 105 men that were to step forward.

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<sup>88</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979),

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

The men whose names had been called, mostly dignitaries of the congregation, were locked up in the cellar of the synagogue. Rabbi Vernik was one of them. The 105 men imprisoned in the cellar were taken to Novogrodek the next day, and shot in pits prepared ahead of time next to the military barracks at Shridlevo, near Novogrodek.<sup>90</sup>

These massacres were going on all over Eastern Europe, not only in Poland, and there were scores of accounts just like Kagan's. In the Lithuanian town of Kedainai on 28 August 1941, an Einsatzkommando unit drove more than two thousand Jews into a ditch. Suddenly, a Jewish butcher jumped up, seized one of the German soldiers, dragged him into the ditch, and sank his teeth into the German's throat delivering a fatal bite. All two thousand Jews, including the butcher, were then shot.<sup>91</sup> While occurrences like the one in Kadainai were extremely rare, they were enough to make anyone want to fight back. Twenty-two-year-old Miles Lerman recalled one instance in the Lvov Ghetto:

Jewish father had his three sons with him. One of the sons managed to escape from the ghetto so when the guards learned that they were missing one person, he brought out the father and his two sons and he said 'as a punishment to the fact that one of your sons has escaped, I ask you to pick one of your remaining sons and you are going to hang him.' The father begged and he said 'do it yourself, I can't.' And he (the guard) kept beating him and saying 'you will do it yourself.' Then he said 'if you are not going to do it, I will kill the three of you and ten others.' So finally the father sees that he can't help it. He closed his eyes, walked several times around the two sons and finally put his hand on one. And this is the one HE hung. He had to put the noose around his son's neck and kick the stool. The following morning when we got up, we found him hanging in the latrine. He had committed suicide.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Jack Kagan, and Dov Cohen. *Surviving the Holocaust with the Russian Jewish Partisans*. (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 41.

<sup>91</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War*, (New York: H. Holt, 1987), 186.

<sup>92</sup> *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*. USA: PBS Home Video, 2002. DVD.

These are the kinds of traumatic events that would make anyone fight back, with absolutely no regard for their own lives.

While anti-Semitism was an epidemic in a large part of Europe, the Eastern part especially, some Jews took their chances and attempted to make contact with non-Jewish families. During Aktion Reinhardt, the large-scale roundup of Jews in the summer of 1942, some Jews would attempt to hide in sewers, drainage ducts, and anywhere possible to keep out of sight of the Germans until they thought it was safe enough to run for the forest or seek assistance from the locals. In the case of Antsel Fridman, he escaped into the night while the Senno Ghetto was being liquidated and found refuge in a hamlet before knocking on the first door he found. Luck was on his side because occupying the house was a single woman named Zosia (her last name was never known) who hid him in her cellar before helping him link up with a partisan unit in the surrounding forest. Not everyone that escaped from the ghettos was as lucky to find their own Zosia. In the case of Gutman Aleinikova, who hid under a bridge in a drainage pipe for a few days, was eventually to be discovered by a child, reported, and killed by the Germans.<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately, this was the more common result when a Jewish escapee was discovered. Not everyone that escaped into the forest did so with the knowledge or certainty that they would become a partisan. When Miles Lerman first escaped from the ghetto, he recalled “When I came to the woods, I was going to hang myself. It wasn’t easy to adapt. Then I said to myself ‘you coward. You’re not going to hang yourself; you’re going to survive this.’”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky. "Righteous Gentiles, the Partisans, and Jewish Survival in Belorussia, 1941-1944." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11, no. 3 (1997): 301-29.

<sup>94</sup> *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*. USA: PBS Home Video, 2002. DVD.

Those who escaped from their villages before the Einsatzgruppen units arrived or from the ghettos with the help of forest guides had the best chance of linking up with partisan units. The vast majority of Jews that were hoping to escape from their towns and ghettos were typically younger, more mobile people, or those who did not have a family to worry about. Escaping to the forests and join the partisan units was a difficult decision for young Jews to make for several reasons:

1. Jews were town dwellers and the outdoor life in the thick of the forest was alien to their traditional way of life.
2. One of the preconditions for life in the forest was the backing of the rural civilian population, which supplied food and vital information to the partisans. The Jews had no allies among the local population and parts of the national groups – especially Ukrainians – were markedly hostile toward them.
3. In order to find shelter in the forest, the young Jews were obligated to leave their families behind in the ghetto, thereby abandoning them to their fate.
4. The Jews did not have the option of retreating from the forest or leaving it temporarily. In Poland, as in other areas in the East, there were units (most subordinate to the AK, the Polish Underground Army resistance force), whose members conducted normal lives during the day and operated in partisan units at night. Some farmers were called to action only for largescale operations. The Jews could not live normal civilian lives while taking part in guerilla action.<sup>95</sup>

Still, even before partisan guides reached the ghettos to lead Jews to the forest, many ghetto occupants who were unconnected to underground movements fled for their lives.<sup>96</sup> Before any

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<sup>95</sup> Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 487.

<sup>96</sup> Levine, 107.

coordinated ghetto escapes could be attempted, ghetto underground groups needed to be set up so they would be able to successfully link with partisans on the outside.

Vilna ghetto resident Alexander Bogen recalls the early days of the German occupation, “I met Abba Kovner at the art academy before the outbreak of the war. He wrote a speech when the ghetto was first formed, which said we must fight within the ghetto fully armed against the Germans. The result was the founding of a fighting partisan unit – the FPO.”<sup>97</sup> Once this had been accomplished, the rest of the plan could unfold. For those who made the decision to leave the ghetto, the act of escape itself – without arms or contacts – was fraught with danger.<sup>98</sup> Just because some were able to escape from the ghettos or their towns did not always mean they were home free. Historian Dov Levin estimates, for instance, that in Lithuania, of the 40,000 Jews still alive at the beginning of 1943, 1,800 were able to escape to the forests from the ghettos, though many died en route or later in the Nazi hunts that followed.<sup>99</sup>

Because fleeing from the ghettos was an extreme risk, the men in charge of partisan units located in the wooded areas would employ young children and women to serve as guides for those attempting to escape. Young children and women who did not possess strong Jewish features were preferred as guides from the ghettos to the forests over men because they looked much less menacing and the Germans typically viewed them as incapable of causing harm. Since guards patrolled the outer walls of the Minsk Ghetto, for example, partisan units had to communicate with the underground within the ghetto to decide on certain signals on when it was safe to make their escape.

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<sup>97</sup> *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*. USA: PBS Home Video, 2002. DVD.

<sup>98</sup> Levine, 365.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 129

One child guide was a thirteen-year-old girl by the name of Sima Fiterson who would stand near the ghetto walls and bounce a ball to signal to potential escapees that there were guards nearby, when she put the ball back in her pocket, the coast was clear for them to make a run for it.<sup>100</sup> Things did not always go as planned, and since groups could not attempt an escape without the help of a guide, they would have to wait, sometimes for days. These stranded groups often presented open targets for German patrols, and took a stand to fight back as well as they could. Some succeeded in fighting their way out while others perished before reaching the forest.<sup>101</sup> Once they made it to the forest, only a very small part of the long difficult journey had been accomplished.

Supplies were something that were very scarce in the early part of the war, and even more so for the units that were separated by long distances from a town or farm. Limited supplies of food, weapons and adequate winter clothing made their fight just that much harder. In the Minsk Ghetto, women like Rosa Altman worked in the Labor Exchange and smuggled out weapons and ammunition to forest guides when they took new recruits from the Minsk Underground to join up with the partisan fighters. Altman and other women put parts in small soup jars, wrapped machine gun ammo belts around their waists under their clothes, and bundled rifle barrels together with sticks.<sup>102</sup> Even if individuals were able to escape from the ghettos on their own

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<sup>100</sup> Barbara Leslie Epstein. *The Minsk Ghetto, 1941-1943 Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 215.

<sup>101</sup> Lester Samuel Eckman, and Chaim Litai. *The Jewish Resistance: The History of the Jewish Partisans in Lithuania and White Russia During the Nazi Occupation, 1940-1945*. (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1977), 118.

<sup>102</sup> Epstein, 164.

and find a partisan outpost, they were not always accepted. As historian Yehuda Merin pointed out, “even here they were often disappointed because partisan groups already there accepted only those Jews with weapons (rifles and pistols).”<sup>103</sup> This non-acceptance of lone would-be fighters was a normal occurrence. When rejected, the Jewish individuals would have to fend for themselves in the unforgiving forests of Eastern Europe with its harsh winters and constant German patrols.

Since the majority of fighters were, at most, lightly armed, attacking the German patrols that scoured the forests in order to acquire their weapons became a necessary risk they had to undertake. Getting ahold of a German uniform was a great achievement because they were extremely warm compared to what they were usually wearing and the uniform could help partisans disguise their appearance and blend in during later missions. The majority of their weapons were procured in the same fashion, but even so, ammunition was hard to come by unless they were able to kill Germans on patrols or raid supply depots. Some partisan groups did receive help from a very unlikely source after Operation Barbarossa.

After Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the German war machine ravaged Eastern Europe the same way it did the West. The resulting outcome was hundreds of thousands of Red Army soldiers cut off from their comrades. After hearing what the Germans would do to them if they were caught, many stole clothes from locals and made for wooded areas while others attempted to acquire jobs and hoped that a local did not point out any suspicious or unwanted people to a German soldier or policeman. As Historian Barbara Epstein recounts, “most formed organized groups and went to the forests with the aim of surviving,

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<sup>103</sup> Yehuda Merin. "Three Jewish Family-Camps in the Forests of Volyn, Ukraine during the Holocaust." Jewish Social Studies 46, no. 1 (1984): 83-92

perhaps of trying to get to the front or rejoin the Red Army, and if not, engaging in resistance in occupied territory.”<sup>104</sup> With the sudden influx of Red Army soldiers in the surrounding forests, partisan units from both sides (Jewish and Soviet) quickly took control of the areas resulting in German units not patrolling the forests at night for fear of coming up against a much larger guerilla force than earlier expected. While the Soviet and Jewish partisans were fighting a common enemy in the Germans, many did not see each other as being on the same side.

As mentioned earlier, anti-Semitism in central and eastern European ran rampant and while some Soviet partisans collaborated with the Jewish fighters, not everyone was as dedicated to them. There are accounts of Polish partisans catching Soviet partisans and beating them up. After they took their weapon, the Poles would let them leave, bloodied, but alive. This went in both directions, even though they were fighting against the same enemy and for the same objective, they often still did not trust each other enough to cooperate. This was not surprising, though, since the USSR had invaded eastern Poland in mid-September 1939. The Jewish partisans were not as lucky. As Sociologist Nechama Tec illustrates, “unprotected small groups of Jewish civilians in bunkers or Jews who were roaming the countryside were attacked and killed.”<sup>105</sup> Apparently the enemy of my enemy is my friend was not a code some Poles and Soviets lived by with their Jewish counterparts. In one instance in 1942, seven Jewish teenagers escaped from their ghetto and fled to the woods after having obtained weapons. They met up with Soviet partisans commanded by Lieutenant Nasyekin who said he would take the boys in if they handed over their weapons. The result was six of the youths being murdered with one

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<sup>104</sup> Epstein, 188.

<sup>105</sup> Tec Nechama. *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 52.

escaping unharmed. Nasyekin was eventually caught by another Soviet commander and executed for these deplorable acts.<sup>106</sup> It was for reasons like this that the majority of Jewish units tended not only to hide from the Germans, but everyone else as well for fear of crossing paths with the wrong group. However, this was not always the case.

Many Soviet partisan units merged with Jewish partisans or Soviet commanders let Jewish fighters join into their brigades. Even though Josef Stalin had made it perfectly clear to the Soviet partisans that they were not to bother themselves with the Jewish fight against the Germans, some did jeopardize their lives to help their Jewish equivalents. While some Soviet brigade commanders did accept Jewish fighters into their units, some gave supplies but no protection. Aleksei Fyodorov was one such commander who by 1943 commanded a brigade of 1,700 fighters and was credited with rescuing hundreds of Jewish children and protecting them in a family camp. While Colonel Dimitry Medvedev accepted Jews from Rovno and Korets into his brigade, he also provided food, supplies and weapons to an adjacent family camp of 150 Jews.<sup>107</sup> However, not everyone was as accepting as these commanders. The Germans had a habit of disguising collaborators in civilian attire, had them infiltrate Soviet partisan ranks, and kill the unit's commander, which eventually led to many individuals who were hoping to join partisan brigades in the forest being shot on sight.<sup>108</sup> As the war raged on and supplies really started to diminish, the survival of some Jewish brigades depended on aid from the Soviets. In certain areas of the forests of Eastern Europe, Soviet air drops began resupplying the Jewish

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<sup>106</sup> Levine, 187.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 271.

fighters with the much needed provisions and materials that helped them stay fit to fight the surrounding German forces.

The majority of the Jewish fighters had to develop dietary provisions outside the norm so they would be able to survive. For a while, the majority of their food came from what they could scrounge off dead German soldiers, steal from markets and farms, or take from supply depots that they would raid when they were in dire need of supplies. Throughout the war, especially when they were in areas that had very little German activity, some of the locals would donate to the partisans knowing full well that being caught by the Germans would be met with severe punishment. While friendly peasants provided food, in most cases, it food was stolen from shops, farms or raided from caches meant for German soldiers.<sup>109</sup> Another place they would acquire food was from fleeing Germans that were retreating from advancing Red Army units. Unfortunately for the partisans, the Germans would often booby-trap their supplies and food they left behind because they knew who would be coming in after they ran. "The Germans left mines and hidden bombs behind when they retreated," remembered Leon Idas, a Greek-born Jewish partisan. "We saw a nice meal in front of us, and we were hungry, but couldn't touch it."<sup>110</sup> Other accounts mention Jewish fighters eating rotten food scraps and animal heads they found simply so they would not starve. It was very common for partisans to go up to five days without food, but water was of urgent importance. There were plenty of instances where, if they got desperate enough, men would drink their own urine. It was terrible but if there was no water or snow around, this had to be done. Without any water, they could not fight.

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<sup>109</sup> "Holocaust Resistance: Living and Surviving as a Partisan." [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org). Accessed August 28, 2015. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/partisan1.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

As the war progressed to the latter stages and the Soviets gained the upper hand on the retreating German forces, Soviet soldiers understood the importance of the Jewish and non-Jewish partisan units. To help the partisans fight the Germans, the Soviets began resupplying them from the air with periodic drops of much needed food, ammunition and, occasionally, medical supplies. Everything the Jewish partisans did was fraught with danger from attacking German positions, handling weapons and explosives, to attempting to take out German communication stations. Many partisans became wounded in these attacks, developed frost bite from the cold and contracted typhoid from head lice.<sup>111</sup> Because of the lack of medical care, many fighters died or had to have limbs amputated. Some of the members of the group, usually the women, tended to the wounded in any way they could and on extraordinary occasions, the wounded would be taken to a local physician if they could be trusted.

In a 2004 article in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, a researcher interviewed twenty-five holocaust survivors from around Europe, who at that time lived in South Florida's Broward and Miami-Dade counties about their attitudes towards food nowadays. The author noticed a common trend among those she interviewed: they had difficulty throwing food away, even when it had spoiled, difficulty standing in lines for food, and many experienced anxiety when food was not readily available to them.<sup>112</sup> When it came to throwing food away, many have said they absolutely hate even the thought because of how precious food was to them during their horrific ordeal. Some even answered they would only throw the food out if it was beyond any kind of salvage, even if it had spoiled. One interviewee under the name H.I.R. said,

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<sup>111</sup> "Holocaust Resistance: Living and Surviving as a Partisan." [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org). Accessed August 28, 2015. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/partisan1.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Amy Sindler, "Holocaust Survivors Report Long-Term Effects on Attitudes Toward Food," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 36, no. 4 (2004): 189-200.

“I can say this with confidence, that when I fill the plate, I will make sure that it’s eaten. I will not – I cannot think of many instances where I would leave food on the plate. And that’s a throwback to the fact that there was a lack of food, a tremendous lack of food.”<sup>113</sup> Anxiety towards food was commonplace for survivors’ years after the tribulation was complete.

Men of military age were armed and carried out defense of the camps, often joining in the military operations of neighboring partisan detachments, and especially in the war against the rails.<sup>114</sup> When it came to carrying out raids on German positions or patrols, the partisans had to use extreme caution and cover their surroundings to make sure they were not running into a trap. Vita Kempner-Kovner recounts the risks that went into picking train targets. “One of the purposes of the FPO,” she recalled, “was to blowup trains traveling to the Eastern front. We couldn’t do it close to places where Jews were working in order not to implicate them. If the Germans found out that Jews did this, they would destroy the entire ghetto.”<sup>115</sup> “Between the years of 1942-1944, one Jewish partisan group in Lithuania saved from certain death or, at the least, deportation to forced labor camps in Germany, more than a thousand Jewish civilians; derailed six German trains and destroyed nineteen bridges; burned a lumber factory and numerous other government buildings; blew up eight hundred meters of rail-bed and killed two hundred and sixty-one police officers, Germans and Soviet soldiers who worked for the German government.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Sidler, 192.

<sup>114</sup> Smilovitsky, 315.

<sup>115</sup> *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*. USA: PBS Home Video, 2002. DVD.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

Not all partisan groups saw these kinds of results. The Germans began stepping up their combing of the forests and sending out locals to try and find where the partisans were hiding. Seldom did the Germans actually go into the forests. But when they did, they entered with tanks, trucks, artillery, machine gun fire and grenades. Luckily, since it was a forest, they could not see where they were shooting. Between 1941 and 1944, the partisans carried out hundreds of raids that severely crippled the German occupiers which helped raise morale amongst those in the camps. On occasion they would take German prisoners. One such event took place on a raid with combined Soviet and Jewish groups. One Jewish fighter had a German surrender to him. He recalled, “He talked to me and says that he’s afraid. He tried to show me pictures of his family and he starts to beg. ‘I am not SS, I’m a soldier’ he said. And he looks to me as a simple soldier, so I tell the Russian colonel I think he’s a soldier, take him to a POW camp and give him away. The Russian took his revolver and killed the German soldier.”<sup>117</sup>

Throughout the course of the war, partisan operations were taking place all the time. Targets consisted of supply depots, railroads, headquarters, and infrastructure, hit and run tactics on German patrols, and the most important, cutting telephone communications between towns. In May 1943, Jewish partisan units destroyed German headquarters in the Polish towns of Markushow, Garbow and Wolka. As these operations were taking place, many Jewish and Soviet partisan groups fought alongside each other, often with the Jewish fighters earning the respect of their Soviet counterparts. There was just one concern, recalled eighteen-year-old Shalom Yoran, “one of my biggest worries was that I would get killed and on my grave they would put a Russian star. Now I died as one of them fighting the Nazis and not as a Jew fighting

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<sup>117</sup> *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*. USA: PBS Home Video, 2002. DVD.

the Nazis.”<sup>118</sup> If they were going to be remembered as a Soviet fighting the Nazis, then no one would know that Jews fought against the Nazis too. This was a great fear shared amongst many of the Jewish fighters.

Over time, certain partisan groups began to stand out from the rest. The Bielski Partisan otriad (military detachment) that hid in the Nalibocka Forest midway between Minsk and the city of Lida, Belarus were one of those groups. Named after the family that orchestrated the group, the Bielski Partisans started a family camp, reaching upwards of 1,200 people by summer 1944.<sup>119</sup> The Bielski Partisans were run by the four brothers, Tuvia, Alexander, Asael and Aaron Bielski after they escaped from the Minsk Ghetto at the expense of their parents and other family members. Tuvia, as the oldest and a former corporal in the Polish Army, was chosen to be the leader. Aaron remembers, “Tuvia believed that if they could save twenty, then they could save sixty. And if they had the food for sixty, they could get enough for one hundred and twenty. This went on throughout the war which is why we were able to save so many.”<sup>120</sup> Beginning in 1941, and over the next three years, Tuvia sent delegates back into the local ghetto attempting to smuggle more and more people out and lead them to the forest. As the Red Army regained land from the Germans and eventually came into the area and occupied portions of Poland, the Bielski family served as low-level administrators for the Soviets, which came as an irritation to the local

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<sup>118</sup> *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*. USA: PBS Home Video, 2002. DVD

<sup>119</sup> Ruby Rohrich. *Resisting the Holocaust*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998). 89.

<sup>120</sup> *Resistance: Untold Stories of Jewish Partisans*. USA: PBS Home Video, 2002. DVD

Poles and strained the relationship between the two.<sup>121</sup> This is one reason why Jewish partisans were practically fighting everybody they came in contact with.

Within the Bielski Partisans group, very few members had weapons training or took part in armed resistance against the Germans that combed the Nalibocka Forest. Still, everyone that was permitted to stay had to work in some capacity. Many within the group that were not too old contributed to the welfare of the group by working as craftsmen, cooks, seamstresses and field medics<sup>122</sup> while the rest would fight or keep watch throughout the area surrounding their camp. Tuvia and the Bielski Partisans were such a success that he was treated with more respect by the families he was protecting than the Red Army officers were receiving from their own troops. It eventually got to the point in 1943 where General Dubov, commander of the Pervomajskaya partisan brigade demanded that Tuvia be killed. Dubov sent Hersh Smolar to carry this out, but was taken aback when he was graciously invited to tour the family camp and was even more impressed when he discovered everything the Bielski Partisans had been achieving in the camp. Smolar returned to his commander and notified him that the Bielskis were an integral part of the partisan movement in the area, thus saving Tuvia's life.<sup>123</sup> By the end of the war, the Bielski brothers had been assimilated into the Red Army where Asael was killed in combat while the other three were successful in escaping and surviving the war.

While the men were typically seen as the fighters and protectors of the partisan brigades, women served an extensive role as well in the survival and protection in each of the fighting

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<sup>121</sup> Timothy Snyder, "Caught Between Hitler & Stalin", The New York Review of Books, Volume 56, Number 7, April 30, 2009.

<sup>122</sup> "Holocaust Resistance: Living and Surviving as a Partisan." Accessed August 31, 2015.

<sup>123</sup> Tec, 151.

units. It was common for Soviet partisan commanders to turn away women from their ranks but just the opposite was the rule amongst their Jewish counterparts. Once they had escaped from the ghettos, women faced the same uncertainty as men, but it was made even more dangerous just by the fact that they were women viewed as weak and helpless. Many were killed by the same partisans they were trying desperately to find. Vasili Tsariuk recalls an instance when a group of women were killed along the bank on the Nieman River: “We were warned from reliable sources that the Gestapo had sent a group of women to poison food in our cauldrons. We were at war, nothing could have been done.”<sup>124</sup> It is sad to think that this was not the only occurrence, but even the men were targeted for the same reason. In their case, it was either be killed by the partisans or by the Germans who captured them. In the Bielski family camp, the women served numerous purposes: cooking, educating children in a “school” (they did not learn anything, it was there just to get their mind off the surroundings), nurses and most importantly, helping the fighters and even non-fighters overcome any psychological trauma they may be experiencing.

One thing many women, especially in the family camps, had to be careful of was pregnancies. They did occur and abortions were typical, because bringing a child into the setting they were placed in for an unknown amount of time would have been suicide for the group if Germans nearby heard the baby cry. Because of this, many women chose not to seek out the comfort of men in their otriads (military detachments) but rather focused on their job and staying around other women. Those who did have abortions performed on them in the woods often had difficulty after the war getting pregnant, as many women in the family camps experienced. This

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<sup>124</sup> Tamara Vershitskaya, “Jewish Women Partisans in Belarus,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 4 (2011): 567-72.

is not to say that babies were not born in the forests, it did happen. It was just a very rare occasion given the circumstances. Needless to say, it was commonplace for each member of the family camps to pair off with someone for the simple fact of trying to live a “normal” life as well as they could. Perhaps one might argue that the very devastation surrounding these people encouraged them to pursue whatever might superficially resemble normalcy. Perhaps the social, cultural, and spiritual vacuum created by the war demanded some familiar structures.<sup>125</sup>

The combined partisan movement against the forces of Germany played an important role in the eventual defeat of the Third Reich and the Jewish partisans were an integral part to that success. While the majority of the Jewish population that was captured was killed in the labor or extermination camps, the Jewish partisans, with the help of the Underground, made sure they were not going to fold to the Germans but go out with a true fight. They learned to survive in a world they knew entirely little about when they entered the forests escaping from a battle hardened enemy and other insurmountable odds faced in nature. Through their fighting, the Jewish partisans were able to keep an estimated 700,000 German troops away from the front lines and scouring the land for them, which helped the advances Allied forces tremendously, regardless of them knowing it or not.

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<sup>125</sup> Tec, 169.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

“To destroy a man is difficult, almost as difficult as to create one.”

- Primo Levi, Auschwitz Survivor

Through the war and its aftermath, both Holocaust survivors and perpetrators had to live with what they experienced in what was one of the most extreme acts of hatred the world has ever witnessed. People have to ask themselves: had the Second World War not engulfed all of Europe, would Hitler and the Nazis have been able to carry out these acts of extreme hate unnoticed for so long? Thankfully, in conjunction with the help from Soviet soldiers, sympathetic civilians and in extreme cases, German soldiers, a significant proportion of European Jews were able to survive the horrors that were thrust upon them by a tyrannical man determined to wipe them from existence.

The purpose of this thesis was to describe to the reader the variety of tactics and desperate measures used by the Jewish people – from overcoming starvation in the ghettos, enduring extreme hardship after hardship in the camps, and fighting a guerilla war in the forests – in their quest for survival at all costs, even if that meant getting ahead through appalling means. This project was also meant to expand the reader’s understanding that many never ceased to give up, even when it was apparent that they were completely on their own.

The characteristics possessed by the Jews who experienced everything from Kristallnacht to the eventual liberation of the camps by Allied soldiers were astounding for them to survive and never give up the desire for freedom. What happened to the Jews in Europe ultimately cannot be fully understood by anyone except those who lived through it, but their fight for

survival has been paralleled over the centuries by people who have been persecuted for their beliefs, skin color and anything else that sets them apart from others.

The destruction and occupation of Europe by the German war machine led ordinary people to fight back against extraordinary odds. It made a whole group of people dig deep and realize they were on their own in the fight for survival. 1933-1945 will always be a black mark in European history but it is the same black mark that brought on one of the greatest and most powerful moments in Jewish history. Without their desire to survive, and had the Germans not been defeated on both the Eastern and Western Fronts, there is a great chance that the Jewish people would not be here today to tell their story.

After the war, the European Jews had to pick themselves up as much as they could and be proud of their accomplishment in the face of such adversity while at the same time try and understand why they were again chosen as the scapegoat by a close-minded individual spreading fear across a country. They tried to live their lives as well as they could, pick back up where they left off. Many married and raised families in hopes that their children would never have to experience something like they did ever again. Through the stories written by Primo Levi and others, their history and experiences will live on forever and the least we can do is read them to get a better understanding. If their stories and how they lived are forgotten, then in a sense, Hitler and the Nazi will have succeeded in their attempts to erase the Jews from the planet.

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