Resistance During the Holocaust

Information from “Resistance During the Holocaust”
Produced by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
Warm Up

If you fled to escape capture, where would you go?

- Who would give you food and shelter?
- How would you pay for these necessities?
- What would be the penalties for Christians who helped you?
Assuming you could get out of your house, how would you escape from the town or city where you lived?
Warm Up

How would you defend yourself?
Warm Up

Would you be willing to risk the lives of your family, your friends, and possibly your entire community by an act of resistance?
Once trapped in a ghetto or camp, malnourished and demoralized, would you be thinking about resistance or survival? What resources would you have to organize resistance?
The Real Question

- The question is NOT: “Why didn’t more Jews fight back?”

- The question IS: “How were so many people able to fight back in the face of such adversity?”
During WWII, an estimated 20,000-30,000 Jews fought bravely in resistance groups.
“We had no weapons except for rocks, bottles and a few knives. We were completely outnumbered and surrounded by a trained German military force loyally supported by local population. But then again, we had no expectation that we would live beyond the next few weeks or months. Why not resist when the alternative was death at a time and place chosen by the Nazis?”
The Facts

- Armed Jewish resistance took place in
  - 5 major ghettos
  - 45 small ghettos
  - 5 major concentration camps
  - 18 forced labor camps
Germans had Superior Weaponry/Military

- Keep in mind that Poland was overrun in a few weeks in 1939.
- In 1940, France fell to the Nazis in just 6 weeks.
- Other countries were soon occupied by German forces.

If these powerful nations could not hold off the Nazis, what chance did civilians have?
Nazi Policy of Collective Responsibility

Entire families and even towns were held accountable for the actions of a few.

- In Lithuania, an entire ghetto population was killed when 2 boys escaped and refused to return.
- In Yugoslavia, the German army routinely executed 50 to 100 people for every German soldier killed by resistance fighters.
- Nazis were also known to execute a person’s family in front of them before killing that person.
Obstacles to Resistance

- **Isolation of Jews and Lack of Weapons**
  - In many occupied regions of eastern Europe, local populations, including many peasants in forest areas where Jews often had the best chances of hiding, were either hostile toward Jews or indifferent to their fate.

*Civilians who did help Jews did so under penalty of death.*
Obstacles to Resistance

- **Secrecy of Nazi Atrocities**
  - Rumors of the death camps became widespread in the later years of the war, but many people (including Jews) could not believe the stories.
  - Many people sent to Auschwitz were required to send postcards to friends and family just before they were gassed: “Arrived safely, I am well.”
Postkarte

Rückantwort nur auf Postkarten (30 Worte) in deutscher Über dem Verband der Juden Budapester - n. 12.

Välten c.10 - 12. kompo (30 szög) n. zürchút a. hungnem
szöge Zsidők Szövetsége,
Budapest, VII., Sip u. 12. ajánl.

Zsolt 1. 10. 1944

Hungarn.

Keine Vermerke ab 1944

Maý 24.
Resistance in the Ghettos

- Nazis set up over 400 ghettos in occupied territories.
- The largest was the Warsaw Ghetto, where over half a million Jews lived in late 1940.
- By summer 1944, the Nazis had emptied all ghettos and killed most of the people who had lived in them.
Resistance in the Ghettos

- **Using Newspapers and Radios**
  - Activists gathered news from BBC or Soviet Broadcasts on hidden radios to inform people of the events of the war.

Anyone found in possession of an illegal radio was executed.
Resistance in the Ghettos

- Acts of Sabotage
  - These activists stole documents, tampered with vital machinery, produced faulty weaponry, slowed down production on assembly lines, stole things for the black market, and set fires in factories.
Resistance in the Ghettos

- **Couriers**
  - These people, often women, would travel under false names and papers and carry illegal documents, newspapers, money and weapons.

In 1942, couriers began spreading news of mass murders at Chelmo, Treblinka, and other camps. Most people found the news unbelievable.
Resistance in the Ghettos

• **Armed Ghetto Resistance**

From the Vilna Ghetto Manifesto:

“Jews, we have nothing to lose. Death will overtake us in any event. And who can still believe in survival when the murderer exterminates us with so much determination? The hand of the executioner will reach each man and woman. Flight and acts of cowardice will not save our lives.”
Resistance in the Ghettos

- **Armed Ghetto Resistance**

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising:
- April 19\(^{th}\), 1943 - May 16\(^{th}\), 1943
- 750 Jewish fighters used guns, grenades, and small homemade bombs to attack the 2,000 German troops
- Although they were eventually defeated, they held off the Germans for 28 days
- On May 16\(^{th}\), the Germans recaptured and destroyed the ghetto. Of the 56,000 captured, 7,000 were shot and the rest sent to death camps.
Resistance in the Camps

• At least 3,000,000 people perished in the Nazi camps
• Some camps were designed specifically for killing, others were forced labor camps
• Jews were used for slave labor even in the death camps and forced to complete horrible tasks
Resistance in the Camps

- **Alleviate the Suffering of Others**
  - Included smuggling/gathering food, money and medical supplies for those in need.

- **Attempts to Inform the Outside World**
  - Some prisoners escaped and presented reports to local Jewish leaders.
  - This information was presented to the Allies, but their priority was winning the war.
  - The camps continued to operate, killing as many as 10,000 people per day.
Resistence in the Camps

- **Armed Camp Resistance**
  - Uprisings in 5 major death camps.
  - Prisoners at Sobibor attacked SS officers and set the camp on fire during roll call. They broke the gate and 300 were able to escape. 200 were able to avoid recapture.

After the uprising, the Germans destroyed all traces of Sobibor. They plowed the camp under and planted crops over the land to hide all traces of what had taken place.
“Upstander” Resistance

**Polish Resistance**
- Germans had closed many Polish schools because they were seen as “subhuman” and believed they should be reduced to minimally educated slave laborers.
- Himmler:
  “The objective of this elementary school must simply be to teach: simple arithmetic up to 500 at the most, how to write one’s name, and to teach that it is God’s commandment to be obedient to the Germans and honest, hard-working, and well-behaved. I consider it unnecessary to teach reading.”
“Upstander” Resistance

- **Soviet Resistance**
  - Largest movement in Europe
  - First their focus was on staying alive, then they conducted acts of sabotage, such as destroying rail lines

- **Jewish Resistance**
  - Faced difficulties due to Anti-Semitism
  - Included women, children and elderly in “family camps”
  - Found throughout western and eastern Europe
Attempts by individuals to maintain their humanity and personal integrity in the face of Nazi attempts to dehumanize and degrade them.
Spiritual Resistance

- **Underground Schools and Libraries**
  Secret schools were organized in ghettos and students would travel to and from class with books hidden under their coats or in their trousers.

- **Documenting the Holocaust**
  Groups collected and stored reports, diaries and documents about life under the Nazis
Spiritual Resistance

- **Secret Religious Activities**
  Groups met secretly for prayer to build morale and reaffirm cultural and religious identity

- **Cultural Activities**
  Children at Theresienstadt painted pictures and wrote poems in classes organized by adults to help them deal psychologically with their circumstances.

*Fewer than 100 of the 15,000 children under age 15 who passed through this camp survived.*
Resistance in Nazi Germany was limited, lacking broad support, and largely ineffective:

- Spies/surveillance by police (included Hitler Youth spies)
- Most political opposition had been removed or killed in the early years

One woman was overheard saying, “Hitler hasn’t made anything better” and was sentenced to 10 months of hard labor.
Resistance in Nazi Germany

• **White Rose Movement**
  Only German group that spoke out against Nazi genocidal policies. Leaders were executed in 1943.

• **Assassination Plots**
  Many plots to get rid of Hitler were planned and in some cases attempted.

• **Distributing Anti-Nazi Literature**
  Groups published books about the concentration camps and atrocities of the Nazis, disguised by innocent covers.
Again, The Real Question

- The question is NOT:
  “Why didn’t more Jews fight back?”

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- Nicholas Winton Clip
- Nicholas Winton NY TIMES Article
- Bielski Brothers Info