

When thinking about Jewish resistance during the Holocaust—the most massive genocide in the frame of human history— it is necessary to consider the possibility that we may not be able to fully conceive the reality of all that occurred. Thus, it may be impossible to decisively conclude whether or not the Jews did enough to resist their Nazi oppressors; for when we truly consider it, what *is* “enough” when talking about resisting the systematic genocide that is “almost beyond human imagination?”¹ An analysis of the events can, at the very least, help us reach a deeper understanding of the extent to which the human spirit is willing to endure. The perseverance of the Jewish spirit in particular seems unlike that of any other, and contrary to Nazi intentions, there is evidence that it cannot be totally snuffed out. Despite the possibility of never knowing whether or not the Jews did *enough* to resist, we do have the faculties to analyze the ways in which the Nazis persecuted the Jews, both leading up to and during the war, and the responses of the Jews during the Holocaust that served to resist such oppression.

In April of 1933, immediately following Hitler’s democratic election, Nazism was in full throttle, and the original goal of Nazi Germany was to make life so unbearable for the Jews that they would simply leave. Therefore, in accordance with that goal, they proceeded to carry out acts and laws characterized by both violence and anti-Semitism. On April 1st, the boycotting of Jewish businesses took place wherein SS guards would stand in front of storefronts and refuse to allow people in. A week later, the permission of Jews to serve as civil servants was revoked, and less than a week after that the notorious legal category of “non-Aryan” was established.²

1. Raymond P Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 199.

2. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 202-03. Non-Aryan was defined as a person who had a minimum of one Jewish grandparent.

Thus, with being legally categorized as non-Aryan, the identification of Jews was made easy and paved the way for more discrimination on behalf of the Nazis and German citizens alike. Signs that read “Jews Not Wanted” were posted all throughout Germany, and anti-Semitic propaganda in the form of posters, pamphlets, children’s books, etc., were rampant.³ In addition, the Nuremberg Laws that were adopted in September of 1935, and “soon became known as the most infamous anti-Semitic decrees ever,”⁴ effectively revoked German citizenship from Jews, outlawed the intermarriage of Jews and German citizens, and enforced even more restrictions; this was not before, however, the construction of the first concentration camp known as Dachau, established in 1933, which was already used to detain those accused or suspected of criminal activity. After the Gestapo was empowered in 1936 to incarcerate whomever they pleased, more concentration camps were built and began to take in prisoners solely on the basis that they were Jewish.⁵

Up to that point in time, the Jews of Germany still found it difficult to believe that their country could truly turn on them so far as to try to eliminate them from Germany altogether, and thought that Nazism would be a passing matter. Such a tragically erroneous belief was shattered on the night of November 9th-10th, 1938, known as Kristallnacht, when “Jewish businesses and synagogues were damaged or destroyed and Jewish individuals were brutalized in a nationwide pogrom.”⁶ The night effectively demoralized German Jewry.

3. Museum of Jewish Heritage. *A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*. New York City. An anti-Semitic children’s book is displayed in the museum entitled “Don’t Trust a Fox in the Green Meadow, Nor a Jew By His Oath, as was a pamphlet entitled “Jewry and Social Democracy” with the cover as a picture depicting a Jew as a devil.

4. Heritage Source Reader. *The Nuremberg Laws*, 266.

5. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 203.

6. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 204. Kristallnacht, i.e., “Night of Broken Glass.”

After the devastation brought on by Kristallnacht, the realization of the necessity to flee finally sunk in and the Jews flooded emigration centers in an effort to make their way to safer countries. Unfortunately, this turned out to be nearly impossible as other countries strictly enforced their immigration restrictions and even reduced their quotas, turning away ships of desperate Jews from their ports. As a result, the Germans decided that the Jews needed to be exterminated and Hitler's "War against the Jews" was in action.⁷

On September 1st, 1939, Germany invaded Poland (the center of world Jewry at the time), enforced its anti-Semitic policies, established ghettos (Warsaw, Lodz, Cracow, etc.), and built even more concentration camps, one of which would become the most notorious of all: Auschwitz. Some of the methods employed by the Nazis to oppress the Jews were exemplified before the war in violent, yet somehow less direct ways (in regards to the previously mentioned Nuremberg laws and anti-Semitic propaganda, etc.) than that of the methods used in the ghettos and concentration camps during the war itself. Within the ghettos and camps, the inhumane treatment of the Jews surpassed a level of conceivability.

In the ghettos, Jews were forced to wear identifying yellow stars labeled "J," "Juif," "Jood," etc., depending on where they were from,⁸ a tradition that (despite common belief) did not originate in Hitler's Third Reich regime, but was nonetheless employed as a way to establish the notion of the Jews' status as inferior. This seems trivial compared to other acts of the Nazis such as seizing Jewish property, enslaving Jews and forcing them to work on railroads or elsewhere (in unbearable conditions) to support the war, enforcing an 1,100-calorie per day food limit, and establishing Jewish councils and making them enforce Nazi rules in the ghettos.⁹

7. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 206.

8. Museum of Jewish Heritage. *A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*. New York City.

9. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 206-08. Known as the Judenrat.

In the concentration camps, if the Jews survived the deportation trip that brought them there (the trip in itself was often fatal for many people, as the conditions were not conducive to life given harsh weather, lack of food and water, crowding in the carts, and sheer exhaustion),¹⁰ they were forced to strip, relinquish their belongings, and go through a “disinfecting” shower upon arrival. One part of Primo Levi’s description of his experience of this nightmarish process demonstrates the extent to which Nazis would go to torture the Jews and attain entertainment for themselves:

We have to form rows of five, with intervals of two yards between man and man; then we have to undress and make a bundle of the clothes in a special manner... I had never seen old men naked. Mr. Bergmann wore a truss and asked the interpreter if he should take it off, and the interpreter hesitated. But the German understood and spoke seriously to the interpreter pointing to someone. We saw the interpreter swallow and then he said: ‘The officer says, take off the truss, and you will be given that of Mr. Coen.’ One could see the words bitterly coming out of [the interpreter’s] mouth; this was the German manner of laughing.¹¹

Evidently, the Germans certainly went beyond just “following orders”, and acted on behalf of their own will, committing crimes against humanity hitherto unfathomable even to the Jews, the most persecuted people of all time. The former example displays Nazi persecution towards an old Jew, who, despite his age, received no sympathy. The same applied to babies, and further—their mothers—as we will see in the next example: “One of the soldiers ‘took the infant, raised him into the air, [and] grabbed him by the leg... ‘The [mother] crawled on the earth, took hold of his boot and pleaded for mercy. But the soldier took the boy and hit him with his head against the wall, once, twice, smashed him against the wall.’”¹² In the rest of the passage, Levine delineates how the mother and the rest of the people she was with in Vilna, a ghetto in Lithuania,

10. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Rockefeller Center, 1986), 17-18.

11. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 22-23.

12. Allan Levine, *Scattered Among the Peoples* (New York: The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc., 2003), 340.

were then transported to the Ponary forest where they were forced to strip, relinquish all belongings, and were then massacred; shot dead (or alive suffering for hours until he/she actually died from the wound) and left to fall into pits.¹³ The dehumanization of the Jews at the hands of Hitler's rule and the Nazis' will, and the methods they used to do so did not have limitations. In the death camps, which had begun to utilize crematoria as a method of quick disposal for the millions of bodies of murdered Jews, the maintenance and functioning of the crematoria was upheld by Jews themselves, who were murdered and replaced in a German effort not to let rumors of what was going on escape the Third Reich.¹⁴

Disturbing as it is, it is important to recognize that these are two heinous examples from an event that killed six million people, and Primo Levi is a survivor; therefore, we heavily rely on the testimonies of survivors for insight into the horrors of the Holocaust. It begs the question of what we do not know—the stories of the six million Jews that could not be told. It illustrates the innumerable amount of ways that Nazis persecuted the Jews. What would the people who were sent to the gas chambers, thinking that they were going to be able to have a shower (an extermination process that murdered up to 800 people in a matter of minutes),¹⁵ say? Or those who were drowned, gunned down, or asphyxiated with exhaust fumes from Nazi vehicles?¹⁶ What we know is inconceivable, what about what we don't know?

Despite the nightmare that the Jews of the Holocaust faced, some resisted their Nazi oppressors. Such resistance took forms physically, psychologically, and even spiritually. False identity cards, for instance, were forged to conceal one's Jewish heritage, as were false

13. Allan Levine, *Scattered Among the Peoples* (New York: The Overlook Press, Peter Mayer Publishers, Inc., 2003), 340-41.

14. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 208.

15. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 211.

16. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 210.

baptism certificates that served to support the false identity cards.¹⁷ We can recall the example of heroic Helene Ehrlich who was working undercover in a Jewish resistance organization in Germany, sending any information she was able to obtain back to her Jewish allies. Once she was caught, she fled the country on a pair of skis;¹⁸ an act of sheer courage in its own right. Even Torah scrolls, which are large items, were sometimes hidden from the Nazis as Jews clung to the things that made them who they were.¹⁹

One of the more famous examples of resistance during the Holocaust took place in the Warsaw Ghetto, wherein Jews operated under the creation of illegal workshops disguised by soup kitchens. The workshops allowed for materials to be smuggled into the ghetto, which were made into products and then sold after being smuggled back out. Furthermore, the soup kitchens hid operations of schools, religious ceremonies, and even some forms of entertainment.²⁰ Though all of these are incredible forms of resistance in themselves (given the harsh punishment Jews would have received if they were caught), there was an even more severe form of resistance that somehow seemed to defy the impossible.

In the Warsaw Ghetto, along with the undercover operations listed above, was the formation of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB), lead by the young Mordecai Anielewicz, which managed to smuggle in weapons from Polish resistance groups. In addition, they manufactured their own weapons in the secret workshops, such as grenades and bombs, and formed lines of communication between other resistance groups.²¹ Following a massive wave of deportation of Jews to death camps in January of 1943, the ZOB launched an attack at the

17. Museum of Jewish Heritage. *A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*. New York City.

18. Museum of Jewish Heritage. *A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*. New York City.

19. Museum of Jewish Heritage. *A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*. New York City.

20. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 214-15.

21. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 215.

Germans that was so intense the Nazis were forced to retreat. Unfortunately, the Nazis re-thought their approach and burned down the entire ghetto, effectively killing most people inside save for a few Jewish resisters who continued to fight until June of that year.²²

Primo Levi found ways to resist his Nazi oppressors as well, despite the failure of his original resistance attempt that resulted in his arrest and deportation to the camp in the first place. He was able to secure a “decent” position as a Specialist in a chemical laboratory (decent relative to the inhumane conditions of other positions in labor camps) and “steal and sell soap and petrol without risk.”²³ Despite Levi’s earlier claim that he “[is] not made up of the stuff of those who resist,”²⁴ he did in fact exercise his own means of resistance, in the form that he could, as did many other Jews in their own right.

Another instance of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust can be identified through my own family’s history. My grandfather, who was born in Belgium in May of 1935, was able to survive the Holocaust as a result of a sacrifice made by his parents; a sacrifice empowered by subversion and resistance. His parents, Isaac and Rosette, denied my grandfather as their son upon detainment by the SS. Though they were deported to Auschwitz and murdered along with six million others—though not before being subjected to iniquities that I can’t bring myself to think about— their son and legacy lived on.

My grandfather, in the meantime, only five years of age, hid in the attic of a Nazi-occupied hotel, owned by a Christian family. When the family thought it was safe, they had him baptized and he assumed a new identity as their Christian son, acclimating to a life that was not his. Though my family does not know for sure, it is likely that he, too had false identity and

22. Scheindlin, *A Short Hist. Jews*, 215.

23. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 141.

24. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 103.

baptism documents. I don't know that he was able to fully conceive the reality of what he was doing at such a young age, but my five year old grandfather resisted Nazi Germany and Hitler's War Against the Jews by surviving. As a result of his survival, he would go on to enact the ultimate form of resistance after immigrating to New York City: having children. By having Jewish children and therefore sustaining the continuity of the Jewish people, my grandfather successfully contributed to defeating Hitler's goal of exterminating the Jewish race.

This is, again, one story among literally millions of others that exemplifies the ways in which Jews were able to resist their Nazi oppressors. Whether it be taking up arms and physically fighting the Nazis as was seen in the Warsaw uprising, or carrying out religious observances, or even Levi's act of smuggling soap and petrol and selling it for the smallest bit of something in return, the Jews could not be totally controlled; they simply would not relinquish everything and resign altogether. I do not know if the Jews did *enough*. I don't believe that it is really for us to know, because it would demand a level of understanding of Nazi actions that I do not believe sane humans can fully achieve. However, when we analyze the ways in which the Jews, both collectively and individually, resisted with whatever means they had, we can see that their achievements were not totally futile, or else there would be no Jews left today. For that reason, as a third generation Holocaust survivor, my existence is proof of Jewish resistance, and further, the undying and indestructible spirit of the Jews.

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