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"Thoughts on the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt." 23 April 1968.

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THOUGHTS ON THE WARSAW GHETTO REVOLT

One question always rises to haunt those who try to comprehend the meaning of the murder of six million. The question has many forms. Did the Jews resist? Why didn't they resist? Were they led like sheep to the slaughter? Didn't they understand what was happening? Was there no leadership? Were they essentially weak and cowardly? Were they possessed of a suicide instinct which made the work of their murderers easier?

The questions all suggest that one generalized answer is possible - that if we only search deeply enough into the awful mystery we will discover some over-all explanation to ease somehow the terrible gnawing at the heart which will live forever in the collective Jewish memory.

The truth is that there is no one answer. The event was so monstrous, unprecedented, unexpected, that no one reaction to it was possible at the time and certainly no pre-arranged plan was possible. We have had thousands of years of experience with hatred and attacks and death - but never in our entire history have we faced this situation: where the complete military and police power of a large state was aimed at the destruction of unarmed civilians, whose very knowledge of what was happening to them was masked by deceit (the very gas chambers were masked as showerbaths) and who were left to their fate by the entire civilized world in spite of repeated and loud protest. Never, never had this ever occurred - hence

there was no planned, prepared, deliberated posture of Jewish reply.

The only thing to be said is that in some situations the criminals found it possible to murder with no resistance; and in other places they met with strong heroic opposition, all the more noble because the eventual outcome was foreordained.

It seems to me that the only general historical judgment to be rendered is that the evil force was so huge, so well organized, so swift and brutal, so unopposed by any moral force, that the victim became easy prey, weakened by hunger and disease, buffeted by being constantly transported from one place to another, agonized by being torn away from family and children, tortured and tormented by pain and blood, and finally forgotten in the festering barracks of a hundred camps. To be transformed from these conditions into a final wisp of smoke disappearing skyward was the last and simplest step. I would suggest that we look not into the soul of the victim to see if there was something strange or lacking there. Such metaphysical exercise strains credibility. Rather should we grasp the simple physical realities of superior power crushing a weaker organism with no arms or allies to come to his aid.

In the face of this it is remarkable that there was any resistance at all. Rather than wonder at the lack of it, I marvel instead at every episode - Vilna, Bialystock, Mir, Sobibor, Treblinka and every other - where in the face of absolutely hopeless odds, courage flashed out like fire, and with ridiculously inadequate means often only naked fists or a hand clutching a brick, Jews clawed back at their murderers, to die with honor.

Twenty-five years ago tonight, at 2:30 in the morning, the few hundred ghetto fighters surfaced from their deep bunkers, where they had earlier read the story of freedom in the Passover Haggadah, for this was the Seder night, although there was no matzo or wine, and joined battle with the Nazi troops prowling the broken and burning streets. When the fight started that night the ghetto was inhabited with the last 50,000 Jews, a remnant of the half-million who had been packed in behind the walls 2-1/2 years earlier. When the fight petered out a month later (a longer period, by the way, than the Polish nation fought in 1939 or the French nation fought in 1940), there were no Jews left alive, and not one single solitary building left standing in the mile-square area. A few score went underground through the sewers, came up on the Aryan side through manhole covers, and escaped to the forests. The ghetto smoked and stank and was dead. But because of the fight the imperishable soul of the Jew has lived.

From October 1940, when the Jews were herded into the section chosen for their incarceration and the walls built and sealed, until July 1942, hunger and typhus killed 150,000. But that process was too slow for the Nazis, for there were still over 350,000 left. Extermination would take too many years, at this rate. Deportation to the nearby death camp of Treblinka was decided upon - and on 22 July the order was given to the Jewish Governing Council to deliver 6000 persons per day to the Umschlagplatz, the train station, in the ghetto for shipment. The people were deceived, were told they were being sent for resettlement in work camps in the east, and everyone who volunteered to go was given 3 kilos

of bread and some marmalade. The president of the Jewish Council, Engineer Adam Cherniakow, shot himself that night, sitting at his desk, rather than be responsible for organizing the daily quota. It made no difference. The trains went on all summer. In the week before Rosh Hashanah, from 6 - 11 September, the meticulous record-keeping of the Nazis showed 100,000 Jews killed, 10,000 shot and 90,000 deported. In the period then, from Tisha B'av to Rosh Hashanah, 22 July - 11 September, 300,000 were exterminated. Now the work was going well - for now there were only about 70,000 left.

By this time the Jewish Fighting Organization had come into being. Arguments as to the value of resistance were laid aside. Political differences between organizations were laid aside. The Zionists took the lead, and the others came in - socialists, religionists, free-thinkers - all joined to fight. The first manifesto was issued in January 1943:

"Jews!

The invader has moved on to the second phase of your extermination. Do not resign yourselves to death.

Defend yourselves! Grab an axe, a steel cross-bar, a knife. Barricade yourselves in your homes.

Better to let yourselves be taken this way!

In the struggle there is always a chance of salvation.

Fight!

Jewish Combatant Organization"

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The first small revolt took place on 19 January - Jews resisted being taken to the trains, and threw hand grenades at the Germans. They threw boiling water, axes, crowbars, anything they could get their hands on. As the Germans attacked houses, Jews inside sprayed the stairs with petrol and oil, setting fire as the Germans entered. The fight raged - many Germans were killed, many more Jews. This was the beginning of the end.

The resistance was so strong, vigorous and unexpected, that the surprised Germans reacted swiftly. Himmler himself came to Warsaw to find out what was happening, and immediately ordered the SS to destroy the ghetto, appointing General Jurgen Stroop to the task. The Germans actually were afraid that a rising in the ghetto would spark a general revolt in Warsaw and even throughout Poland. Stroop himself testified to this fact at his trial in 1951 (following which he was executed) by saying:

"A revolt would have broken out in the whole of Warsaw which our military and police forces would never have been able to quell."

Mordecai Anielewicz, the young and handsome commander of the fighters, wrote to the Polish government-in-exile in London begging for arms - and in such pitiful quantity. Listen to his letter of 18 March:

"Gentlemen:

The situation is becoming more critical each day...
Within the next few days will start the total extermination of Warsaw Jews...Are we prepared? We are left with about ten bullets, which is disastrous....

"We have given ample proof of our capacity to fight and of our decision to resist. Since January 18 the whole Jewish population in Warsaw has been in a state of continual struggle against the invader....

"Gentlemen, we beg you to take the necessary steps with the military authorities and with the representatives of the government. We beg you to read them this letter and to ask them firmly to send us at least a hundred hand grenades, 50 revolvers, and several thousand bullets of various calibres.

"I am ready to furnish within 2 days the plans of our position, wet with our tears, in an attempt to dispel any doubt as to the need for supplying us with arms."

The answer was a deadly silence. Nobody in London cared. Even nearer, just a few yards beyond the wall, in the city of Warsaw itself, nobody cared. Samuel Sigelblum, a member of the Polish government-in-exile, representing the Jews, did everything in his power to draw attention to the agony of the fighters in the ghetto, but was unable to obtain any reaction. He was beside himself with pain and frustration, and when he realized he had failed, he could no longer live in the comfort of London, but killed himself, in a final effort to shock the conscience of his fellow Poles, and the British and Americans. It was the deliberate act of a strong man. He left this letter:

"With these, my last words, I address myself to you, the Polish Government, the Polish people, the Allied Governments and their peoples, and the conscience of the world.

"News recently received from Poland informs us that the Germans are exterminating with unheard-of savagery the remaining Jews in that country. Behind the walls of the Ghetto is taking place today the last act of tragedy which has no parallel in the history of the human race. The responsibility for this crime - the assassination of the Jewish population in Poland - rests above all on the murderers themselves, but falls indirectly upon the whole human race, on the Allies and their governments, who so far have taken no firm steps to put a stop to these crimes. By their indifference to the killing of millions of hapless men, to the massacre of women and children, these countries have become accomplices of the assassins.

"Furthermore, I must state that the Polish Government, although it has done a great deal to influence world public opinion, has not taken adequate measures to counter this atrocity which is taking place today in Poland.

"I cannot remain silent. I cannot live while the rest of the Jewish people in Poland, whom I represent, continue to be liquidated.

"My companions of the Warsaw Ghetto fell in a last heroic battle with their weapons in their hands. I did not have the honor to die with them but I belong to them and to their common grave.

"Let my death be an energetic cry of protest against the indifference of the world which witnesses the extermination of the Jewish people without taking any steps to prevent it.

In our day and age human life is of little value; having failed to achieve success in my life, I hope that my death may jolt the indifference of those who, perhaps even in this extreme moment, could save the Jews who are still alive in Poland."

It did not help. Silence still reigned. The fight went on in the ghetto.

Slowly it came to an end. We have a chronicle written by Zina Lubetkin, who got our through the sewers, describing the last agonizing days. She was in the command bunker deep under the building at 18 Mila St.

"Our friends entrenched themselves at the entrances and waited, their weapons in their hands, for the Germans to come in. The Germans called in and said that no harm would befall those who came out, but not one man came out. Then the Germans began to let gas into the bunker, and the end came for 120 fighters.

"The Germans did not condemn them to a speedy death. They ejected a little gas at a time and stopped. They wanted to destroy the spirit with a slow and painful drawn-out death. Aryeh Vilner was the first to call out to all the fighters, "Come on! Let us kill ourselves, and not fall into

the hands of the Germans!" Then began a wave of suicides. Shooting began within the bunker, the Jewish fighters turning their guns upon themselves. When a gun got jammed its owner begged, implored his comrades to have mercy on him and shoot him. But none of them would dare and harm a friend. Lutek Rothblatt, who was there with his mother and his cousin, shot his mother four times, and she still convulsed, wounded and bleeding. Berl Broido, whose hand was wounded several days before, could not hold his gun. He begged his friends to end his life. Mordechai Anielewicz, who trusted the information that water would overcome the effect of gas, suggested that they try at any rate. Suddenly someone came and said that a passage had been found leading out of the bunker which was hidden from the eyes of the Germans. But only very few succeeded in leaving by this exit. And the rest choked slowly to death.

"In this way was the glory and the strength of the fighting, struggling Jews of Warsaw cut down. One hundred Jewish fighters met their death here. Among them was Mordecai Anielewicz, beloved among all the fighters, the Commander, who was strong of heart and beautiful of body, upon whose lips a smile hovered always, even in times of greatest danger and fear."

"A line of sixty people is marching along the tunnel of the narrow sewer. Our bellies and waists are soaked in the filthy water. The back is bent. A candle is held in each one's hand. So we walk, one after the other. One man does not see the face of another. We walk and plow through the darkness. This is not a dark tunnel but a narrow, stinking crevice. The minutes stretch into hours, every hour is an eternity. We walk this way for several eternities.

"Hunger and thirst have weakened us all, but we had with us also those who had been saved from the destruction of 18 Mila Street, who had not yet fully revived, whose lungs had absorbed poison gas. There were among them such as could not raise their legs and we dragged them, pulled them through the water, supporting them under their arms, carrying them, and we are walking with backs bent or crawling on our knees."

"In the morning, Shlamek and Yrek return from Ghetto, their faces twisted in pain and suffering. They tell us that in the vicinity of the Ghetto the sewer passageways were sealed off and there is no way through. It seems that the Germans caught on to the fact that there was an exodus going on and sealed off all the sewers leading to the Ghetto so that none could come or go. They wandered around the passageways. They looked for other entrances and exits, but in vain. They almost lost their minds in grief and disappointment.

"Hours pass in painful, impatient expectation. We hear German voices breaking through from the street. For a half hour they stand near our hiding place and talk. Who knows, perhaps they

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know that we are here. The troubled, storm-tossed soul prays that an end will come, and finished! The force of the soul and the strength of the body are dying. And suddenly, at 10:00 o'clock it happens. Noise breaks out overhead. The sewer is flooded with light such as we have not seen in many days. The cover was lifted from the street and the day came pouring in over our heads. We were certain that the Germans had discovered our hiding place and instinctively everyone ran back into the dark recesses of the tubes. But soon it became clear that they are our friends. Excitedly they cry to us, "Hurry hurry," and they begin to pull us up. At the opening there is a truck. In a matter of seconds all forty of us were aboard and moving. A second truck stood ready to take the remainder.

"Now we saw each other for the first time in many days by the light of day. We looked horrible, filthy, disgusting, faces twisted with pain and suffering, our knees collapsing in weakness. We were terrified; we had lost the shape and form of men. Only the burning eyes bore witness to the fact that we were living people. We stretched out on the floor of the rolling truck so that we should not be seen, everyone holding his weapon. And so the truck rolls, loaded with armed Jewish fighters, in the very midst of Nazi-occupied Warsaw. This happened on May 10, 1943."

On 18 June Stroop received the Iron Cross, First Class for having liquidated the ghetto.

I believe this fight was a great victory - not a defeat. I believe that out of it a new type of Jew was born, capable of creating Israel by fighting for it. I believe that inspiration flows invisibly and that countless thousands of Israeli boys today fight with determination because of the decision made 25 years ago to go down fighting rather than to go down in any other manner. I believe that the last sentence of Anielewicz, written to his friend Antek Zuckerman, on the outside, the sentence chosen to be engraved at the foot of his monument in Yad Mordechai, is the battle cry for the new Jew and has made every victory in Israel possible during these last difficult 20 years.

"Be well, my friend. Perhaps we shall meet again. The main thing is that the dream of my life came true. I was fortunate enough to witness Jewish defense in the ghetto in all its greatness and glory."

In memory of those defenders of our dignity and our honor, and today's defenders as well, who lay young lives on the altar of sacrifice that our ancestral land may be free, we offer our tribute of ancient and sacred words - El Mole Rachamim.