

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: Forced Into Action

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On September 1, 1939, the Nazis marched into Poland, launching what they termed a *blitzkrieg*, or lightning war (Lande 36). For the Jews living in Poland's capital city of Warsaw, life would never be the same again. Before the end of September, the Nazis had captured Warsaw and with this victory, gained control over the three hundred and thirty-seven thousand Jews living in the city (Warsaw Ghetto 1). Everyday thereafter, the Jews had an uphill battle for survival. Most Jews were only able to persevere through their misery and anguish day after day by holding onto the belief that their lives would eventually get better as evidenced from their history. However, once it became clear to them that things would not get better because their Nazi oppressors aimed at annihilating them, the remaining Jews united in an all-out effort to resist the Nazis.

The oppression of Warsaw's Jews began in late November 1939, simply with the requirement that Jews wear an identifying white armband with a blue Star of David on it (Nazi Occupation 3). Then in the summer of 1940, things got a little worse. The Nazis at this time forced the *Judenrat*, an organization of Jewish elders established by the Nazis to govern over the Jews, to build a ten-foot tall brick wall, with an eleven-mile circumference that would surround Warsaw's Jews within an area of three and one-half square miles (Botwinick 213). This area became known as the Warsaw ghetto, or as the Nazi's preferred to call it "living quarter," and it was officially designated to be the home of Jews in October 1940 (178). Chaim Kaplan, a Jewish educator, whose writings survived the Holocaust, despite the fact that he did not, considered the idea of an

enclosed living environment to be crazy. He believed that to “differentiate citizens of one country according to race, and to erect partitions between them, [was] a sick pathological idea” (Dwork and Pelt 215). But beliefs such as Kaplan’s did not matter to the Nazis, as they emphatically claimed, “the ghettos are the source of epidemics in Poland...[and therefore] to avoid the spread of epidemics [in gentile Poland], the non-Jewish population has been forbidden to enter the infected areas” (245). In conjunction with Nazi demands and propaganda, the ghetto was closed in mid-November 1940 (Nazi Occupation 5). Jews had been cut off from the outside world and were stuck living inside their limited boundaries in the oldest, most deteriorated, and decrepit part of Warsaw (Spielvogel 290).

Living in a run-down ghetto, in the midst great overcrowding, created substantial problems for the Jews, namely having a shortage of running water and toilet facilities for its abundant population (Spielvogel 290). But, despite these problems, the *Judenrat*, the governing agency of the ghetto, persevered in its attempt to create a sense of normality. To that effect, it created the same bureaucratic offices that can be found in any modern city. This included a Registration Office, Records Office, Tax Office, Welfare Division, Health Division, among many other offices needed to handle community needs and problems (Dwork and Pelt 218). But, without a doubt, the greatest problem the *Judenrat* had to contend with was the starvation of its community as a result of a food shortage, which was caused by the Jews being enclosed in the ghetto (218).

To deal with the food shortage, the *Judenrat* did the only thing it could: it gave out ration cards. However, these ration cards were only given to productive individuals who worked long hours and were able to contribute to the German war effort. These

were the requirements set by the *Judenrat* because it believed that appeasement of their oppressors was the key to their survival, as it had been in the past (Botwinick 178). However, working in itself did not guarantee that one would not starve because the distributed ration cards allotted less than two hundred calories of unhealthy food a day per worker. This poor diet and the lack of food was responsible for the outbreaks of epidemics in the ghetto (178). If one hoped to survive and not contract a disease, it was essential to take chances and attempt to smuggle food through holes in the ghetto wall from Poles who were in need of goods, which were in short supply in Nazi occupied Poland (Dwork and Pelt 219). This smuggling trade accounted for eighty percent of the food that entered the ghetto and was essential for survival because the *Judenrat* could not negotiate for an adequate amount of food (219). The shortage of food in the ghetto resulted in the deaths of thousands of individuals. By the end of 1940, ninety-one people succumbed to starvation and in the following year, there were an additional eleven thousand deaths from starvation (Spielvogel 291).

For the Nazis, the act of withholding an adequate amount of food was also a game. As one Nazi administrator explains, the Nazis established the *Judenrat* so that “when deficiencies occur, the Jews direct their resentment against the Jewish administrator and not against the German supervisor (Spielvogel 291). Creating a shortage of food was a foolproof plan for the Jews to become resentful of the *Judenrat*, which was simply a pawn in the game. In addition to the cruel torture imposed through starvation, there were random acts of beatings and shootings that the Nazis carried out in the ghetto (Dwork and Pelt 253). If life in the ghetto does not sound bad enough already, the Nazis had more fun at the Jews expense by closing synagogues, schools, and libraries,

which were very important to Jews and to human beings. But for the Nazis, it was all part of their sick plan to dehumanize the Jews (Spielvogel 292). Luckily, however, it was not completely successful as the Jews resorted to carrying out much of their normal life in the underground (292). This “normal” life that the Jews were trying to maintain grew even harder in 1941 as Jews from small, nearby cities were thrown into the already congested Warsaw ghetto. This increased the ghetto’s population from three hundred and thirty seven thousand to four hundred and fifty thousand, minus the deaths resulting from starvation and disease (Dwork and Pelt 239). Survival though was about to get even harder as 1942 began.

In January 1942, at Wannsee, a secret conference was held, where the Nazis finalized their plans to annihilate all the Jews (Fulbrook 198). Annihilation was deemed the Nazi’s Final Solution to eliminate the Jews from Germany and from Germany’s new territory. With the Final Solution came explicit plans to deport Jews from the ghettos and send them to gas chambers, which were being built. The decision came to a head on July 22, 1942, when Adam Czerniakow, the leader of Warsaw’s *Judenrat*, was ordered to sign an approval commissioning the deportations. But he would not obey this command, adamantly refusing to play a role in the killing of his people, choosing instead to take his own life (Botwinick 180). But even his death would not delay the Nazis’ plans, as they continued on the very same day as Czerniakow’s suicide with their plans to cram six thousand Jews a day onto trains with a one-way ticket to the Treblinka death camp (213). This practice continued until September 1942, when the population of the Warsaw ghetto had plummeted from four hundred and fifty thousand to one hundred and twenty thousand (213). But not all Jews sat idly by while their civilization was being wiped out.

Just six days after the deportations began, on July 28, 1942, three Jewish youth groups with a combined membership ranging between seven hundred and one thousand young men and women, merged into a small resistance force they called the Jewish Fighting Organization (Spielvogel 293). This organization was founded in order to defend the Jewish people from a certain death they knew the Nazis had planned for them (Botwinick 213). Nazi intentions were well publicized in the Warsaw ghetto's underground newspaper, *Oneg Shabbat*, which detailed events happening both inside and outside the ghetto (Marrus 97). Using the newspaper's accounts as ammunition to gain support, the Jewish Fighting Organization gradually convinced ghetto dwellers that the *Judenrat's* appeasement of the Nazis was a failure (Botwinick 213). By January 1943, the remaining population, which was only between fifty-five and sixty-five thousand, gave their complete support to the Jewish Fighting Organization. Ghetto dwellers realized that the time had come to fight for their survival, since they knew they would be sent to their deaths anyway (Spielvogel 293).

The Jewish Fighting Organization, proceeding with its mission to defend the ghetto, attacked a group of SS soldiers who had been ordered to round-up more Jews onto train cars. Attacking the SS men with guerilla like hit and run tactics, through the use of a small amount of rifles that were smuggled into the ghetto and with homemade weapons built for the occasion, the Jewish fighting unit was successful for the time being in preventing Jews from being taken out of the ghetto (Botwinick 214). But the Jewish Fighting Organization knew that the Nazis would return with reinforcements. As a result, they joined forces with the Jewish Military Organization in an effort to increase the strength of the Jewish resistance force and to prevent further deportations to Treblinka

(Spielvogel 293). To bolster their strength, the Jewish Military Organization was able to slightly increase the amount of available arms for an imminent showdown with the Nazis (293)

Since the Nazis could not get the cooperation of the Jews to board trains after the last skirmish in January 1943, the Nazis decided to forcefully empty-out the remaining Jews in the ghetto and send them to awaiting gas chambers at Treblinka, but at this point, the Jews had other plans. They refused to die without a fight (Botwinick 214). Knowing that the end had come, the remaining fifty thousand Jews, under the leadership of the Jewish Fighting Organization's Mordechai Anielewicz fought for their lives against Major-General Juergen Stroop and his squad of SS troops (214). The remaining Jews knew that it was up to them to survive because neither the gentiles in Poland nor anyone from abroad were rushing to save them from the genocide the Nazis had planned for them (Spielvogel 292).

Using the same guerilla tactics that had been successful in the last resistance battle with the Nazis, the Jews sprang into action, moving from place to place. This allowed them to stay one step ahead of the Nazis by making themselves appear to be a larger resistance force (Botwinick 214). But the Nazis had another solution for this problem. With the approval of Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, Stroop's SS troops "decided to embark on the total destruction of the Jewish quarter by burning down every residential block" in order to bring the Jews out of hiding (Spielvogel 293). This act achieved its desired effect. By May 10, 1943, the invading SS force had killed all but a handful of Jews, who managed to escape through the sewers. But for all intents and

purposes, the Warsaw ghetto had been destroyed, and its entire population, annihilated (Botwinick 215).

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