

Jewish Resistance

Excerpt from interview with Professor Michael Marrus

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Q- In what sense of the word can we talk about Jewish resistance, and what kind of resistance?

M- Apropos resistance, it depends on how one defines this. There is a spectrum of Jewish responses to the Holocaust, ranging from the most passive collapse before Nazi power, to armed resistance. The whole challenge is to find where specific Jewish communities, Jewish groups, Jewish individuals, placed themselves along this continuum.

The resistance of ordinary civilians very frequently occurred under conditions not only of isolation, and where there were no weapons or resources for resistance, but also under circumstances in which they were systematically starved and brutalized – in which case, resistance was nearly impossible. But we are talking about the persecution and suppression of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people across an entire continent. There were some situations in which the Jews were indeed able to gather their resources and to assemble the necessary means to resist.

I want to stress one thing about resistance, which it shares with all kinds of opposition, including conventional military opposition. It took time – to assemble resources, to organize the leadership, to plan, to discern the right moment to attack, and to gather information. And time was invariably what the Jews lacked. The Nazi apparatus came down very hard on the Jewish communities. In quick succession they were uprooted, moved from place to place, ghettoized, deported. In only a few, rare circumstances did the Jews have the time – and were able to survive long enough – to assemble the means by which to resist. Some examples are, obviously, in the Warsaw Ghetto; or sometimes in the forests of Belorussia; in Western Europe; or here and

there in France, but these are exceptional episodes of a more conventional kind of resistance.

Employing any fair definition of resistance, it also occurred when people, using the meager resources at their disposal, decided to thwart the Nazi intentions by any number of means, for example, forging documents, or gathering groups together for short periods of time and hiding them wherever possible. In a sense, resistance can even include trying to communicate with the outside world. Think of an organization like Oneg Shabbat in the Warsaw Ghetto, where people tried to gather information about the conditions of Jews under Nazi persecution and smuggle it to the outside. When such information was actually successfully smuggled to the West, to London, and they heard in Warsaw that news about their circumstances had been broadcast over the BBC, Emanuel Ringelblum wrote in his diary, in 1942: “We have struck a blow, we struck a great blow against Nazi Germany.” In his view, this was resistance.

Now, of course, more than half a century later, we know, truthfully speaking, that a blow was not struck against Nazi Germany; it easily survived this dissemination of information, because it was not utilized to relieve the circumstances of the Jews. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of those who risked their lives (and you must remember that they did), to get this information out of Warsaw was a form of resistance to which they dedicated themselves. So, I do not exclude this kind of activity from any definition of resistance.

Resistance is such a broadly gauged phenomenon; it involves all kinds of activities. One of the things that any study of the Holocaust requires of us, is to look at the intentions of those who engaged with their oppressors. We must not limit our thinking – as we are tempted to do – merely to conventional armed opposition.

Q- Would you consider the organizing of a concert in the ghetto to be a kind of resistance, or just a neutral response; or even something that blinded the Jews, who tried to normalize what could not be normalized, and then could not react properly?

M- An extraordinary phenomenon of the Holocaust is that under conditions of the most unbelievable deprivation, Jews gathered their resources in emotional, as well as in material, terms. Part of their emotional resources included a flowering of cultural activity, for example, the establishment of libraries, with a special celebration in the Lodz Ghetto, if I recall correctly, for the loaning of the 10,000th book.

In Theresienstadt, for example, there were musical productions, and an operetta was staged. Should one assess this kind of cultural activity held under conditions of extreme deprivation? I don't know if this was resistance or not (and I'm not concerned with defining it). They could either sink under the weight of oppression and deprivation, become demoralized and lose all sense of hope, or they could respond otherwise – by asserting not only their individuality, but their collective identities, by reaching out to something beyond themselves.

It is not for us to judge. I don't want to say that the Jews ought to have done one thing and not another. But we observe it, are in awe of it, are moved by it. Whether, in the end, we accord it the label of resistance or not, matters much less than, dare I say, standing in awe of people's capacity to assert a commitment to life and to something greater than themselves. When, insofar as most of us could imagine, we would simply have sunk under the weight of what they were experiencing.

Source: The Multimedia CD 'Eclipse Of Humanity', Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.