



Heroism and Resistance during WWII

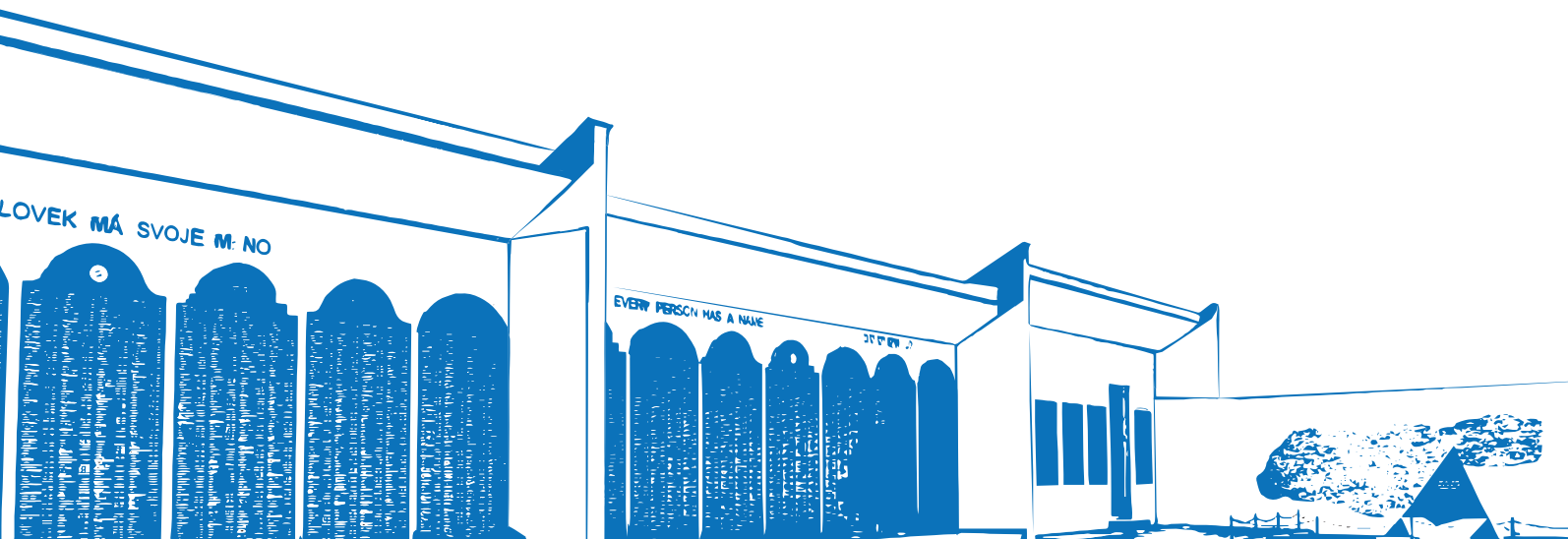
MARKING 80 YEARS SINCE THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING

In response to the persecution, oppression, and humiliation the Jews were suffering at the hands of Nazi Germany and its allies, Jewish resistance took many forms. Armed resistance took place in some ghettos and death camps, as well as by guerilla fighting with the partisan movement. But there were many additional forms of resistance which included escapes, hiding, performing various forms of rescue, cultural activities, and other acts of spiritual preservation.

Resistance Poem

BY HAIM GOURI AND MONIA AVRAHMI

The poem, "Resistance", is a reminder of what constitutes resistance—it is not always taking up arms or marching in streets. It is a mindset of refusing to believe the false narrative of propaganda no matter how many times or how loudly it is repeated. It is an individual act of kindness. It is collecting evidence of everything that's done and said. It is never surrendering. It is obstructing the oppressors at every possible turn. It is keeping one's humanity.



Student Readings

ARMED RESISTANCE

Part 1: The Warsaw Ghetto was the largest Jewish ghetto in German-occupied Europe with 400,000 Jewish occupants. On April 19, 1943, after the deportations to death camps, there were 70,000 Jews there when the uprising began.

For nearly a month, several hundred resistance fighters, armed with a small cache of weapons obtained from Polish underground, managed to fight the Germans, who far outnumbered them in manpower and weapons.

During that month, the Germans systematically razed the ghetto, killing thousands of Jews. In the end, the Germans burned and demolished the ghetto entirely and sent the 50,000 remaining Jews to extermination camps.

Part 2: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a symbol of resistance and heroism and became an example for Jews in other ghettos and camps.

The uprisings that followed were smaller in scope, yet resistance units emerged in over 100 ghettos throughout Europe. Many ghetto fighters took up arms in the knowledge that their resistance could not save many of the remaining Jews who could not fight. But it was an attempt to preserve both body and soul.

Such were the uprisings at three killing centers: Treblinka and Sobibor in 1943; and Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1944, when Jewish prisoners of the Sonderkommando unit rebelled against their SS guards. The Germans killed most of the rebels, either during the uprising or after the revolt was suppressed. Yet they fought for the sake of Jewish honor and to revenge the slaughter of so many Jews.

Part 3: Jewish partisans composed part of the general resistance movement and guerrilla war against Nazi Germany. The first groups of the partisan movement were composed of those who were forced to flee from the Nazis and their collaborators: soldiers who were in areas that were occupied by the enemy, and prisoners of war who escaped from camps. Their natural bases were the forests and swamps of eastern Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine; and the mountainous areas of the Alps, Yugoslavia, Slovakia, and Greece.

Part 4: The partisan movement became a substantial force in the military and political battles of World War II. But the Jewish partisan movement was different. Unlike the non-Jews in occupied areas, the Jews were condemned by the Nazis to total extermination. Therefore, Jews joined the partisan struggle as a path of revenge on the murderous enemy, and they also wished to combine partisan fighting with attempts to save themselves and other Jews.

Many Jews fought as individuals in mixed partisan units (sometimes hiding their Jewish identity), while others belonged to separate Jewish units. There were also a handful of Jewish units that served as family camps with the double purpose of hiding and fighting. As many as 10,000 Jews survived the war by taking refuge with Jewish partisan units.

OTHER FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Armed uprisings and joining national resistance movements were the most direct forms of Jewish opposition to the Nazis. Yet Jewish resistance took many forms: spiritual, cultural, educational, and religious resistance; underground documentation of the events; forging identity cards and protection papers; hiding Jews; smuggling thousands of Jews across borders to safer places and escaping from camps and ghettos. Jews made conscious attempts to preserve the history and communal life of the Jewish people despite Nazi efforts to eradicate them from human memory.

Part 1: Groups in many ghettos established secret archives and methodically wrote, collected, and stored reports, diaries, and documents about daily life in the ghettos. These efforts served to gather evidence on situation of Jews in occupied Europe and also sought to reaffirm a Jewish sense of community, history, and civilization in the face of both physical and spiritual annihilation.

The best known of these archives was that of the Warsaw ghetto, known as Oneg Shabbat and founded by historian Emanuel Ringelblum. Some of the containers holding the archives were dug up from the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto after the war. The papers found inside have provided valuable documentation of life and death inside the ghetto despite its destruction in 1943.

Part 2: Another important example was the Verba-Welzer report: Two Jews from Slovakia, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, escaped from Auschwitz in April 1944. In Zylina, they met secretly with officials from the Slovakia Jewish Council and gave them a secret report on Auschwitz.

The 40-page report contained detailed descriptions of the camp and the gas chambers at Birkenau. It described what was happening in Auschwitz from April 1942 to April 1944. The report helped to temporarily spare about 250,000 of Budapest's Jews from deportation, many of them were also saved. It was an important piece of evidence at the Nuremberg trials in 1946 and at the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961. Rudolf Verba was also witness at a trial of Holocaust denier in Toronto in 1985.

Part 3: In Slovakia, Jews were among the founders of the Slovak partisan movement. The beginnings of the movement were in 1942, but the partisan struggle in Slovakia became a full-scale war in the summer of 1944 with the national Slovak uprising.

Two Jewish labor camps – Sered and Novaky – were liberated by the partisans and the inmates of these camps joined the uprising. Members of many national groups fought in the Slovak national uprising, among them there were 2500 Jews. These Jews hoped that by defeating the pro-Nazi government, the remaining 20,000 Jews in Slovakia would be rescued. However, as the uprising was suppressed, in October 1944, the Germans rounded up thousands of Jews and partisans. Some were killed immediately, while another 13,500 were sent to Auschwitz and Theresienstadt.

Some of the partisans retreated to the mountains and continued their resistance war.

Part 4: One form of resistance was the rescue of Jews by Jews who were themselves suffering from persecution. In Slovakia, members of the "Working Group" together with the Zionist underground in Hungary organized the smuggling of thousands of Jews across the border.

The Working Group, based in Bratislava, was a semi-underground rescue committee led by Rabbi Dov Weissmandel and Ms. Gisi Fleischmann. Among the many heroic actions of the group, in 1943, they enlisted individuals to set up smuggling operations in Prešov and other border towns, including Kežmarok, Žilina, and Liptovský Mikuláš. Priority was given to Polish Jews, who were more vulnerable to deportation. Polish Jewish refugees were smuggled over the Carpathian Mountains through Slovakia, to Hungary. About 2000 adults and 114 children reached Hungary by late November 1943. Additional 6000 Slovak Jews were also escaped through this route.

Part 5: Rudolf Löwy, long-time president of the Bardejov Jewish community, was among the first to learn of the plan to deport young girls on the first trains to Auschwitz. Distressed, he developed a unique rescue plan, untried elsewhere in Slovakia or in Europe. Taking advantage of the Germans' fear of contagious diseases, he secretly met with doctors Mikulas Atlas and Jakub Grosswirth and together they decided they would inoculate some Jewish girls from Bardejov with a double dose of anti-typhoid serum which Löwy secured from Kosice. The girls risked their health, and the rescuers their lives. The plan worked. The girls started showing signs of the disease and it looked like an epidemic had broken out in town. Predictably, the authorities quarantined Bardejov and imposed a compulsory revaccination of the population, therefore cancelling the deportation. More importantly, the "infected" girls who were saved from deportation were released from the Jewish school where they were held. Many of them were able to get safely away before the deportations resumed in April.

Peter Petrus

VICE MAYOR OF BARDEJOV

Ladies and gentlemen, honourable assembly, it is an honour for me to speak to you today, as a representative of the municipality of Bardejov, but also as a citizen of our city.

In its history, there were times full of unique moments, but also some dark moments, associated with suffering and death.

Such dark pages of our history include the 1940s of the last century.

The perverse ideology of fascism and hatred of all "differently-thinking" people has manifested itself in our city, in the worst way.

A large community of our fellow Jews experienced a cruel Holocaust in their own lives.

Entire Jewish families from our city had to endure transports to extermination camps, abuse, despair, weeping and death.

Even though we are already living in the modern era of the 21st century, we must constantly remind ourselves of this terrible period so that nothing like this ever happens again.

The fact that our city commemorates these sad historical events with reverence is also evidenced by numerous visits to this place of reverence, with various commemorations of the victims of the Holocaust.

We regularly commemorate the liberation of the town of Bardejov, the end of World War II, the anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising, and then our steps are always directed to the Holocaust Memorial, where we honor the memory of those who sacrificed their lives and never returned to their homes.

I can proudly say that the municipality of Bardejov maintains extremely warm relations with the Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee. These relationships are characterized by mutual respect.

Dear Memorial Gathering, I am convinced that our meeting today is also proof that we remember our fellow Jews, do not forget their suffering and honour their memory.

At the same time, I would like to express my conviction that this dark side of our common history must be constantly remembered, on behalf of those who have not returned from the death camps, but also on behalf of the survivors.

May this sad and painful past be a lasting legacy for future generations, so that such a horror will never be repeated.

In conclusion, I would like to sincerely thank the non-profit organization Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee for actively devoting itself to the heritage, restoration and preservation of Bardejov's Jewish history.

May the voice of the victims facing death, 'Do not forget us', remain permanently in the memory of all our citizens.