

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Deborah Bachrach

Once the Jews of Europe understood there could be no compromise with the Nazis, pockets of resistance formed. Jewish partisan groups engaged in guerrilla tactics, disrupting the German war effort any way they could. From Palestine, a small number of volunteers parachuted into German-held territory to help their fellow Jews. In Sobibor, a Nazi death camp, hundreds of Jewish inmates managed to kill several of their guards and flee into the nearby woods. Yet for all the courage shown in those acts of rebellion, the best known defiance to the Nazis was the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

WITHOUT warning, on January 18, 1943, German troops surrounded the ghetto. Their immediate orders were to gather up eight thousand Jews during the next few days. The resistance fighters, caught unprepared, could not mount a general defense. Instead, individual groups from the Jewish resistance jumped into action.

A handful of young men, for example, mingled with the slowly moving crowds of Jews who responded to the German order to assemble at the deportation center. When the Jews approached the corners of Zamenhof and Niska Streets toward the *Umschlagplatz*, the resistance fighters fired at German soldiers, engaged in hand-to-hand combat, and screamed at the assembled Jews to disperse and hide. Most of the members of this small resistance group were killed that day but they had taken the first overt step against the German enemy.

The Germans were stunned. The Jews had never openly resisted the German army. No German had ever fallen in battle with a Jew.

During the January *Aktion* the Germans succeeded in rounding up about five thousand Jews, four thousand on the first day. The remaining Jews of the Warsaw ghetto went into hiding, resisting the efforts of the Germans to murder them. Another thousand Jews were forcibly dragged from buildings. The January *Aktion* ended after four days. The Germans had failed to round up their quota of Jews.

The Jews remaining in the ghetto underwent a great psychological change. They realized that passively obeying German orders would gain them nothing. The remaining people in the ghetto embraced the Z.O.B.'s attitudes and methods. The Z.O.B. came to "assume responsibility for the fate of the entire community."

For the first time nonfighters refused to respond to the imperious German commands to appear at the *Umschlagplatz* for deportation. Instead, they demonstrated defiant passive resistance. The Warsaw ghetto uprising was the only case during World War II in which the resistance fighters had the active and continuing support of the community for which they fought.

The Jewish nonfighters began to dig themselves into bunkers. Several groups of people got together and designed very elaborate underground hiding places complete with food supplies, connections to existing water systems, and physician members. The bunkers were disguised so well that the entrances were almost invisible. Many people in the bunkers still hoped that they would find a way to survive.

The resistance fighters of the Z.O.B. knew better. They did not build themselves bunkers, but lived in temporary shelters because their strategy called for sudden movement at short notice. They made no plans for escape.

Between January and April 1943 fewer than a thousand young men and women fighters stepped up their military training for the inevitable return of the Germans. They drilled, they prepared positions, they kept constant lookouts posted near each of the ghetto entrances, and they made every effort to build up their very limited arsenal.

Warsaw Uprising

ON April 18, 1943, the Germans returned to the Warsaw ghetto. Two thousand Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and SS troops, heavily armed, wearing body protection and supported by tanks, appeared at the main entrance of the ghetto. The Jews were nowhere to be seen. Cautiously the Germans and their tanks entered the ghetto. Gunfire erupted. One tank was hit by Jewish light arms and put out of action. Under attack at several points, the German force retreated. Haim Frymer, a Jewish fighter, wrote, "*We heard the astonished outcry of the Germans, Juden haben Waffen, Juden haben Waffen* [the Jews have arms]."

Hitler dismissed von Sammern-Frankeneegg for failing to alert him to the possibility of an armed uprising by the Jews. He was replaced by SS general Jurgen Stroop. Stroop kept a diary of the uprising, recording his impressions of the fighting, which extended to the middle of May.

The German troops returned to the ghetto day after day. While the passive resisters kept themselves hidden within their bunkers, the Z.O.B. fired on the Germans from rooftops and building windows. Battles were fierce but brief. The resistance fighters had few weapons and had to make each shot or homemade bomb count.

The Germans had at first expected to wipe out the resistance within a few days and deport the remaining Jews immediately thereafter. Instead the battle for the Warsaw ghetto continued. Stroop discovered the makeshift ladders that allowed the Jews to move from building to building. He had his troops block the passages in the roofs and building attics where the ladders had rested.

He attached listening devices near the basement entrances of buildings to see if his troops could discover the location of underground bunkers. He brought in dogs to sniff out underground hiding places and piles of rubble where survivors might have found space in which to conceal themselves. The Germans were taken completely by surprise by the existence of the bunkers. Stroop made the following entry in his diary:

The number of Jews taken from their houses in the ghetto during the first days was too slight. It turns out that the Jews hid in the sewerage canals and bunkers that were prepared especially for that purpose. During the first days, it was assumed that there were merely a few isolated bunkers, but in the course of the great action it became clear that the entire ghetto is systematically provided with cellars, bunkers and passageways. Each of these passageways and bunkers has an outlet to the sewerage canals. Hence, this allowed for the undisturbed underground contact. This effective network also served the Jews as a means of escaping to the "Aryan" side of Warsaw. We received constant reports that the Jews were trying to escape through the underground canals."

The Germans began to set fire to the ghetto systematically, house by house, day by day. The fires destroyed the buildings, sucked the air from the bunkers, and severed the water connections that the Jews had created earlier in preparation for the uprising.

The fire and smoke of the burning ghetto could be seen for miles around. Men, women, and children were incinerated in the blaze. Those who survived long enough to stumble out of their bunkers were shot by the Germans. It is reported that not a single bunker was taken intact by the Germans during the uprising.

On April 25, Stroop sent a message to his superiors: "If last night what was the ghetto was alight and burning, tonight it is one mighty furnace." But several days later he had to report that "Repeatedly we saw that the Jews and bandits preferred to go back into the fire than to fall into our hands."

Each day resistance to the Germans diminished as the Jewish fighters fell in battle. Each day, the area still under their control contracted. Those few who survived regrouped, each day finding resistance more difficult to sustain.

Finally, on May 8, 1943, the Germans located the center of the Z.O.B. on 18 Mila Street. The Germans closed all entrances to the position and injected poison gas and threw hand grenades into the underground space. . . .

Destroying the Ghetto

ON May 16, 1943, German forces destroyed the main synagogue of the Warsaw ghetto. General Stroop wrote in his diary: "The former Jewish Quarter of Warsaw no longer exists. According to our evidence, the total number of Jews seized and terminated is 50,065."

The Warsaw ghetto uprising ended. No buildings stood intact. Almost all the passive resisters had died in their bunkers or had been killed as they attempted to escape. Most of the fighters were dead. However, for months after, individuals continued to emerge from the ruins of Warsaw.

A handful of resistance fighters, perhaps seventy-five survivors, made their way through the sewers that ran under the ghetto to the area beyond the ghetto walls. Some were killed as they emerged from the sewers. The Germans sprayed bullets at those resistance fighters who had not yet emerged from the sewers. Some actually managed to escape.

So the Warsaw ghetto, home at one time between 1939 and 1943 to well over half a million Jews, ceased to exist. What could not be destroyed, however, was the memory of the uprising itself.

In the words of historian Isaac Kowalski, the resistance had gained a "moral victory of death in battle, rather than in the gas chambers."

According to Kowalski, "The revolt was conceived on a moral plain; a battle for the honor of their people, for the future of their people. It was an act that grew out of the great yearning for human dignity." The handful of young Jewish resistance fighters dispelled the idea that Jews do not fight. News of the uprising spread throughout Europe and gave hope to many others who tried to resist German efforts to murder them. The myth of the indestructibility of the German army suffered a severe blow as a result of the uprising. Many Jews regarded the uprising with honor and held it in the same regard as the heroic battles fought by Jewish bands against Roman legions so many centuries before.