The Chain of Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto

Julia DeLuca

Illustration 1. “Jews move along a crowded street in the Warsaw Ghetto.” 1942. (Credit: Simon Adelman, courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum photo archives, Photograph #73012A)

UW 1020: “Legacies of the Holocaust,” 2021

Professor Cayo Gamber
During Hitler’s reign he intended to eradicate all Jewish people across Europe, which not only included the physical people, but their culture, essence, and future. The resettlement of Jewish people spanned across Germany’s territories, and many Jews were concentrated into ghettos as a preliminary plan for extermination camps. The ghettos served to isolate Jewish people and demean their value of life by forcing large populations into close living quarters. Though the Nazis heavily oppressed the Jewish people, resistance managed to seep out of even the darkest of circumstances. Historian, Raul Hilberg, examines the steadfast motivation of the members of the Warsaw Ghetto to maintain normal lives despite their acutely adverse situation. As Hilberg depicts,

These outward cultural activities ... are symbolic of the entire population of the ghetto, which is in the process of healing or trying to heal sick people who are soon going to be gassed, which is trying to educate youngsters who will never be growing up, which is in the process of trying to find work for people and increase employment in a situation which is doomed to failure. They are going on as though life were continuing. (qtd. in Lanzmann 171-172)

The Warsaw Jews engaged in smuggling to feed the ghetto, schooling to educate the future of the ghetto, organizing an uprising to fight the Nazis with arms, and developing an archive that recorded all the aforementioned forms of resistance. Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto aimed to simultaneously fulfill the sustenance needs of the people and cultural needs to fuel their spirits and motivation. These acts of resistance were reciprocally reliant on one another, forming a chain of resistance in which the overarching defiance to Nazi oppression was the survival of the Jewish people.
Conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto: “The Beast” Named Hunger

The atrocious conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto made it an unbearable place to live and survive. Since 30% of Warsaw’s population occupied 2.4% of the city’s area, the ghetto was overcrowded and lacked resources (Einwohner 657). By summer 1941, the average per room occupancy was 13 people (Einwohner 657). Having people confined into these spaces caused issues of food insecurity and diseases were easily spread. According to prominent historian Samuel Kassow, “few ghettos experienced more hunger, more suffering, more disease than Warsaw. No other ghetto had to absorb more refugees. All the ghettos in occupied Poland needed effective and well-organized social relief, but none more than Warsaw” (92). The indisputably appalling conditions of the ghetto heavily influenced the lives of residents, as they were constantly faced with the struggles of attaining food, fighting disease, and coping with the deaths of those around them.

The Warsaw Jews were surrounded by corpses and dying people. When explaining the overpowering stench of the piles of corpses in the ghetto, Leah Hammerstein Silverstein states that “even the word hell is not a word to describe it.” The evident starvation and detrimental conditions caused the people in the Warsaw Ghetto to be feeble and dehumanized. When the corpses are piled “two stories high,” and there seems to be little hope of salvation, anyone would be in an incoherent state (Silverstein). Similarly, Leyb Goldin recounts that “in the air and heat of early fall the street is full of the smell of sweat and the smell of corpses” (428). Death surrounds the people of the Warsaw Ghetto and the smell alone overtook their daily lives.

Starvation was particularly common because people lacked the food they needed to physically survive. Goldin depicts the starving people with “their lime-white faces, all skin and
bone, the rouge and color on their spear-sharp eyebrows look ghostly” (433). The extreme hardship that the Warsaw Jews were forced to endure caused many to have a fixed mindset on hunger. Goldin explains the overpowering and bestial nature of hunger that he endured through this dialogue with himself:

   It’s not me thinking it, it’s my stomach. It doesn’t think, it yells, it’s enough to kill you! It demands, it provokes me ‘Intellectual! Where are you, with your theories, your intellectual interests, your dreams, your goals? You educated imbecile! Answer me! Remember: every nuance, every twist of intellectual life used to enchant you, entirely possess you. And now? And now!’ (425)

Survivor Benjamin Meed similarly stated how food “occupies [their] minds.” The “beast”-like nature of hunger caused the Warsaw Jews to focus solely on when their next meal would come. They could not concentrate on anything other than getting food. They were reliant on the Germans for food rations; however, the Germans were not eager to provide resources to the Jewish people given that they were limited. Furthermore, the ghettos were the first step in the Nazis’ plan to eradicate the Jewish people. The ghettos intended to separate Jewish people while simultaneously weakening their health and breaking their morale. Without food, people cannot survive, they can barely think, let alone resist.
Smuggling: “A Reassuring Image”

Illustration 2. “A young boy is caught smuggling in the Warsaw ghetto by a German policeman.” (Credit: Leopold Page Photographic Collection, courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum photo archives, Photograph #05531)

People in the Warsaw Ghetto smuggled food, medicine, messages, books, as well as arms that would be used in the 1943 uprising. Food was an essential item that was constantly smuggled into the ghetto. Since smugglers contributed more than 80 percent of food eaten in the ghetto, this method of securing rations was completely necessary (Kassow 108). German soldiers did not completely eradicate smuggling because the soldiers knew the ghetto would perish in weeks without it (Gutman 90).

Smugglers also brought in books, medicine, information, food, and arms for the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Scholar Carol Battrick reports that children smuggled books in their pants which was essential for their education (218). Warsaw Jews were eager for information. The news of extermination camps would eventually reach the ghetto and initiate the uprising in 1943. Long-lasting food was smuggled in for the uprising and stored in the bunkers to feed the ghetto fighters (Gutman 196). Also, the arms used in the uprising comprised of a “small arsenal of smuggled weapons” (Einwohner 651). As a result, Warsaw Jews had to smuggle to survive and encourage other forms of resistance.
Children were common smugglers in the Warsaw Ghetto. They had certain advantages for smuggling such as smaller size that allowed them to slip into small spaces. They also did not have to wear armbands, so they could disguise themselves as non-Jewish (Battrick 216). Additionally, it is unexpected to assume children were in these dangerous roles, which made them less suspicious, and at times, pitied by SS soldiers (Battrick 216). Children learned smuggling techniques, as depicted through what Estelle Glasser Laughlin wrote about how children “smugglers traded through holes and cracks in the ghetto walls, and they navigated tunnels and cellars under buildings along the wall” and some “became good at sneaking the contraband across the brick divide” (Laughlin 14). Also, some children snuck food in their clothing or rode on streetcars with their smuggled goods (Battrick 218).

Smuggling was essential to the survival of many in the ghetto and children assuming this role “kept their families from starving to death” (Laughlin 14). These children were “sent to buy things, deliver messages to and from the ghetto, and bring medicines” (Schori qtd. in Caplan 64). Some children such as Chana Schori notes that she “did not realize it was dangerous” because she “was six years old” (qtd. in Caplan 64). Nonetheless, “the necessity, however, was more compelling than the danger: either they smuggled or they condemned their families to starvation” (Battrick 219). Children were not fully aware of the dangers and reality of what they were doing. Being as young as five or six, their primary concern was to help their family and their own survival. They knew that they needed to do whatever they could to keep their family alive and that includes sneaking food and risking their lives. As poet Henryka Łazowertówna beautifully conveys in “The Little Smuggler,” “And only one grim thought,/A grimace on your lips:/Who, my dear Mama, who/Will bring you bread tomorrow?” (Łazowertówna lines 32-35).
This overwhelming commitment to providing for their families is what drove many child smugglers to act selflessly at considerably young ages.

It was dangerous to smuggle as a child since the Nazis did not always pity children. Laughlin illustrated that “many were caught and shot on the spot, leaving liver-colored stains along the wall” (14). Also, Henryk Łagodzki lived outside the ghetto and observed the following.

Very frequently the Germans were already waiting on the other side for them. They would grab them and pull very hard through. They were smashing them. If a boy had the potatoes on him then they would literally break his ribs, because they would pull him by his hands and they would smash him. Later they would grab him by his feet and shake him out. (Łagodzki)

Chil Bratljman also recounts the dangers of smuggling: “I started to smuggle. That was a tough way to earn one's bread. Once a Polish policeman beat me [very badly] ... but better beating than death. Often gendarmes would put the barrel of a pistol to my skull.... Then I would return hungry and tired, unable to eat” (qtd. in Kassow 264). These children faced life-and-death situations to fulfill their needs, a necessity for survival. Undoubtedly, these important tasks entrusted in such small hands are impressive and courageous.

However, child smugglers were not only suppliers of essential resources, but also a symbol of resistance. As Carol Battrick explains “the fact that children as young as five were involved in the fight against the Nazis was a source of great pride to the Jews” (221). Since even the youngest children were participating in resistance, the Warsaw Jews were doing all they could to combat the degradation by the Nazis. Young children evading the Nazis is impressive, as they were outwitting whole patrols of people older and more equipped than they were.
Smuggling became a way to maintain the ghetto and instill feelings of hope in its residents. The essence of Battrick’s argument skillfully observes “the smuggler, who was working all hours to sustain the Ghetto was a reassuring image to a large number of the Jews. The idea that the Ghetto would not starve to death because of the existence of these active fighters who were risking their lives to smuggle food, is a popular one in a number of diaries” (206-207). The conceptualization of the smuggler as a heroic character inspired the Warsaw Jews, as they believed in something with such a powerful nature. Similarly, Kassow asserts that “smuggling and trading created personal bonds, a form of community that somehow gave the Jews in the ghetto a sense of comfort, a reminder that they were not completely alone” (191). Given this outlet of imagination and hope, the Warsaw Jews used the smugglers to remind them that all the Jews in the ghetto were in this together and would work to keep each other alive. As a result, smuggling fulfilled sustenance needs and maintained hope and motivation.

Clandestine Schooling: “Transcending the Moment”

Illustration 3. “Group portrait of Jewish preschoolers in the kindergarten established by Ita Rozencwajg in the Warsaw ghetto.” 1941. (Credit: Ita Rozencwajg Dimant, courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum photo archives, Photograph #28513)
In spite of the fact that many people in the Warsaw Ghetto were struggling for their sustenance needs, they still managed to resist in other ways. Clandestine schooling became an important form of resistance that sustained and bolstered culture. As prominent historian Susan Kardos diligently asserts the “existence and vibrancy of schools in the Ghetto is particularly remarkable, given the fact that many children became the sole supporters of their families... Many children needed to smuggle, beg, or steal food, and schoolwork took them away from the survival activities” (48). Nonetheless, clandestine schools were organized by Jewish Self-Help, CENTOS, YIKOR, Techumah, religious organizations, and professional educators (Kardos 39). Further, despite the illegality of schooling:

[They formed] clandestine ‘children's corners’ and kindergartens... elementary classrooms operated in conjunction with public kitchens; an active network of study groups thrived; religious education persisted... youth groups continued their flourishing pre-war intellectual and political activities...At their peak, five hundred students were enrolled in medical courses that employed famous lecturers from the Jewish Medical Faculty of Warsaw University and Krakow University. (Kardos 38)

A community formed around the goal of educating people at any cost. The groups dedicated to this resistance were widespread and remarkable, as they risked their lives for education.

There was no doubt that clandestine schooling was a dangerous activity. Since it was considered illegal, parents and children had to find creative ways to avoid punishment. The danger of clandestine schooling is vividly portrayed by survivor Esteller Glasser Laughlin who wrote that “to own a book was an act of defiance punishable by death, and many defied” (16). Survivor Frieda Aaron explains that they would have to carry their books under their clothes to
conceal them. If an SS officer discovered what they were doing, they “would have been shot on the spot” (Aaron). Similar to smuggling, clandestine schooling was extremely dangerous. Students were directly defying a Nazi regulation that prohibited them to enrich their minds. The fact that Nazis enforced this so harshly shows the importance of this form of resistance.

Despite the danger of clandestine schooling, parents placed an emphasis on the importance of education. For instance, Estelle Glasser Laughlin explains that her father always said that “maybe the secret school is the only normal childhood experience we will ever be able to give them. They must have tutors, no matter the risk” (19). She also draws from the motivation of other parents who “had to sell personal items of clothing or household articles; many sacrificed their meager food rations to pay” for tutors (Laughlin 19). Additionally, Frieda Aaron also states that “my father made sure that my sister and I received a good education.”

According to Kardos, what is notable here is that clandestine schooling served “as a way to help children and their teachers resist dehumanization and hopelessness by maintaining normalcy and humanity, which seed hope for the future” (48). If parents focused solely on the sustenance needs of their children, there would have had a generation that was deprived of their potential to grow intellectually. Furthermore, parental investment in education and their children’s future shows the hope and determination of the Warsaw Jews to devote efforts to their culture.

Great Jewish minds from across Europe were also being oppressed, but they did not allow the Nazis to stop them from educating. When considering the quality of the undercover lectures, it is important to consider survivor David Kochalski’s account:
all the intelligent, all the professor, doctors, and colleges, all of them, so at this orphanage we had even thought we knew who they were, but we had the very education, more educated of Warsaw and surrounding...when night came after supper...we had terrific lectures on everything...All the boys would sit down and they would give us lectures in history, Jewish history and then they would always give us geography and any other arithmetic every other night another professor would start teaching us. Then the rabbis would teach us Judaism. It was like a university.

The access the Warsaw Jews had to such profound minds made the clandestine meetings especially exceptional.

Furthermore, the dedication to religion was also an influence on education. Many lessons included “Jewish literary tradition and was ideologically charged. This curriculum, as well as religious education, reveals how schooling served as a means through which Ghetto Jews kept their history and children alive day-to-day and secured its future by instilling it in their youth” (Kardos 54). Similarly, Estelle Glasser Laughlin stated that her father only read literature written by Yiddish authors because “he wanted us to appreciate our identity” (16).

The collaboration between education, Jewish traditions, and religion instilled a sense of unity within the Warsaw community. As historian Kardos explains, the Warsaw Jews used their intellectual culture “as a reverence for the past to look towards the future” (48). The Warsaw Jews were unwilling to give up their beliefs and history and used it as a way to empower youth.

These clandestine schools and lectures gave the people an escape from their situation even for a moment. As Susan Kardos assesses, “even in the darkest circumstances, teaching and learning can provide participants with the possibility of social and self-determination by
transcending the moment and serving as the lifeline between hopelessness and hope” (37). Estelle Glasser Laughlin describes how when listening to her teacher as “all fears seemed to melt with the joy of the moment” (20). Furthermore, survivor Vladka Meed recounts: “I don’t remember the questions, but I do remember the atmosphere, the elevation, being together with the people and talking about the writer, and about the character, Bontshe Shvayg. And this still remains... in my memory.” Survivor Frieda Aaron concludes that the “moral, spiritual resistance” was a “way of resisting total destruction” and it was the “best way” because they “didn’t have weapons” and the “only possession that was permanent was education.”

Education also created the opportunity for youth to gather and form organizations dedicated to their cultural needs. When considering the role of the youth organizations in the Warsaw Ghetto, it is constructive to consider this statement from Vladka Meed.

Life was going on and it was a life full of meaning, of activity, of vibration, of cultural event, and culture event which I consider this was a way of resistance. Resistance for human life, for dignity. And this kind of resistance enabled the young people to resist with arms. Because the resistance with arms was just a further way in the conclusion of our chain of resistance. (Vladka Meed 1981)

All forms of resistance worked together in developing connections between people in the community. The “chain” shows that each form of resistance does not act alone or more effectively, rather, they work in tandem to fight the Nazi’s oppression.
The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943: “The Last Stand”

Illustration 4: “An apartment building razed by the SS burns during the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising.” 1943. (Credit: Instytut Pamieci Narodowej, courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum photo archives, Photograph #51055).

For the first three years of the ghetto’s existence, “collective resistance was seen as unnecessary” because “survival was a matter of enduring the ghetto conditions” (Einwohner 659). Given the hunger, unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, and overall degradation and dehumanization of the Warsaw Jews, they “were hardly in a position to take on an enemy who was both armed and powerful” (Battrick 202). Since the Nazis were a strong opponent, Warsaw Jews were “under circumstance that made physical resistance often equivalent to suicide.” (Teichman 338). Prominent historian Rachel Einwohner similarly concludes that given the environment and situation of the Warsaw Ghetto “collective Jewish resistance never should have happened at all” (651). However, by July 1942, the ghetto residents were scared and desperate as the Nazis started deporting thousands of Jews a day to Treblinka over the span of six weeks (Einwohner 660). These mass deportations sparked conversations of an armed uprising.
There were two notable fighting organizations in Warsaw: the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) and the Jewish Military Union (ŻZW). The ghetto fighters were extremely under-equipped, as “the ŻOB had obtained only a few grenades and a few dozen pistols, yet by the start of the April 1943 uprising, each of ŻOB’s roughly 500 fighters had a pistol and a few homemade hand grenades, while the estimated 400 members of the ŻZW had pistol and grenades, as well as 21 machine guns, eight machine guns, and 30 rifles” (Einwohner 663).

Similarly, Helen K states that the Germans “came in tanks when they decided to liquidate the ghetto... We didn’t have much ammunition, so we threw Molotov cocktails on the tanks” (101). According to Jürgen Stroop, who was in charge of the Nazi’s oppression of the uprising, the resistors had mostly “Molotov cocktails, pistols, and home-made grenades” (40). Nonetheless, the armed resistance was a strong effort as Helen K accounts that “a lot of people don’t know, and they feel that we went really very passive...The Warsaw Ghetto was holding out for four weeks. Even Poland didn’t hold out for four weeks” (101). Despite the Warsaw Jews being under-equipped to battle with the Germans, they still fought as long as they could endure.

Although many did not consider resisting with arms due to the shattered morality of the ghetto and limited resources, the uprising still managed to take place. This was not some well-planned effort, rather, as stated by survivor Ben Meed, it was “the last stand.” Warsaw Jews were aware of their impending defeat as shown through a statement by Mordechai Anielewicz who “gave an accurate appraisal of the chances of the uneven struggle, he foresaw the destruction of the Ghetto and the workshop, and he was sure that neither he nor his combatants would survive the liquidation of the Ghetto. He was sure that they would die like stray dogs and no one would even know their last resting place” (qtd. in Einwohner 665).
According to Stroop, 13,929 Warsaw Jews died in the resistance, showing that the outcome Anielewicz anticipated occurred (42).

Fighting till the end was the only way that some Warsaw Jews were willing to surrender.

As Einwohner diligently argues:

Collective action in the Warsaw Ghetto emerged not in response to opportunity but to a lack thereof; in fact, it was only once the ghetto fighters became aware of the hopelessness of their situation that they began to plan for resistance... The ghetto residents’ assessment of their situation as one in which their deaths were inevitable facilitated the construction of a motivational frame that equated resistance with honor and dignity. (Einwohner 652)

The Warsaw Jews were fighting for the “last stand” because they did not “‘allow the Germans alone to pick the time and place of [their] deaths’” (Edelman qtd. From Kaufman). As historian Leah Wolfson astutely states it was “a battle in the death throes” (What a Secret Archive Taught the World). The ghetto fighters were prepared for defeat, as they were significantly under-equipped to combat the Nazis. Thus, this armed resistance was a bold, last-minute effort to choose how one would die.¹

¹ It is important not to overly romanticize the uprising over other forms of resistance. Ghetto fighter Marek Edelman stated that people who walked to the gas chambers “went quietly and with dignity...It is an awesome thing, when one is going so quietly to one’s death. It is definitely more difficult than to go out shooting” (Edelman qtd. from Kaufman). Edelman recognizes the strength of other forms of resistance by acknowledging that the uprising was not the only form of resistance. As a result, resistance, such as clandestine schooling or smuggling, that some scholars deem as “passive” were just as critical as the uprising.
DeLuca 15

The Oyneg Shabes Archive: “May History Attest for Us”

Illustration 5. “One of the two milk cans in which portions of the Ringelblum Oneg Shabbat archives were hidden and buried in the Warsaw ghetto. The milk cans are currently in the possession of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.” (Credit: courtesy of Zydowski Instytut Historyczny imienia Emanuela Ringelbluma, courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum photo archives, Photograph #27086)

The Oyneg Shabes Archive was conceived by historian Emmanuel Ringelblum along with other members of this “sacred society” of a couple dozen people who aimed to record what occurred in the Warsaw Ghetto (Ringelblum qtd. in Kassow). Members included Rachel Auerbach, Hersh Wasser, Eliyahu Gutowski, Abraham Lewin, and many more who joined together through the community connections established from other forms of resistance. The archive included 10 metal boxes that were buried under a Jewish school and then two milk cans that were buried later. Historian Milton Teichman explains that the contributors to the archive “were driven by the sense that the world had never before seen anything like this” (345). The archives served to tell “the full range of Nazi brutality” in a way that makes readers today “realize that our previous distance from the event has left us to create images of the Holocaust much less complex and much less painful than they really were” (Teichman 342, 340). As prominent historian Leah Wolfson concludes:
This was what was so precinct about what Ringelblum was doing. He saw the value in those stories. These are heartbreaking stories, and if you find yourself even a little bit into one of them, then that victim becomes a person, instead of that victim being one of six million, or one of the many people who were killed in Warsaw. I think that's what this does so well, and it reminds us that the Holocaust, ultimately, is the story of individual people. (What a Secret Archive Taught the World)

The archives include first-hand accounts that provide people with sincere and powerful information about what happened during the Holocaust.

The writers and artists who contributed to the archives were aware of what could happen if they were even caught. However, these artists chose to avoid the “‘inner exile’” of no self-expression and “documented their surroundings and expressed some kind of connection to humanity, reaching beyond the walls of their captivity to preserve their collective experience for posterity” (Rovit 461). Consequently, this act of resistance recorded all the other forms of resistance. This archive kept their culture alive which is what the Nazis intended to annihilate.

As stated by Emanuel Ringelblum himself, “If none of us survives, at least let that remain” when referring to the archives (qtd. in Kassow 2). Furthermore, David Graber had a similar sentiment:

What we are unable to cry and shriek out to the world we buried in the ground.... I would love to see the moment in which the great treasure will be dug up and scream the truth at the world. So the world may know all. So the ones who do not live through it all may be glad, and we may feel like veterans with medals on her chest. We would be the fathers, the teachers and educators of the future... But no, we shall certainly not live to see it, and therefore I will write my last will. May the treasure fall in good hands, may
it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened... in the
twentieth century.... We may now die in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history
attest for us. (qtd. in Kassow 3)

These brave members of the archive fought to preserve their memory for future generations by
showing their rich culture and history that was present before and during the war.

**Equal Links, One Chain of Resistance, and the Battle against Oppression**

How could you possibly value one form of resistance over another if one may not have
happened without the other? This “chain of resistance” would have broken if any of the links
had been missing. Smuggling fed both the sustenance and motivational needs of the ghetto
through inspirational ghetto smugglers. These smugglers provided books for schooling and
arms that would be essential in the 1943 uprising. Additionally, clandestine schooling provided
a small taste of normalcy and transcended people away from the ghetto, if only for a moment.
The community connections formed from underground lectures led to the formation of youth
groups and the fighting organizations that sparked the uprising. All of these forms of resistance
were equally dangerous and important and would not have been documented as accurately if it
were not for the Oyneg Shabes Archive. An archive that also relied on the community
connections formed from the “chain of resistance.” The Warsaw Jews were killed for smuggling
and learning and fighting and recording, yet they never stopped smuggling and learning and
fighting and recording. From link to link this chain was unbreakable despite the Nazis’ constant
hammering to sever it and destroy Jewish people.
Works Cited

   sfi.usc.edu/video/frieda-aaron-education-warsaw-ghetto.


