

Jewish Reactions to the Holocaust

The simple truth is that ways of rescue were very few. We have tried to investigate these ways, and have found one ray of light in the general darkness: those few people, individuals and groups, whose assistance in the right place and at the right time leave us some hope for the survival of a more humane world. One should mention again the consuls in Kovno and in France, or such individuals as Mayer and Brand, Kastner and Weissmandel, who attempted to act in the right place and at the right time. The measure of their success was small, but at least they made the attempt.

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XXII.

As Sheep to the Slaughter?

From our attempt to sum up the whole issue of rescue, we pass now to our last issue, and will attempt to sum up the Jewish reaction in the Holocaust countries themselves. We have already pointed out that one cannot make generalizations concerning Judenraete. We have brought examples of Judenraete which were fully submissive to the Nazis — especially in Poland, where Lodz is a good example. For Western Europe, we used Holland as an example, and for southeastern Europe, the example was Budapest. We have also brought examples of Judenraete which offered wholesale opposition to the Nazis, like that of Minsk. We have also seen Judenraete which were somewhere between these two extremes — whether they were more inclined toward resistance, as in Slovakia or in France, or toward the other side of the spectrum, but without full submission to the Germans. It is clear from all these examples that the Jewish leadership during the Holocaust adopted different approaches and different strategies. We have seen similar phenomena among the Jewish public at large. There were Jewish social organizations whose general tendency was to oppose the Nazis or to organize resistance activities. We have seen one such organization — OSE — in France; another one in Poland — the Joint and all its branches — and another in Slovakia and Hungary, with the youth movements there.

But what, in the end, was the reaction of the Jewish public in general, and how did it stand up to the Holocaust? Here we are faced

with a difficult problem, since this is a matter for long and voluminous research, and we are only in the initial stages of this work. One should also add that the testimonies we have are of different kinds and point to various types of reaction. Let us have one example. In Denmark, we remember, almost the whole of the Jewish community, the large majority of which lived in Copenhagen — a rather small community of under 8,000 people — was rescued. The people were rescued by Danes, not by Jews. This implies that Jewish action played a very small part in this case. It is possible that what we have here is a Jewish failure of nerve in the face of harassment and persecution.

We also meet with a similar phenomenon in some other places. At the other extreme, we find in most ghettos in Poland a powerful drive to remain alive, which involved active, unarmed opposition to Nazi policies. The more the Nazis hardened their attitude and their policy, the more determined was the Jewish reaction not to give in but, on the contrary, to find ways of getting around Nazi restrictions.

In such cases, what we witnessed was an active Jewish reaction. One must not use the term "passive resistance" here. This resistance was in no way passive but rather extremely active — although it was unarmed — and we have seen why this was so.

Another Jewish reaction was the one we met with in places where the Jewish public opposed a Judenrat which acted submissively. In Holland, for example, we have seen that the general instinct of the Jewish population told it to go into hiding, while the Judenrat collaborated in all the preparations for expulsion.

In order not to have to gild the image excessively, one should also point out that in many ghettos in Eastern Europe, the Jewish police were virtually an arm of the Gestapo inside the ghetto. On the other hand, there were places where the Jewish police were the focus of resistance. In numerous places in Eastern Europe, the Nazis recruited agents at some stage from among the Jews, and these agents, in return for promises of saving their lives or of money, were prepared to collaborate by uncovering hiding places, acting against the underground, and similar activities. In the ghettos, there was a

great deal of corruption and social tension.

The picture is thus hardly uniform, and things take more than one direction. But if we are to be asked about our general impression of Jewish behavior, we can say that it was far from a general picture of submission. And here we come to the issue of the concentration and death camps, not only because there was armed resistance to the Germans in some of these camps — and we have already touched on this — but also because in these camps, which were created in order to destroy man's humanity, we meet with some exceptional phenomena. It is true that in these camps, where Jews were at the very bottom of the ladder, many Jews broke down and were prepared to risk the lives of others, or even to betray them, for a slice of bread, or even for the mere promise of a slice of bread or a better place of work. In the circumstances of a concentration camp, this was natural behavior, since such a camp was created for making people break down. Nevertheless, there were in these camps many examples of preserving one's human dignity. Such phenomena stand out and they may, perhaps, give us some hope for mankind in general.

We find such phenomena in all the camps. Collecting the details of such stories is a process which will take much time. We now possess thousands of testimonies, and one has to sift through them and check them. But altogether, it is already clear to us today that this phenomenon existed. Even if such cases were in a minority, they are far more significant than the majority.

There was one type of Jewish reaction in the camps which found its expression in maintaining the laws of religion. We have many testimonies on this issue. We also have evidence of cases where people did not keep the commandments of the Jewish religion or abandoned them, but kept the norms of human morality. We have examples of people who followed in the way of this or that ideology, be it Zionist, communist, or humanist of this or that sort. A man who held on to some ideology found it, no doubt, easier to maintain his psychological resistance to what the Nazis planned for these camps.

All this raises the major question which comes up in every

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discussion of the Holocaust, whether among soldiers, schoolchildren, or even students, and usually finds its expression in the slogan "as sheep to the slaughter." This slogan is of special interest, since it seems to be used only among Jews. About twenty million Russians, Ukrainians and other Soviet citizens died at German hands — far more than all the Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust. Has anyone in the Soviet Union ever asked the question, why most of these millions went as sheep to the slaughter? Has anyone raised this question concerning the 2.5 million Russian prisoners of war who were murdered by the Nazis without, of course, offering any resistance? Has anyone raised this question concerning three million non-Jewish Poles who were murdered, or many thousands of people of all nationalities who opposed the Nazi regime? We have not come across the question of whether these people went like sheep to the slaughter in any book of history, speech, or any other document written by people who were not Jews and which deal with the tens of millions of people killed in the Second World War. This is a peculiarly Jewish question. It is, so it appears, an expression of self hate and of a demand put to ourselves to be superhuman; heroic, as it were, in a manner which is far from being natural.

But the fact that this question is raised, and it is raised in a violent, and sometimes even in virulent fashion, requires some answer. The answer, so it seems, is to be found only in the uniqueness of the Jewish attitude of undermining and over-criticizing ourselves, at the same time that we forgive others. What is even worse, when we speak of "sheep to the slaughter," we no longer imply that someone murdered these people, but that he slaughtered them like sheep or cattle. By saying this, we no longer refer to those sons and daughters of the Jewish people who were murdered as human beings. Thus we virtually condone the Nazi argument, since the Nazis, too, did not regard the Jews as humans. The mere expression "sheep to the slaughter" depicts the Jews, not as human beings, but as a herd of animals, and it depicts the murderer as a butcher.

It seems to me that those who use such expressions are doing an

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injustice, not only to the Jewish people murdered in Europe, but also to themselves. By doing this, they identify themselves — of course, without being aware of this and with no intention to do so — with ideologies with which they would be shocked to be identified.

Having noted all these reservations, one still has to ask the question and to answer it. The people who were taken to the places of murder were usually surprised and shocked. Immediately after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, people throughout the country — hundreds of thousands of them — were led to their deaths without being prepared for this in the least. They had not even imagined that this was a likely intention of the concentration of Jews. The Germans used excellent camouflage: they claimed that these people were being led away to places of labor — and some, indeed, were actually led to labor. This was used as a proof that the others had also been taken to do some work, while they were led to be murdered. Here we have an extremely interesting story. It is the testimony of a Slovakian Jew named Filip Mueller, who spent two and a half years in Auschwitz as a forced laborer in the gas chambers. He published his reminiscences of this period, where he tells everything he saw with his own eyes during two and a half years. He saw a large part of the Jewish people led to its death. There is one thing which you will not find in his story: Jews kissing the feet of the S.S. men, grovelling, or begging for their lives. Did such things never occur? Filip Mueller maintains that they never did. In any case, he never saw such things happen. People were in shock, of course. People sang, people prayed, people did all sorts of things — but to grovel and ask for mercy from the Germans, that was something they did not do. If there were such cases, they were isolated ones.

Thus, we are not dealing here with a herd. This is not the behavior of a herd. These were human beings who were caught up in an event which they could not comprehend, and they reacted like human beings in such circumstances. The question one asks is, how does a person behave when he has been trapped in a situation in which death is inescapable? What are his reactions? One must enquire of the psychologists as to the mechanisms which defend the mind of

someone in this situation, and soften this blow of being driven toward the inevitable. How do such mechanisms work? This is even more important when we deal with large numbers of people being together in such situations. Each of them can say: "This is unlikely to happen to each and everyone of us, and therefore I have some chance." This prevents people from acting in any manner exceptional to that of the group in which they are included.

We add to this the fact that the Nazis exploited the ties of family among the Jews who were led to their deaths. Take, for example, a young man, who had the strength to resist, to jump off a train, and the like. But he was with his family. To abandon it might mean that he would never see these people again; that he was leaving his mother, his father, his brothers and sisters in the hands of the Nazis, while he, young and strong as he was, could support them in their last moments. We have testimonies of survivors who have said: Had I not been separated in some way or another from my family, I would not have survived, since I would have regarded it as my duty to go with the rest of them.

We should add another argument here: Those people who were led to their deaths were surrounded by guards, usually armed with automatic weapons. But it was not only that they were surrounded by Nazis and collaborators, but they were also in the midst of a population which was mostly hostile, and this is a crucial point. When one has nowhere to escape to safety, what are the alternatives open to oneself? We have a considerable number of testimonies about people who escaped from the places of mass murder — mostly in Eastern Poland and Western Russia, where murder was carried out not in camps, but near the places of residence of the victims — but they were not rescued, since their neighbors betrayed them.

In this context, one should mention another fact. We have numerous photographs of Soviet prisoners of war being led away, at a time when it was already clear that Russian prisoners of war had little chance of surviving in the German camps. What is interesting in these photographs is that we see in them large crowds of prisoners marching in Russia, still surrounded by the fields and

forests of their own country. They can easily escape. They are guarded by very few guards who are clearly seen in those photographs — 8-10 guards on horseback armed with guns and nothing else. Can anyone maintain that such a crowd, a whole Soviet division, could not break away and escape? At least some could have saved themselves. But what was at work here were psychological mechanisms, and these apply to Jews just as they apply to French, Russians, Blacks, Japanese, Chinese — to human beings in general. This issue should, perhaps, be investigated in an objective fashion, including the reactions of people from other nations.

All in all, this relationship between the behavior of Jews and of non-Jews during the Holocaust still requires a proper investigation. After all, although the Jews were the main victims of Nazi policy — as a body, although not in numbers — violence against local populations occurred throughout Nazi occupied Europe. One can mention the example of Yugoslavia, where a mass murder of Serbs took place. How did people behave when Tito was organizing his partisan units in a bloody campaign in which huge numbers of civilians were killed? Did they behave like the Jews, or in a different manner? Here we have an unequivocal answer. There is no question here of any other behavior: they reacted just like the Jews. There are certain differences between the reaction of various nations — for example, between the Czechs and the Slovaks. Czech resistance was practically restricted to talking, and little real action took place. The Czech underground required help parachuted from England in order to assassinate Reinhard Heydrich, the Chief of the S.S. Police, who was also the brutal governor of the Czech parts of Czechoslovakia, in May 1942. This was the one single operation carried out by the Czech underground against the Nazis until the Czech liberation. The rebellion against the Nazis in Prague broke out virtually on the last day of the war. In Slovakia, on the other hand, there was an attempt to start a national rebellion against the Nazis in the summer of 1944. Thus, one cannot deny that there were some differences between the various nations. If we now try to fit the Jews into this spectrum, they were undoubtedly in a far more

active part of that spectrum than the Slovaks and the Czechs. The reaction of the Jews in the first stages of the war was that of evasion and of preserving life. But once it became clear to them that the Nazi aim was murder, there was, wherever the possibility existed, preparation for self-defence, rebellion, partisan warfare in the forests and resistance. We meet with very interesting cases of Jews refusing to cooperate with the Nazis even when there was no longer any choice.

I shall mention here what happened in Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp in Germany. The young Jews imprisoned in it were told that they were to be led away to Auschwitz, and what went on in Auschwitz was, of course, well known in Sachsenhausen. The Jews had no weapons in their hands, not even primitive weapons like swords or daggers. In October 1942 they fell on their guards with their fists, in full view of the other inmates. If we take this example — and there are others of the same kind — we realize that this is a different type of reaction from the Czech or Slovak pattern we have mentioned.

Thus the general problem of Jewish reaction must be discussed as part of a more general and wider problem, that of the general reaction of the various nations of Europe to the Nazis and their actions.

As to the concentration camps, the minority which did not behave as was expected is what matters. The reason for such a statement is that, as a matter of principle, in the Nazi system of government everything was meant to apply to everybody without exception. This is why it was known as a totalitarian system: it had to include the totality of those ruled by it. The aim of the concentration camps was to have everyone break down and behave according to the standards fixed by the Nazis. In principle, it would have been enough to find one person — and even more so a Jew, since the Jews were at the bottom of the scale — who did not answer to these expectations, to justify one in maintaining that the whole system had failed. In fact, the system was defied not by one person or by a hundred persons — nor even by a thousand or by ten thousand — but by many more people.

From this point of view, it is legitimate to say that the Nazis failed. They did not succeed in destroying man — and in our case, in destroying the Jew — either as a human being or as an individual who was also a Jew. They may have succeeded with the majority — these are, of course, things which we cannot now measure. But they failed with a large minority. This is of interest not only to Jews, but to mankind in general — for, if the Nazis did not succeed in breaking everyone in such optimal conditions, it appears that there is still some hope for the human race.

As to the specific Jewish issue, we can now say: this nation, most of whose members attempted to evade the persecutions in the most unlikely circumstances, and which fought for its life in the only way open to it, without arms, without a government or any army, and without anyone to parachute supplies and arms to it; this nation, in whose Judenraete — that is, councils appointed by the Germans — we find all colors of the spectrum; this nation, which organized armed resistance in all the countries of Europe, and in numbers which were quite considerable; this nation, which, even when being marched to death reacted with what can only be termed human behavior — this is a nation whose offspring can easily identify with it.

What was the connection between traditional Jewish moral values and this Jewish reaction? That is an issue which has not yet been investigated. One remembers that in Poland, for example, one third of the Jewish people or more were adherents of Jewish religious law and of Jewish tradition, while the remaining half or two thirds were either not observant of the commandments and of Jewish tradition, or only partly observant. But they had all grown in a traditional background, and the age-old traditions of the Jewish people exercised an influence even on those Jews who were not observant — together with general human ideals derived from socialism, liberalism and other such ideologies. One should examine these various influences and the way they were integrated by the Jews with their own traditions. Let us take, for example, the Bund in Poland. This was a socialist, anti-Zionist Jewish party. The language its members spoke and wrote was Yiddish. They regarded

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themselves as alien to Jewish history and rejected it, but at the same time they were also a product of that history. They accepted the ideals they believed in in a way unique to themselves, which was unintelligible to the people around them. Here, too, we seem to have something which is specifically Jewish, which should be investigated in terms of its influence on the behavior of these people.

We are the followers of this path and the successors of these people, whether we like it or not. All Jews, whether they were born in Morocco or in South America, or are the descendants of Jews who emigrated from Europe to Israel or to any other country, were Hitler's target; and the fact that the Jews of Poland were murdered is only an accident, since the Jews of Poland were simply near at hand. The long term influence of the Holocaust, and of the Jewish reaction to the Holocaust on us, is something we have all been living with and will continue to live with for generations to come.