

Let us not exaggerate. There were communities that collapsed. One cannot even find the dignity of quiet defiance in some Jewish responses. In Copenhagen, for example, the whole Jewish community was saved without its lifting a finger to help itself; in Vienna, but for a few hundred people in hiding, nothing but abject submission was the rule. Unfortunately it is impossible to explore here the reasons behind this apparent lethargy.

The range of Jewish resistance was broad, as I have shown: armed, unarmed but organized, semi-organized or semi-spontaneous. Let me conclude with a form of resistance which I have saved to the last because it is the most poignant. My example is from Auschwitz, and I am relating it on the authority of the late Yossel Rosensaft, head of the Bergen-Belsen Survivors' Association. Yossel was also a "graduate" of Auschwitz, and he testified that in December 1944 he and a group of inmates calculated when Hanukka would occur. They went out of their block and found a piece of wood lying in the snow. With their spoons, they carved out eight holes and put pieces of carton in them. Then they lit these and sang the Hanukka song, "Ma Oz Tsur Yeshuati."

None of the people who did this were religious. But on the threshold of death, and in the hell of Auschwitz, they demonstrated. They asserted several principles: that contrary to Nazi lore, they were human; that Jewish tradition, history, and values had a meaning for them in the face of Auschwitz; and that they wanted to assert their humanity in a Jewish way. We find a large number of such instances in concentration and death camps. Of course, there were uncounted instances of dehumanization in a stark fight for survival: bread was stolen from starving inmates by their comrades, violent struggles broke out over soup, over blankets, over work details—struggles which only too often ended with death. In the conditions of the camps, incidents of this kind are not surprising or unusual, but examples such as the one mentioned are. The few Jews who did survive could not have done so without the companionship and cooperation of friends. And friendship under such conditions is itself a remarkable achievement.

I think the story of Kosów is also appropriate. It exemplifies most vividly the refusal of so many Jewish victims to yield their humanity in the face of impending murder. Kosów is a small town in eastern Galicia, and it had a Judenrat which was not very different from others. On Passover 1942, the Gestapo announced it would come into the ghetto.

The Judenrat believed that this was the signal for the liquidation of the ghetto, and told all the Jews to hide or flee. Of the twenty-four Judenrat members, four decided to meet the Germans and offer themselves as sacrificial victims—to deflect the wrath of the enemy. With the ghetto empty and silent, the four men sat and waited for their executioners. While they were waiting one of them faltered. The others told him to go and hide. The three men of Kosów prepared to meet the Nazis on Passover of 1942. Was their act less than firing a gun?

Dan Diner

## Why the Jewish Councils Cooperated

If we are to base our definition of the Judenrat on the impossible position in which representatives of the Jewish community in German-occupied Poland found themselves, it would seem appropriate to include other Central and Western European institutions of "Jewish self government" within the definition's purview. For all these institutions found themselves in the same situation of compulsory, incriminatory cooperation with Nazi rule—this even when working toward the still-tenable goal of emigration. In fact, Jewish institutions already in existence before the inception of the mass-murder process became deeply entangled in its unfolding: Vienna's Central Bureau for Jewish Emigration, for instance, established in August 1938 on Jewish initiative for the sake of Jewish welfare, saw the emigration lists it had painstakingly assembled transformed, covertly, into death-camp deportation lists. This slippage from steps meant to preserve life to those facilitating its destruction, scarcely perceptible to the Jewish authorities at the start, marks the tragic situation of the Jewish councils throughout occupied Europe.

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As with the Viennese example, the Jewish councils in German-occupied Poland did not at first confront exterminatory measures that, once put in motion, they would try their best to delay, and that would finally lead to forced self-selection. Starting in the autumn and winter of 1939, the newly established councils concerned themselves above all with Jewish social welfare in the widest sense—a thoroughly sensible response, it seemed, to the Nazi concentration of Jews into demarcated, soon to be sealed-off areas, and to the ensuing loss of sources of normal sustenance (that is, work and property). The subsequent outbreak of disease and death throughout the ghettos—the result of malnourishment and disastrous hygienic conditions—pointed, already, toward the Nazi campaign of mass extermination; the Jewish councils' decision to ask the German authorities for work, the Germans being their only remaining source, should be thus reconsidered in light of the terrible circumstances of seclusion. It was an effort to cope with the plight facing those for whom they bore responsibility: to slow down, at least, the steady worsening of their circumstances. But above all—as with the Warsaw Judenrat's proviso in its offer of labor at the end of 1939—it was an effort to end the brutally executed and unpredictable seizure of Jews by the Germans for the sake of forced labor, to render the German actions relatively predictable instead. Such an approach by the councils must be distinguished from their later strategy of “rescue through labor” in the face of extermination. Nevertheless, it is evident that the earlier procedure facilitated the later one to a considerable degree. Blinded by anti-Semitic contempt, the Nazis decided to systematically use Jewish artisanal and industrial workers only in the middle of 1940. What followed had its precedent in the shift of organized Jewish emigration in prewar Central Europe to eventual enforced cooperation with the Nazis: in Eastern Europe, the representatives of the Jewish ghettos ended up, by way of their approach to labor, in a relation of dependency that would turn against themselves.

The horrible form taken by this turn involved a constant exchange of the lives of those capable of work for the death of those no longer “useful”: an exchange that, in its steady decimation of the Jewish population, reveals the drastic hopelessness of the Jewish situation. Different responses to the situation were possible, ranging from clear-cut gestures of resistance to undertaking something like a Faustian contest with the Nazis: an effort to salvage the life of some through a controlled and limited fulfillment of the Nazi need

for Jewish deaths, always in the hope of the behemoth's imminent military defeat. In face of the variety of individual responses, generalization is difficult. To a considerable degree responses depended on the identity and personality of the different Jewish elders, as well as on specificities of location, as was the case with the Lodz ghetto: lying in the Warthegau region annexed to the Reich, it owed its relatively long survival to conflicts of responsibility between Gauleiter Greiser and the SS. At the same time, the degree of community organization was an important factor. In Poland, the Jewish communities to a large extent remained intact corporate entities; as prolonged instances of Nazi will, they were thus subject to instrumentalization via the Jewish councils. The circumstances were very different in conquered areas of the Soviet Union, where the authorities had dissolved Jewish communal structures more than twenty years before. The Jews here were also put in ghettos, unless they were not immediately seized by the mobile firing squads of the various *Einsatzgruppen*. But in the absence of such traditional structures, the selections imposed by the Germans on the Jewish councils in these areas were far more arbitrary in nature.

Once burdened with knowledge of the deportations' end goal, and confronted with the demand for self-selection, the Jewish councils displayed a range of defiant responses, described in detail by the Israeli historian Aharon Weiss in his work on the councils in eastern Galicia and eastern Upper Silesia. Such responses ranged from open refusal to deliver up Jews entrusted to the councils—a decision promptly punished by the Nazis with death for those responsible—to suicides like that of Adam Czerniaków<sup>1</sup>—he declared the delivery of children to their murder a border he could not cross—to the decision to join the resistance (as far as this was possible). There were also the many elders who gave up their functions: the stand taken by the Jewish elder Weiler from Wladzimierz, who abstained from a selection with the words “I am not God and will not pass judgment over who shall live and who shall die” was far from an exception. In view of the historical evidence, the generally over-sharp line of demarcation—particularly in the collective Jewish memory—between Judenrat and resistance is scarcely tenable. Tensions and conflicts between the two only emerged, in any event,

<sup>1</sup>Chairman of the Warsaw Jewish Council, 1939–1942.—Ed.

with the onset of deportations in the autumn of 1941. Cooperation between the councils and the armed resistance, including supplying the latter with money, material, and information, was commonplace.

In the Bialystok ghetto, for instance, contacts and arrangements between the Judenrat led by Efraim Barasz and the resistance were routine. Until the rebellion broke out in August 1943, the resistance saw itself compelled—just like the Jewish council—to wait for a moment judged propitious, that is, to play for time, meanwhile complying with the draconian principle of sacrificing *some* for the sake of those who remained. It is important to recognize that because of the partisan activity in the Soviet territory captured by the Germans in 1941, effective armed Jewish resistance such as that in Bialystok—forming a sharp contrast to the hopeless Warsaw revolt, with its essential motive of salvaging historical honor—was far more likely, across the board, than in the Generalgouvernement established in Poland in 1939. To be sure, not all partisan groups were ready to accept Jews into their ranks. Hostility to the Germans did not necessarily translate into friendly feelings for the Jews, and many who managed to escape from the enforced community of camp or ghetto found their death at the hands of anti-Semitic partisans.

In a comparison of the strategy of reluctant compliance for which the Judenrat generally stands with that of armed Jewish struggle, the latter emerges more ambivalently than is commonly assumed. For a start, the imperatives of military organization undermined the family structure—hence survival in the ghetto. Whoever managed to reach the partisans left behind old people, children, the weak, in circumstances making death very likely. For most people, the factor of family loyalty thus constituted an unassailable barrier—or in the words of a contemporary witness: “the feelings for one’s own family were far stronger than fear of death.” Those most firmly opposing flight from the ghetto to the armed bands were Jewish elders who had now set upon the clearly demarcated and terrible path they termed “rescue through labor,” its reverse side being constant self-selection for destruction. In Vilna, for instance, Jakob Gens spoke up against youths who joined the partisans by pointing to the ghetto’s loss of productive workers and subsequent reduced chances for survival. The feeling was that such resisters threatened the ghetto with reprisals; and as suggested, although standing up for themselves, by the very nature of armed resistance, they were abandoning those left behind to their fates. In contrast to

those joining the partisans, the Judenrat—such was the feeling—had a sense of responsibility for the collective. The only tenable strategy involved becoming indispensable to the Germans—through labor.

In Poland, as mentioned above, the Jews offered labor to the Germans in the early phase of the ghetto’s formation (the fall and winter of 1939), the offer having, however a different character than “rescue through labor.” The latter procedure came into force only with the onset of the Nazis’ organized, industrial mass-murder project. And let us note the low likelihood—then or later, during the mass murder—that the Jewish elders who had decided to embark on “rescue through labor” (in particular Chaim Rumkowski in Lodz, Jakob Gens in Vilna, Mosche Merin in Upper Silesia, and Efraim Barasz in Bialystok), along with the Jewish councils they headed, would recognize something more than a local or regional phenomenon behind the murder operations. The various German agencies offered ample grounds for such a limited perspective. Not all of them, for example, adhered to the instructions handed down from the Reich’s ministry for the conquered eastern territories to the Reich commissioner for what was termed Ostland—comprising Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the greater part of White Russia—upon the latter’s query (November 15, 1941): to exterminate all the Jews in the region, regardless of economic priorities. This drive toward total extinction ran into countervailing policies on a local level in December. We thus find Karl Jäger, the head of Einsatzkommando 3, responsible for murder operations in the Baltic region, complaining of being forced by the Wehrmacht and civil authorities to refrain from exterminating 15 percent of Lithuania’s Jews, since they were needed for labor.

By means of their strategy of “rescue through labor,” the Jewish councils did their best to exploit this tension within the Nazi administration between a will toward absolute extinction and the war-determined interest in exploiting Jewish labor capacity. In however limited a sense, the councils would thus maintain an ability to act, for the sake of gaining time: time worth struggling for in the expectation of a turn in the war’s course and—most concretely—the arrival of the Soviet army. The possibility of gaining time was hence made available, paradoxically, by the requirements of the German war effort. Crucially, underlying the councils’ apparently compliant adaptation to such requirements—that is, underlying their postponement of total extinction by means of labor and the self-selection of those really or supposedly incapable of

labor—were presumptions of purpose-oriented rationality on the part of the enemy: of an overriding interest by the Nazis in their own self-preservation. In this respect, it is striking that such presumptions were frequently confirmed by information gleaned on emerging conflicts between the different Nazi agencies, and on their real divergent interests. In his monumental study of the Jewish councils, Isaiah Trunk indicates that Barasz, Gens, and Rumkowski, in particular, were informed about policy conflicts by “good” Germans in the administration—a favor, by the way, that often had a steep price.

In essence, there was a built-in conflict between organs of the SS and police, who took their orders from Berlin, and agencies of the Wehrmacht and civil administration, located on site. In his diary of February 14 and 18, 1943, Mordechai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff—one of the central figures in the Bialystok resistance—notes the surfacing of heated differences in the office of Königsberg’s armament inspector regarding the planned murder operation in Bialystok, causing its postponement: “Our fate is supposed to be settled on Friday, when General Constantin Canaris [commander of East Prussia’s security police and security services] will be back. . . . Klein [administrative director for the head of the civil administration], our generous protector, has become lord of the ghetto. We see in this a victory for moderate circles in the Gestapo. He maintains that ‘there’ll always be time to exterminate the Bialystok Jews, even at the end—meantime they can slave for us.’”

Indeed, behind the admonishment of Jakob Gens in Vilna, “Jewish woman, remember: labor spares blood!” lay the assumption that the Germans desired above all else to win the war. In that case, its material requirements, hence the war economy, would necessarily have absolute priority. It is this basic assumption of the Jewish councils, grounded in sound common sense, that Raul Hilberg sees as the first step into the trap laid by the Nazis: for Hilberg, such work amounted to cognitive bait, meant to keep the Jews calm so the extermination could proceed as planned. And yet no remotely plausible alternative seemed available to the exchange of labor for time and life. For this reason, it became a principle around which all generally accepted norms and values centered. It is manifest in Efraim Barasz’s criticism, in October 1942, of the Bialystok ghetto doctors for maintaining an ethos befitting normal circumstances, trying to free patients with TB from work: “the doctors don’t understand that today people are not dying from tuberculosis, but because they do not work.”

The strategy of “rescue through labor” hardly ever succeeded. But in many places Jews would certainly not have survived without such a strategy—for instance in Czestochowa, where several thousand Jewish workers, including many from Lodz, made it through the war in the Hasag factory complex. The same can be said for Radom, where 4,700 out of 30,000 Jews survived—one of the highest Jewish survival rates in Poland, as Yehuda Bauer stresses—and for the ghettos of Bialystok and Siauliai. But the most controversial and remarkable example certainly remains the Lodz ghetto under Rumkowski’s leadership. In many respects it was a special case, but it defines, better than any other historical example, what the Judenrat truly signified as a situation. Granted the self-aggrandizing, autocratic nature of the elder Rumkowski’s policies: under the stewardship of his Jewish council, the Lodz ghetto could survive until July 1944, not only the largest, but also the last of the Polish Jewish ghettos. Had the Soviets not stopped their advance that very month, had they begun it again earlier than January 1945, the 70,000 Jews remaining in the ghetto would certainly have remained alive thanks to “rescue through labor” and the accompanying self-selections. And yet if the ghetto had chosen a strategy of direct armed struggle, the Nazis would doubtless have followed through with their deportations in a speedier and more horrible manner. Adam Czerniaków has in fact been criticized for not mobilizing the Warsaw ghetto’s work potential at an early point, as Rumkowski was doing in Lodz. To be sure, it would be sheer speculation to suggest that a total deportation could then have been avoided. Nevertheless, many survivors of the Lodz ghetto asserted that they owed their lives precisely to the absence of an armed revolt in the city.

Whereas work was the sole available key to winning time against the German collective death sentence, the self-selections posed an irresolvable ethical dilemma for the Jewish councils. In the context of the ghettos, the phrase *mi lechaim ve mi lamavet* (who receives life and who receives death [referring to God’s will]) denoted forced decisions that rarely confront human beings. It is clear that the Jewish elders were well aware of the burden’s weight. Even though in the end they lacked free will and were condemned to act as instruments of an executioner, they constantly tried to move, by means of this compulsory function, in a reverse direction. The resulting movement in two directions, along with attacks on the part of the resistance and corrosive self-doubt drove these very ordinary men to a discourse with themselves

and others reflecting well their Faustian dilemma. Jakob Gens laid out its shattering terms before an assembly of Jewish writers and journalists who—so, at least, he believed—scorned him as a traitor. Defending himself with the assertion that he gave life priority over death, he indicated that if ordered by the Nazis to hand over a thousand Jews, he would do it: otherwise, the Germans would themselves arrive in the ghetto and seize not a thousand, but many thousands. In sacrificing a hundred, he saved a thousand; in sacrificing a thousand, he saved ten thousand: “Should I, Jakob Gens, survive, I will leave the ghetto soiled, blood on my hands. But I will go before a Jewish court and declare: I have done everything to save more and more of the ghetto’s Jews and bring them to freedom.”

Rudolf Kastner described the situation of the Jewish councils with penetration: if they fulfilled their functions, they contributed substantially to the smooth unfolding of the liquidation process. If they refused, they called down sanctions on the community and abandoned the possibility of slowing down the mass-murder process. Almost all of Europe’s Jewish councils found themselves caught between these extremes and incapable of escaping their deadly logic. And yet the logic’s nature was not so clear-cut at the beginning: relatively “insignificant” demands for precious objects, for money, and apartments. But finally, what was desired was life; and the Judenrat decided who went sooner, who later:

In sacrificing to Moloch, horrible criteria came to prevail, such as age, accomplishment, general reputation. Personal considerations pressed to the forefront: degree of kinship, predilection, even interests. The way taken by the *Judenrat* was tortuous, ending inevitably in an abyss. Everywhere, the Jews were confronted with the same problem: shall I, whoever I am, become a traitor in order to help or even save others; or shall I leave the community to its fate—pass on my wavering responsibility to others? But is flight from responsibility not something akin to treachery?

This reproach was in fact leveled at the Warsaw ghetto’s Jewish elder Czerniaków, who ended his life, hence his responsibilities. According to a report of the underground, he had offered far more support to the penned-up Jews of Warsaw than his successor, Marek Lichtenbaum.

In respect to the dilemma of the Jewish councils, the words of Leon Rosenblatt are still terrible to read, despite all we now know concerning the monstrous nature of the Final Solution. Rosenblatt was head of

the Jewish police in the Lodz ghetto, responsible, on pain of death by shooting, for delivering contingents of Jews to the Nazis—hence presiding over life and death against his will. The words were transmitted by a sympathetic German interlocutor:

That [=Rosenblatt’s own execution] is hence the simplest solution for me. But what happens then? The SS has already explained: then they select. That means the unbroken, the pregnant, the rabbis, the scholars, the professors, the poets, pass first to the ovens. But if I remain, I can take the volunteers. Often they press themselves on me. And sometimes I have the number I need to hand over. Sometimes there are fewer than I need. Then I can take those who are dying, reported to me by the Jewish doctors, and if they don’t suffice, then the deathly ill. But if they don’t suffice—what then? Then I can take the criminals: but God know—who here is not a criminal? Using our ghetto money, which we have to print according to German exchange rates, a loaf of bread costs three hundred to five hundred marks. I know mothers who inform against their neighbors to procure a piece of bread so their children won’t die of hunger. Who can judge that? And yet: if I *still* haven’t reached the full number? Often I manage without the criminals. But not always. And sometimes even they aren’t sufficient. Then I can take those in advanced old age. But what sort of criterion is that? Herr Hielscher, I’m a poor Jew from Lemberg; I learned my trade and could also lead my battery [Rosenblatt commanded an Austrian motorized mortar battery in World War I]. But I haven’t learned what I’m supposed to do here. I’ve asked the communal elders, the rabbis, the scholars. They’ve all said to me: you’re doing the right thing, stay and select in the way you’ve arranged it. I’ve asked the different communal groups into which we’ve divided the ghetto, I’ve asked the old people, the condemned, the deathly ill: they’ve all assented. And still, Herr Hielscher, I’m no longer content with my life. I implore you on the God in whom you believe: if you know of a better way than what I’ve chosen, please let me know and I’ll bless you day and night. And if you know of none, please tell me: shall I remain, or have myself shot?

The German interlocutor gave this answer: “With God’s grace, proceed as you have—there is no other path, and when you choose it, you are justified before God. I myself would do nothing different.”

Burdened with a demand such as self-selection, enforced at pain of death and challenging the capacities of human reason, religious Jews or those relying on tradition as the basis of their actions often sought out rabbis and scholars for advice. But the extremity of the Jewish councils’

situation exceeded even their capacities, sharpened as they were through deep intellectual labor. As found in the codex of Maimonides (*Halikhot yessodai hatora*, chap. 5, par. 5), the basic rule had always been that in situations where Jews are forced by Gentiles to deliver one of their own to death on account of being Jewish, the others thus remaining alive, all should rather opt for self-sacrifice. But what force could such a principle have when the delivery unto death represented, not an exception, but a *universal rule*—one that the Nazis were determined to apply to every living Jew? In Vilna, Jakob Gens was confronted with Maimonides's rule. But the rabbi of Kovno, Abraham Duber Cahan Schapiro, ruled that when the entire community is threatened with physical destruction, and when a chance exists to save a portion of it, the community leaders had a paramount duty to save as many Jews as possible from death, by whatever means at their disposal. . . .

In light of the absolute nature of the Nazis' exterminatory planning, and the accompanying overthrow of all inherited values, the problem of continued Jewish existence could no longer be couched in traditionally conceivable terms: that is, the death of one Jew for the sake of another's survival. The ghetto's leaders understood perfectly the extreme situation they were facing: either total annihilation—or the survival of a fragment.

However varied the councils' circumstances may have been, together they shared the experience of a borderline situation that renders null and void all anticipations of human behavior ordinarily deemed to be universally valid. It is only through the situation of the Jewish councils that we can start to fathom the extent of the civilizational break represented by Nazism: the denial of all commonly valid—hence action-steering—forms of thought based on usefulness and utilitarianism—indeed on the enemy's interest in self-preservation. The heads of the councils made themselves clear: "I act economically, ergo I exist." The Nazis negated this basic assumption when—all ethics and morals long since cast aside—they broke through any abiding scruples, placing the extermination of the Jews above all economic interests and the war's demands.

The Jewish councils' assumption was a response to what they considered a form of *traditional evil*: limitless material egoism and unfettered satisfaction of one's drives. A desire to economically exploit those one has subjugated would fall entirely within the purview of

such traditional evil, conforming to basic criteria of rationality. Such criteria had—perhaps they still have today—cultural roots so deep that even when the Nazis had long since revealed as false the belief that work would preserve life, the Jewish councils clung to it, lacking an alternative: in the hope that the enemy's self-interest would help grant work and productivity their civilizational due and place a check on a process of extermination perceived, according to these criteria, as lacking all sense. Such long-trusted, universally internalized forms of thought and action would, however, turn out a trap, since the Nazis transformed them into their opposite. An anticipatory rationality of action, commonly presumed to be life-preserving, ended up as a practical paralysis—extending to cooperation with one's own destruction. The councils did not fall into the trap through attributing to the Nazis a morality that the latter did not acknowledge but because their only choice was a final appeal to socially based behavior: that of furthering one's own, *amoral* interests.

Since the Nazis did not even maintain this final barrier, from a German perspective their behavior may well be considered irrational. From the perspective of the victims, it would appear—far more radically—as *counter-rational*. The situation into which the Jewish councils were forced, without an exit, draws us into those vortexes for which Nazism historically stands: into a profound crisis for a moral consciousness based, necessarily, on the fundamental cognitive building blocks of our ordinary world—that is, on behavior perceived as rational, sustaining, even in the most extreme of cases, faith in the enemy's ultimate interest in self-preservation.