

## Patterns of Jewish Response and Resistance

Excerpt from interview with Professor Yehuda Bauer

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Q- The reaction of the Sonderkommando in the extermination camps represents the most extreme example of the victims' reaction in the most extreme situation of victimization? But can one characterize a general pattern of Jewish response during the time of the Holocaust?

B- Jewish reaction to the Holocaust, to the actual murder, runs the gamut of practically every type of reaction that we know – from utter disorientation, helplessness and desperate obedience to anything the murderers said, to a full realization of what was happening. Knowing that there was no way out, some proudly went to their death in the pits and gas chambers, whereas others chose various forms of resistance. In some instances, Jews did collaborate with the Nazis; an example is a number of cases of Jewish Gestapo agents or Jewish policemen who tried to “save their skins”.

The analysis of these types of reactions is frightfully important. The ways in which the victim (or the potential victim), react to situations of mass murder or genocide or Holocaust, are very important for all future human attempts to oppose such events. It seems that the terror and the lack of any way out sometimes forces people, or moves them, to collaborate with the murderer – although psychologists have, as yet, no answer.

In other cases, people went to the other extreme. Believing that they had no way out, the young ones who had access to arms (however few and ridiculous these arms may have been in comparison to what the Germans had), felt they had a moral obligation to make a statement against oppression and murder. They did this by fighting physically against the Germans, and by any kind of

reaction in-between – from maintaining schools and prayer groups, to organizing literary and artistic presentations – because the perception was that the Nazis wanted to destroy the morale of the Jewish population.

Whether this perception was true or not makes no difference. In opposition to a perceived German threat against the morale of the Jews, the Jewish population reacted by maintaining its cultural, educational and religious dignity. There was the smuggling of food into the ghettos, knowingly done, of course, against the wishes of the Germans. These actions were also conceived of as unarmed resistance.

At the same time, you had people who lost all hope and went wherever one led them. These varied types of reactions have been seen in other genocides as well – from one extreme to the other. I would say that because it was a more extreme situation, the Jewish reaction, in all senses, was more extreme.

One can see how in certain groups, such reactions took certain forms; and in other groups of Jews, there were other responses. This was partly due to objective circumstances. A person cannot react with arms when he or she has no arms, or flee into the forest when there are no forests. Someone cannot become a partisan without the minimum support of at least some of the local population. Without teachers, a person cannot have classes.

There were also subjective circumstances. What were the traditions of that particular group of Jews? There were many different types of people and traditions – such as religious, Zionist, non-religious, Communist, liberal, anti-Communist, anti-Zionist, or anti-religious – who saw in their suffering a humane way to oppose radical evil. In all these Jewish reactions, it is crucial to note that a certain ideological stand (whether liberal, Zionist or religious), gave individuals the strength to not just accept what was being done, but to react.

Sometimes this ideology is hidden. It's not an ideology, it's a tradition: A woman protects her children. Now that is true for any woman anywhere, but

she becomes an active person, she pushes her children to rescue themselves, even when she knows she can't rescue herself. She pushes others, she fights for them. Now again, this is not specific to Jews. But in this extreme circumstance it changes a Jewish tradition, while it continues other traditions. She's responsible now; the husband has disappeared. He's been killed and she is alone, fighting for her children's lives, in order to protect them. She draws strength from certain types of Jewish traditions, and opposes others in order to fight. I think this is the classic reaction for a whole series of situations.

The question of the reaction of Jewish women in the Holocaust is part of the Holocaust. Women were targeted just as were men. But in that general, specific situation, Jewish women reacted in a specific manner, because they occupied certain specific positions in the family and community. In certain places, Jewish women (for the first time for thousands of years in Jewish communities), assumed leadership positions. Politically, Jewish women had always been disenfranchised, but in the Holocaust, there was no room for this disenfranchisement. They became leaders of political and social groups in France, Holland, Bohemia, and Slovakia, as well as in the underground groups in Eastern Europe.

The question of armed Jewish resistance has to be seen in proportion. It existed on the margins of the Holocaust. The number of people involved was obviously very, very small in comparison with the millions of dead. Before the Holocaust, Jews had no access to arms, no tradition of an independent military force, and no united leadership. It was very difficult to establish a different situation during the Holocaust, especially when there was opposition or indifference from the societies around them, whether it was an opposition to the very fact of Jewish resistance or an insistence that Jews should be part of a general resistance. All these factors limited Jewish resistance considerably.

People have asked about how many Germans did the Jews [the armed Jewish resistance] kill? Very few, but the purpose of this resistance was not to

kill as many Germans as possible. The purpose was to make a statement against German murder, and the only way that many people thought such a statement could be made was by armed resistance. So it was a moral imperative to resist; it wasn't just a physical reaction, but a moral imperative. This was, of course, particularly true for youth, and the overall picture of Jewish resistance in Europe is much larger, despite it being marginal, than we originally thought. We estimate today that approximately 30,000 Jews participated in partisan fighting in the forests of Eastern Europe against the Germans. This is rather a large number. Most of them died. It didn't prove to be a major way of rescue, but it made a statement.

In the ghettos of Poland and Lithuania, we know of some 17 ghettos where Jews organized some form of resistance. Only in a few places did it result in actual physical resistance. But in a large number of ghettos, especially in what is now Belarus (which was partly Eastern Poland and, therefore, the former Soviet Union after World War II), we estimate that there were some 65 ghettos where there were armed groups, who then escaped into the forests and joined the tens of thousands of Jewish people who tried to resist. They didn't always manage to get arms (and therefore fight), but they tried.

There were Jewish rebellions in extermination camps – in Sobibor, Treblinka, and Auschwitz. The only rebellions in any Nazi concentration camps were Jewish ones. This is true also of a few other places, where there was some organization of Jewish resistance, in concentration and labor camps in Poland. No other group in any concentration camp resisted the Nazis by force; only the Jews did.

There were organizations that prepared to resist, but they never acted, for example, the International and the Polish Resistance in Auschwitz, or the International Resistance in Buchenwald, which took over that camp when the Nazis left. This group did not fight against the Nazis, but rather occupied Buchenwald before the Americans came. So you don't have armed resistance in camps, except Jewish armed resistance. There was Jewish armed

resistance in France (quite massively, considering the small number of young men who remained), and in Italy and in Bulgaria. Over 7,000 Jewish men and women joined the Tito partisans in Yugoslavia; this is a huge number, considering the number of Jews there. There were 1,600 Jews fighting in the hills of Slovakia in 1944, and there was a Jewish underground resistance group in Germany. In other words, it occurred almost everywhere, and it is significant as a symbol.

It is less important whether German lines of communication were vitally disrupted by mines that the Jews had laid – that is not the issue at all. The important issue is that they laid the mines. Jewish armed resistance was massive, nevertheless marginal, but very important because it became a symbol of Jewish reaction. However, Jewish unarmed active resistance was much more widespread than Jewish armed resistance .

**Source: The Multimedia CD ‘Eclipse Of Humanity’, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2000.**