

Most members of Jewish communities were unable to take part in armed uprisings. Yet many found the strength and courage to resist in spiritual, cultural, and moral ways, from sharing meager food rations and forming secret schools to keeping historical records and refusing Nazi requests for information. Jews under Nazi occupation lacked freedom, but they held firmly to their sense of agency – the power people have to think and act independently. Despite the degrading conditions, countless Jews held on to their dignity and humanity by keeping some control over their own actions, no matter how small or the risks involved.

EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

From the diary of Chaim A. Kaplan, Warsaw ghetto, 1940¹

“Everything is forbidden to us, and yet we do everything.”

March 10: “It is our good fortune that the conquerors failed to understand the nature and strength of Polish Jewry. Logically, we are obliged to die. According to the laws of nature, our end is destruction and total annihilation...But even this time we did not comply with the laws of nature. There is within us some hidden power, mysterious and secret, which keeps us going, keeps us alive, despite the natural law. If we cannot live on what is permitted, we live on what is forbidden...The Jews of Poland – oppressed and broken, shamed and debased, still love life, and do not wish to leave this world before their time...As long as that secret power is concealed within us, we shall not yield to despair. The strength of this power lies in the very nature of the Polish Jew, which is rooted in our eternal tradition that commands us to live...”

Vedem (“In the Lead”) was a secret Czech-language magazine published by boys, aged 13 to 15, who lived in the “Home One” barracks of Terezin (a concentration camp and ghetto). At age 14, Petr Ginz took on the role of editor-in-chief. Between December 1942 and July 1944, 800 pages of essays, stories, poetry, and drawings were produced. Only 15 of about 100 of the “Home One” boys survived the Holocaust.

“...We no longer want to be an accidental group of boys, passively succumbing to the fate meted out to us. We want to create an active, mature society and...transform our fate into a joyful, proud reality. They have unjustly uprooted us from the soil that nurtured us, from the work, the joys, and the culture from which our young lives should have drawn strength. They have only one aim in mind – to destroy us, not only physically but mentally and morally as well. Will they succeed? Never!... Torn from our people, by this terrible evil, we shall not allow our hearts to be hardened by hatred and anger, but today and forever, our highest aim shall be love for our fellow men, and contempt for racial, religious and nationalist strife.” – Walter Roth, *Vedem*²





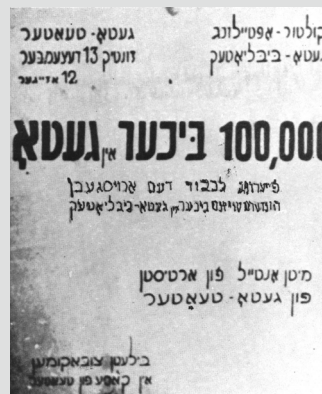
From the ghettos in Lodz, Poland and Kovno, Lithuania:

March 4, 1941

“The soup kitchen for the intelligentsia is a regular meeting place of the who’s who [...] Only here do they at least have an illusion of things they had become accustomed to in the old days: a certain degree of courtesy [by the staff] in their conduct and attitude toward those who are now destitute and stripped of their status [...] [...] From time to time, the kitchen management organized reading and poetry evenings and concerts. The aim was to give the ghetto inhabitants cultural entertainment and provide financial support for the artists. [...] The moments spent in kitchen number 2 – [...] those are also moments of an exchange of opinions, something like a club in which those people, the who’s who meet over lunch.”³

June 9, 1942

“A hunger for the printed word is now making itself felt more strongly in the ghetto. To ascertain how hungry people are for books, it is enough to take a look at the kilometer-long line at Sonenberg’s lending library (even there!) [...] Each reader walks up to the table, requests a couple of titles, finds out if a given book is available (it usually is not), receives a couple of books to choose from, and has to make up his mind in a hurry. There is no time for long deliberation, as there once had been.”⁴



“Today there was a celebration in the ghetto – the loan of the 100,000th book from the ghetto library. There was a celebration today in the theatre hall. We went... from school... there was an artistic program. The speakers analyzed the reading of the ghetto. Hundreds of people are reading in the ghetto. Reading books in the ghetto is the biggest treat that there is. Books link us to freedom; books connect us to the world. The loan of the hundred thousandth book is a great achievement for the ghetto and the ghetto can be proud of it.”

Yitzhak Rudashevski, A Boy’s Diary From Vilna, p77

January 17, 1944

Announcement! Re: Obligatory Registration of Musical Instruments

“For once, a measure not aimed at the stomach of the ghetto dweller, but no less severe on that account. [The ghetto is thirsty for culture...] Now this last vestige of that happiness is to vanish. One can readily imagine what it means for a professional musician, a virtuoso, even a dilettante, to be forced to give up his beloved violin [...] The street will notice nothing; harsh life will go on; and to the torments of hunger and cold will be added the unappeased craving for music.”⁵

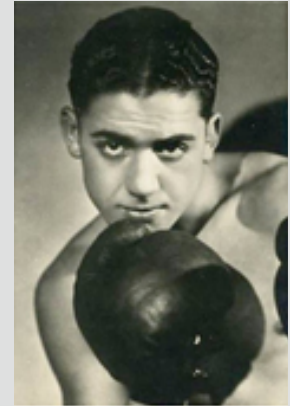


The ghetto orchestra, Kovno, Lithuania. In front standing from left is Michael Hofmekler, the conductor, and sitting next to him is Boris Stupel who survived Dachau and immigrated to Australia. In the background playing the violin is Yankale who was 13 years-old and standing to his right is Shmaya (Alexander) Stupel (Boris’s brother) who perished in Dachau. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (75C09)



From the testimony of Holocaust survivor and Israeli journalist Noah Klieger on Tunisian Jewish boxing champion Victor “Young” Perez and the death march from Auschwitz that both men endured:

“On January 21, 1945, the fourth day of the death march, the starving and exhausted and freezing Jewish prisoners were stopped outside the Gleiwitz concentration camp near the Czech border. Victor had snuck away from the group and entered an abandoned German camp and found a large sack of bread in the kitchen. Perez put the sack on his shoulders and rushed to feed his friends. As he approached the group and stood in front of a small ditch, a German guard pointed his machine gun at Perez and ordered him to halt. Victor tried to explain to the guard, ‘These are my friends and they are starving, I’m just bringing them some bread,’ but the Nazi insisted Perez not move. He ignored the SS guard and leaped across the ditch, hoping to give the sack of bread to his starving friends, but the Nazi aimed his machine gun at Perez and fired several shots, killing the former champion instantly...”⁶



From Rabbi Reuven Feldshaw, Warsaw ghetto, Poland



Jews in prayer shawls praying in a synagogue in the ghetto, Warsaw, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (1605/858)

“The kloyz [small synagogue] is almost full. The cantor prays melodiously; you would never know from him and the worshippers that the world is on the brinks of an abyss. They are wearing prayer shawls and tefillin. If you closed your eyes for a moment and did not look at these people, at their skinny faces... but just listened to the hum of their prayers, you would be sure you had fallen into a house of God in a time of peace and tranquility. There are young people, too, among the worshippers, and not just a few. They, too, are participating in creating an atmosphere in which the physical is forgotten and the soul is dedicated to sublime, lofty service totally removed from the oppression of the body and making the suffering of the moment pale in significance... I was suddenly suffused with warmth that I hadn’t felt since before the war. Someone, something, lifted me, carried me, and placed me in a congregation of Jews from the Middle Ages who were fighting and dying for their religion.... In the world—murder, violence, robbery and fraud; the street, cold; in the heart, anguish and pain; but above them all there hovers a different force, supreme and eternal—the power of past and future generations.”⁷

— Reuven Feldshaw

1 C.A. Kaplan, Megilat Yissurin – Yoman Getto Varsha (“Scroll of Agony – Warsaw Ghetto Diary”), September 1, 1939 – August 4, 1942, Tel Aviv-Jerusalem, 1966, pp. 201-202, 350.

2 Nico Carpentier, Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-democratic Struggle. Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd, 2011; Yad Vashem. “What We Value” - Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust. <https://bit.ly/3zemEK5>.

3 Lucjan Dobroszycki, The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto, 1941-1944 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 28-30.

4 Ibid., at 201-202.

5 Ibid., at 434.

6 Steve Gonzer. “Never Forget: Messaoud Hai.” jVoice vol. 51, no. 8 (February 2020): 10-11, Jewish Federation of Delaware and Halina Wind Preston Holocaust Education Committee. <https://bit.ly/3wPNCWl>.

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