

Jewish Resistance in Poland During the Holocaust: A Look Inside  
the Ghettos and the Forests

By

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In these three ghettos the Jews were able to muster attacks against the Germans, and preserve Jewish life. The study also concludes that partisans in the forest were able to play important roles in weakening the German war effort, and saving Jewish life. The Bielski partisans and the partisans in the Rudnicki Forest faced great success in saving Jews, and sabotaging the enemy.

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Chapter 1  
**Jewish Life in Poland Between the World Wars,  
and German Occupation in World War II**

The trials and tribulations for the Jewish people of Poland that culminated with the atrocities of the Holocaust at the hands of the German Nazis were exacerbated by Polish-Jewish relations prior to World War II. Jewish-Polish relations between World War I and the German occupation of Poland in World War II shaped the vicious treatment that the Jews of Poland faced during the Holocaust. In 1918 Poland gained independence, which propelled anti-Semitism in Poland. During the war, however, Jews were blamed by soldiers on each side of the conflict for helping the other side. In 1914 Joseph Pilsudski was appointed as leader of the military forces of Poland.<sup>1</sup> It was with Pilsudski in charge that the Poles defeated the Russian Army. The Jews fought in Pilsudski's military throughout World War I. The Jews sacrifice during World War I for Poland unfortunately did not help their social status, and prevent future anti-Semitism. Pogroms started to take place against the Jews, and Jewish stores started to be boycotted. Anti-Jewish pogroms were committed in one hundred towns and villages between November of 1918 and January of 1919.<sup>2</sup> This was disheartening for the Jews, especially the younger generations who fought alongside the Polish youth for the independence they had just gained.

Outside influences also played an intricate role in Polish-Jewish relations during the post-World War I period. In 1920 the Red Army attacked Poland, which placed the Jews in a difficult situation. When the Red Army invaded Poland they carried out violent pogroms against the Jews. This shocked the young Jews of Poland who sympathized with the goals of the Russian Revolution.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that the Jews had no real ally in Poland; the Polish people were

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<sup>1</sup> Nomad, Max. *Rebels and Renegades*. (Freeport, NY: Books For Libraries Press, Inc, 1968) 322.

<sup>2</sup> Heller, Celia S. *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland Between The Two World Wars*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) 47, 48, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Heller, 50.

portraying anti-Semitic behavior, and the Red Army, the Jews only possible savior also attacked Polish Jewry. This left the Jews in a vulnerable position because the Red Army and the Polish army both had anti-Semitic beliefs, and the Jews were stuck in the middle of their conflict.

Jews who were Polish patriots volunteered to serve in the Polish army, but they “were detained instead in the military camp in Jablonna, where they were kept in separate barracks in the ‘Jewish section’ and treated as potential traitors.”<sup>4</sup> This led the Jews to align with the Red Army. Jewish communists became prominent figures in both higher and lower ranks in the governmental bodies set up by the Bolsheviks in the territories occupied by the Red Army. Even though there were Jews throughout Poland fighting alongside the Poles, the Polish press exploited Jewish-Bolshevism. They used propaganda to portray the Jews as sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause. These allegations by the Polish press did not bode well for the Jews after the Soviet Army withdrew from Poland. In the aftermath “allegations were made about the treachery of the Jews who supposedly had helped the Bolsheviks in many ways...Terrorism against Jews was rampant on trains and in railroad stations. In captured areas, kangaroo courts were speedily set up to try Jews for treason and their verdicts resulted in the killing of those tried.”<sup>5</sup> The anti-Semitic climate of Poland was developing rapidly.

On the same day Poland signed the Treaty of Versailles and received its independence it also signed the Minorities Treaty. The Minorities Treaty consisted of provisions for the rights of minorities in Poland; specifically it provided rights to life, liberty, and freedom of religion. The signing of this treaty created false excitement amongst the Jewish people. Jewish political leaders assumed the rights under this treaty to be their de facto rights, resulting in Jewish patriotism and loyalty to Poland. On the contrary, the Polish people did not buy into the principles of the treaty.

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<sup>4</sup> Heller, 51.

<sup>5</sup> Heller, 52.

The idea that outside forces needed to impose such a treaty on their nation humiliated the Polish people who in turn blamed the Jews for this because East European Jews and Jewish organizations in the West were the main reason the treaty was written.<sup>6</sup> The idea that Jewish people influenced outside enforcement on a newly independent Poland ignited anti-Semitism in Poland. In addition, the treaty was unsuccessfully enforced, which caused even more complications for the Jews. The League of Nations, which was responsible for carrying out the provisions of the treaty failed to exercise effective sanctions against the violator of this treaty.<sup>7</sup> Without international assistance there was no way the treaty could be enforced.

For Jews in interwar Poland it was extremely hard to advance socially. Heller stated that “Jews were fixed by a rigid rule of ascription and from it they could not legitimately move out, except perhaps by conversion. No matter how Polonized, affluent, educated, and mobile Jews became, the inferiority of their birth was not obliterated.”<sup>8</sup> Jews were considered foreigners in Poland; “‘To be Polish is to be Catholic’ was the prevailing conception among the Poles.”<sup>9</sup> Cultural differences between Jews and Poles were visible. Heller considered the Jews of Poland to be the least acculturated of all European Jewish communities of that time. They dressed differently, wore their hair differently, and even spoke a different language. The majority of the Jews in Poland spoke Yiddish. In a 1931 census only 12 percent of the Jews referred to Polish as their mother tongue.<sup>10</sup> By being different the Jews brought attention to themselves, and permitted the Polish people to resent them for being different.

A major obstacle the Jews faced in Poland was the anti-Semitic belief of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church was a breeding ground for anti-Semitic behavior and belief. Heller

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<sup>6</sup> Heller, 56, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Heller, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Heller, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Heller, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Heller 67, 68.



wrote that “the church thus continued as the bastion of anti-Semitism, both in its traditional form and in ‘modern’ form pursued by the nationalists.”<sup>11</sup> Among the first lessons Catholic Poles learned in school from the clergy was that the Jews had killed Christ. These lessons reverberated into the public school system. This led Catholic Poles to question why they should let the Jews live among them. To further the problem, in 1936 the Primate of Poland openly came out in support of the anti-Jewish campaign.<sup>12</sup> The head of the Polish clergy denouncing the Jews was an irrefutable cause for generating Jewish hatred in Poland. The declaration of these beliefs by the Primate of Poland severely influenced anti-Semitism in Poland, because it shaped the opinion of the Catholic Church and its worshippers.

The church viewed the ancient Jewish faith to be dangerous to the Catholic faith of the country. They also viewed the secularization of Jewish youth to be unsafe for the existence of Catholicism. Sermons and Catholic press demonstrated the belief that integration of Jews into Polish society would lead to Catholic secularization. After an anti-Jewish pogrom in 1936 the Jesuit periodical *Przegląd Powszechny* proclaimed that “one should let the Jews be but eliminate them from the life of Christian society. It is necessary to provide separate schools for Jews so that our children will not be infected with their lower morality.”<sup>13</sup> The Synod of Polish bishops adopted a policy that prohibited Jews from teaching Polish children, and separated Jews and Catholic students in schools.<sup>14</sup> Catholic organizations and the Catholic press in Poland were adamant in their anti-Jewish stance. The Catholic Action organization in Poland was considered the most anti-Semitic in comparison to the organizations existence in other countries. Heller noted that the Catholic press in Poland was persistently anti-Semitic: “In no other country did

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<sup>11</sup> Heller, 110.

<sup>12</sup> Heller, 112, 113.

<sup>13</sup> Heller, 110.

<sup>14</sup> Heller, 110.

such a massive ‘Catholic’ Jew-devouring literature exist as in Poland.”<sup>15</sup> Catholic priests were among the authors of anti-Semitic literature. Although the literature created by the priests was not distributed widely, it influenced newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets, and leaflets.<sup>16</sup> The Jews of Poland faced large opposition from the Catholic Church and Catholic’s alike. The ability of the church to heavily shape anti-Semitic actions hindered Jewish survival in Poland.

Unfortunately for the Jews of Poland a major political party, the National Democratic Party, helped inspire and lead the anti-Semitic movement. The party which was popularly known as the Endek or Endecja party was the chief culprit of political anti-Semitism after independence was gained. The party leader, Roman Dmowski, used anti-Semitism to rally right-wing opposition to the government and forge it into a major political force.<sup>17</sup> This party generated a good deal of Polish anti-Semitism throughout the interwar period. The ability for this political party to rally the Polish people against the Jews spelled disaster for the Jews.

According to Celia Heller sociologists have concluded that extreme aggression and discrimination result from two kinds of circumstances: “when the dominate group considers discrimination to be an effective way to reduce the ability of the minority to act as a social competitor—especially a competitor for scarce economic goods...[and] when the dominant group defines the minority’s different social norms as a form of deviance that endangers its sacred traditions, values, or norms.”<sup>18</sup> Both of these conditions related to the case of the Jews in Poland, and were the premise of the Endecja’s motivation to free the country from the ills of the Jews. The party believed that the Jews were a foreign minority dominating and exploiting the Polish nation, especially in the economic and cultural sectors. The party criticized the “Jews in

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<sup>15</sup> Heller, 111.

<sup>16</sup> Heller, 111.

<sup>17</sup> Heller, 84.

<sup>18</sup> Heller, 84.

many disguises—from Orthodox to Polonized—[who] were transforming and destroying the lofty indigenous Polish values and ways.”<sup>19</sup> The Endeks thought that they could rally the nation through propaganda on the premise that the Jews were toxic to the Polish economy, and culture. The anti-Semitic platform of the National Democratic Party spurred on a rise in their power. In the 1920s and 1930s when Poland faced economic problems and political instability, the party was able to successfully shape government policies toward Jews.<sup>20</sup> With the government making concessions to please the Endeks, Jews in Poland would face severe anti-Semitism leading up to German occupation.

The rise of fascism in Europe during the 1930s gave way to rampant anti-Semitism, which was met with open arms in Poland. There was an inequality balance in Poland; “the Poles owned or controlled the means of coercion and destruction: the state and its machinery... Without the power, the Poles’ anti-Jewish attitudes could not have been translated into effective discrimination and oppression.”<sup>21</sup> Also in 1937 a new state party the Camp of National Unity (OZN) was created to defuse antagonism in the government, and to rally the Polish nation behind it. Jews were not allowed to be members of the organization as the OZN curtailed Jewish economic and cultural prosperity.<sup>22</sup> This created hardships for the Jews of Poland throughout the rest of the decade, and foreshadowed what was to come when the Germans occupied Poland in 1939. It was clear that Poland was not safe for the Jews, and that the Christians of Poland would not defend the Jews against the German Nazis.

The later half of the 1930s saw a significant Nazi influence in Poland, specifically targeting Polish Jewry. Emanuel Melzer stated “Relations between the Polish government and

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<sup>19</sup> Heller, 85.

<sup>20</sup> Heller, 85.

<sup>21</sup> Heller, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Heller, 92.

Nazi Germany had a marked influence on the balance of power of political groups within the Polish state and on the attitude adopted by governmental and public bodies in Poland towards the Jewish question.”<sup>23</sup> In 1936 the Endek newspaper openly claimed that it agreed with anti-Semitic Nazi policy, and that they too considered the Nuremberg Laws to be important in handling and solving the Jewish question. When both Polish and Jewish newspapers criticized the events taking place in Germany the Polish government banned the newspapers, and accepted Nazi policy. This spelled disaster for Poland, and Polish Jewry, because even the Polish government was supporting the Nazis. Anti-Semitic political parties in Poland cooperated with members and functionaries of the German minority.<sup>24</sup> With the combination of German and Poland anti-Semitism the Jews of Polish were on the precipice of destruction.

In accordance with the OZN and the Nazis, anti-Semitic youth terror groups arose in Poland. These young radical groups were an offshoot of the Endek Party. The main groups were the National Radical Camp (O.N.R.), Camp of Greater Poland (OWP), *Falanga*, ABC, and the Association of Young Nationalists (ZMN). These groups made it their goal to “deprive all Jews of Polish citizenship, expropriate their property, and expel them.”<sup>25</sup> Violence was a main concept of these terror groups. People were terrorized if they bought from Jews. These ‘gangs’ attacked Jewish children, threw stones at Jewish adults, and set dogs on all Jews. This resulted in 21 pogroms and 348 anti-Jewish outbreaks that all took place in the Bialystok region alone during 1936.<sup>26</sup> Besides violence, the O.N.R. took over the educational sector in Poland as well. According to Ringelblum the organization began to implement its ideology in the institutions of higher education. This led to riots and deaths at universities, Jews were wounded or killed, and

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<sup>23</sup> Rothkirchen, Livia ed. *Yad Vashem Studies on the European Jewish Catastrophe and Resistance XII*. (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Post Press, 1977) 193.

<sup>24</sup> Rothkirchen, 208.

<sup>25</sup> Heller, 115.

<sup>26</sup> Heller, 117-118.

the institutions became a breeding ground for hatred against the Jews.<sup>27</sup> The Nazi influence had perpetuated throughout Poland, and by the late 1930s even before the German occupation, Poland had turned into a vicious anti-Semitic nation. This would set the stage for the downfall of Polish Jewry once the Germans occupied Poland, because it installed the blueprint for anti-Jewish sentiment.

The interwar period curtailed Jewish life socially, politically, and economically in Poland. There was a wide held belief in Poland that the Jews, who dominated the economic and cultural spheres of Polish society, were transforming and destroying the Polish way of life. Due to this belief the Polish people resented the Jews and wanted to diminish Jewish success. World War I left Poland economically depleted. The Polish government proceeded to solve economic problems at the cost of the Jews through direct and indirect measures.<sup>28</sup> The Polish peasantry was economically devastated, and in order to become more economically stable, the Polish peasantry “used the traditional Polish channel of borrowing from Jewish money lenders. Therefore, in these cases the moratorium meant that the peasantry had been pacified largely at the cost of individual Jews. Some [Jews] were financially ruined.”<sup>29</sup> The economic concessions that the Polish government made to combat their economic crisis revolved around creating Jewish hardships by economically restricting the Jewish people.

In the midst of the Great Depression of 1929 in Poland, Polish leaders decided to squeeze the Jews out of their occupations and replace them with Poles. This left the Jewish population impoverished.<sup>30</sup> Discrimination also played a role in the effort to economically disadvantage the

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<sup>27</sup> Ringelblum, Emmanuel. *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War*. (New York: Howard Fertig Inc, 1976) 16.

<sup>28</sup> Heller, 98.

<sup>29</sup> Heller, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Heller, 97.

Jewish population. There were discriminatory hiring policies against Jews in nationalized industry, railroads, and in public transportation ran by the government. Not only were Jews struggling to obtain jobs, but they faced adversity to even keep their jobs. At the end of 1919 the Compulsory Sunday Rest Law was enacted. This law limited the work week, but made working on Saturdays mandatory. Due to religious obligations on Saturdays Jewish people were not able to attend work and lost their jobs.<sup>31</sup>

The hardships for Jews during this period were evident in Warsaw, the capital of Poland. Warsaw Jews had their banks and major enterprises taken away from them by the national government throughout the 1930s. This resulted in downward mobility for some Warsaw Jews. The Jews in Warsaw were not able to socially advance like their Christian counterparts were. The Warsaw Jews also did not play a role in political life relative to their proportionate share of the city's population. This was partly due to gerrymandering by the Christians, as well as Jewish inability to produce candidates who could win elections at the local levels.<sup>32</sup> By not being able to gain political representation the Jews were limited in what say they could have in the capital city, which put them at a disadvantage when anti-Semitic legislation was put in place.

Social implications dealing with anti-Semitism were prevalent for intelligent and motivated Jews. In 1922 Jews had to build special dormitories at universities because university dormitories were ran by fraternities that excluded Jews. Jews were still able to gain acceptance to university at a high rate, placing Jews into university at a higher proportional rate than their overall population. This caused concern among Christians, and the Endecja provided a solution, which called for a Jewish quota. Students who were academically qualified for admission would be excluded from universities because of this fixed ration. The quotas were issued in 1921 at the

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<sup>31</sup> Heller, 100, 101.

<sup>32</sup> Bartoszewski, Wladyslaw T. and Antony Polonsky, eds. *The Jews In Warsaw: A History*. (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 298, 299.

School of Medicine and the School of Law at the University of Lvov but were eventually discontinued because it violated the Polish constitution.<sup>33</sup> Not only was there anti-Semitism in universities, but in the intelligentsia as well. “In the 1930s, a racist attack was launched against ‘Jewish’ members of the integrated intelligentsia (including Poles of Jewish descent), from which the most illustrious men of Polish letters and science were not spared.”<sup>34</sup> These acts truly defined Polish anti-Semitism in the interwar period, because Jews who were academically motivated and intelligently invigorating for the nation were persecuted because of their religion. All of these social, political, and economic hardships the Jews faced at the hand of the Christian Poles typify the idea that the Poles found it more important to hate Jews than to enjoy prosperity as a nation.

The anti-Semitism in Poland did not deter Jewish people from being proud of their religion. In fact, in response to the mass movement of anti-Jewish ideology Jewish youth groups were created. Another major factor in the creation of youth movements was the Balfour Declaration. The Balfour Declaration provided Jews with the belief that they would be able to settle in Israel.<sup>35</sup> For whatever reason they were created these youth movements served as an “independent and active factor seeking to cope with the challenges and trials of those days.”<sup>36</sup> In Poland these youth movements rejected the existing state of affairs and refused to adapt themselves to the way of life and apathy of the adult Jewish society. 60,000 youth took part in these youth movements which composed a large percentage of organized youth in Poland.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Heller, 119, 120.

<sup>34</sup> Heller, 126.

<sup>35</sup> Heller, 269.

<sup>36</sup> Gutman, Israel ed. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*. Vol. 4. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1990) 1698.

<sup>37</sup> Gutman, 1700.

During the interwar period Jewish youth movements helped create an infrastructure for Jewish camaraderie and resistance that would play a meaningful role in the Holocaust.

The major youth movement in Poland between the two World Wars was Hehalutz. Hehalutz was founded in Russia as a Jewish youth movement to train its members to settle in the land of Israel. In 1921 it moved its headquarters to Warsaw, which propelled the organization to a massive movement in Poland. Hehalutz in Poland was formed within the national Zionist Organization.<sup>38</sup> This gave the organization national appeal, and allied it with an important Jewish movement. By 1924 Hehalutz in Poland had reached the climax of its development, and membership continually increased.<sup>39</sup> Oppenheim stated that Hehalutz's "aim was to create a synthesis between, on the one hand, the realization of broad and overall national and social goals, and on the other hand, the aspiration of finding a solution to the distress of young Jews living in an alien society which had rejected them."<sup>40</sup> Hehalutz was able to gain the trust and support from other movements as well. Hashomer Hatzza'ir and Gordonia both joined Hehalutz. Hehalutz was extremely successful in organizing the Jewish youth of Poland which would play an intricate role in forming Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.

From the beginning of Hehalutz in Poland there were people involved with the organization who believed it needed to serve some sort of military function. Josef Heftman was a journalist and one of the founders of Hehalutz in Poland. He envisioned the organization as: "The military barracks in which everybody dressed in the same costume and sits about a single table and eats the same good with the same utensils, all of this being done over a period of

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<sup>38</sup> Cohen, Asher & Yehoyakim Cochavi, eds. *Zionist Youth Movements during the Shoah*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) 52.

<sup>39</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Ed. Fred Skolnik. 2nd. ed. Vol. 3,8,9. New York: (Macmillan, 2007. Print) 758, 759.

<sup>40</sup> Cohen, & Cochavi, 35.



years.”<sup>41</sup> Hehalutz was a revolutionary force that wanted to change human society. Young Polish Jews joined the youth movement because of the revolutionary atmosphere within the confines of its Jewish environment, and because of the prospects that Zionism had afforded it.<sup>42</sup> This idea was instrumental in attracting new members, because the Jews of Poland needed some line of defense against the harsh anti-Semitism that they were subject to.

The interwar period for Hehalutz is broken up into two main sections; the 1920s and the 1930s. In the 1920s the organization “had developed from a relatively small, ideologically amorphous, and organizationally dependent group into a movement which had a defined ideology and had made considerable progress toward realizing its goals.”<sup>43</sup> During this time the movement was able to integrate its members socially and ideologically. However, in the 1930s the movement moved to the major cities. Its members started to come from central and western Poland where social disintegration among the Jewish population was evident. This change in Hehalutz’s landscape hurt the aim of the movement. Hostility toward Zionism arose, and people were joining just to emigrate and did not care about the principles of the organization.<sup>44</sup> Membership was increasing but for the wrong reason, which caused alienation amongst members. People were making aliyah, and membership within Poland weakened on the precipice of the Second World War.

Another important mass youth movement in Poland between the two wars was Hashomer Hatza’ir. Hashomer Hatza’ir was founded as a Zionist-socialist pioneering organization, whose goal was to educate Jewish youth for kibbutz life in Israel. It had its roots in two youth movements created before World War I in Galicia. During World War I the two movements

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<sup>41</sup> Cohen & Cochavi, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Oppenheim, Israel. *The Struggle of Jewish Youth For Productivization: The Zionist Youth Movement in Poland*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 2, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Oppenheim, 61.

<sup>44</sup> Oppenheim, 65, 66.

merged and took on the name Hashomer Hatzza'ir in 1916. Its roots came from two youth movements that came into being in Galicia; Ze'irei Zion and Ha-Shomer.<sup>45</sup> Hashomer was created as a way for the Jewish youth to sever ties with the adult leadership in Poland.<sup>46</sup> Hashomer attracted middle class youth, many of whom went to high school. However, because of its Marxist ideology it also recruited working class youth. The movement educated its youth through training and study groups. The movement emphasized the training of the individual and the development of the personality, because the organizations did not want the Polish Jews to assimilate to Polish culture. The movement used Hebrew as its main language in an effort to see all of its members off to kibbutzim in Israel. Before World War II the Warsaw headquarters had published two periodicals; *Hashomer ha-Za'ir* and *Ha-Mizpeh*.<sup>47</sup> The movement had become popular nationally, and was important for reinforcing Jewish traditions and study in hard social times in Poland. Like Hehalutz, it would also play a major role in resistance during the Holocaust in Poland.

The Zionist youth movement Betar also impacted Jewish life in Poland before World War II. Founded in 1923 by Vladimir Jabotinsky as the youth movement of the Revisionist organization Ha-Zohar, Betar played an important role in teaching the Hebrew language and culture, as well as self-defense. Jabotinsky believed that Betar members were not in need of an ideology as much as they needed a strong historical consciousness. He wanted its members to take on an “activist national consciousness, a national awareness, and a national cultural ethos.”<sup>48</sup> Jabotinsky envisioned Betar as being a strategic reserve for Ha-Zohar; it prepared youngsters for Zionism, Revisionism and the future ‘legion’. Shavit stated that “Betar was a

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<sup>45</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica., 382, 383.

<sup>46</sup> Kassow, Samuel D. *Who Will Write Our History?* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007) 34.

<sup>47</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica, 383.

<sup>48</sup> Shavit, Yaacov. *Jabotinsky And The Revisionist Movement: 1925-1948*. (Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, 1988) 20.

training institute, and not an autonomous movement with a life of its own.”<sup>49</sup> The major duty of every member was defense training. Every Betar member needed to enlist for two years in special works brigades.<sup>50</sup> This duty was derived from the Betar “credo that Jews can stop bearing the brunt of violence only by mobilizing to fight it.”<sup>51</sup> A major Betar principle was to establish a sovereign state in Eretz Israel by political or military means.<sup>52</sup> Betar’s ideology would later help the Jews of Poland in their struggle to survive in German occupied Poland.

Contrary to the Zionist youth movements, the Bund was a Jewish political party that fought for Jewish labor and social rights. It did not support emigration to Palestine; rather, it believed that the Jews needed to coexist with the people of Poland to fight for socialism. Even before World War I the Bund was part of the Yiddish renaissance in Poland. It wanted the Jews of Poland to be connected with their Yiddish culture, which would later play a role when outside force tried to take these liberties away from Jews in Poland. Gitelman stated that the Bund appealed “to social and economic justice, its advocacy of ethnic and civic equality, and its militancy in struggling for labor and Jewish rights made it a powerful movement, especially among younger workers.”<sup>53</sup> Throughout the interwar period the Bund played an important role in Jewish life. It was a political party that consistently supported the Jews of Poland. When times got hard in Poland it was an organization that the Jews could rally around.

In the aftermath of World War I the Bund’s goal was to fulfill “the Jewish proletariat’s entitlements to national and cultural autonomy.”<sup>54</sup> The Bund in Poland actively represented and supported Jewish life. It was constantly in conflict with other political parties that it felt did not

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<sup>49</sup> Shavit, 55.

<sup>50</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Ed. Fred Skolnik. 2nd. ed. Vol. 3,8,9. (New York: Macmillan, 2007. Print) 510.

<sup>51</sup> Heller, 288.

<sup>52</sup> Shavit, 23.

<sup>53</sup> Gitelman, Zvi. *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003) 7-8.

<sup>54</sup> Gitelman, 59.

truly look out for Jewish rights. In 1918-1920 the Bund was in a dispute with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) because the Bund wanted the Jews to be deemed a national minority and to be assured entitlements in the area of cultural autonomy.<sup>55</sup> The Bund also had a clash with the PPS when in 1919-20 there were a wave of pogroms and the PPS failed to take action against the massacres.<sup>56</sup>

In 1921 the Bund had influence on an agreement between the Jewish and Polish trade unions. The agreement allowed Yiddish to be recognized as the official language of Jewish trade unions. The Jewish trade unions were also permitted to communicate with the Jewish proletariat in Yiddish. In addition, organizational partnership between Jewish and Polish trade unions was created.<sup>57</sup> Later that decade in 1927 the Bund was a major component in the establishment of the Socialist Association of Artisans of the Republic of Poland. This was a trade union for artisans which was created to alleviate the problems Jewish artisans were facing economically and socially.<sup>58</sup> Although these two instances helped the Bund itself gain members, it also showed its positive impact on Jewish life in the labor force in Poland.

The Bund was also a progressive organization that did not discriminate against women. In fact it established the YAF, which was a women's organization. Henryk Erlich the leader of the Bund in interwar Poland commented "that the party's goal was to encourage [women] to join and integrate into the organization array of the Jewish proletariat, with no buffers between them and men."<sup>59</sup> They provided equality within the Jewish youth because they realized that the Jewish people needed to stick together in a nation where they were an alienated minority.

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<sup>55</sup> Gitelman, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Gutman, Yisrael, et al. eds. *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars*. (Hanover, NH: University of New England Press, 1989) 81.

<sup>57</sup> Gitelman, 62.

<sup>58</sup> Gitelman, 63, 64.

<sup>59</sup> Gitelman, 66.

Leading up to the Holocaust the Bund started to gain large support in Poland. On March 9, 1936 there was a pogrom in Przytyk, near Radom. The outcome of this left two Jews killed, twenty seriously injured, and Jewish homes and properties destroyed. There was Jewish reaction to this, but the most influential course of action was provoked by the Bund. Eight days after the pogrom the Bund called upon Polish Jews to stage a half-day protest. "On the scheduled day, hundreds of thousands of workers, shopkeepers, businessmen, and even factory owners laid down their tools and closed their establishments. Hundreds of protest meetings took place throughout the country."<sup>60</sup> This event propelled the Bund to the majority of the Jewish vote. After 1936 the Bund won more votes than any other Jewish party in the organized Jewish community. From 1938 to 1939 in both Warsaw and Lodz the Bund captured a majority of the seats in municipal elections.<sup>61</sup> Another part of the reason for Bund success was the flourishing press, youth organizations, summer camps and sanatoria, sports clubs and powerful trade unions the party boasted. The Bund, like the Zionist youth organizations, provided the Jewish people of Poland with hope, and unity that would be needed once the Germans invaded Poland in 1939.

The Orthodox-traditionalists' ideology in interwar Poland was represented by the Agudat Israel (Agudah). The Agudah did not consider itself a political organization, but rather an association to preserve the faith and the Jewish way of life. It placed great emphasis on the maintenance of religious facilities, its educational function, and its welfare work. The main authority of the organization lied in a Council of Sages, which is a group of rebes.<sup>62</sup> However, the Agudah became involved in politics, gaining representation in the Polish Parliament in retaliation to the admission of other Jewish political organizations in the political arena,

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<sup>60</sup> Gutman, et al, 84.

<sup>61</sup> Gitelman, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Heller, 173.

especially the Zionists. The Agudah's leaders did not want the Zionist parties to be the sole representation of Jewish life, because Zionist goals were at odds with Jewish tradition.<sup>63</sup>

The Agudah was influential in instituting Jewish education in Poland. This new type of education incorporated some secular subjects into its curriculum, and also cautiously used modern pedagogical methods. Heller stated that these schools were created "as a response to compulsory primary school education in independent Poland: it feared the impact of compulsory education on Jewish children."<sup>64</sup> These schools revolved their education mainly around the Torah. Although there were secular subjects in the curriculum they were taught in Polish, and significantly less time was devoted to them.<sup>65</sup> The Agudah's educational approach in interwar Poland was extremely influential in continuing Jewish tradition and way of life, which until Pilsudski's death in 1935 was tolerated in Poland. Constantly embedding Jewish tradition and religion in Jewish youth amidst anti-Semitic tension in Poland reverberated that the Jews would not go quietly into the night during the Holocaust, and would form resistance to try and salvage their people and their religion.

The Agudah joined the Minorities' Bloc during the 1922 election, which immersed themselves even more in politics. This did not mean that the Agudah approved of the Minorities' Bloc, rather it joined "in order not to disturb Jewish political unity in fact of the great anti-Jewish hostility that the Polish-Bolshevik war had triggered. Also [it] prevent[ed] a split in the Jewish vote and thereby achieving a representation in Parliament proportional to the numbers of Jews in the total population."<sup>66</sup> The Agudah was successful, winning 6 seats in the Diet, which was filled with 35 Jewish candidates. Unfortunately, Jewish support and representation in the National

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<sup>63</sup> Heller, 174.

<sup>64</sup> Heller, 156.

<sup>65</sup> Heller, 156.

<sup>66</sup> Heller, 174.

Minorities' Bloc unleashed even more hostility from Poles that could not be reversed.<sup>67</sup> This problem that was predicted by Agudah leaders was the main reason why the Agudah tried to isolate itself from politics, in order to keep Jewish traditions alive.

As a member of the Polish Parliament the Agudah separated itself from both Jewish and non-Jewish political parties. They believed that it was poor judgment to form alliances with the Polish right or left because both sides are anti-Semitic. They also rejected the militant politics of the Zionists and Bundists, because they felt it was detrimental to Jewish coexistence with the Poles. This all derived from the Agudah's belief that Judaism was a religion not a nationality, and their main aim was to protect Jewish life and rights. The Agudah tried to avoid "a challenge to the existing government; instead, they tried to improve the treatment if Jews by personal contact with government leaders."<sup>68</sup>

However, Agudah relations with the Polish government were filled with tension. The Agudah could not comprehend the anti-Semitic political and economic approach of the Sancaja regime prior to Pilsudski's coup. Thus, when Pilsudski returned to power in 1926 the Agudah greeted him with open arms. For the Agudah, Pilsudski was the man who could and would lead the Poles away from anti-Semitism. They participated in Pilsudski's Non-Party Bloc of Cooperation with the government, and urged other Jewish organizations to not join the Minorities' Bloc in 1928.<sup>69</sup> The Agudah believed that as long as the Sancaja regime was in power under Joseph Pilsudski Jewish life would be protected. Pilsudski died, however, and with him went the force against the anti-Semitic tactics of the Sancaja regime. At the beginning of 1936 the regime issued legislation against the kosher slaughter of animals. This is when the realization sunk in for the Agudah that Polish-Jewish relations had little chance of succeeding. In

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<sup>67</sup> Heller, 174.

<sup>68</sup> Heller, 175.

<sup>69</sup> Heller, 177.

March of the same year, the Agudah supported a half-day strike against the Przytyk pogrom, led by the Bund.<sup>70</sup> The Agudah even started to revert against its anti-Zion ideology and preached that the Jews needed to go to Palestine. The Agudah had realized that Jewish life in Poland was deteriorating.

Amidst the internal problems that the Jews of Poland faced amongst the Polish people, the occupation of the German Army in Poland in 1939 spelled disaster for the Jews. By late March of 1939 the German Chancellor Adolf Hitler instructed General Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander in chief of the German army, to begin planning an invasion of Poland. Conquering Poland was just one step in the eventual goal of creating Lebensraum (living space) for the German people, and ridding the land of inferior ethnic and racial groups.<sup>71</sup> Even before the official attack on Poland the German police and SS removed 2,000 Polish Jews across the border to Germany on June 8, 1939. Then on September 1, 1939 the Germans invaded Poland, and two million Jews came under German rule.<sup>72</sup> It did not take long for the Germans to dominate the Poles. In five weeks:

The German army and SS conducted the Polish campaign with a viciousness that was unprecedented in the annals of European conflict up to that point. The outright massacre of civilians...by German troops frequently attended combat operations, as did widespread looting and the destruction of property. Germany artillery mercilessly shelled cities like Warsaw without regard for civilian casualties.<sup>73</sup>

By 1939 the Third Reich had already been carrying out harsh laws against the Jews of Germany. Now the Jews of Poland were under this same rule that would viciously attack them.

The Germans deployed the *Einsatzgruppen* and Order Police to carry out violent actions against the Polish Jews. These groups committed horrible atrocities against Polish Jewry. On

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<sup>70</sup> Heller, 180.

<sup>71</sup> Rossino, Alexander B. *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity*. (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003) 1, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Dawidowicz, Lucy S. *The War Against The Jews 1933-1945*. (New York: Seth Press, 1986) 197.

<sup>73</sup> Rossino, 1.



September 8, 1939 Udo von Woyrsch's Order Police murdered Jewish children and burned the synagogue in Bedzin.<sup>74</sup> The *Einsatzgruppen* had received orders to drive as many Jews as possible beyond the San River, the Soviet occupied area of Poland. Von Woyrsch's group of *Einsatzgruppe* and Order Police were successful in doing so: "In Dynow, near the San, Order Police detachments belonging to the group burned a dozen Jews in the local synagogue, then shot another sixty of them in the nearby forest."<sup>75</sup> These operations continued, as this particular group murdered around five to six hundred Jews by September 20<sup>th</sup>. This means that in less than a month after raiding Poland one *Einsatzgruppe* had murdered hundreds of Jews. Jews were being murdered at large rates, and in disgusting fashion.

The Germans displayed no signs of respect toward the Jews, igniting an attack on the eve of Rosh Hashanah on the Jewish population of Warsaw. German planes flew over Warsaw, bombing the Jewish quarter. The planes flew so low that there was no mistaking the intent. The Germans continued to bombard Warsaw, firing ten to thirty thousand shells daily on the city. "Some 20,000 Polish Jews lost their lives during the invasion and bombardments; Jewish homes, stores, buildings, workshops, factories, and other installations were destroyed, the losses estimated at 50,000 to 100,000 units."<sup>76</sup> The Jews of Poland were being brutally mutilated by the Germans. The Germans did not even consider them humans. When Josef Goebbels visited the Lodz ghetto in November of 1939 he claimed that the Jews were not longer humans, but were animals. In Lodz the Germans burnt a synagogue down and then claimed it was the Polish revenge for Jewish destruction to a monument.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Rossino, 90.

<sup>75</sup> Friedlander, Saul. *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945.* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997) 27.

<sup>76</sup> Dawidowicz, 198.

<sup>77</sup> Friedlander, 21, 22.

The Germans were confiscating Jewish businesses and industry, and using them for military or SS use. Jewish shops were ordered to be opened just so they could be robbed. If these atrocities were not enough, the Germans reenacted the Kristallnacht in every town and city they pillaged. They set fire to synagogues, and organized pogroms against the Jews. The Germans gathered the non-Jewish population to witness the humiliation of Jews so they would learn how to mock, abuse, injure and murder Jews.<sup>78</sup> The Germans told the Polish police that all the brutalities against the Jews were not to be opposed. There was no stopping the Germans in their effort to defeat Polish Jewry. A Polish physician recounted that in October of 1939 the Germans were passing new regulations that made the Jews subject to cleaning the city streets, cutting their beards, pulling their hair out, and making them sing Polish songs on the way to work.<sup>79</sup> The Germans tortured and embarrassed the Jews of Poland. They treated them like they were not even humans.

The next step in the German occupation of Polish Jewry was the ghettoization of the Jewish population. This was a tactic that restricted Jewish life completely, and concentrated the Jews in certain areas which would make it easy for the Germans to attack and deport them. On November 23, 1939 an ordinance was issued that mandated Jewish men and women in the Generalgouvernement over ten years of age to wear white arm bands with the Star of David on it. This made the Jews easily identifiable to German officials. Six days later the Jews of each city had to organize a Judenrat. The Judenrats were responsible for serving as a liaison between the Germans and the Jewish communities, and were the governing body of Jewish life. The Judenrats had to follow the orders of the Germans or they would face extermination.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Dawidowicz, 200.

<sup>79</sup> Friedlander, 29.

<sup>80</sup> Dawidowicz, 203.

In Warsaw the Judenrat members were summoned to report to the SS, and subsequently ordered to order all of the Jews in Warsaw to move into a designated area that would become the Warsaw ghetto. Although the Germans delayed their orders, by October the Germans started to enclose the main streets with barbed wire. The Germans then started to create Jewish ghettos all over Poland, starting in Piotrkow, but that ghetto never got off the ground. The first official ghetto was developed in Lodz. Over 160,000 Jews were trapped in this ghetto in May of 1940. Following suit the Warsaw ghetto was officially created in November of 1940, consisting of half a million Jews.<sup>81</sup> Ghettos became commonplace in every city where Jews were present. Life in ghettos was extremely hard. Dawidowicz stated that “the ghettos were located in the oldest, most run-down parts of town, sometimes in outlying areas that lacked the basic facilities of the city proper—paved streets, lighting, adequate sewage, sanitation facilities.”<sup>82</sup> These were harsh accommodations for Jews, and led to alienation and eventual dismantling of the population as a whole.

Living conditions in the ghettos led to just as much of a problem as did German violence. A doctor in the Vilna ghetto figured each person living in the ghetto to be occupying 1.5-2 meters of space. People in the ghetto suffered from the cold Poland weather, and hunger. If all the food allotted to members of the ghettos was actually given to them each person would only receive 1,100 calories. Obviously the Jews did not even receive their full ration, and sometimes the food was spoiled, stolen, or sold on the black market.<sup>83</sup> It was hard for people to survive under these conditions. Even if people were able to survive the future was dim. The end goal for the Jewish population was the ‘Final Solution.’ Friedlander wrote that “[The Germans] policy regarding the Jews...now applied with much greater violence, of course: identification,

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<sup>81</sup> Dawidowicz, 204-206.

<sup>82</sup> Dawidowicz, 208.

<sup>83</sup> Dawdowicz, 210.

expropriation, concentration, and emigration or expulsion.”<sup>84</sup> The Jews would be sent to concentration camps where they would meet their deaths. The Jews of Poland stood no chance, and had nothing to lose. The only thing left was to try and resist, and hope to succeed.

Polish-Jewish relations and Jewish organizations in pre-World War II Poland all played an important role in shaping what would become of Polish Jewry after the German invasion in 1939. The anti-Semitism that was prevalent throughout Poland between the two World Wars left the Jews in a difficult situation that would be exacerbated when the Germans conquered Poland. With no support from the Polish people the Jews were subject to the harsh rule of the Germans, and everything that came with it. The organizations that were the backbone of Jewish society in pre-Holocaust Poland would rise up and resist the German onslaught in an effort to salvage whatever they could of Jewish life in Poland. Throughout the Holocaust in both the ghettos and forests of Poland the Jewish youth organizations would muster tactful resistance that would preserve some Jewish life in Poland, but more importantly, they saved their dignity.

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<sup>84</sup> Friedlander, 31.

## Chapter 2

### **Jewish Resistance in Warsaw: Inside and Outside the Ghetto**

The German occupation of Poland plunged the Polish Jews into despair. The malicious German treatment toward the Jews made life extremely unsafe for Polish Jews, and left them in a fight for their lives. A lot has been documented on the failure of the Jewish people to launch intense resistance against the Germans, but the critics do not understand how hard it was, and that there were concerted efforts to resist Nazi occupation. According to Gutman, “Throughout the Polish ghettos, hopelessness was a prerequisite for resistance....Public opinion no longer regarded the [ZOB] as an irresponsible element that could bring catastrophe to the ghetto. They had already experienced catastrophe.”<sup>85</sup> Once the Jewish people realized there only hope was to formulate resistance, they followed suit. The ghettos of Poland, with the organization of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB), and other fighting organizations were able to ignite resistance in the Warsaw, Bialystok, and Vilna ghettos. However, the Lodz ghetto, which was a highly concentrated Jewish ghetto, was not able to unleash any form of resistance. Throughout resistance in the Warsaw, Bialystok, and Vilna ghettos there were lots of organizing and planning that went into it. The resistance leaders had to establish relationships with non-Jewish Poles. They also had to overcome many obstacles, such as finding weapons. The organized resistance in these three ghettos sheds light on the fight the Jewish people of the Polish ghettos launched.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Polish-Jewish relations had an effect on shaping the climate that allowed the Germans to destroy Jewish life in Poland during the Holocaust. Much can be said about Polish-Jewish relations during the war, especially since the Jewish ghettos were surrounded by Poles. Jewish life in the Warsaw Ghetto was heavily impacted by

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<sup>85</sup> Gutman, Israel. *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994) 165.

interactions with their Polish counterparts on the other side of the ghetto. It is hard to define Polish-Jewish relations during the war as positive or negative, because it was both. There were Poles who were willing to help the Jews of Warsaw, and others were not. Emmanuel Ringelblum's account of Polish-Jewish relations during the war is extremely important in understanding the environment that existed during this time.

The Aryan side of the ghetto controlled all essential Jewish needs, and thus took advantage of the Jews. Collectors for the electricity works, and municipal gas works went around the ghetto trying to collect money from people for past work, and to continue future work. They would connect and disconnect electric lines, and if someone wanted to have a constant flow of electric current, they would have to bribe electricians, who overcharged them. "This however did not ensure the block of flats against an interruption in the flow of current, because when one electrician had connected the wires in return for the bribe he had received, another one would disconnect them until he received a given sum."<sup>86</sup> The tax-collectors also treated the Jews poorly. They demanded payment of taxes on commercial or industrial establishments that had been pillaged, burnt, or bombed. They also demanded taxes for past years, even when there was no receipt left. If someone did not pay their taxes on the spot the tax-collectors would take their possessions. They even became violent, carrying guns on them, and whipping Jews.<sup>87</sup> These atrocious acts committed by Aryan Poles compounded the Jewish struggle in the Warsaw Ghetto. The Poles knew the Jews were in a compromising position, and they took advantage of them.

Harboring Jews was also a rarity in Warsaw. Ringelblum stated that "The majority of the Polish friends drew back; they were terrified of the consequences of having their Jewish friends stay in their flats or in an Aryan hide-out and they refused to harbour them on one pretext or

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<sup>86</sup> Ringelblum, Emmanuel. *Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War*. (New York: Howard Fertig Inc, 1976) 91.

<sup>87</sup> Ringelblum, 92.

another.”<sup>88</sup> According to Ringelblum only a few rare exceptions, mostly people who needed money, saved their Jewish friends without fear for the consequences. Ringelblum estimated that around 10,000-15,000 Jews were hidden in Warsaw, which accounts for about 40,000-60,000 Poles harboring Jews.<sup>89</sup> However, Ringelblum did not hold animosity toward the Poles. He blamed the Germans, not the Poles, and described the great risks the Poles faced if they hid Jews; “Arrests and roundups at every step and constant searches for arms and smuggled goods in the trains are common in city streets...In this atmosphere of trouble and terror, passivity and indifference, it is very difficult to keep Jews in one’s home.”<sup>90</sup> Instead of criticizing the Poles, who did not help the Jewish situation, history should honor the Poles who did help Jews out. After all, the punishment for helping Jews was severe, and people can not be blamed for not wanting to risk the lives of their families.

The implementation of Jewish resistance in the Polish ghettos stemmed from previous Jewish organizations. The Aleynhilf, which was Warsaw’s major Jewish relief organization, the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and the youth organizations were at the forefront of mobilizing resistance. As members of the JDC, Yitzhak Giterman and Emmanuel Ringelblum together emphasized the importance of Jewish relief work in occupied Poland. In October of 1938 Giterman sent his protégé Ringelblum to Zbaszyn to organize relief for thousands of Polish Jews who had been expelled by the Nazis. In September of 1939 Ringelblum stepped forward to become a major leader of the relief effort when the Germans invaded Poland. These experiences propelled Ringelblum to associate with the Aleynhilf.<sup>91</sup> It is these instances of relief work that

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<sup>88</sup> Ringelblum, 96.

<sup>89</sup> Kassow, 381.

<sup>90</sup> Kassow, 382.

<sup>91</sup> Kassow, 91.

would catapult Ringelblum to become one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto, and become influential in the uprising that would take place years later.

Unlike the other ghettos of Poland, the Warsaw Ghetto, due in large part to the Aleynhilf, did not let the Judenrat control Jewish operations. Kassow stated that “from early in the war, the Aleynhilf came to see itself as a counterpoint to the Judenrat and gamely resisted all efforts to squash its autonomy.”<sup>92</sup> The Aleynhilf also opposed the Jewish police. They believed that the police were corrupt, and lacked national pride. Under Ringelblum’s lead, the Aleynhilf viewed itself as the catalyst that would try to remind the Jews in the ghetto to help the less fortunate. Although the Judenrat officials spoke Polish, the Aleynhilf used Yiddish as the official language in the ghetto, to convey that they would not accept outsiders telling them what to do.<sup>93</sup> This Yiddish culture was important in resisting, because it showed that the Polish Jews would not conform, but would separate themselves, and be proud of whom they were.

Alexander Landau, a prominent member of the Aleynhilf, was also important in shaping Jewish resistance. Landau was a member of the youth group Poalei Tsiyon, and had become close to the youth organization He-Halutz. Kassow iterated that “Landau used his energy, money, and contacts to encourage civic and later armed resistance.”<sup>94</sup> Landau provided people with places to live, and papers that at the very least exempted them from deportation.<sup>95</sup> Landau’s role in helping Polish Jews to safety during a terrible time played an important role in future Jewish resistance. His daughter Margalit was a member of Hashomer Hatza’ir. On January 18, 1943 she marched under the orders of Mordechai Anielewicz and threw a grenade, which led

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<sup>92</sup> Kassow, 92.

<sup>93</sup> Kassow, 95.

<sup>94</sup> Kassow, 159.

<sup>95</sup> Kassow, 159.



Jewish fighters to attack the Germans.<sup>96</sup> Margalit was killed on the spot, but it is her courage and willingness to stand up for what she believed in that was the cornerstone of Jewish resistance.

The road to armed resistance in the ghettos was long, but commencing in the Warsaw ghetto, organized resistance groups formed, and became widespread throughout the Jewish ghettos of Poland. At the outset of the war a Jewish underground was established in Warsaw, which led to the establishment of fighting organizations.<sup>97</sup> As explained earlier in this study, the Jewish youth movements in Poland were the backbone of resistance. Before the war youth organizations prepared for life in Palestine. As the reality of their emigration to Palestine became unlikely, these organizations began training Jewish youth for the physical and spiritual difficulties that loomed. At the beginning of 1940 about twenty outstanding activists from Hashomer Hatzá'ir and Dror returned from Soviet-occupied territory to the area under German rule in order to rehabilitate and stabilize the movements.<sup>98</sup>

Before the Jewish Fighting Organization is mentioned in depth, it is important to recognize another resistance organization that is not well documented. Jewish resistance during the Holocaust in Warsaw is attributed largely to the ZOB, however, the Jewish Military Union (ZZW), which was founded by the Revisionist organization Betar, was also active in the resistance movement in the ghetto. The ZZW was an autonomous organization, but had close ties with the Polish Army. There is not a lot of scholarly research dedicated to the ZZW, but for this study it is important to understand what we do know about the organization and their role in Jewish resistance in Warsaw. The ZZW was founded after the first expulsion from Warsaw in February 1940, because according to the Revisionists, the heads of the Jewish Fighting Organization refused to accept members of Betar as an organized movement into their ranks.

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<sup>96</sup> Kassow, 160.

<sup>97</sup> Gutman, 120.

<sup>98</sup> Gutman, 122, 123.

There were differences in tactics between the ZOB and Betar, specifically Betar's insistence on maintaining connections with Polish forces, and their right to command a fighting organization. The leadership of the Jewish Fighting Organization did not want Betar commanding them.<sup>99</sup> Betar was also able to attract Communists to their new organization, which was headed by Pavel Frenkel, Nathan Shultz, S. Hasensprung, Leon Rodal, Eliahu Alberstein, and Yitzhak Bilawski. According to Moshe Arens who was done research on the organization; Rodal and Frenkel held major Betar positions and were active in the Revisionist movement.<sup>100</sup>

Reports are not clear, but the ZZW was composed of anywhere from 150-300 members.<sup>101</sup> Arens believed there were 250 members in the organization at the beginning of 1941.<sup>102</sup> Arens' reports state that David Apfelbaum, an adherent of Jabotinsky, led the ZZW during battles during the ghetto uprising after becoming the commander in the fall of 1941.<sup>103</sup> However, there is research that concluded Frenkel was the commander of the organization at points in time.

The ZZW's resistance efforts were propelled by their relationship with the Polish military forces. The ZZW received artillery from the Polish People's Independence Action (PLAN) and the Security Corps (KB). Like everything with the ZZW there are no records with definitive amounts of how much aid they were given, but Ber Mark believed there were sixty grenades that a PLAN group smuggled in for the Jewish Military Union through a tunnel, and three crates of grenades that were brought in by the KB.<sup>104</sup> The tunnels connecting the ghetto with the Aryan world served as the main path of transportation that linked the ZZW with their Polish

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<sup>99</sup> Gutman, 168, 169.

<sup>100</sup> Arens, Moshe. "The Jewish Military Organization (ZZW) in the Warsaw Ghetto." (*Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19.2 (2005): 200-225) 212.

<sup>101</sup> Gutman, 169.

<sup>102</sup> Arens, 204.

<sup>103</sup> Arens, 210, 212.

<sup>104</sup> Krakowski, 176.

counterparts. The ZZW members dug two tunnels under the ghetto walls at Muranowska 7 and at Karmelicka 5. “As a result [of the tunnels], the ZZW was relatively well equipped, with supplies including pistols, grenades, Molotov cocktails, rifles, machine pistols, machine guns, and medical supplies.”<sup>105</sup> The usage of tunnels as a passageway for the Poles to provide the ZZW with the supplies they needed for combat was extremely important in the ZZW’s mission to battle the Germans, while their Jewish counterparts in the ZOB struggled to gain weapons.

The ZZW was trained to fight the Germans throughout the war, and received help from the Aryan Poles. Arens noted that “As a result of these connections between the ZZW and the Polish underground organizations KB and PLAN, Polish instructors entered the ghetto to provide training for ZZW members.”<sup>106</sup> Arens believed that the ZZW played an important role in the battles that took place in the ghetto uprising between April 19 and 28.<sup>107</sup> Although the ZZW did not fight along with the ZOB, this chapter will highlight the fighting of the ZZW during the ghetto uprising, and its importance on attacking the Germans. The ZZW should be commended for their efforts in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and it is a shame that they do not get the recognition they deserved, after all, like the ZOB, they risked their lives for the Jewish cause.

The origins of the ZOB are due in large part to the Anti-Fascist Bloc. The Anti-Fascist Bloc was the first general Jewish organization, and its leadership included Mordechai Tenenbaum, Zivia Lubetkin, and Mordechai Anielwicz. Zuckerman stated that the main purpose of the organization was to “help the Soviet Union in the war against the Germans by: (1) helping prisoners and prisoners-of-war; and (2) cooperating with the partisans.”<sup>108</sup> In April 1942, a few months before the creation of the ZOB, the Anti-Fascist Bloc added a military component. This

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<sup>105</sup> Arens, 217.

<sup>106</sup> Arens, 215.

<sup>107</sup> Arens, 218.

<sup>108</sup> Zuckerman, Yitzhak. *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) 182.

expansion included Hehalutz, and a special committee, parallel to the Anti-Fascist Bloc, was established to defend the ghetto. This committee was headed by Tenenbaum.<sup>109</sup> The Anti-Fascist Bloc did not last long, but it created the framework for Jewish resistance, because the Jews started their initial defense strategy within this organization.

The ZOB was founded on July 28, 1942 in Warsaw. According to Lubetkin, it was Zuckerman's idea to form a Jewish Fighting Organization that would fight for the honor of the Jewish people.<sup>110</sup> The original command staff of the ZOB consisted of Zuckerman, Lubetkin, Joseph Kaplan, and Shmuel Breslav.<sup>111</sup> Lubetkin, the wife of Zuckerman, was the only woman to be on the high command of the ZOB. She was also the only woman to be part of the Anti-Fascist Bloc leadership. Her efforts within the Jewish Fighting Organization, and the Warsaw ghetto and Polish Uprising make her one of the most influential members of Jewish resistance in Poland. Lubetkin was a member of the Zionist pioneer-youth movement Freiheit-Hehalutz Hatzair, and like many Jewish resistance fighters, she wanted to preserve Jewish life and dignity.<sup>112</sup> She was present in the Grochow kibbutz, which housed members of Hashomer Hatza'ir, Hanoar Hatzaioni and other youth organizations. Lubetkin stated that the goal of the kibbutz was to "create our own base of operations in every large city so that there would be one place within the terrible demoralizing ghetto life that would be 'different.' We also felt the need to be present in light of what we expected to happen to the Jews."<sup>113</sup> Even to Lubetkin's surprise, members of the kibbutz later became the nucleus of the Jewish Fighting Organization.<sup>114</sup> More of Lubetkin's contributions to the resistance movement, most notably her part in the evacuation

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<sup>109</sup> Zuckerman, 183.

<sup>110</sup> Lubetkin, 93.

<sup>111</sup> Kassow, 165.

<sup>112</sup> Lubetkin, Zivia. *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*. (Toronto, Canada: Ghetto Fighters' House, 1981) 11, 36.

<sup>113</sup> Lubetkin, 51.

<sup>114</sup> Lubetkin, 51.

of Jews through the sewers, and her fighting in the Polish Uprising will be dealt with later, but it is worth noting now that her ideology and contributions were one of the main forces behind Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto.

The Jewish Fighting Organization was founded as a response by the youth organizations, most notably Hashomer Hatza'ir, Akiva (the youth movement of Agudat Israel) and Dror, to the Great Deportation that had taken place in the Warsaw Ghetto.<sup>115</sup> Important figures who were present at the founding session were Yitzhak Zuckerman, Joseph Kaplan, and Mordechai Tenenbaum.<sup>116</sup> The ZOB was organized around combat units based on political parties and youth groups. It was aligned with two other organizations, the Jewish National Committee (ZKN) and the Jewish Coordinating Committee (ZKK). The ZKN arose because the Polish underground government would only deal with an authoritative body that represented the major Jewish political parties, and would not want to talk to youth organizations. Zuckerman had pointed out that “when the organization was first established in Warsaw it was not merely a local structure but an organization that hoped to multiply and create cells and groups in ghettos throughout the occupied lands.”<sup>117</sup> The goal was evident from the beginning; to create a resistance organization to try and counter German occupation throughout Poland.<sup>118</sup>

Gutman stressed the problems that the organization dealt with upon creation; it “had no weapons, no plan of action, and no contact with the outside world – neither with the Allies fighting on the war fronts, nor with the Polish underground beyond the ghetto walls.”<sup>119</sup> This meant that the ZOB had to be very disciplined, determined, and organized. In the early days there were roughly 200 members of the ZOB. These members were able to evade the selection

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<sup>115</sup> Gutman, 165.

<sup>116</sup> Gutman 152.

<sup>117</sup> Gutman, 154.

<sup>118</sup> Gutman, 353, 354.

<sup>119</sup> Gutman, 153.

process and did not rely on permits to save themselves. However, if deported, members were instructed to jump off the moving train. They were equipped with the necessary tools to aid them in returning to the ghetto.<sup>120</sup> This was an important technique that helped intensify Jewish resistance. It was important for Jews to not go to the slaughterhouses without a fight.

Early on in its existence the ZOB received some help from its Polish counterparts. In the first week of August the first shipment of weapons reached the ghetto from the Polish side. In the shipment were five pistols, and six hand grenades. The grenades were obtained from the fighting unit of the Polish Communist underground.<sup>121</sup> Although the amount of weapons in this shipment was extremely small it was better than nothing. This would allow the organization to start out with their armed resistance, and showed that there was support from the Poles. Within a week of obtaining these weapons the ZOB executed its first operation, carrying out a sentence against the Jewish Police commander in the ghetto, Jozef Szerynski.<sup>122</sup> Shortly after, another event took place in Warsaw that embedded in the minds of the Jewish people that they would not go quietly. After Joseph Kaplan was arrested, Breslav, who was also a Hashomer Hatza'ir leader searched to find Kaplan and save him. When he was walking in the streets and questioned by a German he pulled out a knife and attacked the uniformed German sitting in a car; he was shot on the spot.<sup>123</sup> It was courageous acts like those of Breslav that gave Jews in the ghettos the ability to realize that even though there is a cost, fighting back against the Germans was possible; moreover, if they did not fight back they would most likely end up dead regardless.

The ZOB started to build momentum in the Warsaw Ghetto as the Germans started to expel large number of Jews. As mentioned earlier, resistance is a lot easier to organize when a

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<sup>120</sup> Gutman, 154.

<sup>121</sup> Gutman, 155.

<sup>122</sup> Gutman, 155.

<sup>123</sup> Gutman 156, 157.

group of people realize that hope for them is bleak. As the Germans started to send Jews from the ghetto to their inevitable death, Jewish resistance started to look like the only option. Beginning on July 22, 1942, on the eve of the ninth of Av, which is when the Jews mourn the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem, the mass deportations of Jews from Warsaw began.<sup>124</sup> The deportations took place until September 12<sup>th</sup>, during which about 300,000 Jews were expelled or murdered; 265,000 were taken from the assembly point and sent to the Treblinka death camp.<sup>125</sup> The expulsion of large numbers of Jews nearly depleted the Warsaw Ghetto, but as alluded to earlier, brought back outstanding figures of the underground whom had not been in Warsaw during the expulsion. This added to the strength of the ZOB. One of the returnees was Anielewicz. Anielewicz would later become commander of the ZOB.

Anielewicz was a member of Hashomer Hatzair, and from the beginning of his return to the Warsaw ghetto he wanted to command the ZOB.<sup>126</sup> Anielewicz entered the ghetto a few days after the end of the first *aktion*, between September 13 and 14 1942. Zuckerman recounted that him or Anielewicz could have been the commander of the ZOB, but “Anielewicz wanted to be the commander of the ZOB and was fit for it in every respect. He believed in his own strength and he was ambitious. He proposed himself for the job at the staff meeting, and I gladly accepted it.”<sup>127</sup> As commander of the ZOB, Anielewicz sat on the Jewish National Committee and on the Coordinating Committee.<sup>128</sup> Anielewicz was given the task of organizing the uprising in the ghetto along with Zuckerman, Israel Kanal, Lubetkin, and Miriam Heindsdorf.<sup>129</sup> Anielewicz

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<sup>124</sup> Gutman, 133.

<sup>125</sup> Gutman, 133.

<sup>126</sup> Lubetkin, 127.

<sup>127</sup> Zuckerman, 228, 229.

<sup>128</sup> Zuckerman, 229.

<sup>129</sup> Lubetkin, 130.

was a fearless leader, and courageously led the Jews into battle against the Germans. He would lose his life during the Holocaust, because he did not back down to the enemy.

As Gutman made clear, “because [Anielewicz] had been outside the ghetto during the expulsion, he was not weighed down by a sense of personal failure for not resisting...He cleared away any doubts regarding internal affairs and restored discipline and inner confidence.”<sup>130</sup>

Although the circumstances that triggered Anielewicz’s return were devastating for the Jewish population of Warsaw, they now had a leader to follow. In addition to Anielewicz, Eliezer Geller, who had led the Gordonia movement, also returned to Warsaw. Upon his return, Geller immediately got involved with the Jewish Fighting Organization.<sup>131</sup> The landscape of the ZOB changed with the arrival of these two figures, as they gave the organization more credibility. The Zionist socialist Po’alei Zion, the Communists, and the Bund all joined the organization in reaction to the new political agreements that the ZOB had made with them. One of the major agreements was the incorporation of two authoritative bodies (one political, and one military).<sup>132</sup> This enlarged the organization significantly. The ZOB then created the Coordinating Committee to appease the Bund, and became a powerful “continuation of the fighting body [that] the youth movements founded at the height of the expulsion.”<sup>133</sup> The ability of the ZOB to expand, by incorporating many different Jewish youth groups showed the strong desire for resistance in the ghettos.

The ZOB still needed the weapons to make resistance possible. The ZOB made contact with the Home Army and the People’s Guard, which both provided the Jewish Fighting Organization with artillery. Contact between the Jews and the People’s Guard was set up by

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<sup>130</sup> Gutman, 165.

<sup>131</sup> Gutman, 165, 166.

<sup>132</sup> Gutman, 166, 167.

<sup>133</sup> Gutman, 167.



Marek Edelman, Wolf Folman, and a member of the Zionist-Socialist movement who left to work for the Polish underground.<sup>134</sup> According to the authors of *The Polish Armed Forces in World War II, Part 3: Home Army* the Home Army supplied the ZOB with “90 pistols with two magazines and ammunition, 500 defense hand grenades, 100 attack hand grenades, 15 kilograms of plastic and fuses and detonators, 1 light machine gun, 1 submachine gun, explosives such as clock bombs, and time bombs.”<sup>135</sup> Weapons were also obtainable from secret arms workshops. These workshops would produce Molotov cocktails, and would be brought into the ghetto from the Aryan side. They were able to make four or five Molotov cocktails per fighter.<sup>136</sup> Another source of weapons for the ghettos organizations was the purchase of weapons on the Aryan side that were later smuggled into the ghetto. This was made possible partly by connections made through the Home Army and the People’s Guard. Jonas Turkow wrote about contacts with a Polish group that supplied the ghetto with some artillery.<sup>137</sup> Resistance would not have been possible without the arming of the ZOB by outside Polish help. This is one of the major contributions that Christian Poles made to the Jews, and it is important to note that Poles did help the Jews out.

It can be said that the first expulsion of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto rallied the Jewish people, and led the ZOB to instill a strong foundation. However, it was the second expulsion in the Warsaw Ghetto that begun on January 18, 1943 that ignited the first instances of Jewish resistance. Unlike the first expulsion, the Jews did not cooperate with German orders. Gutman explained that although the Germans figured it would be an easy job, “they soon learned that the...Jews were not prepared to obey their orders as in the past, and many work places were

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<sup>134</sup> Lubetkin, 94.

<sup>135</sup> Krakowski, Shmuel. *The War of the Doomed: Jewish Armed Resistance In Poland, 1942-1944*. (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc, 1984) 176.

<sup>136</sup> Krakowski, 176, 177.

<sup>137</sup> Krakowski, 177.

unoccupied.”<sup>138</sup> This can be largely attributed to the ZOB and their ability to convey resistance as the only solution to counteract the Germans this late in the war. One problem in resistance during the second expulsion was that the attack surprised the Jews, and they were not prepared for action. This was only a minor roadblock, and did not stop the Jews from acting. The first shot fired by a Jew was at the hands of Arieh Wilner, in retaliation to Germans penetrating a dwelling of members of the ZOB. The first battle was led by Mordecai Anielewicz. Anielewicz chose a dozen fighters with pistols and stood prepared for the struggle.

Anielewicz’s plan was well planned out. The fighters were to join the lines going to the *Umschlagplatz* (Assembly Point and Transfer Office), and when given a signal they were to burst out of the lines and attack the German guards escorting the lines. Once the signal was given the Jewish fighters assaulted the nearest German.<sup>139</sup> The Jewish fighters lost the battle, but it became apparent from this moment on that the Jews were going to resist the Germans. This small battle was also influential in garnering Jewish support for resistance; “the Jews drew encouragement from the dust of the battle, and many ghetto dwellers adopted whatever means of passive resistance possible in the circumstances – that is, not to obey the German orders, to hide, and to evade deportation.”<sup>140</sup> This first attack led to more and more Jewish fighting. Led by Zuckerman a group of Jews opened fire on Germans who entered an apartment on Zamenhof Street that the ZOB members occupied. During the attack two Germans were wounded.<sup>141</sup> As a result of these battles the Germans refrained from searching the dwellings, and from climbing up to attics and down to cellars. This now made capturing and deporting Jews extremely hard for the Germans.

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<sup>138</sup> Gutman, 179.

<sup>139</sup> Gutman, 181, 182.

<sup>140</sup> Gutman, 182.

<sup>141</sup> Gutman, 182, 183.

Simha Rotem fought in the ZOB, and recounted his time with the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Warsaw Ghetto. Like many Jews, Rotem came from outside the ghetto, but once his family moved to the ghetto he left home and joined the ZOB. Rotem was a member of the Akiva youth movement. After the January Uprising in 1943 he joined Benjamin Wald's group. He described the fighting unit as being like a kibbutz; "we slept together, ate together, trained together, and performed operations with the same comrades... We trained in the use of weapons, emphasizing quick-draw tactics and accuracy of aim."<sup>142</sup> The first operation Rotem participated in was the release of Jewish prisoners held by the Jewish police in the Ghetto jail. Although this was not direct resistance against the Germans, the prisoners were scheduled to be turned over to the Gestapo a day or two after this operation. Rotem gained entry into the prison because he lied and told the police that one of his relatives was in the jail. He was then able to obtain information that made the operation easier to organize. The next day ZOB members entered the jail, overpowered the police, freed the prisoners, and threatened the police with guns.<sup>143</sup> This not only freed Jews, but impressed upon the Jewish Police that the ZOB was a serious organization, and scarred the police for the future.

The first instances of resistance in January led to the unification of the Jewish Fighting Organization, which would be needed, come April. The hierarchy of personnel and the strategic plans were laid down for the inevitable struggle; "The period between the two expulsions was one of marked change and preparation for the last battle."<sup>144</sup> As Gutman noted, the ZOB and the ZZW both learned a lot from the January conflict. They realized that a German surprise attack could take place at any moment, and as a result fighting groups were placed into squads that

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<sup>142</sup>Rotem, Simha. *Memoris of a Warsaw Ghetto Fighter The Past Within Me*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) 22.

<sup>143</sup> Rotem, 23, 24.

<sup>144</sup> Gutman, 196.

attached to dwelling places. In these dwellings they kept their personal arms and trained.<sup>145</sup> It was extremely important for the fighting organizations to maintain a sense of military commitment in everyday life, because the Germans were out in full force, and willing to attack at anytime.

Gutman stated from available data that there were twenty-two fighting groups composed of youth movement members in Warsaw after the January Uprising. Dror had five groups, Hashomer Hatzza'ir, the Bund and the Communists had four each, and Akiva, Gordonia, Hanoar Hazioni, Poalei Zion-SS, and the Left Poalei Zion each had one.<sup>146</sup> The incorporation of the youth movements into fighting groups allowed continuity and camaraderie to develop between the fighting squads, allowing for the individual fighters to feel comfortable in their surroundings, and willing to sacrifice for people they felt strongly about. The ghetto was divided into three sections: the central ghetto, the large workshop area, and the brushmakers' area. The central quarters were patrolled by Anielewicz. The commander of the nine fighting squads in the central area was led by Israel Kanal. Yitzhak Zuckerman led the eight squads in the workshop area, and Edelman led the five squads in the brushmakers' area.<sup>147</sup>

The organization realized during the January Uprising that they needed to change their strategy, and they implemented a new plan that would give them a better chance of resisting. They understood they could not compete in hand-to-hand battles in the streets, but needed to use their knowledge of the area to their benefit. They built passages that went from house to house via ladder, so there would have to be no movement in the streets. As Gutman stated, "in the familiar alcoves, on the narrow ladders, in the corners and crevices, the fighters had a marked

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<sup>145</sup> Gutman, 197.

<sup>146</sup> Gutman, 197.

<sup>147</sup> Gutman, 198.

advantage over the Germans, who feared entering the dark and little-known maze.”<sup>148</sup> The organization chose positions from which to open fire where they could overlook crossroads which German forces would pass to enter the ghetto. The ZOB had a lack of arms, but by April every member had a revolver. One major element of fighting that they did not have was a withdrawal plan, but they did not need one. Reports stated that at their first meeting the emissary said, “We do not wish to save our lives. None of us will come out of this alive. We want to save the honor of mankind.”<sup>149</sup> The Jews of Warsaw were prepared to give their lives to save Judaism. This is why resistance in Warsaw was able to take place; the Jews realized they had to, and they wanted to.

All of the Jewish organization and preparation came into action after the Germans prepared for the final evacuation of Warsaw on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1943. Led by SS Major-General Jurgen Stroop, the Germans attacked Warsaw with the goal to liquidate all of the Jews in the ghetto. At 2 A.M. on the dawn of April 19 Germans, Ukrainians, and Latvians surrounded the ghetto walls. Shortly after Jewish scouts spotted the German forces, and issued a report to the military organizations. By 4 A.M. all of the Jewish combat groups were in position, and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was ready to take place.<sup>150</sup> The Germans initially penetrated the ghetto through the two central streets, however, they were prepared for an attack from the front, and the Jewish fire caught them off guard because it came from defense positions on the crossroads of Nalewki and Gesia streets and Mila and Zamenhof streets.

The Jewish forces in the Central Ghetto were deployed at three points: three ZOB combat squads took up position on the upper floors of the buildings at the corner of Gesia and Nalewki streets, four ZOB squads were located at the intersection of Zamenhof and Gesia streets, and the

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<sup>148</sup> Gutman, 199.

<sup>149</sup> Gutman, 199.

<sup>150</sup> Krakowski, 189, 190, 191.

ZZW force in the Central Ghetto was in the sector of Muranowska Square.<sup>151</sup> The Germans suffered some losses as a result of this rebel attack. Jewish combat groups allowed the Germans to march through towards Muranowski Street where they *Waffen* SS stopped and four ZOB combat groups ambushed the Germans, and blocked the German escape route.<sup>152</sup> Early on during the German mission to eliminate Warsaw Jewry the Jewish resistance movement in the ghetto proved that it was ready to fight for their right to live. The first day of battle impressed upon the Germans that they were in for a fight, and the Jews were not going to go quietly to their deaths.

After an unsuccessful first attack on the ghetto, the Germans reorganized and attacked for a second time. It is not known for sure, but testimony leads historians to believe that the Germans even called in the air force for the second battle.<sup>153</sup> The Germans realized that they were not going to easily defeat the Jews, and would need to use all of their force. The second battle lasted six hours, before the Jews retreated. When the groups retreated they set fire to the German factories and warehouses in the abandoned area. Later that day the Germans attacked the Jewish Fighting Organization's positions on Muranowski Square, where the Jews were able to hold off German attacks and burned an armored German truck.<sup>154</sup> The first day of battle was extremely important for the Jewish resistance effort, as they were able to ward off the initial German attacks. On that day only 580 people were captured by the Germans according to Stroop, which is a small number considering how many Jews were in the ghetto, and the force the Germans had.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, 372.

<sup>152</sup> Krakowski, 191.

<sup>153</sup> Krakowski, 193.

<sup>154</sup> Krakowski, 193.

<sup>155</sup> Krakowski, 194.

The second day of battle brought defeat to the ZZW unit on Muranowska Street. According to Krakowski, the fiercest German attacks that day were directed toward the ZZW.<sup>156</sup> The ZZW groups retreated to the area of Jozefow where some were captured by the German gendarmarie and the Polish Police. The few survivors joined a partisan unit. The Germans also launched an attack on the brushmakers' quarter later that day. In the brushmakers' quarter "the rebels were still holding the whole of the...quarter and most of the area around the Toebbens' factories that day, where they succeeded to a marked extent in preventing the Germans from carrying out the evacuation."<sup>157</sup> The Germans were able to succeed in forcing the rebels to leave all of the defense positions that were set up in the attics of buildings in the central ghetto. Still, the Germans had not been able to evacuate a large number of Jewish people from the ghetto.<sup>158</sup> The Jewish resistance was making life difficult for the Germans, as they were able to cling to life longer, giving them a better chance to get out of the ghetto, and find safety.

The third day of the battle was a turning point for the Germans. Stroop figured out a way to defeat the Jewish combat by setting fire to blocks of buildings in the brushmakers' quarter. Due to this "The rebels were in a grave situation; with the exception of the few who were well secured against fire, masses of people were forced to leave their hideouts and bunkers."<sup>159</sup> This approach by the Germans made it hard for the noncombatant Jews to resist evacuation, and hard for the Jewish fighters to retreat into the buildings. This brought major problems for the Jewish fighters for the rest of the uprising. As Edelman stated "We had to fight not against the Germans, but against the fire."<sup>160</sup> The ZOB and ZZW were still able to amount some attacks on the Germans on the third day. In the Toebbens area the ZOB was able to use Molotov cocktails to

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<sup>156</sup> Krakowski, 195.

<sup>157</sup> Krakowski, 196.

<sup>158</sup> Krakowski, 196.

<sup>159</sup> Krakowski, 197.

<sup>160</sup> Krakowski, 198.

ward off the German attack, and a ZZW group attacked the Germans from a position at the crossroads of Nowolipie and Smocza and Nowolipki and Smocza streets.<sup>161</sup>

The Jewish fighters continued not to back down from the Germans, even igniting them in combat on the fourth day of battle. The Germans were not carrying out any serious attacks, and the Jews tried to attack the Germans to ease the burden of the central ghetto. They threw grenades from balconies, windows, and roofs and shot at the vehicles of SS men. After four days of battle most of the Jewish fighters had survived, and the ZOB was still in contact with Zuckerman who was on the Aryan side.<sup>162</sup> The next day the Jewish Fighting Organization changed its tactics. Anielewicz decided they needed to use guerilla warfare. He called for the acquisition of arms, specifically, grenades, rifles, machine guns, and explosives. This was done because the conditions the Jews were living under were horrific, and he believed the ZOB needed to attack the Germans quickly, or there would be no Jewish survivors.<sup>163</sup> Despite valiant Jewish efforts, the Germans continued to launch an extensive attack, setting fire to every building in their sight. The Germans, however, had not succeeded in crushing all of the defense positions in the area. On that day the ZZW suffered a large blow. A ZZW combat group tried to blow up the Gestapo building at Zelazna Street, and they did not succeed. The group then got into a battle with the Germans, and most of the group was killed.<sup>164</sup>

By the end of the first week of battle the Germans had started to make significant progress in their campaign to destroy Warsaw Jewry. They started to burn the bunkers, killing Jews who were in them. They also started to capture large numbers of Jews, and started to

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<sup>161</sup> Krakowski, 198.

<sup>162</sup> Krakowski, 200.

<sup>163</sup> Krakowski, 201.

<sup>164</sup> Krakowski, 202.



evacuate or shoot them.<sup>165</sup> The ZOB and ZZW were forced to move to underground bunkers, from where they organized attacks against the German forces. As Krakowski noted, “During the entire second week of the revolt, battles went on for control of the bunkers...The rebels, on their part, organized attacks in order to disrupt the Germans’ actions and inflict losses on the enemy.”<sup>166</sup> However, Jewish resistance had started to deteriorate. According to Stroop from April 28 through May 2 the Germans were successful in crushing Jewish resistance, and capturing thousands of Jewish people, killing some Jews in the process.<sup>167</sup> The second week was a disaster for the Jewish fighting organizations. The ZOB and ZZW combat groups both suffered heavy losses in the battles that week.<sup>168</sup> At this point in the revolt Jewish combat groups tried to leave the ghetto, to escape to where they could prepare resistance in the forests. The Warsaw Ghetto had become unsafe for all Jews, and the hopes of full out resistance started to fade.

During the third week of the revolt the battle intensified. In a Polish police report on May 7 it said “The ghetto seems to have come back to life. Jewish ghosts have come out of the bunkers and dugouts and opened fire again. There are a great number of victims on both sides.”<sup>169</sup> On that same day the Germans discovered the bunker where about 100 Jewish Fighting Organization members were hiding. Amongst the men in the bunker was Anielewicz. A battle took place at the bunker and the Germans used smoke candles to force the rebels out, and on May 8, most of the fighters, along with Anielewicz died.<sup>170</sup> The revolt continued, and on May 16 the Germans blew up the great synagogue outside the ghetto, which was meant to symbolize the

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<sup>165</sup> Krakowski, 203.

<sup>166</sup> Krakowski, 204.

<sup>167</sup> Krakowski, 205.

<sup>168</sup> Krakowski, 206.

<sup>169</sup> Krakowski, 208.

<sup>170</sup> Krakowski, 209.

end of the Warsaw Ghetto.<sup>171</sup> Jewish resistance did not end when the synagogue was burnt down. The ZOB and ZZW both fought into early July, but both fell to the Germans.

Zivia Lubetkin's role in Warsaw Ghetto Uprising movement is touched upon earlier, but it is her role after the uprising that has also granted her historical recognition. Before understanding the validity of her contributions to the resistance movement after the uprising, her role in armed resistance should be noted. She participated in a battle in an apartment building on 56-58 Zamenhof Street in April 1943. She stated that after the Germans ransacked the apartment she was in, her comrades and her "fought with grenades, guns, iron rods and light bulbs filled with sulphuric acid. [Two Jewish fighters] stripped the dead or wounded Germans of their weapons and the others pursued the fleeing soldiers...We had actually witnessed the German conquerors of the world retreat in fright from a handful of young Jews equipped only with a few pistols and hand grenades."<sup>172</sup> Lubetkin was also active in collecting money from Jews in the ghetto to benefit the fighting organization's cause. She later claimed that it was expensive to arm the fighters, and the organization demanded rich Jews donate money to help. However, the Jews thought of the organization was a bunch of thieves, which led to ZOB to set up a prison, and detain people who did not pay.<sup>173</sup> These are two examples of Lubetkin's involvement in the uprising, and resistance movement in Warsaw. She had asserted herself as a Jewish leader throughout the war, and it paid off, because in the end people listened to her. When the Warsaw ghetto was destroyed, and it was time to leave, it was Zivia who helped lead the Jews out of the ghetto.

As the ghetto burned, Zivia, and the other surviving Jews needed a way to escape; the only option they had was through the sewers. About twenty Jews would be sent into the sewers,

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<sup>171</sup> Krakowski, 210.

<sup>172</sup> Lubetkin, 153.

<sup>173</sup> Lubetkin, 167, 168.

and be sent to the Aryan side of the city on May 9. The plan was for the Jews to contact their gentile comrades on the Aryan side, who would work together with the Polish underground to figure out an escape. They left at night, and made their way through the ghetto, with their pistols in their hands.<sup>174</sup> Reflecting on the exit from the ghetto, Zivia said “It was difficult to leave the Ghetto, with its ruins and its memories of dead comrades. Each of us was thinking of past times, and of *chaverim*, still alive who were being left behind. Though logic told us that nothing could be done except what we had decided to do.”<sup>175</sup> Zivia Lubetkin was right; there was nothing else left in the ghetto. The most the Jews could do at this point was hope to find refuge in the Aryan world, and survive the war.

Throughout the tough journey through the sewers Zivia and her fellow Jews continued to follow the ZOB mission to save Jewish life. There were times where people wanted to give up, they fell, and wanted to stay in the sewer to die, but Zivia recalled that no one was abandoned. The Polish guides led the way, and the Jewish fighters followed them single file, Zivia and Marek Edelman brought up the rear. The Jews reached a spot where an exit was possible.<sup>176</sup> They had half-crawled, half-walked for twenty hours through the treacherous sewers, without food or drink. They sent two men back to the ghettos, to lead the rest of the Jews through the sewers. To their dismay, the two messengers brought back the bad news that the sewer passages to the ghetto had been blocked; there was no chance of getting the Jews in the ghetto into the Aryan world. The next day, a Jewish comrade Kazik, and a member of the Armia Ludowa, Krzaczek, helped the Jews make their way out of the sewer and loaded them into trucks. The

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<sup>174</sup>Eisenberg, Azriel. *Witness to the Holocaust*. (New York: Pilgram Press, 1981) 402.

<sup>175</sup>Eisenber, 403.

<sup>176</sup> Eisenberg, 403. & Lubetkin, 249, 253.

trucks took the last armed fighters of Warsaw to the forests, which were about 7 km from Warsaw where they were safe.<sup>177</sup>

The rescue operation of the fighters through the sewers was arranged by several ZOB fighters and a Pole who all operated from the Aryan side of Warsaw. Lubetkin described the events:

Two armed men were stationed at each side of the street closing off the approach. The Pole and two others helped our people out of the sewer. A Polish policeman who happened on the scene was warned by one of our men, 'Shut up or you'll be killed!' ... That same morning Krzaczek had contacted a transport company and ordered two trucks to Prosta Street for a large order of wooden shoes. When the trucks arrived and everything was ready for the operation the drivers were informed that it was not wooden shoes they would be transporting but Jewish fighters who had to be rescued from the sewer canals and taken out of Warsaw.<sup>178</sup>

The ZOB fighters who helped organize the plan on the Aryan side depict the true meaning of the fighting organization. They did everything in their power to get Jewish fighters to safety in the Aryan world. The journey was not over for the fighters who made it through the sewers safely; they then fought in the Polish Uprising in Warsaw, committed to defeating the Germans for good.

Even though the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had been suppressed, and the ghetto had been destroyed, the Jewish fighters were still eager to fight. The Warsaw Uprising in August 1944 gave the Jews another chance to battle their enemies, but this time they had much greater support. Zuckerman called for the Jews to support the Polish fighters, and fight in the uprising. He composed a declaration on the third day of the uprising that was published by the Communists and the Home Army in the underground press. Zuckerman acknowledged that when he wrote it he declared he would fight in the ranks of the Communist Armia Ludowa, but his

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<sup>177</sup> Eisenberg, 404.

<sup>178</sup> Lubetkin, 253.

responsibility was to the Jews, and for the freedom of Poland.<sup>179</sup> Zuckerman wanted the Jews to fight as Jews in the uprising, and he wanted to organize a Jewish unit with help from the Poles. When the uprising broke out Zuckerman, Lubetkin and Edelman were in the Old City, which Zuckerman believed was good, because otherwise he would have been cut off from the people who were close to him.<sup>180</sup>

The Jewish fighters were located in apartments on Panska and at Leszno 18, and they were armed with weapons. There were ZOB fighters fighting throughout Warsaw in addition to Zuckerman's unit. There was a group of Hashomer Hatzva'ir fighters who had come from the forests in December 1943. Zuckerman stated that "Many Jews joined the Uprising, including, for example, those imprisoned in Pawiak and released; Jews from Greece and other countries...Others of our couriers joined the Polish units of the AK and the AL."<sup>181</sup> Jews were widespread, taking part in the Warsaw Uprising, fighting as Jews, or aligning with Poles. It did not matter who they fought with, as long as they were fighting the enemy. In the end the uprising failed. Zuckerman then went to the AL commander and asked if he could help move the Jews out of the city. The commander agreed, and the Jews were taken to Zoliborz, through the sewers. There were problems with earlier groups leaving the city, because the Germans were bombing the manholes, but Zuckerman, Lubetkin, and Edelman, along with their unit were successful, and made it to the forests.<sup>182</sup> Zuckerman, Lubetkin, and Edelman were main figures in Jewish resistance. They fought in the Warsaw ghetto, and on the Aryan side of the city. They always looked out for other Jews, and were responsible for the lives of many Jews.

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<sup>179</sup> Zuckerman, 523.

<sup>180</sup> Zuckerman, 527.

<sup>181</sup> Zuckerman, 531.

<sup>182</sup> Zuckerman, 541-543.

In the end, the Germans technically won the battle in Warsaw. They were able to liquidate, and evacuate large numbers of Jews from the ghetto. However, the Jews were successful in mounting resistance for such a long time against a militarily superior opponent. The Jews also succeeded in being able to get combat groups of the ZOB and ZZW out of the ghetto and into the forests where they could join the partisan fight. Many Jewish lives were saved because of the courageous and sacrificial acts by members of the Jewish fighting organizations in Warsaw. ZOB members were also part of the Polish Warsaw Uprising, which showed even more heroism on the parts of the Jews. Even when they did not have to fight, they wanted to. The uprising in Warsaw also was important because the Jewish Fighting Organization was able to spread to other Polish ghettos, and triggered resistance all over German-occupied Poland.

### Chapter 3 Bialystok Resistance

Even though Warsaw was the most populated Jewish ghetto that was subject to German rule, Jews in ghettos all throughout Poland were being attacked, and sent to their deaths at the hands of the Germans. The Jewish Fighting Organization was aware of this, and made sure that other ghettos would be able to fight back like Warsaw did. The Jewish Fighting Organization sent some of its leaders; most notably Mordechai Tenenbaum, to the Bialystok ghetto to form an underground fighting organization. With support from youth movements already in the ghetto, and the Jewish Fighting Organization, the Bialystok ghetto was able to form resistance.

On June 22, 1941 the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, resulting in Bialystok being bombed. Upon attack the Red Army began to flee the city; consequentially shops were looted, and in the ensuing chaos, prisoners, including some Jewish activists, managed to escape. By June 26 Bialystok was conquered without a fight.<sup>183</sup> This spelt disaster for the Jews. Once the city was conquered three companies belonging to Polizeibataillon 309 entered the city. The trials conducted for the Polizeibataillon in West Germany during the 1960's found evidence that made it clear that these companies knowingly participated in a larger plan to exterminate the Jews.<sup>184</sup> With the request of Adolf Hitler these companies were told to kill Jews, and the attacks against the Jews of Bialystok ensued.

Jewish neighborhoods were raided, and Jews were evicted from their homes. One of the commanders shot Jews who refused to open the door, and he instructed other men to do the same. Members of the Polizeibataillon also dragged Jews from their homes, kicked them, and hit them with their rifle butts. These companies also burnt down the Great Synagogue with Jews

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<sup>183</sup> Bender, Sara. *The Jews of Bialystok during World War II and the Holocaust*. (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008) 90.

<sup>184</sup> Bender, 90.

locked inside.<sup>185</sup> These insidious actions by the Polzeibataillon only worsened on July 1 when Einsatzkommando 8, a subunit of Einsatzgruppe B, entered the city. Einsatzkommando 8 “cordoned off several streets and raided Jewish homes, taking about 1,000 men away to the local military command where they were held as prisoners.”<sup>186</sup> By July 8<sup>th</sup>, Heinrich Himmler ordered a full scale massacre on Bialystok, and within the first two weeks there were nearly 7,000 Jewish deaths in the city.<sup>187</sup> These horrific actions against the Jews resonated in the minds of the surviving Jews, which would later lead to the Jewish Fighting Organization’s role in Bialystok.

On July 26, 1941 the Judenrat announced that the military authorities in Bialystok had ordered the establishment of a Jewish ghetto in the city.<sup>188</sup> With the mass movement of Jews to the ghetto the Poles thought they could take advantage of the Jews, and they did. “Many Poles took advantage of the chaos to rob children of the few goods they were carrying.”<sup>189</sup> These actions played a role in Jewish resistance, because it was hard to sit back while people were taking their lifestyle, and eventually their life away from them. The Judenrat largely controlled life in the ghetto under the direction of Ephraim Barash. Barash aimed to normalize ghetto life and appease the German authorities.<sup>190</sup> Barash’s role as leader of the Judenrat would become extremely important when resistance in the ghetto materialized, because Bialystok was the only ghetto where the Judenrat and resistance movement worked together.

Barash’s background played a large role in his actions as head of the Judenrat in Bialystok. He was a member of the Jewish Defense Organization in his home city Wolkowysk, and like his father, he became a Zionist. He belonged to the General Zionist youth movement. He

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<sup>185</sup> Bender, 91, 92.

<sup>186</sup> Bender, 93.

<sup>187</sup> Bender, 98.

<sup>188</sup> Bender, 103.

<sup>189</sup> Bender, 104.

<sup>190</sup> Bender, 115.



was elected to the city council of Wolkowysk, and helped the city's failing economy with help from Gitterman. He was chairman of the local Zionist Organization and president of Zionist foundations. As Bender noted "His extraordinary organizational ability enhanced his status and earned him the respect of all strata of Jewish society in the city."<sup>191</sup> After his family moved to Bialystok in 1934 Barash was appointed director of the Jewish community council. He held the post of acting chairman of the Judenrat throughout the ghettos existence.<sup>192</sup> It was his background as a Zionist, and the respect the Jewish community had for him that led him to work well with the fighting organization. He understood the importance of their mission even if he knew it jeopardized life in the ghetto. His role throughout the existence of the Bialystok ghetto was extremely important in the armed resistance movement.

The origins of Jewish resistance in Bialystok are derived from the Polish-Jewish underground that was formed by Tadeusz Jakubowski, and Marila Rozycka, who were both Communists. The Jewish Communists held meetings starting in December of 1941, and with the help of Jakubowski formed the Organization of Workers and Peasants for War against the Invaders, which later became known as the Anti-Fascist Committee.<sup>193</sup> The next step in resistance in Bialystok was the December 1941 meeting of all pioneer organizations of the Pioneer Coordination Committee. It was at this meeting where the head of Hehalutz Hatzair-Dror in Vilna, Mordechai Tenenbaum, convinced the committee that it was too late to set up a resistance movement in Vilna, and "wished to transfer Dror members in Vilna to 'quieter' places, such as Bialystok."<sup>194</sup> Tenenbaum was convinced that resistance in Bialystok was possible, and he became one of the leaders of resistance in the Bialystok Ghetto.

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<sup>191</sup> Bender, 105.

<sup>192</sup> Bender, 104, 105.

<sup>193</sup> Bender, 155.

<sup>194</sup> Bender, 156, 157.

On New Year's Eve 1941 Abba Kovner, a member of Hashomer Hatza'ir in Vilna, who was a prominent figure in Vilna's resistance, "read his famous manifesto calling for an armed uprising against the Germans, Tenenbaum and Esther Jaffe visited [Anton] Schmidt's house to plan the escape of pioneers from Vilna to Bialystok."<sup>195</sup> It was most likely at that meeting that Tenenbaum and Schmidt decided the details to transfer fourteen members of Dror from Vilna to Bialystok.<sup>196</sup> Schmidt, who was a sergeant in the German Wehrmacht, was very influential in helping the resistance movement in Bialystok start up. He worked with Tenenbaum to secretly move manpower. Barach noted that he did not think Tenenbaum would have ever been able to accomplish the movement of Jews from Vilna to Bialystok without the help of Schmidt.<sup>197</sup> Schmidt was extremely sympathetic to the Jews, and in addition to helping Tenenbaum's needs in Bialystok, he helped save Jewish life in Vilna. Shocked by the brutality of the mass killings at Ponar, Schmidt decided to do whatever he could to help Jews survive. He helped release Jews from the Lukiszki jail, rescued Jews in many ways, and supplied food and provisions to Jews inside the ghetto. He also hid Jews in three houses under his supervision during *aktionen*.<sup>198</sup> People like Schmidt who helped the Jews were extremely courageous, and provided Jews with the notion that they deserved to be free.

The youth movements in Bialystok played an extremely important role in shaping, and carrying out resistance in the ghetto. In Bialystok some of the Jewish youth movements whose activities ceased under Soviet annexation started to function again after the news traveled to the ghetto that Jews were being liquidated in Lithuania. Hashomer Hatza'ir was one of the major youth movements that were able to influence the resistance movement in Bialystok. Adding onto

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<sup>195</sup> Bender, 159.

<sup>196</sup> Bender, 159.

<sup>197</sup> Bender, 158.

<sup>198</sup> Gutman, Israel ed. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*. Vol. 4 (1333).

the members who came from Vilna, refugees from Slonim, Grodno, and nearby towns, who escaped to the ghetto during the first few months of German occupation were also present. These former members and local pioneers set up a kibbutz in the ghetto and revived the organization in Bialystok; members were once again meeting to discuss social and ideological issues, and recruitment policy.<sup>199</sup> Hashomer Hatzar kept constant dialogue with Barash and the Judenrat, which would help resistance efforts. Bender stated, “[Barash] told them what questions the Germans had asked him about the refugees from Vilna. He also informed them which Jews were in the Gestapo’s pay.”<sup>200</sup> Hashomer Hatzar was able to really take shape in Bialystok, while staying in contact with the organization in Warsaw and Vilna. Their relationship with the Judenrat and the other ghettos allowed the movement to act effectively in the resistance movement.

The Bund in Bialystok was revived, but divided on the issue of armed resistance. The youth believed that activism was the correct response to the German’s policies, while the old guard was opposed to an armed uprising. According to Bender, “The younger Bundists developed close ties with the Anti-Fascist Committee and made considerable inroads among the local youth. They...joined the fighting organization.”<sup>201</sup> Although the older Bund members were opposed to armed resistance, it was their youth who realized the need for Jewish resistance, and joined forces with the Jewish Fighting Organization. The Revisionist movement, Betar, also was in action in the Bialystok Ghetto. Led by Itzhak Fleisher, the movement was not very influential because it had trouble making inroads within the ghetto. There was distrust between the Betarists and the left-wing movements that dated back to friction between the traditional Zionist

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<sup>199</sup> Bender, 160, 161.

<sup>200</sup> Bender, 161.

<sup>201</sup> Bender, 166.

Organization and Vladimir Jabotinsky's New Zionist Organization.<sup>202</sup> Hanoar Hazioni was another youth movement that played a role in resistance in Bialystok. The reemergence of the youth movements in the Bialystok Ghetto allowed for resistance to get off the ground, because the youth were willing to join the fighting organization.

During the summer of 1942 Front A was established in Bialystok, which was the beginning of the resistance movement in the ghetto. In January of that same year Haika Grosman, a member of Hashomer Hatzza'ir, was sent to Bialystok on a mission for the F.P.O. to set up an underground fighting organization along the lines of the F.P.O. that had been set up in Vilna.<sup>203</sup> However, Grosman was too busy moving around Poland working for the resistance movement to lead the revolt, and on April 1942 Edek Boraks, a member of the Hashomer Hatzza'ir leadership in Vilna, arrived in Bialystok to take over the military command of the emerging underground. Front A initially incorporated Communists, Betarists, members of Hashomer Hatzza'ir and Hanoar Hazioni, and later included Bundists.<sup>204</sup>

It was not until August 1942, under Boraks' command that Front A was officially formed. He was able to establish a framework that united the Communists, Hashomer Hatzza'ir, and Bundist youth. Even though there was now a coalition between the major youth movements in the ghetto, this did not put an end to the differences and disputes between the Communists and the resistance movement. Many Communists left the ghetto for the forests, because they did not believe that armed resistance in the ghetto would be successful.<sup>205</sup> Regardless of the lack of support from the Communists, Hashomer Hatzza'ir had successfully organized a platform for resistance. The first weapons that surfaced in the ghetto were German weapons. They had been

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<sup>202</sup> Bender, 165, 166.

<sup>203</sup> Bender, 166

<sup>204</sup> Bender, 166.

<sup>205</sup> Bender, 168.

stolen, dismantled, and smuggled in piecemeal. Another source of weapons arose in the ghetto; “‘grenade workshops’ sprang up in the ghetto. Chemists manufactured Molotov cocktails and firebombs. Locksmiths manufactured rifle parts, brass knuckles, and knives.”<sup>206</sup>

Shortly after the establishment of Front A Mordechai Tenenbaum arrived in Bialystok on November 1, 1942. As mentioned earlier, Tenenbaum was one of the founders and leaders of the Jewish Fighting Organization that was set up in Warsaw. Tenenbaum, a member of Poalei Zion-SS, was delegated by the Jewish Fighting Organization to lead the resistance in the Bialystok Ghetto.<sup>207</sup> Tenenbaum became entrenched in the Zionist movement at an early age; at age 14 he joined Hashomer Haleumi. In 1938 Tenenbaum, when he was a member of Dror, participated in the Hehalutz nationwide seminar. As Bender noted, on the eve of World War II Tenenbaum was one of Hehalutz’s most promising activists in Poland, and a contributor to the “ideological mouthpiece of Poalei Zion-SS.”<sup>208</sup> In October 1939 Tenenbaum moved to Vilna where he became a member of the Pioneer Coordination Committee. He continued to travel to different districts in Poland to help the resistance movement, leading to his placement in Bialystok, and his role in setting up a cohesive fighting organization in the ghetto.<sup>209</sup>

Around the same time Tenenbaum arrived in Bialystok, massacres in Vilna and other places in the East took place and were no longer considered isolated incidents; “The Jews of Bialystok had heard of the mass deportation from Warsaw...Tens of thousands of Jews were being evacuated from the district. News of Treblinka had already penetrated the ghetto, and some Jews had begun preparing hiding places, in case of an imminent *action*.”<sup>210</sup> The realization that the Bialystok Jews were in serious danger of deportations helped Tenenbaum and the fighting

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<sup>206</sup> Bender, 169.

<sup>207</sup> Bender, 173.

<sup>208</sup> Bender, 174.

<sup>209</sup> Bender, 174.

<sup>210</sup> Bender, 178.

organizations appeal to the Jews of Bialystok. A positive step for resistance came upon Tenenbaum's arrival in Bialystok with the formation of an alliance between Hashomer Hatza'ir and Dror. Together the organizations created joint committees for military training, organization, production, arms, finances, and political affairs.<sup>211</sup> However, this created problems within the youth movements. Dror was not a member of Front A, and the Communists opposed their admittance. Tenenbaum could not gain the approval of the Communists to allow Dror into the underground, which led Dror to abandon the ghetto for the forests. Tenenbaum was, however, able to negotiate and incorporate Hanoar Hazioni into the movement. Tenenbaum was also successful in negotiations with the Revisionists, who joined the underground.

Tenenbaum was also able to maintain a good relationship between the fighting organization and the Judenrat. Tenenbaum and Barash had a great relationship, and worked together throughout the existence of the ghetto. Bender reported that their friendship "was sincere, based on mutual trust and assistance. While Barash kept Tenenbaum informed of German plans for the ghetto, based on reports by his German masters, Tenenbaum kept Barash up to date with developments in the underground."<sup>212</sup> Barash also helped support the underground, providing it with funds, and rooms. Tenenbaum used Barash's office in the Judenrat building for meetings to help plan the establishment of the underground. In January 1943 a new fighting front, Front B, was formed. It consisted of Dror, Hashomer Hatza'ir, the Revisionists, Hanoar Hazioni, and a Bund faction that was not part of Front A. Front B concentrated on the organization of comrades into underground cells, the manufacture and procurement of weapons, and maintenance of a clandestine archive in the ghetto.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Bender, 178.

<sup>212</sup> Bender, 182.

<sup>213</sup> Bender, 182, 183, 184.

Although Front A and B were both created for the same conceptual reason there were differences between the two. These differences are the reason Front B was created; the leaders of the resistance movement in Bialystok believed Front A did not encompass everything an effective fighting organization in the ghetto needed. The establishment of Front A did not resolve ideological differences among its constituent groups. The Communists believed that armed struggle was a universal struggle, whereas, the pioneer youth movements saw the ghetto as the main arena for nationalist-Jewish struggle.<sup>214</sup> An obstacle facing Front A was that they needed Dror to be admitted, but the ideological differences also led to the exclusion of Dror from Front A. The Communists did not want Dror in a united underground organization.<sup>215</sup> To try and fill voids from Front A Tenenbaum negotiated with members of Hanoar Hazioni, and they were incorporated into operational cells. Tenenbaum continually negotiated with other factions of Jewish life in Bialystok, most notably the Bundists and the Revisionists. Tenenbaum believed the Revisionists were unfairly left out of Front A, and he was able to include them in Front B.<sup>216</sup> As Boraks was responsible for establishing Front A, it was Tenenbaum who established Front B. Tenenbaum realized he could maximize the number of people and resources that would be needed for resistance.

The Jews of Bialystok had avoided mass deportation for a longer time than most of their counterparts, but the time was nearing. Beginning in November 1942 the First *Aktion* was underway. The ghetto was sealed, and Jews were no longer allowed to work outside the ghetto.<sup>217</sup> A little more than a month later Heinrich Himmler issued a general order for 35,000 able-bodied prisoners to be sent to a concentration camp; 30,000 of these Jews were to come

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<sup>214</sup> Bender, 168, 169.

<sup>215</sup> Bender, 178.

<sup>216</sup> Bender, 178, 179.

<sup>217</sup> Bender, 187.

from Bialystok. However, the deportation of the Bialystok Jews was postponed because of a plea by the Gestapo in the ghetto that the Jews of Bialystok were working in factories vital to the war effort.<sup>218</sup> The postponement bought the Jews time, but it did not end the threat of deportation. After mulling over the situation the Germans decided to implement the *aktion* against the Jews of Bialystok in early February of 1943.<sup>219</sup>

The Jews of Bialystok were aware of the deportations in the district, and Barash and Tenenbaum needed to prepare for the possibility of this. Two weeks before the *aktion* took place Tenenbaum wrote in his diary “There are rumors that the ghetto will be closed on the first of February...A terrible feeling pervades the ghetto. All around us everything is burning. Soon, the fire will reach Bialystok...and we are hardly prepared.”<sup>220</sup> During those two weeks Tenenbaum worked hard to prepare a fighting front and draw up contingency plans in case of an *aktion*. The leaders of the underground met on January 29 to finalize plans. They agreed that torching the Judenrat building would be the signal to revolt. Tenenbaum claimed that it was easier “to open fire when the first Jew is taken away then to let thousands be killed to save the rest, for who knows how long.”<sup>221</sup> Fronts A and B agreed with Tenenbaum’s ideology.

As the *aktion* approached them the Jews of Bialystok prepared diligently. They made hiding places in cellars, attics, and hollow walls. They also dug up bunkers. Underground tunnels were built that led outside of the ghetto.<sup>222</sup> On February 3, Hershel Rosenthal, a Dror activist, informed Tenenbaum that none of the Jewish workers had been allowed out of the ghetto. This news prompted Tenenbaum to summon the neighborhood commanders of the underground and order them to prepare for battle; “Instructions were given to deploy cells, take up positions, and

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<sup>218</sup> Bender, 188, 189.

<sup>219</sup> Bender, 191.

<sup>220</sup> Bender, 192.

<sup>221</sup> Bender, 192.

<sup>222</sup> Bender, 194.



distribute hundreds of liters of sulfuric acid in readiness for use.”<sup>223</sup> On February 5, 1943, at 3:30 a.m. the *aktion* in the Bialystok Ghetto was underway. About eighty armed members of the Gestapo, Schupo, and Kripo entered the ghetto. Within seconds the Germans surrounded the neighborhood designated for deportation and opened fire. If the Jews refused to be deported they would be shot.<sup>224</sup> Itzhak Malmed was one of the first Jews to act in retaliation against the Germans. When the Germans came to deport him he threw sulfuric acid at them, injuring one in the eye. The enraged German opened fire and killed a German and injured another.<sup>225</sup> Although the consequences of Malmed’s actions ended with 100 Jews being shot, it showed the Germans that the Jews of Bialystok were willing to fight.

The next day when the Germans entered the ghetto they ordered the Jewish police to round up the Jews. After the Malmed incident the Germans were afraid of Jewish resistance. They started to throw grenades at Jewish homes, and used police dogs and water and gas hoses to force Jews out of their shelters, but according to Tenenbaum there was little success.<sup>226</sup> However, the deportations continued. This did not come easy for the Germans though. Bender noted that there were two phenomena that were unique to the Bialystok Ghetto; “the steadfast refusal of the Jewish police to participate in the deportation, and the fact that the entire ghetto population went into hiding.”<sup>227</sup> Overall, throughout the entire week of the *aktion* 10,000 Jews were deported.

The *aktion* in the ghetto definitely prompted resistance. Boraks, the head of Front A, and Tenenbaum, the head of Front B, had met to discuss contingency plans for when the ghetto would be attacked. There was internal conflict on whether the underground should attack when

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<sup>223</sup> Bender, 195.

<sup>224</sup> Bender, 197.

<sup>225</sup> Bender, 198.

<sup>226</sup> Bender, 198.

<sup>227</sup> Bender, 203.

the first Jew was led away, or wait for a large number of Jews to be taken. Hashomer Hatza'ir wanted to attack right away, whereas Dror was hesitant.<sup>228</sup> Barash and Tenenbaum realized several hours before the *aktion* that the Germans were not intending to liquidate the entire ghetto, which changed the attitudes of the two fronts. They decided they would not retaliate to deportations until the German plan to destroy the whole ghetto became evident. Once Barash informed Tenenbaum that the first deportation was only to be partial the fronts agreed to only counterattack if the number exceeded the original quota of 6,300.<sup>229</sup> With no rebellion in site, nine members of Hashomer Hatza'ir were captured at their cell on Fabryczna Street, and marched to their deaths. After Tenenbaum brought the remainder of the men to the factories, leadership members were distraught by the loss of their comrades, and abandoned the factories to join Boraks' group. On February 10 Boraks' hiding place was also discovered and eight more Hashomer Hatza'ir members were arrested. To add onto the arrests, a Communist division which had also refused to take shelter in the factories was taken by the Germans after Frieda Feld and her friend Bluma threw grenades at the Germans who came to deport them.<sup>230</sup> As Tenenbaum continued to defer resistance more and more members of the resistance movement were taken away, and it got harder to mount any resistance.

On the sixth day of the *aktion*, participants in the workers' assembly decided that the deadline for a countercoup was February 13. Overall no resistance took place during the First *Aktion* in Bialystok. Bender stated numerous reasons for this development, or lack thereof; "Divisiveness, lack of coordination, the absence of a comprehensive strategy, and above all a serious shortage of weapons eclipsed any chance for retaliation. Finally, the capture of the Communists and Hashomer Hatza'ir leadership delivered the death blow to the ghetto

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<sup>228</sup> Bender, 204.

<sup>229</sup> Bender, 205.

<sup>230</sup> Bender, 204, 205.

underground.”<sup>231</sup> Tenenbaum was distraught over the events of the First *Aktion*. His inability to act decisively and his trust in Barash that the Germans would not attack factories led 10,000 Jews to their deaths. However, it is possible that Tenenbaum may have saved more Jews than died because of lack of resistance. If the Jews committed a full force resistance, which they did not have the weapons to be successful, the Germans may have wiped out the ghetto on the spot. By prolonging Jewish life in Bialystok, Jews were able to escape to the forests, where survival was more likely.<sup>232</sup>

On the night of August 15-16 1943 the Germans again invaded the Bialystok ghetto, which was not expected by the underground. At the time of the attack the Jewish underground had almost 200 fighters, and 130 firearms. The leaders of the fighting fronts and commanders of the underground cells had already worked out an emergency plan in the event of an *aktion*, but the shock of the event caused problems for the fronts.<sup>233</sup> Tenenbaum ordered the underground to meet at dawn where he devised a new plan. The new plan would launch at 9:00 a.m. that morning. The main force would attack the Germans posted near the ghetto fence, to create an escape route to the forest. While the first attack occurred, four other attacks would commence as diversionary tactics. Fighters would also be placed in the factories to attack the invading Germans.<sup>234</sup> Without any notice the evacuation and uprising of the Bialystok ghetto was underway in mid-August 1943.

The Jewish uprising in Bialystok took place as planned. Before 9:30 a.m. hand grenades were launched at the Germans. The Germans fired back, and killed thousands of Jewish

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<sup>231</sup> Bender, 207-208.

<sup>232</sup> Bender, 209, 210, 211.

<sup>233</sup> Bender, 254.

<sup>234</sup> Bender, 255, 256.

bystanders.<sup>235</sup> The underground concentrated their efforts on Smolna Street, because it was closest to the forests. Jewish efforts were curtailed by Police Regiment 26, who was prepared; the Jews eventually ran out of ammunition. The Jews were able to inflict a number of casualties on the Germans, but the Jews lost the battle on Smolna Street.<sup>236</sup>

The battle moved to the Judenrat Gardens on Nowogrodzka Street. Members from Dror and Hashomer Hatzza'ir took place in this battle. Most of the underground fighters in this battle died, the rest retreated to factories, and bunkers. The Germans continued to isolate the fighters from the masses, and destroyed communication among the cells. By noon most of the fighters had fallen, and the battle was over.<sup>237</sup> As if the Jewish struggle could not get any worse, by noon of the first day 20,000 out of a total of 30,000 people had shown up at the assembly points. By the end of the first day the underground had lost many of its 200 members.<sup>238</sup> Bender stated, "those who chose to fight on the first day of the evacuation preferred an honorable death to a dishonorable life, for it was clear that no one would come out of the battle alive."<sup>239</sup> The resistance in Bialystok amounted to nothing. There were few survivors, and the Jews of Bialystok were eventually deported in mass numbers.

When studying resistance in Bialystok it is important to ask the question of why Tenenbaum delayed resistance, and ultimately did not form any mass resistance like what took place in Warsaw. After all, Tenenbaum went to Bialystok to set up an underground fighting organization to resist German occupation. He negotiated with all the Jewish organizations in the ghetto to incorporate everyone into the resistance movement, and he repeatedly worked with the Judenrat regarding resistance. He explained how the Jews in Bialystok needed to use armed

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<sup>235</sup> Bender, 258, 259.

<sup>236</sup> Bender, 259, 260.

<sup>237</sup> Bender, 260.

<sup>238</sup> Bender, 260, 261.

<sup>239</sup> Bender, 261.

resistance against the Germans. Bender wrote about one possible reason why Tenenbaum did not call for a full resistance; “after visiting the weapons laboratories in the ghetto, Tenenbaum was dismayed to discovered that the weapons stock was totally inadequate and that production was proceeding very slowly, due partly to the difficulty in obtaining spare parts.”<sup>240</sup> It is plausible that Tenenbaum did not believe the Jewish underground had enough weapons to sustain any sort of battle, and would have just been annihilated quicker. Another reason Bender provided is the fact that Tenenbaum lost lots of his Hashomer Hatzza’ir comrades.<sup>241</sup> For whatever reason Tenenbaum delayed the uprising, and it is unknown what would have happened if it took place earlier.

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<sup>240</sup> Bender, 204.

<sup>241</sup> Bender, 231.

## Chapter 4 The F.P.O. in Vilna

Vilna, which was responsible for sending many resistance leaders to Bialystok, also formed a resistance group in the Vilna Ghetto as the possibility of liquidation loomed. The youth movements in Vilna were very proactive in organizing resistance groups, as well as keeping in contact with their counterparts in other ghettos; mainly Warsaw and Bialystok. The ideology of Abba Kovner, who was a member of Hashomer Hatzva'ir and eventually commanded the resistance movement in Vilna, that the Jews needed to put up a fight against the Germans led to the formation of Vilna resistance. Vilna's resistance movement was also very different from Warsaw and Bialystok, because the Vilna fighters moved to the forests in mass numbers, which became important in overall Jewish resistance. Another major difference in the Vilna Ghetto was the fact that they had to deal with the Lithuanians in addition to the Germans. Overall, the Vilna Ghetto, and its resistance movements were an integral factor in Jewish resistance in Poland during the Holocaust.

On June 24, 1941 Vilna fell to the German forces. The Wehrmacht entered the city, and set up a military government. During the German military administration in Vilna, which lasted between June 24 and August 1, 1941, there were two phases. The first phase was a joint German-Lithuanian government; the second was a direct German military command. During the second phase Lithuanian institutions were abolished and a number of others were limited to municipal functions only.<sup>242</sup> Unlike Warsaw, and Bialystok, Vilna had to deal with another opponent; the Lithuanian armed forces. When the Lithuanians entered Vilna sixty Jews and twenty Poles were seized as hostages on June 24 and 25. "The hostages had been apprehended in order to make certain that the population would obey the instructions contained in that order and warned that

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<sup>242</sup>Arad, Yitzhak. *Ghetto In Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust*. (Jerusalem: Ahva Cooperative Printing Press, 1980) 41.

further hostages would be taken if all the instructions were not carried out.”<sup>243</sup> The Lithuanians wanted to invoke fear into Jewish and non-Jewish Poles.

Although Vilna was part of Poland, and not a part of Lithuania in between the two world wars, the Lithuanians were extremely insistent on controlling the city. Lithuania wanted to impart their rule over Vilna, which was extremely dangerous for the Jews. Yitzhak Arad stated that “The Lithuanians regarded the Poles as a potential danger to their authority...They thus concentrated their main efforts toward imparting a Lithuanian character to Vilna and creating the impression in the German military command that the city had a stable Lithuanian administration complete with civilian, military, and police institutions.”<sup>244</sup> This created problems for the Jews in Vilna because they had the Germans and Lithuanians demanding control onto them, and they also had to deal with the Poles.

To emphasize the control they wanted in Vilna the Lithuanians took measures against Polish and Jewish cultural institutions. They closed down Polish and Jewish theaters, which was an order that came from the Provisional Lithuanian Government at Kowno. The Lithuanians also tried to portray the Archbishop in Vilna as anti-German, so that the Germans would oppose the Polish clergy that was in place in the city.<sup>245</sup> The Lithuanians attempted to gain German support in an effort to expel the Poles, and eliminate their power. However, they were unsuccessful. Report No. 10 from Berlin stated that the “‘Actions of the Einsatzgruppen’ must be directed against the Bolsheviks and the Jews and that there should be no operations at this time against the Polish intelligentsia.”<sup>246</sup> The German plan in Vilna was always to liquidate the Jewish population. Nevertheless, during the joint German-Lithuanian administration no mass executions

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<sup>243</sup> Arad, 47.

<sup>244</sup> Arad, 43.

<sup>245</sup> Arad, 45.

<sup>246</sup> Arad, 45-46.

of Jews in Vilna, or any anti-Jewish pogroms took place. There were, however, persecutions and molestations and Jews were murdered.<sup>247</sup>

Although no mass violence against the Jews took place early on in German-Lithuanian occupation of Vilna, anti-Semitic sentiment was vibrant in the city. Another anti-Jewish operation during the joint regime was the kidnapping of Jewish males from the streets. The abductions began on June 27, and most of the kidnapped people were taken away to work for the Germans and were returned to their homes when their tasks were completed, but some of them failed to return.<sup>248</sup> On June 29 the Lithuanians introduced the system of having two lines outside the food shops, one for Jews, and one for non-Jews. In addition, “Jews began to be ousted from their places of employment. Jewish houses were searched by Lithuanians who ostensibly were looking for arms, but who actually stole every article of value that they found.”<sup>249</sup> The struggle for the Jews of Vilna would get even tougher with the German military administration.

Beginning on July 4, 1941, the Germans issued numerous restrictions and decrees against the Jews, while they simultaneously implemented mass extermination plans under the control of Einsatzkommando 9. Lithuanian units helped the Einsatzkommando carry out the mass exterminations.<sup>250</sup> With the combination of the Wehrmacht and the SS, as well as the Lithuanians plotting against them, the Jews were clearly at a disadvantage. The German military government’s restrictions against the Jews in Vilna were harsh. On July 3, 1941 Von Ostman, the Germany Military Commander in Vilna ordered all Jews to wear a yellow badge. In addition the Lithuanian authorities forbade all Jews from remaining in the streets from 6 P.M. until 6 A.M.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Arad, 46.

<sup>248</sup> Arad, 47.

<sup>249</sup> Arad, 48.

<sup>250</sup> Arad, 53.

<sup>251</sup> Arad, 55.



It was easy to find Jews for exterminations because they were also required to wear special badges or armbands.

Einsatzkommando 9 entered Vilna on July 2, 1941, with the orders to exterminate the Jews of Vilna. Even before the arrival of E.K. 9 the Lithuanians had been murdering small groups of Jews in the forests near Ponar. These murders were important for E.K. 9's influence in Vilna. This is because it was through the Lithuanians that the Germans learnt of Ponar, and realized they could murder large number of Jews there. Arad commented, stating "The information was helpful to E.K 9 to launch the extermination campaign without delay and on a large scale."<sup>252</sup> On July 4 the massacres against the Jews began in three stages; kidnapping Jews from the streets and from their homes, detention of the victims in prison as a transition to Ponar, and finally transporting the Jews from prison to Ponar and murdering them there.<sup>253</sup> Although anti-Semitic decrees and violence had been common practice in Vilna during World War II, July 1941 sparked the first major *aktion* against the Jews in Vilna. It was clear from these actions that Jewish life in Vilna was in severe danger of extinction. Jewish leaders in Vilna started to realize that they would need to band together and stage a resistance movement if they were to have any chance of survival.

The German military government established a Judenrat in Vilna, which created direct dialogue between the Jews and the Germans in the city, and displaced the Lithuanians as the mediator. On July 4, 1941 a German car went to the synagogue on Zydowska Street and ordered Chaim-Meir Gordon to set up a Jewish representative body by the following day. After deliberations between important Jewish figures in Vilna, S. Trotzki was elected chairman of the

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<sup>252</sup> Arad, 66.

<sup>253</sup> Arad, 66.

Judenrat.<sup>254</sup> The council was composed of ten members, but the Judenrat continually expanded. A representative was appointed by the Judenrat for each city district, and on July 15 the German military commandment declared that a Judenrat must be elected by each community. The chairman of each council was responsible for any hostile act directed at the German administration at the hand of the Jews.<sup>255</sup> The members of the first Judenrat in Vilna had been on the former Jewish community council, which meant that the Jewish leadership of the city was represented by the Judenrat.<sup>256</sup>

The German military had a department called the *Gebietskommissariat*, which was controlled by the *Gebietskommissar*. The *Gebietskommissariat* was a very influential body in affecting Jewish life in Vilna. The *Gebietskommissar* was the ultimate German authority in the area under his control. His function included utilization of economic factors in the district to benefit the German war effort, police measures, ensuring the flow of war supplies, dissolution of hostile organizations still in existence, supervision of the civilian population, and assistance in operating and reactivating inland shipping, postal services, and the railroad network.<sup>257</sup> The *Gebietskommissariat* had four departments: General, Political, Economic, and Engineering. The functions of the *Gebietskommissar* were published in ‘The Brown File,’ which was issued by the Ostministerium (Ministry of the East) in September of 1941. The file had a special chapter dedicated to dealing with the Jewish problem in Eastern Europe.<sup>258</sup> In Vilna, H. Hingst was the *Gebietskommissar*. The *Gebietskommissar* of the Vilna district was H. Wulff.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Arad, 58, 59, 60.

<sup>255</sup> Arad, 61, 62.

<sup>256</sup> Arad, 64.

<sup>257</sup> Arad, 87-88.

<sup>258</sup> Arad, 88.

<sup>259</sup> Arad, 88.

At the end of August in 1941 Hingst received 'Provisional Directives' to start the second and principal wave of mass destruction of Vilna Jewry. This would be the stage where the major part of the Jewish community was murdered.<sup>260</sup> The Germans did not waste anytime on these orders, as Arad noted; "The eviction of the Jews from the old Jewish quarter and their incarceration in Lukiszki took place between August 31 and September 2. During the night of August 31/September 1, the Jewish occupants of houses in the area and also on Szklanna, Zydowska and Niemiecka streets (one side only) were removed."<sup>261</sup> On September 1-3 the Jews who were taken to Lukiszki were than evacuated to Ponar where they were massacred. On September 2 alone 3,700 Jews were executed in Vilna. Also on that day the Judenrat was liquidated, because its officers were located in the area in which the *aktion* was carried out.<sup>262</sup> These liquidations left the Jews of Vilna leaderless, and devastated the population.

To carry out the exterminations with ease Hingst was informed that he needed to erect a ghetto for all of the Jews of Vilna to live in. The area chosen for the ghetto was the old Jewish quarter in the center of the city, because it was already inhabited by thousands of Jewish residents.<sup>263</sup> The ghettoization was implemented strictly by German administration starting on September 6. They divided the Jews of Vilna into three zones. The first zone is where Jews were led to Ghetto No. 1, in the second zone Jews went into Ghetto No. 2, and in the third zone Jews were sent to Lukiszki prison and then to Ponar.<sup>264</sup> The attacks against the Jews started simultaneously with the formation of the ghetto. A Lithuanian Police Commander's report on September 9 recalled the events, "The Ghetto Operation in Vilna began at 6 A.M. in September 6, 1941. The *Aktion* was carried out in accordance with a prepared plan... Simultaneous *Aktionen*

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<sup>260</sup> Arad, 101.

<sup>261</sup> Arad, 103.

<sup>262</sup> Arad, 103, 104.

<sup>263</sup> Arad, 101.

<sup>264</sup> Arad, 109.

began in all police districts...The police evicted the Jews from the houses, and soldiers herded them into the places chose for their future residence.”<sup>265</sup> On September 10-11 the Jews being held in the prison were taken to Ponar where they were executed. Sima Katz who escaped, recounted the activities that took place, “The Lithuanians began marshalling us into groups of ten, and led the tens into the hillocks from which the firing was heard.”<sup>266</sup> The Jews of Vilna were quickly being eradicated. At this point Jewish survival from the Vilna Ghetto seemed unrealistic.

After the ghettos had been determined, and the Judenrat had been organized, steps were taken to form a Jewish police force in the ghetto. Notices were posted on the walls of Ghetto No. 1 telling young people to enlist in the ghetto. Jacob Gens, who was a former captain in the Lithuanian Army, was chosen as the police force’s commanding officer, as decided by the Judenrat.<sup>267</sup> Although Gens had married a Lithuanian gentile he was close to the Zionist Revisionists.<sup>268</sup> In July 1942 Gens was appointed as the ‘ghetto representative,’ and he essentially became the ghetto’s ruler after he had undermined the former head of the Judenrat. Porat stated that Gens was “driven to the role of ghetto representative by a strong ambition to become a leader at that difficult time, by having leadership qualities and the strong Jewish-national emotions of a Beitar member.”<sup>269</sup> Gens’ appointment as ghetto representative made the police force an extremely important factor in the ghetto.<sup>270</sup>

Similar to Barash, Gens had a relationship with the underground. However, his relationship with the underground is extremely controversial, and often times led to conflict.

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<sup>265</sup> Arad, 110.

<sup>266</sup> Arad, 115.

<sup>267</sup> Arad, 125.

<sup>268</sup> Arad, 126.

<sup>269</sup> Porat, Dina. *The Fall of a Sparrow: The Life and Times of Abba Kovner*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010) 86, 87.

<sup>270</sup> Porat, 87.

Porat commented that Gens felt that as an officer and member of Betar he could not join the underground, but when the ghetto's end seemed near he would remove large quantities of arms from a hiding place and fight side by side with the youth.<sup>271</sup> Gens was one of the most important Jewish figures in Vilna throughout the *aktionen*, and the eventual resistance launched by the F.P.O.

On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement for the Jewish people, the Germans and Lithuanians launched a major attack on the ghettos. *Aktionen* were carried out in both ghettos on October 1, 1941. The Germans and Lithuanians started at Ghetto No. 2, and the round ups took place at the synagogues, houses, and streets. By the end of the day 1,700 Jews had been taken from Ghetto No. 2.<sup>272</sup> The Germans demanded the Judenrat in Ghetto No. 1 to hand over 1,000 Jews or that they would come in and take 1,000 Jews themselves. The Judenrat decided to go with the former course of action, but only forty-six people came. Eventually, 2,220 Jews with passes showed up thinking that they would be granted immunity. The Germans instead took all 2,220 of them and took them to Lukiszki.<sup>273</sup> This *aktion* was a huge blow to Jewish hope, especially because it took place on Yom Kippur. It showed the Germans and Lithuanians had no compassion at all for Jewish life and just wanted to exterminate them.

Jewish life in Vilna continued to deteriorate throughout October of 1941. Between October 3 and 21 three more *aktionen* took place in Ghetto No. 2, wiping out all remaining Jews in the ghetto and sending them to Ponar. However, these *aktion* also produced the first mass passive resistance by Vilna Jews. The Germans had told the Jews they were being transferred to another ghetto, but the last group to be taken in the first of these three *aktion* realized they were

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<sup>271</sup> Porat, 104.

<sup>272</sup> Arad, 136.

<sup>273</sup> Arad, 136, 137.

being taken to Lukiszki, and laid down on the ground and refused to budge.<sup>274</sup> Unfortunately for the Jewish population of Vilna this act of resistance did not work, and on October 21 the final liquidation of Ghetto No. 2 took place.<sup>275</sup> After the liquidation of Ghetto No. 2 was complete the Germans wasted no time attacking Ghetto No. 1; “After midnight on October 23/24, the ghetto was cordoned off by heavy detachments of German troops and Lithuanian auxiliaries.”<sup>276</sup> The *aktion* lasted until December 22, and thousands of Jews were exterminated. The Germans had essentially destroyed the Jewish population of Vilna.

The *aktionen* that took place against the Jewish population of Vilna in late 1941 was the precursor to Jewish armed resistance in the Vilna Ghetto. Just like in Warsaw and Bialystok, the Zionist youth movements were at the forefront of resistance in Vilna. By late 1941 the Zionist youth movement’s emissaries in Vilna had the idea of armed resistance resonating throughout the movement. The Hehalutz youth movements were instrumental in forming Jewish resistance in Vilna. They were the first youth movement to create a link between the Vilna ghetto and Warsaw.<sup>277</sup> The constant contact between Vilna and other ghettos allowed the Jews of Vilna to effectively understand what was going on throughout Poland, and how to best plan for it. Henryk Grabowski was a courier who arrived from Warsaw to join the Polish underground in Vilna at the end of September 1941. He was linked to Hashomer Hatzar and He-Halutz ha-Za’ir, and he had established contacts with Kovner, Boraks, and Grossman.<sup>278</sup> Through Grabowski’s efforts dialogue between Vilna and Warsaw were made possible, and prepared the Jews for what lied ahead in the war.

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<sup>274</sup> Arad, 139.

<sup>275</sup> Arad, 142.

<sup>276</sup> Arad, 149.

<sup>277</sup> Arad, 222.

<sup>278</sup> Arad, 222, 223.

Vilna's resistance contributions were not only useful in Vilna. The Zionist youth movements in Vilna sent a delegation to Warsaw in December of 1941. This delegation consisted of Boraks of Hashomer Hatza'ir, Shlomo Antin of Ha-No'ar ha-Ziyyoni, and Israel Kempner and Yehuda Picezewski of Betar. Their purpose was to transmit the news of the extermination operations in Vilna and Lithuania to the youth movements in Warsaw.<sup>279</sup> The willingness of Vilna to send their major youth movement leaders to Warsaw to report on the situation in Vilna was extremely important to overall Jewish resistance in Poland. It gave other cities the ability to better prepare for what to expect, knowing what was happening to their Jewish counterparts elsewhere in the country.

According to Arad, despite the large number of Vilna Jews who were murdered during the *aktionen* the youth movements were successful in legally and illegally preserving a nucleus of activists.<sup>280</sup> Shortly after the *aktionen* had taken place Kovner expressed the need for armed resistance at a Hashomer Hatza'ir meeting at the end of December 1941. Kovner considered the extermination of Jews in Vilna to be part of a major plan, and not an isolated incident. He stated, "It is incumbent upon us to determine our further course of action. We stand before the end of an epoch, an epoch of efforts, the purpose of which was to save our members."<sup>281</sup> Kovner's ideas did not go unopposed. Tenenbaum urged members of Hehalutz to go to Bialystok, and Warsaw, because Vilna was too dangerous.<sup>282</sup> Tenenbaum was not Kovner's only opposition though. Female emissaries who came from Warsaw to Vilna brought with them a proposal from Hehalutz Hatza'ir-Dror in Warsaw that Vilna members should go to the Bialystok ghetto. Another emissary from Hashomer Hatza'ir delivered the same message, except she said they their

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<sup>279</sup> Arad, 225.

<sup>280</sup> Arad, 226.

<sup>281</sup> Arad, 226.

<sup>282</sup> Arad, 227.

members should go to Warsaw.<sup>283</sup> Opposition aside, the idea of armed resistance in Vilna started to pick up steam.

Abba Kovner was one of the most influential people pertaining to armed resistance in Vilna because of his commitment and belief in the resistance movement. As a young man his goals were pioneering in Eretz Israel and the proletarianization of the Jewish people. He joined the Hashomer Hatzza'ir branch in Vilna, and devoted all of his time, effort, and thoughts into the organization; he became one of the central figures of the organization.<sup>284</sup> At the outbreak of World War II Kovner understood the problems it would bring about for the Jewish people. He wrote that the world would become “a gallows for the Jewish people.”<sup>285</sup> It is not known what exactly he meant by that statement, but he clearly realized the world was out to get the Jews. Kovner had read *Mein Kampf*, and understood that Nazism was going to try and eliminate the Jewish people.<sup>286</sup> Kovner was a Zionist through and through, and from the outset of German occupation, and Jewish ghettoization in Poland believed that the Jews should fight back. When the Germans invaded Vilna his role as a member of the F.P.O., and as a Jewish leader in the Vilna ghetto and the Rudnicki Forest is why he is considered one of the leaders of Jewish resistance in Poland during the Holocaust.

At the end of December 1941 several dozen Betar members met to discuss the possibility of armed resistance in Vilna. At the meeting Joseph Glazman called for “No surrender to fate and no acquiescence to annihilation!”<sup>287</sup> Glazman was vocal in his support for the need for armed resistance, and he believed that one united force needed to be established, which in the

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<sup>283</sup> Arad, 230.

<sup>284</sup> Porat,, 9, 10.

<sup>285</sup> Porat, 16.

<sup>286</sup> Porat, 26, 27.

<sup>287</sup> Arad, 229.



face of danger would embrace the youth of all factions.<sup>288</sup> In conjunction with the Betar meeting, Hashomer Hatzá'ir members gathered together at the Convent of the Dominican Nuns. At the meeting they spoke about creating a combat organization that would incorporate all the anti-Fascist forces in the ghetto. They also decided that Kovner and other comrades living outside the ghetto should return, which prompted Kovner to return shortly after.<sup>289</sup> Ha-No'ar ha-Ziyyoni also spoke of the need for armed resistance, because the desire for armed resistance also developed among a group of active Communists.<sup>290</sup> Resistance in Vilna was becoming more and more likely as different youth organizations started to come to the realization that they needed to resist German and Lithuania forces.

On New Year's Eve the 'He-Halutz Coordination' held a conference that encompassed members of all Hehalutz youth movements. In preparation for the meeting Kovner was assigned the task of preparing a call to revolt, by expressing the concept of armed resistance. Roughly 150 members of the Hehalutz youth movements attended the conference in the public soup-kitchen at 2 Straszuna Street. At the conference Kovner delivered a manifesto. In his speech Kovner stated, "Let us not be led as sheep to the slaughter! True, we are weak and defenceless. But the only answer to the murderer is: To rise up with arms! Brethren! Better fall as free fighters than to live at the mercy of murderers. Rise up! Rise up until your last breath."<sup>291</sup> Kovner's ideology captivated the Jewish youth movements in Vilna, and forged the path for armed resistance. On January 21, 1942 a group of active youth movement and party members in the Vilna ghetto established the Fareinikte Partisaner Orgaizatzie (F.P.O. or United Partisan Organization). The meeting took place at Glazman's home and was attended by members from Betar, Hashomer

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<sup>288</sup> Arad, 229.

<sup>289</sup> Arad, 229.

<sup>290</sup> Arad, 229.

<sup>291</sup> Arad, 232.

Hatza'ir, Ha-No'ar ha-Ziyyoni, and the Communists.<sup>292</sup> The addition of the Communists into the mix made Vilna a unique situation, unlike the other ghettos. The incorporation of the Communists into the F.P.O. showed Jewish commitment to resistance in Vilna in the aftermath of the *aktionen*.

At the meeting main points of armed resistance were decided on. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the F.P.O. would comprise all movements represented at the meeting, with the aim of uniting all organizations in the ghetto. They also decided that the principal objective of the organization “should be the preparation of mass armed resistance, in case of an attempt to liquidate the ghetto.”<sup>293</sup> Itzhak Wittenberg was named Chief Commander of the organization, and Kovner and Glazman were members of the Command. The organization was set to defend for its people, and wanted to establish contact with the fighting forces outside the ghetto.<sup>294</sup> The F.P.O. was invested in protecting and saving Jewish life in Vilna, as well as all over Poland. The F.P.O. would become very significant as the German war effort continued, and Jewish life started to face the brink of elimination.

In order to be a member of the F.P.O. one had to be a member of a youth movement, and fit for armed underground action. A basic F.P.O. unit consisted of three members from one specific movement, who were dubbed a ‘trio.’ Trios were determined by the F.P.O. command, and lasted four or five months. Trios were subsequently replaced by units of five members called ‘quintets,’ which were composed of members of different movements who lived closed to each other. Quintets became the main operational units of the F.P.O. Three quintets formed a platoon, and four to six platoons of about 100-120 fighters was a battalion. There were two battalions in

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<sup>292</sup> Arad, 234.

<sup>293</sup> Arad, 236.

<sup>294</sup> Arad, 236.

the F.P.O.<sup>295</sup> In March 1942 the F.P.O. formed an intelligence unit under Glazman's command. The intelligence unit's objective was to infiltrate German and Lithuanian institutions. The F.P.O. was taking very serious steps to becoming a strong military organization that would be able to resist German/Lithuanian attempts to liquidate Vilna Jewry.

In March 1943 the F.P.O. published a document titled 'Combat Regulations of the F.P.O.' There were five clauses in the document, which were all important in determining the F.P.O.'s course of action. Clause 1 dealt with the conditions in which the ghetto combat would be waged. Clause 2 and 3 described the structure of the F.P.O. and the mobilization of the members for battle. It considered two situations; mobilization upon the initiative of the F.P.O. command and emergency mobilization.<sup>296</sup> Clause 4 "gave directives to the commanders as well as the rank and file on comportment in battle and the action to be taken if they were cut off from their units of from the F.P.O. Command....This clause emphasized the need to use ammunition sparingly and to display resourcefulness during action."<sup>297</sup> Clause 5 dealt with the formation of an alternative command, in case the F.P.O. headquarters were out of action, or if there was an arrest. A month later the F.P.O. expanded on these regulations to implement the time and place of a possible revolt. It declared that the F.P.O. would revolt and fight within the ghetto, if they believed a general liquidation of the ghetto, and not a limited *aktion* was being launched. It also stated that initial combat would take place in the ghetto.<sup>298</sup> The F.P.O. was preparing to fight, and had organized itself very well. This gave uniformity and hope to Jews in Vilna.

The next step for the F.P.O. was to obtain weapons. The organization contacted non-Jewish clandestine groups that were active in Vilna, and the partisans in the forests to obtain

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<sup>295</sup> Arad, 239, 240.

<sup>296</sup> Arad, 241.

<sup>297</sup> Arad, 242.

<sup>298</sup> Arad, 242.

weapons. The F.P.O. was successful in contacting the Polish underground, but they were not able to gain any weaponry from them. Arad stated that “The A.K. in the Vilna area persisted in its anti-Jewish stance...many Jews of Vilna and its environs who found refuge in the forests or with farmers, as well as Jewish partisans, were murdered by bands of Polish partisans.”<sup>299</sup> This was an obstacle for the F.P.O., because they could not be a serious military force without weapons. It also dashed Jewish hopes of survival in and around Vilna, because of the vehement anti-Semitism displayed by the Poles. The F.P.O. continued to try and find ways to get hold of weapons, which finally came to fruition. After the collapse of the Polish Army in September 1939 the non-Jewish population had come into possession of firearms. F.P.O. members who were employed outside of the ghetto in German army installations came into contact with the civilian population and purchased arms that they smuggled into the ghetto.<sup>300</sup> Another way the F.P.O. was able to obtain weapons was from German establishments. Jews who worked in German weapons-repair workshops stole several dozen weapons, including revolvers, rifles, submachine guns, grenades, and ammunition.<sup>301</sup>

Once the arms were in the Vilna ghetto the F.P.O. still had to be very careful with their placement of the weapons. The weapons had to be hidden from the Jewish police, and ghetto inhabitants, because possession or concealment of weapons was punished by death. The weapons were hid in various hiding-places, such as basements, public kitchens, and the Command headquarters. The F.P.O. would move the weapons were from time to time.<sup>302</sup> Besides hiding weapons in the ghetto, the ghetto was also responsible for making bombs from electric light

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<sup>299</sup> Arad, 249.

<sup>300</sup> Arad, 254.

<sup>301</sup> Arad, 255.

<sup>302</sup> Arad, 258.

bulbs. Molotov cocktails were also made in the ghetto.<sup>303</sup> While the F.P.O. was obtaining and making weapons, they were also committing acts of sabotage to disrupt the German war effort. In June 1942 the F.P.O. command decided to mine the German railroad line. The mine was prepared in the ghetto and on July 8, 1942, three F.P.O. members left the ghetto and placed the mine on the railroad 6 miles from Vilna. An ammunition train hit the mine and the engine and several wagons were damaged. The Germans did not even know it was Jews who performed the action.<sup>304</sup> F.P.O. members who worked in German factories also committed acts of sabotage. They sabotaged equipment and armaments. Such acts were damaging motors, spoiling bolts for artillery, delaying time fuses, and removing screws from aircrafts.<sup>305</sup> These acts of resistance were not known to be perpetuated by Jews, and provided the Germans with struggles in their effort to fight World War II, and to liquidate European Jewry.

The F.P.O. was not the only Jewish resistance group in Vilna. Members of He-Halutz Hatzair-Dror who stayed in Vilna after Tenenbaum and his associates left formed a group headed by Yechiel Scheinbaum. Tenenbaum's departure severed ties between He-Halutz Hatzair-Dror members and the other youth movements in Vilna. Scheinbaum was not invited to the meeting at which the decision to establish the F.P.O. took place.<sup>306</sup> When Scheinbaum contacted the F.P.O. about entering the organization he was told that his followers could enter individually, but not as an organized body. The 'Yechiel Group' as it became to be known looked elsewhere for support, and contacted other underground groups.<sup>307</sup> The Yechiel Group was able to initiate talks with the Kampfgruppe (Struggle Group). The Struggle Group formed in March-April 1942 under the direction of Borke Friedman. Friedman was a member of the F.P.O., but seceded from it and

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<sup>303</sup> Arad, 258.

<sup>304</sup> Arad, 260, 261.

<sup>305</sup> Arad, 261.

<sup>306</sup> Arad, 263.

<sup>307</sup> Arad, 263, 264.

formed a separate underground faction. One of the reasons for Friedman's actions was his struggle for Betar leadership with Glazman.<sup>308</sup> The Struggle Group provided an underground with military experience, because it had a nucleus of Betar members. By November-December 1942 the Yechiel and Struggle Groups merged. Arad stated that "The union was a combination of two factions that complemented each other: 'Yechiel' brought the ideological content of the Zionists and Halutzim, while the 'Struggle' injected the militarist element."<sup>309</sup> Both of these groups aspired to be combat organizations, and their merger favored both groups, and led to more Jewish resistance in Vilna.

As time went on more groups joined 'Yechiel's Struggle Group.' A Grodno group and an Akiva group, both joined in 1943, and brought arms with them. What set the group apart from the F.P.O. was their objective to fight in the forests. With reference to the group Arad stated, "Its purpose was to organize its members, and as many other Jews as possible, in order to leave the ghetto and launch guerilla warfare in the forests, a recourse which it conceived as a method of both rescue and struggle."<sup>310</sup> Vilna now had a very interesting resistance dynamic. They had the F.P.O. and the Yechiel Struggle Group, both who wanted to resist German occupation, and liquidation in Vilna.

In early 1943 Jewish life in and around the Vilna ghetto started to worsen. One of the major reasons for this was a major decline in German-Lithuanian relations. The Germans wanted the Lithuanians to enlist in their army, which the Lithuanians did not respond well to. In retaliation the Germans closed universities in Vilna and Kowno. Demonstrations, clashes, and mass arrests took place in both cities as a result. Arad stated that although "the rising political tension in Lithuania had no direct connection with the Jews...the atmosphere of increasing

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<sup>308</sup> Arad, 264.

<sup>309</sup> Arad, 265.

<sup>310</sup> Arad, 266-267.

German terror affected their policy toward the Jews.”<sup>311</sup> Arad also added that anti-Semitism increased within the Polish community in Vilna.<sup>312</sup> Another problem for the Jews was the German belief that Jews who had fled from the ghettos were active members of the Soviet partisan organizations, and aiding the Soviets in fighting the German army.<sup>313</sup> The consequences of German terror in Lithuania, and Polish anti-Semitism in Vilna, compounded with German belief that the Jews were helping the Soviet war effort were disastrous for the Jews who still remained in Vilna.

There were four ghettos outside of Vilna, Swieciany, Sol, Oshmyay, and Mikhailishki, that the Germans decided to liquidate. The rumors of these liquidations reached the Vilna ghetto in March 1943, and caused panic throughout the ghetto. The Jews from these ghettos were sent to the Vilna ghetto, the Kowno ghetto, or labor camps.<sup>314</sup> The Judenrats cooperated with the Germans during this liquidation process, but the Germans had lied to Gens during the process. A train from Sol to Vilna was supposed to then head to Kowno, but it instead went to Ponar, where hundreds of Jews were shot.<sup>315</sup> On the same day a train from Swieciany ended up in Ponar. Overall about 4,000 Jews who arrived on the two trains in Ponar that day died.<sup>316</sup> However, there were groups of armed Jewish youth in the smaller ghettos who were able to survive and move to the forests. One group of twenty-two combatants who were active in the Swieciany underground left for the forests during the night of March 5/6. Young men also went from the Oshmyany, Mikhailishki, and Sol ghettos to join the partisans.<sup>317</sup> Unfortunately, large numbers of Jews from

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<sup>311</sup> Arad, 355.

<sup>312</sup> Arad, 356.

<sup>313</sup> Arad, 356.

<sup>314</sup> Arad, 359.

<sup>315</sup> Arad, 360, 361.

<sup>316</sup> Arad, 361, 362.

<sup>317</sup> Arad, 367.

the smaller ghettos were murdered in early 1943, and this information reached the Vilna ghetto, and would lead to resistance in the Vilna ghetto.

The massacres that took place in March 1943 prompted an increase in underground activity in the ghetto. However, the resistance movement in the Vilna ghetto was faced with obstacles. As Arad noted, “Hundreds of young men, some of them organized in groups, reached the Vilna ghetto from the small ghettos that had already been liquidated. These groups were in contact with their fellow-townsmen in the forests and in partisan units, and an exodus of organized groups from the Vilna ghetto to the forests began.”<sup>318</sup> Nevertheless reports came from Warsaw regarding the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, which strengthened the spirit of resistance. This helped the idea of armed resistance spread positively throughout the Vilna ghetto.<sup>319</sup> Despite some manpower leaving Vilna for the forests, the ghetto was ready for armed resistance.

A major step in armed resistance was the agreement reached between the F.P.O. and the Yechiel Struggle Group in May 1943. The terms of the agreement stipulated that the Yechiel Struggle Group would affiliate with the F.P.O. as a unit with autonomous rights as to the admission of members and possession of arms, but the F.P.O. staff command would receive reports on new members admitted, and the two groups would cooperate on all arms acquisitions. Also, Scheinbaum became the struggle group’s representative on the F.P.O. Staff Command.<sup>320</sup> The F.P.O. also established close ties with the non-Jewish Communist underground in the city of Vilna. The relationship between the two groups was initiated through the ghetto Communists, and on May 8, 1943 a constitution created an umbrella organization between the F.P.O., the Polish Z.W.C and the Lithuanian ‘Union for the Liberation of Lithuania,’ called the ‘Vilna Anti-

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<sup>318</sup> Arad, 373.

<sup>319</sup> Arad, 373.

<sup>320</sup> Arad, 374.



Fascist Committee.’<sup>321</sup> Although the F.P.O. maintained its independence, there were benefits to the newly founded committee. It was proposed that a partisan base be created in the forests adjoining Vilna to which F.P.O. fighters could retreat. The committee was also asked to help obtain arms, which it did.<sup>322</sup> The F.P.O. had started to make inroads with other organizations to strengthen their ability to launch armed resistance in the Vilna ghetto.

In the spring of 1943 more and more fighters started to leave the ghetto to join partisan units in the forest. Couriers and guides would arrive from the forests, and organized groups of youths would leave the ghetto. Some of the couriers tried to make negotiations with the F.P.O., but the F.P.O. continually rejected their offers, because they did not want to send able men to the forests.<sup>323</sup> The F.P.O. believed that if they sent fighters to the forests large numbers of Jews remaining in the ghetto would not be protected. The F.P.O. could not stop all departures. On June 24 ten men from the Yechiel Struggle Group led by Friedman left the Vilna ghetto in the direction of the Nacza Forests.<sup>324</sup> Gens was very angry after this, and he directed the blame at Glazman and Bernstein of Yechiel’s Struggle Group. Glazman was then taken into custody and was set to be sent to the Rzesza labor camp. While he was en route to the labor camp F.P.O. men attacked the police escort and freed Glazman.<sup>325</sup> This was the first act of violence between the police force and the F.P.O., and it was the first time an underground organization in the ghetto had been openly demonstrated.

The conflict between the F.P.O. and the ghetto administration that transpired in the spring escalated in the middle of July. The event that took place is known as the Witenberg Affair. The event started because the German Security Police had become aware of the City Underground

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<sup>321</sup> Arad, 375.

<sup>322</sup> Arad, 377.

<sup>323</sup> Arad, 381, 382.

<sup>324</sup> Arad, 383.

<sup>325</sup> Arad, 385, 386.

Committee of the Communist Party through a Lithuanian agent. The Germans arrested the secretary of the committee J. Vitas, and committee member Kozlowski. During the interrogation of these two men they revealed they had maintained contact with a Jewish Communist named Itzhak Witenberg.<sup>326</sup> The German Security police came to the ghetto to arrest Witenberg, but he had gone into hiding. The F.P.O. Command, with the exception of the Communists did not know about the events that were taking place, and agreed to go to Gens' house for a meeting on July 15. Witenberg was present at the meeting, because no one knew the meeting was connected with him. Shortly after the meeting started Lithuanian security men and Dessler entered Gens' apartment and arrested Witenberg.<sup>327</sup> As Witenberg was being arrested the Kaplinsky group attacked the Lithuanians and the Jewish police in ambush, and freed Witenberg. Witenberg and his F.P.O. rescuers went into the carpentry workshop at No. 3 Oszmianska and barricade themselves.<sup>328</sup> The F.P.O. felt betrayed by the ghetto administration for obvious reasons, which created a major conflict in the ghetto.

The F.P.O. decided that Witenberg should go into hiding, and they disguised him as a woman. By the next morning the F.P.O. had mobilized its members, and concentrated them in two houses at Nos. 3 and 8 Oszmianska; the F.P.O. was prepared for armed battle. Gens held a meeting with the police, brigadiers, and a group of the *shtarke*. He explained that the police force needed to capture Witenberg; otherwise the Germans would liquidate the ghetto. The group of *shtarke* left the meeting place and went to where the F.P.O. were assembled and started to throw stones and sticks, while demanding that Witenberg surrender.<sup>329</sup> The entirety of the ghetto wanted Witenberg to surrender, because they did not feel one person's contact with Communists

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<sup>326</sup> Arad, 387.

<sup>327</sup> Arad, 388.

<sup>328</sup> Arad, 388, 389.

<sup>329</sup> Arad, 389.

outside the ghetto should jeopardize the 20,000 people in the ghetto. However, Witenberg would not surrender, and continued to hide. The F.P.O. continued to protect him, and requested he surrender, but he would not. He believed that the ghetto was going to be liquidated anyway and he would rather commit suicide than surrender to the Germans.<sup>330</sup>

Witenberg eventually decided to surrender after realizing the F.P.O. Command and the ghetto population both wanted him to. He named Kovner the commander of the F.P.O., and met with Gens where he was handed over to the Security Police. On July 16 he was taken to Security Police headquarters, and found dead in his cell the next morning; he committed suicide in his cell.<sup>331</sup> In the end the F.P.O. had not compromised their ideology of armed resistance to save one person, and the ghetto was not liquidated because of Witenberg's refusal to surrender. Witenberg committing suicide also avoided him interrogation, and giving up names of people involved with the underground. Witenberg died a tragic hero, because he killed himself for the better good of the ghetto.

After the Wittenberg Affair it had become evident that the ghetto community was not on the F.P.O.'s side. The F.P.O. had to decide whether to stay in the ghetto and fight, or move to the forests. Glazman supported moving to the forests; "he and many others among the F.P.O. rank and file did not believe that the populace would respond to a call for uprising on the day the ghetto was liquidated."<sup>332</sup> The partisans again approached the F.P.O., and this time a compromise was reached. The command adopted the stance that armed men would need to be in the ghetto to rise up against liquidation, but a group of people who were in personal danger would go to the forests. The men who left for the forests were called the Leon Group and were comprised of twenty-one men. Gens was aware of the Leon group, and allowed them to depart

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<sup>330</sup> Arad, 391.

<sup>331</sup> Arad, 392, 393.

<sup>332</sup> Arad, 396.

for the forests. Strapped with weapons the groups headed to the forests on July 24, and were escorted by a uniformed policeman who was a F.P.O. member.<sup>333</sup> The Leon Group was caught by Security Police, and fell into battle with them. Nine members of the group were executed, and this enraged the Germans. The Germans found and executed the family members of these nine men, and liquidated the labor camp where the Leon Group passed through.<sup>334</sup>

It was after this incident that Gens decided to crack down on movement to the forests. He called a meeting with the brigadiers and spoke out against those who organized the defection to the forests. He stated that they were placing the ghetto in jeopardy with their actions. He demanded that any instance of escape be reported to him.<sup>335</sup> To make matters worse for the F.P.O. Gens told the F.P.O. that the Security Police knew of the existence of an armed organization in the ghetto, and he demanded all of their weapons to be surrendered.<sup>336</sup> Gens was severely undermining the F.P.O. at this point, and it would be hard for the F.P.O. to form any armed resistance in the future. The organization clearly did not have the support of the ghetto administration.

On August 1, 1943 Heinrich Himmler issued an order that detailed the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto. The Germans planned to transport the Jews to Estonia, where they would meet their deaths.<sup>337</sup> On August 6, 1943 the first transportation of Vilna Jews to Estonia took place. Thousands of men and women left the ghetto for work in the morning, and they were suddenly surrounded by Estonian troops. Although some succeeded in fleeing, most were taken to the railroad station, and loaded onto the freight cars. Approximately 1,000 people were sent to

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<sup>333</sup> Arad, 396, 397.

<sup>334</sup> Arad, 398, 399.

<sup>335</sup> Arad, 399.

<sup>336</sup> Arad, 400.

<sup>337</sup> Arad, 401.

Estonia on that morning.<sup>338</sup> Gens continued to work with the Germans, and tried to get Jews to go to these work-sites to fill the voids, but Jews were scared to leave the ghetto. The Jews, however, would not budge, and made the August 6 *aktion* unsuccessful for the Germans.<sup>339</sup>

The German administration demanded thousands of more people to be transported, and wanted Gens to decide who. Gens helped form a list of people, and from August 19-23 the assembly was carried out, which resulted in around 1,400-1,500 Jews being transported to Estonia. This amount was significantly lower than what the Germans requested.<sup>340</sup> These first two transports were not considered mass liquidation by the F.P.O., and they did not form any uprising, but they still supported an uprising in the case of mass liquidation in the ghetto.<sup>341</sup>

On September 1 the German and Estonian police forces surrounded the ghetto, and demanded 3,000 males and 2,000 females to be transported to Estonia. The F.P.O. quickly organized and got ready for an uprising upon hearing this news. The first battalion met up, and the second battalion of about 100 combatants went to acquire weapons. The second battalion was quickly surrounded by Germans and Estonians. Only 25 escaped to the first battalion. The F.P.O. had suffered a devastating blow to the uprising. The second battalion was caught because a Jewish policeman and a brigadier led the Germans to this group, in order to stop a clash, and send F.P.O. members to Estonia.<sup>342</sup> The Jewish administration in the ghetto had sold out the F.P.O., and severely hurt Jewish hopes again.

The F.P.O. continued their fight regardless of losing many men. Men from Yechiel's Struggle Group joined the F.P.O., and their plan of defense to converge at the main bastion at 6 Straszuna. By 9 A.M. the F.P.O. was prepared to fight, and Scheinbaum was appointed to

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<sup>338</sup> Arad, 405.

<sup>339</sup> Arad, 406, 407.

<sup>340</sup> Arad, 408.

<sup>341</sup> Arad, 408, 409.

<sup>342</sup> Arad, 410, 411.

command the force. The F.P.O. then issued a manifesto to the ghetto inhabitants to help resist, and avoid deportation. They called for the people to do anything to resist, and stated how the Jews had nothing to lose, they would be killed anyway.<sup>343</sup> Meanwhile, Gens helped the Germans and Estonians round up Jews. He was aware of the F.P.O. deployment on Straszuna Street, and did not want there to be a bloody clash in the ghetto.<sup>344</sup>

The Germans and Estonians had trouble obtaining large numbers of Jews to be transported, so they came back in the evening to round up more Jews. The Germans reached 15 Straszuna, and they ordered over a loudspeaker for the Jews to come out. Under the command of Scheinbaum, the F.P.O. opened fire on the Germans, who returned with fire. Scheinbaum was killed instantly, and the rest of the combatants retreated. The Germans also fled the ghetto after the clash, for fear of being trapped in the ghetto alleyways. A total of 1,300-1,500 males were taken for deportation on September 1.<sup>345</sup> No large-scale battle transpired, and Gens wanted to avoid the chances of one taking place. He decided that the Jewish police would handle the transportations, so the Security Police would not have to. Gens organized an auxiliary police unit in addition to the police force to round up the Jews. From September 2-5 Gens and the Jewish police force rounded up enough Jews to please the Security Police's request.<sup>346</sup>

After the initial clash with the Germans and Estonians, the F.P.O. had to decide what course of action to take place in the aftermath. Kovner proposed two options; "to break out through the ghetto walls and fight to reach the forest, for which the prospects were vague, or, to bide their time in the ghetto until the completion of the present operation, and then to leave in an

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<sup>343</sup> Arad, 411, 412.

<sup>344</sup> Arad, 413.

<sup>345</sup> Arad, 413, 414.

<sup>346</sup> Arad, 414, 415.

organized manner, for which there were good prospects of success.”<sup>347</sup> The F.P.O. Command chose the latter, because they felt they could survive in the ghetto until the end of the *aktion*. Gens communicated with the F.P.O. throughout the *aktion*, and informed the organization that the ghetto was not going to be liquidated. As Arad stated, “by agreement with the ghetto administration, the F.P.O. undertook not to launch any action on its own and that the former agreed to try to deter the German forces from reaching the F.P.O. positions in order to avoid large-scale armed conflict within the ghetto.”<sup>348</sup> The Germans did not enter the ghetto again until the close of the operation, but the F.P.O. also did not wage any significant battle.

Arad offered numerous reasons why the F.P.O. never launched an uprising in the ghetto. The capture of the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion was a main reason, because the F.P.O. was not prepared for a change in their plans, and it made them take a defense position. They also did not have the support of the ghetto community, who believed Gens’ assertions that they were being transported to labor camps. The ghetto inhabitants believed they were safer being deported than if they remained in the ghetto. In addition, the problems the Germans faced in Warsaw led the Security Police in Vilna to agree with Gens’ strategy to avoid battle. Gens being able to work out this agreement put an end to an uprising, because the ghetto community listened to him, and went quietly to deportation.<sup>349</sup>

After the *aktion* in early September members of the Jewish underground started to leave Vilna for the forests. Three Jewish partisans came to the ghetto on behalf of guerilla commanders Markov and S. Zimanas on September 7 to recruit F.P.O. members to the forests. The trio was led by A. Bogen, who had suggested to Markov that he go to Vilna to bring back Jewish youth. The F.P.O. Command agreed to send members to the forests. Arad stated, “The F.P.O. men

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<sup>347</sup> Arad, 415.

<sup>348</sup> Arad, 416.

<sup>349</sup> Arad, 417, 418.

departed stealthily from the ghetto during the night, crossed the city to the cemetery, dug up their weapons, and proceeded in the direction of the Narocz forests. They made their exit through a side-gate in Jatkowa Street.”<sup>350</sup> From September 8-13, five F.P.O. combat groups of about 150 men departed for the Narocz woods. Gens was aware of the departures, but he did nothing to stop them.<sup>351</sup> The Yechiel Struggle Group took its men out of the ghetto right after the *aktion*, which numbered over seventy men.<sup>352</sup> The armed resistance organizations in the ghetto believed that they were better served going to the forests, where they could formulate resistance against the Germans that was not possible anymore in the ghetto.

The armed resistance in the ghetto lost hope when the ghetto was encircled on September 23. The F.P.O. members still left in the ghetto had decided to also leave for the forests. Among the people who left in this exodus was Kovner.<sup>353</sup> The F.P.O. and other organizations that participated in the armed resistance movement were not very successful in forming an uprising in the ghetto, but they were able to move their organizations to the forests, which strengthened the Jewish partisan movement.

It is hard to evaluate the effectiveness of resistance in Vilna. The F.P.O. was not able to launch any large-scale resistance in the ghetto, but they were able to save Jews, and move them to the forests, where partisan units survived. Also, just because the Jews in Vilna did not defeat the Germans in battle does not mean they were not successful. Just by forming a resistance organization and developing the ideology that they should not go like sheep to the slaughterhouse was a major accomplishment. Throughout Europe Jews did not stand up for themselves. Overall, although Vilna did not act with any real force in the ghetto, the resistance

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<sup>350</sup> Arad, 423.

<sup>351</sup> Arad, 423.

<sup>352</sup> Arad, 424.

<sup>353</sup> Arad, 432, 435.



movement was successful because they established a fighting organization, made the Germans struggle, and saved Jewish life.

## Chapter 5 Lack of Resistance in the Lodz Ghetto

The ability of Jews in the Polish ghettos to form resistance groups was not successful in all of the ghettos. The Lodz ghetto, which was the first ghetto to be formed in a major Jewish center, did not form any armed resistance organizations. There are a lot of factors that contributed to the lack of armed resistance in Lodz. However, the Lodz ghetto outlasted many of its counterparts, not being liquidated until 1944, when the collapse of the German Third Reich was near. This chapter will explore what took place in the Lodz ghetto; highlighting the German occupation in Lodz, the organization and formation of the Lodz ghetto, and what took place inside the ghetto. All of this is focused on understanding why no armed resistance organizations formed in the Lodz ghetto.

Shortly after the Germans had invaded Poland they started to construct plans to implement a Jewish ghetto in Lodz. On December 10, 1939 Ubelhor, the Kalisz *Regierungspräsident* (district administration chief), distributed a secret memorandum that addressed the creation of a ghetto in Lodz. In the memorandum said, ““The formation of the ghetto is, of course, only a transitional measure. When and with what means the ghetto and thereby the city of Lodz will be cleansed of Jews—I reserve for myself to determine.””<sup>354</sup> Ubelhor envisioned a division of Lodz Jews. One group would be composed of people who were incapable of working, and they would be placed in an isolated and guarded area. The other group would remain outside the ghetto, but be housed in special barracks under strict supervision. However, Ubelhor’s plan never came into fruition. On February 8, 1940 a police ordinance regarding the creation of a ghetto made no distinction between Jews who were capable of working, and those who were not; it stated that the ghetto applied to all Lodz Jews without

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<sup>354</sup> Trunk, 10.

exception.<sup>355</sup> From the outset of German occupation in Poland the plan was always to treat the Jews of Lodz poorly, and eventually exterminate them.

Before the ghettoization of the Jews in Lodz took place the Germans exhibited anti-Semitic actions in the city. At the beginning of December 1939 the Lodz Jewish Community received instructions about a planned evacuation. Candidates registered for the evacuations starting on December 13, and it ended on the December 17. In total, 6,000 people were expelled from Lodz due to this registration.<sup>356</sup> Overlapping with this, from December 11-16 the German authorities deported Jewish doctors, attorneys, teachers, and the residents of two streets of the subsequent ghetto area. The number of Jews deported in this roundup is not known.<sup>357</sup> Jews were not allowed to be on the two most important streets in the city, and they were driven from their apartments.<sup>358</sup>

On October 13 1939 Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski was named head of the Jews by the German authorities. This entitlement meant that he would have to implement all orders by the German Civil Administration concerning the Jewish race in Lodz. Rumkowski was allowed to have access to the German administration, move freely in the streets whenever he wished, control the assembly of Jewish labor detachments, and choose a council of elders. Every Jew in the city was obliged to follow his orders, or they would be punished.<sup>359</sup> Rumkowski was a member of the prewar *Kehilla* (Jewish Community Board), so he had ties to the Jewish community in Lodz before the war.<sup>360</sup> Rumkowski served on the board as a minority representative for the Zionist faction, and had served as the vice-president. When the Germans

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<sup>355</sup> Trunk, 10, 11.

<sup>356</sup> Trunk, Isaiah. *Lodz Ghetto: A History*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006) 11.

<sup>357</sup> Trunk, 12.

<sup>358</sup> Trunk, 12.

<sup>359</sup> Adelson, Alan & Robert Lapidés, eds. *Lodz Ghetto: Inside A Community Under Siege*. (New York: Viking, 1989) 19.

<sup>360</sup> Trunk, 33.

used to go to the *Kehilla* building and ask who the elder is, Rumkowski used to make a striking pose, as to say he was the elder.<sup>361</sup> This is how he eventually was named the elder/head of the Jews of Lodz.

Rumkowski was born in Belorussia, and came to Lodz after the First World War. He was involved in Jewish social welfare. In 1920 he was asked to assist in running summer camps for Jewish youngsters, which were supported through funding by the New York based Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. He was also successful in managing homes for Jewish orphans in and outside the city of Lodz.<sup>362</sup> Rumkowski had done a great ordeal of philanthropy in Lodz, giving a lot back to the Jewish community. However, his obedience to the German Civil Administration, and ability to deceive the Jews in Lodz throughout the Holocaust made him a very controversial Jewish leader. Rumkowski's actions severely hindered Jewish resistance in Lodz.

The arrival of the German military in Lodz on September 8, 1939 brought about rampant anti-Semitism in the city. German occupation eventually transpired into persecution, murder, and deportations for the Jews of Lodz that were exacerbated by the creation of the ghetto. These attacks against Jewish life in Lodz went without any real Jewish defense until Jewish life in the city was destroyed. In the immediate aftermath of German occupation, hooliganism took place in the city. Ethnic Germans and Poles tortured Jews. Trunk noted that "They would haul Jews from their beds in the middle of the night and drive them from their homes just as they were...Robbery and beating of Jews on the streets became regular daily occurrences."<sup>363</sup> These ruthless acts intensified the anti-Semitic acts at the hands of the Germans. In addition the

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<sup>361</sup> Horwitz, Gordon J. *Ghettostadt: Lodz and the Making of a Nazi City*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) 14, 15.

<sup>362</sup> Horwitz, 17.

<sup>363</sup> Trunk, 224.

Germans issued anti-Semitic decrees; they forced the Jews to wear a Jewish badge, and banned the Jews from using the municipal tramway. Jews were also tortured by having to commit forced labor; “A particular scourge was seizure for forced labor, whose purpose was mainly to torment those who were seized, both physically and morally. They were compelled to fill in air-defense trenches, unload coal, move rocks and bricks, and do other unskilled labor.”<sup>364</sup>

Poles continually were a detriment to the Jews in Lodz. Jews struggled to obtain food in the public shops, because if a Pole pointed out a Jew standing in line the German police would drive them away and beat them. Jews were eliminated from the normal food supply system and had to buy food at very high prices.<sup>365</sup> A Polish gentile youth who had previously been a porter with the Jewish merchants on the Green Market shot twenty-four Jews.<sup>366</sup> With the Poles against them, the Jews in Lodz found it extremely hard to resist, after all, Jewish resistance in the other Polish ghettos relied heavily on gaining weapons from the Polish people, whom without resistance would have been bleak.

The beginning of 1940 brought the Germans closer to enclosing the Jews inside of a ghetto. Trunk claimed that in order for the Germans to justify the creation of a Jewish ghetto the Jewish residential area had to be portrayed poorly. The Germans warned the non-Jewish population about coming into contact with the Jews in an announcement made by the Lodz Police-President Johannes Schafer on January 9, 1940. Less than a month later on February 8 Schafer released an ordinance that concerned residential rights for the Jews, and the creation of a closed Jewish residential area. Trunk commented, “According to this ordinance and the related instructions, Jews were forbidden to dwell outside the precisely defined area, and they had to

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<sup>364</sup> Trunk, 225.

<sup>365</sup> Trunk, 226.

<sup>366</sup> Trunk, 227.

move into the ghetto within designated deadlines, according to an established plan and order.”<sup>367</sup>

However, the movement of large numbers of Jews into a small and isolated area was not easy.

Due to this difficulty, on March 1 Schafer announced that as a penalty for lively traffic a raid had taken place on February 29, and a large number of Jews were arrested.<sup>368</sup>

Jewish life in the Lodz worsened throughout March 1940. On the evening of March 6 and the night of March 7-8, what has come to be known as Bloody Thursday occurred. German police and SS men shot several hundred Jews on the streets and in residences, mostly on Piotrkowska Street, the main street of Lodz. Jews were abused and robbed; about 500 Jews were deported into the Generalgouvernement and about 160 were sent to the Zgierz woods where they were killed.<sup>369</sup> These tactics by the Germans created Jewish obedience, and allowed for a smooth transition into the ghetto. After March 7 people no longer walked, but ran into the ghetto. Y. Tabaksblat described the march of the Lodz Jews into the ghetto as, ““The long, tragic procession of pedestrians with parcels and bundles on their backs, with small children in their arms and larger ones at their sides with little handcarts, laden with old baggage, pushed and shoved by various scoundrels, accompanied with wanton, cynical catcalls.”<sup>370</sup> The new Jewish residential area encompassed two Lodz neighborhoods, Baluty, and Old Town. Both of these neighborhoods were impoverished and dirty, which led to terrible living conditions within the ghetto. The placement of Jews in the ghetto spelled the end for the Jews of Lodz.

The ghetto averaged almost 3.5 persons per room, and sometimes as much as 15-20 people would be crammed into a room. Every family was not provided with a roof over their

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<sup>367</sup> Trunk, 13.

<sup>368</sup> Trunk, 13.

<sup>369</sup> Trunk, 14.

<sup>370</sup> Trunk, 14.

head, and for these unfortunate people a typhus epidemic broke out in April.<sup>371</sup> Typhoid fever rose steadily throughout 1940, reaching a high of 3,413 cases in July.<sup>372</sup> Besides typhus, the ghetto was plagued with all sorts of diseases throughout its existence. There were a total of 29,051 cases of infectious diseases from May 1940-July 1944.<sup>373</sup> Hunger was also a major issue in the ghetto. From May 1940-June 1942 5,066 people died from starvation.<sup>374</sup> The terrible living conditions in the ghetto should have triggered some sort of resistance, since the Germans showed complete disrespect for the Jews. On the other hand, the diseases and poor living conditions could be another reason resistance did not occur in Lodz. The Jews were physically weak, and they might have not had the ability to fight.

By April 19, 1940 the police-president had declared that the formation of the ghetto had progressed to complete isolation. Two days before this announcement he commanded Runkowski to have the Jewish Order Service immediately take over guarding the ghetto enclosure. A few weeks later, on May 7 the fifth and final executive ordinance came and sealed the ghetto completely from the outside world. According to Trunk, "All communication was cut off, including trade traffic between the Christian population and Jews."<sup>375</sup> The completion of the Lodz ghetto and its consequences severely limited the prospect of Jewish resistance. The Germans were successful in alienating the Jews from the Aryan Poles, by cutting off any communication possibilities outside the ghetto. Resistance in the Warsaw, Bialystok, and Vilna ghettos took place just as much in the ghettos as it did outside the ghetto walls. Communication with outside Poles and Jews was essential in staging an effective resistance movement, as well as planning an escape plan. Without being able to communicate with anyone outside the ghetto for

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<sup>371</sup>Trunk, 16.

<sup>372</sup> Trunk, 198.

<sup>373</sup> Trunk, 204.

<sup>374</sup> Trunk, 208.

<sup>375</sup>Trunk, 17.

weapons, manpower, and ideas, the Lodz ghetto was at a disadvantage to form any resistance movements.

The organization of the Lodz ghetto played an important role in preventing Jewish resistance. Trunk explained that the Judenrats in the ghettos were “to be an entity that would help realize Nazi Germany’s extermination plans.”<sup>376</sup> It was not supposed to make resistance possible. In the previous ghettos the Judenrats were aware of resistance organizations, and some even had constant dialogue with the respective resistance groups. However, in Lodz, the Judenrat, mainly Rumkowski, obediently followed the German orders, which curtailed any resistance efforts that may have taken place.

The Jewish Order Service (O.S.) that is referred to earlier in this chapter played an important role in ghetto administration. It was founded on March 1, 1940 at the discretion of the Lodz Police Chief’s order in February. The ghetto population did not find out about the organization until May 1. The O.S. was not given weapons, but they used rubber truncheons, and had their own uniforms and badges. Trunk stated that, “The O.S. grew into a large hierarchically developed organization with commissioners, deputy commissioners, investigators, captains, sergeants, and ordinary O.S. men.”<sup>377</sup> The O.S. was an organized police force, that’s main job was to control the Jews in the ghetto, and make sure they did not act out against the Germans. This is evident in the creation of the *Ueberfallkommando*, which was a section of the O.S. dedicated to suppressing any disturbance among the ghetto inhabitants.<sup>378</sup> Unfortunately for the Jews of Lodz, members of the Jewish religion were used by the Germans to implement punishment on acts considered illegal in the ghetto, and to make sure the ghetto ran smoothly. The O.S. was subject to Rumkowski, another way in which he encompassed great power over the

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<sup>376</sup> Trunk, 33.

<sup>377</sup> Trunk, 40.

<sup>378</sup> Trunk, 42.



Jewish population.<sup>379</sup> There were Jewish police forces in the other ghettos, but these forces were not successful in deterring resistance activity. In Warsaw, the Jewish Fighting Organization's first attack was against the Jewish police force. In Lodz, however, the lack of resistance gave significant power to the Jewish police, and severely hindered the hope of resistance.

In the summer of 1941 the Germans began to make plans for the extermination of the Jewish population in Wartheland.<sup>380</sup> This spelt disaster for the Jews of Lodz, because it got the extermination campaign underway for the Germans. By December 1941 reports in the Lodz ghetto claimed that the German authorities were asking Rumkowski to deliver people for deportation. In a speech on December 20 Rumkowski announced that a deportation of 10,000 Jews would take place. On January 16, 1942 the first group of deportees from Lodz arrived at the Chelmno extermination camp. Transports continued to leave Lodz and from February 22 until April 2 forty transports occurred, totaling 34,073 victims.<sup>381</sup>

The liquidation of the Lodz ghetto continued throughout 1942. In early September news perpetrated the ghetto that another deportation would soon commence. On September 4 Rumkowski spoke at the Firefighter's Square to discuss the issue, and on September 5 a ban was placed on the ghetto that did not allow people to walk in the streets until the decree was revoked.<sup>382</sup> On September 7, the Germans publicly hung twenty-one or twenty-two Jews at Bazarowa Square. The Germans continued to deport and murder large numbers of Jews in the ghetto, and from September 5-12 15,859 Jews were deported, and a minimum of 600 were shot to death.<sup>383</sup> Based on resistance movements in the other ghettos, this is a time period where armed resistance should have taken place. In the ghettos where resistance was formed, major

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<sup>379</sup> Trunk, 42.

<sup>380</sup> Trunk, 229.

<sup>381</sup> Trunk, 232.

<sup>382</sup> Trunk, 242.

<sup>383</sup> Trunk, 247.

deportations, and murder sprees provided the Jews with ammunition to rise up and resist. Trunk coined the events that took place in September as “the greatest shock that the ghetto had endured until then. There was almost no family that did not have to mourn a child or parents.”<sup>384</sup> These occurrences were recipe for resistance, but the Lodz ghetto did not have the youth movement leadership, or the organizational infrastructure to revolt.

It is impossible to determine if any form of armed resistance would have prevented a large scale liquidation of the Lodz ghetto, but it could not have worsened the situation. After the events of September 1942 the ghetto remained calm for almost two years. According to Trunk, the ghetto was essentially turned into a giant labor camp. Over four-fifths of the remaining population worked.<sup>385</sup> However, only a small portion of workers in Lodz were benefiting German war production, and in September 1943 meetings were held by the German brass about the possibility of turning Lodz into a concentration camp. The proposal was opposed by the Wehrmacht’s Weapons Inspectorate and the Ministry for Armament and War Production, because they believed it would be a bad idea to eliminate such an influential center for war production.<sup>386</sup> In December of the same year Adolf Eichmann, who was the official over Jewish affairs in the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, and Dr. Max Horn, chief of the SS’s fictive corporation *Ostindustrie GbmH* came to Lodz to preside over how to handle the Lodz ghetto. They decided that the Jewish population in Lodz needed to be reduced, and women, children and elderly should be sent to concentration camps.<sup>387</sup>

Horn went to Lodz again in January 1944 where he stated that the production was low in the ghetto, however, it is not certain if he did this because he wanted it to be easier for the SS to

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<sup>384</sup> Trunk, 248.

<sup>385</sup> Trunk, 248.

<sup>386</sup> Trunk, 249.

<sup>387</sup> Trunk, 249.

take over control of the ghetto. In February 1944 Himmler reached an agreement with Warthegau Gauleiter Arthur Greiser that the minimum amount of Jews needed for the war production would remain, the ghetto would remain a central ghetto, and the *Sonderkommando* of SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Bothmann would carry out the reduction of the ghetto.<sup>388</sup> At the start of May 1944 it had been decided that the Lodz ghetto must finally be liquidated. On June 15 1944 the ghetto's death warrant was signed. Rumkowski was informed that groups of workers must be sent out to Germany in order to clear ruins caused by bombings. He would have to send 500 people right away, and 3,000 weekly. Transports started to leave the ghetto on every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.<sup>389</sup> At this point the Jews of Lodz had no chance of survival, and could not avoid the transports. They had no where to go.

On August 30, 1944 Rumkowski, his family, and the remaining 70,000 Jews of Lodz were transported to Auschwitz, which concluded the final stage of annihilation of Jewish communities on Polish soil. With no forms of resistance the Lodz ghetto survived for longer than any other ghetto in Poland. However, the Lodz Jews did not survive the ghetto. Although resistance in the other ghettos may not have ended deportation and liquidation, members of the organizations, as well as other inhabitants were able to survive because of resistance tactics.

Trunk chronicled the problem of resistance in Lodz, which makes it easier to understand why no organized resistance took place as it did in the Warsaw, Bialystok, and Vilna ghettos. One of the major differences between Lodz and the other ghettos was that Lodz was encircled by Aryan neighbors. The Germans transformed Lodz into a city with German character. The prewar population of Lodz was 9 percent ethnic German, and the Germans successfully were able to convert the Poles overnight into ethnic Germans. The German authorities also expelled Poles

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<sup>388</sup> Trunk, 250, 251.

<sup>389</sup> Trunk, 254.

from the whole quarters, including the Polish intelligentsia.<sup>390</sup> This was a major hindrance on Jewish resistance. The Jews in Lodz had no support or contact outside the ghetto like the other ghettos had. They were trapped in a ghetto with no escape, and any resistance would have been derailed because of this. As is also seen in earlier chapters, Warsaw was the capital of Jewish armed resistance in Poland. The isolation the Lodz ghetto faced made them unable to make contact with Warsaw. The two emissaries that were sent to Warsaw in the winter of 1942-43 never returned to Lodz.<sup>391</sup> Lodz was completely shutoff from Jewish life outside of the ghetto, and they could not be informed about resistance ideas, and they could not be sent resistance leaders to help them out.

Another reason for the lack of resistance in Lodz was the inactivity of the Germans in Lodz during the high tide of resistance throughout Poland. 1943 was a year in which Jewish uprisings took place in Warsaw, Bialystok, Treblinka and Sobibor, yet as Trunk stated it “was one of the calmest and relatively ‘best’ periods in the history of the Lodz Ghetto, No deportations took place in that year and the provisioning situation improved, so the external stimulus toward armed resistance was lacking.”<sup>392</sup> In addition to the calmness in the ghetto through 1943, news was transmitted into the ghetto that the German war effort was failing, and the Germans would leave the city throughout 1944, until the liquidation took place.<sup>393</sup> The Jews in the Lodz ghetto wanted to just hold on and survive, which they felt was possible. The fact that it took a long time for the Germans to deport the ghetto gave the Jews false hope. German complacency at times in Lodz made the Jews believe they did not need to resist, because they did not think there was any threat on their lives.

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<sup>390</sup> Trunk, 394, 395.

<sup>391</sup> Trunk, 395.

<sup>392</sup> Trunk, 395.

<sup>393</sup> Trunk, 395.

The treatment of the Lodz Jews also made resistance hard. They were starved and terrorized for five years so they were physically and psychologically exhausted.<sup>394</sup> In fact the Jews who were fit to resist were deported from the ghetto first, leaving the remaining Jews incapable of physically resisting. The young healthy men were transported to the labor camps in March of 1944, and Trunk believed that the Gestapo did this intentionally to remove the element from which it could expect resistance.<sup>395</sup> Another tactic that was used by the Germans was the falsification of news from outside the ghetto that Rumkowski played along with. The Gestapo and Biebow (director of the Food and Economy Office in the Lodz ghetto) claimed that people were being sent out of the ghetto for work, and work only.<sup>396</sup> Biebow then sent workers from the ghetto out for work purposes, and they reported good things back to the ghetto. Letters from deportees also worked in this fashion. Postcards arrived from people deportees that spoke of good fortunes outside the ghetto, and they arrived before those people were sent to Auschwitz.<sup>397</sup> All of these reports from outside the ghetto provided the Jews with optimism and false hope.

There were, however, groups in the ghetto that wanted to prepare for resistance in case they needed to. Y. Nirnberg wrote about ““meetings concerning an eventual resistance in case of liquidation of the ghetto...[but] all these consultations produced nothing concrete, because there were no weapons and no contact with the city.””<sup>398</sup> There were secret discussions taking place, but memoirists do not have reports of these meetings. There were also conspiratorial groups led by Daniel Wajskop and his assistant Sabina Witenberg. According to a survivor these groups spread radio reports, set fires in several factories in February and March 1944, and attempted to contact the Polish underground movement in the city about sending weapons into the ghetto, but

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<sup>394</sup> Trunk, 395.

<sup>395</sup> Trunk, 396.

<sup>396</sup> Horwitz, 65.

<sup>397</sup> Trunk, 396, 397.

<sup>398</sup> Trunk, 397.

no answer was ever received.<sup>399</sup> These efforts by the Jews in Lodz were all for naught as the ghetto was liquidated in August 1944 with no struggle for the Germans.

All of these reasons made resistance in Lodz very hard to come by. The Jews in Lodz truly believed that the deportations did not necessarily mean death. They also believed that they would be able to outlast the German war effort. Rumkowski, and the Judenrat, along with the O.S. and Jewish police forced crushed any chance of Jewish resistance. It is ironic that Jews prevented Jews from resisting, and surviving the Holocaust in Lodz, but that is what happened. All in all, the major reason resistance had no chance in Lodz was the infrastructure of the ghetto with relation to the city. The Germans did a great job of isolating the ghetto so the Jews could not be in contact with the Polish underground in the city and Jews from other ghettos where resistance was occurring. Without being able to get weapons, manpower, or ideology into the Lodz ghetto, armed resistance was not an option.

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<sup>399</sup> Trunk, 397.

## Chapter 6

### Resistance in the Forests

The Jewish ghettos were not the only place that resistance took place in Poland. The forests of Poland served as a home for many Jewish refugees. While in the forests the Jews were able to stage armed resistance, and preserve Jewish life. Life in the forests was extremely tough, but the theme of Jewish unity resonated throughout the forests. The Jewish leaders of the partisan units were concerned with including all Jews in their groups, because their ideology stressed that saving Jews was the most important concept. In this chapter two partisan units will be discussed: the Bielski Partisans, and Abba Kovner's partisan unit. The risks that the Jewish combatants in the forests took were very high; they faced many life and death situations, but it was their perseverance, and commitment to the existence of Jewish life that allowed them to act courageously, and heroically while saving a significant number of Jewish lives through armed resistance, and intelligent strategy.

The Bielski Partisans, created by the Bielski brothers, Tuvia, Zus, Asael, and Aron, are renowned for their war efforts in the forest, and their ability to preserve Jewish life in the area around Nowogrodek and Lida, which are currently in Belarus. The Bielski motto from early on in German occupation was to not become ghetto inmates in Nowogrodek, near their hometown of Stankevich. They refused to subject themselves to the brutality of the Nazis, which was a major reason they were able to be so successful. The brothers would leave the ghetto and find shelter anywhere they could; barns, pigsty's. No matter where they went, often times to different locations, the brothers maintained contact. At the end of 1941, Aron, thirteen years old at the time, reported that their parents Beila and David had been arrested and taken to the prison in Nowogrodek. In addition, Zus and Tuvias wives' were both in the ghetto. On December 7, 1941 an *aktion* took place in Nowogrodek; 4,000 Jews were murdered, among them were Beila and

David Bielski, as well as Zus and Tuvias wives'.<sup>400</sup> The tragic outcome of this *aktion* provided the Bielski brothers with the attitude to fight. However, the brothers knew they needed weapons to be successful fighters. Tuvia received his first pistol from a Belorussian peasant, and Asael acquired a submachine gun from another Belorussian peasant in exchange for used clothes. There were also problems for the Jews of Lida in 1941. On July 5, 1941 the first mass execution took place in the city with the murders of two hundred prominent men.<sup>401</sup>

Tuvia's mission to start a fighting force led him to find his Belorussian friend named Misha Rodzhetsky. The two decided to form an armed struggle alliance, and recruit fighting men. Unfortunately, the two agreed that the combination of a gentile and a Jew leading a partisan unit would not work. On his way back to Lida, Tuvia came across Soviet soldiers from whom he tried to acquire weapons. Eventually Tuvia got into a fight with one of the men. This was a turning point in Tuvia's military career, because he realized he needed to reunite with his brothers to accomplish his goal.<sup>402</sup> Tuvia then set out toward Stankevich to find his brothers and form a fighting force with them. Around late February, early March of 1942 Tuvia found his brothers on a forest path; Tuvia, Asael, Zus and Aron decided to join forces, and the Bielski brothers would remain together throughout the war.<sup>403</sup>

The brothers continued to roam the forests, and attract Jews to move into the forests with them. By March 1942 Asael had thirteen followers in the forests outside of Nowogrodek. In mid-May 1942 when Tuvia's group joined Asael's base all four brothers were together in the forests, and the search for weapons and manpower pursued.<sup>404</sup> Early on the group was constantly moving

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<sup>400</sup>Tec, Nechama. *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 32,33.

<sup>401</sup> Tec, 34.

<sup>402</sup> Duffy, Peter. *The Bielski Brothers: The True Story of Three Men Who Defied the Nazis, Saved 1,200 Jews, and Built a Village in the Forest*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003) 62, 63.

<sup>403</sup> Duffy, 63.

<sup>404</sup> Tec, 41.



throughout the forest, passing through water and traveling through fields and roads in an effort to constantly avoid danger. They feared that if anyone knew their location it could mean the end. Asael was the head of this combined unit, but he frequently sought out Tuvia for advice. Asael was very concerned with the vulnerability of the group. There were lots of women and elderly people, and there was also a lack of arms. Asael wanted to recruit armed young men, and both he and Zus were committed to bringing in these youth from the ghetto in Nowogrodek.<sup>405</sup>

Procuring arms was extremely important if the Bielskis were going to survive in the forests. Early on the Bielskis were creative, and willing to do whatever it took to gain weaponry. Tuvia and Zus were walking along the river that leads out of Stankevich when they ran into two Russian partisans who were looking for ammunition for their rifles. Tuvia realized he could cut a deal with these men, which would enable the Bielskis to obtain weapons. Tuvia brought the Russians to a peasant who provided them with ammunition and in return the Russians provided the firepower for an attack against a local policeman named Kuzmitsky, who was stocked with arms. Zus rushed into the policeman's home, and after he demanded that nobody could move, Tuvia and the two Russians entered the home and restrained the man. All four men then collected the weapons and brought Kuzmitsky into the forest for interrogation by the partisan commander. The partisan commander Vladimir Ugriumov, known as Gromov, was thrilled to hear about the action against Kuzmitsky. Although Gromov would not form an alliance with the Bielskis because they had women and young people, he provided Tuvia and Zus with weapons, including Kuzmitsky's weapons. He also suggested that the brothers start their own partisan

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<sup>405</sup> Tec, 42.

group.<sup>406</sup> This event was monumental in jumpstarting the Bielskis. As Duffy stated, “The weapons gave the brothers a surge of confidence, a belief that they were now partisans.”<sup>407</sup>

The brothers knew that they needed to stay on the offensive, because they were very vulnerable to attack. Their idea was to create the impression that they were a large fighting force. On missions they sent those without guns equipped with long sticks, which looked like rifles. They wore ammunition belts that encompassed already used bullets, and sang martial songs at the top of their lungs.<sup>408</sup> Zus would take the act of portraying toughness and brutality one step further. Duffy noted that on several occasions he would take a peasant’s son from his home, lead him out of sight, and fire shots into the air. He would then go back to the home and tell the father that he killed one son, and would kill another until the father offered weapons or food.<sup>409</sup> These acts were extremely immoral, but no one had time to judge morality during the Holocaust. The Bielskis needed to create the perception that they were forceful, in order to get what they needed to survive.

The Bielskis received help from a Belorussian peasant named Konstanty Kozlowski who helped them obtain men from the ghettos. Kozlowski was willing to go into the ghetto and bring back a group of young men. He was also willing to use his home as a stopover for Jews who would leave the forest, but were not able to locate the Bielski group. Kozlowski’s loyalty to the Jews was derived from his apprenticeship with a Jewish shoemaker, his hatred for the Germans, and his opposition to the murder of Jews. His home was able to provide Jews with safety because of its location in a *hutor* (isolated farm). Kozlowski also served as a guide for Jews and Nazi opponents. His brother, a Belorussian policeman, also helped. He supplied information to all

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<sup>406</sup> Duffy, 65, 66.

<sup>407</sup> Duffy, 67.

<sup>408</sup> Duffy, 78.

<sup>409</sup> Duffy, 79.

who were opposed to the Nazis.<sup>410</sup> In the summer of 1942 Kozlowski sneaked into the Nowogrodek ghetto and delivered a letter to Yudl Bielski, who was a cousin of the Bielski brothers. The letter informed Yudl to organize a group of young men to come to the forests, and to bring arms with them if possible. Kozlowski brought Yudl and six other men to the forests, stopping in his *hutor* first. Once these men arrived from Nowogrodek there were now thirty partisans in the camp. With the acquisition of seven more men Asael, Tuvia, and Zus decided to organize an *otriad* (the Russian word for partisan unit). They decided to call themselves the Zhukov *otriad* in honor of a Soviet General.<sup>411</sup>

With the establishment of the Zhukov *otriad* positions were needed to keep order. Tuvia was named the commander which made him responsible for running the *otriad*, formulating its policies, and maintaining its security. Asael became the second in command, and was in charge of the day-to-day activities of the unit and the armed men. Zus was appointed head of reconnaissance, which meant he collected information affecting the group's existence and safety, because of his familiarity with the local area and the local population.<sup>412</sup> One man who came to the forest with Yudl Bielski and another man who came after were also appointed into important positions. Pesach Friedberg became the Chief of Staff, and was soon demoted to Quartermaster. As Quartermaster he was in charge of distributing and allocating goods within the *otriad*. Friedberg was eventually demoted from the Chief of Staff position in favor of Lazar Malbin. Malbin's job was to write official letters to the Soviet partisan headquarters in the region, and to clarify policies.<sup>413</sup> The Bielski's had officially become a partisan unit, and were organized to save Jewish life in the region.

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<sup>410</sup> Tec, 43.

<sup>411</sup> Tec, 43.

<sup>412</sup> Tec, 43.

<sup>413</sup> Tec, 44.

With Tuvia in command of the partisan unit it was made clear that he would try and increase the number of Jews in the group in an effort to save as many Jews as possible. This meant that the partisans would have to go into the ghettos, and bring Jews with them to the forests. The partisans would send notes into the ghetto, to notify people on arrangements bringing them from the ghetto to the forest. Sonia Boldo, who had friends and family in the Bielski *otriad* was fortunate enough to be invited to join the Bielskis. On August 20, 1942 Sonia escaped the ghetto, led by two guides, and reached the Bielski camp.<sup>414</sup> Another example of this is Sulia Rubin and her departure from the Nowogrodek ghetto to the Bielski camp. Sulia received a letter from a friend in the Bielski *otriad*, which provided her with instructions on how to leave the ghetto, and find the Bielski camp. Her first attempt was unsuccessful, and she was caught. When she tried again the Bielski unit sent guides, and she was able to make it to the forest safely.<sup>415</sup> There were many instances of the Bielskis rescuing Jews from the ghettos, and labor camps and bringing them into the forest. The Bielskis were always concerned with saving Jewish life, and concerned themselves with making sure large numbers of Jews had a chance to escape to the forests with their help.

With the inclusion of women in the Bielski camp there was always the problem of sexual exploitation of women. Tec referred to this problem by stating “If a woman was single and young, men would court her, sometimes in unusual ways.”<sup>416</sup> Women had casual sex with many men, and would sometimes have to fight them off to get them to stop coming onto them. Even Tuvia, who had a wife in the camp, slept with many women in the forests. Tec referred to his infidelities, as she claimed, “In the Bielski *otriad*, as in most other detachments, the powerful men had easier access to women than the rest, and Tuvia and Zus took full advantage of these

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<sup>414</sup> Tec, 50, 51.

<sup>415</sup> Tec, 54, 55.

<sup>416</sup> Tec, 159.

opportunities.”<sup>417</sup> Abortions were also common in the camp. Of the young women who were sexually active, many had one or more abortions.<sup>418</sup> The men in the camp did not practice birth control, and it caused stress and pain for the women. The Bielski fighters did save many lives, and were very courageous, but their exploitation of women is extremely intolerable, and controversial.

The Bielski partisans were becoming widely known throughout the forests for their resistance efforts. The Jewish partisans would go around the forests stealing food from the pro-German peasants, because the peasants were ordered to supply food to the Germans. Jewish spies would let the partisans know when a transport was coming, and they would attack it, confiscate the provisions, and bring them to the Jewish camp.<sup>419</sup> These acts provided the Jews with food, and limited the supply of food the Germans were obtaining. However, these acts also led to problems for the Bielskis. In August of 1942 news reached Tuvia that a Russian *otriad* headed by Victor Panchenko had decided to annihilate the Bielski camp. Rules of the forests were simple, take only what is necessary for survival and leave everything else. Reports had circulated throughout the Russian partisans that the Jews were stealing from the peasants, and Panchenko wanted to put an end to this. It was ironic that the first serious threat to the Bielskis would have come from another partisan group and not peasants or Germans. The brothers knew they could not fight the Russians, so they arranged a meeting.<sup>420</sup>

Panchenko was young, not even twenty-one at the time of their first meeting. He did, however, have plenty of military experience. He graduated from a military academy, and had served the Red Army during the 1940 invasion of Finland. He moved on to become the

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<sup>417</sup> Tec, 163.

<sup>418</sup> Tec, 167.

<sup>419</sup> Tec, 74.

<sup>420</sup> Duffy, 96, 97.

lieutenant of a unit on the Soviet Union's western border. His unit was overtaken when the Nazis invaded in June 1941, and he retreated to the Nowogrodek area. By April of 1942 he had established a partisan unit of thirty men.<sup>421</sup> Panchenko demanded to know why Tuvia's unit was called a Jewish gang, and why they were plundering the local peasants. Tuvia iterated to him that he was the commander of the Marshal Zhukov partisan group, and not a Jewish gang. He claimed that if Panchenko is a real Soviet citizen he would know that the motherland needs the Jews to fight.<sup>422</sup> Panchenko and Tuvia set out a plan to test if the peasants were lying about the Jews robbing them. For a few days neither the Bielskis nor Russians would go to the village that accused the Jews of robbery. After the allotted time had passed they would go to the village and ask the peasants for food. Panchenko would then survey the peasants to resolve the issue. Tuvia was proven right; the peasants had still blamed the Jews even when no member of the Bielski unit entered the village.<sup>423</sup>

The confrontation with Panchenko's group turned out to be a blessing in disguise for the Bielskis. Panchenko decided to divide the area into two parts; the Bielski people could gather provisions from farms close to and around the towns of Lida and Nowogrodek, while the Octiaber *otriad*, Panchenko's unit, would take food from around the town of Zdzienciol. The Bielski-Panchenko cooperation as Tec refers to it legitimized the Bielski group, and made life safer for both the group and the Jewish fugitives.<sup>424</sup> This was because being aligned with the Octiaber *otriad* gave the Jews credibility, influence, and protection in the forests that no one in their right mind would compete with.

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<sup>421</sup> Duffy, 97, 98.

<sup>422</sup> Duffy, 98.

<sup>423</sup> Tec, 75.

<sup>424</sup> Tec, 75.

The Bielski-Panchenko alliance worked together to commit acts of sabotage, in order to strike fear into their opponents. As September 1942 approached Tuvia and Victor knew the harvest was upon them. They also knew that the harvest would be taken to Germany or to the troops on the front line, so they devised a plan to set fire to the bounty and shoot at anyone who tried to extinguish the flames. On September 1, 1942 Tuvia and Victor divided their men into small units and assigned each unit to light the fires at midnight. The mission was successful. Tuvia estimated that thousands of tons of wheat were destroyed, lighting up the sky for miles around them. Red Army aircrafts flew over the spectacle and dropped bombs on the fires, adding to the conflagration.<sup>425</sup> The outcome of this event was extremely positive for the Bielski and Octiaber *otriad's*. Duffy commented that their prestige increased and rumors speculated that a Nazi Region Commissar feared a partisan invasion of Nowogrodek.<sup>426</sup> The Bielskis had started to establish themselves as a force in the forests, and their reputation was important for survival. Creating fear made it easier to obtain food and weapons from peasants, which in the forests were the most important necessities for survival.

The Zhukov and Octiaber *otriads* continued to work together to sabotage the Germans. Although the Bielski camp was skeptical about continuing to work with gentiles, their common hatred for the Germans made the Bielski-Panchenko coalition worthwhile. Together they could fight the Germans stronger than they could individually. The next plan the two groups ventured on was a strike on a German supply convoy that was moving along a highway that ran from Nowogrodek to the village of Novoyelna. About a dozen Bielski fighters positioned themselves close to a spot in the road, forcing the vehicles to slow down. Ten fighters from Panchenko's unit hid on the other side of the road.

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<sup>425</sup> Duffy, 100.

<sup>426</sup> Duffy, 100.

After unsuccessfully attacking the first German vehicle with gunfire, the partisans reloaded and attacked the second vehicle. The Germans in this vehicle got out and unleashed fire on the partisans, but realized they were outnumbered and retreated into the forests. The partisans then raided the truck and found a plethora of guns and food.<sup>427</sup> The two partisan groups divided the machine guns, rifles, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, and barrels of fresh food. Afterward, the Bielski group moved its camp farther into the forests, for the fear that the Germans would come for revenge.<sup>428</sup> It was a monumental accomplishment for the Bielski partisans to acquire an abundance of weapons and food, and it made it even more special that they were able to obtain these goods at the hands of the Germans. Although on a larger scale this skirmish was small, it was important for the partisans to strike fear in the Germans, who thought they were invincible, and could murder Jews without any consequences.

Panchenko also helped the Bielskis recruit more men. He was aware that there was a group of armed Jewish men in an isolated hamlet on a farm who robbed at night and did nothing all day. The peasants had been complaining about this Jewish group to Panchenko and were looking to get rid of them if they did not belong to the Octiaber group. Panchenko thought that this group should be given the chance to join the Bielskis. Tuvia agreed; he believed that he could save Jews, and strengthen the fighting power of his unit.<sup>429</sup> Tuvia went to the farm and found Israel Kesler, the leader of the group along with several other men. After some debate Kesler decided to join the Bielskis.

Before returning to the Bielski camp, Kesler and his unit wanted to settle some business with a man named Albelkiewicz who was against Jews and partisans. The Kesler and Bielski men went to Albelkiewicz's house and Friedberg questioned the man about his involvement in

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<sup>427</sup> Duffy, 101, 102.

<sup>428</sup> Duffy, 103.

<sup>429</sup> Tec, 75, 76.



catching Jews, and sending them off to their deaths. When Albelkiewicz answered affirmatively, and spoke of how proud he was to turn Jews over, the partisans killed him and his family.<sup>430</sup> The partisans left a sign at the home that read “This family was annihilated because it cooperated with the Germans and pursued Jews, signed The Bielski Company.”<sup>431</sup> On their way back into the forest the group eliminated another family who were guilty of being Nazi collaborators. After both of these attacks the Bielskis were able to collect more weapons.<sup>432</sup> With the assistance of Panchenko, and the vision of Tuvia to enlarge the group, the Bielskis successfully added more Jewish fighters, gained more weapons, and killed German collaborators.

By October 1942 it started to get cold in the forests, and the brothers devised a way to protect the group from the elements. They created two winter bases near Stankevich; some of the group would be placed in a forest known as Perelaz, the others would be placed in the Zabelovo Forest. The conditions in these forests were extremely poor for sleeping, and under the guidance of Yehuda Levin, two dugouts made of wood were built in each location. A third dugout was built in a location near both forests; this dugout was used for hospital purposes, and for cultivation of food.<sup>433</sup> One main component of forest survival was mobilization, because the partisans needed to avoid the enemy, and the poor weather conditions that arose in some areas.

In December 1942 the Germans launched an offensive in the forests. The initial attacks were miles away from the Bielski camp, but the stories of what was happening were enough to frighten the Bielski camp, and the brothers had to make a decision on what to do with their unit. The Germans were killing other Jewish partisan groups, and there was no telling how long it would be before they found the Bielskis. Amidst this German onslaught two prominent Jewish

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<sup>430</sup> Tec, 77.

<sup>431</sup> Tec, 78.

<sup>432</sup> Tec, 78.

<sup>433</sup> Duffy, 111, 112.

partisan fighters were killed. One was Dr. Yeheskel Atlas, who was posthumously awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union award. The other, Hirsch Kaplinski, was a ghetto escapee who had formed a Jewish fighting group in the summer of 1942.<sup>434</sup> The Bielskis did not want this to happen to them, and they decided to move the *otriad* once again. They abandoned their new winter hideout, and moved to a forest outside of Zuravelnik. Still not confident they were safe, and under the assumption that there were spies in their presence, they moved again, this time to a forest outside of Chrapinyevo.<sup>435</sup> The ability of Tuvia and his brothers to assess a situation and make decisive decisions was important in their knack to survive the Germans. Forest fighters needed to be adaptable, and ready to move at the threat of danger.

February 1943 marked a major turning point for the Bielski partisans. The leaders of the Bielski unit received a letter from Fyodor Sinitchkin, who was the commander of the Lenin Partisan Brigade. The letter invited the brothers and their top commanders to a meeting near Butskevich. There were many fighters at the meeting, representing various units, including Panchenko's unit.<sup>436</sup> At the meeting Sinitchkin announced a plan which entailed each unit present to become a detachment within the Lenin Brigade, which in turn, was subordinate to the leaders of the Baranovich Branch of Central Staff of the Partisan Movement. After Sinitchkin commended the Bielski group he offered them a place in his brigade. The Bielskis would now be known as the Second Company of the October Detachment.<sup>437</sup> For the first time in the war the Bielskis were associated with a major partisan organization, which would provide them with supplies and credibility throughout the forests.

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<sup>434</sup> Duffy, 113, 114.

<sup>435</sup> Duffy, 114.

<sup>436</sup> Duffy, 126.

<sup>437</sup> Duffy, 127.

In February of 1943 the Bielski group numbered around three hundred people, and was back living in the neighboring forests of Zabelovo and Perelaz. During this time period the German brutalities were intensifying in the ghettos closest to the forest. The Germans were aware of the Bielski camp, and were trying to hunt down Tuvia, and the partisan unit. On February 15 trouble arose in the Bielski camp. When a group of fighters returned to the Zabelovo camp after a successful mission they left a trail that led German supporters to the camp. Pro-Nazi police saw the trail of blood left by one of the captured animals, and they entered the Zabelovo Forest. The police knocked out Shmuel Oppenheim (he survived), who was on guard, and continued through until a second Bielski guard appeared who got into a quick battle with the police force, signaling to the camp that there was danger. Malbin then urged everyone to go deeper into the woods. The second guard was killed, but when the police force entered the base it was deserted. The Jews had very few casualties during this event, but had to move back to the Butskevich Forest.<sup>438</sup> Although the only reason the police force found the camp was because of a Jewish fighters' mistake, the units organization in their evacuation planning, and the guards bravery were able to save the entire camp.

To keep a Soviet appearance and appease Sinitchkin, Tuvia named Malbin commissar of the unit. He also established a Komsomol (Communist Youth League). The first gentile member of the unit, Grigori "Grisha" Latji, was named the head of the organization.<sup>439</sup> Problems arose with the creation of the Communist group, especially because Malbin, a member of Betar, was appointed commissar. Latji and his men brought their frustration up with Sinitchkin, who arranged a meeting with Tuvia to discuss the matter. Tuvia, as he always did, was able to talk his

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<sup>438</sup> Duffy, 136, 137, 138.

<sup>439</sup> Duffy, 141.

way out of trouble, and pledged his loyalty to the Soviet cause.<sup>440</sup> Part of the resistance in the forests was not armed fighting, but being able to handle diplomatic situations. This was one instance where Tuvia and the Bielski unit averted trouble, because Tuvia had the intelligence to plead with the Soviets and pretend to be inline with their cause.

On April 15 as the weather got better the Bielskis decided to move everyone into one forest. The new base was determined to be in the Stara-Huta Forest, which was close to Stankevich. At this point there were four hundred Jews in the camp, and one hundred armed fighters. More and more Jews started to join the Bielskis as their reputation grew. Jews who had escaped from ghettos other than Nowogrodek and Lida were coming as well. The camp started to resemble a Jewish village. There were shoemakers, tailors, and metalworkers actively working. The armed fighters were reorganized into fighting squads of eight to ten men each, and were ready to fight in the spring. Asael took control of one of the squads, because he wanted to fight, and Zus directed the activity of cavalry reconnaissance teams.<sup>441</sup> The spring of 1943 was a high time for the Bielski camp. They launched armed resistance, and were able to successfully bring Jews from the ghetto into the forests. Duffy noted that “Several partisan actions were launched in the first weeks of spring. Fighters burned a series of wooden bridges situated on roads leading north out of Novogrodek. Telephone and telegraph lines were disabled when the men chopped down the poles that held them aloft.”<sup>442</sup> As far as rescuing people from the ghetto went, Tuvia called for an effort to free the Jews still imprisoned in the ghettos. Bielski fighters with relatives in the ghettos often led the missions. Eliahu Damesek, was a young man who left his elderly

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<sup>440</sup> Duffy, 142, 143.

<sup>441</sup> Duffy, 148, 149.

<sup>442</sup> Duffy, 149.

mother for the forests. He packed up clothes and hand grenades, and became a partisan fighter.<sup>443</sup>

After Jewish fighters were betrayed by the Belous family, Tuvia ordered an attack on their home. Asael assembled a group of thirty men and on April 23, the day the Orthodox Christians commemorated the death of Christ, the partisans stormed the family's home. The partisans massacred the family, and burnt the house down. Ten Belous family members were killed.<sup>444</sup> The Jewish fighters were vicious, and were not going to let German collaborators remain alive.

On June 9, 1943 the Germans attacked Strata-Huta. Zus and the fighters grabbed their weapons and lined up to mount a defense. The camp residents retreated into the forests, and the battle was over quickly. Five or six men had been killed, and three women and one child were shot while they tried to retreat. The Jews did not kill any Germans. This attack angered Zus, who felt that the disorganization of the noncombatants inhibited the organized military defense of the base from fighting effectively. Zus wanted to split the group up, but Tuvia decided against that notion, and moved the camp to Naliboki Puscha, which was located thirty kilometers to the east of Nowogrodek.<sup>445</sup>

The Bielski partisan name was changed again, to Ordzhonikidze by General Platon. This was done to honor Grigori Ordzhonikidze, a Soviet leader and Red Army commander. Platon was the highest ranking partisan, and he believed in Tuvia's mission. Platon had arranged a meeting with the Soviet partisan units to inform them that the Germans were coming into Naliboki Puscha. He turned the meeting over to Yefim Gapayev who was to plan the attack. Gapayev wanted to fortify the forest, and gave each brigade a section to defend. The Bielskis and

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<sup>443</sup> Duffy, 149, 150.

<sup>444</sup> Duffy, 152, 153.

<sup>445</sup> Duffy, 162, 163, 164.

a Russian unit that was helping them cut down trees to block the Germans entry into the woods. They built foxholes at the edge of the forest and mines were placed along the road.<sup>446</sup> The partisans were prepared to fight the Germans, it was their only option.

The planned German attack in Naliboki Puscha was known as Operation Hermann. On July 7, 1943 Nazi commanders were ordered to destroy and annihilate partisan groups and camps.<sup>447</sup> On July 15 the German forces marched into battle, and it took several days for the Germans to get close to the Bielski camp. The Bielski noncombatants were sent deeper into the forest, and one hundred Jewish partisans, along with two hundred Russians waited to surprise attack the Germans. To their dismay a traitor was among them. A Russian partisan let loose a single shot, alerting the Germans to the impending ambush. The Bielski fighters had to retreat after the Germans started to fire.<sup>448</sup> The Germans had now occupied all the area around the forest. The Jewish partisans were once again on the move. This time they fled to an island named Krasnaya Gorka.<sup>449</sup>

The Jews had trouble surviving on the island. They had limited food, and needed to leave the island to obtain food. Although German attacks throughout the forest made it dangerous to leave, they would not have been able to survive if they stayed. Zus was vocal in leaving the island He later said, "Staying there and dying of hunger was not what I wanted."<sup>450</sup> The Jews had fought too long to just give up. Zus, along with eighty other fighters left. They planned on slipping through the German lines and traveling all the way back to the brother's former area of operations in Stankevich. If Zus found it impossible to get there he would send a scout back to

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<sup>446</sup> Duffy, 169, 170.

<sup>447</sup> Duffy, 171.

<sup>448</sup> Duffy, 174.

<sup>449</sup> Duffy, 177.

<sup>450</sup> Duffy, 181.

the island, but if a message was not delivered within two days then it was a signal that he was successful and the rest of the camp could follow suit.<sup>451</sup>

After two days no message was sent back to the island and the rest of the camp, in groups of twenty to thirty people, headed by experienced partisans left for Stankevich. Besides one man who drowned, all of the eight hundred people made it successfully out of the Naliboki Puscha, and avoided Hitler's troops. Duffy concluded that "It was one of the great escapes of World War II, a flight of such daring and luck that it made all the other miraculous Bielski escapes seem like dress rehearsals."<sup>452</sup> There was a struggle at every corner for the Jews in the forest, but under the direction of the Bielski brothers they continued to find safety, and live another day.

August of 1943 was a tough time for the Bielski unit. Sinitchkin was replaced by Sergei Vasilyev as commander of the Kirov Brigade. Vasilyev wanted to divide the huge unit into two sections, one for fighting men, and the other for unarmed men, women, and children. His idea was to keep the combatant group in the original Bielski area of Stankevich, and keep the name Ordzhonikidze, but it would be commanded by a Soviet partisan. Zus would be the deputy commissioner and chief of reconnaissance. Tuvia would become the commander of the noncombatant group that would be placed in Naliboki Puscha. Malbin, and Friedberg would maintain their positions with the group. Asael was assigned to neither of the two groups. He was sent to Vasilyev's Kirov Brigade staff, where he would serve as a reconnaissance officer.<sup>453</sup> Tuvia was distraught over these orders. This new plan had placed the Jewish fight in the hands of the Russian plan.

Tuvia's noncombatant group officially settled into their new base in Naliboki Puscha in November 1943. They built shelters, and continued to recruit Jews who were new to the forest.

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<sup>451</sup> Duffy, 181.

<sup>452</sup> Duffy, 182.

<sup>453</sup> Duffy, 188, 189.

Tuvia believed this location could offer them the protection he had been longing for since they first ventured to this location. He did not think another German offensive like Operation Hermann was likely to take place.<sup>454</sup> As Tuvia's camp was starting to prosper, it gained even more strength when Asael came back to be with his fellow Jews. He did not like his position under Vasilyev, and wanted to be with people he cared about. One day he just left the Soviet base and found the Jewish camp in Naliboki Puscha.<sup>455</sup> The Jewish camp was strong, and resembled a Jewish village. Duffy stated that "The measure of stability gave the eight hundred inhabitants the freedom to build a mini-civilization, a small-scale replica of what the Nazis had succeeded in destroying throughout the towns and cities of western Belarus, indeed much of Europe."<sup>456</sup> The Jews built a kitchen, which continually cooked potato soup. Fighters found a meat-grinding machine, and work began on a sausage-making facility and smoke-house. There were two butchers in the camp who ran this operation. There were cows for milk, and a small mill to grind wheat and other grains. They also built dugouts to house the Jews comfortably.<sup>457</sup> Unlike their first time in Naliboki Puscha, the Jews had created a real village atmosphere that made life in the forests bearable.

The Bielski camp even built medical facilities headed by a doctor named Hirsch. There was also a dentist on staff. A bathhouse was built as well, which ensured the hygiene of the camp inhabitants.<sup>458</sup> Leatherworkers created bridles, ammunition belts, and saddles for fighting and riding men. There were blacksmiths who shod horses for the partisans.<sup>459</sup> Life in the forests was

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<sup>454</sup> Duffy, 206, 207.

<sup>455</sup> Duffy, 210, 211.

<sup>456</sup> Duffy, 212.

<sup>457</sup> Duffy, 212, 213.

<sup>458</sup> Duffy, 214, 215.

<sup>459</sup> Duffy, 216, 217.



extremely tough, but these provisions in the Bielski camp increased the chances of Jewish survival, and made life a lot easier.

While Tuvia set up his new camp for noncombatants, Zus was enjoying his time as a soldier. Vasilyev's staff provided the Jewish group with explosives and weapons, and they carried on missions against the enemy. Shortly after the split up of the Bielski camp, Zus reported that three small Jewish groups were sent on a mission. The groups laid mines on sections of the railway near the Yatsuki station. 260 meters of rail line were destroyed, and a few days later two groups led by Latij laid seven mines, which destroyed 80 meters of track. This was followed by another operation three days later that destroyed 130 meters of rail line.<sup>460</sup> During November and December of 1943 Zus' unit continued to take part in partisan missions. On November 7 four men blew up a railway bridge and burned down a wooden vehicle bridge. On December 12 fighters burned down two houses near the Lida-Baranovich railroad, and seven days later, partisans ambushed an enemy vehicle on the Nowogrodek-Lida road, which killed the driver.<sup>461</sup>

In late December Zus teamed up with Panchenko to carry out attacks against the Germans. Their first joint attack was unsuccessful. They attacked a German convoy, killing four Germans, two policemen, and one civilian collaborator, but the German force was too forceful and the partisans retreated back to the forests. A Jewish fighter was killed in the process.<sup>462</sup> Fortune quickly changed for the Zus-Panchenko alliance. On January 5, 1944 the two groups dislodged the rail lines from their beds on the Lida-Baranovich railroad, which made it impossible for trains to pass through. The units waited for several hours, and a train finally came through, but had to stop because of the problems with the track. Panchenko then ordered the

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<sup>460</sup> Duffy, 209.

<sup>461</sup> Duffy, 228.

<sup>462</sup> Duffy, 229.

partisans to shoot. The partisans were able to fight hard against the German fire and occupied the train. Forty civilians were captured and released, and four soldiers were taken as prisoners. Two Germans were killed, thirteen wounded, and no partisans were killed. The partisans also gained loads of ammunition, rifles, three cars, and forty motorcycles from the train.<sup>463</sup> In another ambush the partisans killed Kurt Fidler, a Nazi lieutenant. Zus stole the man's uniform and wore it for the rest of the war. His family was killed by Nazis, and he was proud to humiliate them.<sup>464</sup> The partisans in Zus' unit were eager to fight, and wanted to derail the Germans war effort at any cost.

As the war continued throughout 1944 the Jewish partisans inched closer to survival. The partisans stayed on the offensive, and did not change their strategy as the Germans were on the brink of defeat. In the Bielski camp a runway was built so that Red Army planes with supplies could arrive, and support the Jewish partisans. General Platon commanded that the Jews keep sending fighters into the field. Asael was responsible for a group of ten to twenty men who stayed in action in the area around Stankevich. On February 4 the Bielskis accomplished their most successful strike against the enemy. They planted a mine on the Lida-Baranovich railroad, and a train traveling toward Lida exploded. Seven train cars were destroyed, four were damaged, and there were no partisan casualties.<sup>465</sup> The Ordzhonikidze fighters had success of their own throughout February, March, and April. Duffy noted that the group had become a wholly Jewish fighting detachment and they "were participating in an increasing number of large-scale ambushes and eliminating more and more enemy fighters."<sup>466</sup> In an attack they eliminated forty-

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<sup>463</sup> Duffy, 229, 230.

<sup>464</sup> Duffy, 230, 231.

<sup>465</sup> Duffy, 242, 243.

<sup>466</sup> Duffy, 246.

seven White Polish fighters, and in another attack killed twelve Germans.<sup>467</sup> The Germans were getting weaker on the Soviet front, and the consistent pressure from the partisans curtailed their efforts even more. The Germans were now fighting many battles, against many enemies.

By April 17, 1944 Tuvia reported that there were 941 people in the camp, and 162 armed fighters. The camp had grown exponentially since the Bielskis arrived in the forests in 1942. Throughout the spring of 1944 the Bielski camp picked up its offensive. Asael started to lead many missions, and led a rampage that lasted three days in late April. The attacks consisted of blowing up two enemy vehicles, derailling a railway, and blowing up a truck. During these attacks they killed Germans and disrupted German movement.<sup>468</sup> The Jews were successfully completing missions throughout 1944, and the war was close to over.

The Jewish partisans would have one more stand before they were to officially become survivors of the war. Tuvia reported with his armed fighters to a location near the edge of the puscha. A Soviet general greeted the unit, along with hundreds of other soldiers. The general informed the partisans that the Germans were close, and that the partisans needed to defend the edge of the forest. The Jewish fighters were the first to see the Germans, and they instantly opened fire. The Jews captured the Germans, and tormented them before killing them. The Bielski fighters started to leave the base to hunt down Germans. The Germans were able to complete one last attack on the partisans, killing nine Jews.<sup>469</sup> However, the Germans had lost the war, and on July 10, 1944, Tuvia Bielski addressed the partisans for one last time. The partisans were free. Zus' unit helped out in the Lida ghetto and was eventually free to go as well. Combining the two units, there were 1,140 Jews in total at the end of the war, by far the largest

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<sup>467</sup> Duffy, 246.

<sup>468</sup> Duffy, 249, 250.

<sup>469</sup> Duffy, 253, 254, 255, 256.

Jewish partisan unit in all of the Nazi occupied territory.<sup>470</sup> The Bielski partisan unit was a major Jewish resistance effort during the Holocaust that saved so many Jews, and proved that the Jewish people would not surrender to German brutality.

As is discussed earlier in this study throughout the war Abba Kovner and many other Jews fled the Vilna ghetto and moved to the forests. In late 1943 Abba Kovner joined his Jewish counterparts in the forest as well, fleeing the Vilna ghetto prior to its liquidation. The Jews in Vilna were able to set up resistance organizations in the ghetto, but they were not successful in mounting any large-scale resistance. It was in the forests under the command of Abba Kovner where the survivors of the Vilna ghetto were able to stage resistance against the Germans, and save what Jewish life was left in the region.

At the age of twenty-five Kovner led ninety F.P.O. members from the ghetto to the forest on September 27, 1943.<sup>471</sup> The destination for Kovner and his contingency was the Rudnicki Forest, which was located on the plains of southern Lithuanian, around twelve miles south of Vilna.<sup>472</sup> Rudnicki was full of partisans, which consisted of two Russian camps, two Lithuanian camps and several outposts of the Polish Home Army, who operated in accordance with the Polish government-in-exile in London. These partisan units were supplied by airdrops from Moscow, and stole from peasants and dead Germans. Cohen stated that “Each partisan carried at least one gun, and some had three or four: two pistols, a rifle, a machine gun.”<sup>473</sup> This was beneficial for the Jewish partisans because there were other fighters who had the same mission as them, who were better equipped for partisan life.

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<sup>470</sup> Duffy, 259.

<sup>471</sup> Porat, Dina. *The Fall of a Sparrow: The Life and Times of Abba Kovner*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010) 149, 150.

<sup>472</sup> Cohen, Rich. *The Avengers*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000) 107.

<sup>473</sup> Cohen, 109.

A short time after his arrival in Rudnicki in early October, Kovner became the commander of a Jewish fighting unit within the Lithuanian-Soviet partisan organization.<sup>474</sup> Kovner organized the Jewish fighters into four divisions, with distinct names. These names were Death to Fascism, led by Jacob Prenner (Betar); Struggle, led by Avrasha Rasel (Komsomol); To Victory, led by Shmuel Kaplinsky and Aharon Aharonowicz (Bundist); and the Avenger, led by Kovner (Hashomer Hatzza'ir). There were fifty fighters in each division, and the four divisions together formed the Jewish Brigade.<sup>475</sup> The Jewish partisans in Rudnicki had a strong presence of youth organization members, which greatly influenced their ability to succeed in the forests. Youth organizations represented Jewish pride, and organization, both qualities that needed to be supplanted in the minds of the Jewish partisans.

The Second Struggle Group from the ghetto fell under Kovner's command. The Struggle Group had come to the forests in early September without permission. There was tension between the F.P.O. and Struggle Group members, especially when Kovner became the head of both groups. The Second Struggle Group was able to maintain some authority, as Borowska was appointed political commissar. In the forest the Jews could not fight with each other, but needed to put aside their differences and come together as one, which they did. Porat stated that "The shoulder-to-shoulder combat, undivided by party issues, that Kovner had dreamed of in the ghetto and the devotion to the tasks at hand and to comrades were all realized in the forest under his command."<sup>476</sup> Kovner's ideology for Jewish unification was spread through the Jewish partisans in the Rudnicki forest, no matter what their pre-forest notions were.

Kovner believed that all the Jews in the forest, regardless of their gender should fight. The Soviets requested that Kovner build a separate camp for Jewish girls, but Abba refused. For

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<sup>474</sup> Porat, 150.

<sup>475</sup> Cohen, 110. & Porat, 153.

<sup>476</sup> Porat, 154.

Kovner, men and women were the same in the forests; everyone who could fight would fight. He stated, "The Jewish camp will be a combat camp...Military law and military discipline will apply the same to everyone."<sup>477</sup> Jews continued to find their way into the forests. At the end of November 1943, 200 came from Kowno. There were 1,000 partisans in the forest at this point, and 600 belonged to Jewish units. The large proportion of Jews in the forests resulted in the partisan headquarters' order to the Jewish partisans that they could not allow more Jews into the forest. This order was not followed; Jews were snuck into the forest from the labor camps and city via back roads. With the overflow of Jews, Kovner ordered that the fighters and non-fighters, against common partisan practice, to live in one camp. To Kovner, bringing in Jews and protecting them was a substitute for the failed F.P.O. resistance in the ghetto.<sup>478</sup> The Jews were in the forest to fight, as Jews, against the enemy. This was made no more evident then when the Lithuanian Brigade asked the Jews to join their group and Kovner did not accept. He stated that the Germans have killed Jews because they are Jews, and the Jews must fight as Jews.<sup>479</sup>

Kovner's wife Vitka played an integral role in the resistance in the forest. Not only did she help Kovner and his F.P.O. peers find the Jewish partisans in the forest, but she helped more and more Jews reach the forests. She too believed that the mission was to save as many Jews as possible. After the development of the four partisan divisions, Kovner's division found an island in a swamp to set up camp. Vitka was vital in bringing Jews to this camp from the fur factory still operating in Vilna. She received help from other women fighters as well.<sup>480</sup> This was exactly what Kovner wanted; a continuous flow of Jews into the forest, and women fighters contributing

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<sup>477</sup> Cohen, 111.

<sup>478</sup> Porat, 155.

<sup>479</sup> Cohen, 113.

<sup>480</sup> Cohen, 111.

to the Jewish mission. Kovner's command of the partisans led to the integration of all facets of Jewish life into the resistance movement.

Once on the island the partisans dug trenches, where they built barracks, or dugouts, of pine trunks. Each dugout was home to one hundred fighters who slept side by side on wooden platforms. There were slanted roofs so rain and snow would run off, and there was a wood-burning oven that carried smoke through the roof. The dugouts were built so they would blend into the forest, and from a distance they looked like forest hills.<sup>481</sup> The partisan camp was well organized in order to keep the Jews safe, and healthy. As is the case in all resistance movements, weapons were very important for the Jewish partisans in the Rudnicki Forest. Unfortunately there were not enough weapons for every fighter, so Kovner developed a caste system. The fighters who were about to go on a mission or about to go on duty as guards would check weapons out of an armory, and return the weapons upon completion of the mission or tour of duty.<sup>482</sup> The caste system preached organization, and accountability, while providing everyone with a chance to participate in the resistance movement.

In the middle of October 1943 Henrik Zimanas, who went by the underground name Yurgis, came to the Rudnicki Forest from Narocz. He came to take command of the Soviet-Lithuanian underground organizations in the forest and cities in the areas of south Lithuania, as commissar and first secretary of the regional party committee. Yurgis had taught at the Jewish high school in Kowno, where Yiddish was the language of instruction. He never formally admitted he was Jewish, but his interest in Yiddish partisan songs made him suspect to Kovner and the partisans.<sup>483</sup> Yurgis played a pivotal role in the forests. He was in constant dialogue with Kovner, and was able to relay important information throughout the rest of the war. With Yurgis'

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<sup>481</sup> Cohen, 111.

<sup>482</sup> Cohen, 112.

<sup>483</sup> Porat, 155, 156.

arrival Kovner only commanded his own regiment, but was in charge of the 400 Jews in the camp.<sup>484</sup>

Unlike in the Vilna ghetto, Kovner and his fighters were able to forge actual armed resistance against their opponents in the forest, such as the peasants, Poles, and Germans. Kovner's armed missions can be inferred to be orchestrated solely to preserve Jewish life, by eliminating their enemies and obtaining weapons and food. It is hard to speculate if there was actual malicious intent, or just as a mean to survive. Nonetheless, Kovner's fighters were prepared to do what it took to benefit the partisan unit. Abba knew of a pro-German family in Drogozha, a village across the river, who were harboring weapons. With the help of a little boy as a tour guide Kovner and his fighters, some with fake weapons, trekked to the home. Kovner stormed into the house and asked for their weapons, which they said they did not have. Just as Kovner believed them a man ran across the yard and picked up a rifle. Kovner marched the man into the house and told one of his soldiers to take the father outside. He demanded that the mother of the household hand over the weapons, or her husband would be murdered. When she still refused, a shot was fired, and Kovner told his men to bring one of the sons outside. The mother finally caved, and the partisans were able to obtain a horse, rifles, pistols, and a machine gun.<sup>485</sup> In the end no one was actually shot, but the Jewish partisans were able to receive weapons they desperately needed, while taking weapons away from a German supporter.

Kovner was very methodical and intelligent in his plans to capture food and guns. He decided that the best time to raid peasants of their belongings was at night. He would send about twenty fighters each on a mission, and they were ordered to only raid peasants who were pro-German. The fighters were only allowed to take what they needed and nothing more. For example,

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<sup>484</sup> Porat, 167.

<sup>485</sup> Cohen, 115, 116, 117, 118.



if a peasant had two cows, they took only one. The partisan fighters were willing to act violently if they felt they needed to. If a peasant was found to help the enemy, they would go out of their way to kill him.<sup>486</sup>

However, there were repercussions to these raids. The peasants in the villages started to resist the Jewish partisans. They would spit on the Jews, and hide food and guns.<sup>487</sup> The Lithuanian peasants hated the Soviets, and therefore hated the Jews. To exacerbate their hatred, the Germans provided them with arms and encouraged them to become informers. White Polish partisans also feared the Soviet Union, and armed the peasants. In addition “The Germans also established auxiliary regiments, a kind of local SS, made up of Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, or Soviet prisoners of war who knew that anyone who fell into German hands and returned from captivity would be killed by his own commanders. As a result, the forest and its surroundings were full of units hostile to the Jews.”<sup>488</sup> The Jews faced a major struggle in the Rudnicki Forest because they had lots of enemies, and very few allies.

Yurgis told Kovner to disguise his troops, but he refused. He stated, “Fighting as a Jew meant being hated by peasants; it meant being alone and not being ashamed of being alone.”<sup>489</sup> Kovner never deviated from his principles that the Jews were in this fight alone, and needed to battle the enemy themselves. The Jewish partisans would meet every threat with a force. If a partisan ran into a peasant in the forest they would kill the peasant before the peasant could kill them.<sup>490</sup> The partisans, both Jewish and non-Jewish, also fought against the peasants by razing villages. A partisan group of twenty fighters set fire to the village of Konyuchi, as ordered by the

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<sup>486</sup> Cohen, 119.

<sup>487</sup> Cohen, 119.

<sup>488</sup> Porat, 159.

<sup>489</sup> Cohen, 119.

<sup>490</sup> Cohen, 119.

partisan headquarters in Rudnicki to do so.<sup>491</sup> It was war, and the Jews needed to act malevolently in order to survive. After all, if they did not act aggressively, their opponents would, and the Jewish partisans would have been wiped out.

Another important man in the Jewish partisan unit in the Rudnicki Forest was Isser Schmidt. Schmidt was a Jewish Communist who had grown up in a nearby town. When the Germans invaded, he fled to Russia and joined the Lithuanian Brigade. He was then sent to Moscow where he was taught to blow up trains, make bombs, and kill Germans; all of which were useful to the partisan effort. He jumped into Belorussia in 1943, and led men through the forests recruiting and sabotaging, where he found Yurgis in Rudnicki. Yurgis sent him to the Jewish Brigade.<sup>492</sup> Cohen described Schmidt's role with the Jewish partisans by stating that he was "a kind of special agent, a policeman who would examine every word and action, rooting out subversives."<sup>493</sup> Schmidt played an invaluable role within the partisan group, and helped in areas where the partisans needed the help greatly.

Polish and German spies would join the partisan unit, dressed as partisans. This was a major problem because they could report the whereabouts of the Jewish group, and it would not take much to destroy the Jewish camp. Schmidt was able to use his training to detect these spies. When Schmidt would identify someone as a spy they would be put on trial. After the trial Schmidt would take the man down a forest rail, and that would be the end of them.<sup>494</sup> Schmidt also dealt with Jewish collaborators. As Cohen mentioned, in the winter of 1943 Schmidt was suspicious of Natek Ring, a Jewish policeman from the ghetto. When Ring did not return to roll call one morning, Kovner investigated and found out that Ring was leading enemy soldiers to

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<sup>491</sup> Porat, 159.

<sup>492</sup> Cohen, 121.

<sup>493</sup> Cohen, 121.

<sup>494</sup> Cohen, 121, 122.

rooms where people were hiding in the ghetto. Schmidt took Ring into the trees and killed him.<sup>495</sup>

Schmidt used his training while in Russia to help the Jews launch their first sabotage attack. The mission was to blow a munitions train forty miles away. This mission also marked the first time a woman had gone on such a mission. Five partisans in all went, and Schmidt led the soldiers through roads, and rivers. They reached the railroad in the morning after their departure, but Schmidt could not find the railroad he wanted to bomb. He broke into a house and woke a man up, and at gunpoint demanded the man take him to the railroad bridge. Once at the bridge Schmidt tied the mine beneath the bridge and ran a fuse into the trees. When the train passed Schmidt pulled the fuse, blowing up the train. A report to the partisan unit claimed that fifty soldiers had been killed, and German weapons were destroyed.<sup>496</sup> The Jewish partisans could not have pulled this mission off without Schmidt.

The Jewish partisans continued to launch attacks against the Germans. When the Russian commander told Kovner he wanted to attack Vilna, and needed Jewish girls to help him, Kovner was not willing to mix Jewish fighters with gentiles. He decided that the Jews would help, but it had to be a Jewish mission, with Jewish soldiers and Jewish orders. All he wanted from the Russians were weapons. On the eve of Yom Kippur two boys and two girls left the Jewish camp for Vilna. The boys set mines in the waterworks, and Vitka, one of the girls on the mission, put a mine on one of the metal grids where the electrical transformers were. The timers were set for four hours. The boys never made it back to the forests, because they refused to leave with Vitka. Vitka led sixty more Jews out of the ghetto, and heard the explosions go off on her way out.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Cohen, 122.

<sup>496</sup> Cohen, 122, 123, 124.

<sup>497</sup> Cohen, 125, 126, 127, 128.

Missions like this served two purposes. They disrupted German order in the ghetto, and they saved Jewish lives.

Jewish partisans continued to commit acts of sabotage by blowing up trains and bridges. In 1944 they destroyed fifty-one trains, hundreds of trucks and dozens of bridges. The Jewish partisans were eager to fight, and sabotage the Germans regardless of what arms they had. When airdrops came with weapons the Jews were last in line behind the Russians and the Lithuanians. The Jewish unit could never replace what they shot off at night. This did not stop them from fighting. Cohen stated, "If the Jews did not have bombs, they went out with pistols. If they did not have pistols, they went out with nothing. Using their bare hands, they tore down telephone poles and ripped up telegraph wires."<sup>498</sup> Kovner led a mission that did not require weapons. A partisan group broke into a chemical factory and stole drums of fuel, which they brought to a bridge on the Vilna-Grodno highway; a road that enemy convoys frequently traveled on. The partisans then tied dead pine needles into bundles, put fuel on the bundles, and placed them on to the bridge. Kovner then turned over the drums, spilling the fuel. A fighter then lit a bundle of needles and raced across the bridge, spreading the fire. There was no way for the Germans to cross the bridge.<sup>499</sup> Without weapons the Jewish partisans had to be creative. Kovner always had a plan, and it always seemed to curtail any German offensive strategy that could have been launched.

The spring of 1944 brought more arms and supplies to the Jews, as a direct affect of the war. The Red Army was advancing, and they were able to drop more supplies to the partisans. Although the Jewish partisans were discriminated against, they were obtaining more weapons. The problem was, there were still not enough weapons to go around. When Jewish fighters

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<sup>498</sup> Cohen, 129.

<sup>499</sup> Cohen, 129, 130.

unrightfully took weapons, Kovner faced execution. Kovner was eventually returned to the partisans, and placed in charge of the sabotage unit.<sup>500</sup> At the beginning of July 1944 the war was ending, and Kovner started to renew contact with Hashomer Hatzza'ir members. On July 7 the Red Army surrounded Vilna, and one week later, the Germans surrendered. After this, Porat stated, "The Jewish partisans from Rudniki entered the city following the troops. Those who had left it through the sewers now returned with the victors, carrying their arms."<sup>501</sup> The Jews of Vilna who followed Kovner and the other partisans to the forests were able to survive the war, fighting in the forests.

The Bielski partisans and the Jewish partisans in the Rudnicki Forest were both the pinnacle of Jewish resistance. Both groups were led by courageous, heroic leaders, who realized that the only chance the Jews had of surviving was by fighting in the forests. On a large-scale the number of Jews saved between these two units was not a considerable amount, but the fact that Jewish life was saved, and the partisans helped the ally cause, was extremely significant.

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<sup>500</sup> Porat, 168, 169.

<sup>501</sup> Porat, 170.

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