The Jewish Communities Response to Persecution during the Holocaust

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History of the Holocaust

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Terrible deeds of hatred and evil were brought upon the Jewish people throughout the Holocaust. Hitler and the Nazis’ reasons for carrying out these actions are difficult to understand because their reasoning is flawed and based solely upon stereotypes. Many millions of Jewish people died in the Holocaust, but a few developed ways and methods to avoid this persecution. Their options varied greatly, from trying to advance in work camps by putting themselves in a position to save themselves and possibly others, to actual physical resistance, to slipping into a life of hiding.

The evil actions of the Nazis towards the Jews were swift, and few could avoid them, especially after World War II began. These actions were not limited to German Jews, however. This “evacuation” of Jews to help create a more “perfect race” extended into countries that Nazi Germany occupied at the time, including Poland, Hungary, and France. In addition, it was not only the Nazis that the Jewish people had to fear. Often, local residents were ready and willing to turn Jewish people over to the Nazis, but even worse, they were willing to join in the beatings and killings. An excellent example of this comes from the book *Neighbors*, which tells us how on a single day in the small town of Jedwabne Poland, 1600 Jews were killed by their previously friendly Polish neighbors.

It is clear that the Jewish faith and community faced overwhelming odds of survival during the Holocaust. To survive they had to find ways to respond to the various persecutions that they encountered. Their responses came in many forms, including “resistances”. It is commonly known that many Jews were sent to concentration or work camps. If not immediately sent to the gas chambers upon arrival, the new prisoners were sent to camp blocks where they would sleep, work, and engage in their daily activities. Many sources, including *Maus I and II* and *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque*
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Land, demonstrate that one’s ability to “organize” went a long way in determining whether an individual would survive the camps. Any talents that could prove useful to the Nazis or this ability to organize often allowed people to move into more “secure” positions.

These positions ranged from a job at the infirmary, like we saw with Sara Nomberg in Auschwitz, to a Kapo, or block leader, to a job as a Tin man, like we saw with Vladek in Maus II. These positions would often give people a sense of confidence about their chances of survival. Once these positions were attained, these prisoners’ lives often became a bit better. When Vladek from Maus attains the job of assistant to the Kapo, it is because of his ability to speak both Polish and English. Vladek used one of his talents to improve his situation. Vladek explains his new status like this: “Everyone they called by number, but me he called by name” (Spiegelman p. 32). We see how he would be protected from roll calls and eventually he is lead to a room specifically for the Kapo. Vladek tells us this about the room: “Here I saw Rolls! Here I saw Eggs! Meat! Coffee! The entire table was full” (Spiegelman p. 32)! Sara Nomberg’s situation in the book Auschwitz, while not as privileged as Vladek’s, was also much more secure than the average prisoner. After she got the job at the infirmary, she was not as nervous about roll call and being selected to be “sent to the gas”. As she now was in a position of use, she could prove her worth to the Nazis and gain a small measure of security.

Another option that the Jewish people employed to counteract persecution was actual physical resistance. This kind of display was rare, because if one were to fail the punishment would result in certain death. An outstanding example comes from the movie The Pianist, where Wladyslaw Szpilman helped a group of prisoners smuggle in
weapons to stage a revolt that was to stop the Germans from deporting any more people to concentration camps. Szpilman was not in the camp to carry it out, but the damage was seen through his eyes from a nearby window. The Jewish people were successful in doing some damage, but thousands were killed, and most of the rest were deported anyway. The Warsaw uprising was the largest and most well-known of all prisoner rebellions.

Another option that the Jewish people used to keep from being persecuted was to go into hiding. It would seem that this was the best option, but from what history and the study of these people’s lives has shown us, that was not the case. It was a good option in that one whom initially could avoid being caught was not immediately sent to the work camps like most Jews, but there were many risks for those who chose this route. The most serious risk was getting caught because the punishment for trying to hide from the Nazis was almost certain death. Another consideration that Jewish people had before going into hiding was where were they going to hide, and if someplace could be found, the trustworthiness of the person allowing them to hide in their home. Through movies and books we have seen examples of both good people that would try to help the Jews hide, and ones that refused and were ready and willing to turn in any Jewish people to the Nazis.

A person that did a good job of hiding the Jews and seemed trustworthy was the lady in Maus I, Mrs. Motonowa. She offered to let Anja and Vladek hide in her cellar. Her husband was often out of town and she felt like she could offer them a relatively safe place to hide. She once asked them to leave for safety reasons, but immediately after it was cleared up she asked them to return. They did have to stay in a rat-infested cellar,
but they were not deprived of any necessities. Even after Vladek and Anja left, Mrs. Motonowa allowed Vladek’s cousin and his family to stay with her. Her generosity allowed entire families to survive the war when so many did not (Spiegelman p. 141-154).

There are many more instances when citizens were not willing to protect the Jews, but were ready to call as much attention to them as possible. One example comes from Maus I. Before Vladek and Anja went to Mrs. Motonowa’s house to hide, they went to the home of Anja’s father’s former janitor. As they were getting ready to enter the house, a lady sitting in a window nearby screamed out, “THERE’S A JEWESS IN THE COURTYARD POLICE” (Spiegelman p. 136-137)! In Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust by Yaffa Eliach, the story “Jew, Go Back to the Grave”, a young boy, Zvi, was able to escape from a group of Jews that were being lined up by a grave and shot in the back for trying to revolt. After the firing had died down and the soldiers carrying out the killings had left, Zvi got out of the grave that he was hiding in and saw some houses of Christian people that he knew nearby. Zvi went to these houses and each time was told, “Jew, go back to the grave where you belong” (Eliach p. 54-55). Only after lying about his identity was Zvi able to attain shelter. The people that were unwilling to help Jews seemed to be more prominent throughout the Holocaust, either because they already disliked the Jews or were afraid of being punished and persecuted themselves if they were caught helping the Jews.

There is no doubt that life was not easy for Jewish communities that Nazi Germany occupied during the time of the Holocaust. Even though the Nazis were fighting WWII, “evacuating” all the Jews from any piece of land they controlled
remained a major priority. The Nazis would relentlessly search them out, making escape
difficult. Life was more difficult because many people, not just the Nazis, were willing
to turn the Jews over to the Nazis to be beaten and killed, or were ready to do the beating
and killings themselves. All of these obstacles make one understand why the odds of
Jewish survival were very slim. Overcoming tremendous odds, some did survive and
were able to carry on Jewish traditions.

The types of torture and persecution that the Jews endured would kill everyone
but the most strong-hearted. I believe that faith played a big part in their survival. An
example of this is “Who Will Win This War?” from Yaffa Eliach’s Hasidic Tales of the
Holocaust. The Jewish prisoners were working for the German army and the day before
Yom Kippur, were directly told that they would not be allowed to fast, as was their
tradition. The next day all of the Jewish people dumped out their coffee and stowed their
bread away and decided to fast anyway. At the end of the day, amidst the rain and mud,
the German officer in charge told them that he knew they had fasted, and offered to let
any of them repent, and told them otherwise they would run up a nearby mountain and
slide back down on their stomachs. None of them agreed to repent, so they all continued
to run up and down the mountain until midnight, signaling the end of Yom Kippur.
Afterwards a young German officer walked over to a group of the Jews and said this,
which to me sums up why I feel amidst all their trials and tribulations the Jews were able
to survive the war: “I don’t know who will win this war, but one thing I am sure of-
people like you, a nation like yours, will never be defeated, never” (Eliach p. 101-105)!
Works Cited


The Nazis win 288 of 647 seats in the Reichstag election. During the last free election in Germany, ostensibly called to obtain a vote of confidence, the Nazi Party wins nearly 44 percent of the popular vote, more than twice as many votes as the next closest political party, the Social Democrats, with 18 percent. In a coalition with another rightwing party, Hitler takes full control of Germany. Recent papers in Jewish Responses to the Holocaust. Papers. People. Through its exploration of antisemitic Christian scripts during the time of the Holocaust, The Gates of the Forest thus demonstrates not only how the Shoah constitutes the backdrop of the Passion narrative in the story. But the novel also presents how the Passion narrative indeed functions as the backdrop of the Holocaust, that which ultimately, insidiously, set the stage for the mass murder of millions of Jews. American Jewish leaders organized a boycott of German goods, hoping that economic pressure might force Hitler to end his anti-Semitic policies, and prominent American Jews, including Louis D. Brandeis, interceded with the Roosevelt administration on the refugees’ behalf. In response, the Roosevelt administration agreed to ease visa regulations, and in 1939, following the Nazi annexation of Austria, State Department officials issued all the visas available under the combined German-Austrian quota. First News of the Holocaust. The extermination of European Jewry began when the German army invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. During World War I, the American press had published reports of German atrocities that subsequently turned out to be false.