

# The survival of Jews during the Holocaust as a research problem

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## **Abstract**

The issue of the protection of Jews during the Second World War is a subject of long-term focus for the author. She has conducted numerous interviews in the United States (particularly in New York) and Israel with survivors of the Holocaust, and also with those who undertook the challenge of saving them. These conversations bring to light the multifaceted problem of the resistance of Jews who had the courage to stand up to the German occupier. Available sources are sufficiently rich in content to be used for the purpose of a proper analysis. It could appear that the subject of the Holocaust has by now been exhausted, however in the majority of publications devoted to the topic the resistance put up by Jews is mentioned only when it took the form of armed struggle. No attention is given to other kinds of opposition, also passive, such as sabotage in workplaces or even choosing the means of ending one's life. Without a doubt Jews showed that they were capable of fighting for survival, and, as the present article intends to demonstrate, they employed numerous and diverse methods in their struggle.

## The term “survival” as used to depict the stances of individuals and groups

The Holocaust has long since been the object of multifaceted research. Chronologically, the first problem which came to attention – soon gaining paramount importance – was that of the genocide committed against the Jews by the Third Reich, as well as its quantitative dimension. Research into the circumstances accompanying the Holocaust was undertaken concurrently. Since the end of the Second World War, a steadily increasing number of testimonies – given by both survivors of the Holocaust and witnesses to the events – has come to light.

But our knowledge of the Holocaust far surpasses that of the resistance organized by Jews, as the vast majority of works focus on the genocide and its barbarity, unprecedented as it was in the history of mankind. Mentions of opposition can be found only sporadically, usually in the accounts of witnesses and victims of German persecution. Generally, “resistance” is considered to mean an instance of armed defiance, particularly occurring during escapes from camps, ghettos or other places of torture and execution. A similarly narrowed approach to the problem has been adopted by the authors of the recent collective work entitled *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* [Night without end: The fate of Jews in selected counties of occupied Poland].<sup>1</sup> In reality, however, opposition could take various forms, depending on the situation faced by an endangered person or group. It did not always consist in direct armed struggle – indeed, in most cases it was focused on frustrating the exterminatory designs of the Germans. Thus, it is not the form that is most important, but rather the very will to express one’s intolerance of oppression.

Authors ought to unearth actions which, although they can be classified as acts of resistance, did not consist in combatting the occupier, but rather in trying to free oneself from his terror and finding a means of salvation. The methods used to achieve these objectives were very diverse. If, therefore, they are gathered and properly documented, we will be able to create a new quality in research into the Holocaust, to build a global image of how Jews behaved when faced with a direct threat to life, and

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1 The authors of *Dalej jest noc* (Engelking, Grabowski, 2018), having at their disposal a wealth of sources, have described only certain forms of resistance and attempts at securing survival – already well known in the literature. Nechma Tec in her publication entitled *Opór. Walka Żydów i Polaków z niemieckim terrorem* (Tec, 2014) also turned attention primarily to the active struggle, focusing among others on membership of the partisans, and a similar approach was adopted by the authors of the III volume of the series *Żydzi w walce 1939–1945* (Roszkowski, 2011). Successive writings should cast the issue in a broader light, but instead they tend to regurgitate information known from previous studies.

– finally – to distinguish from amongst the totality of the Jewish populace those groups which did not give in to fatalism and refused to go passively to their deaths. Conducting such studies is of considerable importance for a sociological analysis of the entire Jewish community during the Holocaust. This perspective is a novelty not only as regards the primary research topic, which is concerned with the fate of Jews in the period, but also for the historiography of the occupation as such, and therefore – by extension – for scholarly analyses devoted to European civilization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Significantly, the Holocaust was the manifestation of a civilizational collapse, brought about in equal measure by cultural decadence and the violation of ethical norms.

“Survival” could be facilitated by anything to which the Jews turned during the Shoah in order to save the lives of individual people or groups (usually families) threatened with imminent death, rescue a specific Jewish community (also a ghetto or a camp), or, in the widest interpretation, deliver the Jewish nation as a whole. This interpretation of resistance necessitates conducting research with a very broad array of detailed objectives, taking into consideration instances of defensive initiatives undertaken by individuals and by larger groups of Jews when faced with extermination. To date, however, analyses undertaken in historical writings devoted to the Holocaust have been concerned primarily with the types of exterminatory practices, the fates of Jews in various lands occupied by the Germans, and – first and foremost – the sheer number of victims. Some attention has also been given to the assistance provided to Jews by persons from outside their immediate circle. Other scholars have focused on some of the stances taken by Jews towards the Germans, and especially on instances of co-operation with the occupier. The motivation for such behavior – whether that of individual persons (informers) or of entire Jewish milieus (the Jewish police, the Judenrats) – may be explained by the desire to save one’s own life, even at the expense of others. But are we really able to understand such people, who simply wanted to survive without any regard for the consequences? Whatever the answer may be, we must isolate those who betrayed their fellow men out of a desire for profit from those who did so because they were genuinely fearing for their lives. And, likewise, as regards the turning in by captured Jews of those who had been hiding them – a not infrequent practice.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless this

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2 There were instances when members of Judenrats actively hindered the activities of the resistance movement, sometimes even sending in the Jewish police to counter underground activists operating in the ghettos. Influenced by the strong propaganda of the Judenrat, the majority of residents of Szawle ghetto wanted to have nothing to do with armed resistance, even when their end was drawing near. In 1943, the population of the ghetto in Wilno actually demanded that Icchak Wittenberg, one of their leaders, be handed over to the Nazis, fearing that otherwise the ghetto would be liquidated (Marrus, 1993, p. 213).

problem, too, although probably difficult or even inconvenient for many,<sup>3</sup> should be taken up as a subject of research.

Researchers studying the issue of the survival of Jews in the Second World War should analyze source materials, and in particular memoirs, in terms of activities undertaken in the face of the Shoah, proceed to a reconstruction of the defensive initiatives that were adopted (collectively and individually), and finally present a synthetic image of the various stances taken by the Jewish community towards the Holocaust. The result would seem to be predictable. Research will make it possible to correct opinions hitherto held as regards the behavior of Jews during the war and emphasize their participation in the fight against the Third Reich.

### The struggle for survival as documented in sources

Extant source materials allow us to identify instances of Jews' active opposition to the German extermination campaign, however until now researchers have focused primarily on determining their number and nature. However, at least the same level of attention should be given to the circumstances accompanying such acts of resistance, which have also been described in sources. We are referring here, among others, to mental motivation, to seeking support in one's immediate circle, to the belief in survival and the sense of standing up to fatalism, and also to a great many other factors dependent on the psyche of individuals undertaking the struggle for life.

Further, any theses put forward must be grounded in sources – and these, as we know, are copious. While they may not be complete, they are clearly sufficient to provide an answer to the following question: what conditioned the survival of Jews during the Holocaust? In 1944, the Central Jewish Historical Commission was set up in Lublin to gather the accounts of survivors and provide access to evidence which could help in the prosecution of German war criminals. Thanks to the enormous effort and involvement of its employees, in 1946 the institution managed to collect approximately 8,000 dossiers of archival documents, a few dozen memoirs, journals and literary works, some 2,000 accounts, a few thousand books found in the ruins of ghettos, and – finally – more than 3,000 photographs and 250 paintings, sculptures and synagogical vessels and accessories.

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3 The authors of the most recent book devoted to survival strategies have come to the conclusion that “ultimately, collaboration had no significance whatsoever for the act of saving lives” (Engelking, Grabowski, 2018, vol. 1, p. 41). This thesis is quite bizarre, for collaboration – irrespective of its form – always impacts opportunities of survival.

One of the most valuable collections is the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, also known as Ringelblum's Archive (*Historia*, 2018).

Those Jews who survived the hell of the Second World War recounted the events exactly as they remembered them. In their accounts, they spared no one. For example, when describing the situation of the Jews of Będzin in the years 1939–1943, Jakub Sender mentioned the surname of the head of the Jewish Commune, who had cooperated with the Gestapo (Relacja Jakuba Sendera, n.d.). Many accounts inform of the collaboration of the chairman of the Judenrat in the Łódź Ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski, who had no scruples when it came to sending Jewish children to death (Relacja Żyda Goldmana, 1945). Further, survivors also gave examples of heroic Poles and Ukrainians who hid Jews in their homes at the risk of their lives (Relacja Markusa Halperna, n.d.; Namysło, 2009),<sup>4</sup> but also of those who remained passive or indeed contributed to the extermination (Relacje Izaaka Plata, n.d.; Relacja Sabiny Charasz, n.d.; Kalisz, Rączy, 2015).<sup>5</sup>

Holocaust researchers also have at their disposal the materials gathered in the Yad Vashem archives in Jerusalem and at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. The Institute of National Remembrance, on the other hand, stores the trial documentation of persons immediately responsible for murdering Jews or sentencing them to death, as well as writings and papers concerning the organization of the vast system of extermination created by Nazi Germany. This is supplemented with sources gathered in other archives, for example in those of individual concentration camps.

Without a doubt, recent studies – even if their scholarly value varies – contribute immensely to the subject of the Holocaust in the broadest meaning of the term, not least by developing our understanding of the various forms of defensive resistance to the Shoah. Their authors include both survivors of the Holocaust and scholars. Historians researching these issues have therefore at their disposal a gamut of materials that only need to be subjected to a diligent scientific critique.<sup>6</sup>

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4 The accounts contain numerous examples of Poles who saved Jews.

5 The data are not always specific, and in some instances they cannot be verified. For example, the authors of the accounts referred to above pointed to the passiveness of people in the Gorlice district towards the extermination, but due to the limited number of sources we are unable to give a precise indication of the percentage of the population which contributed directly to the deaths of Jews. There is no doubt, however, that such behavior did occur.

6 For example, Nechma Tec in the book *Opór. Walka Żydów i Polaków z niemieckim terrorem* describes the resistance of Jews in concentration camps, in the ghetto, and when fighting as partisans. This is not an exhaustive work on the topic, but it definitely brings to light the problem of the struggle for survival (Tec, 2014).

## Fate – or the instinct of survival?

We may observe that Holocaust literature has become home to a certain stereotype, namely that Jews did not fight for their survival. As a matter of fact, this was the charge leveled after the war at those who arrived in the newly created state of Israel, as Tom Segev writes in *Siódmy milion. Izrael – piętno Zagłady* (Segev, 2012). Simply put, Jews were faced with a trial by ordeal, with annihilation – an instance of fate that could in no way be avoided. As it turned out, however, extermination was not the only fate available to Jews during the German occupation. There was an alternative, as an in-depth preliminary survey of sources clearly shows. This option was to fight. And we are not concerned here solely with armed resistance, which was not possible in every situation, but with the very will to live, which allowed many to persevere. It was this will which even in the most difficult of circumstances, when all seemed lost, gave a glimmer of hope – one which was not gifted, but hard-won in a struggle with oneself, with doubt and apathy. Later, this hope was transformed into specific acts. The will pushed people towards survival. It was not always possible to save one's life, for frequently – or perhaps most often – salvation consisted in dying in the fight. This may appear to be a fundamental contradiction: how can death be salvation for someone who is guided by the will to live? The answer is simple – because it was an honorable death, incurred without any surrender. Sometimes this was the only choice for Jews hounded by the nightmare of the Holocaust.

And the Holocaust, as the definition itself suggests, preassumes the element of sacrifice, which may in turn suggest that one should succumb voluntarily to the Shoah. Such an interpretation is present mainly in Orthodox circles. Many Jews, having a chance of saving their lives, for example in a ghetto or a camp, renounced the opportunity and submitted themselves to the will of God. In numerous instances elderly parents, not wanting to be a burden on their children, decided not to escape from the trains taking them to the camps.<sup>7</sup> A question presents itself here: did Jews view the Holocaust as their destiny and were so many of them passive because of this? Or perhaps the opposite was true – that they fought heroically in order not to surrender to the Shoah? When researching the problem of the struggle for survival during the war, we should also consider to what degree the conviction of inevitability was widespread in the Jewish community. Was its acceptance founded in religiousness and

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7 Many historians have posed the question as to why the Jews did not put up resistance. Among them is Martin Gilbert, who received numerous responses from survivors. First and foremost, how were these hungry civilians, practically defenseless, supposed to rise up in arms when each attempt at resistance resulted in the German oppressors taking German reprisals? (Gilbert, 2002).

Talmudic knowledge, and thus applicable solely to God-fearing Jews? Did the fatalism to which we have just referred not also incapacitate other circles of Jews, including those who were more or less assimilated and religiously indifferent? And, finally, how common was the disbelief that Hitler's plans would actually be implemented<sup>8</sup> and to what degree did it impact the stance taken towards the Holocaust? Was passivity dictated by the conviction that the final solution was only a temporary campaign, and that acquiescence to the occupier would allow one to wait out and thus survive the Shoah?<sup>9</sup>

Obtaining answers to these questions is the first step in research focusing on actions undertaken in order to survive, with a singular emphasis on active self-defense. The fundamental issues which come to mind in connection with this problem relate to people's motivation and the means which they had at their disposal, as well as the forms of armed resistance which were available to them and their potential effectiveness. Having thus formulated our research objectives, we may put forward a hypothesis which can be summarized in a single sentence: the assumption that Jews were completely passive in the face of the Shoah is false, and thus it can be demonstrated that many of them chose active self-defense.

### The conditions and methods of the fight for survival

One of the most important aspects of research into the conditions governing the survival of Jews during the Holocaust concerns tracing the mutual relations between the Jewish community and its neighbors, first and foremost Poles. These were later of immense importance for the situation of Jews under the occupation, especially as before the war they had

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8 The majority of Jews were convinced right until the end that Hitler would not implement his genocidal plans, while those who witnessed the Nazis' brutal policies firsthand commanded no respect amongst their own. "One day my mother's brother, uncle Bernard, returned from Germany. While listening to his conversations with grandmother, I first heard about the German plan to annihilate the entire Jewish Nation [...]. In uncle's opinion, we should leave everything and flee as quickly as possible. But where to? [...] Jews, however, did not want to believe that something like this could be true, that such a thing could really occur. Uncle said that the Germans believed in what Hitler said about Jews, they believed that all the Jews in the world had to be murdered. Following these conversations our neighbors came to the conclusion that uncle was mad. According to them, the world would never allow genocide, the murder of entire nations, to happen" (Oster, 2006, pp. 10–11).

9 As an example, Władysław Szpilman recalled the behavior of his own father, who was not convinced about engaging in resistance against the Germans, even though he had been encouraged to do so by a colleague: "We are allowing ourselves to be led to our deaths like a flock of sheep! If only half a million of us threw ourselves at the Germans, we would destroy the ghetto. Or at least die in such a way that we would not be viewed as a shameful blot on the history of the world". His father inquired: "and how do you know that they will send all of us to death?" (Szpilman, 2018, p. 96).



developed variously. Whereas in the lands bordering on Belarus and the Ukraine – not to mention the Eastern Borderlands, where a number of denominations clashed (the Catholic, Jewish and Orthodox) – the occurrence of conflicts cannot be denied, Jews living in, for example, the area of present-day Subcarpathia had on the whole a proper interaction with their Catholic neighbors. This had a considerable impact on behavior under conditions of Nazi terror. A positive example would be the heroic stance of the Kiszka family from Harta in the commune of Dynów, who without any hesitation hid a Jew from a nearby township in their own homestead. They paid the highest price for their act. After they were denounced by a Polish blackmailer, the mother was sent to Auschwitz, while the Germans shot the Jew on the spot (Bober, 2018). Numerous other accounts from another township near Dynów also show that residents were actively involved in saving their Jewish neighbors, thus making it possible for them to survive the war.<sup>10</sup> The darker side of the coin were situations when peasants went so far as to become co-perpetrators of extermination, “shaped by their difficult conditions of life, poverty, and the avarice which these could engender.” Such is the introductory presentation of rural areas penned by Tomasz Frydel, who describes strategies of survival in the district of Dębice. At the very beginning of his work he cites the words of two Jews who had doubts as to whether it was safe to hide on farms, for the peasants were capable of being both ruthless and greedy (Frydel, 2018, pp. 416 ff.). But many Holocaust researchers select only extreme instances – whether positive or negative – from the sources, which they subsequently emphasize and use to form generalizing opinions. This is particularly dangerous, for it may lead to the creation of a one-sided and sometimes wrongful image of the whole.<sup>11</sup>

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10 After the war, the residents were recognized as Righteous Among the Nations (<https://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/pl/historie-pomocy/wasze-opowiesci/uratowali-wielu-zydow>, dated 26.05.2018). We could give many more similar examples from the region of present-day Subcarpathia. The author of the text has held numerous conversations with both Holocaust survivors and Poles living in the area, and her interlocutors have described mutual relations as good. Obviously, though, we cannot ignore those who simply looked on at the executions of their Jewish neighbors, perhaps out of fear or maybe because they were involved in blackmail.

11 Barbara Engelking commenced her paper on strategies of survival adopted in the Bielsko district by presenting the participation of local Poles in catching Jews. She was able to give the exact number of persons – right down to the last victim – who had been killed by their neighbors directly or with their participation. In her opinion, local residents were responsible for the deaths of at least 45% of Jews (Engelking, 2018, pp. 124 ff.). We are immediately faced with questions: where did she get such detailed data and what does this have in common with the strategies of survival mentioned in the title? Whereas Alina Skibińska, who devoted her text to the district of Biłgoraj, has stated thus: “Younger people were encouraged by older family members to escape before German actions; parents would urge children to flee, never the other way round” (Skibińska, 2018, p. 304). But it is sufficient to look through the



Doubtless the point of departure should be the general situation in which the Jews found themselves in lands occupied by the Third Reich. Once the Nazis came to power in Germany, the situation of the Jews became very difficult. Both in *Mein Kampf* and in the twenty-five point manifesto of the NSDAP (published in 1920), Adolf Hitler identified the Jews and other select ethnic nationalities as the enemy, further stating that their radical social exclusion was necessary in order to bring about the re-birth of the country and the German nation (Maciejewski, 1981, pp. 73 ff.; Wielomski, 2004, pp. 11–15). Anti-Semitism, which had been present in Germany during the Weimar Republic, grew considerably in strength in the Third Reich, further stirred up by Hitler's anti-Jewish rhetoric. It is not surprising, therefore, that the elimination of Jews from public life met with approval (Bober, 2013, pp. 23 ff.). While the process of their eradication from the social sphere of the Third Reich took place gradually, in Nazi-occupied Austria (the Anschluss was carried out on 13 March 1938) they were deprived of rights with exceptional brutality, in the space of a single day. In October 1938, some 17,000 German Jews who had Polish ancestry were stripped of their German citizenship and deported to the Polish borderland near Zbąszyń. A month later, the "Kristallnacht" made the Jews more fully aware of the terrible danger which they faced. Many of them, albeit mainly those who were more affluent, found refuge outside Germany, among others in the USA and Great Britain. But those who had no means of protecting themselves and their families from the Nazis' criminal scheme for the utter annihilation of the Jewish race were faced with the specter of a gruesome end (Smith, 2017, pp. 41 ff.). On 31 July 1941, Hermann Göring entrusted the elaboration of a comprehensive plan of extermination to Reinhard Heydrich; on 21 January 1942, the latter presented the finished project at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin. Its focus was the so-called final solution of the Jewish problem. From that moment on, the genocide of the Jewish nation was to be conducted within an elaborate legal framework (Höss, 1972, pp. 103 ff.). Jews were condemned to extermination irrespective of where they actually found themselves – in the

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numerous Holocaust memoirs to see that children also tried to persuade their parents to save their lives, and that these were by no means isolated incidents. The thesis put forward by Skibińska is inherently false, and in all probability formulated to support the goals which the author tried to achieve through her article. In order to verify it, we would have to make use of a considerably richer body of source material than that which is available. It would also be necessary to cite interviews with persons who at the time lived in the district of Biłgoraj. Unfortunately, her text does not reference any such data. Polish perpetrators of the Holocaust – alleged or actual – are the prime focus of the author of an article from the abovementioned book, Jan Grabowski. His approach is equally dubious as a method of researching the problem of the self-defense of Jews and their strategies of survival (Grabowski, 2018, pp. 487 ff.).

concentration camps, within and without the ghettos, and even in Aryan surroundings.

In the concentration camps, they were to live for no more than two weeks, as Karl Fritzsch, the deputy commandant of Auschwitz, famously stated:

You have come not to a sanatorium, but to a German concentration camp, which you may leave only through the chimney. If any of you do not like it here, you can hurl yourselves at the wires right now; and if there are any Jews in the transport, they are not allowed to live longer than two weeks (Frankowski, 2003, p. 56).

When analyzing the psychological and ethical conditions of the camp existence, we arrive at a point where we start to view the Shoah not only as a campaign of mass extermination, but also as a process of the planned and systematic destruction of human beings in the final months or days of their lives. The German occupation always gave rise to resistance, irrespective of the country and the society which it afflicted. This opposition took the form of military action and sabotage, and of a more guarded struggle in culture, the economy, and countless other fields of social activity. Underground movements were therefore an inseparable consequence of wartime reality, even where the ruthlessness of the occupier was not exceedingly severe. A question poses itself: how did Jews react to this form of occupation – the cruelest by far, for its objective was to bring about the extinction of their entire nation?

We cannot lose sight of the conditions of life that the occupation brought into being, particularly for the Jewish communities, as they were incomparable with those of the Aryan populations conquered by the Third Reich. Nevertheless, the mental condition of Jews at the time was to a certain extent analogous with that of concentration camp inmates. It could appear that the same would hold true for the strategies and methods of survival applied, which although not identical in these two instances, would surely have been similar.

Many Jews deluded themselves that they would survive by being submissive to the occupier, while others clung to the hope that they would be considered useful. The means to survival would supposedly lie in convincing the Germans that Jews were indispensable for the German economy. This method was frequently used, but while it improved the odds of remaining alive, it was also frequently unreliable, for the Germans simply put off the physical liquidation which they had already decided upon. Only a few managed to save their lives. In spite of this, the conviction that remaining at the beck and call of the Germans increased one's chances of escaping death was rather common. Such a mechanism also functioned amongst Jewish policemen, who hoped that they would survive because

of their function. Indeed, even the most useful were systematically liquidated, but some deceived themselves until the very end.<sup>12</sup>

Another method consisted in ransoming oneself from the Germans. It always entailed corrupting German officials, although usually those of the lowest rank. As a means of saving one's life, it was rather effective, while it additionally served to soften – to some degree at least – the whole system of extermination.

Jews also sought contacts on the Aryan side. They ensured the greatest probability of surviving the Holocaust, obviously provided that one had the necessary financial means, the appropriate (i.e. Aryan) physical appearance, and also acquaintances, usually from before the war. Jan Grabowski – quoted previously – is however of the opinion that the fate of Jews hiding in return for money was generally tragic. When their funds dried up, Poles would denounce them to the Germans or murder them themselves (Grabowski, 2018, p. 513). We cannot, however, forget about a certain fundamental issue in this regard: that of the financial costs incurred by people offering refuge. Under conditions of wartime – when it was nearly impossible to buy basic foodstuffs even for one's own family – such expenses constituted a considerable burden. In this context, maintaining an additional person often posed a considerable challenge, and thus taking money from those in hiding would appear to have been something completely natural and justified. But the fact that Grabowski failed to take this into consideration in his analysis is not the most significant drawback of his text. That dubious accolade falls to the assumption that Poles denounced Jews whom they were hiding immediately after they ran out of funds – a premise that not only smacks of tendentiousness, but also ignores an important fact: if a refugee were handed over to the Germans, the Pole who had been hiding him would have also been severely punished. Further, it is worth keeping in mind that Poles were afraid that if the Jews whom they were hiding were arrested, they would turn in their benefactors.

Survival on the Aryan side was facilitated by a knowledge of the Polish language and Polish customs, which was not all that frequent, especially amongst Orthodox Jews, who tended to shun Polish culture and cultivate their own. This cannot be held against them, for the Polish state did not require full assimilation. But even those who were sufficiently assimilated and had a “good physical appearance” still had to act with due

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12 A characteristic example is Celek Perechodnik, who joined the Jewish police in Otwock ghetto in order to improve his conditions of life. During the liquidation of the ghetto he witnessed the deportation of Jews to Treblinka – a fate shared by his wife and daughter. He later went on to fight in the Home Army. Before he was killed by the German occupier, he wrote down a memoir in which he reproached himself for not having done enough to save his own family. He dedicated his volume to “German sadism, Polish baseness, and Jewish cowardice” (Perechodnik, 2016).

caution and hide from blackmailers. Frequently, they had no Aryan documents – which were necessary to find work and legalize one’s existence. Many of those who managed to get through to the Aryan side received help and assistance from their Christian friends. A good example of this is the fate of Władysław Szpilman, the Polish composer of Jewish origin.<sup>13</sup>

Offentimes Jews placed their children outside the ghettos in order to protect them from certain death. They themselves then stood a better chance of survival, for example by hiding in cellars and sewers, where it would have been very difficult to live with small children. They also organized hideaways in secluded places in order to wait out periods of mass deportations to extermination camps, etc. Such concealment involved resolving the problem of how to secure foodstuffs, for this required assistance from those living on the Aryan side. Generally speaking, chances of survival without the assistance of Poles were meagre.

### Direct armed struggle

Apart from the most well-known acts of mass resistance that have been numerous cited in historiography, such as the armed escapes from Sobibór or Treblinka, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, or individual breakouts from other ghettos (such as that in Białystok), no mention is really made of Jewish self-defense.

If a Jew were sent to a concentration camp, he or she would have to pass through the selection in order to stand any chance of survival at all. Prisoners of extermination camps were deprived of even this slim prospect, for they were marched off to the gas chambers immediately upon arrival. An exception was the camp personnel, which the Germans used for performing various tasks around the facilities. Being selected for its ranks meant that one’s life expectancy could be extended by even a few months. But those who worked in the extermination camps knew full well that sooner or later they themselves would be disposed of, too. That is why so many were determined to escape at any cost. Group and individual escapes were therefore elaborated.<sup>14</sup>

In the camps, the inmates who stood the greatest chance of survival were usually those who managed not to fall foul of the guards and kept

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13 In his memoirs, Szpilman recalled many of the friends and acquaintances who helped him hide in the Aryan zone. Previously, he had lost his entire family, all of whom were deported to the extermination camp in Treblinka. His story shows how important it was to have prewar friendships in order to make it through the Holocaust (Szpilman, 2018).

14 On the topic of group escapes from the extermination camps of Sobibór and Treblinka, we have a body of memoiristic publications and numerous studies (Willenberg, 2004; Blatt, 2010).

out of their sight. Instances of Jews putting up active resistance were less frequent, although they did occur.

Many prisoners of Jewish origin were motivated to fight for survival by their religious beliefs and the hope that they would receive divine assistance. While the strength provided by humanistic values frequently proved fallible in times of trial and complete despondency, religious beliefs and the unshakable faith in providence were more reliable, although sometimes even they did not stand the test of reality (Sofsky, 2008, p. 110). Many of the Jews incarcerated in Majdanek devoted themselves to the reading of prayer books. They even managed to get hold of a Bible, which they read in secret. Bożena Fiała recalled a certain Dutch Jew who wore his yarmulke in the camp. He tied it to his ears with thread, and for this he was frequently beaten; but he never gave up. This was his personal struggle against the cruel treatment of prisoners (Fiała, 1991, p. 340).

Some inmates found themselves capable of a final rebellious act, being well aware that their death was in any event unavoidable. Such was the case when a transport of mothers with children arrived in Sobibór towards the end of September 1943. The women stood in the cars naked, holding their children on their hands. Suddenly, they all attacked the guards with glass milk bottles. The Germans immediately started shooting at the women (Bem, 2012, p. 42; Bem, 2011, p. 541).

Sometimes, resistance took the form of better organized rebellions and escapes. In 1942, a group of Slovakian and French Jewesses in one of the subcamps of Auschwitz revolted against the German female orderlies, who abused them with great bestiality. The prisoners tried to terrorize the guards using stones and bars, hoping to get out of the camp gate. The rebellion did not succeed, and 90 women inmates perished (Garliński, 1997, p. 113).

In the extermination center of Treblinka II, prisoners staged a mutiny on 2 August 1943. The inmates, who following their arrival at the camp had survived the selection by a miracle, were informed that each escape attempt would meet with collective responsibility. Thus, only a general uprising came into consideration. Samuel Willenberg, who survived the rebellion, witnessed how great was the Jewish prisoners' will to live, even though they were fully aware that death was a very real possibility. Many carried cyanide capsules on their persons: "the knowledge that each of us would remain the master of his destiny gave us great confidence. The Germans would not kill us. Upon seeing that we have no chance of survival, we would commit suicide" (Willenberg, 2004, p. 35). None of those who led the uprising escaped death. The commander in chief, Bernard Galewski, managed to escape from the camp, but after walking a few kilometers he came to the conclusion that he would be unable to proceed any further, and therefore swallowed the poison. Why did he not fight to the end? His main objective had been to avenge all the Jews murdered at the camp, and this would have been impossible to achieve otherwise than through

a general rebellion and the destruction of the entire facility. For him, just as for many other inmates, saving one's own life was less important than stopping the process of liquidation of innocent people (Tec, 2014, p. 198):

The memorable day of 2 August 1943 arrived. The weather was sunny and hot. The stench of burned and rotting flesh – the bodies of those recently gassed – enveloped Treblinka. For us, this was an exceptional day. We hoped that it would bring the fulfilment of what we had dreamed about for so long. We did not think about whether we would remain alive. The sole thing which absorbed our minds was the desire to destroy this factory of death in which we had found ourselves (Wiltenberg, 2004, p. 35).

Some 200 inmates escaped from the camp. According to estimates, at most 100 of them could have made it through to the end of the war. Some of those who remained in the camp were killed by the Germans (Knopp, 2011, pp. 234 ff.).

Another well-known attempt at standing up to the oppressors was the planned escape of a *Sonderkommando* unit from Sobibór in 1943. Due to an error in measurements made for the tunnel which was to lead the prisoners outside the camp gate, the escapees walked directly onto the mines laid by the ss men around the fencing. The mines exploded and the breakout lost all secrecy; 150 members of the group were executed by firing squad (Knopp, 2011, p. 234). Another mass escape, but this time successful, was organized on 14 October 1943 (Blatt, 2010, pp. 175 ff.). The prisoners managed to kill 11 of the 17 ss men who were in the camp that day. Some 300 inmates fled, and 57 of them lived to witness the war's end (Bem, 2011, pp. 619 ff.).<sup>15</sup> There were also individual escapes from Sobibór, but in such instances the Germans always applied collective responsibility (Bem, 2012, pp. 42, 85). Executions were carried out in the presence of all the inmates, so that they could see firsthand the consequences of escapes.

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<sup>15</sup> A group commanded by the former head of the Judenrat in Żółkiewka, Leon Feldhendler, and a Red Army officer by the name of Alexandr Pechersky organized an armed uprising. But the idea of staging an escape had been born even before the arrival of the Soviet soldiers. The plan was elaborated by a Dutch sailor who was remembered by his companions in misery as "Captain Jacobs". He planned to use valuables found on the bodies of gassing victims to bribe one of the guards, who would then help the prisoners gain control of the camp weapons depot. The guard took the gold, however he betrayed Jacobs – but even though he was tortured by the most sadistic ss man in the camp, Oberscharführer Gustav Wagner, the Dutchman gave no one away. When Red Army soldiers were sent to the camp and Pechersky took over command of the group, the escape plan could finally be put into effect (Bem, 2011, pp. 619 ff.).

One of the most significant resistance actions in Auschwitz was the rebellion of the *Sonderkommando*, which was made up of Jews from a number of different countries. The kommando had been set up to help in the operation of the first crematorium, and took part in the initial attempts at gassing political prisoners and Soviet prisoners of war with Zyklon B in a cellar of one of the blocks. But the prisoners knew that, as witnesses, they would be killed. They were aware that they had nothing to lose, and stood only to gain by putting up active resistance. The famous rebellion took place on 7 October 1944 at crematorium IV. Its participants included nearly the entire *Sonderkommando*, with the exception of the personnel of crematorium III. The explosives which were to be used to destroy the incinerator were provided by Jewish women who worked in a factory outside the camp and had decided to attempt an escape together with the inmates incarcerated in crematorium II. The rising failed, and in total 451 people perished. But the camp garrison also suffered losses – three guards died. This was the third such large-scale rebellion, after those in Treblinka and Sobibór, which showed that Jews knew how to fight for their lives, and even if the struggle resulted in their own deaths, it still demonstrated that they preferred to die with dignity, actively opposing the German-planned extermination (Greif, 2001, pp. 55 ff.):

But in spite of the terrible Jewish losses [...] the day of the *Sonderkommando* uprising became a symbol of revenge and an inspiration to the prisoners. The first Nazi torturers from Auschwitz had died in the crematoria, which for years had been used to murder millions of victims. The Jews had taken up arms. In this gigantic camp, where tens of thousands of prisoners were incarcerated, a handful of Jews had freed themselves from the omnipresent feeling of helplessness, the passive assent to a cruel fate. The *Sonderkommando* uprising proved to inmates from all over Europe that Jews were indeed capable of fighting for their lives (Tec, 2014, pp. 188–189).

Some Jews decided to escape from concentration camps single-handedly. According to Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz, in 1942 as many as 51 people escaped from the camp of Majdanek. Two people are known to have escaped from Bełżec. In December 1942, one Rudolf Reder, a Polish Jew and a member of the *Sonderkommando*, was sent to Lwów for a transport of sheet metal. When his guard fell asleep, he made use of the opportunity. Jews also escaped during camp evacuations: 450 prisoners managed to flee from Buchenwald alone (Dunin-Wąsowicz, 1983, pp. 204, 227, 231).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Additional information on escapes from concentration camps (Dunin-Wąsowicz, 1983, pp. 181 ff.).



Each attempt at saving even one man was a heroic act of resistance to the extermination which the Germans had planned for all Jews. It was considerably more difficult to oppose the occupier in the concentration camps, where fear was omnipresent, while human life had no value whatsoever. Faced with constant danger, Jews decided to fight not only for their lives, but also for their dignity, of which the SS men tried to deprive them. The risings in Sobibór and Treblinka are a testament to the inmates' immense will to live.

Another topic altogether is the presence of Jews in the partisan movement. Being unable to hide in the cities on the Aryan side, many ran off to the forests where they fought against the German occupier (Relacja Estery Gorodejskiej, 1945). The largest numbers of Jews were in the forests in the east, and they frequently cooperated with the Soviet partisans. The fighters provided shelter to more than 1,200 Jewish escapees from camps and ghettos. The Jews also set up their own, smaller units. The unit of the Bielski brothers, which operated in the Nalibocka Forest, is very well known, while the 50-man group that fought in the Siemiatycze Forest regularly set up ambushes and took part in raids. It also carried out death sentences on peasants who denounced Jews to the Nazis (Relacja Etki Żółtek, 1945).

But even despite the existence of these detachments we cannot say that Jews, who formed a very close-knit and hermetic community, made any large-scale, organized effort with the objective of putting up active resistance or even evading German pursuit actions. Nevertheless, sources – particularly memoirs, writings left by Holocaust survivors, and accounts written down in the course of specific events – show clearly that the defensive reaction of Jews was a common phenomenon and one based on an active approach to reality, for man's instinct of self-preservation is exceptionally strong.

We should further turn attention to the numerous aid initiatives which to some extent at least helped ease the difficulties of life in, for example, the ghettos. I am referring here in particular to the Jewish Combat Organization, the Jewish Social Self-Help and numerous other institutions, as well as to the underground organizations which operated in ghettos and had contacts with the Aryan side.

### **The current state of and prospects for research**

An analysis of the stances taken by Jews during the Second World War and the various methods which they employed in order to survive the Shoah, irrespective of their effectiveness, should be the objective of large-scale and in-depth research. Furthermore, scholars should not content themselves with depicting persons who were connected with the organized resistance movement, but instead take a closer look at the largest possible

group, also including people who did not identify with their own Jewish community. This may well lead to the discovery of self-defense behavior even in actions and gestures which at first glance do not seem associated with resistance and rebellion. Thus, it will be the role of researchers to enter the reality of everyday life during the occupation and present people who, while having neither the possibility nor the will to engage in an active struggle against the occupier, did everything possible to save their own lives. They paid ransoms, renewed old friendships – weakened over time, and concealed themselves in Aryan society. Sources contain numerous mentions of such activities, however they appear so ordinary and common that we do not approach them as manifestations of opposition. They were, however, just that. The initial thesis of research should be worded thus: each and every behavior of a person endangered with extermination, the intended objective of which was to save one's life in the appalling shadow of the Holocaust, should be classified as a protective action. Since the occupier's goal was to annihilate the Jewish nation, every protective action constituted an act of opposition to the Nazis, and was thereby a form of resistance.

Research into this topic (approached with the above premise) is necessary in order to supplement Holocaust studies and explain how a certain portion of the Jewish population survived. To date, however, no reliable analyses have been carried out that would give due consideration to all these aspects at once. Usually, the focus has been on factors which motivated individuals, for example causing them to engage in armed resistance or hide on the Aryan side. As it turns out, however, attempts undertaken by Jews to survive the Holocaust should be analyzed in a broader and more complex perspective.

And when we gather together these individual acts and arrange them in some form of order, we will arrive at a fuller picture of what we may term the "infrastructure of salvation". This infrastructure was impacted and shaped by various factors. Internal considerations, such as one's beliefs, motivations and efforts, and also external elements – conditions, circumstances, and the reactions of one's environment, in this case mainly those of the Aryan side. Another issue of great importance concerns presenting the degree to which the resistance proffered by Jews influenced the implementation of the extermination policy. Finally, when all these components are combined under the research heading proposed in the present article, they may be used to correct the existing depiction of Jewish history during the Second World War.

(transl. by Maciej Zakrzewski)

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