

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: myth and reality*

Emanuel Tanay, M.D.

Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA

Summary

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Myth has been created over time to frame the event as a guerrilla-like, belated resistance of the Warsaw Jews to the genocide. In reality, only a very small fraction of the ghetto's population, totaling 220 young people, instigated and carried out the uprising on April 19, 1943. The suicidal, futile nature of this event is frequently denied, but we the Holocaust survivors know that resistance was impossible and playing for time was the only avenue of frustrating the genocidal program. The mythical version of the Uprising is inconsistent with the reality and memoirs of those who participated in the event.

Keywords: Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Holocaust, Jewish resistance, Jews, passivity

Introduction

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the six million victims of the Holocaust are dominant memories of the genocide of the European Jews. The message of these enduring images is that the Jews of Europe were passive, that they went to death like sheep, and that those who survived the genocide were rescued by heroic Christians or were liberated by the Allied forces.

Until I came to the United States in 1952, I was not aware that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is considered a major event in the history of the Holocaust. To hear that Jews in German captivity were passive is contrary to my memories of that time. The question of the nature of history occupies professional historians, most of whom recognize that the actual past and "history" are not identical. This is common knowledge among us Holocaust survivors, but it is outside my professional competence to address the philosophical and methodological issues involved in the writing of history. And yet I must touch upon these issues because my memories and the Holocaust history are in conflict.

In spite of historians who try to minimize distortions, all history is an imperfect reconstruction. History is an image of the past, and therefore it is more or less inaccurate. A historical "fact" is often an opinion about the past. As Kierkegaard said, the

* First delivered as the keynote lecture at the University of Vermont Annual Holocaust Seminar, June 27, 2006.

history that I am talking about is the judgment of the crowd. Holocaust history, like all history, depends upon context; to understand context, one has to have empathy for the time period. Most Holocaust history that I encounter is perceived in contemporary terms without regard to existential reality.

The history of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as an image in the minds of the Jews differs greatly depending upon the time frame and location of the history writers. The Holocaust survivors in the 1940's had a different perception of this event than did the Jews who did not experience the Holocaust directly. Holocaust survivors were aware of the state of mind of the Ghetto fighters inasmuch as they struggled with similar situations.

There are two versions of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: one created by and for Holocaust bystanders and one as told by the participants who survived it. The bystander version is a legend of heroic armed struggle that impeded the genocidal project and inflicted significant damage to the Germans and their Polish, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian helpers. By contrast, the story of the participants is the pursuit of a collective suicide.

I rely on two historical sources that reconstruct the ghetto fighters' state of mind, both of which are written in Polish. The quotes that I give here are my own translations, though both books have been translated separately into English. I am referring to the autobiographical work of Marek Edelman, one of the five leaders of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB), and Simcha Rotem, better known by his nickname, Kazik. Kazik is a close friend whom I have known for more than 40 years, and we are in regular contact. Edelman's autobiography was written in collaboration with the celebrated Polish journalist Hanna Krall [1]. I have met Dr. Edelman on two occasions.

In order to secure money for their weapons for the uprising, members of the ŻOB felt justified in robbing Jews at gunpoint. They killed at least one Jew in the process. After the war was over, one of the victim's daughters asked Edelman why her father was killed. Edelman explained:

"He did not want to give us money: therefore there was a verdict.

How much? she asked.

He did not remember. Twenty thousand [zloty] or maybe ten thousand, more likely ten ... this was money to buy arms." [1, p. 79]

Krall reconstructs her discussion with Edelman about the justification for killing a fellow Jew in the following words:

"She said that he didn't want to give you money because it was necessary for her. She was hidden on the Aryan side and that took money. You looked at her – you have blue eyes ... how much one had to pay to hide a child with blue eyes? Two, two and a half for months, what was this for your father? And how much for a revolver? She asked. Probably five, at that time it was still five. Then it was a matter of two revolvers or four months of my life, she said bitterly. You assured her that you did not make such calculations and that you find it regrettable. She asked if you knew him. You answered that you saw him daily on the Umschlagplatz when he came to work. He never did anything wrong – he simply counted people who were being loaded onto the railroad cars ... all of this has no meaning – you repeated – because the verdict

was pronounced because of money. He had a definite date when to deliver the money, namely at 6:00 p.m. When he returned from work two boys observed the apartment and gave a signal. He returned punctually. They waited two hours, then they knocked, he opened the door ... she asked do you think he was afraid, how long did it last? You offered her a cigarette and assured her that he didn't have time to get scared. It was a quick easy death, much easier than what happened to many others. Why did he open the door? She asked why did he return? He could have not returned, hide or not return after work to his home? – it never occurred to him that our warning was serious, you explain. The Jews whom he counted calmly without a word of protest would never dare to do anything similar. He would have died anyway, she said. Why did you not allow him to die with dignity in a humane way? ... What gave you the right to chose his mode of death? Her face became red, her hands trembled; you tried to be patient with her. We did not select death for your father. We selected death for ourselves and for the 60.000 Jews who were still alive. The death of your father was the consequence of this decision, a regrettable consequence that I find it regrettable ... then you added: it is not true that the death of your father made no sense. On the contrary, after this verdict it did not happen that anyone would refuse to give us money." [1, p. 71-81]

The Passover commemorates the Jews' deliverance from slavery in Egypt. We eat unleavened bread at Passover as a reminder that the Jews in their flight from Egypt had no time to allow their dough to rise. In doing so, we celebrate a survival technique. Yet methods of survival during the Holocaust are rarely, if ever, mentioned in the many commemorative events of the Shoah. Instead, the various bereavement ceremonies mourn the six million Jews lost and tell us how they were murdered. The Christian rescuers are celebrated with words and deeds, as well they should be. However, the survivors are mentioned only in the context of honoring the American liberators and the Christian rescuers.

Memories of things past are selective. In the first 20 years after the Holocaust, there was the historical equivalent of a gold rush. Every futile and desperate act of armed resistance was elevated to heroic proportions and celebrated. I believe that the absence of attention to the liberation of survivors is rooted in the mixed feelings toward the survivors. Tom Segev, an Israeli journalist, explored Israel's ambivalent relationship with the Holocaust survivors in a book, *The Seventh Million* [2].

The formally recognized date of remembrance for the Holocaust became a controversial issue in the Jewish community. In 1948, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel decided that the 10th of Tevet commemorating the siege that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. would be the day to recite the memorial Kaddish prayer for the victims of the Holocaust. It was an effort by organized religion to place this calamity into a religious context, but this effort was unsuccessful because the date had no connection to the Holocaust.

The secular Jews adopted April 19, the day of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, as the commemoration date of the Holocaust. The Orthodox Jews objected because this date often coincided with Passover. As a compromise, the Israeli Parliament adopted a date shortly after the Passover, calling it The Holocaust Remembrance and Heroism Day. The connection to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was preserved without offending the

religious Jews. After all, the conflict was never really about the date; the conflict was about what should be commemorated.

In Germany, January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp by the Soviet Army, is the official day for commemorating the Holocaust. The main ceremony takes place in the Bundestag and includes the participation of the President, Chancellor, and other public officials. Many institutions voluntarily lower their flags on that day.

The anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz is, in my view, the most appropriate date for the remembrance of the Holocaust. It is paradoxical that Germany, not Israel, made this choice. In America and Israel, it is left to the survivors to commemorate their liberation.

As the concrete representations of history, formal monuments, too, reflect how the perception of history can diverge from the reality of an event. The extensive grounds of Israel's Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, located in the hills outside of Jerusalem, have many monuments. The one dedicated to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is the most prominent; its front depicts the fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in a heroic military posture, and the back of the monument shows Jews being marched to their deaths.

Dr. Edelman was surprised by the monument erected in Warsaw in honor of the ghetto fighters. He describes it as

"A straight standing man with a rifle in one hand and a grenade in the other raised high. On the belt, he has a load of ammunition. On the side he has an officer's bag with maps. None of them looked like that. We had no rifles, no maps; we were black and dirty, but a monument has to be like that." [2, p. 101]

When I met Dr. Edelman at the funeral of Jan Karski, I told him, "A monument does not have to be like that." The Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. proves that one need not glorify killing in order to honor the dead.

Another concrete example of myth-making is the monument just south of Ashkelon in Israel at the Kibbutz Yad Mordechai, named after Mordechai Anielewicz, the main leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. A giant statue of the hero overlooks the community, and the inscription reads, "My last, largest goal in life has been fulfilled. The Jewish self-defense has become a fact." Thus "collective suicide" has become "self-defense" because that is more consistent with the self-image of Israel.

Yet another revisionist monument in Jerusalem is called the Pillar of Heroism. Inscribed upon it are the words:

"Now and forever in memory of those who rebelled in the camps and ghettos, fought in the woods, in the underground and with the Allied forces, who braved their way to the Land of Israel, and those who died sanctifying the name of God."

This inscription relegates the Holocaust victims who did not actively resist, or who did not die as religious martyrs, to obscurity.

My father, like millions of others, was not killed because he rebelled, and he certainly did not die sanctifying the name of God. My father was killed in front of the assembled inmates of the Plaszow camp by Amon Goeth, the antihero of Schindler's List. He was killed because he tried to save the life of a Jewish boy named Leon Storch

by hiding him. Leon suffered from typhus, a condition “punishable” by immediate execution. If my father had been a Catholic, his death would have made him a candidate for beatification. Instead, monuments like this one imply that my father’s death is historically insignificant.

The Jews did not go to the gas chambers in the spirit of martyrdom (*mesirut nefesh*) described in the Talmud or as the *kedoshim* (“the holy ones”). The Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust, and those who survived, did not live up to the secular standards of heroism or the religious criteria for martyrdom. The Holocaust bystanders expected too much from the victims and too little from themselves. They expect the victims to rebel, which is tantamount to suicide, or to die “sanctifying the name of God.”

The heroism of survivors who did not “rebel” in the ghettos and those who did not “fight in the woods” is not celebrated by monuments or words. Jewish heroism that did not involve armed resistance has received little attention so far, but the reality is that survival itself required heroic effort during the genocide. For example, my mother was offered my release from the Topolya concentration camp if she became an informant; she refused. Rafi Friedel, Mimisch Herbst, and Pil Elephant, my Budapest Zionist underground leaders, would have monuments erected in their honor if they were Christians. They saved hundreds of lives. If I were not a Jew, the fact that I saved a few lives would entitle me at least to a tree in Jerusalem’s Avenue of the Righteous of the World.

A great deal of effort has been expended in combating Holocaust deniers. Holocaust denial asserts that the Holocaust did not occur and that the current Holocaust literature is the result of a Jewish conspiracy to advance the interest of the Jews. I am not concerned with the deniers of the Holocaust, who represent an insignificant minority. I am concerned with the widespread distortion of history designed to gratify the needs of bystanders.

History evolves depending on the needs of its contemporary consumers, and a plausible mythic version of the Holocaust is a much greater danger to historical accuracy than the grotesque falsehood of denying the Holocaust. Jews are obsessed with the denial of the Holocaust as if it were a prevailing view, but more Americans accept that extraterrestrial beings in flying saucers have visited the earth than share the view that the Holocaust is a hoax. Yet the Holocaust, like all other epic events, has created a number of myths that distort history. It is significant that the name “Holocaust” for the genocide of the Jews became widespread decades after the event. The same is true of the veneration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the Christian rescuers of the Jews.

The behavior of the Jews in German captivity

When we reflect on the behavior of the Jews in German captivity, we have to be analytical and ask, “What is armed resistance? What is collaboration? What is honor?” These concepts must be viewed from different perspectives and in the context of the existential reality of the Jews.

Historical perspective asks: What did the Germans intend?

Subjective perspective asks: What did the Jews anticipate?

Purposefulness perspective asks: What was the goal of the victims?

We know now that Nazi Germany was dedicated to the annihilation of all the European Jews. This historical fact was unimaginable in 1939 and did not become operational until June 1941. In his diary, Hans Frank, Governor General of occupied Poland, stated in August of 1942 that

“The rationale of the Ghettoisation of the Jewish population is that of ‘gradual extermination’ ... it is not necessary to dwell on the fact that we are sentencing 1.2 million Jews to death. That much is clear. And if the Jews do not die of starvation, it will be necessary to step up anti-Jewish measures, and let us hope that that too will come to pass.” [3]

The subjective expectation of the Jews was that the German occupation would be an endurable hardship of limited duration. The survival of only some individuals was the only feasible goal for the Jews in German bondage. There was a consensus among the Jews in German captivity that meaningful armed resistance was impossible, but among the Holocaust bystanders, there is a consensus that armed resistance was feasible and that it would have had a beneficial effect.

I was on the Polish side in Warsaw on April 19, 1943 when the uprising started. I was not proud, but rather saddened by the news of armed resistance. The 220 members of the ŻOB were not my role models. They did not inspire me to take up arms. If I had followed their example, I too would be dead. Killing Germans was not my priority; most of the Jews in occupied Poland shared my attitude, including those of the Warsaw Ghetto. I risked my life many times to help Jews survive, but I would not risk my life or that of any Jew to kill a German.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was imposed by 220 young people upon the 40 000 to 60 000 Warsaw Ghetto Jews who were still alive on April 19, 1943. The resistance fighters had 50 revolvers, Molotov cocktails (i.e. gasoline-filled bottles), and a few grenades. Within three days, the actions of less than one percent of the ghetto’s population had transformed the ghetto into a burning inferno.

Edelman wrote that the fighters did not pursue life but “beautiful death” [1, 17]. Arie Wilner, one of the founders of the ŻOB wrote, “We do not wish to rescue lives. None of us will come out of it alive. We want to rescue human dignity” [4]. The majority of Warsaw Ghetto inmates did not support this self-defeating undertaking. Survival was the goal. We the survivors did not consider any form of being killed “beautiful death,” nor did we share Wilner’s belief that suicidal armed defiance would “rescue human dignity.”

The warrior’s code of honor was out of place on the death row, which is what the Warsaw Ghetto was in April 1943. The romantic “man of honor” would have perished in a few weeks in the ghetto. The estimated 60 000 Jews who were still alive on April 19, 1943, had endured two years of torture and starvation already. They had witnessed 300 000 of their fellow Jews killed or dispatched to death camps. Conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto were so bad between 1940 and 1942 that an estimated 100 000 Jews died of starvation and disease.

Most Jews did not despair but continued to struggle to survive. Most survivors never gave up hope. I was in anguish many times but never in suicidal despair. Suicide

was surrender. And yet a collective suicide – the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising – is the most celebrated event of the Holocaust. It overshadows the resourcefulness of staying alive in the ghettos, the resilience of enduring the camps, and the courage of hiding on the Aryan papers. The American Jews and Israelis celebrated the suicidal revolt of the 220 young people in the Warsaw Ghetto and disparaged the valiant efforts of millions to endure.

Voltaire said, “We owe respect to the living, but to the dead we owe nothing but the truth.” Every April 19th, this admonition is ignored by the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemorations. The celebratory speeches proclaim, “They died with honor.” Did the others die without honor? Did the survivors live because they had no honor?

A Warsaw Ghetto survivor, Jonas Turkow, published in 1948 in Buenos Aires a memoir describing his successful struggle for survival. The manuscript was written in Yiddish and the title was *And That's How It Was*. In 1954, this book appeared in New York in an English translation by Philip Friedman. This time it was called *Martyrs and Fighters* [5]. In 1954, the American Jews did not want to know *How It Was*; they needed *Martyrs and Fighters*.

Whoever perceives the ŻOB as guerrilla fighters has no empathy for the existential reality of the Jews in German captivity. The ŻOB was not a guerrilla force. As Che Guevara expresses in his book *Guerrilla Warfare: A Method*, the term “guerrillas” refers to those who, whatever else they may do, fight against ostensibly more powerful armed forces by making unexpected attacks against vulnerable military targets, and who are sustained – in the ideal case – by popular support, high morale, good intelligence, secure bases, and foreign assistance [6].

Armed resistance, or more precisely, guerrilla warfare, was not an option for the Jews in German captivity. Joseph Tito in Yugoslavia, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, and Fidel Castro in Cuba had suitable environments for guerrilla warfare. Che Guevara described the necessary conditions for guerrilla warfare as follows:

“The guerrilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area. This is an indispensable condition. This is clearly seen by considering the case of bandit gangs that operate in a region. They have all the characteristics of a guerrilla army, homogeneity, respect for the leader, valor, knowledge of the ground, and, often, even good understanding of the tactics to be employed. The only thing missing is support of the people; and, inevitably, these gangs are captured and exterminated by the public force.” [5]

The Jews in Poland did not have the support of the Polish people, and they did not live in the countryside; they were confined to ghettos that were essentially urban prisons. Jewish armed resistance was useful to the powerful Germans eager to murder them. The helpless Jews could outwit, but not resist, the Germans. In that situation, “resistance” is the ultimate triumph of symbolism over reality.

The veneration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising by American Jews and Israelis implies that dead lions are preferable to live foxes. I respect the courageous young men and women who made the decision to die. However, I object to the distortion of their purpose, which gratifies the need of the bystanders for warrior heroes. This is an old story: The *Iliad* glorifies Achilles, the dead fighter, and the destruction of Troy; The *Odyssey* narrates Odysseus' atonement for his survival with a 20-year-long ordeal before his return to Ithaca.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and its main leader, Mordechai Anielewicz, is celebrated, but the Lodz Ghetto and its leader, Chaim Rumkowski, who succeeded in saving thousands of the Jews, is disgraced. Rudolf Kasztner, who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews, was labeled a collaborator with the Germans and was murdered in Israel. His crime was that he negotiated with the enemy. This is ironic considering that negotiations with enemies have been a Jewish tradition for the last 2,000 years. Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated on Nov. 4, 1995 by a religious Israeli law student for the same "crime."

During the Second World War, occupied populations did, to varying degrees, cooperate with the enemy. Throughout the German occupation, all Polish cities had Polish city administrations that cooperated with the Germans. The armed Polish police carried out German orders. Indeed, on April 19, 1943, the first man to die in the assault on the Warsaw Ghetto was a Polish policeman named Sergeant Zielinski. The Jews complied with the Germans at the point of a gun.

We don't know what Anielewicz and Kasztner would say to each other if they met in the afterworld, but Homer tells us that Achilles rejected the tribute of Odysseus once they met in Hades with these words:

"Don't try to sell me on death,
Odysseus,
I'd rather be a hired hand back up
on earth,
Slaving away for some poor dirt
farmer,
Than lord it over all these withered dead." [6]

The collective memory of the past is the creation of the preferences of the present. The Holocaust is a tragedy that cannot be redeemed by armed resistance or sacrificial death. The Jews of America and Israel wanted conventional wartime heroes and thus transformed a collective suicide into a martial epic. Mordechai Anielewicz was willing to die for an abstract principle. To the Germans, we were vermin; we did not have a need to prove, by honorable actions, that we were human. Our sense of identity was not threatened, but our survival was in doubt.

American Jews and Israelis were ashamed of the alleged passivity of the Jews in German captivity. The deeds of the 220 brave and desperate young men and women of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising became the standard to which millions were expected to live up to.

The Warsaw Ghetto fighters were self-destructively brave. It takes massive denial to overlook the mountain of historical evidence that resistance was futile. What is neglected is that it took courage to struggle for survival, and the test of courage is the ability to act appropriately when life itself is at risk.

The survivors are alive because they acted in a life-preserving manner. If every ghetto in Europe had a Mordechai Anielewicz to lead a rebellion, American Jews and Israelis would be proud of their brothers and sisters who "died with honor," but the number of survivors would have been much smaller. In Act V Scene 1 of Henry IV, Falstaff tells us about the limitations of honor:

“Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? A word. What is that word honour? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died on Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he bear it? No. ‘Tis insensible then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I’ll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon – and so ends my catechism.”

There is no room for honor between slaves and brutal masters. In a just society, honor requires freedom of choice. Adorno writes, “The hardest hit, as everywhere, are those who have no choice” [8]. The Germans had the absolute power to torture and kill; our capacity to act was reduced to efforts to endure, escape, or hide.

Post-Holocaust mythology

Whenever we are faced with a reality that is distressing or inconsistent with our deeply-held beliefs, we are at risk of relying upon the psychic mechanism of denial and projection. These mechanisms are nearly universal; in severe form, they are symptoms of psychosis if employed by individuals. By contrast, collective distortions of reality, past or present, are not reduced to clinical terms. While widespread physical symptoms are called epidemics, mental aberrations that affect large populations are exempt from being declared pathological. The conventional term for collective distortion of reality is myth.

Joseph Campbell, an authority on mythology, tells us that the function of a myth is to keep the group in harmony with the universe. It seems to me that myth resolves a conflict between reality and the collective self-image, with the myth inevitably balancing the conflict in favor of the image. Myth is a form of denying reality. Actions based on mythology consistently turn out to be disastrous. This is one of the clear lessons of history and individual experience.

Some commentators claim that denial can be adaptive. Most often they confuse denial with the hope of victory against overwhelming odds or with uncommon courage. In the long run, denial and projection increase risk of a bad outcome because they prevent adaptive, protective actions.

For decades it was a cultural pastime among American Jews and Israelis to speak about the disgrace of the submissiveness of European Jews. The contemptuous passivity claims were a wall behind which the American Jews and Israelis were hiding from the painful past. The prevailing view in the first decades after the Holocaust was that the Jews of Europe “went to death like lemmings.” Passivity was the catchword of Holocaust discussions in those days. These ideas resonated with the needs of the bystanders, who unlike the survivors, had a choice to be passive or active.

Passivity and survival are incompatible. During a genocide, or any other survival situation, passivity is deadly. It is inconceivable that a drowning person would react with passivity. Relentless activism and a capacity for adaptation are indispensable in the struggle for life, though they do not ensure survival. Holocaust survivors are people of uncommon courage and resourcefulness, and yet the bystanders accuse us of pas-

sivity. It has never occurred to us to blame our brethren for meekness and conducting “business as usual” while we were tortured and murdered.

The Christian contributions to the Holocaust are incompatible with the self-image of Christianity as a religion of love. The Holocaust created an ethical dissonance in the Christian theology. The Christians need the rescue myth as an antidote to the reality that a Christian theology of hate laid the foundation for the genocide of the Jews. The heroic helpfulness of individuals does not absolve the institution of responsibility for hundreds of years of fermenting hatred of the Jews. Millions of Christians participated in, and supported, the Holocaust.

The nations of the civilized world abandoned the Jews, so the Jews mitigate the associated pain by embracing the rescue myth. The heroic helpfulness of some individual Christians, while relevant, has been exaggerated in the service of denial of institutional indifference and support for the genocidal project. Survival was not bestowed upon a Jew in German captivity by a “rescuer.” Survival was not acquired like a piece of furniture or clothing. Survival was a process; it was accomplished by the survivor through his or her own courageous actions with the assistance of heroic helpers, some of whom were Jews and others were Christians. The hundreds of concentration camp survivors that I have examined psychiatrically told me that they survived in part thanks to assistance by fellow prisoners.

Resistance and reality

Low probability events should be distinguished from impossibilities. Survival during the Holocaust was unlikely, but possible. Armed resistance was completely impossible if by armed resistance we mean an effort to impede the goal of the enemy or inflict some significant harm to the adversaries.

The Jews in German captivity had only two choices: suicide or the struggle to survive. We did not have the option to be passive or to engage in armed resistance. Under the circumstances, both choices were rational and heroic. The enormous asymmetry of power between the victims and the genocide perpetrators made armed resistance suicidal. Yitzhak Zuckerman, a leader of the ŻOB, did not recognize this truism even in hindsight. He stated in May 1947:

“If we had foreseen, if we had understood, if I could turn the wheel of history back to 1939, I would say, ‘An immediate uprising!’ - because then we had much more strength, many more youth, because we had much more pride, a greater store of human feeling ... because we had much more energy ... many more arms...many more soldiers, because then we also had much more hope.” [9]

I consider this a romantic fantasy. Hitler issued his genocidal order “Als Partisanen ausgerottet” (Exterminate them as Partisans) in 1939, not June 1941.

The resistance mythology is a denial that European Jews were helpless in relation to their persecutors. Nazi Germany was known for ruthless retaliation for any act of defiance. This was not limited to Jews who were often shot for something as trivial as a defiant gesture, real or imagined. On June 6, 1944, when the end of Nazi Germany was clearly on the horizon, the French Resistance killed one German soldier. In reprisal, the Germans massacred 624 people in the village of Oradour; among

them were several Jews who were in hiding. This was in France, where the Germans behaved well compared to their behavior in Poland. Was it honorable to resist under such circumstances?

Lidice, a tiny mining settlement in occupied Czechoslovakia, had a population of 450 in June of 1942. It was the site of the assassination of the Gestapoman Reinhardt Heydrich (“Heydrich the Hangman”), carried out by two emissaries parachuted from Great Britain. In retaliation, the SS rounded up Lidice’s inhabitants. The 172 male residents of the village were shot the next day. The women, except for seven who were shot on the spot, were transported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp where most were killed or experimented upon. The 90 children were sent to Germany, renamed, and raised as Germans. Local miners who were away from the village during the first roundup were executed later in Prague. When the massacre and deportation were complete, the SS burned the village of Lidice. Was it worth it to sacrifice a whole village for one German life?

The fundamental question is, should the Jews in German captivity have offered armed resistance? The next question is, was there a realistic possibility of meaningful armed resistance? In my opinion, the answer to both questions is a resounding no.

The absence of armed resistance by the Jews in German captivity should surprise no one. Armed resistance to impede an enemy requires some degree of power. The starving Jews confined to the ghettos had to deal with the might of the Third German Empire. Millions of Red Army soldiers died in German camps without armed resistance. The conditions in the ghettos were at least of equal barbarity. In the Warsaw Ghetto, there was an average of thirteen people per room [10]. Starvation and disease (especially typhoid) killed thousands each month. When starving, helpless prisoners attack their ruthless, armed keepers, the outcome is not in doubt.

Yad Vashem, Israel’s institution dedicated to the history of the Holocaust, describes the creation of the ŻOB with these words:

On July 28, 1942, a meeting was held of He-Halutz and its youth-movement branches: Ha-Shomer Ha-Za’ir, Dror, and Akiva. It was decided to set up the Jewish Fighting Organization YKA (Yidishe-Kampf-Organizatsie). The organization signed proclamations, which it issued in the Polish language with the initials ŻOB: Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa – Jewish Fighting Organization. The members of the Command were: Bresler, Cukierman, Zivia Lubetkin, Mordecai Tenenbaum and Josef Kaplan. A delegation was sent to the Aryan side [i.e., outside the ghetto], to the Poles: Tosia Altman, Plotnicka, Leah Perlstein and Arie-Jurek Wilner, in order to make contact with the Polish Underground and to obtain weapons for the ghetto. The fighting organization had been set up, but all the weapons there were in the ghetto at that time consisted of just one pistol...” [11]

What was the motivation of the 220 young people who decided to offer armed resistance? They tell us clearly that they made decision to die in the ghetto. According to Edelman, it was a “matter of public dying ... there were 220 of us in the ŻOB (Jewish Fighting Organization). Can one call that an uprising? What mattered is not let them slaughter us when they came to get us. The choice of the manner of death was the issue...everything that followed April 19, 1943, was a longing for a beautiful death... It was all matter of choosing the manner of dying...” [1, p. 17]

I knew a number of Jews who committed suicide during the Holocaust, which under the circumstances was understandable. If these 220 young people decided to commit suicide, that would be distressing. However, that they placed 40,000-60,000 other Jews at risk of being killed sooner rather than later is unsettling. Playing for time was the only survival technique available to us.

The Holocaust victims who perished suffered unintended deaths. The Warsaw Ghetto fighters intended to die; it was a quasi-military action without a military objective. The sole purpose of the enterprise was to send a message. What was the message? For whom was this message intended? What were the feelings and views of the thousands of Jews who were still in the Warsaw Ghetto on April 19th and were not members of ŻOB?

At the time, the majority of the Jewish population opposed armed resistance and was unwilling to support it. To buy arms on the “black market,” the ŻOB needed money. They relied on armed robberies of the Jewish population to secure the necessary funds. My friend Kazik describes this activity in a more euphemistic language. He writes in his memoir:

“Before the uprising we went under the command of Henech for expropriations. This is how we called the act of taking money away from well-to-do Jews. In the Ghetto, some did have money ... I remember one such action. The apartment was on the second floor. One of us knocked on the door. When somebody opened, we burst inside, taking appropriate positions. At first, we explained to the owner that we came for a contribution; that means money for the Jewish Fighting Organization. Naturally, he declined. At this point, I stuck a revolver into his belly. He became speechless. Hanech said to me ‘Kazik, kill him,’ I understood that I have to pretend that I am Kazik and that means not a Jew. I made an appropriate facial expression, grabbed him by his collar and took him into a corner of the room, telling him that there was no jokes here. He understood that it was serious. He broke down and asked for some time. He went to another room and brought in the money. That’s how the name Kazik stuck to me.” [12, p. 41-42]

During the uprising, Kazik writes that in one of the bunkers, ŻOB members were received cordially by the Jews: “Only when there were very few in the Ghetto did everyone understand – too bad that this came so late – that ŻOB members were not enemies of the nation” [12, p. 52]. Thus at some point, the ŻOB was perceived by the population as an enemy.

In all of the mythologizing of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, I have not encountered acknowledgment that the 220 young people not only had no support of the surrounding Polish population, but that they had to deal with the antagonism of the Jewish population. In addition, some commentators would like us to believe that active resistance went on for weeks, yet Kazik writes, “After the first three days, the Ghetto became an inferno.” Kazik describes how, in the first three days of the uprising, buildings collapsed, many people were burned alive, and Jews who created hiding places called “bunkers” had to abandon them because of the smoke. “Wanting to limit their losses, they [the Germans] used artillery and bombers. After a few days, everything was destroyed” [12, p. 52-53].

The five leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were collectively 110 years old [1, 8]. Marek Edelman, the oldest among them, was 22 years old. Mordechai Anielewicz, the main leader, was 21 years old. On April 19, according to Edelman, Anielewicz announced, "we will perish together ... we are going to die, there is no going back, we will die for honor and for history" [1, p. 9]. On May 9, Anielewicz shot his girlfriend Mira and then killed himself. Lutek Rotblat shot his mother and sister and then everyone began to shoot; 80 fighters committed suicide on Mila Street. When Edelman and his group got there, they found only a few still alive. Jews killed more Jews than Germans during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. [1, p. 133].

It is a tribute to the determination of the young fighters that with such meager resources they were able to fight the Germans for many days. Yet if these young men and women had had hundreds of weapons, more Germans would have died, but the uprising would have remained a symbolic act devoid of military significance.

The armed resistance that the inmates of the ghetto were able to mount did not impair the genocidal project of Nazi Germany. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of the Jews and the Polish Uprising of August 1944 were doomed to failure. The Polish Uprising did inflict significant damage to the German forces, albeit at a terrible price. Furthermore, the majority of the Polish population supported this futile venture; the Jews of Warsaw did not support the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In a paradoxical sense, we could say that the Ghetto uprising did achieve the goal of its leaders; their goal was dying in Warsaw instead of Treblinka, and indeed most if not all Jews in the Warsaw ghetto died there.

The conviction that survival was impossible was based on the false premise that Nazi Germany would be successful in exterminating all European Jews. True enough, survival was uncertain and unpredictable, but the Warsaw Ghetto fighters made the false assumption that the death of the Warsaw Ghetto Jews was certain. While visiting Kazik in Jerusalem, I heard him question Edelman as to why no provisions were made for escape during the uprising. The answer was that survival was not considered possible.

I admire Kazik's courage and efforts to save lives, and in my book I call him a true hero of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. At my suggestion, the University of Michigan awarded Kazik the Wallenberg Medal. Nonetheless, I am distressed by the willingness of Kazik and the other members of the ŻOB to risk the lives of the Jews who miraculously survived the uprising. Even after the collapse of the uprising, the ŻOB continued recruitment of Jews who were in hiding and on false papers for armed struggle. Resources were wasted to get hold of revolvers, which were rarely used. Kazik carried a handgun in his pocket while on false papers after the uprising, which in view of the frequent searches was a great risk.

Lamentations about the failure of the European Jews to take on armed resistance represent a thinly disguised disdain of the survivors. The glorification of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising implies that it was more honorable to die in the streets of Warsaw than in the gas chambers of Treblinka. We survivors believe that it was more honorable to struggle to survive than to be killed in a futile effort to resist.

The mythical history of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

It is paradigmatic for the bystanders' perception of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that on April 9, 1991, A.M. Rosenthal, the editor of the New York Times, wrote:

"On April 19, 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto rose against the Germans. The world knew. No help came to the Jews of the Ghetto. In the weeks of their revolt, they died by the thousands. At their leisure the Germans then slaughtered the survivors."

In reality, the Warsaw Ghetto did not "[rise] against the Germans"; 220 young men and women did.

The Pianist, a 2002 film by Roman Polański that won the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival and several Academy Awards, portrays Władysław Szpilman as a submissive and scared survivor who is the only member of his family to avoid being shipped to the extermination camps. He hides in a safe Polish apartment after being rescued by Poles and watches passively from the window as the fighters battle the Germans. Once again, the passive survivor is contrasted with the active fighter.

The United States National Holocaust Memorial Museum Web site tells us:

"The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the largest, symbolically most important

Jewish uprising, and the first urban uprising, in German-occupied Europe ... The Germans renew deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto. This time however, they encounter resistance from the ŻOB. The early morning roundups take the ŻOB organization by surprise, and individuals take to the streets to resist the Germans. Other Jews in the ghetto retreat into prepared hiding places. The Germans, expecting the expulsions to run smoothly, are surprised by the resistance. In act of retaliation they massacre 1 000 Jews in the main square on January 21, but suspend further deportations. The Germans were able to deport or kill 5 000-6 500 Jews. Encouraged by the results of resistance actions, the Jews in the ghetto plan and prepare a full-scale revolt. The fighting organization is unified, strategies are planned, underground bunkers and tunnels are built, and rooftop passages are constructed. The Jews of the Warsaw ghetto prepare to fight to the end ...

"On April 19, 1943, the Germans under the command of SS General Juergen Stroop, began the final destruction of the ghetto and the deportation of the remaining Jews. ... The ghetto population, however, does not report for deportations. Instead, the ghetto fighting organizations have barricaded themselves inside buildings and bunkers, ready to resist the Germans. After three days, German forces begin burning the ghetto, building by building, to force Jews out of the hiding places. Resistance continues for weeks as the Germans reduce the ghetto to rubble." [13]

This depiction creates memorable images of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, but it does not reflect reality. Similarly, there are many blogs dedicated to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that glorify the event. Here are some excerpts:

"Passover this year fell on the 62nd anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a doomed rebellion carried out by the 60 000 Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto who remained of the original 300 000..." [14].

"Today marks the 63rd anniversary of the fall of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in which less than 60 000 Jews, with less than 1 000 armed resistance volunteers among them, held out for almost a month against German troops in an effort to end the deportation of Jews to concentration camps and win them their freedom. ... In the summer of

1942, after 300 000 Jews had been deported to Treblinka, the remaining Jews decided that their lives could only be saved by insurrection.” [15]

Wikipedia has the following entry:

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a Jewish insurgency against Nazi Germany's attempt to liquidate the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland during World War II. The main fighting lasted from April 19, 1943 to May 16 that year and was finally crushed by SS-Gruppenführer (then Brigadeführer) Jürgen Stroop. The significant precursor to the main fighting was an armed insurgent action launched against the Germans on January 18, 1943. [16]

David Kopel, director of the Independence Institute, announced on March 16, 2006: “Armed Resistance to the Holocaust” is the title of my forthcoming article in the May 2006 issue of NATIV, the journal of the Ariel Center for Policy Research.” The Ariel Center is a think tank in Jerusalem; its main audience is Israeli policy intellectuals and policymakers. Kopel gave the following summary of his upcoming article:

“Contrary to the myth of Jewish passivity, many Jews did fight back during the Holocaust. They shut down the extermination camp at Sobibor, rose up in the Warsaw Ghetto, and fought in the woods and swamps all over Eastern Europe. Indeed, Jews resisted at a higher rate than did any other population under Nazi rule. The experience of the Holocaust shows why Jews, and all people of good will, should support the right of potential genocide victims to possess defensive arms, and refutes the notion that violence is necessarily immoral.” [17]

Let us recall that as indicated above, the memoir of a Warsaw Ghetto survivor titled *And That's How it Was* was transformed into *Martyrs and Fighters*. When the last survivor dies, the myth-makers will have a free rein.

The Forgotten Heroes

In the first 20 years after the war, survivors were frequently met with recriminations and outright hostility. The survivors were confronted with accusations of passivity. There was an expectation of shame on our part for the absence of armed resistance. The belief that location of dying place was the only choice was a false dilemma. There was another option: pursuing the slim probability of survival.

We survivors are not embarrassed for not becoming suicidal. We see no reason to apologize for the courage to endure. The warrior model conflicts with the survivor ethos. The writer of the Moses legend may have had the courage to endure in mind when he chose the burning bush as the focal point of the story; it does not get destroyed by the fire.

The Holocaust-Me asks in disbelief, “As a youngster you jumped from trains, dodged bullets, studied for priesthood, escaped from Nazi camps, and crossed mountain ranges on foot? Is this real?”

“Yes, this and a great deal more is true,” the Post-Holocaust Me answers with pride.

“You are the father of three children and a grandfather of six? You are a happily married man? You are a professor of psychiatry? You have wealth and good health?” asks the Holocaust-Me.

“Yes, that is true and a great deal more,” I think with satisfaction.

References

1. Krall H. *Zdążyć przed Panem Bogiem*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie; 1979.
2. Segev T. *The Seventh Million*. New York: Owl Books; 1994.
3. Frank H. *Sprawy polskie przed Międzynarodowym Trybunałem Wojennym w Norymberdze. Dziennik Hansa Franka*. Trans. Stanisław Piotrowski. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo; 1961.
4. *Powstanie w getcie warszawskim*. Wikipedia, Polish Edition. 9 Dec. 2006. Available from: http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Powstanie_w_getcie_warszawskim.
5. Friedman, Ph. *Trans. Martyrs and Fighters*. New York: F.A. Praeger; 1954.
6. Guevara E. (Che). *Guerrilla Warfare: A Method*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press; 1964.
7. Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company; 2002.
8. Adorno T. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper, 1950.
9. Zuckerman Y. *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. Berkeley CA. University of California Press; 1993.
10. Roland ChG. *Courage Under Siege: Starvation, Death and Disease in the Warsaw Ghetto*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1992.
11. *From a Report of the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Warsaw Ghetto on its Activities*. Yad Vashem Archives, O-25/96. 9 Dec. 2006. Available from: http://www1.yadvashem.org.il/search/index_search.html.
12. Rotem S, "Kazik". *Memoirs of a Warsaw Ghetto Fighter*. Yale University Press, 2001.
13. *Holocaust Encyclopedia: Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 9 Dec. 2006. Available from: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/index.php?ModuleId=10005188&Type=normal+article>.
14. *20%: On Action and Passivity Revisited*. ShrinkWrapped: A Psychoanalyst Attempts to Understand Our World. Blog, 12 April 2006. 9 Dec. 2006. Available from: http://shrinkwrapped.blogs.com/blog/2006/04/20_on_action_an.html.
15. *May 16, 1943: Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa. What the hell is a Blog?: A blog for the silent movie generation*. Blog, May 16, 2006. 9 Dec. 2006. Available from: http://pearseha.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_pearseha_archive.html
16. *Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. Wikipedia, United States Edition. 9 Dec. 2006. Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw_ghetto_uprising.
17. Kopel D. *Armed Resistance to the Holocaust*. Second Amendment Project. 9 Dec. 2006. Available from: <http://www.davekopel.com/2A/Foreign/Armed-resistance-to-the-holocaust.htm>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: The author wishes to express appreciation to Jennifer Michaels for editorial assistance with this piece.

Author's address:
 Emanuel Tanay M.D.
 2980 Provincial St Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA
 e-mail: drtanay@umich.edu