Ghetto and Camp Resistance
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**Spiritual Resistance in the Ghettos**

While there were examples of courageous armed uprisings in the ghettos, resistance also took forms without weapons. For many, attempting to carry on a semblance of "normal" life in the face of wretched conditions was resistance. David Altshuler writes in Hitler's War Against the Jews about life in the ghettos, which sustained Jewish culture in the midst of hopelessness and despair.

"All forms of culture sustained life in the ghetto. Since curfew rules did not allow people on the street from 7 p.m. until 5 a.m. the next morning, socializing had to be among friends living [in] the same building or visitors who spent the night. Card playing was very popular, and actors, musicians, comics, singers, and dancers all entertained small groups who came together for a few hours to forget their daily terror and despair."

Artists and poets as well entertained, and their works, many of which survive today, are poignant reminders of the horrors of the period (see Appendix II). Underground newspapers were printed and distributed at great risk to those who participated. Praying was against the rules, but synagogue services occurred with regularity. The education of Jewish children was forbidden, but the ghetto communities set up schools. The observance of many Jewish rituals, including dietary laws, was severely punished by the Nazis, and many Jews took great risks to resist the Nazi edicts against these activities. Committees were organized to meet the philanthropic, religious, educational, and cultural community needs. Many of these committees defied Nazi authority.

Some Jews escaped death by hiding in the attics and cellars and closets of non-Jews, who themselves risked certain death if their actions were discovered by the Nazis. The writings and oral histories of survivors of the labor and concentration camps are filled with accounts of simple sabotage. Material for the German war effort, for example, might be mysteriously defective, the result of intentionally shoddy workmanship by Jewish slave labor.

Despite the myth to the contrary, Jewish armed resistance to the Holocaust did occur. This active resistance occurred in ghettos, concentration camps, and death camps. Many of those who participated in resistance of this type were caught and executed, and their stories will never be told. However, there are many verifiable accounts of major incidents of this resistance:

**Armed Ghetto Resistance**

**Tuchin Ghetto:** On September 3, 1942, seven hundred Jewish families escaped from this ghetto in the Ukraine. They were hunted down, and only 15 survived.

**Warsaw Ghetto:** By 1943, the ghetto residents had organized an army of about 1,000 fighters, mostly unarmed and without equipment. They were joined by thousands of others, mostly the young and able-bodied, still needed for forced labor. By that time, the half-million original inhabitants had been depleted to about 60,000 as a result of starvation, disease, cold, and deportation.

In January 1943, the S.S. entered the ghetto to round up more Jews for shipment to the death camps. They were met by a volley of bombs, Molotov cocktails, and the bullets from a few firearms which had been smuggled into the ghettos. Twenty S.S. soldiers were killed. The action encouraged a few members of the Polish resistance to support the uprising, and a few machine guns, some hand grenades, and about a hundred rifles and revolvers were smuggled in.

Facing them were almost 3,000 crack German troops with 7,000 reinforcements available. Tanks and heavy artillery surrounded the ghetto. General Himmler promised Hitler that the uprising would be quelled in three days, and the ghetto would be destroyed. It took four weeks. The ghetto was reduced to rubble following bomber attacks, gas attacks, and burning of every structure by the
Nazis. Fifteen thousand Jews died in the battle, and most of the survivors were shipped to the death camps. Scores of German soldiers were killed. Some historical accounts report that 300 Germans were killed and 1,000 wounded, although the actual figure is unknown.

**Bialystok Ghetto:** Jewish paramilitary organizations formed within the ghetto attacked the German army when it was determined that the Nazis intended to liquidate it. The battle lasted just one day, until the resisters were killed or captured.

**Vilna Ghetto:** Some inhabitants of the Vilna Ghetto began an uprising against their Nazi captors on September 1, 1943. Most participants were killed, although a few escaped successfully and joined partisan units.

**Armed Resistance in the Death Camps**

**Treblinka:** Seven hundred Jews were successful in blowing up the camp on August 2, 1943. All but 150-200 Jews perished, as well as over 20 Germans. Only 12 survived the war.

**Sobibor:** Jewish and Russian prisoners mounted an escape attempt on October 14, 1943. About 60 of 600 prisoners involved in the escape survived to join Soviet partisans. Ten S.S. guards were killed and one wounded.

**Auschwitz:** On October 7, 1944, one of the four crematoria at Auschwitz was blown up by Sonderkommandos. These were workers, mostly Jews, whose job it was to clear away the bodies of gas chamber victims. The workers were all caught and killed.

**RESPONSE QUESTIONS**

Directions: Respond to the questions below on a separate sheet of paper. We will discuss answers as a class. EACH GROUP MEMBER NEEDS THEIR OWN PAPER.

1. Name five non-violent forms of resistance that occurred in the ghetto.
2. Describe two incidents of armed resistance in the ghettos.
3. What was significant about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising?
4. Compare and contrast active resistance to passive resistance. Provide 3 specific examples.
5. What was the result of the Sobibor Camp Resistance?
6. Who were Sonderkommandos?
7. Discuss the statement by Edmund Burke: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."
8. Find 3 facts/events/things that caught your attention AND EXPLAIN WHY each of these facts were interesting or significant to you.