CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

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The term **Kiddush ha-Shem** ("Sanctification of God's Name") has long been synonymous with martyrdom, the Jew's willingness to resist — even at the cost of his life — those who try to force him to abandon Judaism. In the Warsaw Ghetto, Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum taught that there must now be a new emphasis: **Kiddush ha-Hayyim** ("Sanctification of Life"). In ancient and medieval times when the enemy wanted to shatter the Jew's religious commitment, the appropriate mode of resistance was to surrender one's life. But what the Nazis wanted to destroy was the Jew's body, his physical existence. Therefore, he taught, the highest form of resistance was to hold on to life with all one's energy. Nissenbaum urged Jews of the Ghetto to work to save their own lives and those of others. This imperative also implied that Jews should attempt to enrich and ennoble life with everything that gives it meaning and dignity.

Not all the Jews of Warsaw knew of Rabbi Nissenbaum's teachings, but many responded instinctively just as he had. In the face of Nazi terror and atrocity, in spite of the Germans' efforts to degrade and dehumanize the Ghetto residents before they killed them, many Jews struggled to maintain their cherished cultural and religious values and traditions, nurturing the very best of their heritage under the worst conditions imaginable.

The religious community rallied to preserve and foster the spiritual life of Judaism. Public prayer became a forbidden act, punishable by severe beatings or even execution. Nevertheless, prayer services were held in secret, in hundreds of hidden locations. Although **Shehita** (kosher slaughter) was outlawed, many Jews risked their lives to avoid violating the laws of **Kashrut**. The Jews observed Passover as best as they could: clandestine **matzah** (unleavened Passover bread) factories operated, and raisin wine or beet juice were used for the traditional Four Cups of the Passover **Seder** ritual. Mikvahs (ritual baths used by traditional Jewish married women after their menstrual periods) were closed. Nevertheless, some reopened and functioned clandestinely; the patrons and the owners were subject to the death penalty if caught.

Thousands of children studied the **Torah** (Five Books of Moses) in underground **hadarim**, the traditional elementary schools. Hundreds of older **yeshiva** (rabbinical seminary) students continued to study **Talmud** (homiletic and legal texts) in small groups scattered throughout the Ghetto, although the yeshivas were officially closed. An organization called "Love of Torah and Fear of Heaven" provided classes in the **aggadic** (philosophic and narrative) passages of the **Talmud** (known as **Ein Yaakov**), along with life-sustaining free food, to hundreds of poor youths.

Rabbi Kalunimus Shapiro, known as the Piaseczner Rebbe, established a soup kitchen at his residence, and also held services and gave **derashot** (Hasidic discourses) throughout the three years of occupation and the Ghetto. These **derashot**, later published under the title **Esh Kodesh** (Fire of Holiness), spoke of the Jew's unshakable faith in the Creator. Despite all appearances, he wrote, the world is good, and all evil will one day be transformed into good. With fidelity to the **Torah**, the Jews would survive. The Jews must never forget their dignity and self-respect; they are royalty, who — even while being beaten — remain royalty. Most of all, the Piaseczner Rebbe emphasized compassion: for other Jews, whom one must help in any way possible, and compassion for God, who suffers infinitely when His children are in pain.

The indomitable spirit of the Hasidic (pietists who follow a popular mystical path) community in the Ghetto was captured by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum. He reported in his journal (Feb. 19, 1941) that the Bratslaver **Hasidim** had a large sign in their **Shtibel** (prayer house) which read: "Jews, Never Despair." Ringelblum noted that the **Hasidim** there danced with the same religious fervor as they did before the war.

It is also important to stress cultural and educational activities of a secular nature in the Ghetto. We must recall that a large segment of Warsaw Jewry at this time was not traditionally observant, although almost all were committed to some form of cultural and political Jewish life.

Scores of clandestine classes were held throughout the Ghetto. Small groups of elementary school students met in soup kitchens and private homes. There were two secondary schools in which the language of instruction was Hebrew. The teachers were amazed at the diligence

and seriousness of the students. Discipline problems disappeared almost entirely; the children genuinely thirsted for knowledge. They intuitively understood that education was their hope for the future, a lifeline to a world of normality and reason transcending the madness and terror of the Ghetto. So although the children had to hide their books on the way to school, in spite of the cold and dark classrooms, in spite of the shortage of textbooks or school supplies, and — most significantly — in spite of their own hunger and ill health, children went to school eagerly, looking forward to the opportunity to acquire knowledge.

The Ghetto had extraordinarily gifted and devoted educators. Most famous was Dr. Janusz Korczak, whose daring and courage on behalf of his children became legendary. Refusing all offers to be rescued, Korczak accompanied his young orphans on their last journey to the death camp. The ORT (Organization For Rehabilitation in Training, established 1880) organization sponsored vocational classes, as well as courses in fine and graphic arts and architecture. There was even a program of courses in medicine.

Yiddish and Hebrew literary societies sponsored literary evenings and poetry readings to foster and promote these languages of Jewish civilization. There was an eighty-member symphony orchestra which performed great works of the classical repertoire; there were also several string quartets and choral groups. Serious theater productions were staged in Yiddish, Polish, and Hebrew. Amateur performances of comedy, satire and cafe music served to give momentary respite from the harsh realities of daily existence.

Especially popular were the performances presented by children's choirs, generally staged as fund-raising events for their school or orphanage. The songs the children sang often had a bitter edge, lamenting the hunger and misery, and the deaths of friends and family. In spite of this pain, audiences had their spirits uplifted by the sound of young voices who represented the community's hope for the future.

While on the one hand, many people burned their books in a desperate attempt to stoke ovens and keep warm, on the other hand, underground libraries sprang up with couriers bringing novels and works of history or philosophy to the crowded tenements. Especially

popular was Tolstoy's **War and Peace**, which told the story of a Russian victory and a European invader's defeat. The parallel to the Ghetto reader was obvious, and not only did they hope that the fate that befell Napoleon's troops would also befall the invading Nazi armies, but they also looked to the Soviets as their means of liberation.

The historian Emanuel Ringelblum (mentioned above) organized a large group of researchers to objectively document the Nazi atrocities and the fate of the Jews of Poland. The records of this major project, known as **Oneg Shabbat** (Sabbath Joy) were buried in milk cans and recovered after the war. It is due to the heroic efforts of this courageous and resourceful historian, who was also active in relief and social service efforts, and his assistants, that we know as much as we do about the Warsaw Ghetto.

One literary critic has described two kinds of heroism. The first he calls "spectacular": modeled after the heroes of the Greek epics,this kind of hero seeks glory and fame. The second kind of hero he calls "quotidian," the heroism of everyday life, of the commonplace. This kind of hero, motivated by an ethic of love and hope, values life more than reputation or personal glory. The quotidian hero clings to life even when death would be easier; he or she is willing to struggle in impossible conditions, temporarily surrendering dignity for the overarching purpose of saving lives and nurturing those values which impart meaning to existence. By this definition, the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto truly lived a heroic existence: in the face of the enemy's efforts to destroy them from within, they worked valiantly to preserve their cultural and religious traditions, never giving up hope that the world would one day emerge from darkness. In a very real sense, we are the beneficiaries of their heroic struggle.

DIGNITY AND DEFIANCE

THE CONFRONTATION OF LIFE AND DEATH
IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

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