SELF-HELP IN THE GHETTO

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"Yidden, gits mir a shtikele broit." "Jews, give me a piece of bread." The heart-rending lament of the orphaned child, barefoot and almost naked, leaning against a wall in a vain search for warmth and protection against the relentless winter wind: this epitomizes the unspeakable misery and suffering of the Ghetto.

The German policy until the summer of 1942 was meant to induce death by starvation, cold, and disease. The official daily food allotment for Warsaw's Jews was 181 calories. In light of this, the question becomes: How did so many Jews survive for three years; how did they manage to live through three brutal winters; how was it that in the summer of 1942, when the Germans decided to send almost all the Jews to their deaths in the Great Deportation, there were still over 300,000 Jews alive in the Ghetto? The answer emerges when we study the extraordinary network of self-help and relief organizations which the Jews put into place under impossible circumstances.

A central force in the self-help effort was the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, known familiarly as the Joint. Until America entered the war, it was a neutral power whose agencies had to be respected by the Germans, so the Nazis had no choice but to allow the American-registered Joint to operate in Poland with a base in Warsaw, distributing aid of all kinds. With great courage and tenacity such personalities as Yitzhak Gitterman and Emanuel Ringelblum organized and led a variety of self-help agencies. Among these were **ZTOS**, the Jewish Mutual Aid Society, which operated over one hundred soup kitchens in Warsaw, and **CENTOS**, the National Society for the Care of Orphans, which ran schools and provided food, clothing and shelter. Notable also were the House Committees, which functioned in almost every apartment house, and which attempted to provide basic welfare, medical care and sanitation for their residents. Most importantly, the House Committees collected food from every family that was able to make a contribution, and distributed the food to families that had nothing. A familiar site was the collector making his or her rounds with a bucket, into which the more fortunate would place a carrot, a potato, a small cube of sugar, or even a crust of

Two children share a bowl of soup, Warsaw Ghetto.

bread for the hungry. To enforce its decisions the House Committees used the only weapon available to them: publicity. Those families who were able to make a contribution but did not do so found their names prominently displayed at the entrance to the apartment building.

In addition to communally organized self-help, individual families, drawing upon the age-old tradition of family solidarity, stood together to help the old, the infirm, and those without any job. A curious role-reversal was often evident: parents who were unable to work were often kept alive by their children. Young children were especially active as smugglers, taking advantages of their small size to slip through openings in the Ghetto walls, or crawl through dark and fetid subterranean tunnels. Once on the "Aryan" side, these little children—as young as six or seven—would buy or barter food to keep their families alive. Often these tiny courageous heroes would be discovered, and they would never return home. One Ghetto resident suggested that after the war, a monument would have to be erected in memory of the Unknown Child—the smuggler who, robbed of his childhood, daily risked his life to save others.

It is sad but true that not all Jews acted selflessly or heroically; a small minority of Ghetto residents were able, by corrupt activities or wealth saved from before the war, to isolate themselves to some degree from the misery that surrounded them. There were individuals who were capable of leaving a bakery shop carrying cakes and cookies, stepping over the huddled, near-dead emaciated bodies on the sidewalk just outside the store, without offering any assistance. But for the most part Jews did help each other, and it was only because of the massive mutual aid that the Ghetto residents survived as long as they did.

This spirit of mutual aid is captured in a Ghetto photograph which is before me as I write: two children—orphans no doubt—are standing over a bowl of soup. The older child—no more than five or six—holds a spoon, and is placing a bit of soup in the mouth of his younger sibling, who is perhaps three years old. What is most poignant, however, is the penetrating gaze of the older child, a gaze which surely reflects his deep love for his younger brother, but which also reflects his own hunger for the soup that he is giving away. This compassion beyond words, this sharing of the elixir of life at the very threshold of death, is perhaps the deepest of all the Ghetto's sacred mysteries.

DIGNITY AND DEFIANCE

THE CONFRONTATION OF LIFE AND DEATH
IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

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