

# Does the Concept of 'Spiritual Resistance' Add to our Understanding of Jewish Life in the Ghettos?

Nathaniel Rachman

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*Nathaniel Rachman is a recent History graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford. He will start an MPhil in American History at Christ's College, Cambridge, this October, with a focus on the New Deal era. In his spare time he is an amateur cat fancier.*

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In his seminal 1961 work *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Raul Hilberg proposed a thesis that sought to explain a perceived lack of Jewish resistance. Jews in the ghettos of Europe, he suggested, 'hoped somehow that the German drive would expend itself. This hope was founded on a 2000-year old experience. In exile the Jews had always been a minority, always in danger, but they learned they could avert or survive destruction by placating and appeasing their enemies.'<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Nazis, this, for Hilberg, became a fatal assumption. It was, however, an uncomfortable argument, one which undermined suggestions of Jewish defiance and appeared to install an image of almost supine historical passivity in its place. Two responses in particular can be said to have emerged. One was to emphasise the immense difficulty involved in open resistance, particularly when armed. Weapons were nearly impossible to source in ghettos and camps, German forces were fully capable of destroying any rebels, and it was far from clear what the Nazis intended until for many it was too late. The second was to broaden the meaning of 'resistance' beyond narrower definitions. A process undertaken by scholars such as Meir Dworkin and Nachman Blumenthal through the 1960s, it was often encapsulated by the Hebrew term *amidah* (roughly, 'stand'). Defiance, it was argued, could in fact be 'spiritual'.<sup>2</sup> Now, it seemed, Jewish victims had claim to resistance after all.

Predictably, the bounds of 'spiritual resistance' have since then remained amorphous, relying less on a set inventory of actions, and more on perceived intent. Shirli Gilbert's description of the concept's historiographical usage, though focussed on music, is essentially

valid for all activities which are said to comprise it, namely anything that serves as 'a life affirming survival mechanism through which they [victims] asserted solidarity in the face of persecution, the will to live, and the power of the human spirit'. Acts which supposedly expressed this range from clandestine education and the creation of art and music, to the writing of diaries or chronicles and the splitting of rations.<sup>3</sup> Though it could be as simple as a general resolution to live with dignity, it is particularly these cultural and intellectual activities, so well studied in the context of the ghettos, that have dominated discussion of spiritual resistance and which appear more in redemptive post-war narratives from survivors—as Yiddish poet Leivick Halpern declared, 'In mines, in bunkers, in sewage pipes, on the threshold of the gas chambers Jews sought strength in prayer, in poetry, in song.'<sup>4</sup> Central too to the idea, therefore, is its status as a collective phenomenon, enacted on behalf of all Jewry. For Nechama Tec, 'what they [Jews] shared was a belief that no one was alone and that, with the help of others, resilience could turn into resistance—acting not just on behalf of oneself to survive, but on behalf of an entire community of people.'<sup>5</sup> Spiritual resistance by extension takes on an almost indestructible quality, which transcends the death of any one victim or the destruction of the body, and which characterises at the very least a broad swathe of Jewish victims' lives under National Socialism.

In some respects, this has marked a welcome shift. Unlike unrealistic expectations of armed rebellion, spiritual resistance allows a more varied appreciation of how Jews might present defiance in the

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1 Karel C Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair* (Harvard University Press 2004) 69.

2 Or Rogovin, 'Between Meir Dworkin and Yehiel Dinur: amidah in the writing of Ka-Tzetnik 135633' (2018) 24(2) *Holocaust Studies* 203, 203–05; Robert Rozett, 'Jewish Resistance' in Dan Stone (ed), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Palgrave Macmillan 2004) 345.

3 Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press 2008) 2 and 7.

4 *ibid* 11.

5 Nechama Tec, *Resistance: Jews and Christians who Defied the Nazi Terror* (Oxford University Press 2013) 15.

face of enormous persecution. There remains, however, much to criticise in the concept. By moving away from the often redemptive, expurgated accounts of post-war testimonies, whose narratives are perhaps inherently exceptional by virtue of their tellers' survival, we can instead consider material written during the period in question. These sources contain an immediacy, uncertainty, and even banality of experience which better characterises the lives of most Jews in Nazi ghettos. This shifted focus can then let us identify the concept's various flaws. Central among them is its tendency to overlook the physical reality of the ghettos and camps, assuming a sort of immortality to spiritual resistance which ignores how bodily exhaustion and degradations severely limited one's capacity to engage in its practice. In turn, this extreme scarcity produced nearly inescapable divisions and hierarchies, precluding any simply collective face to resistance. Not only did this limit access to acts which might constitute spiritual resistance, such as cultural performance, it also affected their content. While statements from the likes of Halpern assume these activities were somehow innately dignifying, they could in fact reflect the grim, despairing reality of the ghetto. When what little remained of spiritual resistance is placed in this holistic context, it emerges as a fleeting, uncharacteristic experience in lives defined instead by hunger, division, and degradation.

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Jacob Clemenski, member of the socialist Jewish Labour Bund, described post-war a particularly striking visit to a Warsaw Ghetto cabaret.

When we reached the nightclub the street was dark. My escort suddenly said to me: 'Be careful not to step on a corpse.' When I opened the door the light blinded me ... Every table was covered by a white tablecloth. Fat characters sat at them eating chicken, duck, or fowl ... The audience crowding the tables was made up of the aristocracy of the ghetto – big-time smugglers, high Polish officers, and all sorts of big shots ... The audience ate, drank, and laughed as if it had no worries.<sup>6</sup>

Though likely an embellished account, it approximates the truth—in the ghetto, spaces to escape its realities were often exclusive to the point of the grotesque. While a majority starved, a select caste could at least momentarily enjoy comforts that staved off the spiritual degradation others experienced. Indeed, by April 1941, Emmanuel Ringelblum, organiser of the secret Warsaw Ghetto archive *Oneg Shabbat* ('Sabbath Delight'), could list 61 different cafés which provided food and music to a privileged clientele, often dependent on authorities in the Judenrat or even the Gestapo.<sup>7</sup> Nor was this unique to Warsaw. The Łódź Ghetto Chronicle, which documented life in the second largest of the Nazi ghettos, noted on 24 November 1943 how 'small centres for the cultivation of music have sprung up over time; to be sure, only for a certain upper stratum.'<sup>8</sup>

Even more open performances tended to be marred by reminders of these inequalities. Dawid Sierakowiak, a young communist whose diaries provide invaluable insight into Łódź, recorded his attendance on 27 May of a Krawiecka Street concert. 'The whole of select society gathered, bloated and dressed up. The gap between various classes of people in the ghetto grows wider and wider. Some steal to feed themselves, others feed themselves officially, while the rest are

swelling up and dying of hunger.'<sup>9</sup> Hierarchy of a more formalised sort was also used to intrude upon cultural and educational efforts in the ghettos, often rendering them exercises in self-promotion. The Łódź Chronicle, which was almost certainly vetted by Judenrat head Chaim Rumkowski, provides numerous examples of this. A September 1941 entry reporting on a children's play ended by noting that, 'After the Chairman's speech, the little children made a ring around him on the stage and danced joyously accompanied by the sound of music and cheers for the ghetto's first citizen.'<sup>10</sup> For Łódź diarist Leon Hurwitz, the motivation behind cultural programming was clear—'the dictator [Rumkowski] organises concerts so that he can deliver speeches'.<sup>11</sup> Such divisions, however, were not solely the impositions of a ghetto elite upon a silently resentful majority. Indeed, what could morally constitute spiritual resistance was often disputed at the time. This would also refute any monolithic image of Jewry as presenting solely unified defiance, and it complicates easy assumptions that certain acts are necessarily resistive. For Hermann Kruk, a conservative Bundist in Vilna, proposals to open a ghetto theatre amidst such suffering appeared outrageous, and he resolved to boycott the event alongside the local Bund—the streets of the ghetto are to be strewn with leaflets: "About today's concert. You don't make a theatre in a graveyard!" The police and the artists will amuse themselves, and the Vilna ghetto will mourn.<sup>12</sup> Riven by internal acrimony and inequality, spiritual resistance almost never presented the straightforwardly collective defiance that its historiographical proponents demand.

Under these pressures, it is perhaps unsurprising that the content of such cultural performance rarely tallied with a model of spiritual resistance. Shirli Gilbert's powerful study of music in the Holocaust moves beyond Romantic notions of art as an inherently pure expression of high emotion. Though some concerts would play Beethoven and Mahler (in the Warsaw orchestra's case, only to earn extra money for food), many of the most widespread and inescapable forms of ghetto music were far from uplifting or affirmatory of human dignity.<sup>13</sup> One song particularly popular in Warsaw, titled 'Money, money', focussed on the squalor and materialism of the ghetto, with lines such as 'Money, money, money is the best thing, / Back home I ate oranges / Today I am eaten by lice and bedbugs ... / The Jewish policeman is just a scoundrel, / Puts you on the train and sends you away to a camp.'<sup>14</sup> Though perhaps tinged with gallows humour, its basis remained a sense of grief and desperation. Indeed, in a survey of original songs composed in the Warsaw Ghetto, Gilbert concludes that 'their spirit was most often one of sadness, despair, and cynicism.'<sup>15</sup> Their performance by street beggars and children in many case only compounded their depressed tone, and the activity was evidently one motivated by desperation for some sustenance rather than any desire to display spiritual defiance. The Łódź Chronicle documents a similar episode in an entry of 5 December 1941 on 'the ghetto's latest hit song', the content of which 'tells of the *yekes* [recently arrived German Jews], forever hungry and searching for food, and the "locals" who make fun of them and quite often take advantage of their naïveté and unfamiliarity with local customs.'<sup>16</sup> Cultural performance here,

9 Dawid Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak* (first published 1960; Kamil Turowski tr, Oxford University Press 1998) 174.

10 Lucjan Dobroszycki, *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto 1941–1944* (Yale University Press 1984) 75.

11 Gustavo Corni, *Hitler's Ghettos* (Arnold 2003) 154.

12 Friedländer (n 6) 383.

13 *ibid* 151.

14 Gilbert (n 3) 21–23.

15 *ibid* 39.

16 Dobroszycki (n 10) 92.

6 Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination* (HarperCollins 2008) 149.

7 Gilbert (n 3) 28.

8 *ibid* 12.

far from being innately defiant, could in fact express contempt for the ghetto's outgroups.

Moving beyond artistic creations to the practice of prayer furthers this picture of how content often became divorced from spiritual resistance. While prayer might appear an exemplary case of the phenomenon, the exhortation involved often tended more towards pleading for salvation than towards any pledge to resist Nazi oppression. Many of the best-preserved sources on the ghettos are from socialists and intellectuals less likely to be fervently religious, but indications nonetheless exist of a primary focus upon salvation rather than resistance. As Chaim Kaplan, a Warsaw Ghetto diarist and educator, recorded, the city's Jews 'poured its supplications before its Father in Heaven in accordance with the ancient custom of Israel' following the announcement of the ghetto's creation.<sup>17</sup> The rabbi of Grabow's letter to the Łódź ghetto, warning inhabitants of the existence of the Chelmno death camp, finishes meanwhile with the lines 'O Man, throw off your rags, sprinkle your head with ashes, or run through the streets and dance with madness. I am so wearied by the sufferings of Israel, my pen can write no more. My heart is breaking. But perhaps the Almighty will take pity and save the "last remnants of our People." Help us, O Creator of the World!'<sup>18</sup> Characterised by supplication more than defiance, even prayer eschews easy identification with spiritual resistance.

An examination of the act of writing can bring together these two criticisms of spiritual resistance—that of compromised collectivity and that of compromised content. Often construed as a form of witnessing that promoted solidarity in the face of Nazi erasure, it is generally exemplified by the creation of Oneg Shabbat or by the likes of Kaplan, who declared in his diary his undying duty to 'write a scroll of agony in order to remember the past in the future.'<sup>19</sup> It is in this context that historians such as Zoë Waxman can refer to 'the collective response of other ghetto diarists' as compared to those embedded in ghetto hierarchy, whose morally compromised roles ensure, according to Waxman, that they "write not of a shared sense of suffering, but of isolation and disconnection."<sup>20</sup> It would, however, appear that many Jews unconnected to ghetto hierarchy felt no particular impulse to express a sense of collective solidarity or dignified resistance. Sierakowiak's diary is a case in point. His entries castigate 'the rotten, bourgeois-bureaucratic basis on which the ghetto exists, and on which it will perish', though he himself is quick to take advantage of it where possible. Entries range from angry documentation of popular abuses of the ghetto's coupon system, to decrying Rumkowski's creation of an exclusive and well-supplied 'rest home' for ghetto officials as 'a disgraceful blotch on the carcass of the administration'.<sup>21</sup> Already possessing little faith in 'native' Łódź Jews, his initial consideration of new Western arrivals as 'all Christians and Nazis' is hardly indicative of common feeling either.<sup>22</sup> Yet perhaps his most startling repudiation of solidarity comes with his frail mother's deportation, upon which his loyalties narrowed to her, and his misanthropy broadened to almost everyone remaining. His blame immediately fell upon foreign Jews as well as the Nazis. Her fate had been sealed 'solely because of the evil hearts of two Czech Jews, the doctors who came to examine us'. His grief was compounded by the fact that others, even the dozens

of children elsewhere in their apartment block, were not seized in her place. Wishing for a pogrom if the confusion might release her, he noted, 'What do I care about another mother's cry when my own mother has been taken from me!? I don't think there can be ample revenge for this.'<sup>23</sup>

Sierakowiak's increasing disregard for any collective empathy was something observed and acted out by many other diarists. Two other diaries from Łódź, written respectively by an unknown boy and unknown girl, come to similar conclusions. As the anonymous girl wrote, 'You may fall and nobody will pick you up. A human being is worthless, dozens of them are not important. People are disgusting. Everybody cares only for himself.'<sup>24</sup> The anonymous boy, who wrote his entries in four languages in the margins of a French novel, saw events as a general condemnation of mankind. Though he sensed at points a 'collective suffering' among the Jews, his outlook was grim. 'I am already unfortunately convinced', he remarked, 'that humanity (without exception, I believe, and the rest of it could behave in similar circumstances much like the Germans) is a sordid rabble of greedy beasts devoid of any pity or mercy.'<sup>25</sup> Perhaps particularly telling, however, is the fact that even projects such as Oneg Shabbat, which Waxman identifies as an exemplar of collective testimony, denounce the Jewish community for cowardice and division. In an entry for the archive entitled 'The destruction of Warsaw' documenting the massive deportations of later 1942, Yiddish novelist Yehoshua Perle declared, 'Three times, 100,000 people lacked the courage to say: No. Each of them was out to save his own skin. Each one was ready to sacrifice even his own father, his own mother, his own wife and children.'<sup>26</sup> Though the Ghetto Uprising of April 1943 did substantially change subsequent narratives, it is a passage that illustrates well how collective form did not necessarily imply content to match. Instead, it could speak exactly of that 'isolation and dislocation' which Waxman attributes solely to compromised, hierarchical voices.

Given the unromanticised content which written sources tended to record, it follows that their motivation was rarely as simple as bearing collective testimony. Instead, the reason for keeping a diary was often an attempt to ensure one's own emotional survival. This approaches an individualised, introspective sort of spiritual resistance. As Jeffrey Shandler notes in his study of the autobiographies of Jewish youth before the Holocaust, contemporary literary culture often impelled the opposite of a collective response—'the act of reading almost invariably correlates with a marked turn toward introspection' and 'the discovery of a language with which to depict the inner self', a development which in turned spurred the keeping of diaries.<sup>27</sup> For the anonymous girl, the idea of writing on behalf of Jewish community was evidently foreign; as she noted on 10 March 1942, 'I talked to Mrs. Robard for a long while and quite involuntarily I let slip that I was writing a diary. She said she would like to read it. I'd made a silly mistake. I don't want anybody to know about it and nobody is going to read it.'<sup>28</sup> Sierakowiak, meanwhile, dismissed the idea of leaving the ghetto for 'work in Poznan' partly because of his weakened strength, and partly because of the literary life he sporadically sustained: 'I would miss my books and "letters", notes and copybooks. Especially this diary.'<sup>29</sup> Even Kaplan, significantly

17 Zoë Vania Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press 2008) 11.

18 Dobroszycki (n 10) xxi.

19 Corni (n 11) 8.

20 Waxman (n 17) 9 and 25.

21 Sierakowiak (n 9) 79; Corni (n 11) 174.

22 Corni (n 11) 182.

23 Sierakowiak (n 9) 218–26

24 Alexandra Zapruder, *Salvaged Pages* (Yale University Press 2002) 236.

25 *ibid* 375.

26 Friedländer (n 6) 528.

27 Jeffrey Shandler, *Awakening Lives* (Yale University Press 2002) xxix–xxx.

28 Zapruder (n 24) 236.

29 Sierakowiak (n 9) 174.

older and self-consciously a historical witness, found at points a similar role for his diary, noting, 'This journal is my life, my friend and ally. I would be lost without it. I pour my innermost thoughts and feelings into it, and this brings relief.'<sup>30</sup> Oneg Shabbat, meanwhile, again presents an unexpectedly mixed picture. For Ringelblum, his group's exposure of Nazi exterminations to the foreign press was far from a universally redeeming achievement. It only meant that their deaths would not 'be meaningless like the deaths of tens of thousands of Jews.'<sup>31</sup> Israel Liechtenstein, a contributor to Oneg Shabbat, reasserted its collective creed, asking in his last will and testament amid the Summer 1942 deportations, 'May we be the redeemers of all the rest of the Jews in the whole world'. However, his conflicted sentiments are revealed in a reversion to a model of testimony as an individualised, exclusive act later in the document. He declares, 'I only want remembrance, so that my family, brother and sister abroad, may know what has become of my remains. I want my wife to be remembered ... Now together with me, we are preparing to receive death.'<sup>32</sup> Motivation for writing was never, therefore, as clear-cut as a simple desire to represent and immortalise all Jewry. Instead, its basis was often deeply and exclusively personal.

Moving beyond the psychology of the individual to consider that of the ghetto as whole further indicates why spiritual resistance flourished. The ephemerality of hopeful moods, dissipated by constant panics or disasters, posed particular challenges. Indeed, Jews within the ghetto often lacked what might be termed emotional autonomy—that is to say, a capacity for self-constructed, selective 'spiritual' development independent of terrible events which forced a response, often of grief or despair. For all Sierakowiak's attempts to use literature and learning to provide comfort and find purpose, the final anguished lines of his entry on his mother's deportation testify to its limits: 'even the greatest rainfall can't wash away a completely broken heart, and nothing will fill up the eternal emptiness in the soul, brain, mind, and heart that is created by the loss of one's most beloved person.'<sup>33</sup> Josef Zerkowicz's account of Łódź ghetto deportations in September 1942 demonstrates on a broader basis how quickly collective hopes and efforts might be raised and then dashed. Following news that the ill were to be deported, Zerkowicz records a strange, unified energy as the ghetto inhabitants set out to warn the rest of the community: 'No one walked through the streets—everyone ran. And who had the strength or the time to run—No one at all!—So we took to the air ... Our wings were clipped at their roots, and yet we flew.' The endeavour was, however, quickly spoiled, in large part by the actions of the Jewish Police. 'Hundreds of Jewish policemen stand guard; the executioners can do their work in peace. No one will hinder them ... Now all who come running find their wings truly clipped ... their throats issue such strange, crude, entirely non-human sounds ... It is incomprehensible how so many tears can come from weakened and exhausted people who haven't the strength to breathe.'<sup>34</sup> Zerkowicz's metaphor of wings collapses as the futility of the effort is revealed, and almost animalistic grief and helplessness returns. It was a reaction similar to that which the anonymous boy in Łódź recorded in more muted tones on 15 July 1944. Having been relieved at the end of deportations, his happiness was dashed by reports of a letter which described the mass execution of Jews. 'I was overcome with joy but a few hours later',

he noted, 'this joy of mine was spoilt.'<sup>35</sup> If spiritual resistance had to be sustained to truly characterise Jewish life in the ghetto, then it was this emotional fragility and shifting mood which often hindered it. As the Łódź Chronicle remarked, 'The ghetto... lost the habit of thinking more than a few hours ahead.'<sup>36</sup>

What, therefore, was left of spiritual resistance in the ghettos? The admission that its practice was never remotely as collective, straightforward, or characteristic of ghetto life as historiography often suggests, does not demand its existence be entirely discounted. For certain individuals, such as Yitshok Rudashevski, it was a genuine and central mode of thought. Engaged deeply in Vilna communist youth clubs, he spoke with an optimism very rare in other diaries. As he noted on 11 December 1942, 'We sat at meagre tables and ate baked pudding and coffee and were so happy, so happy. Song after song resounded... We have proved that from the ghetto there will not emerge a youth broken in spirit.'<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it appears that those involved in such groups were perhaps most likely to feel a sense of solidarity and defiance. It was in similar circumstances that Sierakowiak could lecture on Lenin to his young comrades or contemplate active resistance, even if he eventually rejected it.<sup>38</sup> Another strong case for spiritual resistance is made by charities such as ZTOS (Jewish Society for Social Welfare), CENTOS (Federation of Associations for the Care of Jewish Orphans in Poland), and TOZ ('Safeguarding the Health of the Jewish Population'), which continued to operate in the ghettos, with German permission.<sup>39</sup> CENTOS, to take one example, was by the summer of 1941 serving 30,000 hot meals a day, with hot milk for 1,000 undernourished children.<sup>40</sup> Judging from Kaunas ghetto's charitable sanitary organisation, the motivation may well have been consciously resistive. As one of its volunteer doctors put it, their activities aimed to ensure 'that the young people should emerge from the ghetto in the glorious future, not sick, broken or weakened, but healthy, both physically and spiritually.'<sup>41</sup> It is also important to recognise the remarkable extent of reading and learning in the ghettos. Sierakowiak could devour Schopenhauer and learn several languages at once, while the anonymous girl from Łódź recorded how her friend, before being deported, passed her 'many scientific books' along with 'the diaries of her friend and her friend's brother'.<sup>42</sup> For some, this could present a method of mental escape, just as how certain inhabitants might find imperfect solace in the flawed cultural events of the ghetto. To discount such ghetto cultures in an effort to present an exclusively 'dark' reading of events tends towards the ahistorical.

Such admissions, however, should not prevent considering these phenomena in careful context. While Jewish charity efforts were impressive, they were rarely prohibited and could do little to prevent extreme hunger and desperation for a vast number. In Łódź, the Chronicle could baldly state by May 1942 that 'the great majority of the ghetto is starving', while Corni estimates that by the year's close 760,000 had already died of 'natural causes' in Polish ghettos alone.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, whether many of these activities, particularly reading and schooling, were genuinely conceived of as spiritual resistance by those who engaged in them, can seem dubious. This suggests the term is better understood as a retrospective label

30 Corni (n 11) 8.

31 Waxman (n 17) 16.

32 *ibid.* 32.

33 Sierakowiak (n 9) 226.

34 Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides (eds), *Łódź Ghetto* (Viking 1989) 322–23.

35 Zapruder (n 24) 383.

36 Dobroszycki (n 10) xxix.

37 Zapruder (n 24) 217.

38 Sierakowiak (n 9) 107.

39 Dan Michman, 'Jewish Leadership in *Extremis*' in Stone (ed, n 2) 333.

40 Corni (n 11) 213.

41 *ibid.* 215.

42 Sierakowiak (n 9) 9; Zapruder (n 24) 232.

43 Dobroszycki (n 10) 169; Corni (n 11) 218.



applied by historians, but comparatively unrecognised by those in the ghettos. Indeed, it is very hard to find more than one or two authors who explicitly employ terms such as ‘resistance’ or ‘defiance’ in this context. For both Sierakowiak and Rudashevski, these activities were often simply a way to pass the day. As the former noted in typical fashion on 19 April 1941, ‘There is no work, only rain. I’m wandering around, idling all day long. Together with a group of friends, Communists, we’ve started to learn Esperanto.’<sup>44</sup> For Rudashevski, meanwhile, writing on 17 September 1942, ‘It is a terrible time when you cannot settle down to some kind of work and you waste days on nothing.’<sup>45</sup> While defiance did enter the latter’s rhetoric as his involvement in communist youth clubs continued, it appears that those elements of ghetto life which might seem to survive as spiritual resistance, were often the least conscious or articulated. To categorise them as resistive, therefore, may simply divorce them from the reality in which they were actually understood.

Even had reading and learning always constituted defiance, however, they were still restricted. Attempts at schooling, for example, often cited as spiritually resistive, still constituted a severely limited enterprise undertaken in totally unfit classrooms. In Łódź, the proportion of children in elementary education was slightly higher than the fifth or so taught in Warsaw, but schools were banned by Rumkowski by the summer of 1942 amid massive deportations and fear they reduced the number available to work.<sup>46</sup> For the high school classes of 1939–41, only 700 students registered in the ghetto ‘gymnasium’. In a population of 160,000 or so, these were not significant figures.<sup>47</sup> Ghetto writing was, similarly, almost certainly a minority activity. As Waxman admits, ‘no study of testimony can be comprehensive, as the vast majority of victims perished without ever writing down their experiences’.<sup>48</sup> The fact, moreover, that some attempted to represent all Jewry in their accounts had little relevance to the experience of the vast majority to which they laid claim, unaware as it was of activities such as *Oneg Shabbat*. Even more formalised events only constituted at most a few hours a month for the majority of inhabitants, marred by unwelcome reminders of reality. Sierakowiak’s remark that the *Krawiecka Street* concert ‘was just better background for meditation on the theme “what I would be eating now if there were no war...”’ is but one example which belies the *Chronicle*’s more hopeful assessments.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, spiritual resistance could do little in its limited expressions to cure the ghetto’s iniquities. As Adam Czerniakow wrote on 8 July 1942, ‘I am reminded of a film: a ship is sinking and the captain, to raise the spirits of the passengers, orders the orchestra to play a jazz piece. I have made up my mind to emulate the captain.’<sup>50</sup>

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In this vein, it is worth briefly exploring what *did* characterise Jewish lives in the ghettos. This will further demonstrate the minimal salience of ‘spiritual resistance’ to the large majority of inhabitants. While it is perhaps dangerous to identify any experiences of too specific a sort, the most common on a general level appear to be hunger, division, and degradation. It was the first of these, hunger, and especially the murderous scarcity that emerged in

all ghettos (with the partial exception of *Theresienstadt*), which induced many of these communities’ worst dysfunctions. It is not therefore surprising that food became the central, endlessly recorded preoccupation of almost all ghetto sources. As Kaplan remarked, ‘Our constant song—potatoes! ... It is our whole life. When I am alone in my room for a few moments of quiet, the echo of that word continues in my ears. Even in my dreams it visits me.’<sup>51</sup> The desperate tactics to obtain more rations were grimly noted by Adam Czerniakow, head of the Warsaw *Judenrat*. ‘In the public assistance shelters’, he wrote, ‘mothers are hiding dead children under beds for 8 days’.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, such were the pressures created by extreme shortage that resentment within the ghetto fractured the family unit, extending beyond the usual targets of foreign Jews and the *Judenrat*. The *Chronicle*’s very first entry, for example, recorded an eight-year-old boy informing on his parents to the Jewish Police, demanding they be punished for stealing his food.<sup>53</sup> It was an experience shared by the anonymous boy too, consumed by guilt over eating his younger sister’s food, and one which Sierakowiak recorded with increasing anger towards his father, whose greed he blamed for ‘pushing mum into her grave’.<sup>54</sup> Division did not, it must be noted, imply ‘atomisation’—that is to say, a total breakdown of all networks. Vital connections remained which sustained Polish Jews and excluded their Western peers, ensuring that the former were at points literally half as likely to die of hunger.<sup>55</sup> Yet these networks were hardly likely to lead to sustained armed resistance, which characterised ghetto life even less than its spiritual counterpart. Undertaken at desperate moments where the choice was liquidation or a last-stand fight, it generally involved small numbers. Of the 50,000–60,000 Jews still living in Warsaw’s ghetto in April 1943, between 250 and 800 took up arms.<sup>56</sup>

It is in this context therefore, that common feeling and compassion tended to dissolve. The general reaction to the ending of deportations provides a particularly striking case of this. Rather than prolonged grief for those taken, the typical response was happiness at survival and delight at the greater amounts of food to go around. As Zelkowitz noted in the Łódź *Chronicle* following giant actions in September 1942, ‘There is not the slightest doubt that this was a profound and terrible shock, and yet one must wonder at the indifference shown by those ... from whom loved ones had been taken. It would seem that the events of recent days would have immersed the entire population of the ghetto in mourning for a long time to come and yet, right after the incidents, and even during the resettlement action, the populace was obsessed with everyday concerns—getting bread, rations, and so forth—and often went from immediate personal tragedy right back into daily life.’<sup>57</sup> Writing privately, he remarked that ‘nearly three years in the ghetto have schooled the people well. They have learned to feel so at home with death that death has become more obvious and more ordinary than life.’<sup>58</sup> Even Sierakowiak, admittedly grief-stricken at his mother’s deportation, was soon forced to return in his diary to his preoccupations of work, food, and reading. The anonymous boy from Łódź remarked that ‘It is the best indicator of our unbelievable psychological degradation that in the ghetto people are equally upset by the disappearance of a few bites of bread and by the death

44 Sierakowiak (n 9) 81.

45 Zapruder (n 24) 206.

46 Corni (n 11) 211.

47 Adelson and Lapides (n 34) xiv.

48 Waxman (n 17) 2.

49 Sierakowiak (n 9) 164–65.

50 Friedländer (n 6) 395.

51 Waxman (n 17) 26.

52 Corni (n 11) 137.

53 Friedländer (n 6) 146.

54 Sierakowiak (n 9) 219.

55 Corni (n 11) 182.

56 Waxman (n 17) 46.

57 Dobroszycki (n 10) 255.

58 Adelson and Lapides (n 34) 325.

of their own father'. While this may have been an exaggeration, it certainly caught some of the truth.<sup>59</sup>

The extent to which communal feeling might collapse even beyond the context of food is demonstrated by the case of Jacob Gens, head of the Vilna Ghetto. When his Jewish police participated in the Nazis' extermination of fellow Jews in October 1942, having bargained the number to be killed down, many responded with weary sympathy. As the Bundist Herman Kruk remarked, 'The tragedy is that the ... public mostly approves of Gens's attitude. The public figures that perhaps this may really help.'<sup>60</sup> A sense of humiliation was therefore to be expected among many ghetto inhabitants. Again and again, the language of bestialisation arises in witnesses' accounts. The anonymous girl in Łódź declared, 'Our life is so tragic, so degraded. They treat us worse than pigs.'<sup>61</sup> Sierakowiak wrote, 'We are not considered humans at all; cattle for work or slaughter.' The anonymous boy noted, 'We are slaves devoid of free will, who are happy when trodden upon and beg only that ignore not be trodden to death.'<sup>62</sup> Even Rudashevski found pessimism hard to escape in holistic assessments of the ghetto: 'Our life is a life of helpless terror. Our day has no future.'<sup>63</sup> All four, moreover, are presumed to have been eventually exterminated along with their relations. As even Robert Rozzet, an advocate of an enormously broad view of resistance, will admit, no optimistic account can hope to 'overshadow our understanding of the heart of the Holocaust, which is comprised of terrible suffering, impossible dilemmas and death'.<sup>64</sup>

Spiritual resistance is therefore of limited utility in understanding life in the Nazi ghettos. In particular it underestimates the suffocating pressures which tended to break efforts at collective defiance, foster internal divisions, and irreparably colour all activities which are assumed to have constituted its practice. Within the broader context of the vast majority of inmates' lives, it was at most an ephemeral phenomenon, subordinated to greater concerns. Indeed, perhaps most troubling of all is the concept's tendency to ignore the physical pressures upon ghetto inhabitants. The march of starvation, disease, and fatigue disintegrated attempts at spiritual resistance, if they were even recognised as such by those who performed them. Whilst Warsaw's Rabbi Nissenbaum may have declared that '[t]he enemy wants the soul but the Jews offer their bodies instead', most found the two to be fatally interlinked.<sup>65</sup> Sierakowiak constantly noted his failing capacity to write and learn as his body degraded—on 29 April 1942, he wrote, 'I don't have any will, or rather any strength, for studying ... Time is passing, my youth is passing, my school years, my power and enthusiasm are all passing.' Eight days later, he remarked, 'we are in such a state of exhaustion that now I understand what it means not even to have enough strength to complain, let alone protest.'<sup>66</sup> Oneg Shabbat, meanwhile, records volunteer teachers despairing at the difficulty of teaching to the starved. As one put it, 'How do you make an apathetic, hungry child, who is all the time thinking about a piece of bread, interested in something else?'<sup>67</sup> No dichotomy existed between 'body' and 'soul'—as the former failed, so did the latter. If spiritual resistance can be salvaged, therefore, it must be placed within a context of physical suffering and applied sparingly, conceived more as an individual and often failed attempt

to preserve the self. It is typified by the introspective writers of the ghetto, rather than the collective, consciously defiant framework often used. What was needed in such an environment was not resistance but a brutal process of adjustment—the narrowing of compassion, the repression of the emotional damage wrought by the personal tragedies almost all underwent in the ghettos, and a doomed focus on survival. Trapped between such impulses, spiritual resistance was for most a tainted and fleeting experience.

<sup>59</sup>Zapruder (n 24) 376–77.

<sup>60</sup>Friedländer (n 6) 436–37.

<sup>61</sup>Zapruder (n 24) 241.

<sup>62</sup>ibid 375.

<sup>63</sup>ibid 198.

<sup>64</sup>Rozett (n 2) 358.

<sup>65</sup>Corni (n 11) 146.

<sup>66</sup>Sierakowiak (n 9) 160–64.

<sup>67</sup>Friedländer (n 6) 150.