

HOLOCAUST:

RESISTANCE, RESCUE AND SURVIVAL

Resistance

Pat Gallagher, Principal at Kent Night Academy, and Chair of the WSHERC Education Advisory Committee.

In studying the history of the Holocaust one can find instances where non-Jews and Jews refused to be passive in the face of the unspeakable suffering they witnessed. They made choices that defied Nazi objectives, often at the risk of their own lives and those of their families and friends. Instances of Jewish resistance, non-Jewish resistance, spiritual resistance, and armed resistance can be found throughout the time period of 1933-1945.

*A piercing voice stopped me.
It came from a middle-aged woman
struggling with two policemen who were
dragging her towards a waiting wagon.
She cried out for help as she was thrown
by the police into the vehicle. Her cries
went unanswered.*

These words of Holocaust survivor Vladka Meed serve to portray a chilling picture of a roundup within the Warsaw Ghetto. They also serve to evoke a commonly heard question, "Why didn't they resist?"

The reality is that they did resist. There were so many obstacles to resisting, that the question becomes not why didn't they resist, but rather, how in the world could they resist? And yet, resist they did!

What then were the obstacles to resistance?

They didn't know the end of the story.

The Nazis took pains to deceive their victims and the public at large. Author and Holocaust survivor **Elie Wiesel** relates to us in his book "Night," that it was 1944 before his community was deported to Auschwitz. The Nazis had been in power since 1933, systematic killing began in 1941, and yet credible information had not reached Wiesel's community. Instant communication and the extensive media coverage that we have today did not exist. On what basis did people have for resistance? They didn't know where they were going, or what the Nazis had planned.

Collective responsibility

The Nazis warned that not only would those who resisted be punished or murdered, but also their families, community members and bystanders. Thomas Blatt, a local author and survivor of Sobibor death camp, related how a number of prisoners within Sobibor attempted escape while on a work detail. Thirteen of those resistors were caught and ordered to choose 13 partners in death before a firing squad.



Thomas Blatt's bowl from Sobibor death camp (on display at WSHERC)

Lack of weapons, ammunition, resources and technical knowledge

Jews within the Third Reich were systematically denied possession of valuables or any viable means to purchase weapons. Weapons obtained illegally were of questionable quality, and ammunition was in critically short supply. Assuming that these hurdles could be overcome, into whose hands would such weapons be placed?

Physical and mental deprivation

The victims of the Holocaust were deprived of nourishment, adequate clothing, warmth and medical attention. Local Holocaust survivor Bronka S. had endured six years of life in the Lodz ghetto, Auschwitz and Mauthausen prior to being liberated at the age of 18, weighing just 53 pounds. Subjected to yelling and beatings, forced labor, confinement, and the loss of over 60 members of her family, she was physically and mentally taxed beyond any human reason. What ounce of physical and mental strength was left to fight the Nazis?

"We had faith in humanity"

Author and Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissmann Klein painfully relates in "All But My Life" that what she experienced in the Holocaust was unimaginable in light of her faith in humanity. The world simply would not, could not allow such a nightmare to evolve.

The obstacles outlined here are but five out of a myriad that challenged resistance — and yet, people did resist.

Surviving in general was resistance. In 1943, no Jew was permitted to live ... Living, that was resistance.

— Henry Friedman, author of "I'm No Hero: Journeys of a Holocaust Survivor," Seattle resident, and member of the Holocaust Center's Speakers Bureau.

activities

1. The author listed a few types of resistance used during the Holocaust. As a class, discuss each and what it might have looked like.
2. Find an article about some event/issue in which people could and might be resisting. Use the 5 W's – who, what, where, when and why – to summarize the article. In your own words, describe how resistance might look relative to that issue/event.
3. Gerda Weissman Klein claimed that she believed in humanity and that she didn't believe humans would allow the Holocaust to occur. And yet, it did occur. As a class, discuss how humanity may have allowed it to occur. Can it occur today? Look through today's Seattle Times – what events are occurring around the world of which you were unaware? Identify some ways you could get involved in your community.
4. How does being more aware of world issues and events benefit humanity? How can you educate yourself on world events and issues on a regular basis?

Published May 24, 2005

0305288



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