

# Commemorating the Uprising

LINDA GRITZ

## Challenges throughout the History of Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Observances

**E**VERY APRIL IN THE 1960S, as *shule* students at our community third seder at I.L. Peretz *Shule* 3 of The Workmen's Circle/*Arbeter Ring* in the Bronx, we intoned the somber Yiddish words of Binem Heller's poem of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, "*In varshever geto iz itst khoydesh nisan*" ("In the Warsaw Ghetto is now the month of Nissan"). Our teachers, parents and grandparents would weep and *kvell*, and we would feel pride in ourselves and pride in the Ghetto fighters, who struck a symbolic blow against incomprehensible human evil.

Thirty years later, I found myself weeping at the Warsaw Ghetto exhibit at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. Walking on actual cobblestones from the Warsaw Ghetto was a deeply spiritual experience for this atheist. The rust-encrusted milk can that had held Emmanuel Ringelblum's hidden diaries and archives of the Warsaw Ghetto was a holy relic. There was a Warsaw sewer manhole cover, which I imagined might have been used by the few surviving ghetto fighters in their escape from the flames of destruction. I wanted to reach out to touch the manhole cover as a religious Jew reaches out to touch the Torah.

With these memories in mind, I joyfully prepared several years ago for a program called *The Spirit, The Struggles, The Songs, Remembering the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, performed by *A Besere Velt* (A Better World), the Boston Yiddish Community Chorus of The Workmen's



Circle. We lovingly created a concert of songs, poems, candlelighting, and readings.

After decades of contemplating the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in a spirit of pure pride and hero worship, I was shocked to hear objections to the concert from several members of our chorus. How, they asked, can we glorify armed violence in today's world? How can we provide justification to the Israeli government to oppress Palestinians with the slogan "Never Again"? On the other hand, how can we provide justification to Palestinians to follow the example of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters and violently resist a perceived oppressor?

Ideological controversy is not new to commemorations of the Warsaw

Ghetto Uprising. There have been many challenges throughout the sixty-three years since the Uprising in April, 1943. Various groups commemorated the first anniversary: A number of synagogues held memorial services; the Workmen's Circle youth section in New York held a pageant with 1,700 attendees; the war-time American Jewish Conference sponsored a 3,000-person commemoration at Carnegie Hall. According to the April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944 issue of the *New York Times*, this latter event included a speech in Yiddish by Solomon Mendelsohn of the Jewish Labor Committee, who was interrupted by an audience member for failing to mention the participation of Zionists in the Ghetto's Jewish Fighting Organization. Others stood and joined the argument. After ten minutes of chaos, Israel Goldstein, co-chair with Stephen S. Wise, restored order by declaring that "the men and women who died in Warsaw deserve something better than this." Mendelsohn continued his speech, which later gave due credit to the Zionists.

*Three years later, on April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1947, the New York Times reported another disruption at the fourth anniversary commemoration of the Uprising sponsored by the American Jewish Congress. A representative of the communist Polish government was heckled during his speech. Boos greeted his final words that "the struggle of the Warsaw Ghetto is the fight Poland continues today."*

Various political and ideological rivals in the Warsaw Ghetto had

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## THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING: BORN IN CONTROVERSY

In the years of deprivation in the Warsaw Ghetto prior to the Uprising, there was ample controversy about how best to respond to the Nazis. Should we hand over the daily quota of Jews to attempt to save the rest of us? Should we risk immediate death to all by taking up arms and fighting back? Endless meetings ended in disagreement and inaction. Ghetto archivist Emmanuel Ringelblum noted that the youth had made a very serious error, namely, listening to their elders:

Mordecai [Anielewicz] and his young companions of Hashomer and the workers' organizations had taken too much into consideration the opinions of the older generation, of the "wise," the "deliberating," who weighed and measured and who had up their sleeves a host of clever arguments against the struggle with the occupation forces. A paradoxical situation arose. The older generation, which had half a lifetime behind it, spoke, thought, and concerned itself about surviving the war, dreamt about life. The youth — the best, the most beautiful, the finest that the Jewish people possessed — spoke and thought only about an honorable death. . . . as befits an ancient people with a history of several thousand years.

An "Anti-Fascist Bloc" formed fighting groups but was still plagued by disagreements and by the difficulties of getting weapons at a time when getting daily subsistence was nearly impossible. Eventually, when the Ghetto's ultimate fate was clear as a result of the massive deportations in the summer of 1942, a number of groups united to form the Jewish



Fighting Organization, or in Polish, the *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa* (ZOB). These groups comprised former rivals among the left-wing Zionist and socialist movements, including *Hashomer Hatzair*, the *Bund*, the Communists, *Dror Hechalutz*, *Po'alei Zion* (both Left and Right), *Gordonia*, and *Akiba*. The marked ideological differences among these groups had been subsumed by their shared life-and-death struggles. However, they still could not come to agreement with the radical right Revisionist Zionists and its paramilitary youth group, *Betar*, which formed a separate fighting organization, the *Zydowski Zwiazek Wojskowy* (ZZW), the Jewish Military Union.

The various groups within the

managed to unite in the face of dire adversity. After the war, world events split those factions again. The USSR, an ally during the war, was now America's Cold War enemy, while West Germany was an ally.

Many American Jewish groups were focusing on the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Many were working to bring Europe's Jewish survivors to America. Survivors were trying to regain their lives and to deal, along with other Jews, with the horror and the guilt and the shame of the Holocaust. For at least two decades, the Holocaust was a taboo subject, too raw for most to contemplate. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a proud moment during this period, but it was a drop in the bucket compared with the magnitude of six million murdered. In addition, the leftwing organizations that publicly embraced the Uprising as a symbol of anti-fascist activism were shunned by mainstream Jewish organizations as McCarthyism gripped the country. Against this backdrop, the path to memorializing the Holocaust was not clear.

***The Chicago Jewish community*** has faced many of these contradictions. The book, *Candles Burned in Chicago*, published in 2004 by the Midwest Jewish Council, recounts accomplishments and challenges over the course of its fifty-three Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemorations, from the first anniversary in 1944, while World War II was still raging, to 1996, when the long-time organizers found no one to whom to pass the baton.

The annual event drew crowds of up to 2000, with major political and cultural figures in attendance. The Midwest Jewish Council always sought to connect the Uprising to cur-

rent events, including anti-Semitism, racism, nuclear disarmament, the Vietnam War, health care reform, and the Middle East. Civil rights leaders from the African-American community were often featured speakers.

A number of mainstream Jewish organizations in Chicago refused to cosponsor the event because some of its organizers and cosponsors, such as the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, were leftists. Representatives from the communist Polish government were often on the podium, which caused controversy even within the left because of growing concerns about the true sincerity of the communist government's commitment to eliminate anti-Semitism in Poland, ongoing since the Kielce pogrom in 1946, which took the lives of forty repatriated Holocaust survivors.

***In the 1950s and 1960s, the Chicago*** Police Red Squad kept a file on the Midwest Jewish Council and designated it as a communist-infiltrated organization — along with the PTA, the League of Women Voters, and other similarly subversive organizations. One event was disrupted by the deliberate release of mice in the meeting hall, allegedly at the behest of the Red Squad. The political acrimony became so intense that an alternative annual commemoration was launched by more conservative Jewish groups in 1951. A rabbi, new to Chicago, received an invitation to speak at both events. When he asked why there were two separate commemorations, each group called the other “Communists” or “McCarthyites.” The rabbi, Reconstructionist pioneer Ira Eisenstein, felt that this petty feuding denigrated the memory of the Ghetto fighters and declined both invitations.

The annual Chicago commemo-

ZOB prepared for an armed struggle but disagreed on the timing to initiate the uprising. This became moot in January 1943 when the Germans resumed deportation activities that had ceased the previous September. The ZOB was initially caught by surprise and could not respond in a coordinated manner, but individual fighting units provided a spontaneous armed resistance that stunned the Germans. After several days of fighting, the Nazis abandoned their deportation efforts. This victory helped prepare the entire Ghetto for the final Uprising, which began on the first night of Passover, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1943.

The ZOB and the ZZW now managed to coordinate their military efforts against the common enemy. The Ghetto desperately fought for weeks, continuing even after German General Jurgen Stroop declared, on May 16<sup>th</sup>, that the Jewish quarter of Warsaw no longer existed.

News of the Uprising spread around the world. The brave and desperate fighters inspired Hirsh Glik, at that time in the Vilna Ghetto, to compose the Hymn of the Partisans, “*Zog Nit Keynmol*,” which is now sung at annual commemorations around the world.

### WHEN TO COMMEMORATE?

Surviving Ghetto fighters and partisans called for an annual observance of the Uprising in the newly independent state of Israel on April 19<sup>th</sup>, but Orthodox Jewish authorities argued that it was inappropriate to destroy the joy of *Nisan*, the month of Passover, by linking it to the Holocaust. Some suggested *Tisha B'Av*, already the most mournful day of the Jewish year, while others suggested the tenth of *Tevet*, a fast day commemorating the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, as a Holocaust remembrance day. A compromise was reached, satisfactory to none. The commemoration day would be in *Nisan*, albeit after Passover. It would precede *Yom HaAtzmaut*, Israel Independence Day, by eight days, reminding us each year that the State of Israel was created as a response to the Holocaust. In 1951, the 27<sup>th</sup> of *Nisan* became *Yom HaShoah U'Mered HaGetaot* (Holocaust and Ghetto Revolt Remembrance Day). The name was changed several years later to *Yom HaShoah VeHaGevurah* (Holocaust and Heroism Day). Many Orthodox Jews rejected this date and observed the tenth of *Tevet* instead.

Many secular Jewish communities in the U.S., including The Workmen's Circle, the Jewish People's Fraternal Order (JPFO), the Jewish Labor Committee, and the Bund, continued observing the 19<sup>th</sup> of April as the annual anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. They considered it not only acceptable but appropriate to have this commemoration coincide with Passover, as the Holocaust and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising provided modern-day examples of slavery and liberation. Indeed, by the late 1950s, the Hagadas of the annual community seders sponsored by the WC/AR and the successors to the JPFO included commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The sharp *khreyn* and the sweet *kharoyes*, symbolizing the biblical Exodus, now also represented the bittersweet Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

—LINDA GRITZ

ration was also threatened by anti-Semites. While conservative Jewish groups were calling for a boycott of the Midwest Jewish Council event, the American Nazi Party threatened to picket the commemoration, per-

having its own 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration, with a thousand attendees. Its broad program focused on the Holocaust but also called attention to modern issues, including the banning of books by Texas libraries (includ-

fight against fascism. In 1983, the Polish government placed Edelman under house arrest to prevent him from attending an alternative 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration sponsored by the fledgling opposition party, Solidarity.



haps because a featured speaker, Rabbi S. Burr Yampol, was chair of the National Committee Against Nazi Criminals and Nazism in America.

For the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1993, an attempt was made to unite and cosponsor one commemorative event in Chicago. Communism was no lon-

ing *The Diary of Anne Frank*) and crimes against humanity in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Liberia.

**Controversy has also dogged the** annual commemorations in Warsaw itself. Marek Edelman, an active Bundist and a leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, had stayed

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**Chicago's Midwest Jewish Council always sought to connect the Uprising to contemporary events. Civil rights leaders were often featured speakers.**

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ger a divisive issue, yet the attempt at unity still failed, due to philosophical and programming disagreements. The conservative groups felt that the commemoration should focus solely on the Holocaust, while the Midwest Jewish Council felt that the lessons of the Holocaust should be applied to issues of the day such as racism and neo-fascism. The Council ended up

in Poland following the war, thus personifying the Bundist principle of *do-ikayt* ("here-ness"), of creating an ideal world at home, wherever home might be. Edelman, however, grew disillusioned with the communist Polish government and refused to attend its official annual ceremony, which commemorated the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as victory in the

**There have always been such controversies,** great and small, involved in Warsaw Ghetto Uprising commemorations, from the days when many could not bear to face the reality of the Holocaust to the decades when the Cold War made life difficult for leftwing groups that were in the vanguard of Uprising commemoration. Still, by the 1960s, annual commemorations were firmly established for both progressive and mainstream Jewish groups. Disagreements were then more commonly about content: How much emphasis on Holocaust resistance versus victimization? How much Yiddish? In Boston, The Workmen's Circle participated in a citywide commemoration until the 1960s, when their cosponsors decided they didn't want any more speeches in Yiddish. The Workmen's Circle then decided to hold their own commemoration, which remained focused on the Uprising while the citywide commemoration became a Holocaust commemoration with little or no mention of resistance.

In the 1990s, religious content became an issue within the Boston Workmen's Circle. As a member of the event committee, I recall that some members wanted our annual commemoration to include *El Mole Rakhaim* and *Kaddish*, while non-religious secularists were aghast (recalling an earlier uproar over a *yarmulke* that someone dared wear to a previous commemoration!). We compromised: *El Mole Rakhaim* was in but *Kaddish* was out.

*How should we commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in today's world? The Uprising is a symbol of all the resistance — physical, cultural, spiritual — that rose up in response to Nazi genocide. The enduring lesson of the Uprising is that we must respond to oppression and injustice. We can debate whether violence or alternative forms of resistance are appropriate to a particular threat, but on both sides of that debate we can derive inspiration from the heroism of the Ghetto fighters.*



Some feel that the lessons of the Uprising are self-evident and do not need to be spelled out for the modern issues of the day. Others are concerned that the Uprising can be used to justify acts of violence today and that today's world is too hawkish to celebrate such militancy. Yet we must honor those who died, those who fought, and those who survived and thereby granted us the capacity

to debate such issues within vibrant Jewish communities. We must not stop observing the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising just because we cannot agree on the best way to memorialize their militant resistance; rather, we must face this issue and honor those who managed to achieve unity in the face of much more complex issues.

The editorial from the April 1946 issue of The Workmen's Circle's newsletter, *Call*, describes the purpose of commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that many of us share today:

At least once every year, just as the pious Jew beats his breast on Yom Kippur, crying aloud "*alkhet shekhotonu lefonekh*" — we must not fail to remember the martyrdom of the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto. . . . To us, April 19, 1943 — the day the fighting began on the streets of Warsaw's ghetto — must take on the same significance which July fourth, 1776, has assumed for Americans. . . . They fought for us more than they did for themselves, and they did so in the hope that we would understand as they did that tyranny's "children" — hunger, pestilence, inequality and war — must forever be banished from the earth. ■

## Yiddish Midterm

At this exact moment when I sit  
At the dining room table grading midterm  
Exams on Yiddish grammar, catching  
Mistakes in the negative, praising the students'

Mastery of the present tense, of word order,  
Of how to form questions and how to answer them,  
My seventeen year old daughter walks through Auschwitz.  
At my dining room table in Philadelphia, I mark

In green ink the progress of young Americans  
Making their way through the thicket  
Of the grammar of the language spoken by those  
Who died in Auschwitz, while there, in Auschwitz,

My only daughter with her teachers at the barbed wire,  
Asks questions, asks answers.

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