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JEFFREY T. ZALAR

Holocaust, Jewish Ghetto Education and the

Before World War II Jews enjoyed a rich cultural and social life throughout Europe. Despite pervasive anti-Semitism, Jews thrived and maintained their customs and traditions. Education had always been a cornerstone of Jewish life. But after the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, a series of laws were passed that gradually excluded Jews from business, civil service positions, universities, and all facets of professional life. On November 15, 1938—five days after a Nazi-organized night of widespread violence and vandalism against Jewish synagogues, stores, and businesses that came to be known as Kristallnacht (the night of broken glass)—Jewish children were barred from attending German schools. With the institution of Nazi decrees to end public education, the situation grew bleak. The effect on children was particularly harsh, as attested to by Naomi Morgenstern:

> Marisha, my best friend, invited me to come with her to school. We met in the morning and walked together with a lot of other children. . . . Marisha went through the gate [of the school], and I followed her, as the watchman greeted her. "Where are you going?" he asked me. "To school, to the first grade," I said proudly and continued walking. The watchman blocked my way. "No, not you." "But I am six already—really I am!" "You are a Jew," he said. "Jews have no right to learn. No Jews in our school. Go home!" I looked around. Marisha and the other children stood there listening. The school bell rang. Marisha, with the other children, ran into the building. I turned around, and walked away. Standing in the street outside, I held on to the fence of the school. I watched Marisha. She entered the school building and disappeared. I did not cry. I thought: "I'm Jewish. There is no place for me. I stood there until no one stood in front of the school. Only me. The new school year had begun. But not for me." (p. 12)

After the start of World War II, the Germans began to segregate Jewish populations into ghettos, primarily in Nazi-occupied lands in Eastern Europe. Historian George Eisen noted that "the educational system in almost all ghettos became victims of similar decrees [as those in Germany]. With one swipe of the pen, schools were outlawed and Jewish learning, specifically that of children, was forbidden under threat of death" (p. 21).

Such decrees did not halt the establishment, mostly illegal, of a network of elementary and secondary schooling and even higher education. Evidence clearly indicates that elaborate networks of schooling were established in ghettos like Vilna, Lodz, and Warsaw. In the Vilna ghetto, for instance, the Jews established a regular school system. The religious schools in this ghetto were particularly comprehensive in that the curriculum included attention to secular subjects such as arithmetic as well as study of ancient Hebrew texts.

In Lodz, the first major ghetto established (on December 10, 1939) and the last to be destroyed, the educational system included at the start forty-seven schools from kindergarten through high school with a total enrollment of 15,000 children. Although conditions in these schools were unbearable (e.g., classrooms were unheated, textbooks and materials were in short supply, and illness was rampant), classes were held with few disruptions for the first two years of Nazi occupation. According to a chronicler of the Lodz ghetto: "For many of [these students], school was a ray of light amid darkness—an anchor and symbol of the continuation of 'normal' life" (Unger, p. 136).

Overt schooling, however, ceased in the autumn of 1941, as children aged ten and over were compelled to join the labor force. Clandestine schools continued in the Lodz ghetto despite gnawing hunger, backbreaking work, disease, and constant fear of deportation. According to one chronicler, "precisely because of these unbearable physical and psychological hardships—many ghetto residents sought refuge, albeit temporary, in other worlds far from day-to-day reality" (Unger, p. 133). One young resident, Dawid Sierakowiak, found this refuge in reading and study. He wrote in his diary on March 25, 1942: "I felt very bad today. I did some reading, but I find it hard to study anything, only several new words in English. One of the things I'm reading is a excerpt from the works of Schopenhauer. Philosophy and hunger—what an unusual combination" (Adelson, p. 120).

In Warsaw, the largest Polish ghetto, the first school year under German occupation began in October 1939. Occupa-

tion authorities allowed only elementary and vocational schools to open; they kept the secondary schools in the ghetto closed. Two months later, they closed all Jewish schools in Warsaw. Judenrate (Jewish Council) authorities made many unsuccessful appeals to the Germans to rescind this regulation. Lacking a legitimate educational system, the Jewish community began to establish an underground network of schools. Clandestine elementary schools operated mainly in children's kitchens under the aegis of various social agencies. However, only a tiny fraction of the ghetto's tens of thousands of school-aged children could actually attend them.

Another vast network of private schools was established in Warsaw primarily for high school students. Unemployed teachers from prewar faculties staffed these clandestine schools, known as *komplety* in Polish. In the Warsaw ghetto, some two hundred students also learned in at least eleven *yeshivot* (schools for advanced Hebrew studies). Most yeshiva students had no legal existence in the ghettos because they were not registered with the Judenrate. Their lack of official status meant that the students had no ration cards. Some more fortunate Jewish families supplied them with food in quantity, as did some welfare agencies. Students took turns begging on the street or soliciting food and money among people of means.

In many ghettos, clandestine schooling sometimes took the form of play. In an attempt to disguise a formal school structure, children, with the aid of educators, formed playgroups. In his brilliant study of children and play during the Holocaust, George Eisen described such playgroups:

> The Youth Care organization of the [Theresienstadt] camp (Jugendfuersorge) formed several "play groups" which replaced the formal school structure. A prisoner remembered after the war that "lessons had to be camouflaged as games." In the guise of play, genuine school subjects such as history, math, and geography were taught. Children took turns in alerting their classmates and teachers to the approach of SS men. On a moment's notice, children and teachers magically transformed the classroom into a play scene. Even the smallest details of these activities had to be well rehearsed, for if anyone were caught it could mean death for children and teachers alike. (p. 84)

Conditions in ghetto schools were deplorable. Survivors, reminiscing about their experiences, recalled the horrible conditions in the Lodz ghetto. Dawid Sierakowiak noted in his diary "School is deteriorating. There are no teachers or classes. Everything is vanishing before our eyes" (Adelson, p. 120). Yet despite these horrendous conditions, learning became a form of spiritual survival and even resistance. David Weiss Halivni, in his memoir *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning in the Shadow of Destruction* (1996), described in detail how learning contributed greatly to his survival: "It was learning that made my life as a child bearable insulated me from what was happening in the ghetto, . . and it was learning that allowed me to resume my life afte the Holocaust" (p. 175). Despite deplorable conditions, Jew established a network of schooling in many ghettos. The at tention to the education of children and its impact on then as a means and expression of survival are remarkable testi monies of courage and determination.

See also: **Holocaust; Judaism; War in the Twentieth Century**

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