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Defenders of Hope: Preserving Childhood in the Ghetto

There is nothing as precious as a child delightedly learning and finding wonder in everyday life. Unfortunately, children forced into the ghettos during the Holocaust were robbed of having an innocent childhood. The desperate ghetto conditions amidst Nazi persecution made having a normal youth impossible, but parents fought ardently for their families by doing everything in their power to give their children some semblance of a childhood and instill in their children the belief that they would escape imprisonment and thrive beyond the ghetto walls. Jews in the ghettos defied Nazi wishes to render them ignorant by educating and exposing their children to cultural events. By taking part in this form of resistance, the Jews maintained a sense of normalcy for their children, preserved their humanity, and fought against the Nazis' desire to annihilate their people.

Individuals in the ghettos resisted by instilling their children with hope through education. Life in the ghettos was full of poverty and suffering, but education provided children a temporary escape from hardships they endured. A young Jewish boy in the Vilna Ghetto, Yitzhak Rudashevski, known as an outstanding student, relied on his education to distract him from the misery that surrounded him. In his diary, he claims “his love of learning was what kept him motivated in spite of the Nazis’ degradation of the Jews” (Monnig 50). Education served as a crucial distraction for many children in the ghettos, and they sought out learning in defiance of the Nazis’ ban on schools. Children pursuing their education were forced to hide books under their clothing and hold hidden classes. While these acts put children in great danger, they defied Nazi control in an attempt to maintain a sense of hope. Many parents in the ghettos understood the importance of education as well. In Zenia Malecki’s testimony, she quotes the mothers in the Vilna Ghetto stating, “Now we are in a cage, but we have to do everything, everything possible

that when the children come out of the cage, they will be able to fly” (259). These mothers realized that although they were raising their families in horrific circumstances, they believed in the possibility of a future for their children and strove to prepare them for that day (USHMM; Eisenberg).

In addition to educating children, Jews in the ghettos fought against Nazi dehumanization by ensuring that children participated in religious events. While some might argue that spiritual resistance is not as bold as other forms of resistance, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum points out that “many Orthodox Jews who opposed the use of physical force viewed prayer and religious observances as the truest form of resistance.” Jews showed great bravery and maintained humanity by practicing the very religion that led to their imprisonment in the ghettos. For many individuals, maintaining their faith was their only source of joy. Dawid Sierakowiak comments on the importance of religion in the ghetto when he states, “I understand what faith means to the devout. It’s an irreparable crime to take away someone’s only happiness, his belief” (121). Evidence of Jewish religious resistance again appears in photographs from the Zabno and Lodz Ghetto. In these images, children participate in the Purim celebration, adhering to their Judaic beliefs. Celebrating Purim kindled hope and held much more significance in the ghetto as Jews remembered a holiday that commemorated the freedom of their people. In an attempt to again fight against oppression, the Jews intentionally incorporated religious practices into the daily lives of children in order to resist the Nazi regime (“Resistance Photograph Collection” 23-24).

The monumental impact of preserving childhood in the ghettos can be seen through the life of Jiri Bader. Bader was born in April 1930 in Czechoslovakia. He lived comfortably with his parents, Pavel & Grete Bader, and younger sister, Vera. Bader’s life was completely shaken

in January 1943 when he and his family were deported to Theresienstadt, a ghetto in Czechoslovakia, just two months before Jiri Bader was supposed to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah. The Theresienstadt ghetto, although painted with the facade of an ideal Jewish community, was saturated with the disease, starvation, and death that encompassed every other ghetto in Europe. Despite these conditions, Bader's parents understood the significance of celebrating his Bar Mitzvah. It served as more than just a commemoration marking Bader's entrance into adulthood. His Bar Mitzvah also provided an opportunity for the Bader family to prove their perseverance. Although he perished, in the moment that his parents were able to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah with him, adhering to their religious beliefs, they garnered the strength to continue in the face of Nazi terror. Individuals like Jiri Bader and his family provided their community with the hope to continue surviving and giving their children a sense of normalcy and faith in the midst of a desperate situation ("Bar Mitzvah").

Through the education of children and integration of religious practices in the ghetto, Jews were able to oppose the Nazi regime and fight to preserve their dignity. Education in the ghettos fostered an environment of hope for the youth and their families, with children relying on education to survive. Religious events provided another crucial source of resistance by allowing Jews to express themselves and giving them the satisfaction of defying the enemy who trapped them in the ghetto. As a result of brave individuals such as Jiri Bader who utilized these forms of resistance, the Jews caged in ghettos refused to give up their lives, their hope, and their humanity.

While exploring resistance in the ghettos, Lucy Dawidowicz stated, "The wonder is not that there was so little resistance, but that, in the end, there was so much." Based on research that I have conducted on resistance in the ghettos, I agree with Dawidowicz's statement. After

studying the resistance that occurred during the Holocaust, it became obvious that resistance presented itself in various ways, ranging from simply praying to boldly smuggling guns into the ghettos. Jews showed great bravery through every form of resistance because even the smallest acts of opposition could have endangered themselves and their families. In today's society, there are many situations that make speaking up and resisting injustice a difficult task. For example, the refugee crisis is a prevalent issue within modern nations around the world. Today's refugees are faced with both trying to flee from their countries and trying to find a place that will provide a safe harbor for them and their families. Images of the children of Aleppo or the tragic image of a drowned refugee child are in the news, and yet, countries, including the United States of America, refuse to accept those suffering. However, people continue to speak up on behalf of refugees, holding rallies and protests to persuade their governments to show compassion. These refugees simply want to protect their children from the horrors around them and desire a better future for their families. Their situation bears a dismally similar resemblance to the Jewish parents who found themselves trapped in the ghettos, wanting to have hope for their children in the most hopeless of circumstances. We must all learn from the Jews and embody their bravery by speaking up for the individuals who cannot protect themselves and remembering that all people share a common humanity.

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