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The Resistance of the Kashariyot

In late 1930, Nazi-controlled Poland began to push its Jewish citizens into isolated neighborhoods called ghettos to further alienate them from Aryan, or non-Jewish, society, and make them easier to control. Jews living in ghettos could not travel by train or use radios, and mail sent to them was censored by the Germans. It became very difficult to get any information on what was happening in the outside world. Without the aid of a certain legion of young Jewish women sneaking news and supplies back into the ghettos, many living there would be completely unaware of the Nazi's ultimate plan to exterminate all Jews. Emanuel Ringelblum, the founder of the underground *Oneg Shabbat* archives, wrote that this group was "a theme that calls for the pen of a great writer," "courageous," and "indefatigable." These women were known as the *Kashariyot*, or "couriers," who helped countless Jews by providing important information, education, supplies, and weapons, as well as encouraging them to resist the Nazis and helping people escape the ghettos.

A *kasharit* was typically a young woman, aged only 15-25, who spoke proper Polish and had blonde hair or blue eyes giving her an Aryan appearance. They often were passionate members or leaders of Jewish youth groups, such as the FPO, a Nazi resistance organization. Men could not do the job without looking suspicious--they were expected to be at work during the day, and could be identified as Jewish if they were circumcised. But for the Kashariyot, the German officers did not suspect them because they seemed to be innocent, non-Jewish, and harmless. The courier Bronka Klibanski "simply asked men who looked like gentlemen to buy her train tickets and carry her suitcases—when she was smuggling guns and ammunition—because her smile and elegant bearing inspired men to be chivalrous" (Weitzman). And Hasia Bornstein "escaped from an

inspection when she was carrying a laboratory for forging documents because she appealed to a guard." Charm and bravery were essential to the Kashariyot.

When Polish Jews were first moved into the ghettos, the main goal of the Kashariyot (as well as Jewish resistance groups in general) was to improve the quality of life there. They ran secret schools, soup kitchens, newspapers, and cultural events to give people hope and dignity. "We had schools for the children in the ghetto. We had a choir. We had theater. We had discussions… Can you imagine? We did whatever we could," recalled Zenia Malecki, a girl who had once lived in a ghetto in Vilna, Poland. She was somewhat of a courier herself, and described an incident where she was caught smuggling food, another common Kashariyot mission. "I had long narrow pockets sewn into my clothes so I could smuggle in flour or peas. One time I was caught, and oh my God, I was beaten. [The SS officer] was a murderer. He threw me in the corner, and I was beaten- oh God! - because he found some peas." Unfortunately, this was just the beginning of the Nazi horrors that Polish Jews would endure during the German's invasion.

In autumn of 1941, the Nazis began secret "mass shooting operations in which entire Jewish communities were murdered in a single day" (Weitzman). Eventually, word got out to the underground Jewish resistance groups, who saw the killings as a wake-up call to the German's plan to anhiliate all Jews. They urgently sent the Kashariyot to warn the communities in the ghettos, from Grodno to Bialystok to Warsaw. Each kasharit recounted the horrific tale to the people, who were in disbelief and shock. They worked very hard to convince them that the murders really happened, as it was a matter of life or death, but many people could not fathom that such brutality could happen, even from the Nazis. Frumka Plotnicka, one of the most well-remembered couriers, "reported the annihiliation of so many Jewish towns and ghettos that she began to refer to herself as 'the gravedigger of the Jewish people'" (Ochayon). Despite these challenges, the Kashariyot were able to drum up a surprising amount of anti-German resistance, especially from other young men and women.

At the same time, many couriers were tasked with providing weapons to the ghettos for armed fights against the Nazis. Using their contacts and knowledge from outside the ghettos, the Kashariyot were able to smuggle weapons in creative ways, buried inside bags, sacks of potatoes and even their own underwear (Ochayon). They relied on their charm and supposed innocence to fool SS officers at inspections, oftentimes barely escaping being caught. This was when their years of practice and expertise were more important than ever, and when the consequences of being discovered were most severe.

The Jewish resistance worked tirelessly to arm themselves and prepare other Jews to fight, but the Nazis out-numbered and out-weaponed them by a long shot, and the ghettos were emptied as Jews were sent to concentration camps. In a last-ditch effort to save the lives of as many Jews as possible, the underground resistance sent out one last mission to the Kashariyot: help people escape the ghettos. The women helped people get fake identity cards and find homes on the Aryan side, constantly weary of traps and blackmailers. Since the couriers were passionate about their Jewish heratige, it must have been bittersweet to help people live undercover as non-Jews, but they persisted with their mission nevertheless. For them, saving Jewish lives came above all.

The Kashariyot, the valiant messengers who risked life and limb to deliver information through the ghettos, had to “face the greatest dangers” and “accept the most dangerous missions…without a moment’s hesitation,” wrote Emanuel Ringelblum in his diary. He added that “the Haikas and the Frumkas will take first place in this history.” (Haika Grosman was another prolific kasharit, like Frumka Plotnicka.) But unfortunately, that has not been the case in most Holocaust memorialization today. Consider the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising memorial, created by the sculptor Nathan Rapoport, who had survived the Nazi occupation of Poland. It depicts a Jewish resistance leader trekking heroically into the distance with a small army of fighters behind him. The only female featured in the sculpture is a mother carrying her child, being swept

away by a storm in the background. Nathan Rapoport was a survivor of the Holocaust, and probably witnessed the couriers' daring messenger work during his time in the ghettos. Yet Emanuel Ringelblum's declaration did not come true- the Kashariyot seem to be forgotten. Most Holocaust rememberence seems to focus on armed Jewish resistance-physical fighting, collecting weapons, everything to do with the military-because many people believe that heroism must involve brute force and violence. They measure bravery in physical strength, but the valiance the underground girl couriers showed on their missions, through intelligence, street smarts, and the art of deception, was nearly unmatched. People who want to commemorate the Holocaust must not forget about the quiet warriors who influenced the lives of so many in the Jewish ghettos. It is essential to represent them in our art, our media, and our stories so that they may inspire others with their heroism, and so that they can be honored with "the pen of a great writer."

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