

## Commemoration of the Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on April 19, 1943 by Gary Tischler

Today is April 19. It is an anniversary, of an event that from start to finish—preceded and was followed by events that exposed once and for all the true outlines of what the Nazis euphemistically called the Final Solution. It lasted barely a month, but has proven to be unforgettable in its echoing impact.

On April 19, in the city of Warsaw and a place called the Warsaw Ghetto, where thousands of Jews had been herded and separated from the city proper in the aftermath of the German invasion of Poland in 1939, the remaining Jews in the Ghetto, faced with deportation to the specifically the extermination camp at Treblinka, rose up and defied General Jürgen Stroop's order to cease German troops, veteran Waffen-SS troops, entered the ghetto on the eve of Passover, the Jewish holiday. Organized Jewish resistance fighters fought back, and for a month battled German forces, with all the courage of a David fighting an implacable Goliath.



In the end, using a limited amount of weapons—some rifles, pistols, Molotov cocktails, grenades--these fighters staved off the Germans, inflicted numerous casualties, and fought bitterly, with little hope, but outsized courage. Many of the survivors and the historians of this conflict, which ended when Stroop used dynamite and fire to burn out the fighters and the remaining residents, told others that they fought so that they could stand up and resist, to die honorable deaths in the face of certain destruction.

The Warsaw Ghetto had evolved as a Ghetto to a jumping off place where literally thousands and thousands of Jews had been rounded up and selected in regular deportations. The Jewish leaders of the ghetto, the Judenrat—had been told that they would be relocated, transported to work camps in the east, and did not realize until the final roundup and deportation loomed, that in fact they were being transported to a killing camp, to be murdered *en masse*.



We all know the numbers, the methods, the sheer size of these events that came to be remembered as the Holocaust. Even to this day, and in spite of the bearing of witness by survivors and the task of documenting the greatest disaster in Jewish history and the starkest and darkest example of man's inhumanity to man, the Holocaust exists as something of a black hole in the imagination. Its documentation, the details, and the sheer

amount of data defy understanding, and comprehension, but exist as a monumental body of facts, a monument and protection against denial, if not acceptance.

The story of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, which was followed in 1944 by a larger uprising and battle with Polish resistance fighters against the city's Nazi occupiers in 1944 is well known in historical literature, in two similar best-selling novels, "The Wall," by John Hersey, and "Mila 18" by Leon Uris, and Roman Polanski's devastating film "The Pianist." We cannot in an evening tell the story, although we are blessed and honored by the presence of three Holocaust survivors in our midst tonight.

The story is first and foremost one of courage by people already possessed of the knowledge of the wholesale and deliberate slaughter of Jews throughout Europe. They had little to fight with. They lived in a place where food and drink were scarce, where people were starving and sometimes lay down on the sidewalk and died, and where chaos ruled. Friends and families simply disappeared on trains, never to return, as trains followed trains, cattle cars blowing smoke on the horizons, leaving behind baggage and packages, and sometimes bodies in their wake.

The numbers of survivors are dwindling as age advances inevitably, but the memory of these events, these numbers, this history, is permanent, thanks to historians and the records and interviewers who scoured the earth for the living witnesses and recorded the story of their lives and their suffering and losses.

Memory is the last and best thing we have to reserve the past. In London, in May of that year, a prominent member of the Polish government in exile, Szmul Zygielbojm, committed suicide. He wrote: "I cannot continue to live and to be silent while the remnants of Polish Jewry, whose representative I am, are being murdered. My comrades in Warsaw fell with arms in their hands in the last heroic battle."

The last act of the battle came like a horrid punctuation when Stroop pushed the detonator to demolish the Great Synagogue of Warsaw. Stroop called it a marvelous sight, a fantastic piece of theater." Some 13,000 Jews were killed in the uprising, while almost all of the remaining 50,000 or so Jews were shipped to concentration and extermination camps.

It is another story of truth, to which all of us at one time or another have responded. I remember going to the opening of the Holocaust Museum and was startled at the tactile presence of the mountain of shoes, the smell of what seemed like fresh leather. We have all been at memorials of thousands or gatherings of a dozen, and recoiled at the deniers, who said only this happened, or none of it happened, it was a fever, a bad and misunderstood dream. We remembered that six million Jews murdered was incomprehensible, but that one Jew murdered was one too many.

We have all seen the photograph, with the small boy at the center, his hands half raised in surrender, fear or confusion, wearing short pants and long socks and a jacket, surrounded by women and other children. They were, according to the German record "forcibly pulled out of dug-outs" in Warsaw.

The picture haunts us still. But it is also a part of memory—we remember it today even as we forget Stroop's name, if not his deeds, or that of any of the other members of the Nazi hierarchy who thought they might become statues in history.

Tonight, soothed by the equalizing power of music, we remember the heroes and the dead of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising