

Yeshayahu [Szaja] Landau

Fortitude of Spirit



More than once, the bitter lament emerges in the recesses of our wounded soul - how could an entire nation have been annihilated? How could they have been taken as cattle to the slaughter? Even knowing all the innumerable reasons, the causes and circumstances which gave the *Press of Blood* the force to crush all living beings under its murderous weight, we again and again stand staring dumbstruck at the astonishing utter helplessness which swept the multitudes of the House of Israel into the claws of Death.

This can only be due to the fact that the force and the blow of the pain are so great and shocking, that even those whose own bodies were immersed in the bloodbath to its full depth, are unable separate and draw from the general tragedy its individual parts and lethal components.

We are still in a state of such shock, that the jaws of time in vain gnaw at the sealed walls of the infinite burden of agony. In vain, the mammoth sledgehammers pound on the anvils of our consciousness, which refuses to grasp the fiendish mesh in its entirety and to believe that which human logic cannot comprehend.

We must therefore stand and focus our gaze on the space enshrouded in the haze of the smoke of the crematoria and, through it, discern the secrets of this hell on earth - to perceive the monumental and plentiful tools of destruction, which were commanded and harnessed to grind all God's creatures in the monstrous whirlpool of blood. On the other hand, we must also see before us the silhouettes which were ground, crushed, and trampled, but who notwithstanding mustered the audacity and defied the impossible.

Without being able to even dream of gaining freedom, they waged a desperate war not in order to attain victory, but for the sake of doing battle! Not in order to save themselves, but to save the honour of their People, which had been cast to the very ground.

They breached open an aperture in the darkness of a world in which all light had been eclipsed!

There had never before been a war such as this, just as there had never been an evil and malicious power such as this, which decreed the extermination of all people - from suckling infants to the oldest elder.

Correspondingly, the properties of heroism and daring were also extraordinarily revealed and vastly surpassed the accepted norms, from antiquity to the days in they were manifested.

In utter desperation, in the Warsaw ghetto, Jews threw themselves from the upper floors of houses onto the heads of the Germans down in the street, to kill at least one German with their bodies.

In August 1942, the Jews in the ghetto began setting fire to their own homes, so that Jewish property should not fall into the hands of the Germans. Prior to his demise, the commander of the rebellion in

Warsaw, Mordechaj Anielewicz, wrote to Icchak Cukierman, who was the link between the ghetto and the Aryan side:

In our struggle against the Germans, we have done even more than we could, but our strength is waning progressively. We stand on the brink of defeat. Twice we forced the Germans to retreat, but they returned with redoubled force. My life's last ambition has been fulfilled.

The poet Icchak Kacenelson *hy'd*, in his poem "The Song of the Murdered Jewish People," wrote:

No, no, it is never too late! The last Jew killing a murderer, has redeemed his people! By killing too, something may yet be saved – Save!

"And in the general sea of blood, also a drop of my own" - the sons of Częstochowa, too, were among those who marched in the path of the rebellion and resistance. Just a small number of audacious individuals, who rose up to revolt against the plot of extermination, stood boldly in front of the cruel enemy's fierce machine.

Individuals and groups organised, in unimaginable conditions, to consolidate an armed struggle against the enemy. The nucleus of rebellion, which was organised in Częstochowa, constituted a link in the chain of centres of resistance which arose and were created within the ghettos, and it contributed its share and its sacrifice - a "burnt offering" on the altar of the general effort.

But, here, the secret and the hidden exceeded the overt. Naturally, as no witnesses survived, the anonymous heroes took their daring to their graves and only tiny slivers have been retained and passed from mouth to mouth.

Mojsze Josel Szancer, for example, was one of many who would have said and who would have thought!

The man Mojsze Josel was a God-fearing Jew, as Jewish men ought to be. All his life, he had been dedicated to Torah study and the service of God. He had never indulged in acts of violence, especially not with a weapon. And it came to pass that, one day, this Mojsze Josel Szancer was marching in Treblinka in the Procession of Death, alongside the multitudes of the House of Israel. Among his own people, he was treading his last steps towards the realm beyond all living. Pace after pace, step after step. The ground shakes under his feet, and soon everything will end.

He marches and on his back is the burden of persecutions, suffering, and blood of his people, which has been persecuted and tortured generation upon generation. He marches and, in his arms, is his infant grandchild, his son's son, young Jakób - the last surviving remnant. With his last remaining strength, he clutches the infant's back and presses him strongly to his chest – increasingly so – as if wishing to become one body and soul with him. He is fully determined to protect the little one until his last breath and to sacrifice his own life to save the life of his grandson.

And lo, two emissaries of The Realm of Evil approach him. They demand the child! In the blink of an eye, the fiend extends his impure hands to snatch the infant from his benefactor, but Mojsze Josel stands his ground - he will not relinquish him, whatever the consequences may be! The fateful seconds seem like an eternity. Mojsze Josel becomes infuriated, a tremor seizes him. He had once been a slaughterer. Not a slaughterer of devils, but of cattle. He still retains a reminder of those days - in his pocket. In one arm – the child and the other hand clutches the blade. His fingers tremble as with malaria – the knife is as sharp as a razor. Mojsze Josel feels he can no longer contain himself! An age-old vengeance whispers incessantly: "*Strengthen me only this once, strengthen me! Let me die with*

*the Philistines!*¹⁸ And he plunges the blade into the flesh of the murderers – *One! And Two!* Mayhem breaks out! The enemy was temporarily confounded, startled by the victim's fierceness. But they regained their ground and, in a wild frenzy of rage, meted out the severest retaliation - until Mojsze Josel fell ravaged.

And those two young men – Izio Fajner (Faia) and Mendel Fiszlewicz who, standing in the square prior to being sent to the camp, threw themselves at the S.S. trooper with knife, fingernails, and teeth! Against immense power, armed from head to foot – bare human limbs.

Was there any chance at all of emerging victorious from such a hopeless struggle? Can this be considered a match in any way, which one may estimate at what price triumph may be gained?

No, we are not speaking of the price of life here, but of the price of death. This assault had but one purpose - to receive the price of one's death! To save that which cannot be robbed even with superior numbers – one's honour!

Another figure [whom people] mentioned, also belonged to the religious and god-fearing community, whose spirits were not dampened even when severely tested and whose insight - the ability to perceive the [impending] danger - stood them in good stead before [the catastrophe].

This townsman of ours – Icze (Izaak) Katz – was extremely learned and was an expert on the secrets of the Talmud and Midrash. Yet, at the same time, he had a vast knowledge of worldly events and, with his sharp intellect, he was able to look profoundly into the depths of the peril crouching at the gate and to discern it drawing near, at a time when no one yet envisaged it.

At a time when no one could or desired to believe in which direction Asmodeus was headed, Icze Katz warned of the approaching storm.

The great merit of the very few - and Icze Katz among them - who perceived from the very beginning of the hateful foe's appearance - in the form of its occupation force, with its soldiers, servants, and assistants - that his ways were the Ways to Hell [Proverbs, 7:27], and his deeds were deeds of evil, and his mission - killing, strangling, and utter eradication.

Verily, the agony and sorrow are immense, that this dark prophecy was far from being accepted by the masses, who regarded it as "outlandish," or as imaginary.

When Dr Mark Dvorzhetski told the Jews of Wilna that Paneriai was not a labour camp, but that they were murdering Jews *en masse* there, they said to him, "Doctor, you're creating panic! Instead of encouraging us, you tell us horror stories. How could they be taking Jews and killing them just like that?"

The situation was the same in each and every locality, in all the Jewish communities everywhere. The Jews simply refused to believe!

Ichhak Cukierman ("Antek"), when he testified at the Eichmann trial, said, "We had good people in Warsaw. It was impossible to believe that such a thing could happen, that they should rise up against the multitudes of the Jewish People and murder them".

Whereas Icze Katz shouted, cautioned, and warned – from the very first day of the Nazi occupation – not to cooperate with the invader! Not to obey his orders and laws! Not to pay ransom! Not to provide

¹⁸ [TN: References to the biblical story of Samson's death; see Judges 16:28-30.]

forced labourers! Not to establish any autonomous representation, whose only purpose was to facilitate the enemy's domineering actions. No dealings should be had with him whatsoever.

"An enemy who declares our extermination," Icze Katz said, "must not receive any aid - even in taking steps which are supposedly to our advantage." But who listened to Icze Katz?

Not Accepting Fate

Generations of life in exile created in our people, well-versed in suffering and tribulations, certain traits of character, the likes of which it is doubtful whether any other nation possesses.

Whilst the heroic deeds of the Gentiles which attain fame are physical acts that they have performed, with the Jewish People, in the course of the many generations we have been in exile, a very special trait has been consolidated and strengthened – to contain the heroism within one's soul and to "express" it precisely by *not* allowing it to be expressed at all, in the sense of "*Who is [considered] strong? He who overpowers his inclination.*" [Pirkei Avot, Ch.4, mishna 1.]

This saying of the Sages only comes to provide an appropriate framework to an abstract concept, which had developed as a result of the history and the particular experiences of the Jewish People and it had left its mark in different ways.

The famous statement "*More than Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews*" [Ahad Ha'am] implies that religion and tradition, constituted in the course of the generations the hoops¹⁹ that held the nation together, and were the barrier against assimilation. However, as correct as this statement may be (and there is, of course, much truth in it) – the distinct quality of not being willing to conform to the status quo was also "*a helpmate for him*"²⁰ [Genesis 2:18].

The Jews never did accept the Diaspora and, from this unwillingness to comply, they drew forth their messianic belief and their longing to return to Zion. The countless prayers scattered throughout the prayer-book attest to this: "*May our eyes behold Your return to Zion*"; "*Return in mercy to Jerusalem Your city*"; "*May You shine a new light on Zion, and may we all [soon be worthy of its radiance]*"; "*Next year in Jerusalem,*" and many, many others. But even more so than these silent supplications, a testimony to the refusal to resign themselves [to exile], and the yearning to go back to the Land of Israel, is the fact (which is one of the cornerstones of the foundation of our [Zionist] ideology of establishing our renewed kingdom in our homeland) that **never [throughout history] did the Jews stop travelling to the Land of Israel – as small as the Aliyah may sometimes have been. It has not been interrupted since the Babylonian Exile, for two thousand [sic.] years**²¹!

Furthermore, to what extent the Jews refused to come to terms with reality and to accept the diaspora as an eternal decree, bears testimony to the fierce adherence to the unshakable conviction that the return to Zion would definitely come, even if unclear when. And even though, according to religious belief, this longed-for change is anchored in the mystical spheres, by which I mean that the nation shall return to its land only once the Messiah has arrived, this did not have the power, and nor did other huge factors, to divert them from the path of this perception. They did not resign themselves to the status quo, despite the fact that the new is beyond human understanding. Their patience is indefatigable and their time is limitless, even beyond the End of all Days. They are prepared to wait,

¹⁹ [TN: As in the hoops of a barrel, which hold it together.]

²⁰ [TN: Viz., this trait was also a major component, in addition to the aforementioned religion and tradition.]

²¹ [TN: The Babylonian Exile began in the late 7th century B.C., and ended several decades later, when the Jews were allowed to return.]

for they are convinced of their rightness. They believe with unswerving faith! It will come, it *must* come! “*And even though he may tarry*²²” – he will surely come – and they shall await him.

Which is to say, that our people has been endowed with this special quality of not accepting the status quo, from which also sprouted our nation’s effervescent liveliness, the burning passion for creative endeavours [and] the obstinate determination to live, even while experiencing tribulations and suffering.

During the Holocaust, these traits were expressed with even greater vigour. Despite all the unimaginable maliciousness, persecution, and oppression, the Jews retained their humanity, [maintained] the basic requisites of life [and] helped one another, [providing] the needy with counsel and aid. This sometimes entailed mortal danger, but this fact could not deter [them] or prevent the expression of these traits of greatness – pure humanism and a refusal to accept prevailing circumstances.

He Sacrificed Himself for Others

With what scales may we weigh the kind of heroism shown by our townsman, the young Izrael (“Sruł”) Rusk, who found himself in the Bliżyn camp? Conditions worsened from day to day, the calamities, the hounding, the backbreaking labour and the relentless hunger. One would have expected they would [be able to] break the prisoners’ spirits, but they did not surrender themselves to their bitter fate; instead, they fought it with all the capacities that their minds and bodies possessed, to elude its suffocating arms.

For a long time, Rusk had a pair of socks concealed on his person, which to trade for bread; but his luck ran out and, during a search, the “stolen goods” were found. He was at once taken to be interrogated, where he was severely tortured so that he should reveal the identity of the benefactors who had given him the socks. But, knowing what could be expected to happen to them, Rusk bit his lips and remained silent! The coaxing and promises with which they sought to entice him, and even the tortures, were of no avail to the Nazi murderers. With superhuman valour, he endured the hellish abuse, until he gave up his soul. But the names of his friends - he never revealed.

Aid and Welfare

What is more, this lack of acceptance of reality had many facets, in the sense that Jews did not despair under the crushing weight of the cruel conditions, and they displayed great liveliness in sustaining both the material and the spiritual as one, to their last breaths.

This effect came to expression, among other things, in the operations of welfare and aid which were organised even under circumstances of pressure and distress. We recall the large group of deportees from Płock who arrived one winter Friday night and were temporarily put up in the hall of the Bank [Rolniczo-] Rzemieślniczy [Agriculture and Crafts].

The urgent aid, which was organised with the speed of lightning and extended to those in need, surprised everyone - even though our townfolks’ sense of helpfulness had always been famous.

And, in a no lesser manner, were expressed our people’s exalted spiritual qualities to extend aid and deliverance to others in the desperate war against the contagious diseases which spread throughout the camp, due to the inhuman living conditions, as well as being purposely nurtured by the villainous foe.

²² [TN: Maimonides’ 12th Principle of Faith.]

This struggle was conducted in the ghetto streets by the old and young, men and women, to improve the sanitary conditions in order to check the spread of the epidemics. It entailed great risks, and demanded its daily sacrifice, every single day. But nevertheless, people acted to save lives with a dedication and heroism that did not fall beneath any other kind of self-sacrifice for an elevated cause.

All this was not limited to extending [physical] aid to others. No cultural activity or spiritual endeavour ceased to exist because of the dreary situation: religious studies on the one hand, and secular education on the other. On ulica Fabryczna, volunteer [female] teachers continued teaching primary school classes, and Reb Szyja Knobler, Lajbke Szajnweksler's son-in-law, gave regular Talmud lessons; *melamdim* taught and elucidated, writers wrote and poets composed poems which bore the mark of the times.

All these fed from the fierce desire to disrupt and annul the enemy's machinations, which foreboded annihilation and perdition. The deeds, responses and steps taken by these people who found themselves in purgatory were intended to rouse everyone around them not to yield to the violent foe; not to accept the cruel destiny; to rebel against and oppose the existing condition.

Each audacious act on their part in the given circumstances, each display of initiative and activity in the dejecting conditions, each phenomenon of coping with the depressing despondency – [together] constituted one [single] volume of supreme spiritual strength, which lay the groundwork and consolidated the creation and emergence of the resistance and rebellion movements against the Nazi beast.



