

# “My People Were No More”

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For 1000 years Jews had lived in Poland. For 1000 years they had been part of, yet separate from, Polish society. They had produced a wealth of Jewish learning and literature, great seats of learning and *yeshivos*. Talmudists, codifiers, a Golden Age. Lands of mysticism, *misnagdim* and *chassidim*. Outstanding rabbis and personalities. At the outbreak of WWII nearly 50% of lawyers and doctors in Poland were Jews. Polish Jewry spanned all types and shades of opinion, belonging to movements as disparate as the Bund, Zionists, Polonisers, Aguda and others.

The story is told of a boy who goes into a travel agent before the War and asked to see a globe to discover where he could escape. He turns the globe this way and that and then looks the agent in the eye and asks, “Is there anywhere else?”

If the German policy was to get the Jews out, when they came to Poland they met people who had the same idea.

The Polish Government called for mass emigration of all Jews...but where to?

*“there is not space for two nations on the Vistula”*

Prime Minister Koc stated emigration was,

*“Indispensable for the solution of the Jewish Question in Poland”*

1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 was a Friday night; the *shuls* were filled to capacity as Germany carried out their *blitzkrieg* on Poland. By Rosh Hashanah, some two weeks later, German intentions were plain: dehumanisation, executions and desecrations. Rosh Hashanah and other *yomim Tovim* were, as would become clear in the course of time, the occasions for horrific ‘actions’ against the Jews:

Lodz, September 13<sup>th</sup> 1939: Jewish population: 233,000 (one third of the population):

*“Erev Rosh Hashanah...according to an order issued today, stores are to remain open tomorrow. What a blow to the Jews on Rosh Hashanah...however, the synagogues are to be closed. There is no possibility of communal prayer for mercy...”*

In Lodz there were three famous synagogues and none were to survive: the Old Town Synagogue, the Temple and the Vilker Shul. This latter *shul* contained a magnificent library and *beis medresh*. It was the largest place for Torah learning in the city. There was a time when study in the *beis medresh* proceeded uninterrupted for 24 hours a day. In a mystical sense, as long as people learnt Torah, the world would keep spinning. The last appearance of this *shul* was in a German propaganda film. The famous *chazan* Winograd in the forced ‘service’ takes the Torah out the Aron and states in Hebrew *“Hayom yom shlishi”*. So that anyone who might one day see this film would know that the Jews were forced to hold this *davening*, for no one ever *leined* on a Tuesday. This was a small, but significant form of spiritual resistance. In the second half of 1940, the Vilker shul was destroyed along with its *sefarim* and *sifrei Torah*

Warsaw: Jewish population: 394,000 (one third of the population) also felt the enormity of the tragedy. Erev Rosh Hashanah 5701 (1940):

*“Near the main synagogue some side room is chosen with windows facing the courtyard, and their hearts are poured out to the God of Israel in whispered supplications. This time it is without cantors and without choirs, there are only whispered prayers, but the prayer comes from the heart; even tears may be wept secretly, and the gates of tears cannot be locked...”*

Warsaw became the iconic representation of Jewish resistance, physical and spiritual.

Emanuel Ringleblum started the project to record all information on the fate of the Jews:

*“I began to collect material on current events in October 1939.”*

The project was known as ‘Oneg Shabbat’ and contained over 20,000 pages. Then the material was buried in milk churns. The majority of the ‘Oneg Shabbat Archives’ survived the war. Ringleblum did not. During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, when captured, he chose not to escape:

*“I prefer to go the way of kiddush Hashem”*

Heroism and resistance takes many forms. The Rabbinic statement:

*“When everyone acts inhuman, what should a man do...He should act more human.”*

So much of Polish –Jewish history is drenched in the theology of dying *al kiddush Hashem*.

In the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the expression *al kiddush Hashem* was redefined.

Death was an inevitability, but not an option.

Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum taught that there must now be a new emphasis: *Kiddush ha-Hayyim* (“Sanctification of Life”). In ancient and medieval times when the enemy wanted to shatter the Jews’ religious commitment, the appropriate mode of resistance was to surrender one’s life. But what the Nazis wanted to destroy was the Jews’ body, their physical existence. Therefore, he taught, the highest form of resistance was to hold on to life.

Rabbi Menachem Ziemba declared. “sanctification of the Divine Name” must manifest itself in resistance to the enemy.

*“In the present...we are faced by an arch foe, whose unparalleled ruthlessness and total annihilation purposes know no bounds. Halachah demands that we fight and resist to the very end with unequalled determination and valour for the sake of Sanctification of the Divine Name.”*

**Polish Jewry is no more. Chachmei Lublin is silent.  
Graveyards make the most noise.**

**But the legacy of what there once was must live on in us.**