

Jewish Reactions to their Mistreatment during the Holocaust

It is a massive understatement to say that Jews were mistreated during the Holocaust. It was one of the largest massacres the world has ever seen and the atrocities committed to the Jewish people were unspeakable and unforgivable. However, the Nazis did not immediately begin the destruction of the Jewish race, Jewish oppression occurred in stages (Tec, 1986, p. 6). It began with defining who was a Jew (if three of your grandparents were Jewish, you were considered Jewish), next they required identification of all those who had been categorized as Jewish. The next step was the confiscation of Jewish property, followed by prohibiting Jews to be employed. Then the Jews were removed from their homes and isolated in ghettos. From there, they were taken to concentration camps to work or, more likely, get executed (Tec, 1986, p. 6). Though the sequence of Jewish rights violations was regulated, the reactions that the Jewish people had to their oppression varied in very distinct ways. Through observation of historical fiction films and articles written about the time period, several categories of Jewish reactions can be discerned including: attempting to escape or hide, trying to help others instead of themselves which includes sacrificing their own lives for others, attempting to collaborate with their oppressors, trying to experience life to the fullest, attempting to preserve their honor and morality, and to try to resist and fight back.

One way that Jews reacted to the Holocaust was to attempt to escape or hide. According to Raul Hilberg, a few thousand Jews were able to successfully hide in Slovakia during this time (1985, p. 742). In *Divided We Fall*, David Weiner is able to escape from Auschwitz and return to his home town in Czechoslovakia. He was one of the lucky ones because in the concentration camp, he happened to work sorting the clothing and packages of the Jews who had been killed.

He eventually was able to steal enough valuables to bribe a guard into letting him escape. Thus, David Weiner successfully escaped from Auschwitz and then he proceeded to hide in Josef Cišek's home.

Some people attempted to hide through the connections that they had with high officials in the army. In *Cold Days*, Edit attempted to use her affair with Buky (a high ranking official) and her friendship his wife to avoid being rounded up. Though Edit did not know exactly what would happen if she was taken to the Danube, she had seen her neighbor get taken and never return. Therefore she tried to have Buky and his wife save her. Unfortunately in this case, it did not work and Edit, Buky's wife and Buky's maid were all shot and thrown into the frozen river. In *Transport From Paradise*, certain high profile members of the Jewish community that were contained in Terezin asked to have their transport papers reviewed by General Knecht. By doing so, they were showing that they were only interested in saving themselves and that they did not care about the other Jews that were in their same boat. They mistakenly thought their previous statuses would allow them to escape the fate that was expected for the rest of the Jews.

A different approach that some Jews had to their situation was the dedication to helping others and acting selflessly. Jewish Councils attempted through the entire war to "make desperate attempts to alleviate the suffering and to stop the mass dying in the ghettos" (Hilberg, 1985, p. 219). In *The Shop on Main St.*, there were many examples of selfless behavior. The citizens formed a Jewish Charitable Association which aimed to help the Jews whose businesses were confiscated by the Germans and given to "Aryanisators." Blau, who was the treasurer of the Jewish Charitable Association, approached Tono and offered to give him a salary if he would allow Mrs. Lautmann to continue running her business. This was a kind, helping act. Blau and the Jewish Charitable Association as a whole were looking out for the entire Jewish community.

In *Transport From Paradise* there were many examples of helping behaviors from one Jew to another. Stephen, who is scheduled to go off on the next transport, spends his last night consoling his wife instead of worrying about himself. Ann, Stephen's wife who is not scheduled to leave on the transport, is obviously distraught and agitated about her husband's deportation. Stephen attempts to calm Ann by fantasizing about their future together, their house and their bedroom and the fact that they will have children someday. This dream does not seem to be one that would actually be able to happen; Stephen knew that he most likely would not return after being placed on the transport. This was purely a selfless act to try to make his wife feel better. Another person in *Transport From Paradise* who helped others was Liza. Her friend Kuzle, who was young and childish, was writing a letter to his parents who were not located in Terezin with him. Liza helps Kuzle by acting like a motherly figure in his life. She helps him write a letter to his parents and tousles his hair in a loving familial way. These acts most likely made Kuzle feel like he was not alone in this horrific place that was not fit for someone so young.

A completely different reaction of Jews to their maltreatment was to attempt to collaborate with the very people that were enacting or enforcing the oppressive rules upon them. There are various actions that can be considered collaboration, from committing acts that would solely save themselves without regard for others or displaying acquiescence to the rules and not doing anything about them. In *Transport From Paradise*, the leaders of Terezin were creating a film to show as false propaganda about how wonderful the Jews that lived there were being treated. In case Germany lost the war, the leaders could save themselves from being prosecuted for war crimes by showing this film. The director of the film and many of the extras were Jewish. Though some of the extras were forced to participate in the movie, others did so because they thought that if they were needed in the movie, they would not be sent out on the next

transport that was leaving. Though the citizens of Terezin did not know exactly where the transports went, they knew that it was worse to leave than to stay (in reality they were going to Auschwitz, one of the largest and worst concentration camps which was designed to immediately kill thousands of Jews upon arrival). The Jewish filmmaker from the movie, Kurt Izrael Geron, was blatantly collaborating with the Germans while making this film. He knew that this film was one large lie and was going to show the world that Jews were being treated wonderfully when they were actually being abused and starving. In actuality, the filmmakers were not Jewish. This was just a feature added to *Transport From Paradise*. However, Beron, who willingly participated in the film, was a Jewish inmate and had been a professional entertainer before his imprisonment.

Marmelstaub collaborates with the Germans when he willingly signs the transport list, giving his approval to send many of his peers in the city to a fate that he knew was bleak. Marmelstaub was appointed fill-in town council head after Lowenbach refused to sign the transport list. His signature gave the Germans a way to possibly cover up their crimes if Germany lost the war. As a member of the Jewish Council of Elders, Marmelstaub had actually been collaborating for quite some time and the rewards of his cooperation are displayed in his high-quality clothing and overweight appearance. In real life, Jewish councils were formed to attempt to protect the Jews as much as possible. Though the aforementioned Jewish Councils attempted to alleviate the Jews from the ghettos, they still followed every single demand from the Germans, including facilitating the transports (Hilberg, 1985, p. 219). Also, Jewish leaders in the ghettos became rulers that were very power-hungry and selfish (Hilberg, 1985, p. 220).

Beyond helping others, some Jewish people went so far as to sacrifice their lives to save others. In *Transport From Paradise*, after witnessing the heartbreaking conversation between

Ann and Stephen, Vagus offers to step up and take Stephen's place on the transport. This way, Ann and Stephen are able to remain together. However, while doing this, Vagus knew that he was basically writing his own death sentence. Also while in Terezin, Mrs. Feiner who worked as a typist for the Jewish underground organization in Block H IV, was discovered and was going to be tortured for information. In order to be able to keep those secrets with her forever, she begs Binde to shoot her. When he does, she dies and was able to remain loyal to the Jewish resistance. Finally, Lowenbach sacrifices his life in symbolic solidarity with the Jewish resistance when he refuses to sign the transport list that is sending thousands of Jews from Terezin to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Though Mrs. Feiner and Lowenbach were not thinking of one specific person that they were attempting to save through their own deaths, they were keeping secrets that could put other Jews in danger and they were making a statement that showed their commitment to their Jewish peers.

A very common way that Jews dealt with the Holocaust was to try to experience life to the fullest before the worst could happen to them. One way to experience life was to continue to form romantic relationships. In *Transport From Paradise*, Mr. Spiegel and Mrs. Feiner formed a relationship while in Terezin, most likely after both of their spouses had already been sent on transports or had died of illness in Terezin. Mr. Spiegel brings Mrs. Feiner potatoes and sugar cubes as a sign that he loves her. This was a way to escape the horrors that were inflicted upon them by the Nazis. Liza also has a boyfriend that she made while in Terezin. Liza however also allowed a special situation for her guy friends on their last night before the transport. The boys knew that they were probably going to their death and they never would be able to experience sex in their lives. Liza allows the boys to have sex with her in order to give them that one experience before their death.

Stephen and Ann, husband and wife, continue to love each other and engage in fantasies with one another. They say things such as “hold me tight” and kiss each other to show their love. Dany in *Transport From Paradise* plays his guitar to experience joy in his life. In *The Shop on Main Street* Katz and many other Jews continue to practice the jobs they love even though they were being oppressed. Katz continued to be the town barber because he loved to cut hair. This was the way for him to continue to experience life to the fullest. In the same movie, Mrs. Elias spends much of the film searching for her son, Danko. She is attempting to round up her family so that she can spend valuable time with them and because she does not want her family to be separated. She did not know that the deaths of her entire family were likely to follow if they went on the transport.

Another way that Jews dealt with their impending death was to attempt to preserve their honor and morality. In *The Shop on Main Street*, the participants in the Jewish Charitable Association, especially Blau who is shown in the movie, are attempting to preserve what honor they have left by helping other Jews of the society. Lowenbach’s refusal to sign the transport papers was a way for him to show his morals and to die with honor instead of in vain. Though he knew that he wasn’t going to save anyone by not signing, he felt the need to take some sort of a stand for his own ethics. Adolf Gottlieb from *Cold Days* preserves his honor by continuing to attempt to get justice for the cruel acts committed by the army toward him for being a Jew. Liza attempted to preserve her dignity when she refused Marmelstaub’s offer to have sex, even though that may have saved her from the transport. Marmelstaub had just agreed to sign the transport papers and her refusal could have been a symbol of her refusal to condone his collaboration.

The final way that has been observed through historical films was that the Jewish people attempted to resist and fight back. In *Transport From Paradise* there was a resistance movement that occurred in Terezin in Block H IV. They wrote anti-fascist statements around the ghetto and tried to resist in as many ways that they could. Mrs. Feiner participated in the resistance as a typist and Lowenbach was suspected to be a part of the resistance because of his refusal to sign the transport papers. Though in the movie there was a sizable resistance, in real life the actual impact of the resistance in Terezin was pretty minimal overall because of how quickly Jews were dying or being deported to Auschwitz. Its presence solely attributed to “spiritual resistance and individual identity” (Avishar, Ilan,, 1988, p. 69).

Jewish people had many different ways of dealing with the atrocities committed against them. Most people had more than one reaction in order to help themselves cope. Attempting to escape, collaborating with the oppressors, helping others, sacrificing their own life, trying to experience life’s pleasures, preserving their own honor and morality and resisting or fighting were the main ways that people dealt with their situation. It is interesting to note the differences between the historical readings and the films depicting the time period. The readings focused on the amount of Jews that were able to hide and the different attempts of the Councils to help stop suffering. The films depicted the behaviors of Jews in these dire situations that were still completely human. Their desires to help one another, build relationships and preserve morality were a common feature in the films. Perhaps there is a disconnect between the written and visual descriptions of the time. In order to attain a complete grasp on Jewish reactions to the Holocaust, careful study of both film and articles is necessary.

Bibliography

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