



REVOLT IN THE DEATH WORKS

The doomed Jews of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Sobibor did not all die like sheep. Many perished like lions in little-known uprisings against the Nazis—and some even blew up the grisly ovens and gas chambers

BY ARLENE & HOWARD EISENBERG

LET ME LIVE, my lords! Let me live!" This plea was uttered in a Nazi concentration camp by a man who feared he was about to die. He was not a prisoner but a guard—a brutal S.S. trooper, a man who had witnessed the death agony of tens of thousands of men, women, and children without flinching, a man to whom the spilling of blood was less upsetting than the spattering of ersatz coffee on his uniform. But now, in a sudden adrenal flash of insight, this practiced, callous executioner understood how precious one life could be—when that life was his.

The World War II death factories run by Nazi Germany are now mere charnel memories. Four million human beings were murdered at Auschwitz, 700,000 at Treblinka, and 250,000 more at Sobibor—all in Poland. Yet only during the trials of the S.S. men who ruled these camps do the memories truly surge back to life.

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One of the most persistent myths is that the inmates of these slaughterhouses—most of them Jews—went to their deaths like resigned, even obedient sheep. Many of them did. Yet it is a disservice to the courage of many half-starved, brutally beaten men and women who resisted fiercely, martyrs who resolved to die as lions rather than as sheep. In 1943 and 1944, in little-known, almost forgotten acts of gallantry, these condemned people rebelled against the Germans, destroyed half the crematory ovens at Auschwitz, set fire to Treblinka, and forced the razing and shutdown of Sobibor.

In the death camps, where survival from Monday to Tuesday was an achievement, the successful planning of an uprising was a near-miracle. Prisoner-to-prisoner contact was difficult and punishable by summary shooting or, if the guard was good-natured, mere flogging to insensibility. And always there was the risk of betrayal by informers.

Rebellion was sometimes a matter of individual desperation, of a last-minute decision to sell one's life dearly. One day a Treblinka prisoner broke from the ranks, shouting, "I can't stand any more!" and managed to mortally wound a particularly vicious S.S. sergeant. A naked young woman suddenly broke from a group marching the last hundred meters to the crematorium and made a hopeless dash for the fence. When a Ukrainian guard pursued her, laughing at the notion that a woman already stripped of her clothing could possibly escape, she wrenched his rifle from him and wounded two of her captors.

Whole trainloads of new arrivals sometimes fought unequal pitched battles with the S.S. Sometimes the glare of the furnaces, the palls of greasy black smoke that hung over the camps, or the sudden recognition that this was not the promised place to work but only a place to die, kindled rebellions. The Jews matched pocketknives against bayonets, sticks against rifles, stones against machine guns. In the end their bodies were strewn in the courtyard. But they died fighting.

There were other bizarre acts of hopeless valor. At Konin a plan to poison the German garrison, burn the camp, and blow up the railroad siding was reluctantly conceived by a gentle rabbi.

Like a complex plan for a massive simultaneous uprising in every subdivision of Auschwitz-Birkenau's 40-square kilometers by some 100,000 Christian and Jewish prisoners, the rabbi's revolt failed. And the Auschwitz rebellion was undone when a sympathetic construction worker was searched and the plan discovered.

But at Punor prisoners attempting a tunnel escape had more success. They dug by hand, hiding what they later computed to be some 400 wagonloads of dirt be-



Nazi guards lead survivors of Warsaw ghetto uprising off to the death pens. Many Jews sensed where they were going and fought the Germans with fists and sticks.

tween ingenious double walls in their underground prison bunker. To make sure they were digging in the right direction, they used a compass stolen from the camp commander's quarters. They lighted the first dozen meters with Sabbath candles discovered among belongings of dead women who had brought them from the ghettos. Using a saw made from a kitchen knife to cut the leg irons used to hobble them, they completed their flight to freedom. Thirteen survived machine-gun fire to fight in nearby forests as partisans.

One of the boldest uprisings was planned and directed by Alexander Pechorsky, a Russian Jew who had been taken prisoner by the Germans on the Eastern Front. On September 23, 1943, Pechorsky arrived at Sobibor. He quickly saw that the place was not a detention camp but a death factory, so he began organizing a general uprising and escape program. He ruled out a proposal to tunnel under the fence. Dig too low and they'd hit water; dig too high and they'd be blown up by land mines.

Instead Pechorsky and his conspirators chose a more direct method. First they decided to put their faith in two *kapos*, or trusties. As always, this decision was made after careful soul-searching. The *kapos* could be vital in luring Nazi officers—if they didn't warn them instead. When machine-gun fire unexpectedly broke out two days before the uprising was scheduled to take place, the prisoners were certain they had been betrayed. Later they learned the firing had been directed at a newly arrived batch of prisoners who had elected to fight to the death at the railroad.

On October 13, 1943, carefully staggered appointments for uniform fittings were kept for S.S. officers in the camp tailor shop and the bootmaker's shop. The prisoners rose respectfully as each officer entered the tailor shop. Two assistants meekly held the new jacket for the German to try on. As the officer slipped his arms into the sleeves, he was pinioned—and an ax that had been secretly fashioned in the camp smithy paid a debt owed to the slaughtered.

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In the bootmaker's shop the Nazis died with their boots half on and half off. In a barracks under construction, Nazi officers were called in "to give advice." Two officers who walked unexpectedly into the blacksmith's shop were quickly and quietly disarmed and felled. Their rifles, concealed in long, hollow pipes, were carried to the uprising headquarters, where women prisoners who cleaned Nazi officers' quarters were even then depositing bullets gathered in the dead men's rooms.

ALL THIS took one hour. At 5 P.M., when the whistle blew for forming ranks, the prisoners marched toward the gates instead of the barracks. The plan called for them to persuade the Ukrainian guards in the towers to flee with them to join the partisans, since most of the Nazi officers were dead. For added insurance, the camp arsenal was stormed and weapons distributed.

But it had not been possible to let all the prisoners in on the plans, for fear of the one deadly leak to the S.S. And now suddenly there was a stampede for the barbed-wire fence. In the hubbub, shooting began from all sides. Machine guns opened up from the towers. The prisoners responded with tommygun and rifle fire. Logs and rocks were to have cleared a way through the mine fields, but the exhilarated inmates raced ahead, blowing themselves up.

Pechorsky led one group to the fence behind the officers' quarters, clipped a path through it, and, guessing correctly that there would be no mines there, took them into the forest in relative safety. At least a score of S.S. men and Ukrainian guards were killed. But, more important, at least 50 prisoners managed to escape. Since they were certain to tell the world about the gas chambers and furnaces of Sobibor, an order was dispatched from Berlin. The camp was closed down, the buildings were razed, and a forest of young pines was planted on the site.

The goals of the Auschwitz uprising in the autumn of 1944 were even more ambitious than had been those of Sobibor. The men of the *Sonderkommando*—those Jewish prisoners whose grisly task was to throw their own dead into the furnaces—knew they would be allowed to live six months at best. After that they who had seen too much would become furnace fodder. They determined not only to attempt a mass escape but to blow up the crematories as they left.

Ammunition and explosives were needed. Jacob Freimark, a strapping Auschwitz escapee, recalls how he and others found one source for Molotov cocktails in the high-octane gasoline salvaged from a Russian airplane shot down nearby. Freimark, one of the team of 14 men harnessed as human horses to haul a wagon filled with excrement from camp latrines,

safely hid the bottles of gasoline deep in the slop buckets.

Meanwhile, supplies were being gathered from another quarter. One thousand women worked as slave laborers in the huge explosives factory. For weeks fruitless efforts were made to establish contact with someone in the powder arsenal. Finally 23-year-old Rosa Robota was approached. To the surprise of resistance leaders, they found that she had already organized an underground group among the women. Now, day after day, Rosa and her girls smuggled out the necessary ingredients for demolition charges.

Freimark vividly remembers the moment, shortly after noon, when the first shots echoed through the camp and he saw an S.S. trooper topple from his watchtower. He will never forget the look on the face of another S.S. man who was shot. "He had the most astonished look in his eyes I have even seen," recalls Freimark. "When the bullet struck and he saw his own blood flow, he just couldn't understand. He couldn't believe that Jews Hitler had taught him were spineless cowards were actually shooting S.S. supermen."

Two of the four crematoria were blown up, and 300 prisoners escaped. Before one squad of inmates went through the gate, they paused—though every moment's delay reduced their chances of getting away—to exact retribution on an S.S. noncom even more bestial than his comrades. This man had delighted in tearing infants from their mothers' arms and hurling them screaming into the furnace. The prisoners found him and, in a piece of harsh but poetic justice, fed him to the flames.

Rosa Robota subsequently proved herself to be the bravest of the brave. When the revolt was finally quelled by 2000 elite reinforcements, a pitiless Nazi investigation determined that powder from the factory had gone into the explosives. Three girls were arrested and tortured. At length they implicated Rosa. She knew the names of the revolt's male leaders, but days of torture could not wrench the information from her. Underground member Noah Zabudovitz managed to visit her in Block 11 before she was hanged. "On the cold concrete floor," he recalled, "there lay something that resembled a bundle of clothing. When it made a movement in my direction, I barely recognized her. Only Rosa's eyes had not changed. They looked at me, tortured. I could not control myself and burst into tears. She spoke. She said she had not betrayed us."

At Treblinka "Freedom or Death!" was the underground slogan—and more often it was death. About 1200 Jews could be crowded into the gas chamber, which was decorated with a big Star of David above the entrance and baskets of flowers on either side.

But the most ironic entrants were the German woman and her two young sons who arrived on a train transport. They had been sent to Treblinka by mistake and expected to be sent home as soon as they showed their Aryan papers. But even her ultimate proof—that her boys were uncircumcised—was ignored. The three were dangerous, the camp commandant ruled; they had seen too much. The mother and her children were gassed to death. “Her children wept as did the Jewish children, for all are equal in death,” recalls an eyewitness, Jacob Viernik.

Viernik’s civilian construction experience made him so valuable to the Nazis that, passing with comparative freedom between Camp #1 and Camp #2, he was able to coordinate his camp’s revolt with that of the other camp. On August 2, 1943, a pistol shot was to be the signal. It came an hour too soon—probably because a guard had summarily executed a prisoner. But the men were ready.

One five-man unit, using a key made from a soap impression, quickly opened the arms supply room and passed out grenades and rifles. At watchtowers, prisoners lured down greedy Ukrainian guards with hoarded gold coins, then jumped them and wrestled their weapons from them. Other units doused barracks and death buildings with gasoline, then set fire to them. Others cut telephone lines, opened gates, fought the S.S. hand to hand.

Fires raged everywhere. Many of the Nazis panicked before men such as Rudolf Masaryk, a young relative of the founder of the Czechoslovak Republic. Rudolf Masaryk, a Christian, had elected to stay with his Jewish wife when she was sent to “a health resort in Poland.” The resort was Treblinka. Now, seizing a machine gun, he mowed down the guards, screaming, “This is for my wife! This is for my unborn son!”

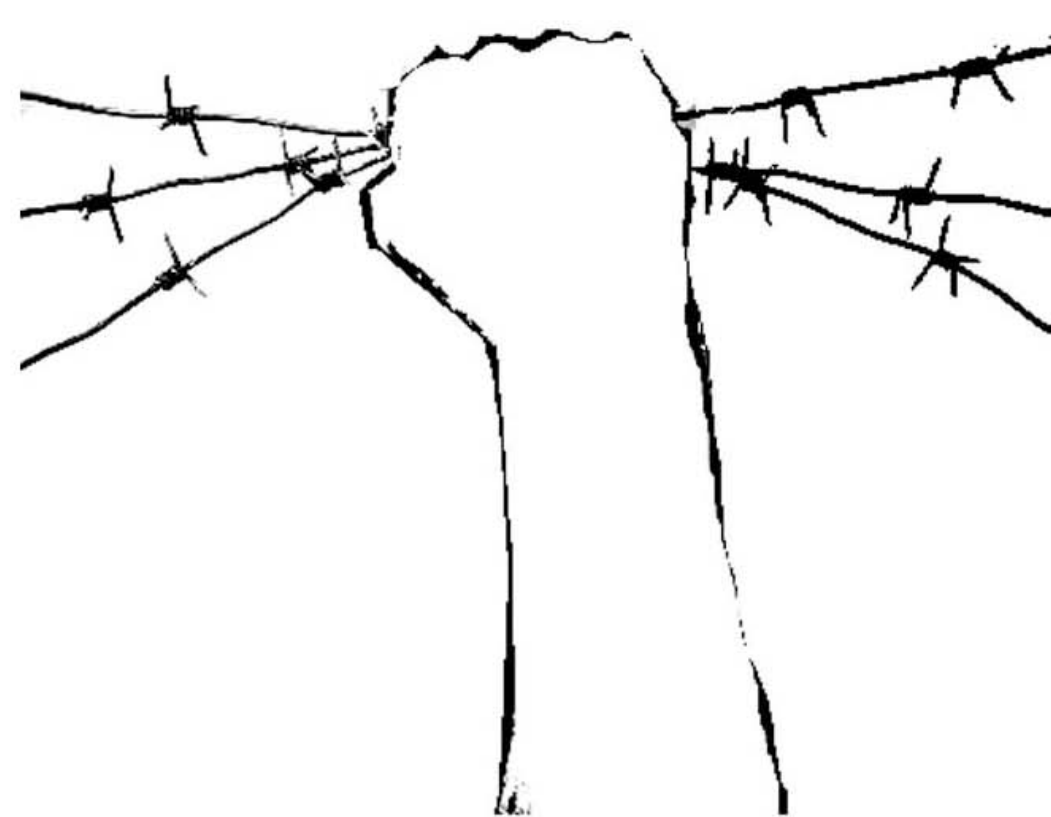
At first the prisoners seemed to be winning. Hundreds burst through the gates toward the distant forests. But a passing German troop train stopped at the burning camp and reinforcements were rushed in to crush the revolt. Jacob Viernik was one of the few who escaped. A personal vow “to tell the world about Treblinka”—the only thing that gave him the will to live—was fulfilled. Viernik’s story, circulated all over Europe, documented for the first time the horror that until then had been only a barely believable rumor. The Nazis quickly razed what remained of Treblinka.

As West Germany enters the final five years of its recently extended statute of limitations on Nazi war crimes, its enlarged legal staff continues to call for punishments such as the life sentence at hard labor imposed on Treblinka commandant Kurt Franz.

IT IS PUNISHMENT that might not

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have been possible if it had not been for those determined prisoners who escaped to testify at war crimes trials of the horrors they had witnessed and experienced. It is punishment prophesied at Treblinka itself on the very furnace grate on which thousands of corpses were burned. Bodies were being routinely placed in the inferno during what was just another day of mind-numbing horror when suddenly an uplifted arm was observed. Its index finger pointed toward the sky. And, hour after hour, long after most of the other bodies had disappeared into ash, that arm still pointed, still accused, still called down God's judgment upon its murderers. ■ ■



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