

4.

Silent Starry Night

The starry night is silent
and the ice burns like fire.
Do you remember how I taught you
to use a pistol?

Song of the Warsaw ghetto

From the anti-fascist struggle and the Resistance movements in various European countries, a singular and paradoxical figure emerges: that of the Jewish fighter, whether engaged in the national movements struggling against occupation or waging his own war, the men and women of the *Main-d'oeuvre immigrée* with their 'unpronounceable' names and the insurgents of the Warsaw ghetto.

A singular figure: the image of the Jew in the face of Nazism that history has retained is not that of the Resistance fighter but that of the victim, the long convoys heading for Auschwitz or Treblinka, the gas chambers and crematoria; while the image of the Resistance is that of patriotic national movements – sometimes to the point of chauvinism: 'To every man his *boche!*'

What, then, is the place among all these stereotypes of those whom the Vichy propagandists called *métèques* ('half-breeds'), the stateless, the cosmopolitan, and whom the Nazi warlords in Poland saw as sheep letting

themselves be calmly led to the slaughter? Are these Resistance fighters simply the exception that confirms the rule?

In that case, though, how is it possible that one need only scratch lightly the veneer of ‘patriotic resistance’ in Paris, from summer 1941 on, and examine more closely its armed actions, to find the indelible mark of the Jewish immigrant worker, the militant of the communist MOI who believed it ‘better to fall as a fighter than die as a deportee’? How is it that one need only examine carefully what the ‘great patriotic war’ declared by Stalin meant behind the German lines, in Byelorussia and the Baltic lands, the partisan struggles in these regions, to find again the trace of the Jewish fighter in flight from the ghetto, the ‘Avengers of Vilnius’ and other *maquisards* of the Minsk region? How is it that this figure of the Jewish fighter emerges even in the extermination camps: the revolt of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* and the rebellions in the camps of Sobibor and Treblinka?¹

Too often, these acts of resistance are frozen in symbols and epic myths – like that of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. But in this case the legend, with its emotional and spectacular aspects and heroic songs, distorts and conceals the reality. The cult of great heroes, the petrification of the action of the martyrs in rituals of memory, only distance us from reality and lead us onto a terrain of poetic illusion, a cinemascope Resistance, vividly coloured but imaginary.

Beyond the odyssey of people like Léopold Trepper, and the sacrifice of Mordechai Aniélevitch,² was there really a Jewish Resistance? How was the action of the Yiddishland revolutionaries continued – or interrupted – by the war? Did the figure of the Jewish combatant acquire a sufficient profile to stand against that of the victim and martyr who accepts his lot as the blow of fate?

This Resistance did exist, and was quite different from the image given by the rose-tinted stereotypes. This is what we learned from our meetings with militants who were engaged on different fronts, from the Bulgarian labour camps to support networks for children in Lyon. Its texture was not that of the heroic gesture immortalized in a snapshot; its constant themes were hunger and fear, missed encounters, tiresome tasks, boredom and greyness, pain and anguish. The individuals whom we interviewed did not conduct Red Orchestras or lead Combat Organizations; they committed

themselves to the Resistance without hesitation, in a movement that was quite natural, 'because it had to be done', and they acted anonymously, rarely with any glamour, and with their existence constantly in peril. It is their commitments that made up the everyday Jewish Resistance in its infinite diversity. Their stories recall this Resistance of the shadows.

What was specifically Jewish about this Resistance? Lucien Steinberg reveals this in the book he wrote on the struggle of Jews against Hitler throughout Europe. Recalling that Hitler's war against the Jews was in a certain sense a 'war within the war', he writes,

Whereas for the non-Jewish individual participation in the Resistance increased the risks of death, for the Jewish individual this very participation gave him an additional chance to survive, more or less great according to circumstance and place ... To sum up, among all the human groups in Hitler's Europe, the Jews were the only ones who were absolutely obliged to disobey his law if they wanted to physically survive.³

This remark of a general character, however carefully weighed, does not take account of the conditions and forms of Jewish participation in the Resistance. Fundamentally, the conditions of struggle were different for Jews in the Western countries and in those of the East. The structure of the Jewish population was different, and the conditions in which the 'final solution' was applied were also different – as witness the absence of ghettos in the West. In Eastern Europe, Jews would find themselves tragically isolated, alone in confronting their fate, whether they met this with resignation or armed resistance – a situation that Manès Sperber laconically sums up as follows: 'The ghetto explosions shook up the atmosphere. The Poles slept.'⁴ In Western Europe, on the other hand, Jewish resistance was integrated into the context of national movements: the fighters of the MOI were attached to the France-Tireurs et Partisans Français (FTP-F), their leader Louis Gronowski reporting to Jacques Duclos. Yet this combat took different forms according to the particular situation. It was not accidental that a detachment made up exclusively of Jewish fighters was formed within the FTP-F-MOI framework in early 1942. Conversely, it was not as a Jew, but as a highly competent military strategist, that Joseph Epstein (Colonel Gilles), a Yiddishland revolutionary, communist, veteran of Spain and escapee from prisoner-of-war camp, became head of the FTP-F in Paris in 1943. Similarly in Bulgaria, there were many Jews among the partisans, and they considered themselves first and foremost Bulgarian resisters; there was very little anti-Semitism in Bulgaria before the Second World War.

It could be said that under the German occupation, refusing to wear the yellow star, obtaining false papers and working under a false name was in these circumstances, for a Jew, already an act of resistance, a battle and a challenge to the adversary. One Spanish veteran told us that after escaping from the camp at Le Vernet at the start of the war, he went to Paris ‘to melt into the crowd’. We asked him what he had done then – had he joined the Resistance?

Not at all, I led a normal life. I worked throughout the war; I was a winder in a company making electric motors. I passed as a Catalan, I was lucky not to ‘look Jewish’, as people used to say, or have a typical accent. I went everywhere without papers, I had decided once and for all that this was less dangerous than to show a Polish passport giving my first name as Isaac. I always managed to get by. In the factory, however, there was a bloke who suspected that I wasn’t in a regular situation; he was a nasty piece of work, a Croix-de-feu member. One day he called me a ‘dirty kike’; it wasn’t so much the insult that bothered me, but the danger of word spreading around that I was Jewish. Then one of my mates, an Alsatian who knew that I’d come back from the Spanish war, went up to the Croix-de-feu type and said: ‘Drop it, or I’ll punch your face in!’ So things went quiet. When the Service du Travail Obligatoire [STO] was started, I managed to convince the boss that I couldn’t go off to Germany, without going into details.

It goes without saying that the chutzpah and sangfroid that enabled this Jewish man to ‘get by’ for four years in a Paris occupied by the Germans and patrolled by the French police under their orders was not accidental. The man who waged this ‘private’ resistance, without a fuss, was a militant who had been prepared politically and psychologically for this dangerous existence by his years of struggle in Poland, France and Spain; but how much less desperate this was than the lot of those thousands of people who unresistingly climbed into the buses taking them to the Vel’ d’Hiv on 16–17 July 1942.⁵

Basically, the Nazi racial lunacy condemned all European Jews to the same death sentence, no matter what their origin and their social category. This was particularly apparent after the sadly famous conference at Wannsee on 20 June 1942. Yet not all European Jews were prepared in the same way, by their social background, mental attitude and political convictions, to confront this situation. Thus, while there certainly was in France a Jewish Resistance, or a Jewish dimension of the Resistance with certain specific characteristics, it would be wrong to say that this was the action of French Jews. In these exceptional circumstances, despite themselves, there were Jews on both sides of the barricades, as there had been before the war and would again be after. On the eve of the Second

World War there was no such thing as a Jewish community in France, but, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet puts it, ‘a *plural* ensemble whose limits and boundaries were strictly speaking indefinable’. Two antagonistic poles, however, openly and bitterly so, were constituted on the one hand by those assimilated dignitaries of whom some even sympathized with the far right, and on the other hand by the lower strata of recent immigrants from Yiddishland who were strongly influenced by radical currents – communist, Bundist, left Poale Zion. Was it by accident that in 1943 one group provided the personnel of the UGIF, a creation of the Gestapo for which it drew up lists of Jewish children, while the other blended into the ranks of armed Resistance in Paris, Lyon, Grenoble, Toulouse and Marseille?

Nor is it accidental that the Vichy authorities made a distinction that was not simply ‘tactical’ between Jews who were French by origin and foreign Jewish refugees. If at the start of the war they went beyond the Nazi demands as regards the census, internment and subsequent deportation of the latter group, it required a far stronger pressure of Himmler’s men and the collaboration ‘ultras’ for similar measures to be applied to the former. Enemy number one for Vichy was the immigrant, the ‘half-breed’, the cosmopolitan whose attachment to the international communist conspiracy was scarcely in doubt.

There was a basic kernel of truth in this madness. It would be hard to imagine the ‘Israelite’ president of a board of directors, the senior army officer, the business lawyer – ‘Israelite’ being more respectable than ‘Jew’, as these dignitaries themselves said – suddenly breaking with all the instilled mental attitudes of respect for authority, administration, legality, etc., and going to throw bombs and derail trains, whereas embarking on Resistance, underground struggle and the hazardous forms of existence this implied represented far less of a rupture for the immigrant from Yiddishland who had worked for years on the black in illegal workshops on the boulevard Poissonière, or the militant who had known the rigours of repression in interwar Poland, or the anti-fascist who had crossed ten frontiers with false papers in order to go and fight in Spain. Besides, there is the question of social and political consciousness. This category of Jews from the East had a far more realistic perception of German fascism than did the dignitaries of the consistory whose response to Kristallnacht had been to minimize the anti-Semitic outrages in Germany. They knew what mass anti-Semitism and the anti-Semitism of the state pogromists could

lead to, they or their family had often experienced this in the flesh, they knew that no accommodation or compromise with this barbarism was possible, they perceived the impending confrontation with death in its full dimensions. Those of them who had come from Germany, and those who had been in Spain, had long since known that Hitler wanted war, that his triumph would inevitably lead to a European conflagration; they were the last to fall into the illusion of Munich.

Even in the East, or in Poland, the application of the ‘final solution’ did not put an end to the conflicts of class and interest that divided the Jewish community. Hannah Arendt was much criticized for having written in her book on the Eichmann trial that the *Judenräte*, the Jewish councils set up in the ghettos by the Nazis, bore a share of responsibility for the fate that befell the ghetto populations. Léon Poliakov considers that, with all the reproaches that can be made against certain of the *Judenrat* leaders, ‘historically, the Jewish councils were inevitable’. Gershom Scholem, for his part, resolved the problem by saying that ‘among their members, some were monsters and others saints’.

But this problem can be tackled from a different perspective than that of moral or historical responsibility: that of social attitudes. In the Warsaw ghetto, workers either continued to work in the factories set up by the Germans, or if they were unemployed they died of hunger. Those who sat on the *Judenräte* and enjoyed certain privileges from this had not been productive workers before the war, but individuals whose competence in matters of organization, management and administration fitted them for this task. Politically, they were not extremists or radicals, but people from the right-minded middle, the party of common sense, along with a few adventurers; their natural movement was to do everything to ‘limit the damage’ – even after the Germans had deported four-fifths of the ghetto, and despite alarming news from other ghettos – rather than preaching revolt. In the few cases where communists or other representatives of radical currents infiltrated the *Judenräte* (as in Minsk), this was to strengthen resistance and not to ‘administer’ the impossible. Before examining the problem in moral terms, it should first be noted that on the whole, in these exceptional circumstances, social allegiances continued to determine the respective trajectories of both sides; it was not Jewish dignitaries who set up the Combat Organization of the Warsaw ghetto, and

it was not class-conscious workers who managed the catastrophe under the vigilant eye of the SS.

In his essay on French Israelites' attitudes towards Nazism from 1930 to 1940, Maurice Rajsfus gives several examples of what he sees as the blindness of the Jewish bourgeoisie in France (also, in some cases, their German counterparts) towards the rise of fascism in Europe.⁶ He recalls how, for them in general, the most fearsome enemy was certainly not Mussolini, whose muscular nationalism and sense of order aroused lively sympathy, and not even Hitler, whose ravings were scarcely taken seriously until 1933, and whom they tended to consider even later as a braggart with no future – no, the real enemy was Moscow, the Soviets, the communist movement, the spectre of collectivism. Most often deaf and blind to the coming catastrophe, these worthies prized above all their loyalty to the existing state and its institutions; their patriotism worked overtime, and as French Jews they noisily expressed their concern about the influx of Jewish refugees, even German ones after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. As for German Jews, they waxed indignant at the campaign to boycott German products launched after Kristallnacht.

Kurt Tucholsky, the radical German-Jewish writer and lucid witness of the Weimar Republic, invented the character of 'Herr Wendriner', one of these Jewish bourgeois content in his skin and in his country, a caricature true to life, like a drawing by Georg Grosz. Herr Wendriner's sleepless nights are filled with stock exchange quotations; his visits to the barber are the occasion for long chauvinist tirades and homilies against the Bolsheviks; when he attends a funeral it is to talk business; and when the time comes to salute by extending one's arm, he salutes like everyone else ... Was the attitude towards Nazism of so many Wendriners in France, Germany and Poland anything but the extension of what had seemed to them most 'reasonable' before danger threatened?

The most conscious fraction of the Jewish workers, those most inured to political struggle, reacted differently. For them there was no radical break between pre-war conditions and those of the war: in these aggravated conditions they continued to militate for the same cause.

The odyssey of Pierre Sherf is typical in this respect. Wounded in Spain, he returned to Paris, renewed his contact with the party, and was active until the declaration of war. Then he enlisted in the French army, fought and was taken prisoner, spending two years in a POW camp. He was returned to

Paris ill and sent to the Val-de-Grâce military hospital, where he was visited by his wife and by comrades already active in the Resistance. So when he returned to civilian life in March 1943, he could immediately ‘resume service’; he took part in Resistance work among Romanian immigrants in France, then became a cadre in the underground MOI.

The anti-fascist radicalism of this kind of militant was undivided and complete. What Mélinée Manouchian said of the Armenian Resistance fighters is perfectly applicable here to their Jewish comrades in battle: ‘Everything prepared us for an underground existence. Like Marx’s proletariat, we had nothing to lose; doubly persecuted, as foreigners and as Communists, we had endurance to pain, and from our childhood no longer feared either cold or hunger.’⁷

Janine Sochachewska, one of the leaders of Jewish resistance in Lyon (the ‘La Carmagnole’ group), adds,

I was young, I was strong, I had a moral strength as never before. It was not just the Jewish spark that awoke in me – I am Jewish despite myself, because it is impossible to free yourself from an education, a culture, although my whole life I have been among Poles. I struggled because I was a Communist, and because my country, Poland, was occupied, and because France was occupied.⁸

This statement is an excellent basis for examining the Resistance activity of those eastern Jews who were immigrants in France. They knew very well that it was impossible to make a deal with fascism, and the pact between Stalin and Hitler at the start of the war did not convince them to the contrary.

‘Did I agree with the German–Soviet pact? At the bottom of my soul, no,’ wrote Louis Gronowski, leader of the MOI:

I remember my disarray, the inner conflict. This pact was repugnant to me, it went against my sentiments, against everything I had maintained until then in my statements and writings. For all those years, we had presented Hitlerite Germany as the enemy of humanity and progress, and above all, the enemy of the Jewish people and the Soviet Union. And now the Soviet Union signed a pact with its sworn enemy, permitting the invasion of Poland and even taking part in its partition. It was the collapse of the whole argument forged over these long years. But I was a responsible Communist cadre, and my duty was to overcome my disgust.⁹

And yet, a few days after the signing of the pact, when the front pages of the newspaper displayed the photo of a smiling Stalin alongside Hitler’s envoy Ribbentrop and the German army was marching into Poland, Adam

Rayski, another cadre of the MOI, wrote in the organization's Yiddish-language paper *Naïe presse*,

Let the name of Adolf Hitler disappear forever! Cursed for always the idea of National Socialism! No one wanted this war except Hitler and his clique ... He will drown in the sea of blood that he is preparing to spill; beneath the ruins of his destruction he will find death.¹⁰

This was in no way the tone of the PCF, despite the MOI being closely dependent on it; until the end of 1940 the party continued to put forward slogans that were quite ambiguous in the context of the time, such as the 'expropriation without compensation of big Jewish and non-Jewish capitalists to the benefit of the popular collectivity'.

This dilemma facing Jewish communists at the start of the war, this contradiction between their visceral anti-fascism and what was now presented to them as an imperative of realpolitik for the USSR, crops up in the statements of our witnesses: 'When explanations are really needed, when people really look for them, they always end up finding them', Max Technitchek remarks, mentioning the way in which he had to convince himself at this time that once again Stalin was right:

At the beginning of the war I found myself, like many foreign refugees in France, enlisted as a 'volunteer' in the French army. I saw the weapons we were given, and understood right away that we were going to lose the war. Rifles dating from before 1914 against Hitler's armies ... I knew that France and England were not prepared for this confrontation. But this only strengthened me in my convictions: the pact between Hitler and Stalin was naturally a shock to me, but I ended up telling myself that basically things were complicated. The Munich agreements had isolated the USSR, and I found it normal that it should try and extract itself from this hornet's nest. Also, I didn't know the secret clauses of the pact that handed part of Poland to the USSR; I felt that France and England dreamed of a war between Germany and the Soviet Union – in short, I ended up considering the signature of the pact as a legitimate tactical manoeuvre on the part of the USSR.

'We were disoriented,' Isaac Kotlarz adds:

On the one hand there was the propaganda of the Communist Party in favour of the German–Soviet pact, on the other hand the Red Army seemed to be on the skids in Finland. After Munich, we no longer placed any trust in the France of Daladier – besides, we had already been well and truly scalded by the non-intervention policy of the Blum government in Spain. France run by people like Weygand and Gamelin meant the victory of confusion: we were well aware that it would all end in catastrophe. Those who were party members were in expectant mood, awaiting instructions.

In actual fact, the unease of these militants would continue until Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, which they learned, one of them notes, with a

relief that was paradoxical but none the less immense. They had finally found their political compass again, recovered their footing; in short, they would be able to launch all their forces into the struggle against the Nazis without the fear of sinning against the 'line'. Adam Rayski: 'And so, for us to become ourselves once again – that is, Jews, Frenchmen, anti-fascists – we needed Hitler's aggression, termed "criminal", against the "homeland of socialism".'

It is all the more remarkable that, in the depths of their disarray, these combatants began to establish structures and draw up perspectives of action that often set them in the vanguard of the Resistance in France.

Louis Gronowski recalls in his memoirs that while certain leaders of the French Communist Party were engaged in negotiations with the German occupation authorities with a view to obtaining authorization for *L'Humanité* to reappear, immigrant militants began individually to orient themselves towards actions against the occupation. Up to the invasion of the USSR by the German armies, in June 1941, the PCF leadership was opposed to any propaganda against the occupiers, and still more so to any action; but immigrants were already active in sabotage of German airfields and in the mines of the Nord. From autumn 1940, Gronowski says, the political and military apparatus of the MOI was reshaped and ready to act. In July and August 1941, the Jeunesses communistes (JC) organized the first demonstrations against the occupation in Paris. Many young foreign Jewish militants took part in these. One of them, Tyszelman, a very popular figure in the JC, was arrested on 13 August along with a French militant, Gautherot, while taking part in an illegal demonstration; they were shot a few days later, their condemnation proclaimed on Paris walls by one of the first *Bekanntmachungen*, which would be followed by many more. On 23 August, another JC militant, the future Colonel Fabien, shot a German officer at the Barbès metro station. 'I've avenged Titi' (Tyszelman), he cried out. This action was reputedly the first armed initiative against the Germans in France. Fabien was accompanied by another militant whose name proclaimed his foreign origin: Lucien Brustlein.

To be sure, not all these Jewish proletarians and petty artisans from Central and Eastern Europe who found themselves in France under the occupation were engaged in the Resistance to a single man. Tens of thousands of them died together with their families, non-combatant victims, in the death camps. It is their figures, bent, humiliated and starving, and the

piles of their dead bodies, that are the essential focus of the historical research, literature and film devoted to the fate of European Jews during the Second World War.

But an active minority struggled and most often continued to struggle. This was not just with the energy of despair, when, as Léon Poliakov puts it, the final solution could no longer be ignored; Jewish resisters began to be active in Paris even before the Vel' d'Hiv roundup and the first deportations. It was particularly when organizations and traditions of struggle already existed that the combat was pursued – or renewed – in new forms.

Some people have maintained that in the face of absolute horror and genocide 'any resistance was impossible' (Hannah Arendt), or again that 'in such circumstances, to die fighting, singing psalms, veiling the gaze of children with one's hand, or screaming with fear and despair, were strictly identical behaviours'.¹¹ This may be true in relation to the situation of deportees arriving on the ramp at Auschwitz and headed for immediate gassing, but it was certainly not the case for the situation of all Jews in Hitler's Europe. Those who resisted were not simply, as Léon Poliakov writes, exceptions who 'shone with an incomparable brilliance',¹² but rather a category whose behaviour as a minority in the face of adversity had very clear social, cultural and political roots.

They were, moreover, so little the exception that Poliakov himself cites the figure of 15 to 30 per cent of Jews in the French Resistance. Even if this figure is exaggerated, the question that has to be raised is not 'why did so few Jews resist?' but rather 'why, in proportion, were there so few native French in the patriotic Resistance in France, why was the percentage of foreigners so high, particularly that of Jews from Eastern Europe?' As one of their number, a member of the Manouchian group, said shortly before his arrest in late 1943, 'I only did what had to be done; if more people in this country had done as much, the situation would have been quite different.'

The answer to the question raised here can largely be found already in the previous chapters. It remains true that this situation brings to light a strange paradox. In all the European countries occupied by the Nazis, resistance developed on a national basis, rooted in national sentiment; it was a patriotic resistance. Yet behind this generally accepted fact – did not Stalin himself put proletarian internationalism in cold storage, proclaiming

that this was the time of the great patriotic war and liquidating the Comintern in 1943? – the reality was more complex: first of all, because the struggle of the Resistance was combined, at the national and patriotic level, with the social dimension of the struggle: the hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants who mobilized in Greece, France, Yugoslavia, etc., against the occupier were struggling for the liberation of national territory, for the defeat of fascism, but also so that ‘nothing should be as it was’ in their respective countries, in terms of social organization and political structures; for a world from which the conditions that gave rise to the barbarity of fascism would disappear forever – it was this combination that made for the specifically revolutionary dimension of the Resistance. It is also what explains the tensions and conflicts over strategy that divided the Resistance in each country, leading to a rift within the Resistance in states such as Greece and Yugoslavia, and, in a country like France, to the complex antagonisms between the different tendencies of which its precarious unity was woven.

We should also note that the patriotism or nationalism of the Resistance was not necessarily the same among those at the top and among those at the bottom. For someone like de Gaulle, it meant above all the *union sacrée* of the nation against the occupier, around leaders determined to restore after the war the traditional forms of ‘democracy’ and the old order; for a rank-and-file communist militant, it meant above all expelling the occupiers by a mass mobilization, a radical struggle that would sketch the outline of a new world.

Jewish combatants in the Resistance were uprooted émigrés straddling several cultures, swept up by the course of history and naturally internationalist; how did they find their place in this patriotic Resistance, and could they find an ideological anchorage? How could they accept, as Jews, the frequent outbursts of chauvinism?

The head of the MOI recalls that it was not always easy, when the organization undertook its first terrorist actions, to convince militants educated in an internationalist spirit that every German soldier was an enemy, a *Boche* that it was legitimate to get rid of. This problem arose also for Max Technitchek, despite his rapid rallying to the new line:

I was, I believe, a true internationalist. I hated the Nazis not simply because they were anti-Semites, but above all because they were racists in general, despising Slavs and French. On the other hand, however, I was not shocked by the patriotic character of the Resistance. In

France, I understood the policy of the national front as a continuation of the Popular Front policy. In order to win, the whole people had to be united, including large fractions of the bourgeoisie. The population had to be mobilized around general themes, such as liberty, independence. And then, if you wanted to mobilize the mass of French people, you had to play on the emotional and patriotic wellsprings, accept saying *Boche* rather than 'Nazi' or 'German'. On condition, of course, that this was understood as just being a tactic, limited in time and adapted to an exceptional situation.

The majority of Jewish Resistance fighters undoubtedly subscribed to the same type of 'realist' argument. They accepted the national patriotic character of the Resistance as a *fait accompli*, a necessity. Besides, their 'being-in-the-world' as *émigrés* was infinitely variable: many of them were young people, even adolescents who had arrived in France in early childhood, who spoke French without an accent, knew certain quarters of Paris like the back of their hand, were integrated into groups of young people whom they played sports with, went on excursions with, militated with – in other words, they were young Parisians from the popular quarters, not greatly distinguished from any others, except for the fact of speaking Yiddish at home. These young people who viewed France as their adopted homeland did not feel foreign to the national sentiment that inspired the Resistance. In the streets of occupied Paris, they felt far more at ease than did the older Jewish militants who had gone to school in Poland and could get rid neither of their raucous accent nor of the habit of 'skirting the walls' and furtively turning round to see if they were being followed. If they accepted this national dimension of the Resistance struggle, however, they did not believe that the specific dimension of their Jewish struggle had to disappear.

From the start of the war, the Jewish group of the MOI was the best-structured and most active; it would provide the cadres of the *Organisation spéciale*, responsible for major acts of terrorism and sabotage; it would also supply almost all the militants of the *Travail allemand*, the work of propaganda and demoralization among the German troops – work that was extremely dangerous, and internationalist par excellence, carried out for the most part by women. In cafés and other public places frequented by the *Wehrmacht*, young women who spoke German sought to make contact, starting with an anodyne conversation on how hard times were, the absurdity of the war, by way of which they sought to 'situate' their conversation partner: as a fanatical Nazi, indifferent, former socialist or communist, etc. If the exchange proved positive, the discussion could take a

more open turn at the next meeting; sometimes anti-fascist leaflets written in German were scattered, left on cinema seats, in restaurant toilets, etc. This work did indeed bear fruit; groups of German soldiers were formed in contact with the Resistance, information was transmitted, uniforms and weapons supplied to combatants. Sometimes, too, militants of the Travail allemand were denounced to the Gestapo and paid for this activity with their lives. Rachel Schatz, who was active in the Resistance in Lyon, recalls that the Parc de la tête d'or was a favoured place for the Travail allemand: women militants entered into conversation with soldiers, leaving leaflets on the benches and posting stickers:

One of my friends, too, went to work for the Germans. This was doubly dangerous work. On the one hand, she collected material and information under the cover of 'doing the cleaning'; on the other hand, her Resistance activity required her to hang around in public places with Germans and be taken for a collaborationist, a soldiers' girl, one of those whose heads were shaved at liberation. But she brought round several German soldiers to work with the Resistance.

Throughout the war, in France, the existence of an underground Jewish press in both French and Yiddish, basically initiated by the communists, attests to the existence of a Jewish Resistance. In May 1943 it celebrated the courage of the Warsaw ghetto fighters, whose insurrection had just been crushed. Many other indications also manifest the desire to emphasize the part played in the struggle by Jews. Thus, in 1944, an MOI circular designed for PCF cadres called for the creation of Jewish units with the perspective of the battle for the liberation of Paris. The argument here was particularly clear:

At this time, the thousands of Jews in the ranks of the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur [FFI] are seen as French, Polish, etc. citizens, not as Jews. We want to destroy the reactionary and fascist lies that claim Jews cannot be soldiers or fighters. At the same time, we will break the chauvinist and wait-and-see policy of the Jewish reactionaries. [The point is] to show the world that Jews, just like other peoples, have the right to life and happiness.

This was a somewhat premonitory text. After liberation, the desire to wrap the Resistance up for posterity in the tricolour, and affirm its essentially patriotic character to the detriment of its social dimension, often led memoirists and historians to push this *métèque* face of the Resistance into the shadows – the *Mémoires* of Jacques Duclos, and Charles Tillon's book on the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans, scarcely speak of it, just to cite those Resistance leaders who were in direct contact with the action of foreigners,

and Jewish partisans in particular, by force of circumstances. Does it damage the patriotic image of the Resistance to accept that during the year 1943 the greater part of partisan actions in Paris were the act of foreigners, activists in the MOI, up to the great raid that came down on them in the autumn? Is it a sin against internationalism to recognize, behind the 'Polish', 'Hungarian', 'Romanian' or 'Czech' partisan, the Yiddishland revolutionary, the traditions of struggle he or she pursued, their culture, their language, and the particular resonance of their name? It was not because, on the infamous *affiche rouge*, the Nazis exposed to public vindictiveness the 'Hungarian Jew' Elek and the 'Polish Jew' Rayman, making their Jewishness an argument against the Resistance as a whole, described as an 'army of crime', that the Jewish dimension of Rayman and Elek's struggle and commitment became a factor best no longer alluded to. The intransigence of their anti-fascism, their courage to act, were clearly rooted in a consciousness for which the communist ideal and the sense of their Jewish identity were indissociable. It was no accident that their action, that of the combatants of the *affiche rouge*, became a symbol of the revolutionary spirit of the Resistance.

In the years after the end of the war this revolutionary spirit of the Resistance continued to disturb, and not only those whom one might logically expect to reject it. In 1951, Artur London, one of the leaders of the MOI, and responsible in particular for the Travail allemand before being deported to Mauthausen, was arrested in Czechoslovakia in the context of the Slansky affair. He was stupefied to hear his interrogator demand that he should acknowledge that the MOI, 'whose three leading figures were Jews', was 'a section of the Trotskyist Fourth International': 'The very fact that despite being Jewish you returned alive [from Mauthausen] is proof of your culpability and proves us right.'¹³

As we have said, not all the Yiddishland militants involved in the Resistance were made of heroic material. They joined the struggle like anyone else, without pretensions, because this commitment struck them as a necessity at the time. Léa Stein, a Yugoslav communist and veteran of Spain, joined the Resistance in France by a circuitous route. In 1938, after being demobilized from the International Brigades (where she was a nurse), she found herself in Paris along with her husband, a *brigadista* of Austrian origin whom she met in Spain. She was pregnant. In early summer 1938, the situation of immigrants in France was aggravated by the new regulation

that removed the few rights they had gained under the Popular Front: Léa Stein's husband was assigned residence in a village in the south-west. When the war with Germany broke out, he was arrested along with other German citizens in France, anti-fascists and Jewish refugees included, and interned in a camp in the Pyrenees:

I was responsible for one newborn baby and I was pregnant again; I heard it said that it was possible to be repatriated to Yugoslavia from Marseille. I had a terrible desire to go home, so I left for Marseille with my baby and a bulging belly; Yugoslav and Italian comrades arranged things for me. In Marseille they were beginning to register Jews; I asked at the Yugoslav consulate for a repatriation certificate, but I was refused this, as I was in their records as a communist. What to do? I feared I would be arrested, so I decided to return to Paris, in the occupied zone. A smuggler got me across the demarcation line. In Paris I made contact again with comrades from the Yugoslav Communist Party, and obtained a foreigner's residence card by using my sister's papers. It was then that the party, knowing that I spoke German, asked me to go and work in the Nazi administrative apparatus.

In the countries of Western Europe, as we have seen, the Jewish Resistance was essentially integrated into the national Resistance, while often asserting its specific character and the special dimension of Jewish struggle against Nazism. In the East it was generally isolated and dramatically alone, even if, in Byelorussia, for example, the Resistance in the ghettos was in contact with Soviet partisans.

The stubborn will to survive, however, could sometimes lead in these exceptional conditions to forms of resistance that were out of the ordinary. Shlomo Strauss was mobilized into the Polish army in 1939.¹⁴ Wounded during the German invasion, he was taken prisoner and interned in a camp. When he learned that the detainees would be divided according to their national origin, he decided to forge a new identity; he was now called Timofei Marko, the illegitimate son of a Ukrainian laundress. He grew a long Cossack moustache to fit the part.

A commission of SS and medics arrived in the camp where he was held and selected a certain number of tall and fair-haired Ukrainians whose 'racial purity' they appreciated. Marko was among these. He was transferred to Austria where he was taught the trade of a turner. His knowledge of German led him to be appointed head of this group of newly promoted 'Aryans'.

At Sankt Pölten, in Austria, Marko established an underground communist cell among his 'compatriots' and made contact with Austrian communists. On the eve of the offensive against the Soviet Union, the Nazis

sought to form a volunteer corps from these Ukrainian ex-POWs that would fight alongside them. This was how Marko learned that Hitler was getting ready to unleash hostilities against the Soviet Union. He went to the Soviet consulate in Vienna and conveyed this information. Without much result, it would seem.

Having become a skilled worker, Marko was posted to an aircraft factory at Obergrafendorf, close to Wiener Neustadt. The communist cell that he set up carried out small acts of sabotage. Responsible for all the *Ostarbeiter* (Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Poles, etc.) in the factory, he maintained almost friendly relations with various German officers, who viewed him as a National Socialist. He took advantage of this position to try to improve the situation of the *Ostarbeiter*: abolition of corporal punishment, improvement of rations, etc. He helped some of his fellow workers escape and join the ranks of the Resistance.

Always acting in combination with the Austrian Resistance, Marko obtained and hid the plans of the Rotbach Neuenkirchen underground aircraft factory. But when the Red Army reached Austria, Marko was immediately arrested as a ‘collaborator’. Interrogated relentlessly by the NKVD, in a state of exhaustion he signed the paper he was handed. When he said that he was a Polish communist, he was asked to show his card – of an illegal party dissolved by the Comintern years before. He was thrown into prison. In the end, he owed his salvation to chance: a Soviet prisoner of war whom he had helped when working in the aircraft factory. He was then interned in a camp of Soviet prisoners awaiting their repatriation – they would in fact be deported to Siberia. On return to Poland after the war, Strauss-Marko held high office in the police service before emigrating to Israel.

The combativeness of Jewish Resistance fighters was based on a paradoxical and dramatic combination of historical optimism and absolute despair; continuing to trust in the future, the basis of the pre-war revolutionary utopias, their Jewish historical optimism rested on the conviction that at the end of the day barbarism would be conquered and Nazism defeated, that the Jewish people would rise again, that a better world would be born on the ashes of the barbaric empire. Even the fighters of the Warsaw ghetto knew that, if their own battle was a desperate one, Germany had none the less begun to lose the war at Stalingrad; even those condemned to death by the *affiche rouge* knew that a near future would

justify them. On the other hand, however, there was the absolute despair of those witnessing a crime that as yet still had no name, that human consciousness and their Jewish consciousness were incapable of conceiving, who witnessed the disappearance of their world. In this dead of night they often had the impression of fighting against phantoms, in an absolute disproportion of forces; what could bullets do against a barbarism that the highest reason and historical understanding could not even name, no more than they could conceive the future beyond this catastrophe? That is the despair of the hero of Manès Sperber's novel, at the time when the Nazis had finished razing the Warsaw ghetto:

He felt free from everything, the gratification of a useless freedom. The freedom to commit destructive acts, to shoot one of these gaping bystanders, to set fire to a cinema filled to bursting, to kill a German officer on the public road, to kill themselves with a bullet to the heart. But there was no freedom to dream of a future, to imagine a different tomorrow. He was not free to escape his helpless being.¹⁵

Hunted down, cast into illegality, forced to live with false papers, to obtain food and everything else necessary to survive outside the 'normal' circuits, to live underground, the Jews who rejected the law of their persecutors under the occupation were thereby made available for the Resistance; very often, therefore, the step was easily taken, particularly by young people, leading from the refusal to declare oneself at the local police station as a Jew to a more active opposition. In fact, the transition to organized resistance, if synonymous with increased risk, also meant for the new combatant the end of isolation, joining a dynamic collective with means of action and protection at its disposal.

The derailing of trains, the execution of *collabos* and Nazi officers, the firing of fuel dumps, throwing hand grenades in restaurants, sabotaging of industry and factories working for the occupation, the destruction of electricity pylons – these are well-known images, clichés of Resistance action. There was no action of this type in which Jewish combatants did not take part, which they did not organize, by the dozen, on all fronts, at all levels. It was Jewish partisans who prepared an attack on the German commandant of 'Gross-Paris', von Schaumburg, and then liquidated the organizer of the STO in France, Ritter. It was Epstein, an exceptional military strategist, who perfected in 1943 the tactic of attacks in successive waves against the parades of German troops in the streets of Paris. But the

Resistance was also the patient and painstaking work of people like Léa Stein:

Thanks to my knowledge of German, I managed to enter the *Werbebüro*, the recruitment centre at Pontoise. All the lists of persons due to be requisitioned for work in Germany passed through my hands; I warned the Resistance, or sometimes the interested parties directly – like the baker's son who gave me bread until the end of the war as a token of gratitude. The Germans clearly had no suspicion that I was Jewish. In 1942, however, I felt that things might turn out badly. I had lost my connections with the Yugoslav comrades, most of whom had returned to their country to fight in the ranks of the partisans. I left Pontoise ...

The Resistance also included escape attempts from POW camps by the likes of Max Technitchek, where the solidarity of the detainees sought to block the discrimination that victimized Jews:

After volunteering in the French army, I was taken prisoner at the start of operations and deported to Germany. The Resistance was very well organized in our camp; we had our underground newspapers, we organized all kinds of sabotage, we prepared escapes. I twice tried to flee and was recaptured. I was unlucky, my second escape in particular had been very well prepared; I had money, papers and contacts to cross the frontiers into the 'free zone'. But at Kassel I came up against an extraordinary control; my papers weren't sufficiently 'solid' and I was sent back to the camp.

Hanna Lévy-Hass, for her part, had never held a gun, yet she played her part in the partisan struggle in Yugoslavia. A secondary school teacher in Montenegro, and a militant in the Communist Party, she was entrusted with a particular mission after the Italian occupation: to teach peasants how to give first aid to the wounded, with the perspective of insurrection:

It was clear from the start of hostilities that the Yugoslavs were going to rise up. When the generals capitulated, the ordinary soldiers fled back to their villages with their weapons; I saw these Montenegrin peasants returning with full boxes of munitions, I saw women building up stores in the cellars. From the beginning, the occupiers only held the cities. The mountains and villages were controlled by the insurgents who were lacking in everything, even shoes, but ready to fight.

The Italians launched an offensive against the partisans in our region. I found myself in the midst of the battle; the towns and villages were bombed. I saw our first dead; the wounded flooded in. After two weeks we understood that the uprising in Montenegro would be crushed. The partisans fell back, leaving us with the wounded. The Italian army was approaching. We had to evacuate our field hospital. I saw our wounded leave under their own steam, with open wounds; they showed an amazing courage. We took refuge in the mountains, in a kind of citadel where we gathered our wounded, as well as a certain number of wounded Italians. When the Italian army arrived, we passed ourselves off as voluntary nurses acting out of humanitarianism. I spoke Italian; the officers wanted to know where the partisans were, but we kept silent. They took down our names but let us leave. On the plain, we saw the burning villages.

As a Jew, Hanna Lévy-Haas could no longer work as a teacher. After the defeat of the uprising, she found herself confined to the small town of Cetinje:

The Italian occupation was burdensome, but it was nothing compared with that of the Germans, which followed in 1943. When they laid siege to the town there were some thirty Jews there, including elderly and sick. I wanted to join the partisans. But the Jews begged me not to leave: 'If you go,' I was told, 'if one of us disappears, we will all be shot.' I gave in, and a little while after we were locked up in the town prison. We remained there for six months. We had not given up hope, we were still on Montenegrin soil, the Red Army was advancing westward, the Anglo-American armies had landed in Sicily, and the opening of a new western front seemed imminent. And then suddenly, the Germans loaded us into cattle trucks ... I arrived in Bergen-Belsen in August 1944.¹⁶

In the Lyon Resistance, the husband of Rachel Schatz was engaged in activity that she herself defined as 'very dangerous', without going into further detail. But 'you just didn't ask questions'. Her work was to rescue Jewish children, most of whom had come clandestinely from the occupied zone. This was a special commission run by women and linked to the MOI, which took responsibility for this delicate mission in Lyon:

The first thing was to see to the children whose life was threatened and place them in institutions, basically religious ones, or with peasants. It wasn't easy work; you had to follow rules of strict security; we had false papers, so did the children whom we took to their refuges. Sometimes you had to take the train with a whole group, and it wasn't easy to persuade a young child that he's no longer called Moshe or Yankel, but Jean or Richard. I remember a trip from Lyon to Limoges when I accompanied a group of children; I'd rehearsed them and told them to pretend to be asleep if a police control was carried out on the train. There was indeed a control; I told the gendarmes some story or other, and everything went well. Were they fooled or not? Who knows?

We had set up networks for placing the children almost everywhere around Lyon. In the region of Villefranche-sur-Saône, for example, there was a network that operated very well in the surrounding villages, led by a Jew and a non-Jew.

My daughter was ten years old at the time, and also placed away from Lyon by the network. She told me much later that she had been angry at me for devoting my time and energy to other people's children instead of her. She couldn't understand.

Shlomo Shamli, a Bulgarian Jew, left Hachomer Hatzair for the Communist Party just after the invasion of Soviet territory by the German armies. In Sofia the communist militants had collected weapons with the prospect of coming battles. Shamli took part in this activity, but Jewish men were soon requisitioned for forced labour by the Bulgarian authorities allied with Germany. He was sent from one camp to another, eventually to one close to

the frontier with Greece. Bulgarian Jews were assigned to the construction of roads and railways.

The Communist Party had set up an underground organization in the camp. It developed its propaganda among forced labourers and made contact with partisans in the region. The camp officers were Bulgarian. Shamli was in touch with one of these administrators who was a party member. The others lived in fear of an attack by the partisans.

Dynamite was used for railway construction. Shamli and his comrades got hold of some and passed it to the partisans, along with weapons, clothes and shoes that they obtained in the camp:

In March 1943 we saw trains pass close to the site where we were working, taking Greek Jews to Auschwitz. We managed to get an enormous rock to fall on the tracks. The traffic was interrupted and a train blocked. We stole food from the camp and took it to the deportees in the train, trying also to convince them to escape. But most of them refused, unable to believe that they were being taken to their death. Only fifteen of them listened to us. We hid them in the camp and they later joined the partisans in the mountains.

May 1943 saw the famous – and sadly, exceptional – episode of the demonstration that prevented the deportation of Bulgarian Jews to Auschwitz. When it was announced that Jews would be transported to the Danube ports and from there to the camps, a demonstration was called in Sofia. It was held on 24 May and attracted more than 10,000 people, Jews and non-Jews alike. The police brutally intervened, arresting hundreds of people, including the chief rabbi.

On 25 and 26 May, the Jews were taken to the ports of Lom and Svistov on the Danube, but the Bulgarian authorities were forced to abandon deportation in the face of the growing mobilization of public opinion, particularly inspired by the Orthodox Church, the Writers' Association, lawyers and many personalities from the world of art and entertainment.

Pierre Sherf, in charge of the Romanian 'language group' of the MOI in Paris, saw to the 'little tasks' that made up the everyday activity of the Resistance militant: circulating forged banknotes and ration tickets 'expropriated' by the combatants, manufacturing false documents of all kinds and organizing solidarity with the families of the deported. Then he was entrusted with the task of organizing liaison with MOI groups in the north and east of France, where Polish and Italian miners were particularly active. Rail tracks were sabotaged, electricity lines brought down, German soldiers disarmed and killed, strikes organized in the mines, and so on. Each

month, Sherf's partner, who was also his liaison agent, visited groups, delivering political reports, ration cards, weapons, etc. Sometimes Sherf himself visited, sleeping in miners' homes and leaving at daybreak: 'They didn't always know that it was the Communist Party', he says; 'most of them were non-party, or just party sympathizers – but they knew what racism was'. Sometimes, too, he had to decide on a difficult problem, a case of conscience:

There was a partisan commander in the Briey basin, a Polish Jew, famous for his courage; one day he had two fighters who had refused to take part in an action shot. What should be done? Finally, we expelled him from the party. Later, an MOI leader said that he would have decorated him for his courage then arrested him for his brutality.

During the Paris insurrection, Sherf was a commander in the patriotic militia; then he took part in the liberation of northern France on the heels of the American army. But in December 1945 he was summoned for still more pressing tasks: Romania was in the process of swinging to the camp of 'socialism' Stalin-style; the Communist Party there needed all its cadres.

In countries such as France, the repression that fell on Jews, including foreigners, was relatively gradual, massive deportations being preceded by alarm signals of all kinds, discriminatory measures. Militants thus had time to prepare for battle. But in the East, in Poland in particular, the picture was different; from the very first days of the German occupation terror reigned across the whole country, with massive arrests among the leaders of Polish political parties and the intelligentsia – 180 professors of Cracow university were arrested and sent to concentration camps. As far as Jews were concerned, the Nazis consistently applied a policy of isolating them from the rest of society, starting by imposing the yellow star, then forbidding any collaboration between Jewish and Polish institutions, then encouraging bands of Polish lumpenproletarians to carry out pogroms, then forbidding Jews to travel by train (January 1940), then sending them to forced labour camps (from February 1940) – a policy of segregation that culminated in the construction of ghettos: the Warsaw ghetto was established in November 1940.

The Jewish communists, the Bundists and the socialist Zionists thus found themselves in danger of death by virtue of being Jewish and revolutionary. Before the question arose of taking part in the struggle against Nazism, they thought first of all of saving their own skins. For many

of them, salvation lay in the part of Poland occupied by the Red Army under the clauses of the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact.

This meant a brusque rupture with no return in the existence of these women and men, a new chapter that opened, despite the great diversity of their ‘Soviet’ trajectories: for some, struggle in the ghettos or in the ranks of partisans in Byelorussia or Lithuania; for others, deportation to Siberia; for others again, adaptation to the Soviet system, acquisition of Soviet citizenship, with the benefits and dangers of such a situation. The testimonies of those who found themselves caught up in this torment illustrate the contrast between the situation in the West and that created in the East by the German invasion.

When the Wehrmacht fell on Poland, Isaac Safrin, a radical but non-party student, was working during the vacation at a children’s home in Warsaw. ‘Leave immediately!’ his father insisted, ‘go to Russia!’ He knew that his son had drawn attention to himself at university by virulent articles against the Nazis, published in various political and cultural magazines. Isaac hesitated; his mother was against his leaving, believing that things would soon ‘settle down’. But his father insisted: ‘Leave. Then at least one of us will survive.’ A clear-sighted prediction: Isaac Safrin was the sole survivor.

In the early days of October 1939, Safrin thus left Warsaw in quite adventurous conditions:

I was asked to accompany handicapped children to the Soviet-occupied zone, and accepted. But I did not have a pass. On the other hand, I did have one for the children, made out in Russian by the Soviet authorities. I thus thought of a ruse. Although I didn’t know Russian, I learned by heart the text of the pass and translated it into German. Then I presented myself at the Kommandantur, asked to be received by the major, quickly showed him the document and read it to him in both Russian and German – but adding my own name to it. This worked; we received an official document from the Gestapo authorizing us to leave the part of Poland occupied by the Germans. The officer even said, ‘Go, you can take off your armbands [with the star of David], you’re not Jews any more, now you’re Soviets!’ That says something about how good relations still were between Hitler and Stalin.

Late in the night, Safrin and the children arrived at a small town on the Bug; this was the demarcation line. The region was swarming with smugglers, traffickers of all kinds. But the Soviet border guards blocked their passage. There were thousands of refugees there, completely destitute, mostly Jews. Safrin saw a Red Army soldier for the first time in his life:

He wore a curious pointed hat, called after Budenny, which made a big impression on me. I said to myself, 'Perhaps he's got a hidden aerial in it connecting him to the general staff?' It was terribly cold. People were there without any shelter. I wore all three of the jackets I'd taken with me. The smugglers prowled around in search of victims to fleece. In the middle of the night, an old man died. People made preparation to bury him, digging in the ground with bare hands. Then there was a scene engraved forever in my memory. A Bund militant who happened to be there stood up and began to speak. He spoke and spoke, with that rhetoric peculiar to the Bundists. I no longer remember the content of his speech, except for one phrase: '*Die Raten haben uns verraten!*', 'The Soviets have betrayed us!', which he repeated over and over again. The next morning, however, the border was opened and we were able to reach Białystok.

As a Bund militant, Haïm Babic had no illusions about what to expect when the Germans reached Warsaw. In the night of 7–8 September, therefore, he crossed the bridge on the Vistula and headed east –one of thousands fleeing the German advance. The German planes machine-gunned their columns along the roads. When, after several days, he approached the river Bug, people began to turn back: 'The Germans are already there!' Despite this discouragement, Babic continued his route, but a few kilometres from Brest-Litovsk the road was cut; Germans and Poles were still fighting. Along with a group of refugees, he spent the night in a village deserted by its inhabitants, but the next day the Germans who had occupied this ground forced them away:

In no way would we take the road back to Warsaw. So we tried our luck across the fields; we hid. Finally, a demarcation line was established between the zone occupied by the Germans and that which fell to the Soviets. The Soviets took control of Brest-Litovsk, and I was fortunate to land up there at the end of September 1939.

It seems that in the course of this exodus, around 300,000 Jews left the territories occupied by the Germans and fled east. Thousands later returned to the zone occupied by the Germans, deceived by the apparent calm that reigned there, but some 250,000 remained on Soviet territory. Among them were many cadres of the Bund, the left Poale Zion and the former Communist Party; the life of these parties was all the more paralysed.

It may seem strange that a powerful organization such as the Bund, rich in long traditions of underground action, which at the outbreak of the war held seventeen out of twenty seats occupied by Jews on the Warsaw municipal council, found itself caught unawares by the German invasion. Haïm Babic maintains that 'we Bundists had no illusion as to the ability of the Polish army to resist the Wehrmacht'. But the sudden departure of this experienced and courageous militant was in no way surprising, if we

remember that he did no more than follow such prestigious leaders as Alter and Erlich – liquidated by Stalin in 1941.

To tell the truth, the disarray of the communists – whose party had been dissolved by Stalin in 1938 – was no less. Yaakov Greenstein, an experienced militant from the Łódź region, also took the road for Białystok thanks to a quite remarkable combination of circumstances:

I was walking in the street [in his home town, Pabianice] when I noticed a comrade, of German origin and a militant in the Young Communists, wearing a swastika armband. I hid myself in a doorway out of fear that he would see me and denounce me, but he did see me and came after me and caught up with me: ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘all the *Volksdeutsche* who do not collaborate with the Nazis will be shot. I don’t have a choice, I’ll try to do work where I won’t dirty my hands. I’m working at the town hall, but at the bottom of my heart I’m still the same. I’ll look you up to warn you if you’re on their black list; if they don’t arrest you tonight, it’ll be the night after; you’d better disappear.’

But I didn’t know where to go. We discussed it, and finally he made me the following suggestion: ‘I’m an interpreter at the town hall. You can turn up there tomorrow morning when it opens, and I’ll try and get you a safe conduct to join your girlfriend in Białystok, in the Soviet zone.’ I thought about it; the proposal was tempting. On the other hand, the town hall was really the wolf’s lair. Finally, I tried my luck. At exactly ten o’clock I was there, and my friend was waiting. ‘Here,’ he called out to the German soldiers, ‘this is a good bloke from the town. He’s come to ask for an *Ausweis* to join his wife on the other side of the demarcation line. Can you give it to him?’ A German replied, ‘As you know him, write out the paper yourself!’ We went into an office, and he made out the pass in my name and stamped it. ‘Well then,’ I said, ‘why don’t you stamp a dozen blank ones for me, I can make use of them.’ And that’s what he did. I handed the precious documents to the party comrades and set out for Białystok. Later on, this *Volksdeutsch* comrade provided our friends with many other valuable documents.

Poland was now a country devastated by bombing and terrorized by the occupying forces. The Resistance was divided into groups that were very often hostile to one another, and found extreme difficulties in getting organized. The Jewish militants, in contrast to those fighting in France, most often found themselves cut off from this Resistance, a section of which was vigorously anti-Semitic. The liquidation of Jewish *résistants* by their Polish counterparts that Manès Sperber depicts in his novel *Qu’une larme dans l’océan* is no mere literary device; some of our witnesses were themselves caught up in such ‘incidents’. It was precisely here, where the Jewish workers’ movement was most solid, most dynamic and most autonomous, that it was most directly affected by the new conditions created by the war. And it was here, in a surprising way, that the Jewish *résistants* found themselves most isolated and most vulnerable.

At the time of the invasion of Poland, the Communist Party no longer existed; it was slowly re-established, in the Warsaw ghetto, among other places. Only in January 1942 did it officially reappear as an underground party under the name of the Polish Workers' Party (PPR): its armed wing was initially called Gwardia Ludowa, later Armia Ludowa. In the Warsaw ghetto, one of the communist groups published from December 1941 a daily paper that lasted until March 1942. The Bund, for its part, re-organized its pre-war security service in April 1940, with a backbone formed of street porters, transport workers and kosher butchers, in order to respond to the anti-Semitic gangs that were organizing pogroms. It was also very active in the Warsaw ghetto, issuing a plethora of publications. One of its opponents from that time, Adolf Berman,¹⁷ a leader of the left Poale Zion, pointed out that with its youth movement Zukunft and what remained of its trade unions, the Bund was the largest organization in the ghetto. But the left Poale Zion was also present in the ghetto, publishing there its paper *Proletarische Gedank*.

In the ghettos, as in the extermination camps to which they were the antechamber, the *résistants* embarked on a race against death. To struggle and resist was the only lucid choice, but this most often meant for the fighters no more than choosing the time and manner of their death. Beyond the immediate outcome of the struggle, which most often was inevitable, their combat was for history, for memory. After the war, historians and the surviving actors themselves studied at length the political and military weight of the Resistance in the countries of Western and Southern Europe, compared to that of the great pitched battles: the question is far from settled. But no one would claim that the revolt of a few hundred insurgents in the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943 influenced the course of the war in any way. The immense importance of this event was in another dimension: a symbol, as is often said, the manifestation par excellence of the will to attest by struggle 'despite everything' – the famous *trotz alledem* of Heinrich Heine, found also from the pens of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and again in the famous song of Wolf Biermann. It embodied the will and capacity of human resistance in the face of adversity, despite the extreme disproportion of forces.

It would not be said that the Nazis managed to liquidate the entire Jewish community of Poland in the crematoria of Treblinka without resistance. That was what the Zionist, communist and Bundist militants

proclaimed when they united in the Jewish Combat Organization that was formed after the great *akstia*, the raid of July 1942. This affirmation of life by way of a sacrifice and combat with no prospect of victory is a tragic paradox that can only be understood as an act of faith in history, in the capacity of humanity to rise again beyond barbarism, in the future of the Jewish community of Yiddishland. In his remarkable memoirs and reflections (recorded and transcribed by the Polish journalist Hanna Krall), Marek Edelman,¹⁸ who was a member of the leadership of the Combat Organization, relates the following fact: before the insurrection was launched, some people asked whether a collective suicide in the ghetto would not be a way to alert world opinion and Western governments to the fate of the Jews in Poland. One of their number proposed that all the survivors of the ghetto should force the wall on the ‘Aryan’ side and wait to be encircled by the Gestapo and executed by machine guns; a woman militant proposed setting fire to the ghetto and letting the wind ‘scatter their ashes’. Edelman notes that at the time these proposals were made, they in no way seemed to arise from a pathetic view of history, but were quite simply presented as concrete alternatives.

In order to protest against the indifference of the Western powers to the massacre of the Jews of Eastern Europe, Shmuel Zygelboim killed himself in London on 11 May 1943. He was the Bund’s representative to the Polish government in exile. His testament bears the mark of a complete despair about the present, a riveting cry directed at world opinion:

I cannot live while what remains of the Jewish people in Poland, whose representative I am, is being liquidated. My comrades of the Warsaw ghetto have fallen arms in hand in a final heroic combat. I have not been given the chance to die like them, with them. But my place is by their side, in their common graves. By my death, I want to express the strongest possible protest against the passivity with which the world views and tolerates the extermination of the Jewish people. I know that in our day a human life is worth little; but as I have been able to do nothing while alive, perhaps by dying I shall contribute to breaking the indifference of those who may have the possibility of saving in extremis those Polish Jews who still survive.

Curiously, this despair as to the present went together in Zygelboim’s testament with an extraordinary confidence in the future, in particular the future of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe. He wrote, ‘I desire that those of the millions of Polish Jews who survive will one day experience liberation, together with the Polish population, in a world of liberty and social equality. I am convinced that such a Poland will come to pass, that such a world will exist.’ On the threshold of death, at the very bottom of the

abyss, this militant reaffirmed the validity of the utopia of his organization, the Bund, his conviction that his historical perspective was correct.

On the eve of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the majority of members of the Jewish Combat Organization pronounced in favour of struggle, despite the overwhelming disproportion of forces (they had only a few dozen pistols in poor condition, and some grenades, knives and Molotov cocktails, and their numbers were only around 220, according to Edelman, in contradiction with the exaggerated figures that were subsequently advanced). ‘Humanity has already established that to die arms in hand is finer than to die with bare hands’, Edelman notes at this point, with the bitter irony that characterizes his memoirs. He also mentions the death of Mordechai Aniélevitch, a Zionist militant and commander of the Jewish Combat Organization, along with his eighty comrades, in the final hours of the insurrection, though he does not approve of this symbolic sacrifice: ‘This should not have been done. You don’t give your life for symbols’, he maintains. Edelman, together with a few of his companions, managed to escape from the ghetto through the sewers. He then worked as a doctor in Poland, where he had some trouble in the wake of Jarulewski’s *coup d’état* on account of his active sympathy for the Solidarność trade union. Could one imagine a more living embodiment of an act of faith in the future of humanity than the Warsaw ghetto uprising, when the Red Army was still a thousand kilometres from the Polish capital?

We discovered that there was far more truth in the memoirs of an escapee from the ghetto such as Marek Edelman, written without pretension or glamourizing, than in all the epic reconstitutions of this insurrection. Far from being heroic, Edelman explains, life in the ghetto was first and foremost grey and wretched, stunting both minds and bodies. The images retained in his memory – the trade in the ‘life numbers’ parsimoniously attributed by the Germans, the queues waiting for the trains to Treblinka despite the warnings of the Resistance (at the doors of the wagons bread was distributed to those leaving), the forming of the Jewish Combat Organization by a handful of young people whose combined age was just 110 years – these all created a scandal by giving the lie to prevailing legends. But, Edelman asks, is it an attack on the memory of the ghetto combatants to recall that they were so few in number and that their leader who will be remembered by posterity was the simple son of a fishwife?

The pious discourse about the Holocaust obscures memory, as the only distinction it makes is between the generic category of victims and that of the murderers. This is certainly in part because, at the end of the day, the Nazis reserved the same fate for a banker or a tailor, for the leader of the UGIF, the head of the *Judenrat* in Łódź and Warsaw as for the militants in the underground resistance in the ghettos. But for all that, this sinister democracy of the crematoria does not make an Edelman or an Aniélevitch equal before history with a Rumkowski, the head of the Łódź *Judenrat* who, with the help of his Jewish police, handed over tens of thousands of individuals on whom the deadly trap of the ghetto had closed, in the hope of saving his skin, or even a Czerniaków, the head of the Warsaw ghetto who ended up committing suicide in July 1942 when the Germans launched the first major deportation operation, having administered the ghetto on their behalf since it was established in 1940. These men followed traditions that were totally contradictory, a contradiction continued beyond the Nazi genocide.

In Paris, during the war, Jewish partisans organized commando actions at Jewish workshops in the Faubourg Poissonnière, where the bosses prospered from making equipment for the Wehrmacht; some of these combatants were arrested in the course of the actions, denounced by these 'good' Jews, and shot or deported. In the ghettos, the shadow fighters liquidated the most zealous members of the Jewish police or the collaborators of certain *Judenräte*. The leader of the Resistance in Vilnius handed himself in to the Germans under the pressure of his brothers in misfortune. The Judaism of the devout, fuelled basically by incantations and conditioned reflexes, does not like facts of this kind to be remembered. Which is why Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has a sulphurous odour still today.¹⁹

We have seen, in the revolts of the ghettos and extermination camps (in Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz), rebels whose motivation was above all else the desire to testify for the future, the moral and historical meaning of the action being more important than its tangible result. But such a meaning is not contained in these actions with the same precision and dryness as a military communiqué of the Resistance announcing that in the course of an action a group of partisans has killed so many enemies and taken so many rifles. The uncertain subjective dimension attached to the meaning of actions such as the revolt of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* or even the

Warsaw ghetto uprising opens the field for deadly clashes between candidates for the moral, historical and political legacy of the action of these combatants, for burning quarrels over interpretation and, let us say frankly, sometimes for the most injurious travesties of reality and distortions of meaning.

For some writers, the Warsaw ghetto uprising was pretty much entirely the work of Zionist militants, and when they took up the gun in April 1943 it was with the thought of their companions ‘across the Mediterranean’, the happy people making the desert bloom in Eretz Israel; it was to them, the future of the Jewish homeland, that they dedicated their combat and their death in the ghetto. Grayek Chalom, for instance, when he mentions this or that legendary figure of the ghetto uprising – Marek Edelman, Michaël Klebfish, the Bund militants – whose mistake was to be a political opponent of Zionism, shamefully omits to mention their regrettable political allegiance.²⁰ For others, the insurrection was above all the action of communist militants, and clearly the ‘sublime heroism’ of the combatants was nourished by the Stalingrad victory.²¹ For others, again, the uprising was a kind of stoic sacrifice designed to shake the conscience of the world, or else a combat conceived and organized with the perspective of linking up with the partisans in the forests. The list of these disagreements, and the transfiguration of reality that certain heroic visions of history induce, is never-ending and not always disinterested: the few hundred fighters, ragged and starving, armed with knives and home-made revolvers, becoming thousands, their faces lit up with hope by the victories of the Red Army (which, a year later, camped on the banks of the Vistula while the Germans crushed the Warsaw insurrection), or else by the grandiose achievements of the *haloutzim* in Eretz Israel.

A Bund veteran who has lived in Palestine since 1934 expresses indignation at this self-interested partiality of memory:

In Israel, the establishment is unwilling to recognize the positive work of other currents; you never hear any reference to the Bund in the schools, in discussions of the Warsaw ghetto. And yet, didn't we take part? The engineer Michaël Klebfish, who distinguished himself by making grenades and Molotov cocktails before falling in combat by throwing himself at a machine gun so that others could escape, wasn't he one of ours? And wasn't Artur Zygelboim one of ours? However, I often remember that at the time many *sabras* were not among those least indifferent to the fate of our brothers in Poland.

One day, I recall, soon after the war, we organized a meeting in Tel Aviv to commemorate the Warsaw ghetto uprising. A woman comrade from the Bund, who had escaped from the ghetto through the sewers, and the former secretary of the tailors' trade

union in Poland, Hersh Himmelfarb, were due to speak. Their speeches would be naturally in Yiddish. When Himmelfarb started speaking, he was interrupted by some people who started making a terrible row and finally attacked the podium and threw a flowerpot at his head. The meeting had to be stopped.

By dint of being commemorated, celebrated, recuperated, the Warsaw ghetto uprising often ends up being no more than a lifeless symbol, if not something still worse, an advertisement.²² These rituals almost lead to the resistance and combats in other ghettos being forgotten, such as those of Lachwa, Tuczyn, Białystok (a week of fighting in August 1943) or Minsk.

The odyssey of the Minsk ghetto combatants is striking in more than one respect. First of all, by the power of the organization that they set up only a few weeks after the Germans had captured the Byelorussian capital in late June 1941; its ramifications extended even into the *Judenrat* appointed by the Nazis. Also by the quality and solidity of the relations it maintained with the non-Jewish Resistance among the Soviet population, including the partisans. And finally by what was the most spectacular exploit of this ghetto Resistance: the rescue of thousands of people, including women and children, who managed to leave the city and join the partisan detachments and ‘family camps’ in the Byelorussian forests.

Two of our witnesses, Hersh Smolar and Yaakov Greenstein,²³ both experienced communist militants who took refuge on Soviet territory at the time of the invasion of Poland, and were caught in Minsk by the speed of the German advance in June 1941, played a key role in the ghetto Resistance. Smolar was one of its three leaders. He kept a grip on the many activities of the underground combatants: publication of leaflets and papers, reprinting the broadcasts of Soviet radio (it was a capital offence to possess a radio set in the ghetto), and contact with the outside world, in particular with partisan groups. The ghetto Resistance fighters provided weapons, medicine and uniforms that they took from the Germans to the fighters outside. Yaakov Greenstein gives an insight into these many activities:

The Resistance was structured into groups that acted according to the rules of strict secrecy. After a certain time, each group was responsible for contact with the partisans in a particular zone. We even had people in the ghetto administration, in the labour office, the housing office, the police. Some of them, working outside the ghetto, were charged by the organization with stealing weapons or printing and radio material. In this way our printer comrades managed to bring a whole secret printing press into the ghetto. But the task that most mobilized our militants was the production of weapons and their acquisition by every means possible.²⁴

His wife, Bella, took an active part in this work of ‘recovery’:

Bella went to work for a German unit. This unit was in charge of a major Soviet arms depot that had fallen into the hands of the occupiers. Along with other women, Bella had to do cleaning and washing, sometimes even clean weapons. This group of women were charged with stealing weapons, munitions and grenades and bringing them to the ghetto.

Bella did her work well. Each day, on her return from work, she brought precious weapons. We had made special trousers and shoes for her, so that she could hide bullets in them. From time to time, she brought a bundle of firewood: when we untied it, we found machine-gun components and grenades.

The head of the ghetto police, who subsequently joined the Resistance, obtained a false identity paper for Hersh Smolar, in the name of Yefim Stolarewitz. These false papers enabled him to move around and also work a bit in the ghetto, so as not to die of hunger. Soon, however, the Nazis were on his track:

The following night and day until noon, the Gestapo tried by all means to discover a trace of me. After midnight, Gestapo cars arrived in a courtyard that was only three buildings away from the place I was sleeping that night. But I heard the echoes of their automatic weapons, and the cries of despair of the women and children. An ordinary night in the ghetto ...

At dawn, I left my hiding-place and made for Moshe Gebeliev's workshop. He was one of the members of the Resistance triumvirate, and I asked him what had happened during the night. That was when I fell into the hands of the ghetto police, who took all the men to the very house which I used for my meetings, the apartment of Nina Lis, our liaison agent with the ‘Aryan side’. They ordered us to bring out the bodies of the people who had been killed the previous night and take them to the cemetery.

I was frozen, as if paralysed. I could hardly put one foot in front of the other. At that point I felt a hand on my shoulder pushing me back. I lifted up my eyes and saw Hersh Ruditser, one of our people who was also a member of the *Judenrat*. He had me accompanied by a ghetto policeman to a house close by, where they explained to me that the Gestapo had been looking in the night for Yefim Stolarewitz, and that, not finding him, they had killed all the inhabitants of the house, including women and children, a total of seventy people. Among them was Nina and her young daughter. The Gestapo had issued an ultimatum: if I was not handed in by midday, the whole ghetto would be liquidated.

The new head of the *Judenrat*, Yoffé (the former head, Eliahou Moushkin, had been hanged), had a clever idea, albeit macabre: he hastily had new papers made in the name of Yefim Stolarewitz, headed for the cemetery where he muddied them with blood from the victims of the previous night's massacre, then took them to the Gestapo chief: ‘We found these papers in the pocket of one of the dead men’, he said, ‘Yefim Stolarewitz is no longer in this world.’

Smolar himself, still well and truly alive, set out to organize the departure of as many people as possible from the ghetto for the zones held

by the partisans. These were very active throughout Byelorussia, which was covered with forests and marshes. From July 1941, Stalin had given the order to develop partisan detachments in the enemy's rear. These initially had to provide themselves with weapons taken from the enemy, and food from the peasants, but from 1943 they received logistic support from the Red Army. Liberated zones were formed, and the partisan detachments grew.

In Byelorussia, the Nazis were unable to complete their project of total extermination of Jews, as they had largely managed to do in Ukraine. Many Jews thus joined the partisans' ranks, and family camps were formed under their protection. In 1942, Smolar says, the partisans only accepted people able to bear arms. The ghetto resisters, for their part, supplied weapons bought from Italian soldiers who had been sent to the Russian front. But the successive raids conducted by the Nazis in the ghetto made this kind of activity increasingly difficult. The Resistance's financial resources dwindled, German workshops employed ever fewer Jews, and the resisters no longer had a foothold in the *Judenrat*. The Germans' successive *aktsia* led to the deportation of thousands of people. The Resistance leaders felt the net closing in around them.

They decided then to establish a Jewish base in the forest. At the same time, the leadership of a partisan unit led by a Soviet officer, Semion Gozenko, took the same decision. 'We appointed a builder, Shalom Zorin, as commander of this operation', Smolar explains. 'Our aim was to concentrate in the Zorin base all those we had been able to get out of the ghetto, including women, children and old men. Among those able to fight, many were directed to other partisan units, in the Nalivoki forest.'

Yaakov Greenstein explains that Semion Gozenko, a Ukrainian communist, had been helped to escape by Jews in the ghetto who worked on trash collection. They had hidden him in a cart filled with rubbish. He subsequently became commander of the Ponomarenko brigade, in which Jews were welcomed. He adds,

Zorin was in one of the first groups to escape from the Minsk ghetto and make for the forests. This group was part of the Stalin brigade. Zorin sent a message to the general in command of the brigade, Platon Tcherniagov, asking him whether it was possible to establish Jewish family camps for those unable to fight, under the protection of partisan units in the forests of Nalivoki.

Constantly subject to the threat of German round-ups, living in extraordinarily precarious conditions, suffering from cold, hunger and disease, these refugees did not have an easy life in the family camps. Many failed to survive the test – though a greater number did so than survived the convoys heading for Auschwitz or Treblinka.

Greenstein joined a partisan detachment fighting in the Ivenitz forest. Out of 130 combatants, seventy were Jews from the Minsk ghetto. The first action he took part in was designed to ensure supplies for the unit. At night, the partisans encircled a village whose inhabitants were known for their hostility towards the Resistance. They seized cattle and flour, loaded their booty onto carts and returned to their base across the German lines. He recalls,

We acted in groups of eight to ten people, so as not to be spotted by the Germans. As we operated in villages that were very close to the German garrisons, we conducted operations very quickly so as to get back to the forest before dawn. Each of these expeditions lasted a week. Each region was divided into zones, and each partisan brigade had its zone in which it had the right to draw supplies. The peasants themselves knew which brigade their zone belonged to. In the villages of their zone, the partisans were supposed to behave ‘humanely’; that is, only to take what was necessary, not to steal, and to convince the peasants that it was their duty to accept this tribute voluntarily in the fight against the enemy

Every week, representatives of the ‘special department’ went out to the villages and obtained information about the partisans’ behaviour. If it turned out that they had behaved incorrectly, or stolen, their group was severely punished. These rules did not apply to villages hostile to the partisans, those that collaborated with the invaders.

Hersh Smolar, after joining another partisan unit, accompanied the commander to the villages. This time it was no longer a matter of supplies, but rather of propaganda and recruitment:

Every evening I went with Commander Kasinski to one of the villages. We gathered the young people in one of the shacks and tried to convince them. If they agreed to follow us, we gave them a few hours to make preparations, and returned with them to the base at night. The majority of them came with their weapons. But if they did not show great enthusiasm, if they hesitated or said, ‘We’ll see, wait a bit’, Kasinski declared in a solemn tone, as if giving an order, ‘In the name of the Red Army, I declare you mobilized.’ Then they all came to the base. Once they arrived in the forest, they asked us to pardon the lack of enthusiasm they had shown, but they did not have any choice. If it was not clearly apparent that they had been ‘enrolled by force’, the Germans would kill their families.

Charged with directing a small unit of recruits, Smolar was quick to notice their lack of enthusiasm for the partisan life. He soon understood why:

One day, before midnight, I was standing guard – I did not want to give those placed under my orders the impression that I was privileged, either as leader or as a Jew – and I began to

hum a Polish poem by Adam Mickiewicz. And suddenly, without my noticing, all my partisan group got up and stood around me, looking at my face with surprise, but without a word. Then they said, 'Continue, chief, it's very good.' They didn't say 'beautiful', but 'good'.

It turned out that all these partisans were Poles, Catholics, whose parents had been arrested during the terrible year 1937 as 'Polish spies', and who even among the partisans had not dared 'confess' that they were not Byelorussians. After this episode, says Smolar, his relations with his men became excellent.

But the consequences of this forced mobilization appeared very dangerous. Smolar recalls how one day, at the time of the battle of Stalingrad, his brigade found itself encircled by the Germans while it was attempting to move base. He managed to escape, but lost all his recruits, the Polish peasants, who surrendered to the Germans. When the time came for investigation, explanations were conflicted. The brigade commissar explained that this treason was easily explained by the 'origins' of these young people. 'The apple does not fall far from the tree', he said; in other words, like father, like son. But a Jewish militant blamed those responsible for such a risky operation. At the end of the day, it was decided to regroup the Jewish partisans in a special unit. Smolar was appointed its commissar.

Yaakov Greenstein took part in an attack against a railway hub of strategic importance for the Germans, which was crowned with success:

Around 800 partisans, the whole brigade, had been mobilized for the operation. We were divided into different groups. My task was to take the station, then to blow up the tracks with dynamite. The brigade took up position, and at midnight exactly we launched an almighty fire. We were deployed over several kilometres. Shouting 'hurrah', we set off to attack the rails. Our shooting and cries from all sides sowed confusion among the Germans, who started running in all directions. Our bullets stung, and their dead and wounded littered the ground all round the railway station. We mined the tracks, lighting fuses that could be seen sparkling into the distance, then we mined the wagons and the locomotives that were in the station. The fire ceased and we withdrew – everything blew up. At dawn we were already 25 kilometres away. Our losses were only one dead and six wounded.

In Byelorussia, the partisans were not just fighting German troops, but also bands of Ukrainian irregulars, 'Vlassovians', the Byelorussian police, and sometimes also Polish partisan units supported by the government in London. Greenstein relates the extermination of a group of fighters belonging to the Zorin detachment by one of these Polish groups. By way of reprisal, he recalls, 'we erupted into their camp, taking them by surprise, so that they surrendered without a single shot being fired. Then we

disarmed them, took their officers, and divided their soldiers among our different units’.

Until the Second World War, despite the successive shocks of Hitler’s victory, then that of Franco, the defeat of the Popular Front in France and the Moscow trials, the world view of the Yiddishland revolutionaries maintained its unity, a form of cohesion based on confidence in the dialectic of history, the conviction that revolution was the currency of the century. After the war, the picture changed completely. Their world view, their perception of the present and the future, was torn asunder, between two resolutely antagonistic and contradictory poles. On the one side, there was the fact that, at the end of the day, fascism had been defeated and the traditional order in Europe overturned by the presence of the Red Army on half of its territory, and by the existence of powerful mass movements born out of the Resistance in countries such as France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, etc. Revolutionary optimism was thus set to gain a second wind in this situation, in which history seemed to be on the move once more, and the slogan ‘never again’ was echoed by tens of millions of workers and by thousands of fighters who were still armed. It was in order to take their place in this new rise of seemingly impending revolution that many Jewish militants returned to Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia to take part in the building of the ‘new order’, and others took up their work again in the workers’ organizations of Western Europe.

On the other side, however, there was also the fact that the world from which they had come, their native soil of Yiddishland, had been wiped off the map, and along with it the social, cultural, linguistic and historical fabric of their own existence. An irremediable break, a yawning gulf between past and present, which made them for evermore survivors of a *Yiddishkeit* suspended in the postwar air, more uprooted than the most wretched of the *Luftmenschen* of their buried world had ever been. For them, in particular, nothingness had become, as Adorno put it, a historical category.

‘Let a Frenchman try to imagine’, wrote Richard Marienstras,²⁵

but could he imagine its full consequences, a France wiped off the map, and him finding himself with a handful of French-speakers among men quite ignorant of what had been the collectivity to which he belonged, and whose language, customs, landscape, history, cuisine, institutions, religion and economy defined the concrete modalities of his membership of the human race. What then would be his taste for living, what possibility would he have of defining himself otherwise than in the most external fashion with the project of the community in which he found himself?