

## Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day 5776

יום השואה והגבורה

Warsaw, Poland: July 2015. Seventeen members from Temple Sinai are the only attendees at an hour-long piano recital featuring the music of Warsaw's most celebrated classical composer, Frédéric Chopin. The recital is held in a soaring rotunda adjacent to Warsaw City Hall. Lining the walls of the orchestra from floor to ceiling are centuries-old portraits of Polish royalty: men, women, and children. The 500 high-back chairs in the audience are upholstered in red crushed velvet, complementing the deep crimson carpeting on the floor. A gray haired pianist clad in black fills the hall with a whirlwind of notes, captivating the audience with his incredible talent.

I was not an appreciative audience. I was distracted by images of what it must have been like to sit in this bastion of luxury 70-plus years ago, listening to music, sipping libations, hobnobbing with those in power, while outside the Nazis' vice-like grip strangled the Jews of Eastern Europe. Sequestered in the recital hall, I felt trapped. Not a sound or sight from the outside world distorted the expressive concertos: not the drone of rush hour traffic, not the rumble of nearby street cars, not a glimpse of the modern city – nothing! I felt angry and agitated. How could anyone in Nazi-occupied Europe have sat here enjoying themselves while outside Jewish children foraged for food and families were marched through the boulevards toward death?

Scattered throughout the modern city of Warsaw are telltale remnants of Jewish life in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. Large sections of the ghetto walls still stand. The sizeable bricks are evenly spaced, held together by dense layers of cement. Elsewhere paving stones trace the outlines of the walls. They're inscribed with the words *Mur Getta*, ghetto walls, 1940, 1943. As the Jewish population in the ghetto rose, the walls were pushed back, constricting by thousands of square feet the already uninhabitable space.

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Elsewhere in what was the Jewish ghetto stories-high apartment buildings now stand vacant. Rising up from the ground like skeletons, they are draped with large canvases displaying photos of Polish Jews before the war. Photos of men and women on their way to work. Photos of children mugging for the camera. Photos of merchants managing pushcarts laden with all sorts of goods, hardworking people trying to make a living. The images are of everyday life, of everyday people.

Above a main thoroughfare in central Warsaw is a memorial call the Footbridge of Memory. It outlines the span over which Jews crossed from the small ghetto to the large ghetto. It's a narrow bridge, barely visible, a fleeting shadow like the thousands people who crossed it daily. Graffiti scrawled on a nearby utility box reads: *Po haya pa'am gesher*, once there was a bridge here. It was indeed a *gesher tzar m'od*, a very narrow bridge.

Not far from the Footbridge of Memory is the *umschlagplatz*, the square where Jews were rounded up and deported to extermination camps. On the original transport site now stands a dignified memorial, a marble structure shaped like a box car. But this box car is open on the top and on each side is a large space that lets in light and fresh air. Etched into the marble is a dedication: "Along this path of suffering and death, over 300,000 Jews were driven in 1942 through 1943 from the Warsaw ghetto to the gas chambers of the Nazi extermination camps." Carved into the remaining space on the memorial are the names of the Jews who were deported from this site. And on every street corner within the former ghetto are black stone blocks engraved with the Hebrew inscription *Zakhor*, remember. In Warsaw, it's impossible to **not** remember.

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The observance of *Yom HaShoah* is directly connected to Warsaw. It was there, on the 27th day of Nisan in 1943, that the Warsaw Ghetto uprising began. This uprising was the first urban uprising and the largest Jewish uprising in German-occupied Europe. The fighters were young, in their teens and twenties. They were not adequately equipped or trained in warfare, yet for three weeks they waged a strong and relentless resistance. The result, as we know, was doomed.

Each year, we dedicate the day on which the uprising began as a day of memorial to the martyrs of the Holocaust and to the heroes whose bravery and selflessness in the face of annihilation defies imagination. For the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe, and for Holocaust survivors and their families everywhere, every day is *Yom HaShoah*. There is no escaping the memory of the horrific crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Nazis and their collaborators. For those of us geographically distant from the sites of the former ghettos and extermination camps, we need *Yom HaShoah* as a reminder to never forget.

How easy it would be to isolate ourselves behind soundproof walls and opaque windows. We could shut out everything bothersome by focusing only on that which is pleasant in life. How secure we would feel closing our eyes to fear and injustice, paying no attention to hatred and prejudice, by cocooning ourselves in only pleasing settings and comfortable situations. But that's not living and that's not an appropriate Jewish response to the realities of the world.

It was in the basement of a house on Mila Street that the Warsaw ghetto uprising was planned and from which it was carried out. Across the street from Mila 18, embossed in the glossy façade of a nondescript building, are silhouettes of people

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walking. It's impossible to identify who these people are, but there are a lot of them, and they're all facing the same direction, embarking on a shared destiny. What appears to be shattered glass disrupts the images and showers down upon them from above, suggesting that something about their lives is irreparably broken. What I didn't notice about the mural until looking at a photo I took is that my image was reflected back with the images embossed on the wall. I was one with the people depicted in the mural.

This is the message of Yom HaShoah. We are not just observers to a tragedy that happened over there in Eastern Europe some years ago. As Jews, we are part of a shared history that touched our people, our families, and our loved ones. We are a family, regardless of where we live. What affects one Jew affects us all.

On Yom HaShoah, we stop, we observe, we reflect, we remember. We remember the heroes who risked their lives trying to save others. We memorialize the martyrs of our people and pray that their memory be remembered for blessing.

*Zikhronam Livrakhah.*