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Israel

The politics of memory

A debate over who did what in the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt is part of broader dilemmas of commemorating the Holocaust

By Amotz Asa-El

HAVING HEARD in 1942 the initial reports of the massacrings of European Jewry, an educator from the Jezreel Valley named Mordechai Shenhavi had a dream.

"I saw," he recalled in 1946, "millions walking toward Zion with tombstones on their shoulders ... and they chose a location, and each of them took down his tombstone ... and the monument of their lives was thus erected ... one kilometer long, one kilometer wide, and 100 meters high."

That fall, during a Jewish National Fund board meeting, he called to build a site that would commemorate the unfolding catastrophe's victims, and name it Yad Vashem, meaning "a monument and a name" (Isaiah 56:5).

It was a dream in line with the Jewish culture of memory that sanctifies the recollection of landmark events like the Exodus, the giving of the law, and the Creation.

Accepted by the Jewish Agency a week before Germany's surrender, Shenhavi's vision was made law in 1953, when the Knesset unanimously approved Yad Vashem's establishment, and Shenhavi became its first director.

Yet unanimity would soon prove elusive, as the Holocaust's commemoration would evoke narrative controversy, ideological bickering and emotional angst.

MENTIONED ALREADY in the Nuremberg Trials, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising became famous early as a Masada-like revolt joined by a coalition of Jewish groups led by Mordechai Anielewicz.

The son of impoverished grocers and a counselor in the socialist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair, Anielewicz was 23 when the ghetto's disparate youth movements, both Zionist and anti-Zionist, formed a united military underground.

Anielewicz, who was fair-haired and spoke an unaccented Polish, traveled in 1942 to Częstochowa, 200 kilometers south of Warsaw, hoping to organize a nationwide



Israeli youth look at a model of the Warsaw Ghetto displayed at the 'From Holocaust to Revival' exhibition at Kibbutz Yad Mordechai

revolt as the deportations to the death camps began. However, as the Warsaw Ghetto's evacuation began, he returned there, determined to make it rise up in arms.

Utilizing his basic acquaintance with light weapons, earned as a teenager in a Polish paramilitary summer camp, Anielewicz oversaw the smuggling into the ghetto of more than a hundred pistols and several rifles. At the same time, he and his colleagues manufactured homemade grenades and Molotov cocktails, and also prepared bunkers, trenches, and communication lines.

Called the Jewish Fighting Organization (JFO), the militia Anielewicz and his colleagues formed confronted German troops for the first time in January 1943, when he and a dozen of his men infiltrated a convoy of deportees and stormed its guards.

In the ensuing fighting most of the Jewish attackers were killed. However, the Germans were caught off guard, the deportations were halted, and word spread that Jewish guerrillas attacked German troops. Anielewicz's name quickly passed throughout the ghetto, and also outside it, where the attack he led inspired the Polish underground as well.

The 60,000 Jews who were still in the ghetto when the revolt began were planned to be deported April 19, Passover Eve 1943. The rebels, some 750 armed men and women, spent months preparing for that moment.

When the column of German and Ukrainian soldiers entered, they were fired at fiercely enough for its estimated 2,000 troops to hurriedly retreat, and for their commander to be replaced.

The new commander, Gen. Jurgen Stroop, who would ultimately be tried and hanged in Warsaw, torched the ghetto methodically, gradually reducing it to rubble and quelling the uprising. On May 8, the Germans reached Anielewicz's bunker on 18 Mila Street where sappers blew open its door.

The first German soldier to enter was immediately shot dead, but the Germans soon drilled a hole in the ceiling and flooded the bunker with gas. Some, including Anielewicz, died from the gas; others, including his girlfriend Mira Fuchrer, shot themselves dead.

Anielewicz's heroism soon grew much larger than one rebel's defiance, courage and death.

Eight months after Anielewicz's death, a

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new kibbutz, Yad Mordecai south of Ashkelon, was named after him. In 1951, a 4 meter-tall bronze monument of a muscular, stern-faced and bare-chested Anielewicz holding a grenade was erected on the kibbutz.

Israeli children were bussed by the thousands to the monument that in 1968 was joined by a museum that commemorates the Warsaw Ghetto fighters in general, and emphasized Anielewicz's role as the warrior who saved the honor of the Jews.

This is how the story was told until 2009, when former defense minister Moshe Arens, who died in January at 93, decried what he portrayed as a politicized narrative dictated by Israel's socialist founders.

ONE KILOMETER northeast of Mila 18, in Muranowska Square, warriors from a separate Jewish underground called the Jewish Military Organization (JMO) climbed onto a rooftop on April 19, hoisted a blue and white flag alongside a Polish red and white flag, and began sniping at Gen. Stroop's men.

Their battle lasted four days, in which almost all of JMO's 250 fighters were killed.

After researching the revolt, relying largely on Stroop's report to Hitler, Arens argued in his book, "Flags over the Warsaw Ghetto" (Gefen, 2011), that JMO and its Revisionist commander, Pawel Frenkel,

dominated the fighting, and not the socialist Anielewicz and the JFO.

The two flags under which Frenkel fought and died were cited not only by Stroop, but also by Israel's first foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, who, while hoisting Israel's flag at the UN, hailed "the blue and white flag ... that was waved above the Warsaw Ghetto's walls in the desperate revolt."

Arens claimed JMO's role in the fighting was edited out of the evolving narrative. Born in Lithuania and raised in New York, Arens was the American head of Betar, and did not deny his historiographic cause's political roots.

As he saw things, the revolt's narrative was shaped by Zivia Lubetkin (1914-1978) who fought alongside Anielewicz before reaching the Aryan side, where she fought with the Polish underground until the war's end. Lubetkin, whose granddaughter Roni would become the IDF's first woman combat pilot, shaped the narrative three times.

First, in a speech at Kibbutz Yagur in 1946, Lubetkin recounted the revolt at a time when the Labor-affiliated Hagana was handing over fighters from Menachem Begin's Irgun to British police. According to Arens, Lubetkin deliberately avoided mentioning Frenkel, the man, and JMO, the group.

Historiography's alleged manipulation

then continued when Lubetkin and her husband, fellow Warsaw Ghetto fighter Antek Zukerman, established with other ghetto fighters Kibbutz Lohamei Hagetaot – literally, The Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz – and built within it the Ghetto Fighters Museum, which also omitted Frenkel and JMO.

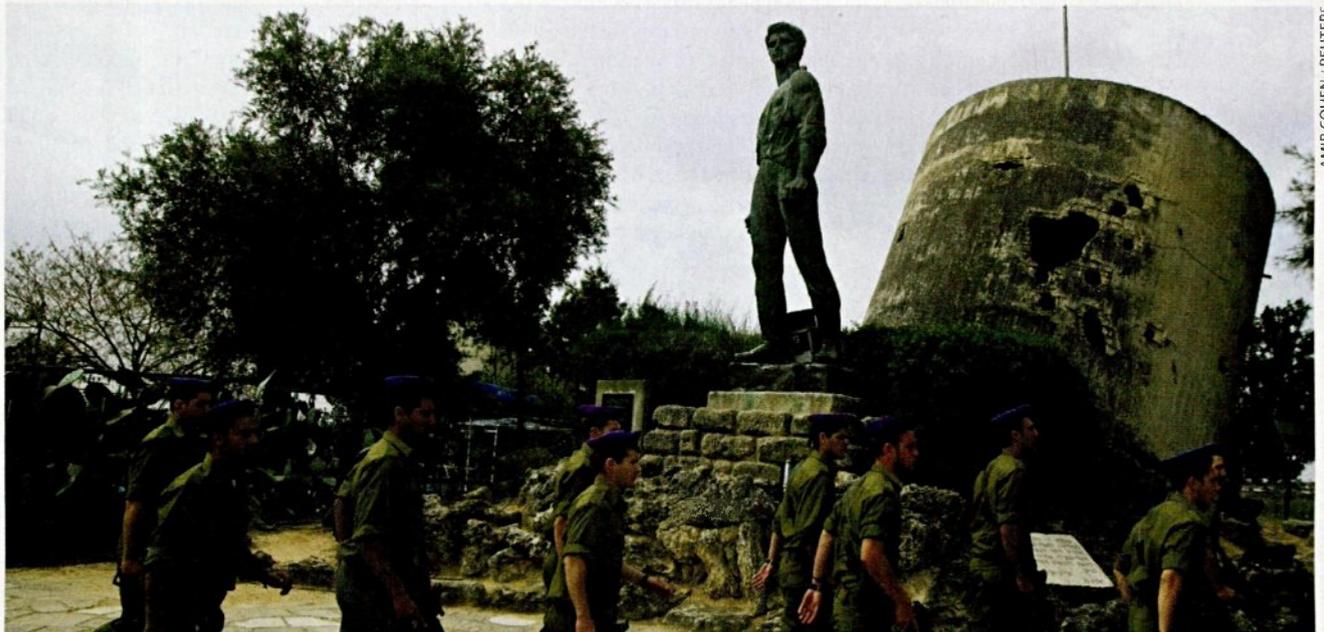
Finally, in her testimony during the Eichmann Trial in 1961, Lubetkin again made no mention of her political rivals' role in the revolt.

Arens's claim, that Frenkel's group was better trained and more effective militarily, is accepted by Holocaust historians like Yad Vashem's Dr. Havi Dreifuss, though Yad Vashem did not heed Arens's demand that it change its exhibition's portrayal of Anielewicz as the revolt's key figure.

Then again, JMO's fighting won forceful recognition when its battle's last survivor, Ziuta Hartman (1922-2015), was honored in 2008 with lighting a torch in the official, nationally televised Independence Day ceremony.

Having said all this, the politics that fueled Arens's cause will likely fade away, because the debate over the balance in the roles of the Jewish Right and Left in resisting the Nazis is dwarfed when compared with the larger dilemmas created by the Holocaust's commemoration.

The narrative underpinning Yad Vashem's landscaping and usage is that the



AMIR COHEN / REUTERS

Israeli soldiers walk in front of a statue of Mordechai Anielewicz, commander of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, at Kibbutz Yad Mordechai

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Warsaw ghetto survivor Aliza Melamed stands in front of a picture of Anielewicz

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Mordechai Shenhavi (left) at the cornerstone ceremony for the Naaman brick factory near Acre in 1939

story of the Holocaust must be told in one breath with the story of Zionism.

That is what guided its founder Shenhavi in the spirit of his dream about “millions walking toward Zion with tombstones on their shoulders,” and that is why foreign leaders are brought to lay a wreath in its Hall of Remembrance.

Most expressively, Yad Vashem’s very location, on Mt. Herzl’s shoulder, around the corner from Israel’s central military cemetery and a short stroll from the tombs of Theodor Herzl and eight Israeli prime ministers and presidents, is designed to decry the Holocaust as the result of the lack of Jewish power.

This narrative, like the quest to emphasize and glorify the ghetto revolts, reflects the shame Israelis originally felt in the face of the Jewish people’s failure to defeat the plot against the Jews. Driven by both anger and guilt, this complex was encapsulated in the Hebrew idiom “like lambs to slaughter.”

The term itself emerged from within the Holocaust’s gathering inferno when poet Abba Kovner (1918-1987) declared in the Vilna Ghetto on December 31, 1941: “Hitler is plotting to annihilate all of Europe’s Jews. The Jews of Lithuania are the first in line. Let us not go like lambs to slaughter!”

Kovner’s prophetic call, made three weeks before the Final Solution’s schem-

ing at Wannsee, but well after the mass shootings in Ukraine, Lithuania, and Latvia had begun, made some follow him to the forests where they fought as partisans.

The Zionist narrative stitched Kovner’s manifesto with the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt and the rest of the rebellions, and hailed them as the antithesis to the Jewish weakness that the Holocaust otherwise exposed.

The revolts’ legacy was amplified through monuments like Anielewicz’s, museums like Yad Vashem, and in the Knesset’s initial naming in 1951 of the national commemoration day as “Holocaust and Ghetto Uprising Remembrance Day.” This is also the spirit in which Israel annually sends schoolchildren, soldiers, generals, lawmakers, and ministers to attend memorial ceremonies at Auschwitz.

There are alternatives to this narrative.

THE HIDDEN Chamber of the Holocaust in Jerusalem’s Mt. Zion, a museum run by the adjacent Diaspora Yeshiva, avoids the Holocaust’s Zionist context and emphasizes religious aspects like the prayers the victims said before dying.

Though it has no pretension to rival Yad Vashem’s size, money, and scientific authority, this museum encapsulates ultra-Orthodoxy’s defiance of the Zionist narrative that sees in the Holocaust not divine punishment for the Jews’ religious sins,

but human punishment for the Jews’ lack of a state.

Yad Vashem’s proximity to the graves of Zionist icons like Theodor Herzl, Yitzhak Rabin, and 3,400 fallen IDF soldiers is implicitly, but evocatively, rivaled by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and its emergence in 1993 between the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial, and the White House.

The American museum contrasts with Yad Vashem not only in its location, but also in its sponsor, the American people, through an act of Congress and (partial) federal funding.

While welcomed by Israel, which sent president Chaim Herzog to address its opening ceremony, the American museum’s latent statement is that the Holocaust’s lesson transcends its Jewish context; that alongside the political guilt it evokes among Zionists it should evoke moral guilt among non-Jews.

Indeed, as noted in 2002 by Yale sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, the Holocaust’s treatment in the non-Jewish world has gradually been reconstructed from the story of a war crime to a super-symbol of evil whose commemoration should prevent future genocides anywhere in the world.

If Mordechai Shenhavi’s commemoration dream in 1942 could have a happy side to it, perhaps this is it. ■