



Resources

Holocaust Unit

Action - Resource F

Rosenstrasse Women

Many people believe that it was impossible for the Germans to resist the Nazi dictatorship and the deportations of German Jews. However, a street protest in early 1943 indicates that resistance was possible, and indeed, successful.

Until early 1943, Nazi officials exempted Jews married to Gentiles or "Aryans" (the Nazi term for German non-Jews) from the so-called Final Solution. In late February of that year, however, during a mass arrest of the last Jews in Berlin, the Gestapo also arrested Jews in intermarriages. This was the most brutal chapter of the expulsion of Jews in Berlin. Without warning, the SS stormed into Berlin's factories and arrested any Jews still working there. Simultaneously, all throughout the Reich capital, the Gestapo arrested Jews from their homes. Anyone on the streets wearing the "Star of David" was also abruptly carted off with the other Jews to huge provisional Collecting Centers in central Berlin, in preparation for massive deportations to Auschwitz.

The Gestapo called this action simply the "Schlußaktion der Berliner Juden" (Closing Berlin Jew Action). Hitler was offended that so many Jews still lived in Berlin, and the Nazi Party Director for Berlin, Joseph Goebbels, had promised to make Berlin "Judenfrei" (free of Jews) for the Führer's 54th birthday in April. This "Schlußaktion" was, indeed, the beginning of the end for about 8,000 of the 10,000 Berlin Jews arrested in its course. Many who left their houses for what they thought would be a "normal" day of work, without turning back for even a last glance or hug, were to end up shortly in the ovens of Auschwitz, never again to see home or family.

About 2,000 of the arrested Jews who were related to Aryan Germans, however, experienced quite a different fate. They were locked up in a provisional collecting center at Rosenstraße 2-4, an administrative center of the Jewish Community in the heart of Berlin. The Aryan spouses of the interned Jews—who were mostly women—hurried alone or in pairs to the Rosenstraße, where they discovered a growing crowd of other women whose loved ones had also been kidnapped and imprisoned there. A protest broke out. The women who had gathered by the hundreds at the gate of the improvised detention center began to call out together in a chorus, "Give us our husbands back." They held their protest day and night for a week, as the crowd grew larger day by day.

On different occasions the armed guards between the women and the building imprisoning their loved ones barked a command: "Clear the street or we'll shoot!" This sent the women scrambling pell-mell into the alleys and courtyards in the area. But within minutes they began streaming out again, inexorably drawn to their loved ones. Again and again they were scattered, and again and again they advanced, massed together, and called for their husbands, who heard them and took hope.

The square, according to one witness, "was crammed with people, and the demanding, accusing cries of the women rose above the noise of the traffic like passionate avowals of a love strengthened by the bitterness of life." One woman described her feeling as a protester on the street as one of incredible solidarity with those sharing her fate. Normally people were afraid to show dissent, fearing denunciation, but on the street they knew they were among friends, because they were risking death together. A Gestapo man who no doubt would have heartlessly done his part to deport the Jews imprisoned in the Rosenstraße was so impressed by the people on the streets that, holding up his hands in a victory clasp of solidarity with a Jew about to be released, he pronounced proudly: "You will be released, your relatives protested for you. That is German loyalty."

"One day the situation in front of the collecting center came to a head," a witness reported. "The SS trained machine guns on us: 'If you don't go now, we'll shoot.' But by now we couldn't care less. We screamed 'you murderers!' and everything else. We bellowed. We thought that now, at last, we would be shot. Behind the machine guns a man shouted something&emdash;maybe he gave a command. I didn't hear it, it was drowned out. But then they cleared out and the only sound was silence. That was the day it was so cold that the tears froze on my face."

The headquarters of the Jewish section of the Gestapo was just around the corner, within earshot of the protesters. A few salvos from a machine gun could have wiped the women off the square. But instead the Jews were released. Joseph Goebbels, in his role as the Nazi Party Director for Berlin, decided that the simplest way to end the protest was to release the Jews. Goebbels chose not to forcibly tear Jews from Aryans who clearly risked their lives to stay with their Jewish family members, and rationalized that he would deport the Jews later anyway. But the Jews remained. They survived the war in Berlin, registered officially with the police, working in officially authorized jobs, and officially receiving food rations.

The implications of this protest are that mass, public and nonviolent acts of noncooperation by non-Jewish Germans on behalf of German Jews could have slowed or even stopped the Nazi genocide of German Jews. True, some six million Jews were murdered. Not many Jews were saved. Yet when the (non-Jewish) German populace protested nonviolently and en masse, the Nazis made concessions. When Germans protested for Jews, Jews were saved.

Although there were a few men in attendance, this was a protest by women; women were really the origin and the core of the protest. Women, traditionally, have felt responsible for home and family; to the women who were protesting, their families were, in some sense, their careers; to lose their families was to lose everything meaningful for them.

At the protest in the Rosenstraße there was a flickering of a tiny torch, which might have kindled the fire of general resistance if Germans had taken note of the women on the Rosenstraße and imitated their actions of mass civil disobedience. Perhaps they did not do so because they were used to thinking that neither women, nor nonviolent actions, could be politically powerful.

Source: http://www.rosenstrasse-protest.de/texte/texte_stoltzfus.html