The dire circumstances of life in the ghettos forced the ghetto residents to struggle for survival on a daily basis. Thousands died of hunger, cold, disease and overcrowding. Physical survival was the primary battle of the ghetto residents.

Engaging in armed resistance was a different, and much more difficult, type of battle. Most ghetto residents, including infants, children, the elderly and the sick, had neither the will nor the strength required for armed resistance. Those who did attempt to engage in armed resistance had to find within themselves the extra determination, resolve and physical power to look further than their own private search for the necessities of life.

However, an examination of Jewish armed resistance in the historical context of the Holocaust reveals the terrible trap in which those who desired to resist found themselves. They were faced with a world of “choiceless choices”, as characterized by Professor Lawrence Langer, a Holocaust scholar. In the crushing reality of life in the Holocaust, decisions were made between one abnormal result and another, in what was always a lose-lose situation. As such, would-be resisters found themselves facing difficult decisions: should they resist when such actions would endanger their own families and communities because of the Germans' use of collective punishment? Should they resist in the face of opposition by the Judenrat, and the adults in general? Should they resist when financing a revolt meant that monies that could have been used to save Jews hiding outside the ghettos would have to be spent on weapons? Should they resist if by doing so they would have to desert their own families? This article will summarize some of the major dilemmas faced by those who considered armed revolt.

The Risk of Collective Punishment

Those who attempted armed resistance were not just risking their own lives – they risked the lives of those around them. When one Jew tried to escape or rebel, the Germans often punished ten Jews, twenty Jews or an entire community, according to their whim. Collective punishment was a tangible and real threat, and it served the Germans' purposes by paralyzing the will to act and directly affecting decisions regarding armed action. It was difficult to think of armed uprising when family and friends would bear the brunt of any punishment meted out if plans to rebel were discovered.

Baruch Shub has testified about the situation in the tiny Radoszkowicze ghetto with respect to those, like himself, who wanted to join the partisans and fight in the forest. Shub himself fled the ghetto and joined the partisans, a decision that disturbed him for the rest of his life:
Baruch Shub

Watch Baruch Shub's Testimony

Every day the Germans took everyone in the ghetto to the main square of the town... The Germans would count everyone and if someone was missing, the German would threaten to kill a number of Jews for every Jew that had fled from the ghetto. There was a group of youths who lived in the town that began to organize, and they started to talk openly about abandoning the town and going to the forest [to join the partisans]... The pressure from the community on this group of 15-20 youths was immense. The community was frightened to death that the moment one of these youths, never mind 15 of them, went to the forest and Germans counted the Jews the next day and found one missing, that all those who were left behind would suffer. For this reason there was incredible pressure from the community on this group for them to cancel their plans to go to the forest; to just sit quietly and hope things would work out.... A year afterwards, [two youths]... couldn't stand the tension anymore – this was already after I had left – and they left the town and joined the partisans. The Germans executed all 350 people who were still there. They left only 25 people alive in one house. This still haunts me – that I left so irresponsibly and maybe recklessly, without thinking about those around me....

This, then, was the first "choiceless choice" made by those who took the path to armed resistance: for any act of resistance, German reprisals were directed against their communities, their families, their friends.

Challenging Authority
In order to revolt against the Germans, it became necessary in certain of the ghettos for the resistance groups which were organizing to challenge the power of the established ghetto authority, the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police. The *Judenrat* in many cases thwarted the underground resistance movements by continually reassuring the population in the ghettos that all would be fine if they just cooperated with the Germans, as was the case in Bialystok, for instance. This is understandable if we remember that the mandate of the *Judenrat* was to obey German orders. Many members of the *Judenrat*, until the end, were convinced that they could negotiate with the Germans – the Germans, in turn, did much to foster this deception. As such, the *Judenrat* in many cases labored under the completely mistaken impression that the Germans would behave logically and that, since the Jews were their workers, they would never squander their work force by murdering it. Such things defied logic, and could therefore not be true.

In Vilna, 60,000 Jews were taken away and disappeared, beginning in the summer of 1941. Rumor had it that they had been murdered en masse in Ponary, a nearby forest. These rumors reached the *Judenrat*. Information was available to the *Judenrat* because six women who had been wounded by gunfire in Ponary managed to escape and to return to the Vilna Ghetto hospital. However, the information was kept secret, whether out of fear for the women's lives, to prevent panic among the general population, or because the *Judenrat* did not believe the Nazis could or would kill all the Jews of Vilna. Thus, for the first few months of systematic murder in Ponary, the Jews of Vilna believed that the thousands of kidnapped men had been taken to work. The youth movements, on the other hand, were far more realistic and analyzed the situation more dispassionately. They were not fooled by German deception, nor did they have any false hopes. On the basis of the same information as was available to the *Judenrat*, they reached a completely different conclusion. By January 1, 1942, 150 members of the youth movements in Vilna gathered to hear Abba Kovner read his manifesto:

*They shall not take us like sheep to the slaughter!*

*Jewish youth, do not be led astray. Of the 80,000 Jews in the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" (Vilna),*
only 20,000 remain.
Before our eyes they tore from us our parents, our brothers and sisters. Where are the hundreds
of men who were taken away for labour by the Lithuanian "snatchers"? Where are the naked
women and children who were taken from us in the night of terror of the "provocation"?
Where are the Jews [who were taken away on] the Day of Atonement?
Where are our brothers from the second ghetto?
None of those who were taken away from the ghetto has ever come back.
All the roads of the Gestapo lead to Ponary.
And Ponary is Death!
You who hesitate! Cast aside all illusions. Your children, your husbands, and your wives are no
longer alive.
Ponary is not a camp – they were all shot there.
Hitler is scheming to annihilate all of European Jewry. The Jews of Lithuania were tasked to be
first in line.
Let us not go like sheep to the slaughter!
It is true that we are weak and defenseless, but resistance is the only response to the enemy!..
Resist! To the last breath.[2]

This proclamation represented a turning point in an understanding of the situation and how to
respond to it. The idea of resistance was disseminated from Vilna by youth movement couriers,
mainly women, to the ghettos of Poland, Lithuania and Belorussia.
The news reached the Warsaw ghetto, where the ghetto residents saw the same thing happening
to them in the summer of 1942 when about 300,000 Jews were deported from the ghetto and
murdered in Treblinka. In Warsaw, when mass deportations began, the Judenrat urged the Jews
not to hide from the Germans, but to report voluntarily for deportation. [3] However, the youth
groups in Warsaw, as well, came to the conclusion that there was a plan to exterminate the Jews,
and determined that armed struggle against the Nazis was the road they would take.[4] However,
in order to recruit the whole ghetto population in their struggle against the Nazis, they first had to
create a new authority in the ghetto to replace the Judenrat. The decision was made to execute
the two police commanders Josef Szczerynski and Yakov Leyken, as well as Israel First, the
Judenrat's contact man with the German authorities. These were the people seen as responsible
for collaborating with the Germans, and for the deportation of the thousands of Jews to their
deaths in Treblinka. As Zivia Lubetkin explains,

[W]e wanted to strike a blow at the Judenrat and its police force, the accomplices to the
extermination of tens of thousands of Jews. We wanted to put fear in their hearts. We wanted
everyone to know that from now on there would be reprisals for every criminal act committed
against Jews. We knew that the Germans could not find us without the help of Jewish informers
and collaborators….Our reasons for executing these two collaborators and German henchmen
were explained on wall-posters that we pasted throughout the ghetto. We warned that the Jewish
Fighting Organization would avenge any crime committed against the Jews.
We were amazed at the effect of the operation. It far surpassed any of our expectations or
dreams. Our Jewish brothers and the members of the Judenrat finally understood that there was
another authority in the ghetto. [5]
The fact that the ZOB in the Warsaw ghetto successfully challenged the authority of the Judenrat and the Jewish police, and rallied the ghetto population around the resistance organization instead, explains to a great extent, the success of the uprising in Warsaw when it finally came in April 1943. The fighters encouraged the ghetto population to fight back however they could, even passively just by hiding and preventing the Germans from deporting them. As such, the fighters were not the only ones to stand up against the Germans; approximately 50,000 Jews who remained in the ghetto joined the fighters in the struggle by hiding in bunkers underground and refusing to cooperate with the Germans when they came to clean out the ghetto. This ultimately made things much more difficult for the Germans.

The Dilemma of Procuring Weapons

Another "choiceless choice" involved how to procure and pay for weapons. The decision to opt for armed combat necessitated procuring weapons, yet obtaining weapons during the Holocaust was a nearly impossible task. Incredible courage, quantities of money, and connections with non-Jewish members of the underground were essential in order to obtain weapons. However, even if these preconditions were met, they were not always enough. Even when the members of the underground movements had weapons, in most cases they did not know how to use them. Ultimately, the youth movement fighters succeeded in obtaining only a very small number of weapons.

The issue of obtaining weapons was fraught with moral questions. For instance, where would the money come from? In Warsaw, it had to be "coerced" from the rich Jews of the ghetto, as Lubetkin explains:

Large sums of money were needed to purchase weapons. It cost millions of zlotys to arm five hundred fighters. In the beginning we set up a sub-committee to solicit contributions under the aegis of the Coordinating Committee. When this proved insufficient, we started to impose taxes. We began with the public organizations, the Judenrat treasury and the ghetto bank, which was guarded by Polish policemen. One fine day we went in with pistols and took all the money from the bank. We emptied the Judenrat treasury in a similar manner. Later on, when these funds proved to be insufficient, we levied taxes on rich Jews, particularly those who maintained ties with the Germans. It went very easily at first. We would send a notice from the Jewish Fighting Organization: "You are required to pay, etc.," and we would receive the money straight away. They obviously thought it was the fearsome gentiles who were demanding the money. When they learned who was really responsible they said, "Yiddishe gaslonim (Jewish thieves), they certainly won't impose any severe punishments," and they refused to pay. Although we knew only too well that all the Jews would eventually be murdered and their money stolen, we could not kill Jews for not fulfilling their obligations. Preserving the high moral level of our fighters was always a primary consideration for us.

…..we finally had to set up our own jails where we detained those who refused to help us financially. We imposed our taxes only on the rich whose source of income was definitely
known to be corrupt. Even in jail they were reluctant to meet our demands. Their families, however, finally agreed to pay the required sums.[6]

This was not the only moral conundrum. The large amount of money required for the purchase of weapons could have been used to ease physical suffering of ghetto residents, or to support those Jews who had escaped the ghetto and were living in secret on the "Aryan" side of a particular city. In other words, the members of the youth organizations often had to decide between using money to procure weapons or to secure food and shelter – another “choiceless choice.” Every decision created a new dilemma. This dilemma was discussed by Marek Edelman in a frank interview conducted with journalist Hanna Krall in 1976.[7]

[Edelman]: We were accumulating weapons then. We would smuggle them from the Aryan side (we were forcefully taking money from various institutions and private people); we also published newspapers, and our liaison girls took them all over Poland...
[Krall]: How much did you have to pay for a revolver?
[Edelman]: Between three and fifteen thousand [złotys]. The closer to April [1943], the greater the cost: market demand was growing ever larger.
[Krall]: And how much did you have to pay for hiding a Jew on the Aryan side?
[Edelman]: Two, five thousand. Different prices. It depended on whether the person looked Jewish, whether they had an accent, whether it was a man or a woman.
[Krall]: That means that for a price of a single gun it would be possible to hide a person for a month. Or perhaps two people, maybe even three.
[Edelman]: It was also possible with a gun to ransom a Jew from a szmalcownik [Poles who would blackmail Jews in hiding or trying to pass as Aryans, agreeing not to turn them into the Gestapo for a fee].
[Krall]: If you were then faced with a choice – one revolver or a single’s person life for a month...
[Edelman]: We weren’t ever faced with that kind of choice. Perhaps it’s better that we weren’t.[8]

Abandoning One's Family

Often, another "choiceless choice" that had to be made by the fighters involved the knowledge that by participating in armed resistance, they would have to abandon their families. Abba Kovner was one of the outstanding figures among the partisans in the forests of Lithuania. Yet, even though he was a commander in the Vilna Ghetto underground, Abba Kovner did not succeed in saving his mother – he could not take her to the forest with him, and she was forced to remain behind in the Vilna ghetto. She was murdered at Ponary. Often, powerlessness and the inability to save parents and siblings resulted from these difficult decisions, and they exacted a heavy price, even years later. Abba Kovner went on to become an acclaimed Israeli poet after the Holocaust and his aliyah (immigration) to Israel, but his inability to save his mother continued to haunt him. In some of his poems, Abba Kovner describes the blatant contradiction between his image as a fighter, a partisan and a leader, and his failure to save his mother.

*I'll be back. And they will call to me, Savior.*
*Armed I'll be back. Seated on a white horse.*
Not a white horse and not a savior!
On this path I will come. Beneath the fence
Like a mole, I’ll return to every threshold.
Brothers, he said, I showed you the way!
A gloomy and narrow lane of life.
Shrouded in bereavement, mothers will approach me
And they will say, Our son! And my mother
My mother didn’t say anything.

I’m tired. I opened a gate. In a little while I’ll rest
From my journey. The forest, the forest!
(And the forest is big and alien)\[9\]

The trap in which Jews found themselves and the heavy price exacted by the difficult decisions that they were forced to make, cast a shadow on the familiar definition of the word “heroism.” Years after the Holocaust, Hasia Taubes, a member of the youth movement, who escaped from the ghetto, said: “To leave a mother – it’s moral bankruptcy.”\[10\]

Conclusion

An examination of the “choiceless choices” that faced would-be resisters makes each and every manifestation of armed resistance that much more worthy of respect, and that much more surprising. In comparison to the moral dilemmas faced by young people, often teenagers, who attempted to resist a power much greater than themselves, picking up weapons may have been the least difficult part of resistance. Understanding the “choiceless choices” that faced the resisters clarifies for us the overwhelming odds against resistance. It becomes much easier to understand the decision made by the majority of the Jews in the ghettos not to resist.

[1] Baruch Shub, testimony, Yad Vashem Museum Archives.
[4] Leyken, because of his height and his brutality, was called "the little Napoleon."
[7] Edelman was born in 1921 in Warsaw. During the war he was a member of the Bund movement and, together with other members of the Bund, he joined the resistance in the Warsaw ghetto in November, 1942. He was one of the commanders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He survived the war and remained in Poland where he became a respected cardiologist and came to be considered a national hero for the work he did opposing Communist rule. He died in 2009 and was buried in Warsaw with full military honors.