No Song for Birds in Flight: The Life and Afterlife of Suicide in the Warsaw Ghetto

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An unnamed square in northern Warsaw is the center of the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto. The northern side of the square is named for Józef Lewartowski, a resistance organizer who was shot by the Gestapo in 1942, while the southern boundary bears the name of Mordechai Anielewicz, a 24-year-old commander of Jewish forces during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Near the center of the grassy area stands the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which opened in 2014 and attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. The museum's main entrance faces the eastern edge of the square, and to enter the museum a visitor must pass Nathan Rapoport's memorial to the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Rapoport's monument, which was unveiled on the fifth anniversary of the uprising in April 1948, displays two scenes on its eastern and western faces: on the eastern side of the monument is a bas-relief scene of a procession of Jews being crowded for deportation (Figure 1). On this side of the monument, the figures are static: with the exception of a bearded man clutching Torah scrolls and reaching forward, the figures in the crowd are hooded and gazing at the ground. The physical flatness and restrained imagery of the eastern face of the monument starkly contrast the western side, which depicts a battle scene from the 1943 uprising (Figure 2). Flanked by fellow fighters, a bronze-cast Anielewicz leans out from the frieze, clutching a grenade, his gaze turned skyward. A trilingual commemoration is carved on the base below the bronze fighters: "The Jewish Nation: To Its Fighters and Martyrs."[1] The monument presents a clear binary between the Jewish fighters who resisted—whose features and figures are rendered in vibrant detail—and the flat forms of the hundreds of thousands who were deported to the death camps.

When Rapoport's monument was unveiled in 1948, it was hailed by Polish experts as "a first-rate ideological concept"[2] and "the first postwar monument that can be called an achievement."[3] Writing in 1948, architect Bohdan

1. Presented on the monument in Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew.

2. Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, Poland. Sygn. 303/X/32. (Bohdan Pniewski in "Wypowiedzi przedstawicieli świata nauki i sztuki dotyczące Pomnika Bohaterów Getta Warszawskiego," [Statements from Representatives of the World of Science and Art Concerning the Monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto], Central Committee of the Jews in Poland, Building Committee, April 28, 1948). All Polish translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

3. Jarnuszkiewiczowa, Jadwiga, "Pomnik Bohaterów Getta" (Monument of the Ghetto Heroes), *Architektura* 6/7, 1948, no. 33. Accessed via the online collections of the Warsaw Public Library, Central Library of Mazovia.

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Figure 1: Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, eastern face. Photo by Kat Peplinska.

Pniewski drew attention to the contrast between the two faces of the monument, praising "the dynamic form of the sculpture's front, which expresses a battle, and the calm, subtle sculpting in the back," while adding that "it is good that the front is made from bronze, and the rear from stone," a judgement that calls further attention to the imbalanced depiction of the ghetto fighters as individuals, juxtaposed with the masses who went to Treblinka.[4] The monument and early commentary surrounding its content reveal a crucial dimension of commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto: the manner of death, or the alleged *choice* in that manner of death, was a strong determinant of how the victims and survivors of the ghetto were commemorated. The illusion that most Jews went peacefully to their deaths has already been sufficiently debunked, but the impact of this view on perceptions of death and suicide in the Warsaw Ghetto and in the aftermath of the Holocaust have not been fully explored.

In this article, I explore how one manner of death in particular—suicide—has shaped the legacy of the Warsaw Ghetto and perceptions of death in the ghetto itself. In addition to influencing how the ghetto has been commemorated and remembered, I argue that survivor and witness accounts of suicide in the ghetto can also be analyzed to bring new understandings to how the social concepts of morality and choice functioned in the ghetto. Relying primarily on first-person sources, such as diaries, memoirs, and interviews, I reconstruct how ghetto suicide was understood and evaluated as one of the

4. Jewish Historical Institute, 303/X/32.

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Figure 2: Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, western face. Photo by Kat Peplinska.

few choices available to Jews under Nazi occupation. These sources often frame suicide as an act that was loaded with a moral significance that distinguished it from other ways of dying in the ghetto: although death was omnipresent in wartime Warsaw, death by suicide was not, and survivor

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recollections show the controversy and ethical dilemmas surrounding the act of suicide. I aim to emulate the methodology of Saul Friedländer, who advocates for an approach of "working through," or "rendering as truthful an account as documents and testimonials will allow, without giving in to the temptation of closure," in the presentation of histories of trauma.[5] In this case, the avoidance of 'closure' permits an exploration of suicide not only as a psychological topic, but as a historical subject connected to changing social conditions in the ghetto. The goal of this study is neither to condemn nor glorify events of suicide in the Warsaw Ghetto; Rather, the study of suicide in the context of the Holocaust presents an opportunity to rigorously question preconceived notions of morality, choice, and resistance in the shadow of genocide.

This article adds to the existing debate surrounding suicide and the Holocaust by centering studies of wartime suicide on the role of the witness. To date, many of the extant works on suicide during the Holocaust have focused on the effect of Nazi policies on suicide rates in Jewish communities under occupation. Studies addressing this question include those by Konrad Kwiet, Thomas Bronisch, David Lester, and Karolina E. Krysinska.[6] In addition to scholarship that approaches suicide from an epidemiological or quantitative point of view, there is also the body of work which examines suicide as a qualitative element of life and death during the Holocaust.[7] Works by Konrad Kwiet and Mark Mengerink fall into this category.[8] In this article, I focus not only on the data and context of suicidal acts, but also on witness accounts that deal with the idea of suicide to expand what Mengerink has called the "continuum" of reactions to suicidal behavior.[9] I contextualize the question of suicide in the Warsaw Ghetto into the broader histories of wartime resistance, choice, and morality.

Incorporating the perspective of the witness into a history of suicide allows us to refer to methodological innovations made by scholars in the fields of historical memory and trauma studies, such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshanna Felman, and Lawrence Langer.[10] Caruth theorizes trauma as the inability to

5. Saul Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah,'" *History and Memory* 4, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 1992): 53.

6. See: Konrad Kwiet, "The Ultimate Refuge: Suicide in the Jewish Community under the Nazis," *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 29, no. 1 (January 1984); Thomas Bronisch, "Suicidality in German Concentration Camps," *Archives of Suicide Research* 3 (1997); David Lester and Karolina E. Krysinska, "Suicide in the Lodz Ghetto During World War Two," *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 42, no. 3 (2000).

7. For a helpful summary of the historiography of quantitative studies of suicide during the Holocaust, see: Itzhak Levav and Anat Brunstein Klomek, "A Review of Epidemiologic Studies on Suicide Before, During, and After the Holocaust," *Psychiatry Research* 261 (March 2018): 35–39.

8. Mark Mengerink, "The Holocaust's Forgotten Victims? Jews, Suicide, and Resistance" (PhD diss., University of Toledo, 2006).

9. Mengerink, "The Holocaust's Forgotten Victims?" 187.

10. See: Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, 1995); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, 1996); Shoshana Felman, "In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," in "50 Years of Yale French Studies: A Commemorative Anthology. Part 2: 1980–1998," a special issue of *Yale French Studies* 97 (2000); Lawrence Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven, 1998).

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process or assimilate the memory of catastrophic events: in the history of suicide, neither the encounter itself nor the aftermath are explorable except through the interpretation of witnesses. Including witness understandings and ruminations on suicide, as opposed to focusing on suicide exclusively as a means of dying, allows us to build on Caruth's thesis by illuminating a spectrum of daily experiences somewhere between "the encounter itself" and "the experience of having survived it."[11] I take seriously Felman's claim that "the main role of the historian is, thus, less to narrate history than to *reverse the suicide*."[12] In bringing witness voices to the foreground of the history of suicide in the Warsaw Ghetto, I attempt to populate this space of deep silence with what Felman has called "the uniqueness of the living voice:" the varied (and sometimes contradicting) impressions of the individuals who experienced these events and committed them to history through their written or spoken testimony.[13]

The question of how scholars writing on this region can approach the history of suicide was raised by Róisín Healy, who advocates for an integration of scholarly attention to suicide into other areas of historical inquiry.[14] Such an approach has proven useful in investigating how dramatic social changes have imprinted themselves on changing beliefs regarding death and suicide, a topic that is surely relevant to societies that have undergone as much turmoil and tragedy as Poland in the last century. The traumatic experience of the Second World War—which in Poland was accompanied by mass public death on a scale seldom encountered in human history—preceded the seismic sociopolitical flux accompanied by the end of the war and the beginning of a major domestic power struggle.

"Working Through" Ghetto Morality

This section focuses on witness testimony concerning the act of suicide as well as those that ruminate on the idea of the act as well as suicidal thinking. Émile Durkheim theorized suicide as one of the "great group of states of mind which would not have originated if individual states of consciousness had not combined, and which . . . derive from individual natures."[15] Durkheim argued that the degree of isolation from or integration into society directly affected the emergence of suicidal behavior within a group, therefore, according to Durkheim's formulation, the prevalence of suicidal behavior is an indicator of social integration in a given community. This perspective, which is valuable in its recognition of the social determinants of psychological health, falls short in capturing the wide variety of meanings assigned to suicide by ghetto writers. Aron Einhorn, a scholar who took part in the compilation of the underground Oneg Shabbat archive, responded to a survey of intellectuals in 1942 assessing the changing relations between Yiddish-speaking Jews

11. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 7.
12. Felman, "In an Era of Testimony," 115. Emphasis in original.
13. Ibid.
14. Róisín Healy, "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 3 (September 2006).
15. Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, 2nd ed. (London, 2005), 277.

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and the Polonized intellectual class in the ghetto.[16] Einhorn had a pessimistic view of the possibility of coexistence between these groups, describing social conditions in the ghetto as a "moral swamp" that was worsened by the fact that "there had never before been such a deep impasse between the intelligentsia and the masses," caused by the "indifference" of the former.[17] When asked if he could think of any improvements in social cohesion in the ghetto, Einhorn answered that "the only bright moment has been the fact that the Jews cling so strongly to life, they fight for it stubbornly. The best proof is the small number of suicides in the ghetto."[18] To Einhorn, the failure of social cohesion among Jews of different socio-cultural background was, at least slightly, offset by the individual yearning for life that seemed to be reflected in the suicide statistics: The low number of observed suicides represents for Einhorn not the triumph of social cohesion, but the transcendence of the individual above the disintegrating social world of the ghetto. Responding to the same survey, journalist Shul Stupnicki also praised the preservation of individual life amidst the suffering in the ghetto: "I see it as a positive [sign] that people in the ghetto have become so toughened, so hard-hearted that they pass by the dead and keep fighting for life."[19] Like Einhorn, Stupnicki did not observe strengthened social bonds among residents of the Warsaw Ghetto, but instead viewed increased individual resilience as a product of the failure of those bonds.

The views of Stupnicki and Einhorn, who before the war were both members of the Yiddish-speaking Warsaw intelligentsia, are at odds with those expressed by diarist Chaim Aron Kaplan. Kaplan, who was born and raised in a traditional family in Horodyszcze (today Haradzišča, Belarus) and felt out of place in the Warsaw Jewish community, even after forty years living among Warsaw Jews; his diary includes both passionate rebukes and defenses of them.[20] Apparently aware of the mass suicides that followed the intensification of Nazi oppression in Germany and Austria in the mid-late 1930s, Kaplan described the absence of such suicides as reflective of a distinct "secret power" of the "beaten-down, shamed, broken Jews of Poland."[21] Unlike their counterparts in Austria and Germany, who "voluntarily wiped themselves out when the world became too narrow for them," the low suicide rate among Polish Jewry revealed "a wondrous, superlative power with which only the most

16. Known as the "Two and a Half Years Project." For more on the background and findings of the survey, see: Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington, 2009), 230–51.

17. Aron Einhorn response, ca. early 1942. Ringelblum Archive: The Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, vol. 26: Literary Works from the Warsaw Ghetto. Eds. Marek Tuszewicki and Agnieszka Żółkiewska (Warsaw, 2017), 85–86. All citations from the Ringleblum Archive were accessed via the online collections of the Jewish Historical Institute (Warsaw, Poland) unless otherwise noted.

18. Einhorn response, 88. Op. cit. Jewish Historical Institute, Ringelblum Archive.

19. Shul Stupnicki response, ca. early 1942. Ringelblum Archive, vol. 26.80–83. As quoted and translated in Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?* 237.

20. Abraham I. Katsch, "Introduction," in Chaim A. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan* (New York, 1973), 12.

21. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, 131.

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established communities among our people have been blessed."[22] This claim, written in Kaplan's diary nine months before the establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto, inverts the Durkheimian premise of anomic suicide: the harshness of Nazi oppression in Warsaw did not alienate and destroy the city's Jews, but instead awakened an innate connection to "our eternal tradition that commands us to live."[23] The distinction that Kaplan draws between the will to live of Warsaw Jews and German Jews reflects the comparative religiosity of these groups: before the war, Polish Jews were generally more traditional and religious than their counterparts in Austria and Germany, a fact that was believed to shape these communities' rates of suicide since the early twentieth-century.[24] One might certainly expect that areas of higher religiosity would have lower rates of suicide when considering Judaism's categorical condemnation of suicide, although Jewish suicide rates in Poland had in fact been on the increase since the 1920s.[25] In addition to reflecting cultural beliefs, Kaplan's diary also reveals his personal views on the Jews of Warsaw and on the city itself. His appraisal of the "secret power" of the Warsaw Jews reflects the derisive sarcasm that he often used to describe worsening conditions in the city (which he occasionally described as a "Polish Sodom," which "even in peacetime was not outstanding for its hospitality").[26] Despite the light contempt in these descriptions, Kaplan's comparison of different European Jewish communities frames suicide as an act that could create boundaries around regional groups and even define national character: Warsaw was differentiated from Vienna or Berlin not only by tradition, history, and circumstance, but also by its Jewish population's predilection to suicide.

Other written accounts from wartime Warsaw portray suicide in a different light. Leyb Goldin described the reduced occurrence of suicide in the ghetto in his semi-autobiographical account of a man dying of starvation. Unlike the previous authors, who view resistance to suicide as an indication of new internal strength, Goldin attributed the same trend to weakening morals among ghetto inhabitants. After seeing a man who allegedly died of hunger buried with "injuries on his neck," Goldin's protagonist Arke (a stand-in for Goldin himself) wonders whether the man may have committed suicide:

> Maybe he didn't die of hunger—maybe he committed suicide? Ah, but how? Nobody takes his own life today. They used to commit suicide in the good old days . . . why does nobody take his own life anymore? The pain of starvation

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Within each national context, levels religiosity and assimilation varied a great deal. For more on the religiosity of Polish Jews in the interwar period, see Theodore R. Weeks, *From Assimilation to Antisemitism: The "Jewish Question" in Poland, 1850–1914* (DeKalb, 2006) and Szymon Rudnicki, "Jews in Poland between the Two World Wars," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2011). For early commentaries on religiosity and suicide and a thorough exploration of the Jewish press's coverage of interwar suicides, see: Daniel Rosenthal, "Victims of Seductive and Unfortunate Lives: Jewish Suicide in Interwar Poland," *Jewish History* 29, no. 3/4 (December 2015).

25. Rosenthal concludes that suicide rates increased among Polish Jews throughout the interwar period among secular and religious Jews, a process that was entangled with increasing urbanization and the economic crises of the 1920s–30s.

26. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, 183 and 248.

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> is terrible and more lethal than any disease. You see, diseases are human, capable of humanizing the sick man, ennobling him. Hunger however is something animal, wild, primitive. . . a starving human turns into an animal. And animals know nothing of suicide.[27]

For Goldin, the absence of wartime suicide indicates the completeness of the dehumanization of the starving ghetto inhabitants, while Einhorn explains the same phenomenon as a result of a yearning for life shared among Jews of various social classes. Like Einhorn, Goldin writes of weak social ties in the ghetto, focusing particularly on how mass starvation served to erode prewar social bonds. "It might happen, today or tomorrow, that I will have to give up my ration card," Arke imagines, "And the cashier, and the waitress, and the big wig by the door—they will look at me indifferently for the last time, and they will never guess that I will never come again. . . but *I* will know. . . and maybe in a few months or *after* the war, when the statistics about dead consumers comes out, I will be represented in them."[28] Both of these testimonies of death in the ghetto provide pessimistic views of social cohesion among ghetto inhabitants, with suicide functioning as an indicator of different processes relating to society in the ghetto and the individual fight for survival.

In these accounts, descriptions of suicide act as a signifier to explain or process disintegrating social systems in the Warsaw Ghetto. Einhorn's suggestion that the low number of suicides suggests an internal attachment to life seems to directly contradict Goldin's observation that suicide decreased as ghetto residents became more "animal, wild, [and] primitive." Emphasizing the individual perspectives of these two writers helps clarify how suicide relates to social cohesion in the ghetto, and how the particular conditions of the Warsaw Ghetto denatured the causational relationship suggested by Durkheim. For both Goldin and Einhorn, the topic of suicide provokes discussion on the general state of social or moral conditions in the ghetto, and such discussion reveals how intricate social structures in the ghetto were. Goldin ultimately concludes that "we are not animals. . . We operate on our children. Maybe that's pointless, maybe even criminal. But animals do not operate on their young!"[29] Goldin's commentary on the suicide of his acquaintance, then, seems to reflect his emotional state at the moment of witnessing the man's burial rather than a consolidated philosophy on suicide in the ghetto.

The characterization of suicide as a human element of prewar times fits into the quasi-nostalgic moments in Goldin's piece, which Samuel Kassow explains as the tragic contradiction between the starving individual preoccupied with his own deterioration and his prewar inner life, his lingering beliefs and values. The sight of doctors operating on a child challenges Arke's view of ghetto inhabitants as being too animalistic to commit suicide; the drive towards self-preservation (and perhaps the futility) of the surgery is also reflected in the production of Goldin's text, which gave him the "ability to

27. Leyb Goldin, "Chronicle of a Single Day," 1941, Ringelblum Archive, vol 26. 494–95.
28. Ibid., 496. Emphasis in original.
29. Ibid. 503.

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narrate his thoughts, to provide a link—however tenuous—to prewar beliefs and standards."[30] In Kassow's interpretation, it is the act of writing that, like surgery, negates the dehumanization that Arke observes in the ghetto. It is the saving of lives and the passing on of testimony—not suicide, as Arke initially imagines—that represents the dignity of prewar life in Goldin's text. The juxtaposition of suicide (which Goldin portrays as an intentional and organized end to life) and surgery (an intentional and organized preservation of life) highlights the way that suicide functions as a metaphor in Goldin's "Chronicle:" the inversion of the immoral and debasing death by starvation that is the main focus of the text. Although both Einhorn and Goldin describe dissatisfaction with social unity in the ghetto, both authors use the idea of suicide (the *idea*, because neither testimony directly deals with a confirmed death by suicide or the author's own suicidal thoughts) as a signifier of moral conditions in the ghetto. These testimonies help us move on from Durkheim's premise—that social integration has a causational effect on suicide rates—by emphasizing the range of impressions and associations regarding suicide that appear in the work of ghetto writers. Such an approach allows historians to view suicide as part of the daily psychological experience of the Warsaw Ghetto and not only as a part of the daily death statistics.

In the texts by Goldin and Einhorn, suicide is narrativized as part of the moral world of the ghetto, as both an indicator of changing social conditions and a result of increasing hardship. In both of these accounts, commentary on suicide in the ghetto becomes part of the process of working through the perceived changes in social relations and moral standards that attract attention in many ghetto testimonies. A framework such as Aron Einhorn's, which evaluates suicide rates in a discussion about the increased pace of Polonization among Jews in the ghetto, shows the symbolic adaptability of suicide as an indicator of changing social and moral practices in the Warsaw Ghetto. Although suicide can be understood as an individual act, it is one whose context and possibility is, as Durkheim posited, greatly informed by broader social conditions. These conditions not only create the occasion for suicide, but also create the symbolic language through which suicide is discussed and interpreted.

The extreme deprivation and uncertainty in the ghetto shaped views on suicide and death in new ways. The aerial bombardment of Warsaw began shortly after the outbreak of the war in September 1939, and the material damage and loss of life were staggering. "It is beyond my pen to describe the destruction and ruin that the enemy's planes have wrought on our lovely capital," Kaplan wrote in a diary entry on September 12, "Dante's description of the Inferno is mild compared to the inferno raging in the streets of Warsaw."[31] In his postwar memoirs, Władysław Szpilman recalled the effect that the September 1939 raids had on the lives of his family and colleagues: "A shell had killed one of my own colleagues on Mazowiecka Street. Only after his head was found was it possible to establish that the scattered remains belonged

30. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?* 142.
31. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, 29.

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to a human being who had once been a talented violinist."[32] Conditions for Warsaw's Jews deteriorated further after they were forced to relocate to the cramped ghetto, whose walls were sealed in November 1940. On November 4, Kaplan wrote of the ghetto as "a city unto itself" that had "changed for the worse, in the direction of ugliness, tastelessness, and lack of beauty. Here too it is a graveyard, only here the skeletons walk about in the streets."[33] Starvation rations, outbreaks of dysentery and typhus, and Nazi brutality contributed to the deterioration of conditions in the ghetto. A 1942 publication of the underground ghetto newspaper "Morgn Frajhajt" estimated that 454 deaths occurred among Warsaw Jews in January 1936, a record high for monthly fatalities. In August 1941, an outbreak of typhus caused the monthly death count to soar to 5,560, a record loss of life that made the month the deadliest before the beginning of mass deportations in July 1942.[34] Between November 1940 and July 1942, an average of 2,535 ghetto inhabitants died every month.[35]

These numbers represent the mass loss of individual lives, whose violent and sudden extinction greatly affected other residents of the ghetto. Stupnicki's observation that by 1942 most Warsaw Ghetto residents could "pass by the dead and keep fighting" attests the extent to which death shaped the psychological landscape of the ghetto: Stupnicki was describing not the triumph of individual inner strength over unimaginable hardship, but the harsh reality of acclimation by attrition, where within the confines of the Warsaw Ghetto there was no possibility of daily life without exposure to ubiquitous death. The constant proximity to death pushed suicide to the forefront of commentary on moral and emotional conditions in the ghetto, not only as a fact of life and death in wartime, but also as one of the few choices available to the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Suicide and Choice

Although there is no objective relationship between suicide and morality, the intertwining of these concepts in testimony from the ghetto reveals how suicide became a signifier of perceived fluctuations in general morality. The reason that suicide—and not death by hunger or typhus—became loaded with moral meaning under Nazi occupation is because of the cultural and moral context surrounding suicide, particularly the association with choice in one's own death, as well its absolute proscription in Jewish tradition. As Mark Mengerink points out, the issue of choice complicates academic studies of suicide in the context of the Holocaust: "If freedom of choice serves as a

32. Władysław Szpilman, *The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939–1945*, trans. Althea Bell (New York, 1999), 43.

33. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, 219.

34. "Morgn Frajhajt," no. 203–4. Vol. 2. March 6, 1942; Ringelblum Archive, vol. 21: The Press of the Warsaw Ghetto: The Radical Non-Zionist Left. Eds. Piotr Laskowski and Sebastian Matuszewski. (Warsaw, 2016). 540.

35. Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. Emma Harris (New Haven, 2009), 49.

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prerequisite for one to commit suicide, and Jews had little freedom to make choices during the tremendous persecution they faced, then how can we say that Jews truly had freedom to choose death voluntarily?"[36] Absent the intolerable conditions created by the Nazi occupation, people who committed suicide in the ghetto would not have died in the way that they did. Rather than attempting to discern whether some acts of suicide represented "true" acts of free will—an impossible task—I ask how witnesses evaluated suicide as a choice available to Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.

One of the events that most clearly illuminates suicide as an issue of controversial choice is the death of Adam Czerniaków, the president of the Warsaw Ghetto's Judenrat (Jewish Council). On July 22, 1942, the Warsaw Judenrat received the order to begin compiling lists of Jews to be "resettled" from the Warsaw Ghetto, allegedly for labor in the east; a minimum of six thousand Jews "regardless of age or gender" were to be deported that day, and the pace of deportations was to remain steady until nearly the entire population of the ghetto had been deported.[37] Czerniaków appealed to Hermann Hoefle, the SS official in charge of the deportations, to spare children and residents of certain orphanages from the order; Hoefle rejected the appeal, and Czerniaków returned to his office and swallowed potassium cyanide. He left a brief note to his wife: "They want me to kill the children of my nation with my own hands. There is nothing left for me but to die."[38] Czerniaków was immediately replaced as chief of the Judenrat, and the deportations continued uninterrupted. Between Czerniaków's death in July and the conclusion of the *Grossaktion* in September, over 250,000 people were deported from Warsaw to the death camps.[39]

Adam Czerniaków's contemporaries understood his suicide on dramatically different terms, which underscores how individual ideals and understandings of resistance and leadership shaped Czerniaków's legacy. Many of these writers' evaluations of the Judenrat president were changed by his suicide, which became more central to his legacy than the work he carried out in his life. Marek Edelman described Czerniaków as an "honest person who didn't profit from his position," whom the Germans "systematically abused, disparaged, and even beat."[40] Mary Berg, an engineering student whose classes Czerniaków often visited, acknowledged that while "Czerniaków often rides in a car to meet with Governor Frank. . . each time, he returns a broken

36. Mengerink, "The Holocaust's Forgotten Victims?" 6.

37. Adam Czerniaków, *Dziennik warszawskiego getta* (Diary of the Warsaw Ghetto), ed. Marian Fuks (Warsaw, 1983), 304–6.

38. Czerniaków, *Dziennik warszawskiego getta*, 306.

39. According to German documentation, 253,742 Jews were deported during the Grossaktion, leaving 35,639 registered residents of the ghetto; Engelking and Leociak estimate that the population of the ghetto was reduced by as many as 300,000 people during the summer 1942 deportations, and over 60,000 remained in the ghetto. For a discussion of these figures and a full timeline of the deportations, see chapters 5.1, 5.2, and 6.1 in Barbara Engekling and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, trans. Emma Harris (New Haven, 2009).

40. Rudi Assuntino and Wlodek Goldkorn, *Strażnik: Opowiada Marek Edelman* (Guardian: Marek Edelman Speaks, Kraków, 1999), 61.

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man. He carries the heavy burden of responsibility for everything that takes place in the ghetto."[41] Conversely, Emanuel Ringelblum regarded Czerniaków with suspicion and excluded him from Oneg Shabbat activities in spite of his awareness of Czerniaków's own secret diary keeping.[42] Controversial as he was in life, it was Czenriaków's death that proved to be far more influential in shaping his legacy. Ringelblum criticized Czenriaków's suicide as "a sign of weakness,"[43] while ghetto survivor Stefan Stok believed that Czerniaków "showed a great amount of courage by committing suicide."[44] The day after Czerniaków's death, Berg wrote respectfully of the man who "saw no other way out than to leave this horrible world. His closest collaborators, who saw him shortly before his death, say that he displayed great courage and energy until the last moment."[45] Members of the ghetto resistance movement generally criticized Czerniaków for his failure to effectively warn or rally the Jewish masses before the start of deportations to Treblinka; Marek Edelman argued that in failing to adequately explain the reasons for his suicide to the public, Czerniaków "turned the order of annihilation of the entire Jewish people into his own private affair."[46] Such comments reveal the weight placed on Czerniaków's decision and his death, which—whether appraised positively or negatively—was understood to possess the potential to change the fate of the ghetto and its residents (or, at the very least, to provide an example of death that could be simultaneously legible as an example of "weakness" or "courage"). The moralized descriptions of Czerniaków's death reveal the centrality of suicide to ghetto writers' portrayals of the consequence and emotional valence of choice.

One of the most passionate accounts of Czerniaków's death was written by Chaim Kaplan. Before 1942, Kaplan was generally critical in his descriptions of the "good-for-nothing" Judenrat chief, portraying him as an inept leader whose deference to the Polish elite and weakness before the Nazi authorities put the entire ghetto population at great risk.[47] After Czerniaków's suicide, however, Kaplan's view of the Judenrat chief changed completely:

41. Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing Up in the Warsaw Ghetto* (Oxford, 2006), 48.

42. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?* 212.

43. Ibid., 335.

44. Stefan Stok, interview with Rina Wolgroch for the USC Shoah Visual History Foundation. London, February 17, 1997. Accessed via the digital collections of the USC Shoah VHA: 27507.

45. Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, 167.

46. Assuntino and Goldkorn, *Strażnik: Opowiada Marek Edelman*, 61. For more reactions from resistance fighters to the suicide of Czerniaków, see footnote in Yitzhak Zuckerman and Barbara Harshav, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Berkeley, 1993), 194–95.

47. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, 194, 250, and 254. Kaplan was especially critical of Czerniaków's supposed extension of the curfew in the ghetto to match the curfew on the so-called "Aryan side" of Warsaw, which was extended as a punishment after the murder of a Pole caught spying for the Germans in March 1941. Kaplan reproached the maneuver as "patriotic prestige," further lamenting that "Czerniaków's patriotism will be our undoing." In an entry on the next day, Kaplan admits that Czerniaków himself did not order the curfew extension, but his quickness to hold Czerniaków responsible reveals his earlier disdain for the chief.

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> The first victim of the deportation decree was the president, Adam Czerniaków, who committed suicide by poison . . . He perpetuated his name by his death more than by his life. His end proves conclusively that he worked and strove for the good of his people, that he wanted its welfare and continuity even though not everything done in his name was praiseworthy . . . The president, who had a spark of purity in his heart, found the only way out worthy of himself. Suicide! . . . He did not have a good life, but he had a beautiful death . . . There are those who earn immortality in a single hour. The president, Adam Czerniaków, earned his immortality in a single instant.[48]

For Kaplan, Czerniaków's choice was not only the selection of resistance over collaboration, but also the selection of a "beautiful death." Itzhak Zuckerman, one of the commanders of the underground forces, was far more acerbic in his assessment of Czerniaków's death. He believed "Czerniaków's suicide made no impression on the Jews" because "at the moment of truth, he decided to die":

> He could have committed suicide in another way, as a leader of the community warning his people. It was hard for me to forgive him for choosing to die as a private person. A person who is going to be a leader has to know how to finish. At a moment like that, it's not enough to be 'aesthetic.' He could have won immortality if he had summoned us in the underground and said: I'm putting everything at your disposal! Though he didn't participate in the police actions during the great expulsion, the police did carry it out, and he didn't save anyone and didn't do any good.[49]

The echo of "immortality" across these accounts' event emphasizes the significant meaning placed on the manner of Czerniaków's death (which, in spite of Zuckerman's claim, seems to have made somewhat of an impression on the Jews of the ghetto, if only by virtue of its near ubiquity in witness testimonies): the stakes of Czerniaków's decision are not merely the life and death of the president himself, but his *immortality*. Zuckerman himself does not take issue with the fact that Czerniaków ended his own life, but that he did so as "a private person." Both Zuckerman and Kaplan frame Czerniaków's suicide as a transcendent moment not only in fomenting the legacy of the Judenrat chief, but in shaping the possibility for action in the summer of 1942. Zuckerman's rebuke that Czerniaków "could have committed suicide in another way" shows that he felt that Czerniaków's suicidal act may have served as an effective call to action if he had communicated with the underground forces, while Kaplan's testimony frames Czerniaków's suicide as the apotheosis of service to the "welfare and continuity" of the people of the Warsaw Ghetto that had been in good faith all along, even if Kaplan had not always been convinced of that fact. In both cases, discussion of the suicide itself becomes an anvil on which wider ideas of choice and consequence are hammered out: the important matter for the observers of Czerniaków's actions is that he chose his death, even under the extremely limited circumstances. Such commentary on Czerniaków's suicide reveals a belief that the fates of the ghetto and its inhabitants may have been changed by the suicide of one man. In this

48. Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, 385.
49. Zuckerman and Harshav, *A Surplus of Memory*, 194–95.

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case, Czenriaków's choice over his own death is framed as having real consequences for the ghetto and its people.

In assessing the question of suicide in the context of the Holocaust, we must ask: what choice truly existed in determining the circumstances of one's own death? What choice did Czerniaków really have? Lawrence Langer presents these dilemmas as matters of "choiceless choice," a situation where "crucial decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's choosing."[50] Although Langer's theories describe the conditions in the death camps, and specifically Auschwitz, they also apply to conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto after July 1942, when the beginning of mass deportations shut avenues of survival and stability that ghetto residents had previously counted on. Nazi authorities disregarded the privilege awarded by previously precious work permits, and people with or without documents were seized in the street and shot or forced onto trains at the Umschlagplatz: Marek Edelman remembered July 1942 as the "turning point in the ghetto" when "the very basis of ghetto life started to move from under people's feet. Every night filled with the shrill, crisp sound of shots was an illustration that the ghetto had no foundations whatever, that it lived at the will of the Germans, that it was brittle and weak like a house built of playing cards."[51] Life in the ghetto became an ordeal "from which no familiar or acceptable system of cause-and-effect behavior [could] be derived," where one's own choices no longer seemed to have any effect on one's imminent death.[52] The conditions of genocide denatured the relationship between cause and effect—between choice and outcome—which necessitates a reconsideration of suicide not as the choice of death over life, but the choice of a known death over a yet unknown one.

Choice often emerges in ghetto narratives as the option between death meted out by the Nazis or death on one's own terms. Anna Heilman described the risk taken by Jews who smuggled food into the ghetto: "They had no choice: it was more frightening to die of hunger than from a bullet. . . . . All of us would have chosen to finish it right there and then, rather than day after day to suffer, to despair, to lose our health, and then finally to be annihilated in the German crematoria."[53] Heilman's description of ghetto life resonates with Langer's concept of "choiceless choice," as she portrays smugglers as having no real choice between life or death, but only a choice of how to balance the risk of death by a German bullet to avoid death by hunger. This idea—that some deaths were preferable to others—is widespread in ghetto testimony. While in hiding in the spring of 1943, Władysław Szpilman weighed his limited options and concluded that "the best I could hope for was to commit suicide rather

50. Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany, 1982), 72 (chapter title: "Auschwitz: The Death of Choice").

51. Marek Edelman, "The Ghetto Fights," in Tomasz Szarota, ed., *The Warsaw Ghetto: The 45th Anniversary of the Uprising* (Warsaw, 1987), 17–39.

52. Langer, *Versions of Survival*, 79.

53. Anna Heilman, *Never Far Away: The Auschwitz Chronicles of Anna Heilman* (Calgary, 2001), 50.

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than fall into German hands alive."[54] In August 1944, Szpilman swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills when German forces set fire to the house where he had been hiding for over a year:

> Why let myself be burnt alive when I could avoid it by taking the sleeping tablets? How much easier my death would be than the deaths of my parents, sisters, and brother, gassed in Treblinka! At these last moments I tried to think only of them. I found the little tube of sleeping tablets, tipped the contents into my mouth and swallowed them . . . The tablets worked instantly on an empty, starved stomach. I fell asleep. I did not die. Obviously, the tablets had not been strong enough after all . . . My first emotion was not disappointment that I had failed to die, but joy to find myself alive. A boundless, animal lust for life at any price. I had survived a night in a burning building—now the main thing was to save myself somehow.[55]

Unlike descriptions of suicide that serve as allegories for the moral conditions of the ghetto, Heilman and Szpilman portray suicide not as a signifier of the social tectonics of ghetto life, but as an option for control over one's death in the total absence of options for controlling one's life. Szpilman's reaction to the realization that his suicide attempt was unsuccessful—"not disappointment . . . but joy"—reveals the situational utility of suicide as an absolute final option: Szpilman was not choosing death over life, but a death of his own planning over death by fire or capture. This distinction is important because it reveals suicide as a product of the unnatural conditions created by genocidal policies in the Nazi ghettoes and camps. These policies not only caused millions of unnatural deaths: they also fundamentally transformed the relationship between life and death for Jews living under Nazi occupation.

Heroism, Resistance, and Commemoration

In 1949, architect Bohdan Lachert published his plan for a modern housing district in Muranów, on the ruins of the former Warsaw Ghetto. Lachert envisioned "the construction of a new residential district on a hill of rubble . . . the rising of a new life . . . on the terrain that commemorates the unprecedented barbarity of Hitlerism, and the heroism of the ghetto insurgents."[56] The new socialist housing estate would sit atop the steep brick hills of the ghetto ruins: "Just like ancient Troy, which in its own geological layers reveals the layers of successive seasons of destruction and rebuilding . . . so too will Muranów, rebuilt on heights of rubble, also give its testimony."[57] In concrete terms, Lachert's plan was to rebuild Muranów, Warsaw's former Jewish district and the wartime site of the ghetto, *on top of* and *out of* the rubble left over from the war. Thus, the postwar reconstruction of Muranów was to represent the "heroism of ghetto insurgents" through blood-red facades of prewar brick, a symbol rendered uncanny by the fact that human remains almost certainly

54. Szpilman, *The Pianist*, 187.
55. Szpilman, *The Pianist*, 218–19.
56. Bohdan Lachert, "Muranów—Dzielnica mieszkaniowa" (Muranów—A Housing District), *Architektura* 5, no. 19 (1949).
57. Ibid.

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remained in the ruins that became the foundation of the new housing estate.[58] Although Lachert's design was ultimately discarded and the red facades covered with plaster, a 2010 study revealed that a plurality of lifelong Muranów residents still identify their neighborhood as "a symbol of Jewish heroism."[59] The same study found that over 60 percent of Muranów residents identify the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as the defining event in the neighborhood's history, a number significantly higher than those who named the establishment or destruction of the ghetto itself (around 10 percent).[60] In the final section of this study, I examine how the idea of suicide has shaped the legacy of the Warsaw Ghetto, focusing on how a focus on suicide can complicate the heroic legacy of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

From Lachert's 1949 design, which (literally) embodied ghetto martyrdom into physical form, to the two-faced friezes of Rapoport's famous monument, the postwar history of the Warsaw Ghetto is typically focused on the heroic, idealized death of the ghetto fighters. Even before the end of the war, the story of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters reached distant corners of occupied Europe and became the stuff of legend. It was this legend that inspired Hirsch Glik to write the words to "Zog Nit Keyn Mol," one of the most famous partisan war songs (whose lyrics also serve as the inspiration for the title of this paper). Partisan Shmerke Kaczerginski witnessed Glick writing the song and described the scene in his postwar memoirs: "Word of the [Warsaw Ghetto] uprising boosted our morale, gave us pride. We grew wings. . . . . And everything suffused with the spirit of Warsaw. . . . . Through his [Glik's] words, I felt the impact that the Warsaw [Ghetto] Uprising had made on him."[61] Glik's song, which has become a recognizable symbol of armed Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, manifests the story of the ghetto uprising into a musical refrain that has become symbolic of all armed resistance during the Holocaust.[62]

Although the uprising's most popularized image is one of united strength under fire, documents from uprising's leaders reveal a legacy fractured by questions of choice, survival, and the value of armed opposition under

58. See: Beata Chomątowska, *Stacja Muranów* (Muranów Station, Wołowe, 2015).

59. Michał Bilewicz, Maria Lewicka, and Adrian Wójcik, "Living on the Ashes: Collective Representations of Polish–Jewish History Among People Living in the Former Warsaw Ghetto Area," *Eslevier* 27, no. 4 (August 2010).

60. Ibid, 7.

61. Shmerke Kaczerginski, *Ikh bin geven a partisan* (I Was a Partisan), (Buenos Aires, 1952), 108. As translated and quoted in "Songs of the ghettos, concentration camps, and World War II partisan outposts," *Music of the Holocaust: Partisan Songs*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, online exhibit: https://web.archive.org/web/20230329204553/https:/www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/collections-highlights/music-of-the-holocaust-highlights-from-the-collection/music-of-the-holocaust/never-say-that-you-have-reached-the-final-road (acc. Oct. 17, 2023).

62. The song has a legend of its own, exemplified particularly well by Paul Robeson's 1949 Moscow concert. For more on Paul Robeson and Glik's song, see John Patrick Diggins, "I Walk in Dignity," *The New York Times*, February 12, 1989, 26–27; and Maxim Matusevich, "Zog nit keyn mol: Paul Robeson's Tragic Love for Russia," in Felipe Espinoza Garrido, Caroline Koegler, Deborah Nyangulu, and Mark Stein, eds., *Locating African European Studies: Interventions, Intersections, Conversations*, Routledge Studies on African and Black Diaspora (Oxford, 2019).

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hopeless circumstances.[63] Yitzhak "Antek" Zuckerman, one of the commanders of the uprising, recalled the bitter internal debate that characterized the preparations for action against the Germans after the end of the Grossaktion. At a gathering of ŻOB, *Żydowska organizacja bojowa* (Jewish Combat Organization)[64] commanders in early September 1942, Zuckerman criticized a plan to provoke the remaining ghetto inhabitants to action by setting fire to the ghetto with gasoline as "public collective suicide," "a suicide pact to aid the Germans," and "a proposal [that] came out of heartbreak, depression, helplessness, lack of faith."[65] He anticipated that "if the proposal of the majority at that meeting had been accepted, within forty-eight hours, we would have set fire to parts of the ghetto and waited for the Germans to come. Then we would have attacked them with sticks and stones and would have been killed. For what purpose? So this little group would die an honorable death?!"[66] For Zuckerman, the possibility of an "honorable death" was not enough to justify action in September 1942: "We should have done it on July 22, but we didn't. We didn't alarm, we didn't warn. Now we would be nothing but a rear guard in the parade to death."[67] Plans for action in the fall of 1942 were ultimately abandoned, and armed skirmishes only commenced after German forces entered the ghetto on January 18, 1943: between January 18 and 22, around 4,500 Jews were deported from the ghetto and another 1,200 were shot in the street. Although armed action prevented the Germans from deporting 8,000 souls demanded by Himmler,[68] the ŻOB and ŻZW (*Żydowski związek wojskowy*, Jewish Military Union) also faced heavy casualties, with Marek Edelman estimating that four-fifths of ŻOB forces were killed during the winter action.[69] On April 19, German troops once again entered the ghetto with the goal of carrying out mass deportations. Jewish fighting forces retaliated, and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began.[70]

Zuckerman's condemnation of the September 1942 plan reveals the tension between the insurgents' ideal of hopeless rebellion as a means to a glorious (or at least better) death, and the will to live of the non-insurgent population, which accounted for the vast majority of the ghetto's remaining population. In addition to ŻOB, the other major Jewish fighting organization was the ŻZW: estimates of their combined strength range from a couple hundred to a couple

63. For more on the multifaceted memory of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, see: Markus Meckl, "The Memory of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," in *The European Legacy, Toward New Paradigms: Journal of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas* 13, no. 7 (December 2008): 815–24.

64. An armed resistance group formed in the July 1942 in response to the Grossaktion deportations, uniting fighters from different political and social worlds into one group.

65. Zuckerman and Harshav, *A Surplus of Memory*, 216.

66. Ibid., 216–17.

67. Ibid.

68. Havi Dreifuss, "The Leadership of the Jewish Combat Organization during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: A Reassessment," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 34.

69. Assuntino and Goldkorn, *Strażnik: Opowiada Marek Edelman*, 219.

70. Dreifuss, "The Leadership of the Jewish Combat Organization," 38.

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thousand fighters.[71] They were joined by bands not affiliated with a fighting faction, as well as the uncoordinated action of the tens of thousands of civilians still in the ghetto. According to Marek Edelman, "every house [in the ghetto] fought," a claim that has been supported by the recent work of Havi Dreifuss, who wrote that the centrality of "another struggle, the struggle of the masses of tens of thousands of Jews who hid in hiding places in the burning ghetto . . . the masses of the Jewish public—who in their lives and deaths gave the revolt its popular character—have never stood at the center of research and their fate has been ignored."[72] The primary goal of the non-combatant Jews who remained in the ghetto was survival, an objective fundamentally at odds with the insurgents' plans for rebellion. Despite this, suicide became a significantly more widespread method of avoiding German capture during the summer 1942 and January 1943 deportation actions, and witnesses were more inclined to see resistance in suicidal acts after July 1942 than before. In his 1945 memoir, Marek Edelman recalled an incident in January 1943 where sixty men who refused to board the train to Treblinka were shot on the spot, behavior that, according to Edelman, "served as an inspiration that always, under all circumstances, one should oppose the Germans."[73] Edelman's retelling of this episode recalls Konrad Kwiet's claim that such suicides were acts of resistance because they interrupted the mechanisms of the infrastructure of Nazi genocide.[74]

Even after the rejection of a September 1942 uprising—during which, as Zuckerman pointed out, the position of the fighters would have been even worse than it was in April 1943—the idea that an uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto represented an act of suicide did not disappear. Testimonies from surviving uprising participants generally acknowledge that the purpose of the April 1943 rebellion was not the pacification of German forces in the ghetto, but, as Zivia Lubetkin wrote, "to convince the Germans that liquidating the Jews won't be easy for them."[75] The planning for the armed uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto began only during the meeting in September 1942—which Zuckerman remembered as the "most fateful night for the Jewish Fighting Organization"—after

71. Exact figures are hard to discern. Engelking and Leociak note that in April 1943, ŻOB forces consisted of twenty-two groups of ten to twelve people each (a total of 220–264 individuals), while Israel Gutman places the total forces (ŻOB and ŻZW) around 750 (Israel Gutman, *Walka bez cienia nadzei* [A Battle Without a Shadow of Hope], Warsaw, 1998, 264). In their study on the ŻZW, Dariusz Libionka and Laurence Weinbaum cite a figure from Adam Halperin estimating the ŻZW forces at 260 before the January 1943 action and around 100 after (Dariusz Libionka and Laurence Weinbaum, *Bohaterowie, hochsztaplerzy, opisywacze: Wokół Żydowskiego Związku Wojskowego* [Heroes, Hucksters and Storytellers: The Jewish Military Organization], Warsaw, 2011, 443–46). Rumors and legends during the uprising placed the number of Jewish participants at 1,500 (Katarzyna Person, *Assimilated Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto* [Syracuse, 2014], 146) or as high as 7,000 (Engelking and Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto*, 793).

72. Havi Dreifuss, *Geto Varsha—Ha-Sof: April 1942–Yuni 1943* (The Warsaw Ghetto: The End, April 1942–June 1943, Jerusalem, 2018), 11, as cited and translated by Avinoam Platt, *The Jewish Heroes of Warsaw: The Afterlife of the Revolt* (Detroit, 2021), 22.

73. Marek Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights*: *Warsaw, 1943–45* (Nottingham, 2013), 54.

74. Kwiet, "The Ultimate Refuge," 138.

75. Cywia Lubetkin, *Zagłada i powstanie* (The Holocaust and Uprising, Warsaw, 1999), 101.

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80 percent of the ghetto's population had already been murdered, a fact that underscores the goal of the movement as one of self-determination, and not self-preservation.[76] The Warsaw insurgents succeeded in creating a legend, even as they could not succeed in changing the outcome of the war. "One can hardly speak of victories," wrote Edelman in 1945, "when Life itself is the reason for the fight and so many people are lost, but one thing can be said about this particular battle: we did not let the Germans carry out their plans. They did not evacuate a single living person."[77] This ethos is strongly represented in the uprising's postwar legend: Mordechai Anielewicz, the young commander whose resemblance is forever immortalized on a grassy Warsaw square, was among the dozens of individuals who committed suicide on May 18, 1943 in a bunker at 18 Miła Street.[78]

The shape of the figures on the memorial's obverse side—the Jewish masses who are not distinguished as individuals on Rappoport's stonework—provide an important counterweight to the heroic narrative of the 1943 uprising. The stories of non-combatants eschew grand narratives of redemption or transcendence through self-sacrifice. Władysław Szlengel, a poet who was shot by German troops in May 1943, left behind a wealth of verses and stories describing life and death in the ghetto. A poem (*Pomnik*, Memorial) about the death of a woman (presumably the author's mother) illuminates the tension between legend and grief: "To the heroes—Poems, Rhapsodies! / The Heroes will be honored by descendants / Names engraved on tombstones / and a marble monument. . . / But who will tell you how they came / Not the bronze or the subject of myth / and they took HER—they killed her. . . / and now SHE isn't here."[79] Another poem, "Dwie Śmierci" (Two Deaths), juxtaposes the "normal" death of non-Jewish Poles—"human and not that hard"—to the "garbage death, Jewish and hideous" of the Jews targeted for genocide.[80] The tone of "Dwie Śmierci" is embittered, displaying resentment for "your [Polish] death, which would not greet our [Jewish] death if they should ever meet." However, the poem ends with a transcendent image, as the two deaths, who "damn each other and curse each other madly" are being quietly observed by the "same penurious, spiteful, evil, and / the identical Life." Thus, it is death and its many grim possibilities that serves as the final and irreconcilable entrenchment of the wartime fate of Poles and Jews. In these verses, Szlengel illuminates the inglorious "choiceless choice" of life and death in the ghetto; it allows us to unveil the enormous abstract death of the Nazi genocide—without, as Saul Friedländer warns, "eliminating or domesticating that initial sense of disbelief"—and look more closely at how the dynamics of mass murder played out in the

76. Zuckerman and Harshav, *A Surplus of Memory*, 214–15, footnote 72.

77. Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights*, 66.

78. Assutino and Goldkorn, *Strażnik: Opowiada Marek Edelman*, 81–82. On page 89, Edelman relates that around fifteen people survived the attack on the bunker.

79. Władysław Szlengel, "Pomnik" (Monument) in Władysław Szlengel ed., *Co czytałem* umarłym (What I Read to the Dead, Warsaw, 1979). Access via Wolne Lektury.

80. Władysław Szlengel, "Dwie śmierci" (Two Deaths) in Szlengel, *Co czytałem umarłym*.

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impossible choices of life and death made by the human beings in the Warsaw Ghetto.[81]

There are countless methodological challenges inherent in historical studies of suicide; scholars can hope neither to conclusively count deaths by suicide nor discern their "objective" cause. Even absent a perfect quantitative study, qualitative studies of suicide and its role in the imagination can reveal changing views on life and death in a given context. In this article, I have used the topic of suicide as guide to reframe questions of morality, choice, and resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto. I argue that the idea of suicide is a useful framework for understanding life and death in the Warsaw Ghetto because of the various meanings that ghetto inmates assigned to suicide, as reflected in their written testimonies. A focus on suicide in ghetto witness testimony does not deny the powerful will to live shared by the writers of these testimonies, nor does it pathologize these individuals or suggest that they were complicit in the Nazi plans for the complete destruction of their communities. Rather, it allows us to understand more of the dramatically denatured relationship between life and death that emerged as a result of genocidal violence. As historian David Patterson has written, within the walls of the ghetto, ordinary death was "murdered and thus made into ghetto death."[82] The disappearance of normal death in the ghetto included not only the gradual disappearance of the Jewish traditions and rituals of burial and mourning that accompanied prewar death, but also the disappearance of normal boundaries between life and death in everyday existence. The physical proximity to the dying and dead, which grew more intense as months in the ghetto wore on, and the reality of death as the only outcome of one's choices (explained by Langer) changed the way that individuals in the ghetto understood not only their own deaths, but also matters of choice and morals.

Suicide in the Warsaw Ghetto is a topic deserving of scholarly attention because it was a part of both death and life for the people struggling to survive within the ghetto's walls. Departing from Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma, which may be "the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it," the trauma of suicide in this context reverberates between death and survival, offering no easy path to closure or resolution. Understanding the variety of meanings contained within ghetto commentaries on suicide allows us to bring these stories back from the void and see reflected within them a multifaceted world of death and life.

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81. Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York, 2007), xxvi.

82. David Patterson, "Death and Ghetto Death," in Eric J. Sterling and John K. Roth, eds., *Life in the Ghettoes During the Holocaust* (Syracuse, 2005), 169.

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