Chapter 10
The Controversy Surrounding the Jewish Council

> *It is better to die as free men fighting than to live by the grace of murderers. Let us defend ourselves to our very last breath.*[341] – Aba Kovner

Besides leveraging Hungarian collaboration in the annihilation of the Jews, Eichmann adeptly selected compliant Jewish council members to assist in gathering and ensuring Jewish compliance without rebellion. This section will examine the broader role of Jewish councils, focusing on their primary motivations, and then analyzing how these dynamics unfolded specifically in Hungary. As previously discussed, the events in the Vilnius Ghetto highlight a striking contrast between Jewish compliance under the *Judenrat*, led by Jacob Gens, and the resistance efforts led by Aba Kovner. Gens, as the head of the *Judenrat*, sought to cooperate with the Nazis, often clashing with Kovner's push for resistance.[342] In hindsight, it appears that Kovner's decision to resist was ultimately justified. However, when he and his group escaped, their resources were limited, and not everyone was able to join them. The other alternative at the time was to comply with the Nazis, buying time in hopes that the war would end, and everyone could survive, as Gens suggested.

From April to June 1961, Hannah Arendt covered the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem for *The New Yorker* magazine. Her reporting resulted in a series of articles, which later became the foundation for her most renowned and controversial book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.[343] The book was first published in the United States in 1963 and shortly thereafter in West Germany. Arendt presents her own theory to explain the Holocaust, challenging the widely accepted explanation. The study had previously discussed her perspective, arguing that to understand the mass murder of European Jewry, we must examine the concept of mass society, where individuals become interchangeable and act in a banal

341 Cohen, *The Avengers*, p. 69. After hearing about the atrocities and killings of Jews by the Nazis in Ponary (Ponar), where thousands were executed and buried in mass graves, Kovner assembled his underground group in Vilnius, delivering the message that the Nazis would eventually kill everyone. He made this statement convincingly, emphasizing that the best course of action was to fight back. He also sent a messenger to Warsaw to convey the same message.

342 For a detailed discussion, see Chapter 5. "Vilnius" is the modern Lithuanian name of the city, used officially and in contemporary contexts. However, it is commonly referred to as "Vilna" in Jewish historical and cultural discussions, reflecting the traditional Yiddish and Hebrew name.

343 See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, pp. 115–117.

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manner, blindly following the actions of the collective. Her book sparked controversy, with many critics objecting to Arendt's use of the term 'banality' to describe mass murder. Critics point out that in his interview with Willem Sassen, Eichmann claimed to have acted with zeal and reflected on the nature of the orders he followed, rather than merely obeying them passively.[344]

Arendt presented another perspective in her book, one that became one of its most controversial aspects: her critique of the *Judenräte*, the Jewish councils. Arendt claimed that they collaborated with the Nazis, arguing that their actions significantly increased the efficiency of the extermination of Jews.[345] However, this caused angry reactions in the Jewish community, and even led to some of her close friends distancing themselves from her.[346] Furthermore, her attitude toward Jewish nationalism and Zionism appeared to be cautious. Arendt believed that there was a deliberate attempt during the Eichmann trial to promote Zionist ideas and Israeli militarism, rather than a focus on conducting a trial that sought justice. Despite the controversy surrounding the book, it remains one of Arendt's most famous and influential works and was the first to be translated into Hebrew.

In her analysis of the Wannsee Conference, Arendt discussed how Heydrich expected the greatest difficulties in eliminating the Jews, while Eichmann knew that he could not have been more wrong.[347] According to Arendt, the use of the *Judenräte* (Jewish Councils) made it easy for the Nazis to carry out their plan. Eichmann described how smoothly the process went and how it became routine. The Jewish councils were informed by Eichmann and his men about how many Jews were needed to fill each train, and they made out lists of deportees. The few who

344 Chapter 15 will further explore Arendt's position in light of recent scholarly work, as well as the newly released 1957 recording of Eichmann's interview. Rather than dismissing Arendt's conclusions based on Eichmann's testimony, this study highlights the challenges of relying on perpetrator accounts and demonstrates that Eichmann's interview statements are credible and align with the study's findings.

345 Ibid.

346 Arendt received a lot of criticism from Jewish sources for this book, including from the scholar of Judaism and Kabbalah Gershom Scholem and the jurist Jacob Robinson, who was an advisor to the prosecutor in the Eichmann trial. Many critics felt that the book lacked a specific reference to the Jewishness of the victims, which was especially noteworthy given Arendt's own Jewish background and biography. On a related note, Arendt later faced additional criticism due to her complex relationship with Martin Heidegger, who supported the Nazis. While not justifying her position, perhaps it can be understood in the context of her concept of the "banality of evil", viewing many individuals who joined or supported the Nazis as ordinary people who, in certain circumstances, could act like the majority. For her, after the war, it is possible that these individuals returned to being ordinary men.

347 Arendt, Hannah, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, p. 13.

tried to hide or escape were rounded up by special Jewish forces.[348] Arendt notes that Eichmann knew how to select and establish a Jewish council, and that the council's elders were informed by him or his men about how many Jews were needed to fill each train. Eichmann ensured that no one protested.[349] He also did not see resistance. Eichmann mentioned that he received the cooperation of the Jews, and without their help in administrative and police work, he wouldn't have been able to carry out the plan.[350] The Nazis were able to trust that the Jews would do their job.

Furthermore, Eichmann remarked that the Jews did not resist, reflecting his impression that resistance was not a significant factor. The study addressed several challenges related to resistance, and it appears that the Jewish council's act of withholding crucial information contributed to a level of compliance. During Eichmann's trial, this prompted one witness to testify that some individuals even volunteered for the transports. In court, the judges mentioned the matter of cooperation, with one of the resistance witnesses admitting that the ghetto police were an instrument in the hands of the Nazis.[351] As mentioned, other scholars such as Randolph Braham also criticized the Jewish Council in Hungary seeing it responsible for not releasing crucial information about the Nazi genocide to Hungary's Jewish population.[352] Others criticized the shocking naivete of the Jewish leadership in Hungary, that had resulted in servile behavior.[353] However, Yehudah Bauer raises the valid point that there is no guarantee that the information would have been accepted or believed by the Jewish population even if it had been released.[354] Bauer further rejects the criticism regarding the failure to expose the Vrba-Wetzler report, noting that, ultimately, the report reached Hungarian Regent Horthy, who, on June 26, convened a cabinet meeting. Bauer argues that while the warnings from FDR and other factors played a role in influencing Horthy to halt the deportations on July 9, it was the Vrba-Wetzler report – transmitted to him by the *Judenrat* – that had a significant impact. Thus, contrary to Vrba's claim that the *Judenrat* did not expose the protocol to the Jews, Bauer contends that sending the report to Horthy proved to be more consequential.[355]

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348 Ibid., p.115.

349 Ibid.

350 Ibid., p. 117. The study had previously addressed the issue of relying on perpetrator testimonies, using Christopher Browning's four-level test to determine the reliability of criminal testimony.

351 Ibid p.124.

352 Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, pp. 84–85. See also: Hanerbrink, pp. 616–618.

353 Laczo, *Hungarian Jews in the Age of Genocide*, pp. 181–182. Laczo concluded that "our fathers" had proven "too weak in the storm".

354 Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933–1945,* pp. 150–155, 159–160.

355 Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, pp. 238–240.

Raul Hilberg offers further criticism of the *Judenrat,* the Jewish council established by the Nazis, as well as the actions of Jews in general during the Holocaust. Hilberg's analysis delves deeper into the role of the J*udenrat* and its actions under Nazi rule. He examines the decisions made by the Jewish council and scrutinizes their effectiveness in protecting and representing the Jewish population. Hilberg's critique extends beyond the *Judenrat* to encompass the broader behaviors of Jews during that time. Hilberg's main argument regarding the tragedy of the Jews is that they and their leadership were constrained by the limitations of their historical experiences. He suggests that during the Holocaust, they exhibited behaviors similar to those they had displayed throughout their long history of exile. These behaviors included lobbying, self-deception, repression, obedience (both automatic and intermittent), cooperation, paralysis, bribery, evasion, and attempts to alleviate their circumstances through petitions, ransom arrangements, monetary redemption, rehabilitation, and relief. Hilberg presents a comprehensive analysis of events spanning over 2,000 years in organized tables to support his claim that a distinct pattern of Jewish response had developed and become deeply ingrained over time. According to this perspective, the Jews perceived the Holocaust as just another calamity in a long line of misfortunes they had faced, and they reacted accordingly. However, the extermination of European Jews by the Germans represents an unparalleled level of genocide. Never before in the history of Western civilization had criminals managed to overcome all administrative and moral obstacles to carry out such a comprehensive killing operation. Additionally, it was the first time that Jewish victims, bound by the constraints of their historical experiences, fully surrendered themselves to the impending disaster. Therefore, the extermination of the Jews was not an accidental occurrence.[356]

However, renowned scholar Yehuda Bauer offers a contrasting perspective. In an earlier discussion, the study examined his argument regarding the potential for Jewish resistance, presenting the victims in a more favorable light due to the slim chances of resistance and the dire circumstances they confronted.[357] Here, Bauer portrays the *Judenrat* in a more favorable light, arguing that the Hungarian-Jewish community was already aware that Jews were being killed in Poland, and that there was nothing further Kasztner or other members of the Jewish Council could have done to warn them.[358] Bauer analyzes the situation, showing that Hungarian Jews

356 Based on Dina Porat's article on Hilberg (in Hebrew), available at: https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/study/2012-11-20/ty-article/0000017f-e606-df2c-a1ff-fe57f87e0000. Additional details regarding Raul Hilberg's work in this context can be found at: https://www.berghahnbooks.com/downloads/OpenAccess/BrownJudging/BrownJudging_02.pdf.

357 As discussed in Chapter 5.

358 Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933–1945*, pp. 150–155, 159–160. 197–200. See also the discussion in Chapter 5, where Tovah Kortchin vividly describes the widespread refusal

had no realistic chance of resisting or escaping to Romania, as claimed by Ben Hecht and other Kasztner's critics.[359] Bauer adds that, although survivors of earlier Nazi persecutions warned Hungarian Jews, many refused to believe them. However, Kasztner's critics argue that Romania, just a few miles from Cluj, offered an escape route, and they accuse him of discouraging its use and withholding details of the deportations. In 1944, Romania allowed Jews to transit freely, and some estimate that around 15,000 escaped via this route. The study acknowledges these claims but did not explore the Romanian escape route in depth, which is necessary to provide clearer support. This option is not rejected; however, the study aligns more closely with Bauer's view, emphasizing that even if escape was theoretically possible, it required convincing people, careful planning, and overcoming significant obstacles. Moreover, Bauer argues that any large-scale flight could have been easily stopped by Hungarian and German authorities.[360] It seems that Bauer has a valid point, but the study will further indicate that despite the various factors at play, the behavior of the Jewish council was also among the reasons Eichmann persisted with his genocidal plan.[361]

Peter Hayes further discusses the perspective of Yehuda Bauer who aimed to avoid placing blame on the victims for their own fate, and he also provides a more

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to believe reports of the killings. Ferenc Laczo further discussed the difficulties of survival after a successful escape. His study of about 349 Hungarian survivors reveals that where a number of witnesses understood their escape from the Jewish camp group as a key to their eventual survival, many tended to employ ethnic labels to identify the perpetrators of violence against them, and this frequently meant references to Eastern European collaborators. See Laczo, Ferenc, p. 156.

359 Kastner's critics replied that he received SS permission to visit Kolozsvar/Cluj on May 3, 1944, but failed to warn the Jews there despite the fact that Cluj was only 3–5 miles from the Romanian border and that the 20,000 Jews there were guarded by only 20 Hungarian gendarmes and a single SS officer and could therefore have escaped. They also say that he could have telephoned other Jewish communities but did not, and that timely warning might have enabled thousands or tens of thousands of Jews to save their lives through "local uprisings, resistances, escapes, hiding, hiding children with Gentiles, forging documents, paying a ransom, bribes," and other diverse means. On the other hand, Bauer rejected these claims.

360 Bauer, *Jews for Sale? Nazi-Jewish Negotiations 1933–1945*, pp. 159–161. Bauer praised Kasztner for negotiating with the Nazis and saving about 1,600 Jews. Footnote 47 further elaborates on Bauer's view and opposing perspectives. In a personal communication, Dr. Mordecai Paldiel emphasized the plausibility of the Romanian route, presenting a perspective that diverges from Yehuda Bauer's approach.

361 Suppose for the sake of discussion, that the Jewish council conveyed the truth or refrained from cooperating with the Nazis in rounding up the Jews – despite Bauer's assertion that resistance or escape was futile, I find it difficult to believe that Eichmann could have efficiently dispatched such a substantial number to Auschwitz within just two months. It's plausible that he would have been forced to explore alternative methods, potentially forfeiting the significant influence of the Milgram effect he leveraged when collaborating with the Hungarians. This could serve as a crucial point challenging Bauer's argument; however, it remains a reasoned assessment rather than a definitive prediction of how events would have unfolded.

in-depth examination of the difficulties encountered by members of the Jewish council. Hayes emphasizes that individuals who initially resisted complying with German orders were frequently subjected to execution.[362] Other scholars, such as Samuel Lederman, advance contrasting perspectives on Arendt's work. Lederman argues that her writings are grounded in a deep skepticism toward paternalistic leadership and political judgment. As a radical democrat, Arendt questioned conventional views on the relationship between leaders and their communities, both in her involvement in Jewish politics and in her theoretical work. Thus, her criticism of the *Judenrat* reflects her commitment to radical democratic principles.[363] In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt asserted that had the *Judenrat* refused to cooperate with the deportations, the result would have been chaos and considerable suffering, but the number of victims would have been much lower, between 4.5 to 6 million people. Lederman argues that this statement has gained infamy for its over-generalization and perceived inaccuracy, as well as its irresponsibility. However, Arendt's argument was rooted in a principled critique rather than a consequentialist one. Arendt believed that the moral weight of the *Judenrat's* decision to cooperate (which she saw as fundamentally wrong) outweighed any hypothetical considerations about the potential outcomes of a collective refusal to cooperate.[364] In this context, Chapter 15 references Tuija Parvikko's 2021 work, which offers a comprehensive exploration of Arendt's theories and provides a deeper understanding of her perspective. Parvikko argues that many readers surprisingly failed to interpret Arendt's book within its proper context and that Arendt herself recognized the connection between the controversy surrounding her work and the broader politics of history.[365]

During this discussion, the study expressed some disagreements with Arendt, suggesting not to place blame on the *Judenrat* due to the life-threatening situation they were in. It further emphasizes the uncertainties regarding whether providing information would have led to belief or resistance among the Jews. Yet, it agrees with Arendt's last assertion regarding the moral significance of the *Judenrat's* decision to cooperate. Specifically, for the case of Hungary, it also aligns with her point that had the Jewish council refused to cooperate with the deportations, the number of victims would have been lower. However, the study presents different reasons

362 Hayes, *Why?: Explaining the Holocaust*, pp.178–180.

363 Samuel Lederman, "Hannah Arendt's Critique of the *Judenrate* in Context: Modern Jewish Leadership and Radical Democracy," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32, no. 2 (September 2018): 207–223, 218–219.For further analysis, refer to Chapter 15, Section III, as well as Tuija Parvikko's 2021 work, which offers a deeper understanding of Arendt's perspective.

364 Ibid., p. 218. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 12.

365 Tuija Parvikko, *Arendt, Eichmann, and the Politics of the Past* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2021), conclusion and prologue.

for this, which rely on Eichmann's methods of operation. Therefore, for Hungary only, and based on these reasons, it rejects Lederman's argument regarding this point.

Lederman argues that Arendt viewed the Jewish determination to survive at any cost as a negative and politically harmful notion. However, Arendt believed that individuals should be willing to sacrifice themselves for a cause – whether to avoid committing evil, to fight against an enemy, or to uphold the dignity of their people. She praised the Warsaw Ghetto resistance for transcending the pariah status of Jews in Europe, aligning them with other Europeans in the broader struggle for freedom. Arendt was deeply skeptical of elites and their political judgment, instead placing her faith in "ordinary" people and their potential to forge new paths. This view is essential for understanding her critique of the *Judenräte*.[366]

When asked about the justifications presented by the *Judenräte* for their actions during critical moments, Arendt delivered a stark response, asserting that the notion of sacrificing a few to save many resembled the ancient practice of human sacrifice, in which a few virgins were offered to appease the wrath of the gods. Arendt rejected this notion, stating that it went against her religious beliefs and the principles of Judaism. In a related context, Arendt praised Adam Czerniakow for remembering the Talmudic imperative that forbids sacrificing one individual for the security of the community or allowing one woman to be raped for the sake of others: "If they ask you to sacrifice one man for the security of the community, don't surrender him; if they ask you to give one woman to be ravished for the sake of all women, don't let her be ravished".[367]

While Arendt raised a valid point, it's crucial to recognize that for the Judenrat, non-compliance often meant risking their lives. Moreover, even when they chose to cooperate with the Nazis, there was often a sense of sacrifice involved, as they were navigating incredibly difficult circumstances. Therefore, it could be argued that

366 See Lederman, "Hannah Arendt's Critique of the Judenräte in Context: Modern Jewish Leadership and Radical Democracy", pp. 218–219, and Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 12.

367 Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship," in *Responsibility and Judgment* (Schocken Books, 2003), pp. 12–48, at P. 36. Available at: https://grattoncourses.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/responsibility-under-a-dictatorship-arendt.pdf. One Talmudic source can be found in Mishnah Trumot 8:12, and Maimonides further explores it in Yesodei Hatorah 5:5. See https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Foundations_of_the_Torah.5.5?lang=bi and https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/history/hevra/mesirat-2.htm . The study does not elaborate on the Talmudic discourse and the multitude of factors and conditions it considers in such cases. The Talmud presents a logical point that individuals should not be the arbiters of who lives and who dies. If faced with such demands by perpetrators, one should strive to escape or resist, rather than comply and hand people over to the perpetrators. However, if someone did not act in this manner during the events, some understanding of the situation they went through could be extended afterwards.

passing judgment on them for their actions may be unjust. Despite the undeniable truth that refusing to comply with the Nazis might have saved countless lives, it's crucial to recognize that becoming a member of the *Judenrat* and working with the Nazis was often a decision made under extreme duress. Additionally, the decision to join the *Judenrat* instead of facing execution may have been influenced by other considerations. Among these were the belief that, had they refused, the Nazis would simply have appointed others, and the recognition of a low likelihood for any successful resistance.[368] However, we cannot ignore the fact that their actions resulted in the loss of many lives, and it seems morally questionable.

Forced to implement Nazi policies, Jewish councils remain a controversial and sensitive subject. Jewish council chairmen faced the harrowing choice of whether to comply with German demands, such as providing lists of Jews for deportation. In Lvov, Joseph Parnes refused to hand over Jews for deportation to the Janowska forced-labor camp and was murdered by the Nazis for his defiance. In Warsaw, Jewish council chairman Adam Czerniakow, rather than assist in the roundup of Jews, committed suicide on July 23, 1942, the day after deportations began. Survivor Tomasz (Toivi) Blatt testified that the Nazis would arrive in the morning and demand the Jewish council deliver a set number of men. If the council failed, the Nazis would begin indiscriminately rounding up people, beating and shooting them. In another testimony, Bella Jakubowicz Tovey recounts a meeting between her father and the Jewish council leader in Sosnowiec, who urged him to join the council, suggesting it would improve his family's chances of survival while waiting for the war to end. Her father, a devout Jew, refused, stating he could not send others to their deaths. When asked about God's lack of intervention, he replied that he would not be a messenger of the angel of death.[369]

The Israeli-German historian and political writer Dan Diner has noted that the Jewish councils faced the difficult decision of choosing between total annihilation or saving fragments of their communities. However, the approach taken differed among councils.[370] Diner further explains the gradual progression of events

368 For those who survived the war, a crucial issue emerged around how to address their experiences and reintegrate them into society. The study will further address this issue and offer an approach centered on forgiveness and accountability.

369 See the article on Jewish Councils (*Judenräte*) at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: "Jewish Councils," available at: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-councils-judenraete.

370 Dan Diner, *Why the Jewish Council Cooperated*, New York: Schocken Books, 2001, p.174. This is possibly how they viewed their options. Examples of the different approaches taken by various councils can be seen, for instance, in one case where efforts were made to save children from deportation, while in others, such as the Łódź Ghetto, the focus was on preserving young adults and families.

regarding the *Judenräte* (Jewish Councils) in occupied Poland. Initially, they did not face extermination measures, but as Diner describes, the situation worsened over time. The councils were concerned for the welfare of the people and had to request better conditions from the Nazis.[371] They witnessed people dying and suffering from a lack of food and the need for jobs. At a later stage, they were asked to submit people for transportation. Diner elaborates on the challenging situation faced by the members of the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council), emphasizing the moral dilemmas they confronted. It seemed irrational to them for the Germans not to use their work, and lacking alternatives, they hoped that the enemy's self-interest would grant them work opportunities. The council did not fall into the trap of attributing the Nazis' immorality to their actions, but rather focused on the social needs of the people.[372] Perhaps their perception has evolved over the years, leading to a more favorable view than in the past. However, certain actions, such as Chaim Rumkowski's request to be given the children and the way he articulated it in his speech, may still be considered unacceptable. Despite that, Diner argues that the Jewish councils believed that they were acting in the best interest of their people and had good intentions in trying to save Jews.

Isaiah Trunk further discussed the survival strategies that leaders attempted to utilize, with one of the main ones being rescue through work. The idea was that if the Jewish people could prove themselves useful to the regime, they would have a better chance of survival. Survival was a crucial factor, as the main goal of the Jewish people was to survive the ghetto. They believed that compliance was the key to survival, as they did not think resistance would work, and that the Nazis would ultimately lose. The Jewish people felt that by complying, they could buy time, and that they needed to prove themselves useful to the Nazis in order to increase their chances of survival. Trunk went on to discuss the complexity involved in making an objective evaluation. Samuel Lederman writes that Isaiah Trunk's study is still an important source for this critique of Arendt's generalizations.[373]

After reading Trunk and Dinner, one may come to view the *Judenrat* in a more positive light. It seems that the *Judenrat* worked with the Nazi authorities during the Holocaust because they believed it was the most viable option for survival, and that resistance would only result in more violence and persecution. They believed that if they resisted, the Nazis would become more ruthless and escalate their brutal

371 Ibid., p. 166. In German, *Judenrat* is singular and refers to one Jewish council, while *Judenräte* is the plural form, referring to multiple Jewish councils.

372 Ibid., pp. 174–175.

373 Ledreman, Samuel, "Hannah Arendt's Critique of the *Judenräte* in Context: Modern Jewish Leadership and Radical Democracy," p. 223. Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation*. Macmillan, New York, 1972.

tactics, which would ultimately lead to the complete annihilation of the Jewish people. The Jewish leaders were in an untenable position and had to make difficult choices that frequently contradicted their own moral convictions and the interests of their communities. The Nazis adeptly exploited this situation to their advantage.

After the Nazi invasion of Poland, several key figures such as heads of *Einsatzgruppen*, Gestapo, Adolph Eichmann, and others were summoned by Reinhard Heydrich for a meeting on September 21, 1939, to discuss the policy towards Jews in occupied Poland. A document was subsequently released summarizing their conclusions. The main points included relocating Jews residing in rural areas, particularly villages in western Poland, to larger cities near railway lines. Furthermore, each community would establish a Jewish council, known as *Judenrat*, comprising individuals with prominent positions such as rabbis and doctors, who would share responsibility with the Nazis. Their role would involve overseeing the transfer of Jews from various villages and locations to the designated urban centers. At the same time, the Nazis aimed to maintain Jewish-owned industries temporarily, as they were deemed essential until they could be replaced by Aryans.[374] This historical event provides valuable insights into the methods employed by the Nazis and their utilization of Jewish councils. Their objective was to centralize and concentrate the Jewish population, thereby granting the Nazis complete control over them, with the eventual options of expulsion or annihilation. By appointing leaders within the Jewish council, the Nazis were able to delegate the implementation of their policies without arousing suspicion. Initially, the Nazis exercised restraint, allowing the Jewish councils to assume responsibility for the welfare of their communities and alleviate suffering. However, this was just the beginning, and as the Nazis gained more control, they could enforce stricter demands upon the Jewish council. During this particular stage, it is challenging to criticize the Jewish councils since their collaboration with the Nazis in concentrating the Jewish population was not initially viewed with suspicion. They played a significant role in facilitating this crucial step for the Nazis. It can be understood that the Jewish councils, to some extent, became victims of circumstances, as they initially believed their cooperation would alleviate the suffering of their community. However, as time progressed, the Nazis imposed further demands, and criticism emerged regarding the actions of the Jewish councils.

According to Peter Hayes, within a month of invading Poland and incorporating around two million Jews into its territory, the Nazi regime had developed a system to segregate these individuals from the surrounding population. This involved confiscating their properties and valuables, while relying on Jewish leaders to assist

374 Solomon, *History, vol. 2,* The Open University of Israel, pp. 44–45.

in implementing this policy. Hayes asserts that this particular aspect of German policy was both diabolically effective and aimed at minimizing German resources.[375] Hayes further explored the critiques aimed at the Jewish council by scholars like Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt, both previously examined in this study, who challenged the actions and decisions of the council during that era, contrasting their perspectives with Yehudah Bauer's alternative views. Bauer also avoids attributing blame to the victims for their own fate, and he even considers expanding the concept of resistance to include acts of self-preservation when necessary.[376] Hayes further detailed the challenges faced by members of the Jewish council, highlighting that those who initially refused to comply with German orders were often executed. In some cases, the first group of Jewish council members was deliberately targeted as an example. An illustrative instance is that in Lodz, out of the initial 30 council members, 22 were executed as a means of setting a precedent. This impression is echoed by Ernő Munkácsi, the secretary of the Hungarian Judenrat, who describes their desperation and fear in trying to prevent the looming catastrophe.[377]

Life in the ghetto was characterized by unbearable conditions, with numerous individuals cramped into small living spaces. Thousands were relocated to the ghettos from nearby cities, leading to severe resource shortages, including food, and deteriorating health conditions. In response, the Jewish councils, known as the *Judenräte,* attempted to engage with the Nazis to improve the situation, unwittingly falling into a deceptive trap. The *Judenräte* sought to present themselves as agents dedicated to alleviating the suffering of their fellow Jews, complying with the Nazis' demands in hopes of securing better services. As the collaboration between the *Judenräte* and the Nazis intensified, the Nazis began to exploit their influence. They instructed the *Judenräte* to select Jews for forced labor, ultimately leading to their deportation and execution. To maintain a semblance of normalcy within the ghettos, the *Judenräte* established welfare organizations to address health issues, provide food, care for children, and more. Additionally, they had the responsibility of managing essential services like electricity and sewage for the benefit of the entire community. Under Nazi supervision, a Jewish police force was established, operating under the authority of the *Judenrat*. Their primary role was to enforce regulations and maintain order within the ghetto. The Nazis were aware of the *Judenrat's* influence and the role of the Jewish police in shaping public behavior,

375 Hayes, Peter, *Why?: Explaining the Holocaust*, p. 180.

376 Ibid., p. 178.

377 Ibid., p. 180. See also https://www.mqup.ca/how-it-happened-products-9780773555129.php?page_id=46&.

and they exploited this knowledge – often through corruption or other means – to achieve their goals.[378]

Many members of the Jewish councils held the belief that their cooperation would ensure their survival and that their efforts could potentially bring an end to the war. They aimed to demonstrate their usefulness to the Nazis in order to secure their own lives. However, the Nazis were skilled at manipulating them to serve their own sinister purposes, leading some members to reluctantly comply with morally reprehensible actions. For instance, Chaim Rumkowski, the leader of the Lodz Ghetto, advocated for compliance by handing over Jewish children to the Nazis, while sparing those who were capable of work and survival. Unfortunately, despite their desperate efforts, the fate of the *Judenrat* and the ghetto inhabitants was sealed, and they all perished in the end.

Members of the *Judenrat* who survived the Holocaust often faced accusations and, in some cases, even physical attacks. In 1946, Asher Berlin was attacked in Tel Aviv by a gang that mistook him for someone else. Despite being slashed with knives and left with scars, he survived. The attackers falsely accused him of informing on Jews to the Gestapo. In those years, there was mob justice in Palestine, where Jews suspected of collaborating with Nazis were brutally beaten. The chaos in public places was widely condemned. Eventually, criminal courts replaced the lynch mobs, and in 1950, Israel passed a law to prosecute Jewish collaborators with the Nazis. These trials, often overlooked, hold significant importance in understanding the Jewish experience during the Holocaust. Dan Porat's new book sheds light on this history.[379] In "Bitter Reckoning," Porat sheds light on previously unknown trials that took place over a span of two decades after World War II. These trials involved survivors accused of collaborating with the Nazis, revealing accounts of Jewish policemen and camp functionaries who mistreated, assaulted, robbed, and even killed their fellow Jews. As the trials unfolded, perceptions shifted, and the *Kapos* were increasingly seen as victims rather than evil collaborators. Consequently, the fervor to prosecute them diminished. Porat's book explores how these trials transformed Israel's understanding of the Holocaust and delves into the impact of suppressing the trial records, which were classified by the state for an extended period. Balancing empathy for the difficult choices faced by those who chose to collaborate with rigorous analysis, "Bitter Reckoning" challenges our notions of complicity

378 Solomon, pp. 50–56. As previously mentioned, *Judenrat* (German) is singular and refers to one Jewish council, while *Judenräte* is plural and refers to multiple Jewish councils.

379 Dan Porat, *Bitter Reckoning: Israel Tries Holocaust Survivors as Nazi Collaborators,* Harvard University Press, 2015.

and justice and prompts us to contemplate the complex nature of victimhood in extraordinary circumstances.[380]

Religious individuals who adhere to Jewish law were faced with numerous challenges and had even greater concerns regarding the actions of *Kapos* during the Holocaust. Their commitment to upholding Jewish laws made them acutely aware of the moral and ethical dilemmas posed by the role of *Kapos*. According to Jewish law, there is a significant question regarding the actions of *Kapos* during the Holocaust. Rabbi Efraim Oshry, a Holocaust survivor who served as a rabbi and guide in the Kaunas Ghetto during that period, provided valuable insights through his written responses.[381] These responses shed light on the Nazi atrocities and the resistance of religious Jews who were committed to upholding Jewish laws. Rabbi Oshry firmly stated that a *Kapo* is prohibited from providing the Nazis with a list of Jews to be sent away, as it directly contradicts Talmudic and Halakhic (Jewish law) principles.[382] These sources prohibit an individual from identifying and handing over a specific person to their oppressors. As previously mentioned, Hannah Arendt also references some of these Talmudic sources in her writings.[383] In response *Mimaamakim* 3:12, Rabbi Oshry allowed for the *Kapo*'s name to be mentioned during his son's reading (*Aliyah*) of the Torah, but only after the *Kapo* had repented.[384] The Rabbi provided sources and showed leniency in this case, recognizing that the *Kapo* was forced into his actions. However, in a different response (*Mimaamakim* 3:14), Rabbi Oshry did not allow such a *Kapo* to serve as the prayer leader (*Baal Tefilah*). It is preferable to have someone else lead the prayers in such a situation. It seems that Rabbi Oshry's response to Kapo prisoners who express remorse reflects a balance of forgiveness and accountability. He forgives them but also highlights the seriousness of their actions by not allowing them to lead prayers.

Survivors often equated Jewish *Kapos* with Nazis. Dan Porat focuses on Hirsch Bareneblat's trial in Israel, where the district attorney initially aimed to charge him as an enemy organization member. However, this count was withdrawn last-minute by the attorney general out of concern for implicating many other Israeli citizens who had worked under the Nazis if Bareneblat were convicted. Porat's book "Bitter Reckoning," challenges conventional notions of complicity and justice, encouraging readers to reevaluate their understanding of the complexities faced by those caught in extraordinary circumstances. David Mikics compellingly discusses Porat's

380 See more at https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674988149.

381 Kaunas is the modern Lithuanian name of the city, officially used today. The traditional Russian and Yiddish name is 'Kovno,' or sometimes 'Kovna,' as it is commonly used in Hebrew texts.

382 See footnote 367.

383 Ibid.

384 Efraim Oshri, *Mimaamakim* [from the depth], Vol. 3, New York, 1959, 3:12.

study of the *Kapos*, delving into their roles and experiences and emphasizing how their post war trials in Israel, profoundly shaped Israel's perception of the Holocaust.[385] Hirsch Barenblat gained attention for his controversial role as the head of the Jewish Ghetto Police in the Bedzin Ghetto, leading to subsequent legal cases in Poland and Israel. In 1964, Barenblat was acquitted by the Israeli Supreme Court. Chief Justice Moshe Landau, who presided over the Eichmann trial, acquitted him of all charges. Landau argued that it would be "hypocritical and arrogant on our part—on the part of those who never stood in their place", to "criticize those 'little men' who failed to attain moral supremacy while enduring merciless oppression under a regime whose primary goal was to dehumanize them". Landau suggested that the crucial question was not whether handing people over to the Nazis for deportation constituted a criminal act, but rather who bore responsibility for the malevolence inherent in those actions.[386]

Therefore, it is important to approach this topic with sensitivity and an open mind, considering multiple perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play. The study examined differing views on the Jewish councils' actions and motives during the Holocaust. Hannah Arendt and Raul Hilberg criticized their collaboration, while Yehudah Bauer and other scholars acknowledged the difficult conditions they faced, leading to a more sympathetic evaluation of their actions. Arendt's work remains highly debated and influential in the field of Holocaust studies, emphasizing the necessity of considering a range of viewpoints on this topic. By adopting a balanced approach, one can argue that members of the Jewish councils were victims who faced coercion by the Nazis, leading them to act in specific ways. This perspective may incline us to refrain from harshly criticizing them post-Holocaust and be open to the idea of forgiveness. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to recognize that certain actions they undertook cannot be disregarded. It is crucial to remain aware of these actions in order to prevent similar occurrences in the future, should new persecutions arise. Rabbi Ephraim Oshry's approach in responding to *Kapo* prisoners expressing remorse, reflects a nuanced blend of forgiveness and accountability.[387]

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385 David Mikics' discussion of Dan Porat regarding the *Kapos* is insightful and thought-provoking. You can find it at https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/kapos.

386 Ibid. See Miciks' article when he discussed Hirsch Barenblat.

387 The Rabbi's response reflects a balance of forgiveness and accountability. He forgives them but also highlights the seriousness of their actions by not allowing them to lead prayers. They can engage in various activities and be accepted within the community, but assuming the role of leading prayers is a distinct position with certain conditions. One of these conditions is to gain acceptance from all members, as they become the messenger and representative of the community before God.

Figure 15: Jewish paratrooper Yoel Palgi from Mandate Palestine in uniform. Credit: https://commons. wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yoel_Palgi.jpg?uselang=en#Licensing.

Figure 16: Hannah Szenes in a Hungarian army uniform as a Purim custom. Szenes is remembered as a hero for her courage and sacrifice. Credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HannahSzenes1.jpg.