

Running head: THE REVOLT OF TREBLINKA

The Revolt of Treblinka:

Recovering the Lost Heroism of the Jewish People

Tiffani Douglas

Grove City College

Abstract:

As an event unique in world history, the Holocaust deserves a substantive amount of sensitivity in its representation. In his reconstruction of the revolt that occurred at the extermination camp Treblinka, Jean-Francois Steiner makes a praiseworthy attempt to respect those Jews who lost their lives during the Holocaust while still challenging traditional perspectives of the Jews as victims.

In his novel, *Treblinka*, Steiner demonstrates powerfully what few other Holocaust writers who have not lived through the Holocaust can grasp—the concept of Jewish heroism during the Holocaust. The psychological and emotional hardships the Treblinka Jews endured as they rose from the depths of despair was enormous, yet they remained resilient in their extraordinary resolve to pursue life at all costs.

## The Revolt of Treblinka:

## Recovering the Lost Heroism of the Jewish People

*Introduction*

Literature has many accounts of the experiences of Holocaust survivors. Given the atrocious nature of the event, it is inevitable that the vast majority of these stories—whether factual or fictional—are rife with despair, grief, and trauma. Although the contents of Jean-Francois Steiner’s riveting novel *Treblinka* confront readers directly with the monstrosity of the Holocaust, the focus of the book is not to astound readers with the victimization and slaughter of the Jewish people. Instead, the book is written as a tribute to the Treblinka Jews’ unnerving determination to survive despite daily encounters with death. For the Jews of Treblinka, revolt was not a way to rebel against German cruelty. Rather, it was a vague vision, a seemingly unattainable dream to latch onto in order to find a reason to live one more day.

The book was first published by Steiner in 1966. As the son of a Jew who died in Auschwitz, Steiner had a very specific motivation for writing *Treblinka*. He was very meticulous in gathering research for the book, interviewing nine of the forty survivors of the revolt and searching for ways in which the survivors’ experiences reflected what he wished to convey in *Treblinka*. For Steiner had “inherited his father’s admiration for a heroism lacking in the received versions of Jewish responses to persecution” (Poznanski, 2009, p. 295). He sought to depict the Holocaust from a new angle and give the leaders of the revolt a voice as they wrestled with death. Yet the book remains sensitive to the precarious situation of the Jews who planned and led the revolt; the Treblinka Jews had to battle with their own wills to survive before conceiving a plan to unite the 2,000 Jewish inmates in the camp.

In his challenging article, “Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory,” Elie Wiesel (1989) contends that, where Holocaust representation is concerned, “the cry unuttered is the loudest” (p. 1). According to Wiesel, those like Steiner who have not lived through the Holocaust are incapable of representing its tragedies in a way that lives up to the monstrosity of the event. Works like *Treblinka* are not as powerful as the silent grief of Holocaust survivors.

Samuel Moyn (1995), author of *A Holocaust Controversy: The Treblinka Affair in Postwar France* defends Steiner’s need to express what Wiesel believes is inexpressible: “youth—only as a youth and to the youth of his day could he have written his book—justifies all” (p. 93). Steiner disagrees with Wiesel, stating that the purpose of his book is to engage his contemporaries—the Jewish youth—about the heroism of those who had the courage to lead the Treblinka revolt. For Steiner, the Holocaust was not entirely about the slaughter of the Jews.

Steiner’s book also disagrees with the claims of Theodor Adorno (as cited in Rothberg, 2004), who declared that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (p. 1). A deliberately cold, detached tone creates an unnerving sense of naturalness about the events of Treblinka, jarring readers with the reality of the actual unnaturalness of the camp’s activities. Steiner’s masterful use of language to convey this effect testifies to his belief in the power of poetry to provide a glimpse of the inconceivable nature of the condition of the Treblinka prisoners. Steiner’s characters shine through his cold tone in a way that depicts their humanity all the more clearly. The result of Steiner’s (1967) efforts is what the book’s cover jacket labels “a unique blend of history and novel” that functions as an intensely provocative representation of the Holocaust.

#### *Review of Literature*

The publication of *Treblinka* sparked a whirlwind of controversy among scholars. Debates centered on a wide range of issues addressed in the novel, from accusations of Jewish

complicity to the dangers of idealizing Jewish prisoners (Moyn, 2005). Renee Poznanski (2009) wrote a review of Samuel Moyn's book, which is referenced earlier in this text. Poznanski (2009) notes that "Steiner made extensive use of testimonies but encountered protests by witnesses accusing him of manipulating or even falsifying their statements in order to represent the victims as complicit with the murderers" (p. 295). This incited a storm of protest, compelling scholars to address the question of Holocaust representation and literature. *Treblinka* provoked two responses among scholars: its interpretation of the facts was either considered inexcusable or praiseworthy in its remarkably insightful and emotionally charged depiction of Jewish resistance.

For some (Foley, 1982, and Bond, 2008), the impact of *Treblinka* on the French perspective of the Holocaust negated the question of its consistency with the historical events of the revolt. Moyn (2005) believes that the French nation changed its perspective of the Holocaust from a "universalist paradigm that assimilated the Holocaust to other Nazi crimes" to a "new regime of Memory in which the Holocaust received specific attention as a phenomenon in its own right" (p. 2) as a result of the publication of *Treblinka*. The invaluable influence of *Treblinka* on French culture stands as a testament to the power of Steiner's book. If a work of literature has the ability to influence the masses so profoundly, perhaps it is worth the fictional weight Steiner attributes to it.

Like Moyn, critic Barbara Foley (1982) justifies Steiner's embellishments. In an article that analyzes various Holocaust narratives, she explains that narratives such as *Treblinka* "can be seen as historical, insofar as 'history' here entails not particularity—the testimonial authenticity of the eyewitness account—but instead generality—the explanatory power of a wide-ranging replication of historical currents" (Foley, 1982, p. 345). Foley (1982) argues that Steiner's book

remains true to the basic outline of history, even if he did rework certain testimonies and enhance the personalities of certain characters in the book.

Although it was originally published as nonfiction, *Treblinka* more appropriately fits a specific subgenre of Holocaust narratives that Foley (1982) labels the realistic social novel. She says that “Holocaust writers working in this tradition rely upon direct historical underpinnings and attach to their narratives guarantees of documentary accuracy that point to a concern with historical particularity not ordinarily accompanying standard historical novels” (Foley, 1982, p. 345-346). One of the greatest values of social realistic Holocaust novels is their ability to remind readers of the resistance Nazis encountered from the Jews.

The social realism of *Treblinka* also presents some problems concerning Holocaust representation. Foley (1982) claims that the novel “adopts conventions of suspense and romance that extract from the Treblinka rebellion a disturbing sense of catharsis” (p. 347). She argues that focusing on the heroism of the rebels overshadows the overwhelming reality of so many deaths; *Treblinka* allows for a sense of restoration in a context of utter tragedy. Foley (1982) sums up her arguments by stating that “the realistic social novel proposes too many analogies between the world of its characters and the world of its readers” (p. 347-348). In this manner, the book deviates perhaps in an unsettling way from the authenticity of the Holocaust.

Other criticism concerning *Treblinka* has been written from a literary point of view. Scholar David Bond (2008) formulates an interesting thesis. According to Bond (2008), Steiner accounts for the appalling success of the Nazis by attributing it to their ability to give the Jewish people false hope. Bond (2008) asserts that “Steiner’s account of this process [of giving false hope] becomes an astonishing (and horrifying) description of how fiction is passed off as fact” (p. 370). For example, presenting the “right” type of work permit will supposedly save the Jews

from “deportation.” Heartbreakingly, the Jews do not realize this is part of the Nazis’ manipulation and that all choices eventually lead to extermination.

Bond (2008) praises Steiner’s work for its accomplishments in raising awareness of the Holocaust. He says that, by “using language honestly and accurately to describe experiences that most readers can barely imagine, [*Treblinka*] demonstrates how language can be distorted to convey what is patently untrue” (Bond, 2008, p. 378) within the novel. By the end the essay, he justifies Steiner’s use of fictional techniques in a nonfiction work, asserting that the novel “awake[s] in the reader an awareness of truth” (p. 378). By demonstrating the lies orchestrated by the Nazis during the Holocaust, *Treblinka* provides an appalling and provocative account of the events of the Holocaust.

Scholarly criticism of *Treblinka* is rife with controversy. Poznanski (2009) sums up the immense impact of *Treblinka* with the statement that “the proportions assumed by the controversy—the book’s very success—allowed Steiner’s issues to reach a large public in whose eyes the victims of the Second World War had previously remained an undifferentiated mass” (Poznanski, 2009, p. 296). Steiner’s novel fulfills a momentous purpose: humanizing the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and vividly communicating their tremendous courage in the revolt.

### *Method*

Regardless of Steiner’s techniques, few scholars could criticize the emotional power of *Treblinka*. The novel accomplishes what is nearly impossible; Steiner reconstructs the history of the Treblinka revolt in a way that emphasizes the heroism of the revolt leaders while giving readers no illusions concerning the entirely abject, hopeless state of the camp inmates. The revolt had no hope to fuel it, and this makes the determination of the revolt leaders in planning the revolt anyway all the more extraordinary.

In the novel, Steiner negates the ability of the Germans to completely dehumanize the Jewish inmates of the camp and creates a sense of restoration for the Jews that remains appropriate to the tragedy of the Holocaust. To do this, Steiner creates a world of contrasts which serve to highlight the heroism of the leaders of the revolt. The leaders embody characteristics that completely oppose the weaknesses of most of the other characters in the novel. He deplors that the vast majority of the Jews “allowed themselves to be led to the slaughterhouse like sheep,” unwilling to fight for their lives (Steiner, 1967, p. 7). This passivity is demonstrated within and without the camp as the story transitions from Jews being herded peacefully out of the Vilna ghetto and into concentration camps to passive acceptance of death and collaboration among the inmates.

These examples and others are contrasted with the heroism of the revolt leaders. Unlike most prisoners at the camp, the members of the “Committee of Resistance”—the term Steiner uses for the principal men responsible for leading the revolt—refused to give up on life and instead began their resistance by battling death within the camp. In the early stages of the resistance, they focus all their energy on helping Jews escape Treblinka so they can warn the outside world about what is truly happening in the camp. And within the camp, the revolt leaders’ resourcefulness and grim will to live contrasts the mass of other prisoners. Steiner narrates that many of the prisoners give in to despair and commit suicide, either by hanging themselves or intentionally provoking the Germans. Although the Committee also battles with this despair, they are able to overcome it and live for their plans of revolt. This is another quality, according to Steiner, that characterizes a hero of the Holocaust.

The humanity of the revolt leaders is also emphasized as a characteristic of heroism. Steiner brings readers into the minds of the members of the Committee, narrating their doubts,



anguish, fear, and other emotions that threaten to overwhelm them as they plan the revolt. Furthermore, in a reversal of conventional perspectives of the Holocaust, the Germans are dehumanized and even referred to as “Technicians.” The commandant of the camp, Kurt Franz, is depicted as cold and mechanical, prizing the “machine” that is Treblinka. These contrasts in the novel reinforce emotional responses to the story and highlight the heroic qualities of the revolt leaders. The result is a work that sensitizes readers to the atrocity of the events at Treblinka and invokes a sense of respect and admiration for the Jews who resisted extermination.

### *Analysis*

In his search for Jewish heroism in the Holocaust, Jean-Francois Steiner was frequently frustrated. He believed that the greatest tragedy of the Holocaust was not the physical death of so many Jews but rather the death of their spirits. His fear was that the few instance of resistance to extermination involved Jews who had already resigned themselves to death. In searching for a subject for his book, Steiner rejected chronicling the Warsaw ghetto uprising because the Warsaw rebels “knew that the revolt would fail; ultimately, they chose death just as surely as those who simply let it overwhelm them” (Moyn, 2005, p. 6). The Warsaw ghetto resistance did not constitute heroism for Steiner because the Jews of Warsaw had given up on life, despite their bravery in the revolt.

Steiner had a specific agenda in mind when he reconstructed the world of Treblinka, and his writing profoundly accomplishes his goals. He began *Treblinka* with a brief recounting of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto. The first reference to heroism in the novel is presented cynically by Wittenberg, the leader of the Jewish resistance movement in the ghetto. Upon being captured by the Germans, he laments the loss of life:

What a dream he had had! Honor, heroism—all that had lost its meaning. There was room only for hate, an immense, inextinguishable hate which nothing could ever overcome. But he felt empty even of hate. You must be alive to hate, and he was already dead. (Steiner, 1967, p. 70)

An echo of Steiner's perception of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Wittenberg's thought process as he goes to his death reflects submission to death and therefore fails to achieve Steiner's standard of heroism.

Instead, Steiner chose to return to Jewish values in his search for the archetypal Jewish hero. Moyn (2005) observes that *Treblinka* "shows that Steiner believed that Jews could partake in heroism, only it had to be their own kind, one that overcame the restricted choice between different kinds of death" (p. 35). This is the heart and soul of *Treblinka*; the story is remarkable because, unlike the Jews of Warsaw or Vilna, the Treblinka Jews chose to pursue life at all costs. Steiner battles the perceived passivity of the victims by attributing distinct qualities of heroism and resolve in the leaders of the Treblinka revolt.

Steiner depicts a paradox in the process the Treblinka Jews go through to attain the courage to revolt. The ability the inmates have in coming to grips with the bleak certainty of their own demise is the only thing that motivates them to abandon despair and pursue revolt. The novel provides a vivid description of this process:

"And then, suddenly, came the miracle. Just when their abdication was total, when all values had ceased to exist, when their humanity had almost left them, the Jews, rousing themselves from the bottom of the abyss, began a slow ascent which death alone would stop. A few months earlier these men had won back the right to die by committing suicide; now they were discussing their right to die by fighting. It was that night, in that

buzzing barracks, that the miracle occurred at last: “the miracle in abdication.” (Steiner, 1967, p. 187)

The Jews of Treblinka found the courage to abandon their desolation only when they came to grips with the hopelessness of their situation. This paradox characterizes the entire concept of Holocaust heroism in the novel.

The members of the Committee are able to envision the revolt only when they abandon hope and depend instead upon desperation. No character in the novel exemplifies this gruesome motivation for action as effectively as Choken. Early in the novel, the Committee consists of Galewski, the Jewish commandant of the camp and the principal leader of the revolt; Berliner, a desperate Jew full of anger; and Choken, the emotional support of the Committee. Choken convinces Galewski and Berliner that escape is necessary. Choken declares that pursuit of life is the answer to their abjection. He emphatically asserts,

There is no vengeance possible and hatred is sterile. It's not to die in desperate battle that we need, it's not to kill Germans that matters. What we need is a victory and witnesses to tell about it...witnesses of the victory of the Jews over the S.S. (Steiner, 1967, p. 272)

He volunteers to fulfill this purpose and convinces the other two men to plan and carry out his escape, which they do.

Tragically, Choken's escape is futile, for he fails to convince a single Jew to accept the reality of the extermination camps. After his escape, he travels to Novoradomsk, Poland, where his cousin lives. Steiner (1967) narrates, “He was given a warm welcome, until he mentioned Treblinka. The town lived in a peaceful stupor. His cousin begged him not to mention Treblinka to anyone” (p. 266). The cousin's only response to Choken's warning is to berate him for depriving the Jewish people of hope.

In addition to responding with the obliviousness of the cousin, another villager in Novoradomsk reacted violently to Choken's warnings, attacking him for daring to suggest that his wife, whom the Nazis had sent to Treblinka a mother earlier, was now dead. The welling of emotion Choken experienced as he responded to the attack nearly overwhelmed him and he came to one of the most profound realizations in the novel:

Choken had trouble controlling him and left him with a certain sense of shame. From that day on he suffered a great crisis of doubt that led him to the brink of despair. It was then that he decided that the only possible combat was the one Galewski was waging in Treblinka: the combat after death. (Steiner, 1967, p. 267).

Encountering the extermination firsthand and crossing that border between "life" and "death" when one comes face to face with the reality of Jewish extermination, as Choken did, was the only way to battle abdication. The Jews outside Treblinka did not listen to Choken because they could abandon their hope.

Choken's story ended dimly. Failing to penetrate the ignorant passivity of the Jews of Novoradomsk, Choken traveled to Warsaw and participated in the uprising there. Eventually, he was mortally wounded, captured, and sent back to Treblinka. Just before he died in Galewski's arms, Choken entreated Galewski,

"You must do something. Something that will make a mark, that will go down in history as an extraordinary victory. There are plenty of heroes, as many as there are cowards, and they all end up in Treblinka. What we need is a victory; the victory of the dead." (Steiner, 1967, p. 272).

After his excursion outside Treblinka, Choken realizes that warning Jews can no longer be the goal of the revolt; instead, he implores Galewski to give Jewish prisoners the chance to become witnesses of heroism.

Facing the truth of the Holocaust is not the only quality that embodies a hero for Steiner. In an interview conducted shortly after Treblinka was first published, Steiner explained that, in Jewish culture, “what should really matter is not how one dies but whether one lives” (Moyn, 2005, p. 6). Many of the inmates of Treblinka forego this Jewish value and commit suicide. Steiner seems to lay the blame for this decision on the Nazis. He described their relentless dehumanization of the Jews of Treblinka by asserting that the Jews

are only alive by an ancestral reflex, but unconsciously they are ashamed not to have died with their families. That is the extraordinary power of the Nazi system. Like certain spiders, it puts its victims to sleep before killing them. It is a death in two stages: you put men to sleep, then you kill the sleepers. (Steiner, 1967, p. 147)

The Committee of Resistance recognizes this “system” and attempts to prevent the prisoners from “sleeping.” The revolt leaders give the inmates no false illusions of hope but rather rebuke them for attempting to aid the Germans in their quest to exterminate the Jewish race by surrendering their humanity.

One of the scholars Moyn addresses in *A Holocaust Controversy*, David Rousset, is a prominent scholar on German concentration camps. Moyn (2005) describes Rousset’s perspective of the “sleepers” in Treblinka: “Rousset emphasized the prisoners as not only literally but also existentially naked as a result of their internment and in the midst of a life no different from death—on the border between them” (p. 54). **The inmates of Treblinka were caught in a world of death from which only extreme displays of humanity could break free.**

Ironically, Kurland, one of the less important members of the Committee of Resistance, most accurately defends the Jewish obligation to pursue life. Kurland, who joined the resistance effort late in the novel, explains,

“To live is to eat, to hope, to love. To live is to act. You love life the way you love a woman, with your heart and with your body too.” After a silence during which he seemed to be reflecting Kurland added pensively, “Yes, life is like a woman: perhaps you should not love it too much if you are afraid to suffer. Then after another silence, he added, “But I feel sorry for men who have never loved.” (Steiner, 1967, p. 365)

He reminds the resistance leaders that to choose life is not merely to refrain from suicide. They must passionately maintain hold on their humanity as well, for this is the only way they can avoid Rousset’s “existential nakedness.”

Kurland himself lives this out in a unique way that testifies to the resilience of the Jewish people. On the brink of the revolt, Kurland runs to “the hospital,” a building. Considering his role in the novel as an example of the Jewish hero, it is shocking that Kurland’s primary task is giving lethal injections Jews too weak or sick to go to the gas chambers. Steiner writes:

[Kurland] took out some other papers, his complete works. They were plays, all of which were set in the “hospital.” Such were these Jews who, “with the blade of the sword at their throats,” did not give up hope; such were these men who died but did not abdicate from life. While they were being killed they wrote plays—for their own sake, for no reason, to stay alive. Because life, no matter what it is like, must be lived, and because to live is not merely to survive; it is to laugh, to think, to write. (Steiner, 1967, p. 315)

Kurland stubbornly engages in what, for him, defines humanity: the ability to express individuality and record his experiences at Treblinka. Artistic expression defines life for Kurland

and gives him the motivation to participate in the revolt. Kurland's example asserts the important idea that life in Treblinka is not measured by passively surviving another horrific day but rather engaging in activities that distinguish one man from those around him. In this sense, his embrace of life qualifies Kurland as a hero.

Kurland is not the only character in Treblinka who creates a channel for his humanity. For Galewski, the leader of the Committee of Resistance, the revolt itself serves as a catalyst for perpetuating his own ascent from the depths of despair. Galewski "did not know how to use a gun and had no idea what the word *strategy* meant, but he lived the revolt. As he had given it birth, it was what kept him alive" (Steiner, 1967, p. 308). To the very end, Galewski remains at the heart of the revolt, encouraging the other members to persist in their loyalty to resistance. Just as Kurland lived for his literature, Galewski lived for the revolt, and the text depicts the emotions that were aroused within him as a result of planning it.

Galewski's motivation for his dedication to the revolt transcends even the immediate need to facilitate the escape of potential witnesses. For all the original members of the Committee of Resistance, including Galewski, "this revolt had a further dimension: the destruction of a myth, the recovery of their humanity. It was this dimension that gave them their irresistible strength, but which conversely made them doubt themselves at times" (Steiner, 1967, p. 302). Although initially this seems to be a weakness, this doubt is also a manifestation of Galewski's commitment to his humanity and becomes a quality that gives him strength in the last days leading up to the revolt.

Galewski's passionate dedication to the revolt is contrasted by the depiction of Germans in *Treblinka*. The "Technicians" are portrayed as lacking any trait that defines humanity; they are mercilessly cruel, devoid of emotion, and meticulous in their dedication to running the camp

perfectly. Steiner even describes the camp in this manner, using a disturbingly ironic tone: “so that the machine would be able to ‘treat’ them [the Jews] properly, all the wheels must remain in place, the machine must keep on running—the furnaces must remain lit” (Steiner, 1967, p. 285). Even Kurt Franz, the commandant of the camp, is a vision of perfection and is frequently described as cold and calculating. This reversal of traditional perceptions of the Jews and the Germans during the Holocaust causes Galewski’s humanity to achieve prominence in the novel.

Steiner raises the concept of Jewish heroism during the Holocaust to a new caliber. Even more than demonstrating humanity in the face of constant death, the revolt leaders of Treblinka exhibit what Steiner terms “superhumanity.” Steiner claims that

To choose superhumanity is to realize that fear is simply the first obstacle. It provokes a hatred of the enemy... This hatred is violent, sovereign; it seizes one’s being completely.

A little like love, it fills one with a new power. (Moyn, 2005, p. 21)

The members of the Committee of Resistance embody this trait in a way that restores the perspective of Jews during the Holocaust from being terror-stricken victims to passionate, desperate heroes.

However, *Treblinka* leaves no room for idealism. The Committee has no grand hopes for restoration following the revolt. Steiner remains true to the devastating spirit of the Holocaust, and hope has abandoned the scene of the novel. One minor character in *Treblinka*, Rapoport, demonstrates the trauma of the Jewish people in the wake of the Holocaust. In the novel, Rapoport had a dream in which he escaped Treblinka, and because of the dream he maintained the certainty that he would live beyond the war. Steiner (1967) explains,

In the future he saw himself as a multimillionaire, going from country to country, and everywhere surrounded by throngs of listeners who would come to hear him talk. He



talked on and on without end. He was the witness. Today he lives in Israel and when he tells the story his face becomes transfigured with pain. Mystic of hell, prophet of the abyss, he returns to this place which he knew he would leave some day, but from which he will never escape. (p. 279)

The horror of what occurred at Treblinka would live on in the memories of those who escaped the camp. This is the bittersweet fulfillment of the revolt leaders' goal of liberating witnesses.

### *Discussion*

For all its controversial content, *Treblinka* accomplished what few other Holocaust narratives of its time have: Jean-Francois Steiner depicts the internal difficulty of making the decision to pursue life among inmates destined for death. *Treblinka* made the Holocaust about overcoming psychological "death," not physical extermination.

However, Steiner limits the determination to survive to the Jewish race alone. One of the Warsaw ghetto rebels illustrates to Choken, "Throughout our history we Jews have agreed to fight without hope, but without despair either, with faith in God and in Israel, that our people have survived" (Steiner, 2005, p. 269). The validity of this claim is a source for future research. It begs the question, why were there not revolts among other Jews during the Holocaust? What distinguished the Treblinka Jews from the *Sonderkommandos* (inmates whose duties were directly involved with extermination) of other camps?

Another noteworthy issue Steiner's novel introduces but does not thoroughly explore is the ruthless, meticulous manner in which the Germans deceived the Jews into hoping even as they were led to their deaths at Treblinka. Through the voice of Galewski, Steiner pardons this compliance by constructing a scenario:

Suppose that the S.S. had arrived announcing that they were going to kill us all, swearing it, starting to prove it. There is no doubt at all that the three million Polish Jews would have revolted. They would have done it with their backs to the wall, with the courage of despair. And it wouldn't have taken a few thousand men to beat us, but the whole Wehrmacht—and even then it isn't certain that all the soldiers would have obeyed!

(Steiner, 1967, p. 147)

This illustrates the possibility that Jewish resistance was minimal not because of the cowardice of the Jews but because of the complete effectiveness of the Nazi regime in suppressing the Jewish will to resist. Scholars who criticize Steiner for his accusations of Jewish complicity fail to take this passage into account. Steiner blamed the Germans as fully as the Jews for the slaughter during the Holocaust.

Steiner also creates new meaning in his interpretation of eyewitness interviews and testimonies. In his Cultural Studies theory, scholar Stuart Hall (1993) claims that meaning can be constructed through language. Meaning “depends on the practice of interpretation, and interpretation is sustained by us actively using the code” (p. 62). *Treblinka* exemplifies this theory, for “Steiner in fact filtered their experience through a unifying narrative and ideological purpose that super-imposed his own message on their different and more disparate meanings” (Moyn, 2005, p. 124). For example, in his construction of the character Adolf Friedman, Steiner provides readers with an image of the classical military leader. He constructs this image through the nature of Adolf's participation in the Committee (he was in charge of organizing the inmates for combat) and the connotation of his name, which, interestingly, is a name Steiner invented to protect the real person his character represented, as he did for every other character in *Treblinka*.

Richard Glazar, a survivor of Treblinka, describes a very different Adolf Friedman in a letter he wrote to Steiner to protest the contents of *Treblinka*. Glazar writes,

I can see him clearly, lying there opposite on the bunk and up there in the hut with the “ready-mades,” the clothes left behind by victims, where I worked to begin with. Surprisingly enough, still fairly plump, with a shiny bald head. He was quite a chap, but completely non-military, a suave politician and a fatherly *Vorarbeiter*.<sup>i</sup>

In changing the personality of Adolf, Steiner creates a new perception of his characters and thus transforms the meaning of the revolt to reinforce his interpretation of Jewish resistance.

### *Conclusion*

Steiner’s goal of educating the world about the heroism of the Jews has extended beyond the walls of Treblinka. The legacy of *Treblinka* has saturated the twenty-first century, and Jewish resistance during the Holocaust has become an expanding field of study. Organizations like the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, established in 2000 by Mitch Braff, have made it their goal to promote the truth that passivity did not wholly characterize the Jewish race during the Holocaust, and many Jews were courageous in resisting the Nazi regime.

*Treblinka* addresses questions concerning the Holocaust that had long remained unanswered before its time. Far more than decrying the compliance of the *Sonderkommandos* in aiding the mass murders, *Treblinka* serves the rare function of a testament to Jewish heroism.

Moyn (1967) explains that

in reconstructing—and partially reimagining—the history of the Holocaust, Steiner must have believed that he had shown... why there was no cause for shame; a unified Jewish people could now be deservedly proud of the heroism even of its dark recent past. (p. 44)

Far more than a factual—or fictional—account of a revolt in an extermination camp, *Treblinka* attempted to reconstruct the events of the revolt in a manner that would transform universal perspectives of Jews during the Holocaust, in the eyes of both the Gentiles and the Jewish race.

The novel is a perceptive account of the Jewish determination to lift themselves from the pit of despair and pursue life. As Kurland, the spokesman for the pursuit of life in *Treblinka*, notes poetically, “This revolt...must appear as a symbol of the destiny of the Jewish people, whom no earthly power has ever been able to defeat. This revolt must show the world that at the very bottom of the abyss we have not despaired” (Steiner, 1967, p. 203). The embellishments in the story of the Treblinka Jews serve to emphasize this profound truth. Steiner’s novel interprets the horrors of the Holocaust in a way that accentuates the restoration of the honor of the Jewish race.

---

<sup>i</sup> This excerpt from Richard Glazar’s letter to Jean-Francois Steiner is extracted from <http://www.holocaustcontroversies.blogspot.com/2006/10/richard-glazar-on-jean-francois.html>. Excerpts of the letter are also referenced and cited in Samuel Moyn’s (2005) work, *A Holocaust Controversy: The Treblinka Affair in Postwar France*.

---

Works Cited

- Bond, D. J. (2008). Jean-Francois Steiner's Treblinka: Reading fact as fiction. *A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language*, 26(3), 370-378. Retrieved from MLA International Biography.
- Foley, B. (1982). Fact, fiction, and fascism: Testimony and mimesis in Holocaust narratives. *Comparative Literature*, 34(4), 33-60. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications and Open University.
- Moyn, S. (2005). *A Holocaust controversy: The Treblinka affair in postwar France*. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press.
- Poznanski, R. (2009). A Holocaust controversy: The Treblinka affair in postwar France (Review). *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 23(2), 294-298. Retrieved from <http://www.muse.jhu.edu>.
- Rothberg, M. (2004). Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering what one never knew. *Biography*, 27(3), 660-663. Retrieved from <http://www.muse.jhu.edu>.
- Steiner, J. (1967). *Treblinka*. New York: MJF Books.
- Wiesel, E. (1989, June 11). Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing memory. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>