

**Speech by Dr. Josef Schuster, President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, at the Forum 20 July 1944 of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, entitled, “I was looking for a way to continue living as a human being in Germany” – What the Jewish resistance against National Socialism means to us today,” held on August 31, 2021**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since last year, I have been confronted with the topic of resistance against National Socialism to an extent that I have not seen for a long time. In both positive and negative ways.

Let me begin with the positive side.

The hundredth birthday of Sophie Scholl on May 9 of this year, as well as my speech at the swearing in of new recruits to the Armed Forces on July 20 in the Bendlerblock, and now here at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, have caused me to think more and more intensively about this subject. I have been, and am today, able to publicly express thoughts that I find important about resistance.

Sophie Scholl's centenary birthday, which occasioned the remembrance of her and her fellow campaigners in the White Rose, led to a series of events and a debate about the resistance fighters of the Nazi period.

The resistance fighters continue to exert a fascination. Scholarly debates on the subject are still underway.

What I find truly repulsive – and now I'm turning to the negative side – is the instrumentalization of the issue at demonstrations by Corona deniers and so-called contrarians (*Querdenker*), which we have been experiencing for more than a year.

People who want to protest against the lockdown and vaccinations are positioning themselves in line with persecuted Jews such as Anne Frank and equating themselves with resistance fighters such as Sophie Scholl because they consider it courageous to rise up against the alleged “Corona dictatorship.”

The self-image that these people have is as distasteful as it is ludicrous.

I have to put it this harshly.

The resistance fighters of the Nazi period have been repeatedly exploited in political ways since 1945. This is not new. I will come back to this in a moment.

Yet I have never experienced this kind of appropriation of resistance fighters by people who reject democracy, or who at least incite an aversion to our political system.

I don't want to excuse this as a lack of historical knowledge. Right-wing extremists in particular are very aware that they are using this narrative, and conspiracy theories, to present themselves as victims, to legitimate violations of rules, and to trivialize National Socialism. And currently, it is unfortunately all too easy for right-wing extremists to plant their crude ideas in segments of society that have previously been out of their reach.

We cannot allow this appropriation of the resistance fighters and the victims of the Shoah!

In our fight against extremists and contrarians, we can – as paradoxical as it may sound – look to the resistance fighters as our role models!

Because it is important to show civil courage and composure, even if this is not popular at the moment and if this is considered as the behavior of a spoilsport. We must denounce the anti-Semitism and hostility towards democracy among Corona deniers, even if this makes us unpopular in our own families or among our friends. Intervening instead of looking away – this, ladies and gentlemen, is what I consider the heritage of the resistance.

I would like to express my profound thanks to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Foundation 20 July 1944 for the opportunity to hold the keynote speech today and to take part in the panel discussion that will follow.

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I very much appreciate that you are addressing the topic of Jewish resistance. The Jewish resistance, which was almost ignored by researchers in the first decades after the war, is no longer a niche phenomenon. Yet there are still many people who know almost nothing about it.

Before I shine a light on Jewish resistance groups, I would like to say something briefly about the political instrumentalization of the resistance, which I just mentioned.

On both sides – in the old Federal Republic and the GDR – the resistance against National Socialism was viewed through a political lens and interpreted accordingly.

The assassins of July 20, 1944, were still regarded as traitors by many Germans even after the war. Goebbels's propaganda continued to bear fruit here. It is shocking and shameful that many relatives had to wait years for pensions and compensation payments.

At the end of the 1960s, the Auschwitz trials and the student movement in West Germany led to a stronger confrontation with the Nazi era, but now the resistance fighters of July 20 were no longer politically acceptable. They were labelled enemies of democracy and imperialists.

And just as in the Federal Republic the communist resistance was downplayed for a long time, in the GDR it was the other way around with the resistance of the mostly aristocratic officers. They were only appreciated very late in the GDR.

For a long time, the Jewish resistance was not a topic at all in West German research. In the GDR, it was almost completely subsumed under the communist resistance.

This is what happened with the group around the Berlin Jew Herbert Baum, from whom I borrowed the title of my speech, as I will explain to you later.

Herbert Baum had indeed been involved in the KPD's illegal struggle against the Nazi state since 1933, and in 1942 he and his group carried out an arson attack on an anti-Soviet exhibition in Berlin's Lustgarten. But it is certain that Herbert Baum mainly gathered young Jews around him. Today, they are considered one of the most important Jewish resistance groups in Germany at the time.

Looking back, it is striking that the debates in this country also focused very much on the resistance in Germany. The view beyond the national horizon often came up a little short.

However, anyone who wants to talk about the Jewish resistance will only do justice to this topic if they broaden their view. In many European countries that were occupied by Germany, Jews were among the resistance fighters, for example in the French Résistance and among the partisans around Tito. And of course the resistance in the ghettos and camps must be acknowledged. First and foremost, we have to remember the uprisings in the Warsaw Ghetto and the extermination camps in Treblinka and Sobibor.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am a medical doctor, not a historian. Therefore, I do not presume to be capable of offering a complete historical analysis here. It would not be possible in half an hour anyway.

I would like to focus on two aspects in my following remarks:

- On the special characterization of the Jewish resistance;
- And on the question of what the resistance means for us today.

Let me turn to the first aspect. What distinguishes the Jewish resistance from other resistance groups, and what were the goals of the Jewish resistance fighters?

What all resistance groups had in common, regardless of their origin or denomination, was that they were hopelessly inferior to the National Socialists in terms of logistics. In terms of

weapons, equipment, infrastructure, money, and number of people, they actually had no chance against the Nazis. Especially in terms of numbers of supporters, the regime could count on millions of people, unlike the resistance groups. This also meant that the Nazis were able to establish perfect surveillance and spying.

The resistance groups had to constantly reckon with denunciations, which was very often the reason for the arrests and, ultimately, deaths of their members.

However, this inferiority against the Nazis was not as blatant for any other resistance group as it was for the Jews. They were no longer allowed to practice their professions, so they had hardly any money. Jews were not even allowed to own a typewriter. The Herbert Baum group, for example, also had a few non-Jewish members who secretly typed out leaflets at their workplaces. Jews were persecuted, spied on and denounced like no other population group.

In saying this, I do not want to relativize the work of the other resistance groups. That is the last thing I would want to do. No, they all risked their lives.

But I do believe it is important to keep in mind these different baseline conditions when we deal with the Jewish resistance.

This is especially true when we look at Jewish resistance in the ghettos and camps. From today's perspective, I find it completely astonishing – and to be honest, sensationally courageous – that in this situation these completely disenfranchised, humiliated and physically debilitated people dared to rebel at all.

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At this point, by the way, it is important to pay special tribute to women. A Canadian author has just published a book that examines the role of women in the Jewish resistance for the first time.<sup>1</sup> Since Jewish women could often move about more inconspicuously than Jewish men, they often served as couriers. For example, they smuggled dynamite into the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as rifles and ammunition.

Dear Professor Löw, you also suggested in an essay that the Jews in the ghettos were completely on their own. It was not as if the non-Jewish population in the occupied territories had been their supporters.

I quote from your essay, Professor Löw:

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<sup>1</sup> Judy Batalion, *The Light of Days. The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos*. New York: William Morrow, 2021. German edition: *Sag nie, es gäbe nur den Tod für uns. Die vergessene Geschichte jüdischer Freiheitskämpferinnen*. Munich 2021.

“They were dependent on outside help, but considerable parts of the respective local populations were indifferent or even hostile to them.”<sup>2</sup>

The different baseline conditions of the resistance fighters also led to the fact that the aims of many Jewish resistance fighters differed somewhat from the others.

At this point I would like to return to my lecture title, which is a quotation from Herbert Budzislawski from Berlin, who belonged to the circle of people around Herbert Baum. The Gestapo arrested him in 1942, and he formulated a statement after his interrogation. He wrote:

“I had the feeling that injustice was being done to me as a Jew in National Socialist Germany. I was looking for a way out that would enable me to continue living in Germany as a human being.”<sup>3</sup>

At its core, this is what it was all about: preserving one’s own dignity. To remain a human being. This also applies to the few survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. They were concerned with self-assertion and resistance against the Nazi ideology of denying Jews their humanity.

Plans for a coup d'état, as with the assassins of July 20, 1944, are not to be found among Jewish resistance groups. They were aware of their limited possibilities. But within the framework of these truly minimal margins, the preservation of life was quite existentially at stake, in addition to the preservation of human dignity. The rescue of as many Jews as possible was the declared goal of many Jewish resistance groups. They forged papers, smuggled people out of camps or ghettos, hid children, organized escape routes. The hope of one day being able to live in a Jewish state of Israel was the decisive motivation for some resistance fighters.

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They always had a concern that other resistance groups shared: they were endangering family members or other innocent people with their illegal activities. It was clear to the Jews that if they were caught, it would mean certain death for their families, because they were Jewish.

After the attack on the anti-Soviet exhibition in Berlin by the Herbert Baum group, the Nazis arrested 500 Berlin Jews in retaliation. They shot 250 of them and deported the remaining

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<sup>2</sup> Andrea Löw: Widerstand und Selbstbehauptung von Juden im Nationalsozialismus (*The Resistance and Self-Assertion of Jews under National Socialism*) in: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in: Regina Scheer: Im Schatten der Sterne. Eine jüdische Widerstandsgruppe (*In the Shadow of the Stars. A Jewish Resistance Group*). Berlin 2004.

250 to camps. Every Jewish resistance fighter had to live with the certainty that his actions could trigger the murder of hundreds of Jews.

For this reason, there were probably also discussions within the group around Herbert Baum as to whether the arson attack on the exhibition might be too risky. Similar discussions – namely about whether it was permissible to endanger many human lives – took place in the Warsaw Ghetto and in camps such as Treblinka and Sobibor.

So why then did the Jews decide nevertheless to rise up against their overpowering occupiers?

This brings us back to the beginning: because they wanted to preserve their dignity by fighting for justice and humanity.

In Israel, survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising founded the “Lohamei HaGeta’ot” kibbutz in 1949 and established a museum there. In a newspaper article about the kibbutz, I found a statement from the uprising survivor Raya Kalisman. She said that she wanted the museum to convey to young visitors the idea,

- I quote -

“... that people are still able to stand up for justice and distinguish between right and wrong, even when circumstances have supposedly left them no choice.”<sup>4</sup>

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One of the central messages of the resistance fighters, which is still valid today, is that people always have a choice!

There is another motive of many Jewish resistance groups, and that is the preservation of memory. The National Socialists sought to erase every trace of Jewish life. Jews also resisted this attempt. The most famous example is the Ringelblum Archive in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Emanuel Ringelblum and his companions collected official documents such as posters or ration cards as well as diaries, poems and family photos. Shortly after the deportations began, they hid the documents in metal boxes in the basement of a building in the ghetto, as well as in two large milk cans.

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Vrankovic: Das Haus der Ghettokämpfer. Die Geschichte des Kibbuz La homei HaGeta’ot und das dort ansässige Widerstandsmuseum (*The Ghetto Fighters’ House. The History of the La homei HaGeta’ot Kibbutz and the Resistance Museum Located There*). JungleWorld 2018.

Only three members of the secret archive survived the Shoah. They helped to recover the archive after the war; they discovered the first part in 1946, and then the two milk cans in 1950.

Today, these are invaluable sources for the reconstruction of life and death in the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as for the resistance itself. All of those involved had known that, if their archive collection were discovered, they would be killed immediately.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

So far, I have mentioned only a few individual Jewish resistance groups and few names. Those people – almost all of whom paid for their courage with their lives – deserve to be named. I am glad that there is now much more intensive historical research – research that is less marked by political interpretations – on this subject. Much became possible only when archives opened up in Eastern Europe. At the local level, too, there are always initiatives that perform research on the fates of individuals and save these people from oblivion.

This brings me to the second aspect that I would like to illuminate in a little more detail: the question of what the Jewish resistance means for us today.

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Two thoughts are important to me here: What image of Jews is being conveyed in schools today? And, secondly, what lessons do we draw from the history of the resistance?

On the first point:

Already in 1980, so almost 40 years ago, the historian Wolfgang Wippermann warned against a “pedagogy of victimhood.”<sup>5</sup> In a presentation about the Herbert Baum group, Wippermann put it this way:

I quote:

“The widespread yet false impression that the Jews allowed themselves to be led to the slaughter like lambs, willingly and without resistance, makes it difficult for students to identify with the Jews as individual human beings who took action and in part defended

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<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Wippermann: Die Berliner Gruppe Baum und der jüdische Widerstand. Informationszentrum Berlin Gedenk- und Bildungsstätte Stauffenbergstraße. Beiträge zum Thema Widerstand (*The Baum Group in Berlin and the Jewish Resistance. The Information Center at the Berlin Memorial and Educational Site at Stauffenbergstrasse. Articles on the Subject of Resistance*). Berlin 2001.

themselves. Of course, I do not want to oppose a detailed treatment of the Holocaust in the classroom, but I doubt whether this ‘pedagogy of victimhood,’ as I would like to put it very casually, is able not only to convey knowledge about the mass murder of the Jews, but also to create an emotional impact.”

Where do we stand today, forty years later?

To be honest: unfortunately we haven’t come very far.

Jews are still presented in school lessons primarily as victims: as victims of pogroms in the Middle Ages and as victims of the Shoah.

It is probably no coincidence that many young people in Germany use the phrases “You victim” and “You Jew” synonymously as pejoratives. Although in-depth knowledge about the Holocaust is often non-existent, the role of Jews as victims has become entrenched.

The contributions that Jews made to German intellectual life, on the other hand, and the Jewish religion – all this is still neglected in the classroom. As is the topic of Jewish resistance. The history of National Socialism and the Shoah are not complete if the subject of resistance and Jewish resistance is not dealt with.

In order to push back against this persistent, widespread “pedagogy of victimhood,” the Central Council of Jews has been working for several years with the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, and with textbook publishers. In 2016, we adopted a joint declaration with the Conference with the aim of ensuring that Judaism is taught in its entire breadth in schools.

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Only then can young people become aware of the dimensions of this genocide. Only when young people appreciate this can they understand the despotism of the Nazis, as well as the loss that resulted from the murder of the European Jews.

Teachers should also be trained and educated accordingly. So far, our universities do not even offer a course on the Holocaust every semester. The Central Council of Jews is convinced that attendance at a seminar on National Socialism should be mandatory in teacher training.

In addition, we held workshops for textbook editors in 2019/2020 with the Federation for Educational Media (*Verband Bildungsmedien*). Fortunately, all major textbook publishers participated. In the workshops, we drew attention to inappropriate, or at least dubious, depictions of Judaism and explained why we view these texts or illustrations critically. In the meantime, we have been working continuously with the publishers.



The image of Jews that is conveyed in schools is extremely important for our coexistence today. Respectful interaction among equals does not just happen by itself.

At the same time, nobody is born an anti-Semite. The fact that age-old anti-Jewish stereotypes persist nevertheless is due to the fact that they are passed on, whether consciously or unconsciously, over generations. Nowadays, social media plays an ungodly role in this.

Young people are confronted with anti-Semitic stickers, memes and videos on these networks. We have to educate them about this and arm them against it. Otherwise they will adopt this content without questioning it. Right-wing extremists deliberately use social media as a gateway and feed their hatred into it.

To immunize young people against these right-wing pied pipers, we need to give them a stable ethical framework.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, brings me to the second aspect of the importance of resistance for us today.

What lessons do we draw from history? Where is the connection between the resistance fighters of that time and us today?

I am against hero worship of the resistance fighters. Because the more we put them on a pedestal, the more inaccessible they become to us ordinary mortals.

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These people were not perfect either. Perfect superheroes only exist in comics or in the movies.

It is also legitimate to be critical of their worldview or some of their actions. But we must place them in their historical context and judge them accordingly.

They all deserve our respect. Unlike the vast majority of people at the time, they were not willing to continue to participate or to quietly look the other way. The Jewish resistance was about exerting resistance against the persecution of themselves and others.

The situation in which we live today in Germany cannot be compared in any way with the Nazi era. I have already mentioned how repulsive I find the behavior of some Corona demonstrators.

But we don't have to look far to see what real political resistance still means; take a look at the news from Belarus, for example. Publicly voiced criticism of allegedly falsified election results, or of widespread corruption, leads to arrest and torture in the Belarusian dictatorship.



In Hong Kong, too, there has recently been a wave of arrests against the opposition.

In Germany, political protest can also become dangerous, but not – and this is the crucial difference – because of reprisals by the state.

But when people protest against right-wing extremists, they subject themselves to acute endangerment from these extremists. The most impressive and shattering example is the murder of the Kassel District President Walter Lübcke. What triggered the murder?

Walter Lübcke had informed a citizens' assembly about the establishment of a refugee shelter. He was booed and insulted. In response, he said: "And whoever doesn't represent these values can leave this country at any time if he doesn't agree."

These words, which I agree with across the board, circulated in right-wing extremist networks. He became a declared enemy there.

He paid with his life for standing up for our democratic values.

I dare to repeat these words and share this view because I have personal protection. If I didn't have that, I'm not quite sure I would have the courage.

I have great respect for all people who take action against right-wing extremists. The Central Council of Jews deliberately honors such people regularly with the Paul Spiegel Prize for Civil Courage. They include, for example, the Protestant pastor Wilfried Manneke, who has already experienced terrible hostility in Lower Saxony because of his commitment. Or the journalist and right-wing extremism expert Andrea Röpke, who does everything she can to ensure that her private address does not become known in order to protect her family. In 2020, we awarded the prize to the group "Grandmothers Against the Right Wing" ("*Omas gegen Rechts*"), which unfortunately we were not yet able to combine with a dignified ceremony because of Corona.

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These people, ladies and gentlemen, act in the spirit of the resistance fighters.

They do not simply accept grievances. They do not look away. They do not remain silent. They show civil courage. This was particularly important to the former president of the Central Council, Paul Spiegel himself. That is why the prize is named after him.

I also called for this civil courage from the soldiers during the pledge ceremony on July 20 in the Bendlerblock. Because you have to keep the symbolism in mind: Federal Armed Forces soldiers are sworn in with an invocation of the memory of soldiers who broke their oath back then.

The first lesson is basically this: blind and absolute obedience are wrong.

I consider this deliberately chosen symbolism to be particularly important, even so many decades after the war.

Because each generation has to come to terms with National Socialism anew. To develop an attitude, and to defend democratic values against the mainstream in a group – that must be taught. In the Bundeswehr, there is a lot wrong with this, as recent incidents from the German special forces or among German soldiers in the NATO mission in Lithuania have shown.

Soldiers accept such things unquestioningly when there is a lack of historical awareness, but even more so when there is a lack of civil courage.

But we also have to ask ourselves how honestly and self-critically the Germans actually deal with their Nazi past. What strikes me as positive is that in the past ten years, some companies and medical societies have come to terms with their Nazi past. This has been easier because the generation of perpetrators and those responsible at the time are no longer in office.

However, as far as general knowledge about National Socialism and the Shoah is concerned, I am sometimes shocked. Shocked about the gaps, about the deficits. Neither are the facts known to the general public, nor do younger people know about the involvement of their grandparents and great-grandparents in Nazi crimes.

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If more sensitivity is not created here soon, Germany will soon no longer be able to pride itself on its exemplary reappraisal of the Nazi era.

The political scientist Samuel Salzborn, the Anti-Semitism Commissioner for the state of Berlin since last year, once put it drastically like this:

“It is nothing less than the greatest lifelong lie of the Federal Republic: the belief in an actual coming to terms with the past.”<sup>6</sup>

I do not share this negative view 100 percent, but I am firmly convinced that we have neither reason to relax, nor to pat ourselves on the back.

Rather, we must continue to come to terms with the Nazi past in our migration society and under the conditions of accelerated communication.

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Salzborn: *Kollektive Unschuld. Die Abwehr der Shoah im deutschen Erinnern (Collective Innocence. The Repulsion of the Shoah in Germany Memory)*. Leipzig 2020.

Above all, however, it is important to convey to young people why they should consider themselves lucky to live in a free, democratic constitutional state. And why it is worth fighting for these democratic rights and for tolerance.

I think they can learn this very well from the example of the Jewish resistance fighters. Because here you can learn a lot about the persecution of the Jews and the Shoah, as well as the question of how individual people rebelled against the Nazi regime at that time.

In other words, what can happen, in extreme cases, when a social minority is marginalized, and what kind of moral backbone people have demonstrated in the past, despite the danger to their lives.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I was recently asked by the Kassel Regional Council to participate in a campaign on the occasion of the second anniversary of Walter Lübcke's death. It is under the hashtag #Haltungzeigen ('to take a stance'). I was photographed holding a poster and formulated a few sentences on the topic. All of this can be seen online.

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I want to tell you honestly: It is very easy to participate in such a campaign. It requires a little time, nothing else.

It's much harder to intervene on the train when someone is being anti-Semitic or racially insulted. Or criticizing an anti-gay joke at a party instead of just laughing along with everyone else.

And even that only requires a little moral courage in everyday life. We won't be prosecuted for it. We do not expose ourselves to punishment. Certainly no one risks his life for it.

But this is exactly where we have to start.

Because we always have a choice.

