

# SHALOM

*Jewish Peace Letter*

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## Remembering the Fallen



**STEFAN MERKEN** • **Break the Cycle**

**ROBERT SHARLET** • **Vietnam**

**CLANCY SIGAL** • **Freedom Summer '64**

**MARGARET SARACO** • **This Day in History**

**MURRAY POLNER** • **Resisting the Holocaust**

# Stefan Merken

## Break the Cycle

**I**F YOU'RE LIKE ME, WATCHING THE NEWS AND READING the newspaper, the events of the past summer are disturbing to say the least. Even shocking. Some commentators have evoked the Sarajevo assassinations, which led to World War I.

In Israel civilians remain on alert to duck-and-cover from Hamas rockets should a cease-fire fail. In Gaza our mass media were filled with photos and texts of dead and wounded civilians. and soldiers. In Ukraine and in its separatist provinces, the bodies of innocent airline passengers are testimony to the madness of rivalries. As always, mutual hate and demonization abound, followed inevitably by death and suffering.

Some may think me naïve but I see myself as a realist. I suggest we need to try to coexist. Modern warfare does not bring genuine peace. It rarely if ever has. Several months ago,

STEFAN MERKEN *is chair of the Jewish Peace Fellowship.*

in a most unprecedented and unexpected act, just before the outbreak of the Gaza War, the uncle of slain Israeli teenager Naftali Fraenkel called Hussein Abu Khdeir, father of a slain Palestinian teenager and offered his condolences. Imagine. An Israeli and a Palestinian sharing their grief over losing their children.

What could be more universal: two families who understand the heartbreak of the other.

This miserable cycle needs to be broken if peace is ever to have a chance. There are precious souls on all sides who seek and pursue peace. The conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine could become a perfect model of people-power overcoming the inflexible ideological goals of those who rule. It happened in the Philippines. It happened in Northern Ireland. It happened in South Africa, Is it not too much to hope that someday Israelis, Palestinians, Ukrainians and the people of its disputed eastern sector can accomplish the same?

A Healthy, Happy and Peaceful New Year from the JPF. ☆

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Robert Sharlet

## Lament for the Long Forgotten War



*High Peaks, Adirondack Mountains, Northern New York. For the fallen from Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, it's home in a box, family and neighbors gather, a sad requiem, the flag folded, presented to the mother.*

**N**EARLY A HALF CENTURY AGO DURING THIS SEASON of remembering the fallen — just after sunset on a hillside along the border of New York and Canada — the sad sounds of taps echoed through the hills and valleys. It was a warm evening summer of '67 when hundreds of townspeople — nearly everyone living in Ausable Forks, a tiny hamlet of five hundred or so souls — came out to pay last respects to a local boy, James Saltmarsh, killed a week earlier in Vietnam.

An honor guard had fired twenty-one rifle volleys as yet another son of the North Country of upper New York State was laid to rest. Finally, the elegiac lament of the bugle was heard, closing the burial ceremony in the breathtaking High Peaks region of the Adirondack Mountains.

It was just an ordinary rural burial ground, not a hallowed place dedicated to those fallen in America's wars. Over

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**ROBERT SHARLET, a long time academic, is co-authoring a memoir of his brother Jeff — a Vietnam GI and, subsequently, a leader of GI protest against the war — with his son and namesake, Jeff Sharlet, the writer. In the interim, the author writes a biweekly blog, Searching for Jeff. Published originally in The Rag Blog (<http://www.theragblog.com/robert-sharlet-lament-for-the-long-forgotten-war-dead/>).**

the years I had become familiar with military cemeteries, having visited several abroad. I rarely came away unaffected by the magisterial simplicity of those solemn places that call to mind legions of eternal youth no longer walking the earth.

My first such experience was while passing through eastern Poland in the Sixties. I was visiting a Polish colleague at a university near Lublin. He took me for a drive; he wanted to show me something.

We came to a small stately, fenced-in area. Entering, I realized it was a cemetery, but a very unusual one. There was just a single stone obelisk with Cyrillic script, standing guard so to speak, over rows of widely spaced, carefully landscaped low mounds, each with a bronze marker. This was the burial place of hundreds of Soviet soldiers who fell liberating Poland in 1944.

Without a trace of individualization, a fast moving army had buried its dead quickly and collectively. The men of Eighth Guards Army lay with their comrades, regiment by regiment. I was well aware of the staggering Soviet war losses, but still seeing them up close left me stunned.

An even more affecting sight greeted me years later in 1990 on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Traveling by boat up the Volga, my companions and I went ashore at the place formerly called Stalingrad, the scene of one of his-

tory's legendary battles, where well over a million Soviet and German soldiers met their deaths.

Our Russian guide, a young woman, led us to the Soviet victory memorial, a massive stone building on a bluff above the high banks of river. We entered the structure and were struck by its eight-story circular atrium accessed by an ascending walkway, every inch of the soaring walls carved with names of the dead. Quietly, pointing up the wall, the guide told me her grandfather's name was inscribed there. What could one say — I bowed my head. To this day recalling the moment still brings a tear.

What of the North Country dead for whom there was no victory? They simply came home to local graveyards in the little towns and villages of the upper reaches of New York State where they grew up, played football, or marched in the band — places of several thousand residents with names like Cape Vincent, Hannibal, Phoenix, Rouses Point, Ticonderoga.

In the small town of Mexico on the shores of Lake Ontario in New York's Oswego County — resonant with the early American history of this part of the country — the local high school had lost three recent graduates in less than a year by fall of '67.

The great majority of the North Country dead were not drafted — they had enlisted. Impelling so many to volunteer for an increasingly unpopular war was a region long in economic decline. Prosperous in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by the mid-twentieth the local industries had seen better times.

Logging was greatly restricted, sawmills shuttered, mining played out. Most of the riverside mills were long shut down, their giant water wheels turning aimlessly, as most of the pulp paper companies had moved South in pursuit of cheap labor and less environmental concern.

By the Sixties, the North Country had become a region of little economic opportunity for the boys coming out of the small-town high schools. Sure, there were community colleges scattered throughout the region at which draft deferments awaited, but many of the local guys grew up on farms and had neither interest nor money for pursuing further education.

With Adirondack unemployment fifty percent above the state average, the military beckoned to the young men of the North Country, attracted by the combination of adventure, challenge, and, not least, a paycheck. As one twenty-year old enlisting at a local recruiting station put it, "There just isn't

much for a young guy to do."

Many of the volunteers had been athletes, opting for the Marines or airborne. Often they virtually went from the football field to distant battlegrounds with exotic names like Dak To, Quang Nam, Khe Sanh — for so many, places of no return.

The journey was all too frequently a short one. Vietnam tours were twelve and thirteen months, and when a soldier was done, he could head home, "back to the world" as they called it. Some fifty-eight thousand never completed their tours. They'd go off to war — Basic Training, Advanced Infantry Training, deployment to Nam, often cut down by enemy fire or a land mine early tour, mid-tour, and sometimes just weeks before return. Next of kin notified.

During World War II, notification was by the dreaded telegram, the Western Union guy. In modern wars with their "lighter" casualties, the bad news can arrive at warp speed, and is delivered by

military personnel. Recently in Mechanicville, New York, just south of the Adirondacks — by area the smallest town in the state — a middle-aged mother awaited a call from her Marine son.

Since deployment to Afghanistan just weeks earlier, he rang home every Sunday morning at six a.m. His mother set the alarm, rose early, but no call. A few hours later a knock at the door — two Marine officers broke the heartbreaking news: her son had been killed twenty-four hours earlier, shot in the neck, just over a month in-country. She told the press he had wanted to serve in Afghanistan adding, "I'm extremely proud of my son."

**FOR THE FALLEN FROM VIETNAM, IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN,** it's home in a box, family and neighbors gather, a sad requiem, the flag folded, presented to the mother — almost always the mother — the gravediggers at a respectful distance waiting to turn to the final task. What then of the enduring casualties of war, of all wars, those left behind, parents, young wives, fatherless children?

From the mother and father of a Russian soldier killed in the Soviet Afghan War, a final message carved on his tombstone: "Dearest Igor, You left this life without having known it." The lost one is of course buried in the hearts of those who loved him, left now with just memories and photos.

Some years after Vietnam, in a documentary on the war, an older couple was filmed sitting quietly in their living room, a picture of a young man in uniform in a silver frame



*A military honor guard lays a fallen soldier to rest.*



between them, their only child, a pilot shot down over North Vietnam. Coping with loss, not for them the revisionism of defeat — we shouldn't have been there, lives wasted — no, the war remained a just cause, their son died doing his duty, they were ever proud.

Or fighting back tears, the same sentiments expressed more recently by the mother of an Afghanistan GI, Sergeant Orion Sparks: "He didn't shirk any of his years.... I felt honored that he was my son and I was able to be part of his life."

Long after the guns go silent, time passes, rights and wrongs fade — the parents grow old, the young widow remarries, children grow up, move away, but the boy who went to war remains, forever young, in the silver frame on the mantle. The strange poetry of war obits, the military fanfare at graveside, the heartrending notes of taps closing a life — all become distant memory. Pain dulls, never goes away.

The young men in those picture frames remain unchanged, the boy who went off to war looks as we last remember him. And so it was with my brother Jeff Sharlet who served in Vietnam, was possibly exposed to something there — possibly Agent Purple, we don't know — and died several years later at twenty-seven. For our parents, now long gone, as for all those North Country families, Igor's parents in Russia, and the mothers of those two Afghanistan GIs — in spite of reaffirming sentiments — nothing could have been worse than losing a child.

I remember the day we buried Jeff. It was a beautiful sunny June day in '69. I sat between my parents as the limo sped along broad avenues toward the cemetery, the hearse flanked by two outriders — booted, helmeted motorcycle policemen in reflecting sunglasses astride big Harleys.

To my distraught mind, two images came to the fore — a scene from the 1950 French film *Orpheus*, when death, a striking woman cloaked in black, arrives by limo, preceded by goggled motorcycle outriders, submachine guns slung, announcing her authority; and then as we approached the gates of the cemetery, the more gentle image from the lines of Emily Dickinson's poem:

*Because I could not stop for Death,  
He kindly stopped for me ...  
Since then 'tis centuries; but each  
Feels shorter than the day  
I first surmised the horses' heads  
Were toward eternity. ☆*

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## Margaret Sáraco

# Grief, Oh This Day In History

Reports: "Israeli teens kidnapped and murdered and Palestinian teen killed in apparent retaliation"

"If we go on as we are, then history will take its revenge." — Edward R. Murrow, 1951

Sleeping

...does not bring peace to the mothers  
A mourner's shroud envelopes the heart  
Decaying in a dark, murky place

Working

...does not bring peace to the fathers  
Clutching the chest with ancient bone  
The constricted lungs snap

Weeping

...does not bring peace to the sisters  
The dam broken, Water rushes through, beyond  
No cessation of movement

Silencing

...does not bring peace to the brothers  
Eerie white stillness clamors  
As vacant, pointless, non-sounds shout meaninglessly

Sensation of life/death bridge the space between  
Feeling less alive and more dead  
Collective human emotion stored  
On this day, history is made.

Oh, to this day in grief ☆

**MARGARET SÁRACO is a poet and teacher. Her poems have appeared in literary journals and anthologies including *Poets Online*, *PoetWorks Press*, *Free Verse*, and *Italian Americans and the Art of Culture (AIHA) anthology*.**

## Clancy Sigal

# Guns and Love

**I**T'S BEEN FIFTY YEARS SINCE "FREEDOM SUMMER" AND the murder by Mississippi Kluxers of three young civil rights volunteers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and "Mickey" Schwerner. The triple killing was world news mainly because Goodman and Schwerner were white Jewish New Yorkers. If it had been only the African American Chaney, nobody outside the "beloved community" of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee would have cared. The Deep South's culture of violence against blacks was a given.

What's not so given, even today, is the black community's long tradition of armed resistance. I'm riffing off Charles Cobb's new book *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*. Cobb, a Brown University professor, is a former SNCC field worker, a bland way of saying he was under constant fire. I'm also dipping into my own experience in the Freedom Summer — South... but also North.

Ever since slaves were imported to Jamestown in 1619, armed self-defense was an authentic part of the African American experience. I don't just mean well-known rebel-

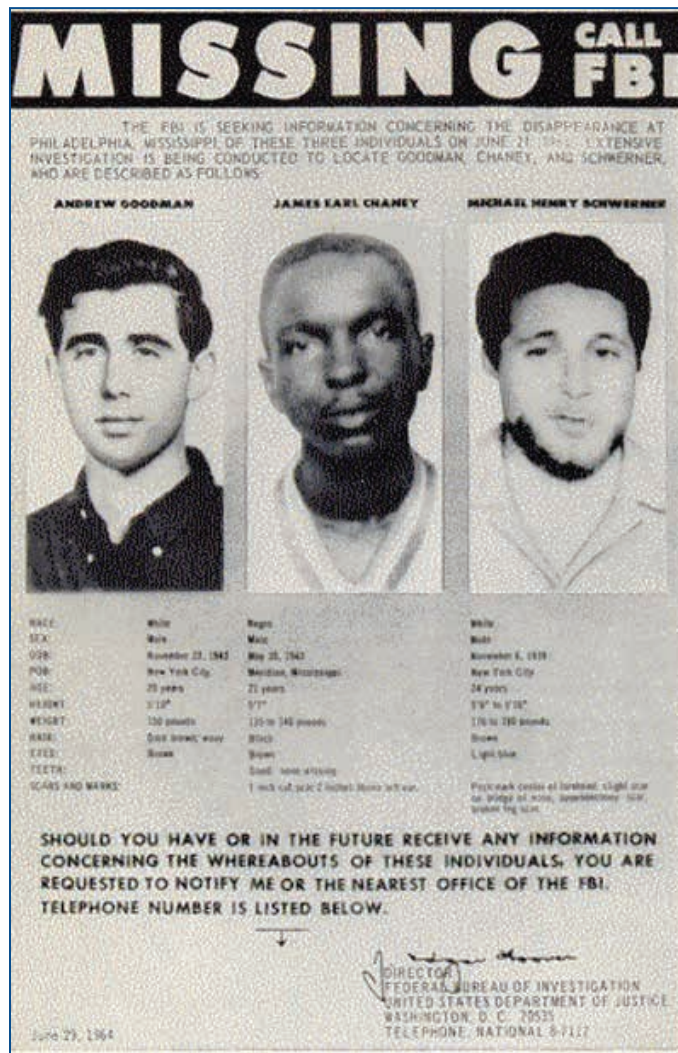
lions like Nat Turner's, but ordinary day-to-day. Almost every household I ever visited in the South had a hidden shotgun or pistol under the bed. This contradicted the Reverend

Martin Luther King Jr's dominant peace-and-love message, his honestly-held outreach to whites, many of whom (like me) flocked to his Gandhian banner. Less publicly known is that wherever "Martin" traveled he was bodyguarded by men with guns. Indeed, his own Atlanta home was a discreet arsenal of weapons.

Even less public was the role of armed black women who for decades had to endure sexual and physical assaults by white southern cops and other thugs who, given immunity from prosecution, felt they could rape at will. Attending church services in Tuscaloosa, Selma or Montgomery, I was no longer surprised sitting next to a respectable black woman who opened her purse to fan herself, revealing a modest little .22. Cobb cites the well-known story of Mama Dolly Raines in southwest Georgia (where I stayed with SNCC) sitting by her window with her shotgun to protect the Reverend Charles Sherrod, a passionate believer in nonviolence, who was staying with her.

In Albany, Georgia,

where I was longest, love and commitment were the hallmarks of community organizing. The locals we were embed-



*Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964: Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner.*

**CLANCY SIGAL** is a screenwriter, journalist and novelist, who wrote the autobiographical novel *Going Away*.

ded with took us in like their own children. We were family. They would do anything to protect us from the constant threat of beatings and death. Or as Mama Dolly, a midwife, told Sherrod, “Baby, I brought a lot of these white folks into this world, and I’ll take ’em out of this world if I have to.”

It’s sometimes hard for civilized Nawthenuhs to remember how American-cherry pie violence was in the South. In Chattanooga, where I first went to school, streetcar conductors wore holstered pistols; city bus drivers all over the segregated South “packed.” You shot a “nigger” who gave you lip without second thoughts or fear of arrest. If you’re the local sheriff in rural Georgia and fancied a black man’s woman you erased him from the picture by beating him up and jailing him for assault.

Passive resistance began to change when World War II veterans, trained in weapons, came home. Suddenly bad whites were confronted by armed ex-soldiers in the Deacons for Defense or ex-Marine Robert Williams’s Black Armed Guard (with an NRA charter yet!) in Monroe, North Carolina, to defend against racist attacks. Historically, there had always been the odd, defiant black man with a shotgun standing on his porch confronting KKK cross burners. Now, here and there, wherever Reverend King went, or was afraid to go, was *collective resistance*. In Birmingham when one of King’s bodyguards was asked how he protected his man, he replied, “With a nonviolent .38 police special.”

Up Nawth the black mind-set wasn’t all that different but with an entirely different circumstance. When I held a seminar on Black Nationalism at Monteith College for half a



*The Reverend Charles M. Sherrod, pictured next to one of four monuments at the Civil Rights Park in Albany, Georgia.*

dozen young street blacks, each one of them proudly showed me his shiv or cheap pistol. My sweet-tempered Detroit host, Jim Boggs, the African American auto worker and Marxist activist, walked me to the corner bus stop on my last day, but not before reaching behind his prized bust of Lenin on the mantelpiece and withdrawing his own .38 to escort me a city block. In my old Chicago neighborhood my host, a postal worker, waved me up to his apartment by pointing a shotgun out of the window to signal to the gang kids downstairs, including his own son. He meant business.

The 10th District cops I rode with, both African American, were *armed*: each hid a .45 under his clipboard, wore a hip-holstered .38 and an ankle .25 caliber as backup to the backup, plus two Mosberg 500 riot shotguns in the rack. “And you know what,” said my police driver, “we’re still outgunned.” His theory was that much of Chicago’s black-on-black violence was a form of culture shock. “These southern boys come up North with their mamas looking for work. Down in Alabama and Mississippi they had to toe the line or get lynched. Yassuh noesuh shonuff suh. All that peckerwood crap. Take that train up to Chicago and the chains drop off. They ain’t no more oppressed. Run wild. Cuss, shoot dope, murder each other or white folks. They wouldn’t dare do that in Yazoo County.”

So in honoring Chaney, Schwerner and Goodman, martyrs to a beloved community of nonviolent resistance, I can’t help thinking how it might have turned out differently if on that lonely Mississippi road in 1964, they’d been tailed not by murderous morons but by the Deacons for Defense. ✨

## SHALOM *Jewish Peace Letter*

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Murray Polner

## Resisting Evil

**W**HAT MORE IS THERE TO SAY ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST that hasn't been said before?

Herded into concentration camps, one-third killed far from the death camps, dragged from their homes in the Baltics, Ukraine, Poland, Belgium, France, Greece, Croatia and every other country under Nazi and Fascist control, one and a half million of their children slaughtered, their women and girls raped, and still far too many people believe that they didn't fight back.

But if anyone resisted and fled, where could they find sanctuary? How could my Ukrainian Jewish aunt and her family and neighbors in the small town of Lyubar have defied the *Einsatzgruppen*, Christopher Browning's "ordinary men" and their homicidal Ukrainian and Romanian henchmen, before she and others were hung and shot by them? Who actually believes that ordinarily peaceable civilians could stand against an enemy who by 1941 had conquered much of Europe? Yet, in spite of all the obvious hurdles, many did fight back as best they could.

Richard Middleton-Kaplan, professor of English and humanities at Harper College, has wisely observed, "Given the evidence that exists to disprove the myth [that Jews failed

to resist], a historian might consider the issue to require no further discussion. But if Jewish resistance has been amply demonstrated to specialists, public perception remains unaware of the proof."

Patrick Henry's masterly collection of cerebral and quite readable essays in *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis* (Catholic University Press, 2014), proves that Jews fighting the Nazis and their allies, violently *and* nonviolently, was fairly common. Frequently relying on unfamiliar sources, Henry's essayists depict all kinds of resistance, from futile skirmishes with a handful of axes, hammers and rocks, as in the late-1944 revolt at Auschwitz, then the last remaining death camp, to the larger revolts in the Bialystok, Vilna and Warsaw ghettos.

Henry, an emeritus professor at Whitman College (full disclosure: he is a contributing editor of *SHALOM*) explains that these desperate actions and many more took place "without any hope of forcing the Germans to change their minds." But such acts had some benefits. Timothy Snyder, in *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and*

*Stalin*, shrewdly remarked that ghetto resistance "worked powerfully against the anti-Semitic stereotype, present in the Home Army and in Polish society, that Jews would not fight." "Powerlessness," Henry rightly emphasizes, "is not syn-



1942: Deportation of Polish Jews to Treblinka extermination camp from the ghetto in Siedlce, occupied Poland.

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Murray Polner is co-editor of *SHALOM*.



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onymous with passivity.” There were in fact many kinds of resistance. Some fought back by saving children, their own and others as well. Alexander Donat, the printer of a magazine I once edited, sent his five-year-old son to a Polish Catholic convent, where courageous nuns saved his life. Pacifist Huguenots in France shielded Jewish children, and extraordinary people such as Raoul Wallenberg and others rescued many desperate Jews. Fleeing was another form of nonviolent resistance. Seventy-six thousand French Jews were sent eastward by Vichy and their German overlords, but others managed to cross the Pyrenees into Spain, and still others found refuge in places like Shanghai, Bolivia and the United States.

Even within the heart of Nazi-controlled Europe, many Jews resisted. In Berlin, as early as 1933 and until 1941, anti-Nazi Jewish women (some as young as fourteen) began provoking Nazis when they brought flowers to the graves of antiwar socialists Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht, both assassinated years before by the proto-Nazi *Freikorps*. Dieter Kuntz, of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, describes how the Herbert Baum group, comprised of anti-Nazi Jews and non-Jews, quixotically tried as late as 1942 to destroy an anti-Soviet, anti-Jewish exhibit and were publicly guillotined.

*Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis* portrays numerous examples of Jewish resistance. Suzanne Vromen — she is professor emerita of sociology at Bard College and lived in Belgium when the Germans invaded in 1940; a year later she and her family escaped and found refuge in the Belgian Congo — notes: “Anti-fascist Jews and non-Jews were an active minority of [Belgian] resisters,” but “the clandestine Communist organization of foreigners were primarily Jewish.” Elsewhere, young Zionists fought, as did *Mischlinge* (half-Jews) and their non-Jewish spouses, the latter carrying out the only successful protest against the Gestapo, as Nathan Stoltzfus’s *Resistance of the Heart: Inter-marriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany* made clear.

Citing Abba Kovner, the partisan fighter and later Israeli poet, Steve Bowman, professor of Judaic studies at the University of Cincinnati, writes that “the forefront of the battle against the Nazi invaders in Lithuania consisted of Jews” and that “The Lithuanian division in the Red Army was seventy percent Jewish, including officers, and the language was Yiddish.”

Robert Jan van Pelt of the University of Waterloo served as an expert witness for the defense in the civil suit British Holocaust denier David Irving brought against Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books. He tells of *Sonderkommando* revolts in Treblinka in August 1943, Sobibor in October 1943, and Auschwitz in October 1944. Henry also wisely included selections on lesser known fighting in Italy, Greece, Romania, Scandinavia, and Slovakia, as well as several accounts of children resisting in the only way they could: “through diary writing and song.”

Esther Gitman, then a toddler, escaped with her mother

from the pro-Nazi Ustase in German-occupied Croatia. Years later she wrote *When Courage Prevailed: Rescue and Survival of Jews in the Independent State of Croatia, 1941-1945*. In it, she writes that most Croatian Jews initially tried to ignore the Croatian Ustasi’s virulent anti-Semitism and pro-Nazi sentiments. Eventually, though, sixteen hundred Jews joined the partisans as doctors, nurses, writers, cooks and fighters. In his revealing book, *1941: The Year That Keeps Returning* (not cited by Henry), Slavko Goldstein, a Croatian Jew, wrote that the Ustase murdered thirty-two thousand Jews plus forty thousand Romani and three hundred and fifty thousand Serbs.

If asked why Jews didn’t resist, Berel Lang, professor emeritus at SUNY-Albany, responds, “To whom are the Jews being compared?” Three million Soviet troops were taken prisoner, yet remained essentially passive in spite of horrendous treatment. “Of the seven prisoner rebellions in concentration and death camps,” adds Middleton-Kaplan, “six were enacted by Jews; the only other one was by Soviet prisoners of war.” Then think of the upward of three million or so victims of Pol Pot in Cambodia and the Hutus in Rwanda who did little or nothing to battle their mass killers.

Yehuda Bauer, former director of Yad Vashem and author of *Jews for Sale?* and *Rethinking the Holocaust*, used the Hebrew word *amidah* or “standing up against” to include armed *and* unarmed resistance. In Eastern European ghettos, theaters, religious and musical groups, art exhibits, food sharing, schools and orphanages were organized while under siege, and those, too, were acts of resistance, “life-sustaining activities that fostered human dignity.” And when his orphanage children were deported to Treblinka, the nonviolent resister and teacher Janusz Korczak famously refused to abandon the kids, choosing to die alongside them in the gas chamber.

There were also countless examples of spiritual, nonviolent resistance as when the Shidlowitz rebbe, Rabbi Haim Rabinowitz (not included in this book), comforted people pressed up against him in cattle cars for four days without food or water. “Fellow Jews,” he assured them, “do not fear death. To die for *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of the Name) is a great privilege.”

In the end, then, the myth of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust era is just that: a myth.

**A T THE VERY END** of his luminous introduction, Henry, a Catholic, wonders whether the long history of Christian, especially Catholic, anti-Semitism contributed to the Nazi nightmare. Why, we must ask, were so many Catholics in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland and Ukraine -- where they were in the majority — so eager to collaborate with the Nazis and their genocidal schemes? Henry offers his hope that “Christian apologies to the Jews and burgeoning examples of interfaith reconciliation offer a ray of hope that whatever residue of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism” still exists will in time be erased. ✧