In studying the history of the Holocaust one can find instances where non-Jews and Jews refused to be passive in the face of the unspeakable suffering they witnessed. They made choices that defied Nazi objectives, often at the risk of their own lives and those of their families and friends. Instances of Jewish resistance, non-Jewish resistance, spiritual resistance, and armed resistance can be found throughout the time period of 1933-1945.

A piercing voice stopped me. It came from a middle-aged woman struggling with two policemen who were dragging her towards a waiting wagon. She cried out for help as she was thrown by the police into the vehicle. Her cries went unanswered.

These words of Holocaust survivor Vlada Meed serve to portray a chilling picture of a roundup within the Warsaw Ghetto. They also serve to evoke a commonly heard question, “Why didn’t they resist?” The reality is that they did resist. There were so many obstacles to resisting, that the question becomes not why didn’t they resist but rather, how in the world could they resist? And yet, resist they did!

What then were the obstacles to resistance?

They didn’t know the end of the story.

The Nazis took pains to deceive their victims and the public at large. Author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel relates to us in his book “Night” that it was 1944 before his community was deported to Auschwitz. The Nazis had been in power since 1933, and yet credible information had not reached Wiesel’s community. Instant communication and the extensive media coverage that we have today did not exist. On what basis did people have for resistance? They didn’t know where they were going, or what the Nazis had planned.

Collective responsibility

The Nazis warned that not only would those who resisted be punished or murdered, but also their families, community members and bystanders. Thomas Blatt, a local author and survivor of Sobibor death camp, related how a number of prisoners within Sobibor attempted escape while on a work detail. Thirteen of those resisters were caught and ordered to choose 13 partners in death before a firing squad.

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The obstacles outlined here are but five out of a myriad that the world simply would not, could not allow such a nightmare to evolve.

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Resilience

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activities

1. The author listed a few types of resistance used during the Holocaust. As a class, discuss each and what it might have looked like.

2. Find an article about some event/issue in which people could and might be resisting. Use the 5 W's— who, what, where, when and why— to summarize the article. In your own words, describe how resistance might look relative to that issue/event.

3. Gerda Weissman Klein claimed that she believed in humanity and that she didn’t believe humans would allow the Holocaust to occur. And yet, it did occur. As a class, discuss how humanity may have allowed it to occur. Can it occur today? Look through today’s Seattle Times—or events in the world of which you were unaware? Identify some ways you could get involved in your community.

4. How does being more aware of world issues and events benefit humanity? How can you educate yourself on world events and issues on a regular basis?