Seventy-five years ago, approximately 750 Jewish fighters began the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Against insurmountable odds, these young people decided they would resist the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. The operation was supposed to last for three days. Instead, the fighters launched their offensive, encouraged the civilians to go into hiding in bunkers, and prevented the clearing of the ghetto for nearly a month. Their courage led to numerous smaller uprisings in ghettos and concentration camps throughout German-occupied Europe and inspired the Polish population to rise up against the Germans in the city wide uprising of August 1944.

This exhibition is dedicated to the heroic efforts of the ghetto fighters—it not only tells the stories of the leaders of the uprising, but of a number of local Holocaust survivors who were there as the ghetto burned, lived through concentration and forced labor camps, and eventually found safe haven in the Skokie area.

The Warsaw ghetto uprising is a reminder to all that tyranny must never win. One must stand up to evil and injustice.

This exhibition is a production of the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center with assistance from the curatorial and photographic archives departments of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Following the German occupation of Poland in 1939, German authorities began forcibly concentrating Poland's Jews into ghettos.

The Jews of Warsaw, over 350,000 people, along with masses of others from nearby towns, were sealed off from the rest of the city on November 16, 1940. Life in the ghetto was a constant struggle for survival and more than 80,000 inhabitants died from disease. Beginning in the summer of 1942, German authorities aimed to decrease the population of the ghetto and began mass deportations of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka killing center, where they were murdered upon arrival in the gas chambers.

In response to these actions, the ZOB (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa, the Jewish Combat Organization) and the ZZW (Zydowski Związek Wojskowy, the Jewish Military Union) were formed and, with smuggled weaponry from the Polish resistance, prepared for an armed uprising should the Germans attempt to deport the 55,000 Jews who remained in the ghetto.

German SS and police units planned the final deportation to begin on April 19, 1943, and to be completed within three days. Yet when they entered the ghetto, the streets were deserted. The fighting groups and ghetto inhabitants had barricaded themselves into bunkers. On the first day of fighting, the ZOB fighters stunned the Germans and forced them to retreat outside the ghetto wall. By the third day, German commander SS General Jürgen Stroop instructed his forces to burn down the ghetto, building by building, to force the Jews out. Resistance fighters continued to make sporadic raids, but the ghetto was reduced systematically to rubble. On May 8, German forces attacked the ZOB command bunker at 18 Mila Street and killed ZOB leader Mordechai Anielewicz and those with him. The uprising was suppressed on May 16.

The Warsaw ghetto uprising was the largest, and symbolically the most important, Jewish uprising in German-occupied Europe. The fighters knew they were bound to lose, but at stake was the honor of the Jewish people. They chose to die fighting.