

Alex Gibson

Mrs. Sutton

White Rose Essay

Harmony Middle School

February 24, 2017

## Armed Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, once proclaimed, “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest” (“Elie Wiesel Quotes”). As anti-Semitism and religious persecution spread across Europe, millions of Jews were tortured and brutalized. Nazis sent them off to concentration camps, where they were starved, overworked, beaten, and murdered as if they were less than human. Some Jews chose to let the events take their course, but many brave individuals took the initiative to resist the inevitable annihilation of the Jewish population. Elie Wiesel explained the viewpoint that was shared by those people – that even if they could not prevent their mistreatment, they could still fight against it. Most of them joined resistance groups in the ghettos hoping to thwart the German war effort. Among these resistance members was a Zionist youth leader named Abba Kovner. During the Holocaust, Abba Kovner persuaded many Jews in the Vilna Ghetto to join the *Fareynegte Partizaner Organizatsye* (FPO), or United Partisan Organization, which he led in an armed rebellion against the Nazis.

The Vilna Ghetto was very unique among the multiple ghettos established during the Holocaust. Before World War II, the city of Vilna was part of northeastern Poland (“German-Soviet Pact”). However, once the German-Soviet Pact, a ten-year non-aggression agreement between the Soviet Union and Germany, was enacted, Vilna was transferred to Lithuania under German orders (“German-Soviet Pact”). Thereafter, in September 1941, the Vilna Ghetto was established by the Nazis in two parts, known as Ghetto no. 1 and Ghetto no. 2 (“Vilna”). Craftsmen and permitted workers were sent to Ghetto no.1, while Jews not able to work were sent to Ghetto no. 2 (“Vilna”). The Vilna Ghetto was also unique in that it functioned as a ghetto but was subject to Einsatzgruppen-style killing actions. This meant that the Jews could be taken

directly to Ponary forest, just 8 miles outside Vilna, and be executed by the German Einsatzgruppen (“Vilna”). By the end of 1941, approximately 40,000 Jews, including the entire population of Ghetto #2, had been killed at Ponary by Einsatzgruppen (“Vilna”).

Armed resistance was one method used by Jews in the ghettos to defy the Nazis. This type of resistance was often carried out in uprisings planned by resistance groups. In most cases, the resistance groups attempted to achieve two goals. The first goal was to prevent the liquidation or destruction of a ghetto by means of armed resistance (“Vilna During the Holocaust”). The second goal was to escape and join partisan units outside of the ghettos to continue revolting against the Nazis, which often followed a mass uprising (Gutman 1268). However, there were many obstacles to overcome while preparing for armed resistance. Firstly, it was tremendously difficult to smuggle in weapons from outside the ghettos. Zenia Malecki, a member of the resistance in Vilna, recalled, “You couldn’t carry in a whole gun; you had to smuggle it in parts” (Gurewitsch 3). Smuggling weapons required a great deal of time and risk, and many Jews were caught in the act. Secondly, most Jewish resistance members knew little to nothing about how to handle guns, so training had to be provided (Gutman 1268). Thirdly, conflict usually occurred between the Judenrat, who wanted to keep the ghetto inhabitants safe, and the resistance groups, who would not stop at anything to defy the Nazis. Because the Nazis would threaten to kill a group of Jews if one person made the wrong move (often referred to as collective responsibility), the Judenrat thought it was safer not to resist (Arad et al. “Address by Gens” 1). Lastly, gaining support for the underground movements in the ghettos was often difficult, even if the inhabitants of those ghettos were in danger of death.

Abba Kovner played a big role in founding the FPO (*Fareynegte Partizaner Organizatsye*, or United Partisan Organization) and also promoting and leading armed resistance

in the Vilna Ghetto. On January 1, 1942, at a meeting of Zionist youth leaders, Abba Kovner famously proclaimed, “They Shall Not Take Us Like Sheep to the Slaughter!” (Arad et al. “Proclamation” 1). Kovner’s speech helped promote resistance in the Vilna Ghetto, which eventually led to the founding of the FPO several weeks later. Yitzhak Wittenberg was given the position of chief commander and Abba Kovner obtained the position of lieutenant (“Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto”). With the main goal to carry out an armed uprising in the event of Vilna’s liquidation, the FPO did all they could to create chaos among the Nazis. However, when the Nazis threatened to kill every occupant of the Vilna Ghetto if the FPO did not turn Wittenberg in, Wittenberg was forced to give himself up, and he committed suicide before he could be tortured by the Nazis (“Resistance”). With Wittenberg dead, Abba Kovner took over the role of commander and led his fighters in several battles during 1943. They blew up German military trains, destroyed German equipment, and set up an illegal printing press outside of Vilna (“Resistance”). On September 1, 1943, German and Baltic police units arrived in Vilna to deport some Jews to Estonian labor camps (“Resistance”). Fearing that the ghetto would be liquidated, the FPO called for a mass armed uprising, but their call was ignored by the population of the ghetto (“Resistance”). As a result, Kovner and the members of the FPO instead attempted to escape through the forests to join Soviet Partisan units, which most of them successfully accomplished (“Resistance”). Abba Kovner greatly contributed to armed resistance in the Vilna Ghetto and, as a result, assisted in saving the lives of many Jews.

In conclusion, Abba Kovner convinced many Jews in the Vilna Ghetto to join the FPO, which he led in an armed rebellion against the Nazis. Kovner’s efforts to lead the FPO fighters in an armed resistance helped them achieve the goal to resist the Nazis, even though preventing their mistreatment was nearly impossible. Despite the many obstacles along the way, Jewish

resistance members, including Abba Kovner, risked their lives to fight for the freedom of other Jews in the ghettos. In the end, armed resistance saved many lives and displayed the capability of Jewish resistance members to hold immense courage while surrounded by the constant fear of Nazi pogroms.

Lucy Dawidowicz, a Holocaust historian, once said, “The wonder is not that there was so little resistance, but that, in the end, there was so much.” Based on my research, I completely agree with this viewpoint on resistance in the Holocaust. I learned that there were numerous obstacles that limited resistance in the ghettos. Some of these obstacles included starvation, disease, fear, difficulty smuggling and training with weapons, conflict between the Judenrat and resistance, and the misconception of safety in the ghettos. I am surprised that so many Jews possessed the courage to participate in resistance, despite the many obstacles they would have to face. I also learned in my research that Nazis attempted to use collective responsibility to keep resistance at bay. For example, if even one Jew tried to resist, their whole family or even their whole ghetto was murdered. Because Jewish resistance members found the courage to resist regardless of the threats to their families and ghettos, it is clear about resistance that “in the end, there was so much.”

## Works Cited

- Arad, Yitzhak, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margalio. "Address by Gens, Head of the Ghetto, at the Meeting of Brigadiers, Supervisors and Policeman, on the Danger of Bringing Arms to the Vilna Ghetto, May 15, 1943." *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1999. Web. 6 Jan. 2017.
- [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%202002.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%202002.pdf).
- Arad, Yitzhak, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margalio. "Proclamation by Jewish Pioneer Youth Group in Vilna, Calling For Resistance, January 1, 1942." *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1999. 6 Jan. 2017.
- [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%202004.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%202004.pdf).
- "Elie Wiesel Quotes." BrainyQuote. BrainyQuote, n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2017.
- [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/e/elie\\_wiesel.html](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/e/elie_wiesel.html).
- "German-Soviet Pact." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2017.
- <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005156>.
- Gurewitsch, Brana. "Zenia Malecki." *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama, 1998. 257-63. Web. 6 Jan. 2017.
- <http://mchekc.org/admin/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Zenia-Malecki.pdf>.
- Gutman, Israel. "Armed Resistance in the Ghettos." *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*. New York: Macmillan, 1990. 1268-270. Print.

"Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2017.

<https://www.ushmm.org/research/the-center-for-advanced-holocaust-studies/miles-lerman-center-for-the-study-of-jewish-resistance/medals-of-resistance-award/resistance-in-the-vilna-ghetto>.

"Vilna During the Holocaust." The Jerusalem of Lithuania. Yad Vashem, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2017.

[http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/ghetto\\_last\\_days.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/ghetto_last_days.asp).

"Vilna." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2017.

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005173>.