

## **Abba Kovner: Was the Pen Still Mightier than the Sword?**

Dr. Abraham Peck

Abba Kovner (1918-1987) was a revolutionary who used the weapons of war and poetry to revolutionize Jewish identity. He was a hero of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust and a shaper of its memory.

Early in his life, after moving with his parents from his birthplace of Sevastapol, a Crimean Black Sea port, to Vilna, Lithuania, he abandoned a commitment to his religious identity for one that was both secular and revolutionary.

In this, Kovner was part of a growing movement of young Jews across Europe and Palestine who saw redemption of the Jewish people through the mixture of socialist revolution and the Zionist dream of a Jewish homeland. It was a movement that no longer considered the long wait for a Messiah as a solution to the growing dangers that threatened Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe.

When Abba Kovner was just twenty one years, the formerly independent country of Lithuania was annexed by Soviet Russia, then conquered two years later in 1941 by Nazi Germany during its invasion of the Soviet Union. The Germans began a systematic destruction of Lithuanian and Vilna Jewry, helped in large part by a Lithuanian Christian community that sought revenge for the perceived support that its Jewish community provided for the hated Soviet conquerors. Within six months more than two-thirds of Vilna's Jews had been murdered by anti-Semitic Lithuanians and by Nazi shootings at a mass grave in Ponary, a few miles outside of the city.

Kovner and his colleagues escaped the killings through the heroic efforts of a group of Dominican nuns near Vilna who sheltered them. He reentered Vilna and its Jewish ghetto in December 1941 to find a community unwilling to believe what had happened at Ponary, even though a few survivors of the slaughter returned to tell what had occurred there.

But those, like Kovner, who did believe urged the remaining Jewish community to organize and resist. At the beginning of 1942, Kovner issued a manifesto that proclaimed, perhaps for the first time, that the Nazis planned to kill all of European Jewry. "Let us not go like lambs to the slaughter," he wrote. "True, we are weak and helpless, but the only answer is resistance! Better to fall as free fighters than live at our murderers' mercy!"

Kovner and his colleagues formed the United Partisan Organization (UPO), one of the first underground organizations in those Jewish ghettos under Nazi occupation. By the middle of 1943, Kovner had become head of the UPO. Although the UPO planned a resistance to the Germans when the ghetto was to be liquidated, circumstances, including opposition to the plan by the ghetto's leadership, made such a response impossible.

Kovner and members of the UPO, including his future wife, Vitka Kempner, escaped to the forests where they joined other groups of Soviet-led partisans in sabotage and guerilla attacks against the Nazis and their collaborators.

At the end of the war, Abba Kovner helped organize a clandestine group called in Hebrew *Bricha* (flight) that helped many Holocaust survivors escape the ravages of war in Eastern Europe. These survivors found safety in American and British-occupied Germany or attempted illegal emigration to Palestine.

The revolutionary character of Kovner's understanding of the Holocaust was based not on the despair and hopelessness of the greatest tragedy in Jewish history as he wrote in 1945: "We need to transform the Jewish tragedy from a sea of tears and blood into a form of revolutionary strength."

Rather, such a vision would form the basis of a revolutionary ideology that viewed the surviving remnant of European Jewry as a prophetic voice, a voice that sought to change the direction of Jewish destiny and human destiny, to steer a course towards the moral and social perfection of humanity. In the end, such a vision failed because of a world, both Jewish and non-Jewish, that could not comprehend its meaning or its value.

Another failed effort, again with Kovner as the major driving force, was a plan to poison the water supplies of the major German cities in the American and British zones of occupation. Called *Nakam* (revenge in Hebrew), the plan got as far as the preparation of the poison in Palestine. The plot failed when Kovner threw the poison overboard as he was arrested on the sea voyage back to Germany.

Abba Kovner left Germany for Palestine in 1946 where he lived for the rest of his life on a kibbutz that he helped found. He fought in Israel's 1948 war of independence and then put down his sword, picked up his pen, and dedicated the rest of his life to writing and creating the beginnings of Holocaust memory in Israel and beyond.

His poetry, for which he received the Israel Prize in 1970, helped to highlight the special place of Holocaust survivors in Jewish and world society, a place that was filled with a sense that the world did not understand their suffering and the message they sought to bring -- a message that the evil that destroyed their brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, had not been erased and waited only the chance to emerge once more. He wrote:

"How, my friend, is my poetry different from yours? / The place of its birth, the date of life / or the fact that it tastes of ashes?"