

by Orit Ohayon-Madar

**V**itka Kempner Kovner's life-story is one of struggle, courage, and determination. Not only did she manage to survive the Holocaust, but also as a member of a Partisan unit from Vilna, she engaged in acts of sabotage and physical resistance directed against the Germans.



## VITKA KOVNER:

Vitka, wife of poet/underground leader, Abba Kovner, was born and raised outside of Vilna, in the Polish city of Kalisz. "Kalisz was on the German border, and by the second day of the war the Germans invaded the city. Thus for me the war began very early on," Vitka recalls.

Shortly after the Germans arrived in Kalisz, the Jews of the city were expelled to a monastery. "I saw how the Germans were treating the Jews and how they were humiliating them," says Vitka, "and very quickly I decided to escape." That night she said goodbye to her parents, without truly imagining that their parting would be forever. "It took a long time for me to understand that it was the end," she relates.

Together with other youths from her vicinity, Vitka, then 19-years-old, began her journey to Vilna. As a member of the *HaShomer HaTzair* Youth Movement, she was informed that in Vilna, which was not yet under German occupation, she could join the ranks of other youth group members and possibly immigrate to Palestine. It was a hard journey; Vitka and the other youths had to cross areas that were under Soviet occupation in order to reach Vilna. Fortunately, the Germans did not succeed in thwarting their escape and Vitka arrived in Vilna, where she lived until Russia annexed the region in 1940, forcing her to leave.

In June 1941, Vilna was occupied by the Nazis, and Vitka returned to the city. "I remember coming back to a different city than the one I left," says Vitka. "They began rounding up the men and we started to live in great fear. We decided to hide whomever we could outside the city."

At the same time, rumors began circulating about the ghetto:

It was a time of fear. We did not know where the Jews were taken to from the ghetto, and why they did not come back. When we arrived at the ghetto, everything was still warm: the unmade beds, the hot burners; it was obvious that somebody had lived there until very recently.

When they understood the fate of the Jews,

there was a great deal of ambivalence: Should they flee? Should they fight?

Once we arrived at the decision to stay and fight, we gathered all those who were hiding in monasteries, including Abba Kovner. When I arrived at his monastery, the head-nun begged us not to go. She said she was willing to hide us all. We told her that it wasn't right to look after ourselves and leave the other Jews behind in the ghetto, and that we must fight for the sake of everyone. "In that case," said the nun, "I am also coming with you." And indeed she came with us to the ghetto, but the guards identified her as a non-Jew and would not let her enter.

Once Vitka managed to escape from the ghetto, she had to remove the Yellow Star, an act punishable by death had she been caught. Returning to the ghetto, too, was not simple and once, taking a wrong turn, she ended up in a grove in the middle of a Nazi training camp. Gathering her wits, she approached the Germans and pretended to be a Polish woman who was lost; thanks to her correct accent, she succeeded in deceiving them.

"Finally, after months of planning, and with the help of a policeman from the ghetto, we sneaked out the bomb that Abba had built and detonated it. When we managed to get back into the ghetto [without being discovered] it was a day of celebration," Vitka remarks. The bomb worked as planned, and according to the newspapers, a great deal of damage was done to the train cars, and a few soldiers were killed. "The

## A PARTISAN'S RESOLVE



*Jewish Partisans from Vilna return to the city following Liberation. Back row, far right: Vitka Kempner Kovner. Back row, fourth from the left: Abba Kovner*

Inside the ghetto the underground established three goals: to hold an uprising if informed that the ghetto was about to be liquidated (otherwise they would endanger Jewish lives in vain), to execute terrorist attacks outside the ghetto, and to join the Partisans in the forest.

"I joined the team that was responsible for terrorist attacks outside the ghetto, and my first and most important mission, together with Yoske Maskovitz, was to detonate a bomb on the railway in order to damage the train that transported equipment to the war front," recalls Vitka.

Detonating the bomb turned out to be the easiest part of the mission. In order to determine where and when to place the bomb, Vitka had to exit the ghetto many times, an act involving much danger and permitted only to those in work groups. "I sat entire nights following the trains' routes, trying to determine the hours they passed by and when the Germans patrolled and checked the railways."

Germans believed in collective responsibility; had they known that Jews had executed the bombing they would have had us killed by the thousands." The Germans did not imagine that this was the work of Jews, and, therefore, retaliated by executing all the residents in a nearby Polish town.

After fighting in the Vilna ghetto, Vitka joined a division of Jewish Partisans, and at the end of the war she joined a retaliatory group:

We had seen concentration camps, and after what we witnessed there we decided that even though the war was over, we had to take revenge for the spilling of Jewish blood. We carried out one mission in which we poisoned a camp of SS soldiers, and following this mission we understood that we had to leave Europe.

Vitka arrived in Palestine in 1946, and settled in Kibbutz Ein Hahoreh, where she still lives today. She and Abba Kovner (who passed away in 1988) have two children and four grandchildren.