

PRONOUNCEMENT BY ABBA KOVNER, DECEMBER 1941



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.



“Jewish youngster, do not trust those that deceive you. Of the eighty thousand Jews in ‘The Jerusalem of Lithuania’ [Vilna], only twenty thousand have survived. In front of our very eyes, they tore our parents, our brothers, our sisters from us.

Where are the hundreds of men who were abducted for labor by the Lithuanian ‘kidnappers’?

Where are the naked women and the children who were taken away from us on the terrible night of the provocation?

Where are the Jews who were taken away on Yom Kippur [taken on that day]?

Where are our brethren from the second ghetto?

Whoever was taken out of the ghetto gates never returned again.

All the roads of the Gestapo lead to Ponary [the woods in the outskirts of Vilna where Jews were shot by the Einsatzgruppen]

And Ponary is death!...

Hitler is plotting to annihilate all the Jews of Europe. It befell the Jews of Lithuania to be the first in line.

Let us not go like sheep to the slaughter!

It’s true, we are weak and defenseless, but the only response to the enemy is resistance!

Brothers! It is better to die as free fighters than to live at the mercy of murderers.

Resist! To our last breath.”



NOTE: Over time, some have misrepresented Kovner’s line, “Let us not go like sheep to the slaughter,” saying instead that “Jews went like sheep to the slaughter.” This has led to the false belief that Jews were passive in the face of Nazi persecution, when in fact Jews resisted in countless ways.

Abba Kovner was born in 1918 in Russia. In 1927, his family moved to Vilna (part of Poland until the Soviets transferred it to Lithuania in 1939). In 1941, the Nazis captured Vilna and required Jews to live in the ghetto there. Kovner escaped and later returned to the ghetto, convinced that armed resistance was the only way forward. Many Jews responded to Kovner’s manifesto with disbelief, but others understood it as a necessary call to action. The ideas in the proclamation were spread to other ghettos and Jewish communities across Europe through youth movement couriers. In 1942 Kovner helped to form the FPO (United Partisan Organization), an armed underground group. Kovner commanded a unit known as the “Avengers” from the forests near Vilna and led sabotage missions against the Germans and their collaborators. The Avengers destroyed over 180 miles of train tracks, 5 bridges, and 40 enemy train cars, killing 212 enemy soldiers and rescuing at least 71 Jews. After Vilna was liberated in 1944, Kovner co-founded the Berihah movement, helping Holocaust survivors escape Europe for British Mandate Palestine. Kovner was himself smuggled to British Mandatory Palestine with his wife, Vitka Kempner, a fellow partisan. In 1961, Kovner testified at the war crimes trial of Adolf Eichmann. He went on to become an award-winning poet, living in Israel until his death in 1987.

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