

## **The Escape to the Rudnicki Forest**

"I was brought to Lukiszki Prison...and bloodily beaten. All of us were taken out of our cells...loaded into...five or six big trucks. We were taken to a fenced in area called Ponar. We saw the prepared graves...there were hundreds and thousands there who had ended as we were to end. All the Jews were lined up. Men, women, and children were separated, and ordered to take off outer clothing. In front of the grave stood six Lithuanian soldiers with rifles. The victims were stood in rows of six. As soon as a row was arranged, a Lithuanian gave an order, there was a salvo, and six people fell into the grave. Another row of six were driven up, again shots, another falling of victims into the open grave. I know I fell to the ground and there was a heavy mass on me...of the murdered constantly falling into the big mass grave. It began to get dark. I crawled out of the grave. I was naked and covered in blood."<sup>1</sup>

"A Living Message from Ponar"...the beginning of 1941  
Herman Kruk's Diary

## **The Creation of the Resistance Movement--F.P.O.**

A young girl came back into the Vilna ghetto, bleeding after escaping **Ponary**. She related her experience to a few ghetto residents. She told of Jews in the forest being lined up at the edge a large pit and shot to death. Abba Kovner, a young charismatic poet heard her story and took her warning to heart. However, most ghetto inhabitants did not believe that all the people who had left the ghetto had been killed, it just didn't seem possible.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of 1941, the underground was established through Kovner's great vision. Abba Kovner gave his first proclamation of resistance on January 1, 1942 in the ghetto's soup-kitchen located at the end of Strashun Street. Kovner stated,

"Jewish Youth!

Do not place your trust in those who deceive you. Of the 80,000 Jews in "Jerusalem of Lithuania," only 20,000 are left. Before our eyes our parents, brothers, and sisters were torn from us.

Where are the hundreds of men who were seized for labor by the Lithuanian kidnappers? Where are the naked women and the children seized from us on the night of the Provocation? Where were the Jews sent on the Yom Kippur? And where are our brothers from the second ghetto?

No one returned of those marched through the gates of the ghetto. All the roads of the Gestapo lead to Ponary. And Ponary means death. Those who waver put aside all illusion: your children, your wives, and husbands are no more. Ponary is no concentration camp. There they were all shot! Hitler aims to destroy all the Jews of Europe. It is the lot of the Jews of Lithuania to be the first line.

Let us not go like sheep to the slaughter! True, we are weak and without a protector, but the only answer to the murderer is--revolt! Brothers! Better to fall as free fighters than to live at the mercy of murderers. Let us revolt! We shall fight until our last breath!"<sup>3</sup>

During the period of relative calm the *Fareynegte Partizaner Organizatsye*, referred to as the F.P.O., began to smuggle weapons into the ghetto in various ways. One way was with the help of underground Jewish gate guards who helped get weapons through the often brutal German supervised inspection process.<sup>4</sup> Key positions in the ghetto administration, such as the Jewish police stationed at the gate, were often given to refugees from Poland. The refugees that fled Nazi occupied Poland into Vilna prior to the war were left without family in the ghetto. In spring of 1942 after the Warsaw uprising, another underground faction organized, called the Struggle Group, through the initiation of Borka Freidman, aided by Shlomo Brand and Dr. Leon Bernstein. Although the group of twelve's leadership was aligned with Betar, the membership cared more about the person's readiness to fight than about party affiliation. Most of its members were older, more mature than the FPO youth, and were ghetto policemen--some were even refugees from the same hometown in Poland. Jewish police and gate guards affiliated with the Struggle Group helped smuggle arms into the ghetto. Late in 1942, the Struggle Group was joined together with Yechiel Scheinbaum's group that was a predominately Zionist group that swelled in numbers made up youth coming from ghettos that had been previously liquidated. The smuggling of arms increased when all the groups united together into one group.<sup>5</sup> In April 1943, Borka Freidman was the first to escape the ghetto and led a group to the Naroch forest. Borka's wife Chasia recalled what happened next,

"My husband was best friends with Joesph Glazman...He was in Betar...He wanted to create a brigade of partisans to revenge the enemy, to explode trains. Staying in the ghetto was impossible. No one was in the forest in April 1943. Freidman got help from some partisans from Belarus. Then Gens gave a warning that anyone leaving the ghetto to the partisans, their families will be destroyed. Myself, his parents, his niece, his brother, and our two 1/2 year old son were all taken to the prison on Lydos Street. At 12 midnight the Gestapo was coming to take the people from the prison. We were all in the prison waiting. But at 11:30 pm we were stolen from the prison. Our family went and hid at Strashun 1 in a maline for three weeks."<sup>6</sup>

The first act of sabotage was carried out by a trio of F.P.O. members on July 8, 1942 when a railroad line was mined damaging a train's engine and several of its compartments.<sup>7</sup> As the underground organizations grew in the ghetto, there was a relatively peaceful co-existence between the Judenrat and the underground. However, Gens's attitude changed when he began to feel that the underground threatened the existence of the ghetto. The first clash with the F.P.O. occurred on June 26, 1943 when Gens tried to arrest Josef Glazman, the second in command of the underground organization. Glazman, pictured to the right, was Gens's former deputy and now a thorn in his side that he wanted sent from the ghetto to an outside labor camp.<sup>8</sup> Another serious confrontation took place in July 15, 1943, when the commander of the F.P.O., Issac Wittenberg was freed by the underground members while under arrest. The Nazis demanded his return, threatening the ghetto population with a final liquidation. The F.P.O. finally agreed to surrender Wittenberg, pictured to the left, after threats by the ghetto's inhabitants and Gens. Before Wittenberg was tortured by the Nazis, he was thought to have taken a cyanide pill given to him by Gens.<sup>9</sup>

On June 21, 1943, the ghettos in the *Reichskommissariat Ostland* were ordered to be liquidated by Heinrich Himmler. Jewish prisoners fit for work were to be scheduled for deportation to work camps, and the rest were to be killed. German soldiers, along with Estonian collaborators surrounded the ghetto. In the August and September *Aktionen*, over seven thousand men and women capable of work were rounded up and sent to a work camp in Estonia. During the September *Aktionen* the F.P.O. called on the ghetto population to rise up in rebellion. The inhabitants did not heed the call believing that they were to be sent to work camps, and not to Ponary to be murdered.<sup>10</sup> Street by street in the ghetto, the Germans mined buildings and rounded up the remaining Jews. The underground came together on Strashun Street, located at

the end of the ghetto. The tension in the ghetto was extremely high. The underground organized groups in various locations. Kovner's group organized at the dead end of the street, M. Shames headed a group at 7 Strashun in the middle position of the street and was in charge of the underground's only machine gun at the time.<sup>11</sup> According to M. Shames's recollections,

"From my position...I could see from quite a distance two soldiers carrying a box of explosives and after a while running away empty handed. Some of my fighters expressed impatience and asked for orders to shoot. But I refused. I understood very well their desire of revenge, no matter what the consequences will be. But I could not afford to be carried away by emotions. It was clear to me at that moment there was nothing we could gain by shooting. The two soldiers were too far away and in my estimation out of range. I also thought that the sound of the machine gun could very well provoke the Gestapo to destroy the Ghetto itself."<sup>12</sup>

After two days of waiting for the Germans to enter the street, a skirmish broke out between the underground, and the Germans and Estonian forces. In the exchange, Yechiel Scheinbaum stationed at the head of the street, was shot, and killed instantly by a sniper. Standing next to M. Gurwitz, Yechiel fell to the ground, and then a call came to get out of the building. Underneath them, the Estonians were setting mines to their building. The group ran down stairs, and leapt out the back window minutes before the building was destroyed. With pending nightfall and awareness of the undergrounds existence, the Germans retreated from the ghetto.<sup>13</sup> M. Gurwitz retold the story of the shoot-out stating,

"Ilya Scheinbaum was killed next to me. When the Germans and Estonians entered into the ghetto, the FPO gathered together. We occupied the position at the beginning of the street on the second floor. We were ready to fight. We had rifles, explosives, and explosives with liquid fuel. Another group armed with a machine gun took the position on 6 Strashun, where the library, public bath, and prison courtyard used to be. The Estonians found out that we were armed. We saw through the window that the Estonians were retreating. When Scheinbaum saw them leaving, he leaned out the window and was killed by a bullet through his throat, and fell down. A sniper from below shot him. Then we got the order to retreat to 6 Strashun--there was no fire [from my position]. The ghetto was surrounded by Estonians. Our group leaped out the window."<sup>14</sup>

As total liquidation of the ghetto neared, beginning in August of 1943 the first lists of ghetto inhabitants were drawn up by *Wehrmacht* officer Major Karl Plagge for those eligible to work at *Heeres Kraftahrpark*, referred to as H.K.P., a work camp for the repair of German

military vehicles, pictured to the right. These workers were housed at the "Cheap Houses" located at 37 Subocz Street on the outskirts of the city. Over one thousand people went into hiding inside the ghetto, as time went on most were caught.<sup>15</sup> Three groups of Yechiel's underground members from the Vilna ghetto escaped weeks and days before the final liquidation. On September 15th, the last group of fourteen escaped out the [side gate](#) located off German Street. Dr. Bernstein paid a Lithuanian policeman to rent his truck and drove to the outskirts of the city.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Dworzecki states in his memoir,

"The last group of Yechiel's combat organization left for the forest, after Jacob Gens was shot. The group of fourteen included: Leon Bernstein, Pesia Sheinbaum, Mitia Lipenholz, Nisan Roitbart, Leizer and Zenia Bart, Israel Weiss, Shlomo Brand, Zenia Berkowitz, Yanek and Rita Faust, Hugo Griner and Masha Shneider."<sup>17</sup>

The day following the escape, a teenager wrote in his journal about the rumors he had heard.

Although he refers to [Nathan] Ring as a part of the group of escapees leaving on September 15, Ring left with the second group to the forest.<sup>18</sup> The teenager writes,

"Incidentally, yesterday Genkind told me that during the commotion [following Gen's death] Bernstein, Ring, and Gruner boarded a truck together with Lithuanian criminal police and their chief and went there [to the forest]. It cost however good money."<sup>19</sup>

In total three groups of Yechiel's underground members escaped the ghetto before liquidation: on September 11th the first twenty five members were led by Y. Tshuzhoi, on the 13th the second group of thirty were led by E. Magid, and on the 15th the last group of fourteen were led by S. Brand. Five other groups of F.P.O. members also escaped at this time in route for the Naroch forest.<sup>20</sup>

At seven o'clock in the morning on September 23, 1943, the final liquidation began. The remaining sixty, some say eighty F.P.O. underground members that still remained in the ghetto

escaped by crawling through the [city sewers](#). The underground members emerged out of the sewer at Ignoto Street and split into two groups. The first group gathered themselves in Pushkin's cellar underneath the Gestapo's Central Police Station where they remained for four days before heading to the forest and the second group proceeded to Kailis, a work camp of furriers that produced coats for the German troops on the front. However, on the way to the gathering point three F.P.O. members were stopped by the Gestapo. There were shots fired and Max Gross a Gestapo policeman was killed. All three FPO members were caught alive, brought to Rossa Square, and hanged at the gallows by Nazi officer Bruno Kittel.<sup>21</sup>

The remainder thirty-seven hundred prisoners from the ghetto at liquidation were sent to labors camps in Estonia and Latvia; over four thousand women and children were sent to Sobibor extermination camp and were murdered. During the selection at Rossa Square, the Missionaries Church at 20 Subocz Street, several hundred adults deemed unfit to work and children were taken from the Square to Ponary to be shot. About twenty five hundred Jews were left in Vilna, in the Kailis fur factory and *Heeres Kraftfahrpark* labor camp, and in two other smaller camps that provided labor for the German war effort.<sup>22</sup> In the words of one ghetto prisoner who ended up at Rossa Square at the time of the ghetto's liquidation,

"We were taken to Rossa Square...There were two rows of Gestapo facing each other for about 200 feet...they took my father immediately...My brother put rough on my mother to make her look younger. But when we went through the Gestapo with my mother, they pulled her from his arms to the left, and he went to the right. I was left stunned...The Gestapo hit her to make her keep going...my sister and I went to the right. Right was the path to work, left to death. The older men went to wagons with the older women. The young men went to work...They took us to a gate, and there were two men and a woman hanged on poles. The woman was alive..she was trying to tell us, "No, they won't do this to you."...they were the three partisans who had been caught coming [out of] the ghetto through a sewer."<sup>23</sup>

During the two years of its existence, starvation, disease, street executions, maltreatment and deportations to concentration camps and an extermination site on the outskirts of town called

Ponary reduced the population of the ghetto from an estimated 35,000 to zero. By mid-September of 1943, the ghetto had been completely liquidated.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Escape from the Vilna Ghetto to the Rudnicki Forest**

The remaining F.P.O. members escaped the last day of the final liquidation through the city's sewer system. The group of fourteen who escaped out the side gate over a week prior drove by truck to Vilna's outskirts, then walked all night to the forest. The walk was about 25 miles from the city. At the edge of the forest the last two groups met up with one another and together walked through the forest.<sup>25</sup> In the words of one escapee, "[the group] walked all night in the forest, it was very difficult to survive."<sup>26</sup> On the outskirts of town there was a Nazi guardhouse. The ghetto escapees had to traverse around the guardhouse without being caught.<sup>27</sup> Later one of the other groups came upon armed Russian partisans.<sup>28</sup> However, one by one the groups escaping from the Vilna ghetto safely emerged into the forest. About one hundred and fifty of the underground succeeded in escaping from the ghetto during the September *Aktionen*, establishing themselves in two forested areas: Rudnicki and Naroch. The number of Jewish partisans in the Rudnicki Forest rose to 300. However, in the Naroch Forest most were killed by the Nazis.<sup>29</sup> The groups in the Rudnicki forest led by Abba Kovner, split into four detachments and are known today as the "Partisans of Vilna."<sup>30</sup> The detachment directly under Kovner's command was "The Avengers." The Avengers group built five underground bunkers, and one central bathhouse.<sup>31</sup> Kovner organized the Jews into a fighting group according to a military structure.

### **Notes**

1. Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, 223 - 224.
2. Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 176.
3. Abba Kovner's proclamation is a combination of several translated versions. Kowalski, Isaac. *A Secret Press in Nazi Europe*, 82; Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 231 - 232. Kovner's testimony, ICJ, (12) 83 p. *op. cit.*,

- 11; Arad's version of Kovner's testimony was taken from Kovner's article: "Nissayon Rishon," p. 11. The archives of Beit Lohamei ha-Getta'ot contain the Yiddish manuscript of the manifesto, with the caption "We must not go like sheep to the slaughter" (author's translation -- YA), bearing the date January 1, 1942. The manifesto extends 3 1/2 pages and its contents include the version of the manifesto drafted by Kovner, and additional items of appeal.
4. Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, 257 - 258, 268.
  5. Arad, *Ghetto in Flames*, 264 - 8, 257.
  6. C. Spanerflig videotaped interview 2004.
  7. Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, 260 - 261.
  8. Shneidman, *Three Tragic Heroes*, 125 - 126.
  9. Shneidman, *Three Tragic Heroes*, 63 - 4; Gutman, Ed. Yitzhak Arad, *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 1574.
  10. Gutman, Ed. Yitzhak Arad, *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 1574.
  11. Shames, "Memoirs of a Machine Gunner." *Anthology on Armed Jewish Resistance*, 401 - 402; Shneidman, *Three Tragic Heroes*, 72 - 74.
  12. Shames, "Memoirs of a Machine Gunner." *Anthology on Armed Jewish Resistance*, 402.
  13. Bart, *Until Our last Breath*, 287 - 288, note 6.
  14. Videotaped interview with M. Gurwitz in the old ghetto, Vilnius 2005.
  15. Irina Guzenberg, *The HKP Jewish Labor Camp*, 23; Gutman, Ed. Yitzhak Arad, *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 1574.
  16. Dworzecki, *Yeruschalayim D'Lita in Kamf un Umkum*, 478 - 479; Lazar, *Destruction and Resistance*, 133.
  17. Dworzecki, *Yeruschalayim D'Lita in Kamf un Umkum*, 478 - 479.
  18. In a phone conversation F. Bulkin-Wolozni-Srebernik said that she and Meyer went with N. Ring's group and was in the forest at the time the third group consisting of L. Bart and Z. Lewinson-Bart arrived; Dworzecki, *Yeruschalayim D'Lita in Kamf un Umkum*, 478 - 479; Lazar, *Destruction and Resistance*, 133.
  19. Unknown, Ed. Nathan Cohen. *The Last Days of the Vilna Ghetto* Jerusalem, Vad Vashem.
  20. Dworzecki, *Yeruschalayim D'Lita in Kamf un Umkum*, 478 - 479.
  21. Isaac Kowalski, *A Secret Press in Nazi Europe*, 263; Dworzecki, *Yeruschalayim D'Lita in Kamf un Umkum*, 479.
  22. Gutman 1574; Ran 463.
  23. Beker, *Symphony on Fire*, 58 - 9.
  24. Gutman, Ed. Yitzhak Arad, *The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, 1574.
  25. Lazar, *Destruction and Resistance*, 134.
  26. Bart, *Until Our Last Breath*, 290, note 17.
  27. Videotaped interview with F. Jocheles-Brancovski traveling by car June 2004 states, "Vitka told me, in September at the guard station Ruska and I distracted the German guards so that a large group of partisans could cross the bridge." It was raining really hard and the water level in the river was high.
  28. Bart, *Until Our Last Breath*, 290, note 19.
  29. Videotaped interview with C. Spanerflig, Borka Friedman's wife, June 2004 states, "...when Glazman left for the Narocz forest in August, no one knew what had happened to my husband [Borka Friedman]. The ghetto was getting worse and worse. Glassman realized that Borka Friedman was right. They collected a second group to go to the forest, and there they found out from some Poles how Borka Friedman's group perished."
  30. The four groups were: Za Pobedu (To Victory), Smert Fashizmu (Death to Fascism), Borba (Struggle Group), Nekamah (The Avengers).
  31. Bart, *Until Our Last Breath*, 292, note 13.