

The Culture of Jewish Resistance

BY DAVID G. ROSKIES

Imagine, if you will, a documentary on the French, the Greek, or the White Russian partisan movement during World War II. For starters, it would all be filmed on location, with the main protagonists showing us exactly where they organized their cells and fought their battles, were denounced and imprisoned, with many of these sites now turned into national shrines.

All the interviews would be conducted in the same language, requiring subtitles only for export. As for the touchy political issues involved, only one version of the story would come out. In France, assuming the director were someone on the left, he/she would play up the Communist underground over the Gaullists, and would greatly minimize the role of the British and American air force. The "White Russian" movie, produced in Moscow, would obviously tow the party line, with not a word about the Poles, the collaborators, or the fate of the Jews. Most importantly, these hypothetical films would all have a happy end—the liberation of the country from the Fascists and the return to civility.

Not so, "Partisans of Vilna." Except for some home-movie footage of the city (presently under Soviet rule, and officially known as Vilnius), the viewer has to go by words, drawings, scale reproductions, and a few minutes worth of valuable newsreel.

The story is told in almost all the languages of the Jewish Diaspora and required a veritable team of translators to decipher. Just as they speak many languages, the former partisans and participants don't weave a seamless tale: they break down and cry; they admit their mistakes; they agonize over what could have been. And when it's all over, Vilna, their beloved city, is *Judenrein*, though they are alive to remember.

Delving deeper, we discover that Aviva Kempner—the child of survivors from Vilna—who produced the film faced much greater obstacles than access to location, or language, or politics, or even the scope of the tragedy. For in the three hundred years that Vilna served as a center of Jewish life in eastern Europe, nothing was farther from its ethos than the idea of Jewish armed resistance. Only in its capacity as a spiritual center had Vilna earned the honor of being called "The Jerusalem of Lithuania." It was the unrivalled seat of learning, the source of great books

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Jewish Partisans in Vilna on Liberation Day, July 1944

and ideas, the model for a certain kind of religious discipline.

Even in the modern period, which, for the Jews of eastern Europe began in the 1880s, Vilna was the seedbed of utopian solutions to "the Jewish problem"—Zionism and Socialism. Throughout most of its history, the city had been spared the scourge of pogroms. If they suffered, the Jews of Vilna suffered the plight of all Jews: discrimination, poverty, and powerlessness.

No two-hour documentary could possibly fill in this background, yet without it, one can scarcely appreciate how great were the odds against there ever being an orga-

The fighters had no access to arms, no military training, and no hinterland (who knew anything about the woods, except as a place to picnic). Even among themselves, there were competing strategies: some wanted a symbolic last stand in the ghetto; others wanted to regroup in the forests. And once the few survivors made it to the forest, their closest ally, Soviet General Markov, forced them to disband as a separate Jewish brigade.

Though "Partisans of Vilna" cannot illustrate all the historical, cultural, political, generational, and logistical factors militating against armed revolt, it does argue the opposite case very effectively—that the young fighters grew directly out of the native Jewish soil. Abba Kovner, the "star" of the film makes this eminently clear at the outset when he describes the hub of Jewish Vilna, the synagogue courtyard, and especially the library it housed, where young and old, religious and secular, scholars and revolutionaries rubbed shoulders before the war. What he is saying, in effect, is that you have to know history to make history, and these young men and women were keenly aware of where they stood in the ongoing struggle for Jewish survival.

Thus, "Partisans of Vilna" is both the culminating chapter in a three-hundred-year saga of Jewish cultural resilience and resistance, and the story of the most radical break in that history: the decision of a few hundred young Jews to go down fighting when faced with the destruction of their entire community.

What made them do it? Not the hope of survival, since fighting back meant dying that much sooner, and death, they now understood, awaited all of Europe's Jews. Nor was it some Quixotic dream to turn the tide of war, since the ghetto was of no strategic importance to anyone. Rather, in a world where all roads led to destruction, it was a way of choosing the manner of one's death and of responding as a disciplined collective.

To act "as a disciplined collective" in the face of imminent death requires a sense of common past and common purpose; a tradition of self-reliance; a system of codes to communicate in secret; a veritable "counter-culture." And

this is precisely what the members of the Jewish youth movements in the Vilna ghetto possessed—as their *natural legat*.

Armed resistance, in the wider scheme of things, was but the logical extension of the soup kitchens, schools, charities, refugee centers, hospital, clinics, public health stations, laundries, orphanages, day care centers, vitamin laboratories, supply distribution centers, concert halls, libraries—in short, of the whole self-help network in the ghetto to which, in turn, was based on a centuries-old tradition of Jewish autonomy in eastern Europe. Most, if not all of the partisans-to-be, were also active on these other ghetto fronts which we now identify as "spiritual resistance." Some, like Hirsh Glik, Shmerke Kaczerginski and Abraham Sutzkever, were even great poets, or were to become major poets much later—like Abba Kovner. Born of the brave new world of east European Jewry, they represented the very best that the culture had to offer. But if, at the time of the revolt, they were looked

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upon as rebels and madmen, it was because they alone understood that the Holocaust—a destruction so different in degree and scope from anything known before—required an equally radical response.

And so the point of this documentary is that not everyone becomes a hero given the worst set of circumstances; that the capacity for human survival *in extremis* is not a function of biology or chance but is largely a matter of culture. Logically, the combined force of mass murder, expulsion, ghettoization, starvation, epidemic and constant terror would have reduced any group of people to a jungle mentality. That is certainly what the Nazis had in mind.

But as a people schooled in adversity, secure in its minority status and highly skilled in group behavior, the Jews of eastern Europe were able to devise a counter-strategy that defied all "normal" logic. And the heroism of those who lived to tell the tale cannot be measured in terms of how many guns they smuggled, or how many trains they blew up. Despite its name, "Partisans of Vilna" is not your run-of-the-mill war movie. Rather, it is the unknown story of how very young men and women with no hope of survival banded together; how they were united in their hopeless struggle through songs and a common set of symbols; and how, having lost their parents, their homes and their past, they clung to the collective memory until someone with a camera and a sympathetic ear relieved them—if only for a moment—of that terrible burden.

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Consider what the film does show: How the traumatized survivors of the initial mass slaughter were rounded up into a ghetto and were slowly starved to death. How the Germans exacted collective punishment against any form of resistance. How the older generation of Jewish leaders was dedicated to maintaining a semblance of normalcy. How the head of the Jewish Police and Judenrat believed that it was safer to gamble for a little bit more time in the hopes that the war would end, and how the vast majority of the ghetto Jews believed that, too.