

How did Jewish people resist during the Holocaust?

History

Lesson 4 of 4 lessons

Lesson 4: Jewish partisans in Vilna

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A group of Jews formed a partisan group in Vilna

The Jewish ghetto in the city of Vilna had a library with 45,000 books. There were cafes and theatres and a **synagogue** for Jews to worship. The original synagogue in Vilna had been destroyed by the Nazis. The Jewish people in the Vilna ghetto resisted in lots of non-violent ways. But some resisted in other ways.

In 1942, an organisation was formed, an armed resistance group who wanted to use self-defence. This is called a **partisan** organisation. These Jewish **partisans** had a motto. Their motto was

“we will not go like sheep to the slaughter.”

There were resistance groups in other ghettos organised by the Jewish leaders of the ghettos. But in the Vilna ghetto it was different. The partisan organisation in Vilna was made up of young Jewish men and women.



Jewish partisans' aims

The aims of these young Jewish partisans were to organise self-defence in the ghetto, to **sabotage** German industrial production and military activities to make it more difficult for the Germans to fight the War. Their ultimate aim was to join wider partisan groups as well as the army of the Soviet Union to fight against the Nazis.

Jews were sent to work each day in factories, making artillery shells and other weapons for the German army. The partisans used this as a way to sabotage the Germans' weapons. Then news arrived in Vilna of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. This inspired Jewish partisans like 20 year-old Hirsh Glick to write resistance poetry and songs. Hirsh Glick and other partisans needed weapons. Collecting weapons was extremely difficult and dangerous. Slowly buying or stealing weapons, risking their lives every day for carrying or hiding, the Vilna partisans were able to collect a small stash of weapons. The weapons were hidden all over the ghetto - in walls, underground, even under a false bottom of a water bucket.



Jewish partisans fight for survival

The resistance fighters were preparing to fight during the final liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto. No one knew when that was going to happen - it could be days, weeks, perhaps even months. So every day, the members of the Vilna partisans practised.

Some Jews in the ghetto heard about the partisans and thought that all Jews in the ghetto would be punished if the partisan group was discovered by the Nazis. To save his other partisans and the other Jews in the ghetto, the partisans' leader gave himself up to the Nazis.

In September 1943, the Nazis surrounded the ghetto to clear it of all Jews, either killing them in the ghetto or transporting them to be murdered in the death camps. The partisans reluctantly decided not to begin a fight to the death because they feared that those older Jewish men and women living in the ghetto might be killed in the fighting. The only way out of the ghetto and into the forest was through the underground sewers.



The final results of the partisans' resistance

The way to the forest was full of danger. From the ghetto the underground members were taken to the cemetery and from there marched to the forests. They walked only at night. One of the partisans describes their journey:

During the day we hid among the trees and the shrubs, avoiding any unnecessary movement so we wouldn't encounter people that were passing through the forests. If they had discovered us, they might have called the Germans.

We had to eat and we had only one way to get food: steal it. We were armed. When food supplies were low, a partisan would take a team to a farmer's house, knock on the door and inform them that this was a burglary and it was best for them to give us the food so that we would not need to use our weapons. More than once, I threatened non-Jewish farmers with my weapons and took eggs, vegetables and bread - anything we could take to live.

Credit: Nissan Reznik, *Nitsanim Me'afar – Sipuro Shel Chaver Hanoar Hatzioni Mi'mekimi Irgun Ha'FPO Ba'ghetto Vilna*, p. 133



The fighters performed many acts of sabotage. The partisans destroyed power and water supplies, freed groups of prisoners from a prison camp, and even blew up some German military trains. Although very brave, the efforts of the partisans did not prevent the ghetto's destruction. By the end of 1943, the ghetto was gone, with thousands of women and children moved to death camps to be murdered.

Hirsh wrote a song about Jewish resistance, about Jews standing up for themselves.

Never say that you're going your last way

Although the skies filled with lead cover blue days

Our promised hour will soon come

Our marching steps ring out: "We survived!"

This song is written with blood and not with a pencil

It's not a tune sung by birds in the wild

This song was sung by people amidst collapsing walls

Sung with rifles in their hands



Glossary

Synagogue: A Jewish building used for worship.

Partisan: A member of an armed secret group, formed to fight against an occupying force.

Sabotage: To damage or destroy something *deliberately*; to wreck something to make something more difficult for your enemy to achieve.

