



FIG. 21. *Vitka Kempner 815*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 56½ x 58½ x 2 inches; 2015.

Vitka Kempner (1920–2012)

Kempner was a leader of the United Partisan Organization's armed resistance in the Vilna ghetto. She fought alongside founder Abba Kovner, whom she later married. Fearless in combat, she was the first woman to play a role in blowing up a Nazi train. Born: Poland. During Holocaust: Poland .

VITKA KEMPNER

Courageous and Modest

Michael Kovner interviewed by Eva Fogelman

Vitka Kempner's heroism was not well known outside her immediate circle of Partisans until the release of the documentary, "Partisans of Vilna," in 1986.¹ Vitka often stood in the shadow of her husband, Abba Kovner, the leader of the Partisans in Vilna, with whom she worked closely in fighting against the German occupiers during World War II. Abba was the talker; Vitka was the doer. When Abba died in 1987, and Rozka Korczak, a close partisan comrade died a few months later in 1988, Vitka decided to tell her story to her cousin Rich Cohen.² She explained to Cohen that if she kept silent, the story would die with her.

Since then, Vitka's story can be found in many books and archives. She has been the subject of several biographies, including one by Michael Kovner. Her archives are available at Yad Vashem (oral history videos), the archives at Givat Haviva and at Kibbutz Ein ha-Horesh, which was her home until her death in 2012.³

Vitka was the daughter of tailors who kept a small retail shop in Kalish, Poland. Her parents were Zionists. From an early age, Vitka was drawn to the right wing Zionist youth movement, Betar, a group that had a militaristic cast to it. In her last year of high school, friends convinced her to join Ha-Shomer ha-Tza'ir, a Zionist movement of the Left. She continued her youth movement affiliation after moving to Warsaw enrolling in Jewish studies at a seminary. When the Germans invaded Warsaw, however, Vitka returned to her hometown.

This interview with Vitka's son, Michael Kovner, who is an artist in Jerusalem, presents us with a first hand account as passed on to the second generation.⁴

Eva Fogelman (EF): When did you become aware of your mother's heroic deeds?

Michael Kovner (MK): I was aware of my mother's activities from an early age. My mother thought of herself as a fighter, not as a survivor. The people who came to visit us were Partisans. Every Saturday there were Partisans who came to visit, and they would talk among themselves. I would eavesdrop and hear her stories. Ruzka, Mina, Yulek, Jessa, Zelda and Chayka [Knesset member Chayka Grossman]. I learned that among the Partisans, men and women were equal.

EF: How did your mother become a hero among the Partisans of Vilna?

MK: When Germany invaded Kalish in western Poland, every Jew was asked to come to the main street to be deported. Her parents said: "Let's go!" She replied: "You go, I won't go!" It is at this point that she started going east to Vilna. She saw an option and ran away with her brother, Baruch, who joined Mordecai Anielewicz to fight in the Warsaw ghetto uprising and was killed. This was also the last time she saw her parents, and did not know exactly when or how they were killed.

My mother had a certificate to go to Palestine, much valued, but she decided to stay and fight. That was truly very brave. She did not want to leave her people behind. In Vilna, she lived outside the ghetto. She could have saved herself. But she gave up her chance to survive because she wanted to be with her peers of Ha-Shomer ha-Tza'ir. She did not think about how to survive but rather how to fight. Aviva Kempner reminds me that my mother said: "We never thought we would live, it was just a choice on how to die."



EF: Is there any particular story that stands out?

MK: Yes, two stories. One story is about how she blew up the train in July 1942. Vitka blew up the first German train that killed more than 200 German soldiers. It was known that if a commander sends a girl on the most dangerous mission, he is signaling that she is his girl. At this point she became Abba's girl. She spent a few nights surveying the best place to blow up a train. One night, she was caught in a cross-fire. It turned out to be a shooting range for Germans. She explained that she was lost, and they helped her find her way back to Vilna. A few nights later, she led a group of Jewish fighters and hooked up a pipe onto the rails. She connected a fuse from the bomb along the rails to the detonator and escaped into the woods. When the train went over the detonator they heard a big blast and saw flames. Germans who were not killed jumped off the train and started shooting and Vitka led the group back to a ghetto cellar.

The other story is that after one raid, the non-Jewish Partisans took the weapons of the Jewish Partisans to make fun of them. My mother took a white horse and rode it to meet the brigadier of the Partisans and demanded that they return the weapons. After this incident everyone appreciated the Jewish Partisans, and as for Vitka - she could not be put down!

In the ghetto there were thousands of people, so each person's behavior did not affect the whole operation. But in the Partisans there were fewer people, so what other people thought about you was very important. In the Partisans, if you made a mistake, the whole battalion knew about it, and it had an impact.

My mother knew how to navigate. She always found her way back. One day she was caught and taken in a vehicle to Gestapo headquarters. She said to herself, "Oh, this is my end." She blurted out: "When the Red Army will free us, I will tell the Red Army your name and they won't harm you." They let her go. This was my mother. She had good intuition. The Partisans respected her. Her friends would say that she didn't need to stop to eat and she didn't need sleep. She was admired for her strength.

One day I went to a banker in Bank Leumi, and he said: "There was Abba and Ruzka but

your mother was something else.” Everyone said she was a brave woman. Everyone spoke about her in the same way. Most of the women in the Partisans stayed in the field and cooked. They were not engaged in fighting. The commander did not want them because it was a burden to take the women because they could not carry heavy equipment.

My mother was notorious for not knowing how to drink vodka. The non-Jewish Partisans were tough people and they would get angry when she refused to join them for a drink.

She looked more Jewish than the others even though she dyed her hair, so she made sure to walk like a Pole.

EF: Could you elaborate on your mother’s role in the Partisans?

MK: My mother moved in and out of the Vilna ghetto. When the Jews in the ghetto were liquidated and sent to be killed en masse at Ponar, she found hiding places for some of the Partisans. Then my mother smuggled and directed 600 Jews out of the Vilna ghetto into the woods. As commander of the patrol section of the Jewish Partisans, she gathered intelligence and maintained contacts with resistance groups in the city, assisted with procuring medication, and, of course, she led her division on combat operations and sabotage.

EF: What did your mother do after liberation?

MK: My mother was the first partisan to reach liberated Vilna, where she encountered the Jewish Soviet soldiers. She was awarded the highest badge of courage in the USSR. My father formed the Organization of Eastern European Survivors and arranged the “B’richa”.⁵ My mother’s role was to smuggle refugees across the border to Romania. In a very chaotic time she found a way to get from border to border to get to Palestine. Abba went back to Europe to organize a revenge operation, and she remained alone in Palestine.

EF: How was your mother as a mother?

MK: I grew up on kibbutz Ein Ha-Horesh and remember my mother being very ill. When I was three years old she contracted tuberculosis and I could not see her for a year. The following year



I could only see her from afar. She was warm and supportive. She thought I was the best young man and the best artist. She gave me all the support she could. She never gave up a fight for the truth. She believed in the Ha-Shomer ha-Tza’ir model of communal education. She tutored children on the kibbutz, and at the age of 45, my mother went on to study for a doctorate in psychology. She developed a new form of therapy, “non-verbal therapy by color,” enabling troubled children to speak with colors. She always focused on the children’s strengths, rather than their pathology, and gave hope to their parents that change is possible.

EF: How do you think your mother’s heroism has shaped your life?

MK: Rav Nachman of Bratslav said: “Whoever speaks the truth it is as if he has spoken with God.” My mother’s words came from the heart and were clear and simple truths. I, too, seek the truth. My mother gave me inspiration. As were my mother and father, I am committed to living in Israel, as are my children and grandchildren. ■