



FIG. 23. *Zivia Lubetkin 811*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 56½ x 58½ x 2 inches; 2015.

Zivia Lubetkin (1914–1978)

One of the leaders of the Jewish underground in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, Lubetkin was the only woman in the high command of the resistance group *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa (ZOB)* and testified as a witness at the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem in 1961. Born: Poland. During Holocaust: Poland.

ZIVIA LUBETKIN

Tough and Compassionate

Dalia Ofer

For Israelis, including myself, who grew up during the 1950s and 1960s, Zivia Lubetkin was an icon. Her personality and life story embodied the image of heroism during the Holocaust, as understood in Israel during the first decades after World War II. I never met her personally, but I vividly remember a talk she delivered to students of the Hebrew University High School a number of years before she passed away. Lubetkin talked in a low voice, and the hall, filled with some 300 teenagers, was electrified. They listened eagerly to a complex message she presented about the meaning of resistance during the Holocaust and the difficulties of Holocaust remembrance. Her talk was a source of inspiration and engendered further talks and deliberation among the students.

People who knew Lubetkin from Poland and during the Holocaust recalled: “She had blazing eyes and a penetrating glance, was simple and direct, demanding the maximum of others and of herself. For her, thought and action were one.”¹ Let us look back at her biography and ask what in her personality enabled her to act as she did and why she became such a prominent figure in the pantheon of Jewish heroes during the Holocaust. Was she gifted with the personality of a leader, or was it the trying years of the Holocaust that transformed her?

Born on November 9, 1914 to a well-to-do, traditional Jewish family, in the town of Beten in eastern Poland, Zivia Lubetkin was one of six girls and one brother. During the Holocaust, both parents were murdered, together with the rest of the community, in the summer of 1942.

Lubetkin was a member of the Zionist-Socialist youth movement Freiheit (Freedom). In 1934, she left home to join the first training farms (hakhsharah) for youngsters preparing for kibbutz life in Palestine. Since her parents did not approve, she left home without their blessing. Four years later, she was sent to join the Kielce kibbutz, a major training center of the movement, hoping to conclude training for immigration to Palestine. She was among the initiators of the union between Freiheit and the Young Halutz (Young Pioneers), who also trained and prepared youngsters for Palestine. When the new movement, Dror, was established, she was summoned to Warsaw to direct the network of training farms in Poland. This assignment earned her leadership status and admiration from both the young pioneers and her peers.

In August 1939, she was sent to Geneva as a Labor bloc delegate to the

21st Zionist Congress. Meeting with delegates from Palestine, whom she greatly admired, was a source of inspiration. She longed to make aliyah (immigration to Palestine) and join a kibbutz. But when news reached Geneva of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin, Lubetkin and her colleagues returned to Warsaw. Following the German occupation of Poland, Lubetkin, together with a few other leaders of the movement, fled to the east and found herself under Soviet occupation. She reached Soviet-controlled Lvov and participated in the movement's underground activities there, as the Zionist movement was banned in Soviet territories. However, Lubetkin and other members of the Dror movement were concerned about the fate of Dror in occupied Poland, and decided to return to Warsaw. In January 1940, she reached Warsaw to renew the movement's activities with Yitzhak Cukierman (nom-de-guerre "Antek"), who later became her partner. Dror House at 34 Dzielna Street, which housed a public kitchen, served as an underground center of support and information for the members of Dror and other Zionist movements.

I suggest dividing Lubetkin's activities in the ghetto into three different periods: the first, from January 1940 to January 1942; the second, to the end of the mass deportation from Warsaw in September 1942; the third, ending on May 10, 1943, with the destruction of the ghetto and Lubetkin's escape to the Aryan side. In each of these three periods, Lubetkin was a leader who responded to the needs and trials of Dror members and others. The first, includes before the Jews were forced into the ghetto in November 1940. These were months of uncertainty, endless anti-Jewish rules that destroyed the Jews economically, the barring of Jewish children from schools, and the ever-growing fear of being in the streets.

The move to the ghetto, in the second period, increased misery and anxiety. During 1941, starvation and death plagued the Jews in the ghetto as the Germans forced waves of more than 150,000 deportees into the limited space, overcrowding it beyond capacity. Lubetkin fought to provide food and housing for movement members, and encouraged them to initiate activities with destitute youth and

others who desperately needed guidance and assistance. She negotiated with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the self-help organization in the ghetto CENTOS (Centrala Towarzystwa Opieki nad Sierotami), the Judenrat, and anyone who could provide supplies. She was quite successful. Survivors of the movement say that Zivia was the mother and sister of the movement, providing encouragement, warmth, and a listening ear, sharing values and hopes for a decent future. That is how the late Israel Gutman, a survivor of the ghetto and a distinguished historian of the Holocaust, remembered her.² Bella Gutterman, in her seminal biography of Zivia Lubetkin, quoted from a diary of Hannah, a member of Dror:

Zivia was in the center of the doer and doing. In the corridors of the JDC she stood and dealt with handling our welfare . . . in the passageways of the community, exhaustingly dealing with obtaining aid for the comrades, transit permits, exemption permits from labor camps, fighting for our principles in meetings of institution heads, arranging our pioneer issues. Sometimes there would be a weak "I am worn out" - and again with renewed vigor, back to her work . . . Zivia always looked awful, quite simply, she had not time to eat. A friend of ours in town told me once: "Take care of your Zivia, she won't hold out for long under these conditions."³

Information came of the systematic killing of Jews in Vilna and Chelmno. The efforts to maintain the movement and assist its members to endure the suffering of the war were no longer relevant. How to combat the Nazi policy of annihilation was now the central issue. Lubetkin later testified in the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961:

After we heard about Vilna on the one hand and about Chelmno on the other, we realized this was indeed systematic. . . . We stopped our cultural activities . . . and all our work was now dedicated to active defense.⁴

The move, from activities that cherished life and hope in the direction of a fighting underground, was a painful and slow process. Lubetkin was among the founders of the anti-Fascist bloc in March 1942, the first organization in the Warsaw Ghetto to engage in armed combat against the Germans. However, only

after the first week of mass deportations from the Warsaw ghetto, on July 28, 1942, did Zivia Lubetkin, together with her comrades, reach the point of no return. No more planning and deliberations, but action. She was one of the founders of the Jewish Fighting Organization (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa or ZOB), a member of its command, and among those who planned its organization. Nevertheless, ZOB was unable to be effective during the weeks of the great deportation as its late establishment, the lack of arms, and the capture and killing of its two major leaders, ended in despair. Lubetkin, and many members of the underground still alive after the halt in the deportations in September 1942 felt that their lives had no value. Efforts to fight the Germans and save Jewish honor had failed. More than 300,000 Jews were killed or deported to Treblinka, while some 60,000 remained in the ghetto. It became clear to Lubetkin and the rest of the underground members that the next deportations were only a question of time. Why continue living?

The idea of setting afire the remains of the ghetto, and committing a collective suicide, was raised. In desperation, Zivia Lubetkin supported it. This was a breaking point in Lubetkin's spirit. But she and the other supporters of the idea were slowly convinced that it was too early for such an act of despair. The goal should remain fighting the Germans and defending the honor of the murdered Jews. They reasoned that the Germans would come again for a final murderous raid on the remaining Jews, and they should dedicate their actions towards the last fight.

This is the beginning of the third period that ended with the ghetto uprising and its burning by the Germans. Lubetkin played a central role in unifying the different political groups in the ghetto, bringing together Zionists and anti-Zionists such as the Bund. She was a member of the Jewish National Committee (Zydowski Komitet Narodowy), the ZOB's political leadership, as well as a member of the Jewish Coordination Committee that worked with the Bund. Lubetkin participated in the ZOB's first resistance operation in January 1943, which raised great hopes that the resistance movement would be able to mount a real uprising when the Germans came to complete the deportation.

From January 1943, Lubetkin was a central figure in the ghetto underground's planning for the uprising. The leadership endeavored to get aid from the Polish underground as the entire population prepared for the final battle. People constructed elaborate hideouts for when the German troops entered the ghetto. Under the leadership of Lubetkin and Mordechai Anielewicz, the fighters organized in small groups in bunkers and on roofs to attack the Germans from different points.

After the first days of combat during the April 1943 uprising, the fighters were trapped in the bombed and burning ghetto. Lubetkin, who was responsible for connection between the groups spread throughout the ghetto, moved around the various bunkers, maintaining contact between the leadership and the fighters who remained in the burning ghetto. She was aware of the horrible condition of the fighters and others in the bunkers and understood that urgent help was needed. The day before the Germans discovered the ZOB headquarters at 18 Mila Street, the command decided that Lubetkin should set out to find a connection to the outside via the sewage tunnels that led to the Aryan side. On May 10, 1943, she had been crawling and walking through the sewers for 48 hours with a small number of fighters, their legs sunk in filthy water. Anielewicz, and the 120 remaining fighters did not survive. To the end of her days, Zivia was haunted by the thought that she had abandoned her friends.

Until the end of the war, Lubetkin hid in Polish Warsaw, serving in the underground and fighting in the rebellion there from August to October 1944, part of a ZOB company that joined the fighting units of the Polish underground. Together with the surviving fighters, she was rescued in November 1944 from a hideout by Polish soldiers of the Red Army.

After the end of the war in Poland and until Lubetkin immigrated to Palestine in June 1946, she dedicated herself to assisting survivors. She became a source of hope and support for many. The trials she faced during the ghetto years molded her character with toughness and compassion alike. These determined the two faces of her leadership, both mother, and strong, demanding commander. ■