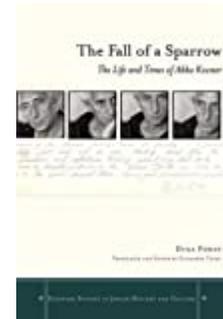




**Dina Porat.** *The Fall of a Sparrow: The Life and Times of Abba Kovner.* Translated and edited by Elizabeth Yuval. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. xxiv + 411 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6248-9.



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## A Leader Poet for the Nation

We have here the first full account of the noted partisan and Hebrew poet Abba Kovner (1918-87) in an English version, translated from Hebrew by Elizabeth Yuval. Born in Sevastopol and raised in Vilna, Kovner became a leader of the partisan movement in the resistance to the Nazi invasion and conquest. The author, Dina Porat, who had only met her subject once briefly, shows some signs of hero worship. Her background account borders on hagiography, though sometimes she casts doubt on positions that Kovner adopted. Already in the preface, she praises him for the magnificence of his locks, for his beautiful Hebrew, for his sense of humor, and for the admiration that he managed to draw from all who came into contact with him.

Porat opens with a description of Kovner's primary vision, namely, to provide a home for his homeless people following the devastation wrought by the Holocaust. That vision, for her, was matched by his natural gifts, leadership qualities, and intelligence. For the sake of convenience, she divides his life into four parts. The topics in the first part, covering 1918 to 1941, range from his

birth in Soviet Sevastopol, to the Crimea, his Zionist Socialism, and the beginnings of his literary creation. Part 2, 1941-44, examines the Holocaust and self-defense. Porat addresses the events leading up to the liberation of Lithuania, Kovner's aliyah (emigration to the Land of Israel), and the Israeli War of Independence in the third section, which focuses on the years 1944 to 1949. Finally, the last part, examining 1949 to 1987, explores his life as an acclaimed public figure and spokesman for the resistance, as well as the promotion of Jewish self-affirmation and independence. Porat bases her extensive work on all existing sources, both personal and critical, as well as on Kovner's own writings and over one hundred interviews that have been conducted with him by other biographers. As the subject did not leave a continuous narrative of his own life, activities, and thought, the author had to fill in the gaps.

The peak of the horror Kovner experienced followed the outbreak of the Second World War. Vilna went through radical transformations in regime. The city had come under Polish control following the First World War

and the inauguration of Polish independence. Then with the German-Russian pact, the Soviet regime took control in 1939. The Nazi occupation from June 22, 1941, was as sudden as it was brutal, and of course heralded the total destruction of the Jewish community. In addition, Lithuanians not only generally welcomed the Nazi intervention in revenge for the Communist repression, but they also turned against Jews, who they saw as collaborators with the Communists. According to Kovner, Jews had not appreciated the full extent of the Nazi threat and had not foreseen the horror of Nazi ambitions and capacity. They had been too busy reading Karl Marx, and had not focused on *Mein Kampf*, he claimed. Whether he himself had taken these matters into account at the time of the Nazi occupation is also in doubt. But who can successfully and honestly project from a position of hindsight? The Zionist movement had to be transformed into a residual partisan exercise, and this, in fact, became the fulcrum of Kovner's life and activity, also occupying the major space of his writing.

The first phase of the new occupation was passed by Kovner in hiding at a convent, protected by nuns. By September 7, 1941, Jews were confined to two separated ghettos in the town. Kovner was the first person, as he reported at Adolf Eichmann's trial in 1961, to realize explicitly that the fate of European Jewry was to be extermination. On December 31, 1941, a general meeting was held, for which a manifesto was written and read publicly, not just publicizing this fact but also advocating what Kovner saw as the only viable and respectable response: resistance. This "manifesto" was promulgated on January 1, 1942, asking Jews not to go "like lambs to the slaughter."

An underground movement was set up, with members living separate lives from others in the ghettos. Membership ranged across the spectrum of Jewish movements, from Revisionists to Communists. The Jewish community had been decimated very early on; by the end of 1941, two-thirds of the population had already been murdered. Members of the underground movement set up a united framework, known as the FPO (fareinikhter partizaner organizatziyeh), United Partisan Organization, which drew support from all segments of the residual community. The ghetto was doomed, despite the splendid defiance and the brilliant organization that gave heart to the community. There was also no help nor cooperation forthcoming from the Soviets, though it was believed at the time that they were fighting a common cause, even if they did not share the same convictions. There was always a lingering doubt about how far to take up the challenge, as that could provoke heavier

reprisals, and further endanger everyone. Much of the internal conflict, particularly around the Yitzhak Wittenberg affair, is famously treated in the play by Yehoshua Sobol, *Adam*, written in 1982 and performed by the Israeli national theater, Habimah, in 1989, as well as by Kovner's reaction to it. At a later and even more critical stage, the Warsaw ghetto uprising of April 19, 1943, became the template for Vilna. Wittenberg had been the leader of the underground movement, to whom Kovner was deputy, and the Germans wanted to capture him in order to achieve the final rout of the ghetto. They demanded his surrender, otherwise they said that they would destroy the ghetto in its entirety. The weight of ghetto opinion was against the underground leadership, which wanted to hold out rather than betray their steadfast leader. This constitutes the dramatic tension in the selection of such "options."

At the confrontation between Wittenberg and the leaders of the underground movement, the feeling was that he should hand himself over. He assented to this by handing over his gun, the symbol of leadership, to Kovner. The criticism and resentment earned arising from the fact that he had been complicit, both strongly and critically, aroused the anger of Kovner, who now argued that the decision was taken not lightly or selfishly, and so had to be understood within the context of the presentation of two options, both of which were extremely unpleasant and even unacceptable

The movement was defeated, and the members fled into the forest, until June 1944, when they began to fight for the liberation of Vilna. The group was absorbed by the larger resistance movement, and Kovner was made commander of a fighting Jewish unit within the Lithuanian-Soviet partisan organization, soon to be disbanded by the higher command. July 13, 1944, marked the liberation of the city, and at the end of that year, Kovner left for Lublin. Then came the episode known as the "*brihah*" (flight), which, from the summer of 1945, based itself in Tamisio, Italy. This new stream, solely focused on exodus to the Land of Israel, grew exponentially under Kovner's leadership. And he reached the Land of Israel in August 1945. It was not long before Kovner was recruited into what became known as the IDF (Israel Defence Force), and by the end of the first year of the war, he was appointed a captain in the Givati Brigade, virtually coinciding with Israeli independence, on May 22, 1948. He moved imperceptibly from his function as ghetto leader to that of Israeli fighter, although he remained primarily a poet and a preacher attached to his role as promoter of new Jewish responsibility.

In Israel, Kovner was an active representative of the leftist party, Mapam, but he differed in fundamental respects from its leader, Meir Yaari, who held that the class struggle must be the primary criterion. For Kovner, the greatest concern was loyalty to the Jewish race, with all other considerations subsidiary. He had intimate experience with Soviet practice, and was deeply suspicious of it. He worked on many museum projects, and directed the setting up of the Diaspora Museum, which opened its doors to the public in 1978, all the time from his kibbutz home in Ein Hahores, where he made an effort to integrate old traditions into the contemporary situation.

This book is an excellent and reliable account not

only of a major activist and author but also of a vital phase in Jewish history. The text, occasionally somewhat clunky and with referencing that is not always sufficiently precise, overall constitutes a major and indeed massive work. Porat has presented a portrait of a leader, who was both personally admirable and in most respects ultimately successful. The circumstances were of course exceptional, and the enemy ferocious beyond any normal standards. This forced Kovner into a corner, and he sometimes, as with his declared policy of the demand for revenge (*nakam*), mistaken. Fortunately, this revenge was in any case not put into effect. What Porat has managed to achieve is the assured positioning of Kovner in the pantheon of Israel's heroes.

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