



The Avengers: A Jewish War Story

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The true story of a band of Jewish guerrillas, called the Avengers, in World War II. What happened to these rebels in the ghetto and in the forest, and how, fighting for the State of Israel, they moved beyond the violence of the Holocaust and made new lives.

In 1944, a band of Jewish guerrillas emerged from the Baltic forest to join the Russian army in its attack on Vilna, the capital of Lithuania. The band, called the Avengers, was led by Abba Kovner, a charismatic young poet. In the ghetto, Abba had built bombs, sneaking out through the city's sewer tunnels to sabotage German outposts. Abba's chief lieutenants were two teenage girls, Vitka Kempner and Ruzka Korczak. At seventeen, Vitka and Ruzka were perhaps the most daring partisans in the East, the first to blow up a Nazi train in occupied Europe. Each night, the girls shared a bed with Abba, raising gossip in the ghetto. But what they found was more than temporary solace. It was a great love affair. After the liquidation of the ghetto, the Avengers escaped through the city's sewage tunnels to the forest, where they lived for more than a year in a dugout beside a swamp, fighting alongside other partisan groups, and ultimately bombing the city they loved, destroying Vilna's waterworks and its powerplant in order to pave the way for its liberation.

Leaving a devastated Poland behind them, they set off for the cities of Europe: Vitka and Abba to the West, where they would be instrumental in orchestrating the massive Jewish exodus to the biblical homeland, and Ruzka to Palestine, where she would be literally the first person to bring a first hand account of the Holocaust to Jewish leaders. It was in these last terrifying days--with travel in Europe still unsafe for Jews and the extent of the Holocaust still not widely known--that the Avengers hatched their plan for revenge. Before it was over, the group would have smuggled enough poison into Nuremberg to kill ten thousand Nazis. The Avengers is the story of what happened to these rebels in the ghetto and in the forest, and how, fighting for the State of Israel, they moved beyond the violence of the Holocaust and made new lives.

From Rich Cohen, one of the preeminent journalists of his generation and author of the highly praised *Tough Jews*, a powerful exploration of vindication and revenge, of dignity and rebellion, painstakingly recreated through his exclusive access to the Avengers themselves. Written with insight, sensitivity, and the moral force of one of the last great struggles of the Second World War, here is an unforgettable story for our time.

The Avengers: A Jewish War Story Details

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From Reader Review The Avengers: A Jewish War Story for online ebook

Erastus Vault says

Heartbreaking, mind-blowing, and inspiring.

Sherwood Smith says

This was one tough book to read--it took me months. Some of it was so horrific I could only read a page or two, then I had to put it down.

At the center are Abba Kovner, Vitka Kempner, Ruzka Korczak, three young Jews when the war broke out who ended up as fighting partisans. As their families, neighbors, and cities were systematically obliterated around them, they determined to fight back, not march passively to death as millions did.

After the war, Abba and Vitka bent their experience and skills toward revenge. Not satisfied with hunting down hiding SS officers and killing them one by one, they wanted to kill Germans indiscriminately, in massive numbers, the way the Jews had been killed. This horrific plan was actually carried out, not against German at large, but against the camp of SS officers and death camp guards kept at Auschwitz for judgment. After their bread was poisoned, 2300 of them were reported sick. The media kept silent on whether or not they survived or died. But after that, Abba decided to shift the effort to insuring the emerging nation of Israel's survival, and so the book describes out the core group of fighters in the 1948 war, when the Jews were totally outnumbered, came at the battle with all their PTSD-honed skills.

The book is vividly, I would even say shatteringly described. Cohen traveled to all the spots he depicts, and it shows in the narrative. He interviewed many survivors and their families. It is quite clear through this book that the shadow of that experience 1939-1945 stretched out for decades afterward.

Stephanie says

What an incredible book. As the grandchild of survivors (the only ones in their extended families), I grew up with stories of the Holocaust. But I had little knowledge of the heroic efforts in the Vilna ghetto and of the partisans. We hear so much about tragedy and inhumanity but rarely do we hear of out and out fighting, resistance, saying no in the face of no choices. This book really touched me and I loved how it carries the reader from the beginning of the atrocities, through the worst and then to the beginnings of Israel and the struggle once again for freedom. I seriously cannot believe this has not yet been made into a movie. It should be.

I'd recommend this to anyone with an interest in the untold stories of history, certainly any Jewish person, but much wider than that. Anyone who loves heroes and stories of survival will love this book.

Priscilla says

This is a very interesting book! It's the story of Jews who fought back during World War 2, a perspective you normally don't hear about. When Germany invaded Vilna, Poland, they relocated all of the Jewish citizens into a small ghetto. Every so often, the Nazis would ask for a thousand or so volunteers to leave the ghetto for another work camp where they would have better living conditions with more food and better clothes. But in reality, they were taken to concentration camps for mass slaughter.

When the Vilna Jews became aware of the fate of their people, a small contingent formed The Avengers. The group was made up of young adults; the oldest member was 25. They swore revenge and operating by stealth, they successfully bombed trains, killed Nazi leaders and supporters, and halted the German army progress. By the end, they were responsible for almost 100,000 German deaths.

While interesting, this book was very fair. It doesn't completely paint The Avengers as The Good Guys and anyone who opposed them as The Bad Guys. The Avengers did what they thought was necessary. Other Jewish people did what they thought was right. They dealt with racism and a ruined Europe the only way they knew how.

I liked how the book didn't stop when the Russians rolled into Vilna. There were battles even after WW2 was over, including the Jewish battle to migrate to Palestine and establish a Jewish nation. It told a complete story, as well as a unique story. Most WW2 Jewish literature deals with Jews in concentration camps. This is the story of those who were left behind.

I highly recommend this book! Very interesting, very inspiring.

Ridgewalker says

This is a fact based account of the Jewish resistance in WWII in the town of Vilna Poland. The author pieced together the story from interviews in the 1990's in Israel. The story is told in the matter of fact manner that can only come from those who had lived through it. To them it was every day, something they had no choice except how to react. For me it was interesting to watch how human nature played out in the ghetto's. Some saw cooperating with the nazi's as the best way to safety, most did not believe the atrocities being carried out until it was too late. A few saw resisting as the only real option. As I was reading I couldn't help but wonder what my reaction would have been. I confess I am too far removed from the experience to be able to say for certain. Books like this need to have been written though and we need to read them.

Eric says

Excellent history of 'the avengers', a group of Jewish partisans who lived in the Vilna ghetto, and escaped to the surrounding forest before the liquidation of Lithuania's Jews. Fascinating inside look at partisan life, its many fractured and conflicted groups (Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Jewish). Also a peek into the psyche of the collectively abused. The "avengers" went on to hatch plans to poison German and Polish towns following the war, and succeeded in poisoning an allied prison camp, killing many of their abusers. Then finding themselves in occupied Palestine, fighting first the British, and then the surrounding countries in the 1948 War, and battling Palestinian partisans ever after.

Russell says

I know it's going to take me a long time to read this book. Not because it's not well-written, or because it's not a gripping tale. It is both well-written and gripping.

It will take me a long time simply because I find reading (or watching) anything Holocaust-related draining and enervating. A few pages a day is as much as I can manage. I know these stories need to be told, particularly those about the few who were able to make the leap and find the courage and the means to fight back.

Why do I find it so emotionally draining? I guess because we all know how the story ends, at least the big picture. The numbers don't change for the better. If anything, they get worse; our shorthand notation about "the six million" may be inaccurate. According to one Holocaust researcher I heard lecture, the real number is probably closer to seven million.

Anyway, I hope people like Rich Cohen carry on telling these stories about resistance and partisans; even if all it does is help us change the way we view the Holocaust.

Saleh MoonWalker says

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Nikki Golden says

This was not a well-written book, but the plotline was interesting enough to warrant a high star rating.

It is hard to read a book about WWII, especially as a Jew, and not wonder what I would have done in any and all situations. It's amazing to me the levels that people were able to rise under such circumstances.

This book centers on three people who ended up in Vilna who created the Jewish resistance from within the ghetto and then from joining with other partisans in the forests around Vilna once the ghetto was extinguished. The story is so powerful for many reasons, but to me, mainly because these people left their families, which is something I don't think I would ever be able to do.

The three then emigrated to Israel, after the war and partook in the fight for Israel, too. An amazing story.

Jeeps says

"It's our duty to fight for our people," she said. "It does not mean we've forgotten about Israel. We do it because we love Israel. Every people has its stories of heroism. It is these stories that give you the strength to go on. But these stories cannot remain only in the past, a part of our ancient history. They must be a part of our real life as well. What will the coming generations learn from us? How good will they be if their entire history is one of slaughter and extermination? Our history must not contain only tragedy. We cannot allow that. It must also have heroic struggles, self-defense, war, even death with honor."

I used so many post-it tabs on this book. I used so many that I can run my hand over them like an instrument and make music. I tabbed the damn afterword more than once.

There's a pervasively singular narrative surrounding the Holocaust of Jews being led to their deaths by the Germans and of the Allies as their liberators. This is true — but as with most truth, it's more nuanced than that. Cohen writes in the afterword, "Yes. This is an important story; maybe the most important. It is what happened to the majority of Jews in the War. And yet: It is not the only story." *The Avengers* shifts the narrative onto the Jews who resisted. Since the back of the book isn't on Goodreads I'll quote it here, since I wouldn't be able to write a better synopsis:

This true story of World War II starts in the Lithuanian ghetto of Vilna, where a small band of underground Jews fight with unending cunning and courage. At the heart of this resistance are Abba Kovner, a fiery poet and leader, and two fearless teenage girls, Viika Kempner and Ruzka Korczak. When the ghetto is liquidated, these three flee to the forest and fight alongside Russian and Polish partisan groups—dynamiting bridges, derailing trains, and destroying power plants and waterworks. Their actions eventually lead them down a winding path to Palestine, where a struggle for independence awaits the weary yet fiercely indomitable avengers. It is a side of the war not often seen—Jews fighting the Nazis on their own terms. It is also the story of three remarkable people able to call themselves comrades, lovers, friends.

Cohen was related to Ruzka, and much of this story was told to him firsthand since his childhood (the three of them, with their complicated personal history — though Cohen doesn't label it as such it's clear the three were involved in a poly relationship — remained close in relationship and proximity until their deaths), with clear due diligence when in pursuit of writing this book as an adult. As such his admiration for them is hard to miss, but he also doesn't shy away from telling and examining some of the complicated decisions they made. I'd go so far as to say this is a strength of the book: it's a fascinating and relevant look at the paths that war and persecution push people down. The fighters themselves didn't tell all of the history here until they reached old age and their stories — and their fight — were in danger of dying with them. It doesn't aim to be a comfortable narrative, just to reframe it, and it's incredibly effective at doing this. The author was born and raised in America, but the first time any American soldiers are mentioned in the book is not towards the end, and by then the story so thoroughly belongs in the hands of the fighting Jews at the center of the book that the soldiers' importance seems incidental. Their part exists outside of this narrative.

All three of them were remarkable, eloquent people, but Abba was the wordsmith. Cohen may not have been Abba's descendant, but he certainly inherited his talent for insight and poetry, which just makes this an incredibly smart, engaging, moving read. I'll leave you with one more quote to demonstrate this and then leave it at that, because hopefully if you have any interest in the history and relevance of World War II I've managed to impress upon you that this one is essential reading.

Some of the Jewish refugees . . . walked out to visit the camp. Abba never made the trip. Perhaps he did not have the strength to go, perhaps he did not need to. Though Abba had never seen Majdanek, he already understood it; he understood it the way Einstein understood the black hole—as a theory, as something the numbers suggested. His calculations, rhetoric and fears had long told him such a place must exist, that somewhere, on the edge of the universe, a hole must have opened, a void that swallowed up all energy, even light. The trains had to be going somewhere—right?

Lee says

A+++ story of resistance, revenge, and reconsideration that everyone should read. Straightforward, super-dramatic, moving, vivid, semi-inspiring retelling of the Nazi occupation of Vilna (which I've always known as Vilnius, the largest city of Lithuania), establishment of the Jewish ghetto (80K Jews crammed into a tight medieval labyrinth, with houses often having three stories of cellars in part to hide from persecution throughout history), "relocation" of thousands to work camps to the east, discovery that families and friends are being relocated to a firing squad and mass-grave pit in Ponar, the conflict between the call to arms and other ideas for survival as the ghetto population drops to 15K, escape to the forests through the sewer system and teaming up with partisans undermining the Nazi war effort, the Soviet surge to the west that liberates the ghetto once it's down to a few thousand, the very interesting post-WWII after-life of our heroes (Abba, Vikta, Ruzka), particularly Abba's crusade to poison the drinking water of major German cities and anonymously and without warning take revenge and kill six million Germans (the plan didn't come off of course but they did manage to hospitalize a few thousand former SS prisoners of war), and then their relocation and participation in the nascent Jewish nation of Israel, including the 1948 war against Egypt and pretty much all surrounding Arab nations. Makes me wanna become one of those aging guys who only reads fat WWII histories. Audacity, oomph, and heft delivered by basic facts of the story; authority and execution delivered by the storyteller. But also it made me see how the perma-Israel/Palestine conflict emerges from the Holocaust and makes me want to read more about the history of Israel, especially more of an Arab take. Moral complexity up the wazoo when it comes to the surviving Jews ransacking Polish peasants for food and arms and often flat-out killing them and then these super-badass survivors escaping centuries of hatred in the Euro diaspora for an ancient island of their own in the middle of a roiling ocean of not-so-welcoming Arabs . . . Read this thanks to one of those "you may also like" recommendations on the side of the Goodreads screen -- good job, GR, I really did like this. Also read because my totally assimilated father's Jewish side of the family came from Lithuania and my mother's Catholic side from nearby Poland, so throughout I could imagine myself or relatives in similar circumstances (as Jewish partisans blowing up trains or anti-Semitic Polish peasants ratting them out) had relatives not had the good sense to move to New Jersey about fifty years before the Nazis came to power. Anyway, a great relevant read.

Rachel Brown says

Fascinating, unsettling story of three young Jewish partisans-- two women and a man-- who escaped the destruction of the Vilna ghetto and fought the Nazis from their forest hiding place. (Vilna is where my family is from. Had my ancestors not fled earlier anti-Semitic persecution, that's where I would have been during WWII. About 40,000 Jews were forced into the Vilna ghetto; a couple hundred survived.)

The heroism of women and Jews is often ignored or disbelieved, so I particularly appreciated this extensive documentation of jaw-dropping acts of courage performed as a matter of course, over a course of years, by a gentle-looking Jewish scholar and two tiny teenage Jewish girls.

While much of what the partisans did during the war was completely justified, and more falls into the "who am I to judge" category," the book continues past the war, as Abba and his allies plot what I can only describe as a horrific act of terrorism. (view spoiler)

Who am I to judge, given what they went through and witnessed? Who am I to not judge, given their intent?

Abba, the man, and Vitka and Ruzka, the women, were extremely strongly implied to have been a romantic threesome during the war; afterward, Abba and Vitka married, and lived next door to Ruzka and her husband in Israel for the rest of their lives. I can't help being glad that they got their happily-enough ever after ending.

Dario says

The Avengers tells a vital story. The facts of the Jewish resistance born in the Vilna ghetto in Lithuania and led by Abba Kovner are grim, moving, inspiring.

While most of the Vilna Jewish community allowed itself to be both divided and subdued by the Nazis, with the SS-appointed Jewish police fostering denial (if we comply, some Jews will survive, the community must be preserved at all costs, etc.) Kovner understood from the beginning--even before the Nazis themselves made it official policy--that all Jews would be exterminated, and that the only choice was to arm themselves and fight back.

Together with two extraordinarily courageous women, Ruzka Korczak and Vitka Kempner, Kovner formed the UPO, the United Partisan Organization, which carried out clandestine attacks and acts of sabotage against German forces from within the Vilna ghetto and--after the ghetto was liquidated--from the nearby forest, where they endured cold, hunger, and malnutrition in order to continue their struggle.

The material itself, gathered by Cohen from many sources as well as extensive firsthand conversations, is riveting. Unfortunately--and despite the glowing praise for Cohen's "sparse and muscular writing" from the NYT reviewer--the author's style is so spare it's flat. As a consequence, the story itself suffers, the topography of human feeling and emotion blunted in what I felt was a poorly-calibrated attempt at objectivity and detachment; because of this, many sections and chapters end with a sense of anticlimax and "is that it?".

I still highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the holocaust and the principle of fighting against tyranny and oppression, but what could have been a mesmerizing, unputdownable book was--for me--a rather turgid read; had the book been better written, I wouldn't have hesitated to give it five stars.

Calley says

Rich Cohen did an excellent job of transcribing the story of other people in history in an unbiased, loving fashion. He presents a "different Holocaust story," without disparaging what happened before, during and after the war. He does a great job of making known his subject's opinions without forcing them down the reader's throat, showing positive and negative sides of each internal and external struggle.

With his simplistic writing style, he conveys the unobscured fighting and decisions that took place amongst each character. Many had very little "gray" area of worry in making the right choice, and new what was best for them and those around them. I think that when everything you know gets taken away, your line of sight must become much more clear; whether it is to fight or not, stay with family or fall in love.

I would recommend this book to just about anyone. The social history is astounding, and Cohen presents the landscape and backdrop in an understated fashion so as to not take away from the personal aspects of the story. I really admired the beginning and end of the book, where he shares his own part in the story.

Towards the end of this book, when the focus shifts to post-WWII dramas, I started thinking about how little Middle Eastern history was shared with us in K-12, and I wonder (, nay, HOPE, EXPECT) that there is more of it in newer textbooks. Hell, ours didn't even mention Japanese Internment WITHIN the US. anyway, that's not really part of the book review, just a thought.

Charles says

This is the second book of Cohen's that I have read, and I intend to read at least one more (Tough Jews). I tend not to read a lot of full-length non-fiction; I find non-fiction tends to drag and become dry after 200 pages. Cohen manages mostly to avoid this in his retelling of a select few Jewish partisans during WWII (though the narrative does slow down in parts, especially the second act). The story is engaging, interesting, and heartening (despite its dark subject matter).

Obviously, this is not the first or only examination of "tough Jews." Much has already been written about Jewish warriors (ancient and recent) and iconoclasts. Cohen, however, brings a unique passion to this angle on Jewish history. He is unashamedly non-objective in his approach to the subject. He is unabashed in his goal to present an alternative take on the Holocaust and Jewish history as a whole. Cohen does not subscribe to the view of Jews as constant victims and nebbishes. He wants people to recognize that there are Jews (Israelis, partisans, gangsters, businessmen, etc) who are strong, who are fighters, who will not go like sheep to the slaughter.

Cohen's approach is refreshing. Not only is he challenging the prevailing narrative (Jews in cattle cars) of the Holocaust, but he is thumbing his nose at the self-effacing, multi-cultural, politically-correct, peace-love-and-understanding Jews in America today. Cohen's Jews pick up guns. They shoot people. They seek revenge. They are true to themselves. They are not ashamed and do not seek the approval and condescension of the goyim. In short, Cohen is admonishing that American Jews to have pride, both in themselves and their ancestors.
