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Vladka Meed, Who Infiltrated Warsaw Ghetto, Dies at 90

By JOSEPH BERGER

Vladka Meed, who with her flawless Polish and Aryan good looks was able to smuggle pistols, gasoline for firebombs and even dynamite to the Jewish fighters inside the Warsaw Ghetto, and who after the war became an impassioned leader in the national effort to educate children about the Holocaust, died Wednesday in Phoenix. She was 90.



She died after a steady decline from Alzheimer's disease, said her son, Dr. Steven Meed.

With her husband, Benjamin, and a handful of other survivors, Mrs. Meed took a leading role in efforts to get the world to acknowledge what the Nazis had done to the Jews of Europe. It was a difficult proposition, given the impulse of so many people after World War II to put the slaughter behind them.

The Meeds helped start the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization in 1962 and then the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, which, beginning in 1981, rallied thousands to reunions in Jerusalem and in several American cities. These events sometimes featured American presidents, and the resulting attention inspired films, books and courses and contributed to the creation of museums in Washington and New York.

Mrs. Meed's resistance work started with the deportation of 265,000 Jews from Warsaw to the Treblinka death camp and continued after the uprising by the ghetto's besieged remnants. She told her story in Yiddish in her 1948 book, "On Both Sides of the Wall," one of the first published eyewitness accounts. It was translated into English, German and at least three other languages, is still in print, and was a central source of the 2001 television movie "Uprising."

When the Germans walled off a portion of Warsaw, she was still a teenager. Working as a machine operator sewing Nazi uniforms, she grew increasingly dejected watching the

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deportations in 1942 that included her mother, a 13-year-old brother and a married sister. But she responded resourcefully to a call for armed resistance.

With her brownish hair and prominent cheekbones, she could pose as a gentile, so the Jewish underground asked her to live on the Christian side of the wall and become a courier. Born Feigele Peltel on Dec. 29, 1921, she took the Polish nickname Vladka.

Women were often preferred as couriers, she said in a 1983 interview. “If a man in the underground went on a mission, he could be recognized as a Jew by his circumcision,” she said. “A woman’s body might be searched, but it could not give that information.”

She was soon buying bullets, pistols, even dynamite, and carrying them, as well as money and essential information, to the Jewish side of the wall. Sometimes she became part of a Polish ghetto work detail, sometimes she bribed her way across and



sometimes she clambered over the wall. With death all but certain, she once recalled, “there was very little left to fear.”

Several times, she smuggled Jewish children out of the ghetto and into the homes of sympathetic Christian families. According to Michael Berenbaum, a leading Holocaust scholar, she helped pass on to the Polish underground the startling news about Treblinka — that trains filled with Jews were returning empty, that no food was being shipped and that there was an omnipresent stench of corpses.

The ghetto uprising, in which lightly armed young fighters took on the Nazis by firing from hide-outs in buildings and sewers, began in January 1943 and continued for four months, though Mrs. Meed did not take part in the final battle in April. She had been ordered to remain outside the walls for future missions, and as the rebellion ended she saw the smoke billowing from the ghetto while pretending to enjoy a carousel ride.

“Aryan Warsaw hardly lifted a finger to help” the Jews, she wrote in her memoir.

After the uprising, she continued to work for the underground, carrying provisions and money hidden in her shoes and bra to Jews in hiding. In 1944, she married Mr. Meed, another courier. He died in 2006. In addition to her son, Mrs. Meed, who lived in

Manhattan, is survived by a daughter, Dr. Anna Scherzer of Phoenix, and five grandchildren.

The Meeds were on one of the first boats carrying survivors to reach New York, and she was invited to lecture about her experience and about the Eastern European Yiddish culture that the Nazis virtually destroyed.

As her husband prospered in an export-import business, they were able to start organizations that brought the survivors — often feeling isolated, even within the Jewish community — together and gave them a potent identity.

In the mid-1980s, with the Holocaust beginning to become part of the American curriculum, Mrs. Meed arranged with the American Federation of Teachers and other groups to train teachers in Holocaust education. Every year a few dozen teachers would take a three-and-a-half-week program in Israel and Poland on teaching the Holocaust, including visits to the death camps and to the Warsaw that Mrs. Meed knew so intimately.

The program continues, and Steven Meed estimates that 950 teachers have been through it.

In a 1988 interview, Mrs. Meed explained her motivation.

“Our ranks are getting thinner and thinner,” she said, “and we were thinking how and who will continue to tell the story, but to tell the story in the right way.”

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