

Vladka Meed, Warsaw Uprising Leader, Dies at 90

By Michael Berenbaum

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Vladka Meed, one of the last surviving leaders of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, died in Phoenix on November 21 just before her 91st birthday.

Born Feyge Peltel in Praga (a district of Warsaw, Poland,) she joined the youth arm of the Jewish Labor Bund at age 14 and was thereafter a Bund activist through the time of the creation of the Warsaw ghetto. She joined the ZOB (Jewish Fighting Organization) when it was formed after the great deportations of the summer of 1942, when more than 265,000 Jews were shipped from Warsaw to their death in Treblinka between July 23 and September 21.

Because of her flawless Polish and red hair, Peltel could pass as a non-Jew. She adopted the name Vladka, a name she kept even after liberation. She worked as a courier, smuggling arms into the ghetto and helping children escape out of it.

During the ghetto period, Meed's mother and brother were among those who were deported. They had succumbed to the Nazi deception that bread and marmalade would be given to all those who reported for deportation and because of their hunger, they seemingly allowed themselves to be deceived. She recalled: "There was very little left to fear ... I was depressed and apathetic." However, despair gave way to fierce determination after she heard Abrasha Blum, a member of the Jewish Coordinating Committee that sought to unite the diverse political factions of the ghetto, give a rousing speech calling for armed resistance. Among her most important missions as a courier was to smuggle a map of the death camp of Treblinka out of the ghetto in the hope that solid information about the killing would spur a decisive response in the West.

She brought dynamite into the ghetto, which required not only courage, but also money to "grease" the path in and out. She was to recall that she had known nothing about dynamite and certainly not how dangerous it could be. Ignorance fortified her courage. After the ghetto uprising she continued supplying money and papers for Jews in hiding as she lived on the Aryan side, passing as a non-Jew.

Vladka recalled that she had to be careful that her eyes did not betray her identity. Jews trying to pass as non-Jews often revealed themselves unwittingly by the sadness in their eyes, by seeing things that other Poles had long since ceased to notice. She taught herself

to laugh a deep joyous belly laugh that gave off an aura of freedom and nonchalance that no Jew could imagine.

She retained some of the characteristics of a courier throughout her life. She would size up a situation quickly. She could get a person to talk about himself and establish a quick rapport, revealing very little of herself but absorbing all essential information from the other person. She was strong and resolute. She was persistent, even stubborn. She would speak softly but her words carried weight. One seldom said “no” to Vladka and one was often subsequently grateful for the coerced “yes.”

In her writings she alludes to the loneliness and pressure of her double life only in passing: “You can be my friend,” she said to Benjamin Miedzyrzecki (Meed), who was also passing as an Aryan and who would later become her husband, “because if I don’t come back, I want someone to know that I am missing.” She married Benjamin Miedzyrzecki formally in 1943. I remember Ben telling the story of their first wartime marriage. Ben and Vladka were seeing each other, staying out late at night and Ben’s mother understood that there were no tomorrows for Warsaw’s Jews: one simply could not wait. She took off her wedding ring and told Ben to give it to Vladka. She lifted a glass of water and said “Zol zayn mit mazl,” wishing the young couple good luck.

Vladka was one of the first survivors to arrive in the United States in 1946 aboard the *Marine Flasher*, which became a transport ship for survivors. Meed traveled and spoke widely as a living eyewitness to the Warsaw ghetto uprising. In 1948 she published *On Both Sides of the Wall* in Yiddish, one of the earliest accounts of the uprising and still one of the most compelling. The book, long ago translated into English, remains in print 63 years after its publication. [Ed. Note: The English translation *On Both Sides of the Wall* is currently out of print.]

With Ben and a group of friends from the 1950s or even earlier and a group that included Jonas Turkow, Alexander Donat, Jack Eisner, Joseph Tekulsky and Anne Celnik and other survivors, she launched the Warsaw Ghetto Resistance Organization in 1962 to commemorate those who had been murdered, and to raise awareness among young people and the wider public about their lives. What began as an annual memorial meeting of a couple of hundred survivors became a world-wide project drawing large audiences to annual events in all fifty states and many countries, and prominent memorial museums in Washington, DC and in many metropolitan centers.

During the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Jerusalem in 1981 and the American Gatherings, in Washington in 1983 and Philadelphia in 1985, Vladka was in charge of the cultural events that celebrated Yiddish culture. Few performers dared turn

her down and survivors had tears in their eyes as they enjoyed the culture of the world into which they were born.

Vladka and Ben's home was a gathering place for Yiddish life. Yiddish poets and resistance fighters would mingle and there always would be Yiddish music. Her Julliard trained daughter Anna would play and sing. Vladka loved to sing. Among her favorite songs were *Ikh vil nokh eyn mol zen mayn heym* [I would like to see my home one more time]. For her, the Shoah was not only about what the Germans did to the Jews, but about the world that the Jews had created before the Holocaust and even within the ghetto.

When her husband, Benjamin Meed, assumed leadership of the survivor community, Vladka Meed organized a teacher training program, co-sponsored by the Jewish Labor Committee and the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, one of the earliest such programs. It took American teachers from public schools and Christian parochial schools and brought them to Poland and Israel to experience a Seminar on the Holocaust and Resistance – for Vladka the story of resistance was always essential. For almost 20 years, she unfailingly led the mission each summer, sitting in on each class, herding her adult students on trips throughout Israel and showing them the Warsaw she knew so well.

Meed helped produce a dedicated and informed cadre of teachers throughout the United States. These teachers are to be found throughout the country and still call themselves Vladka's students. Central to this program were the direct testimonies of survivors, none more impressive than Vladka Meed's.

When she could no longer lead the program, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum stepped in to run it and thus assure its continuity. [Ed. Note: "Vladka's program"—[The Holocaust and Jewish Resistance Teachers' Program](#)—is administered by [The American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors & Their Descendants](#) in collaboration with the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#). The program is funded with a grant from Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc. (Claims Conference).]

She is survived by her two children Anna Scherzer and Steven Meed, both physicians, and their spouses, Dr. Joseph Scherzer, also a physician, and Dr. Rita Meed, a psychologist, five grandchildren Jessica, Jeannine, Michael, Chava and Jonathan.

As a couple Vladka and Ben lived and breathed Holocaust commemoration. They sustained the survivor's movement and always saw themselves as part of that community.

When Ben was organizing the survivors' organization and Vladka the teachers program, their home and their professional activities were one. They had a deep love forged in danger and disaster and relied on each other. Each made a critical difference in their individual way. They never liked to sit on the dais above their people, but on the floor surrounded by friends and family. I spoke with their son Steven today. He and Rita are friends of many years. He summed up his parent's lives. "They made a difference and the world is a better place because they walked this earth," he said lovingly, respectfully.

"Each made a unique individual contribution to Holocaust remembrance and to survivors and their joint contribution was unequalled."

Michael Berenbaum is a writer, lecturer, and teacher consulting in the conceptual development of museums and the historical development of films. He is also an adjunct Professor of Theology at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. He has served as visiting professor Holocaust Studies at numerous colleges and universities including Wesleyan University, Yale University, George Washington University, The University of Maryland, American University and Richard Stockton College. He has served as Project Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, overseeing its creation. Berenbaum is the author and editor of twelve books, scores of scholarly articles and hundreds of journalistic pieces.