

Translation of the *Shoah* Interview with Abba Kovner

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2008 Translation for pages 12-21 by Raye Farr – June 2008

2024 Revised translation by Ila Gross for student use

to understand why many Jews did not revolt against the Nazis

Transcript of Abner Kovner's explanation of why the Jews in the Vilnius Ghetto did not revolt and how the Nazi's were able to control them.

INTERVIEW WITH MR. ABBA KOVNER

La: I want you to explain ...the famous proclamation of January 1, 1942 from the unified command of....the Vilna partisans, and the proclamation that followed throughout the month of January of the same year; what is striking, is that at the same time, the extraordinary...prescience of this proclamation and their extraordinary lucidity. One can say with some certainty that Vilna folks were the first to understand what was happening and what was going to happen. OK, and this...I do not assume that they understood this because they were...more intelligent or more courageous than other Jews, those in the Poland ghettos, e.g., I think that it is due to the conditions when extermination began in Lithuania, in the Baltic countries generally, and in Ukraine after the invasion of the Soviet Union by the Germans on June 22, 1941, well, and I think that is based upon the very particular character of the extermination rhythm of Jews in the Soviet territories. And I would like for Abba Kovner to try to describe, not succinctly, but rather in great details the circumstances, and try to portray the feeling...of the speed; because finally between June 22, 1941 and January 1, 1942, around six months. Can he try to describe what happened in those six months, how the Jews reacted, and how and which Jews were led to understand...

Ko: In other terms, what you are asking is...to tell the whole story of this period? In fact, I try to think how I can answer you, without making this..., without telling you in detail the chronology of each hour, each day, each week. Now, from another side, if I want....to make you understand, it is necessary that...I try but I think it is impossible and that I tell you in detail, then...let me try, I am not certain that I will succeed. Factually, your question places me immediately in the center of a difficult maze...you do not allow me the possibility to arrive to

the doors of the ghetto, you force me to penetrate immediately into the heart of this maze. But, I will try...Jews entered Vilna, they left Vilna and the Lithuanians entered Vilna, and nevertheless Vilna remained always what we called her in Hebrew _____ that is Vilna, Jerusalem of Lithuania. In fact, the....rulers changed, things were very difficult, but the Judaism of...70,000 individuals, which were not only a number, 70,000 Jews, representing an important community, this Judaism did not change. In fact, Russians succeeded to shake the general colonies, and the Jewish colonies, they...started by sending to jail in Siberia all the hostile elements, what they called "bourgeoisie" what they called anti-communists, Zionists, but in fact these represented a not too important layer. One must say that the majority of the Jewish population of Vilna...was composed of...members of the lower middle class, and poor classes, and naturally, they had radical tendencies, and when the Russians arrived, they...accepted their ruling....even laughing, sighing a bit, but...without being too concerned.

To understand the political situation, I believe it is very important to remember that...at the time, Vilna and surroundings were in a...very particular situation and constituted a kind of political oasis, a shelter. One must understand that the encounter with the Russians took place like...a drama in 2 acts; first in 1939, the defeat of Poland, and then the Germans following the pact Ribbentrop-Molotov, starting at that moment, Vilna was the ...capital of Lithuania, of akind of free Lithuania, and constituted an oasis between the German world and the Soviet world, so the situation...of the Vilna population was very peculiar, and it is necessary to understand it, to remember that in addition to the original community of Vilna, there were a significant number of refugees from Poland, from Warsaw and other places, and therefore they were added to this population...Then at that time there were in Vilna the Vilna Jews and those refugees. here was a whole group of pioneers....particularly the youth...Zionist pioneers. Without a doubt...

Interviewer: *But Vilna was... Vilna was in the Soviet orbit, starting from the pact... Ribbentrop-Molotov?*

Ko: In fact...I repeat this situation unfolded as a drama in a few acts. First the Russians entered, but...they left, and Vilna became the capital of a democratic Lithuania, factually this period of...independence was very short, as the Russians succeeded to...create Communist

infiltrations, and by such, little by little, Vilna itself invited...the Soviets to come back and let their influence be felt in the city.

La: *And ... Vilna became a Soviet Socialist Republic? Lithuania became a Soviet Socialist Republic?*

Ko: At the time, Vilna became...the republic, the capital of a Soviet republic which was formed then. In fact, inside this chaos, Jews were in a peculiar situation. Indeed, the governments...changed, the war stopped at the borders, and...when the Jew finds himself in a situation where he is...crushed among several governments, in general, he turns towards the one that can give him some help. From one side he could have turned towards the Russians, who were there...Vilna had been an important city in Poland and we could expect help from the Poles...but, Poles, were...refugees the same than the Jews, but one could not expect anything from Poland, or from Lithuania, as Vilna had been the capital when Lithuania was independent. Therefore, the Jews were convinced that help would come from somewhere and I believe it is important to understand this situation of a Vilna jammed between different national groups with different ideas, and expecting help from somewhere. It was inconceivable that help would not come from anywhere.

Indeed, when war...between Russians and Germans started, when the Germans entered Vilna just a few days after the war started, ...this was a shock for those who did not expect the Germans so soon in Vilna, and...even those who feared the start of such war, hoped that there would be a few weeks to organize, to escape. But...seeing the Russians leaving so soon, seeing...Russians parachutists escaping, sometimes without taking the time to pull up their pants, was a tremendous shock for everybody.

The time to get organized was not there anymore. I remember that...at the time, at the time I was part of the Zionist youth _____, the young guard, and...one the...young (guard) that I had formed came to ask me what we should do. It might be necessary for me to explain that...during the Soviet period, I formed the first group of resistance, and that probably let me understand better what was happening. In fact, we had been forced to close our...movement, to...dissolve it and I organized a non-violent...resistance, which had, above all, an educational aim. It was to keep, to preserve the Zionist values which we had developed; the young were...from the high schools of Vilna. Therefore, when the war started, one of the

youngsters of the movement came to ask me what to do, and...immediately, I said what we should do, was to leave the home, leave parents, and...get away. Where? To the east. But ...when one looked east, one realized that...all roads were occupied by the Russians, and...I remembered the book by Tolstoy: "War and Peace", and I told them: "east, but...north-east in the direction of...Leningrad." That is, I told them for sure not in the direction of Moscow, as I was persuaded at that time that Hitler, like Napoleon, would march directly to Moscow. Therefore, I told them, better to go towards Leningrad. And...they were in Russia.

You know...in the...course of the thirty years after the war, I was asked... - by people who had not been there, who could not understand - I was asked why the Jews did not escape, why they did not escape from the ghettos, the mass assassinations..., and here I am at the point in my history where...it was the right time to escape, then, Jews did not escape? But yes; they escaped; I remember of a day when...I opened my window andI saw a group of planes passing and bombing, no need to ask who and what, in fact it was already the...Germans who were here and...were bombing, it was the beginning of the war, the moment when the Russian army was escaping in mass and...next thousands of folks who were escaping, the Jews.

La: And at what moment did you advise the young Jews to escape towards Leningrad?

Ko: At the moment when I saw the Russian pilots, and...I am stressing the pilots, I accentuate this fact, who had...abandoned their planes, who got up on trucks, and were escaping at full speed. And they used their guns to fire...to German planes, their guns. Then, I understood that the situation was lost, that there would not be any fight, and that it was necessary to penetrate to the most profound areas of Russia, the farthest point possible.

La: This was how long before the arrival of Germans to Vilna?

Ko: Three or four days before the arrival of Germans, well...there were several groups, hundreds of our youngsters left towards Russia, the Kazestan etc. ... What I want to underline, is that lots of Jews escaped, and...who escaped first are those for whom escaping was easier, particularly the refugees, those who had already escaped once....the Polish refugees of '39, which I mentioned before, were the first ones that left. For families, it was harder, and families who had relatives in Minsk and others also escaped. For example, I remember...people around

me, those that remained, those that thought there was time to leave tomorrow. For me, the question did not exist, because I was a member of the resistance command and we had decided to stay and resist, but my brother, for example, thought to escape the following day. But suddenly the escapees came back and said: useless to escape, there is no place to escape, Germans are already there. They were not in Vilna yet, but they were already in Minsk.

La: Further (*east*) than Vilna ?

Ko: They were already further east. That is, groups of German parachutists had arrived before the troops and the refugees found themselves between fires.

La: *What are you saying when you state that for you there was no question about escaping because you were...one of the resistance chiefs and you wanted to resist? Did you think you could resist against the German army?*

Ko: No, no, no nothing of that. In fact, I decided to stay because the majority of the Jews were still in Vilna. Yes, many had successfully left Vilna with the Red Army, with passports to Panama, or other places...Shanghai, but...in Vilna an essential part of the population remained, I wanted to stay with them.

I am at the point in my history when the Germans had not arrived yet. We're getting closer but not yet there. I still want to say something about those who came back to Vilna. At the time Vilna was full of rumors, of...this one had been killed, the other one assassinated and...he had not been assassinated by the Germans or in bombings, it was because already Lithuanian and Ukrainian partisans were trying to kill the Russians who were retreating but they killed Jews first.

La: That is Lithuanian nationalists...antisemitic by tradition?

Ko: Yes, they were individuals that...had the uniform of the Lithuanian socialist republic, who had taken off their uniforms and with Soviet arms fired upon retreating Russians but starting on the Jews.

When the Germans entered Vilna, the pogroms began, and the killings... When the first pogrom started, when the first killing took place, people said, "It's just a passing phenomenon." And in fact the pogrom was over. At the same time, you began to see men taken for forced labor; they took them somewhere, and...they worked. But ... the

threat continued, certain killings stopped, while the taking of men for forced labor continued every day. Some of those men returned home, others ... were never seen again. In the months following the entry of the Germans, terror began to reign in Vilna.... If one had known what would happen next, perhaps one would have said it was child's play, compared to the horrors that awaited us, but at that time, it appeared already... as terror. You got up in the morning, you didn't know what might happen? If they would take you, your brother? Every day, the same... agony. They demanded payments of money, requisitioned our apartments, but finally, what was much more grave was the fact that they took able-bodied men and took them away for work. And... the more days that went by, the more men they took, and... the more days that went by, fewer were the numbers that returned.... Women began to hide their men, their children, their brothers, their husbands – in the... *caches*- (hiding places), behind armoires, anywhere, to evade the roundups, but...the number of those who left and didn't return were increasing.

At first one thought that... the men who left really were taken for labor, that they were constructing ...railway lines. Then little by little, you began to fear that those who didn't return ... just weren't alive any more.... At that time, what dominated was an impression of fog, of fear...and the fog. Pretty soon when the ... ghetto was created in Vilna, paradoxically something ...changed, and there was less fear than before. It was a more 'known' situation.

La: *The ghetto became... a protection?*

Ko: At that moment, it seemed like something that might protect against that terror that ruled the streets. One thought that...from the moment the ghetto existed, you would no longer hear the doors that creaked, the cars that stopped in front of the doors, the squealing of tires, and the boots, the sound of boots coming up the stairs and that one was going to knock and that soon, you wouldn't know what might become of you.

La: Were you in the ghetto ... at the same time as the other Jews?

Ko: Yes and no. I'll tell you soon. You want me to tell you?

La: Yes.

Ko: OK. In fact, personally, I am less important. What needs to be said, first, it's a lovely morning, orders were given to the Jews ...to be in the street in half an hour with ...whatever

they were going to take and to go towards the ghetto. We [one] didn't know yet what that was – the ghetto. In fact, the crowds filled the streets in an instant, you have to understand that Vilna was a large city, Jews lived everywhere, in all four corners of the city, a little like today in Paris... they aren't...gathered in one spot. There were a great many Jews, and far fewer Germans. Why didn't the Jews flee, in fact, at that moment? Well, OK, put yourself in the place of the Jew who's at the window, who knows he has fifteen more minutes to come downstairs. Five minutes have already passed, he isn't alone, he has with him ...his mother perhaps, perhaps a grandfather, a brother, a sister, and in fact, in fact at that moment the greatest concern is, first, how to stay together.

La: That happened when, at the creation of the ghetto?

Ko: ...I think it was the 6th of September '41, though ...I'm not very good with dates, and the ghetto was constructed immediately after they assembled us in that place.

La: Is it...is it...is it true, in fact, he is absolutely right, the steps (traces?) of the Jews disappeared, and ...especially the Jews from the area called _____, I think.

And... in a way, I think those Jews were killed and that...in the quarter _____ itself, in the empty apartments, they gathered other Jews,

KOVNER 6 Ko: Well, so, you are at the window, you see ...the thousands of people coming down into the street with a pack, a bundle for the whole family. And...I think that it is natural that the first thought which occurs to you is, first: "where is your sister, your mother, the people closest to you?", and then the second thing, or perhaps it's the first: what to put in the bundle? Because ...you're only entitled to one pack for the whole family, for the father, mother, grandmother, the... So, it's curious, strange things happen. You ask yourself: what is the most important focus and ...you reflect on the function of the life ahead, that is to say, you're going to the ghetto, you will live there. If one of the bundles ...falls in the street, and the ...cloths open, and you see two silver candlesticks come out of the bundle, it's because people think they're going to the ghetto to live there...and there will be holidays when you will light the candles.

And so, the concern for the family... You have around you... your family, you go down to the street, you are carrying ...a babe in arms, the baby falls, you pick it up; your first thought isn't to flee; it's to pick up the baby to stop its crying. And then you find yourself carried along

with the others, with your family around you, and... and ...all the thousands of people going forward, and... and, then finally, you are swept along. You are swept along, you don't flee, you are there. And then suddenly, you arrive.... there's the ghetto, and it hits you that you are in the middle of Vilna, you aren't far, you aren't in ...an atrocity, in something incomprehensible, you are in a familiar place, you can put down your bundle, a sigh of relief, you've arrived. It's...it's there, it's the ghetto. You know why I'm telling you this so carefully, in such detail? Because myself, I wasn't there. Me, during this period, I was hiding with my friends...that was... two young Poles, we had found a place in that monastery in order to... evade the deportations...to work. The Germans continued... I don't think 'deportation' is the right word....

La: The roundups. [*Des rafles*]

Ko: That's it. In fact, they ...grabbed people, they took them, they rounded them up, there wasn't any order.

One day, I had a meeting in the city.... I was wearing my *uni* ...in fact, my habit, I was disguised, I had taken off the yellow star, and ...I returned ...towards the city.

The meeting was ... _____ Street.

La: I don't understand...if you were in a monastery, did you wear the star in the monastery?

Ko: No, in the monastery... In fact, when I said I took off the star, what I was describing was that between the monastery and the town, I took off the star. In the monastery, I was hidden, as a woman,... as a nun and I had clothes with the star in the cupboard, because Jews had to wear the star. Outside the monastery, when I was in the town, I didn't wear the star; returning to the town, I had to again... wear my clothes with the star.

La: ...It was a monastery for women?

Ko: Yes.

La: The Benedictines.

Ko: Evening fell, I was at this meeting...

La: _____ Street?

Ko: Yes, _____ Street and suddenly... cries, yelling, shots, breaking down doors.... They came up from everywhere driving Jews into the streets... on some pretext that a German had been killed and that it was a reprisal, that they were gathering... all the Jews in the streets. In fact,

La: A reaction.

Ko: It was a response to that assassination. In fact, it was a matter of emptying six streets in that quarter to create, later, the ghetto. And that night was called – later on in history – the night of the provocation. Myself, I was... miraculously, I succeeded in hiding... behind a door, terrified, and ... that's how I stayed alive.

La: So, what you're talking about happened before the establishment of the ghetto?

Ko: Yes, I repeat, it was several days before the creation, the constitution of the ghetto...but, obviously, ... I couldn't know that... that only took on significance later, afterwards; I understood that in fact it was an action ... designed to empty all those houses, all those streets, in order to make a ghetto. Myself, I only remember having left the town very early in the morning, having returned to ... the monastery absolutely terrified, trembling with fear... I was afraid, I didn't know that in fact I was witnessing an historic event.

La: That is to say, wait... that, was it the Jews who named it "the night of great provocation"? They ... they were accused of having assassinated a German soldier, they rounded up the Jews who were in seven or eight streets... that is in the streets that they later designated as the ghetto. Is that right?

Ko: I just recounted how... by the greatest coincidence, I found myself involved in that night of great provocation, and... how... when I returned to the monastery, I ... had this sense of ...terrible panic, of cruelty, of bestiality, But ...at that time I still had no idea of the historic dimension ...of the event of which I was part. Back at the monastery, I continued ... to get news of what was happening in the ghetto from friends who acted as a liaison between those of us in the monastery and the ghetto, in particular _____ and ... _____. They came, they told us exactly what was happening, and ... I spent ... entire nights trying to imagine the situation and asking myself what I would have done if I were in their place. That was so ... strong, so powerful, that I ended up putting myself in the place of those who were there and ... that allowed me ... perhaps that allows us to understand how I launched my proclamation and my appeal at that moment. The destiny of... the ghetto in Vilna seemed to us something impossible

to comprehend and unimaginable. It didn't resemble anything else, any of the other ghettos in Poland. In fact, the German domination happened all of a sudden. It hit us over the head: from one day to the next. What were called "actions" followed with an intensity, with a violence, with a suddenness such that ... it was terrifying. But I must add something else; in that moment, we didn't talk about dates, or facts, we were [] speaking of human beings. And... people were asking questions, very simple ones, questions of existence, of survival... and also questions as stupid as: where to pee? You have to understand that... [they were stacking people up in numbers ... ten times greater than usual]... five families found themselves in one apartment, all having to make their first soup on the first evening on the same gas [burner]... When I had the chance to visit the ghetto, I remember I saw lines of dozens and dozens of people at the toilets. And to eat... that constant anguish over food. And... all of a sudden, that uncertainty. The Germans constructed two ghettos right next to each other, so... one asked the question [wondered]: where is the logic of this? If there are two ghettos, it must be that one is good and one is bad, and ...one wondered: where is paradise, where is hell? No one knew.

La: They didn't construct, they established the ghetto.

Ko: And in the midst of this doubt, a certainty suddenly appeared; the small ghetto disappeared in a few days, it was totally emptied, nothing was left.

La: Did they already know...that when people were taken during the night of the great provocation and those of the small ghetto, and those rounded up during the actions, did they know that they were individuals...sent to die? Or they did not know?

Ko: I would prefer to answer this question later and not now. I'll try to answer, but when I'll think...Now, I'll talk about individuals. I am a part of all these people who do not know anything yet. I find myself...in the convent and...I do not yet know something. I go to the ghetto occasionally, another certainty is added to the first one, it is that a part of the people in the ghetto are taken somewhere, but do not yet know where, or who will be taken. First they take those without work, then the old, but, there is a certainty: that these people are taken somewhere and their fate is worse.

La: Can he speak about the way Germans used to terrorize Jews and...divide to rule, to know that while distributing working certificates these were truly life certificates, a particular group of the population, changing the color of those certificates? Can he speak about this?

Ko: I am ready to explain, but I would not like to spend much time on this. La: No, but...tell him...that when speaking of...pardon when speaking of panic...I think that this is panic. People did not have even the possibility of thinking, so... Your definition may be one definition; in fact, it is rather difficult to define what panic is. When...when I think about: panic, I certainly differentiate: fear, scare and panic. I do not speak of these thousands of people who are running in the streets, crazed. In fact... your definition may be one; I did not think exactly this one, it is very difficult to define what is panic, I do not think the classic panic. Certainly, one can differentiate fear, scare and panic, but...the essence of it, there was no outlet, there was not where to escape. The first day, when the ghetto was formed, Jews had still in their memory all their past experiences with the Lithuanians, the Poles, the Ukrainians... who...had betrayed them, had shot them, but also they had friends among them...The Poles or the Ukrainians, there was the possibility...to escape for 10, for 20, for 100, for a minority. But for the majority there was nowhere to go, there was no exit. I might be using a word not quite appropriate: panic. When one says: panic, one imagines crowds running, howling in the streets, it was not so. Germans were watching carefully. Panic appeared only in a few brief instances, and Germans did all that was feasible so that this panic of people howling in the streets did not take place, and indeed it did not.

La: How did an action occur, was it silent?

Ko: Yes, there was...silence. In fact, it was...moments of silence, but...I would like to return to what I was telling a while ago about panic. Methodically, Germans did everything to avoid panic. They created a method from the first day, from the moment the ghetto was formed... I believe the method can be defined by a simple word: Schein, that is: certificate. By the Schein, Germans tried to create this psychological panic. The essence of Schein was to create a differentiation among individuals; those who had important work, those unemployed, those who had a large family, and those single, those old and those young, that is a differentiation. To make people understand that all did not have the same destiny, that all were not destined to the same place, some will go here, others there. The unfortunate who got a bad number, who did not have a good Schein either hid, or tried to get a good Schein or one...fake, and the others who had a good Schein at that moment considered themselves very happy...they had a

destiny [future] that appeared sure. The Germans did this administratively being careful that it did not seem military-like. In fact they used a Jewish administration. All this developed rapidly, Jews entered the ghetto in September; around November there wasn't a great number anymore; there had been 70,000 Jews before the ghetto formation, there remained maybe around...25,000 at this time. You talked awhile ago about silence...I did not live inside the ghetto, but I remember that once I was present during an action. A...crazy race, the...panic, the fear, that was before; when the individuals were already in the street, there, yes, there was silence. Those who had a good certificate kept aside; not scared; the others were....depressed, desperate and...there was an impressive silence in this crowd.

La: It seems that people...precisely during actions, and actions were always...selections, that is...separating those with a good certificate from the others, but...they always questioned themselves even those holding good certificates, because one wondered if...it was better to be...young or old, ...one did not know and the question was to know how to be at the same time young and old? They spent their time trying to guess what the intentions of the Germans were.

Ko: What you said is true; but...I should not have given the example of young and old, because they knew very well what was the better to be, it was better to be young, but...let's say...that one was an engineer and...one was a lawyer...one could ask oneself: is it better to be an engineer, lawyer, or chimney-sweeper. The "Schein" - a German word meaning "certificate" - the certificate which at a certain time... seemed to be the most important, it was ...the yellow certificate, the one that established that you had a trade. But, we say...individuals with a trade, it is not in a modern sense that everybody knows. When we say workers, one thinks of those who already worked in German bases, or for Germans, in general...people who had been taken to forced labor, and they were people whose work was indispensable...of craftsman or...German industry and worked with the craftsman within this frame, by...

La: Working for the Wehrmacht.

Ko: Yes, they worked for the Wehrmacht, for the army...not only the Wehrmacht... For any shop directed by a German...For the army, for German organizations, all those who worked with craftsmen or German workers were given a yellow certificate. And... another example which demonstrates well the method used by the Germans, it was the fact that when somebody

got a yellow certificate, he could well say to himself: I am alive, but what will happen to my family? Then, the Germans created a certificate system, I do not remember well, but I think there were blue certificates, which allowed a person with a productive trade to get a certain number of blue certificates for members of his family.

La: There were all kind of certificates, there were yellow, blue, pink, white, it is kind of crazy the business of certificates.

Ko: It is so... I just talked of blue certificates, it was for the...immediate family, but then one thought "OK, I have a wife, but I also have a mother," then for mothers, pink certificates were given and the...aim of this method was to make people think: what is non-productive work? Because the others who had a productive craft or were a member of his family must, according to the German will, feel reassured, calm. To be calm at the time when actions will come. Among those who got a certificate, one counted particularly all the members of the ghetto administration, members of the Judenrat, the Jewish Police, and...obviously from that moment a frantic race started trying to get certificates, and that was what the German expected to see. They expected a type of war among Jews to grab the certificates assuring life. And...indeed, everybody battled to get a yellow certificate, and then a blue one for the relatives.

La: Those certificates were...for work, but one can state that in truth they were certificates for life. Did Jews know that?

Ko: Yes. At least they thought that they were certificates for life. And for a certain time, yes, they constituted an insurance for life. So, we saw terrible scenes, people who lived through them will never forget them. One saw whole families, in the street, for the selection, one saw them being separated, one saw...a father who had a certificate, his wife, no... The oldest child in a family had a certificate, the other children did not. And ...these scenes were extremely dramatic. One saw cases when...the smallest motion of a Gestapo soldier's finger was enough to separate... a family. One saw cases where... a husband followed his wife to the bad side, so they were not separated. There were also cases where...the wife was sent to the bad line, and the reaction of the husband was that of a paralyzed man, of...a man...almost fossilized, no reaction at all. They looked at each other from one side of the street to the other, they knew they will never see each other again...but there was no reaction. At a certain period, they took all those who had a white certificate, then those who had a pink certificate kept their life, and

then...the following Aktion saw different scenes, when those who had pink certificates were taken. So, then one ceased to understand. And...the time arrived...after selections happened at an intensive tempo, things stopped. Those who had disappeared were no more, but now let's try to take the place of those...who survived. Those alive, how did they live? What did they think? First...great despair prevailed, sorrow about those who had disappeared, for the relatives, for the friends, but life went on, one questioned oneself: what to do now to survive? ... Logic wanted no more Aktions. Germans promised no more Aktions, Jewish administration promised the same. The fact that one continued to be alive seemed to signal that one was indispensable to the industry, the German war industry, but...what will follow? That was the question. Was one going to live? How? It was... at this time that the idea grew up in me that all that happened around us was leading us to death. There was only one issue for us, it was resistance. This idea matured and led me to reflect deeply...towards the organization of such a resistance.

La: Wait, a little while ago I raised a question which was that...and you said you wanted to answer it later. When did you become absolutely sure that all those that were taken...had been led to death, or had already been killed? As they went from 75,000 individuals in June 1941 to 25,000 by the end of December.

Ko: This is precisely the moment when I was going to answer that question. For quite a long time before this period one name came back constantly on the lips of Jews of the ghetto and surroundings, it is the name of Ponari. Some Jews had already...visited Ponari, it was...a small place... not far from Vilna, very nice and...we went there. The first time that I, myself, heard the name of Ponari, the association of ideas, quite naturally was...at the time when I went...as an educator of the Zionist Socialist Youth, to.....a picnic to Ponari. The inhabitants of the place, peasants who came to Vilna, were telling us that they heard shots in Ponari. And that it was necessary to get close to this place. After the destruction of the first ghetto, the rumor was spreading...I say spreading, but maybe someone had interest in the rumor spreading.. that a third ghetto had just opened and that it was Ponari. And the rumor said that... the third ghetto was also a work camp, that it was worse than ours, that people over there died of hunger, worked very hard, that the work was inside the ghetto which was completely locked, from which one could not leave - we, in fact, to go to work, they escorted us every morning, we got out - whereas in Ponari, conditions were terrible, but they lived in the place; how could we

imagine that 40,000 people taken to Ponari were no more? One day, one of my contacts working at the Vilna hospital of the Vilna ghetto - here I would like to precise that it was... the ghetto's hospital, it was...a hospital where Jewish physicians and nurses had the main duty to hide from the Germans all...cases...of epidemics. Because...the big German terror were the epidemics, particularly typhus; there were a certain number of typhus cases in the ghetto, and...physicians and nurses of this ghetto hospital did everything possible to hide it from the Germans. One day, I was called and told to go to the hospital of the ghetto, that there was a young girl, injured, who wanted to talk to me, and only to me. I arrived to the hospital, and...this young girl, 11 years old, came from Ponari. From her I got the first direct evidence about what was happening at Ponari. She had been...executed, and fell like all the others inside the ditch, covered by...many cadavers, but...finally, being only injured, she was able to get out of the ditch, to drag herself, and return at the end of the day, to Vilna. It is the history of a child who told me the truth about Ponari. First, she did not see there any houses, or streets. Then, all who had been taken to Ponari were executed. Obviously, she did not know what happened before, and what was going to happen after, she knew one thing: all those who had been taken with her had been executed. A little later, I encountered another escapee of Ponari, much older. I still have...before my eyes the pictures she described...the firing that she saw, because ...among those executed there was...one of my students, and this is the way I found out her fate. It was a...group of women. This time, the Germans took only women, and they took them to... Ponari, they had to wait for many long hours; most likely they waited for Weiss, the Gestapo Commanding Officer at that time.

La: Weiss?

Ko: Weiss. There were...119 women. They were told to line up, a very long line; behind them there were ditches; they shivered because of fear and cold. The majority of women were of working age, and...Weiss arrived, he looked at them. In the middle of the line was...my student, a youngster...quite beautiful. So, he told her: "Get out of the line." She did not react, she was like...paralyzed. He told her: "Look, the moon is beautiful, and you, you are young and beautiful. Don't you want to live?" She answered: "Yes, I want to live." He told her "Then, I'll give you a chance. Get out of the line, but on one condition: you'll walk forward and not look towards the back." She hesitated; women around her pushed her at the

elbow and said: "Go, get out!" So finally, she took a few steps, she got out, got forward, her companions looked at her with...with envy...with fear. Then the German took out his gun and fired into her back. She fell and... the Lithuanians burst out laughing, and started firing on the whole line of women, including... the woman who talked to me, and all the women fell into the ditch, dead.

At the beginning, we kept all testimonies secret. Those who heard them believed...or did not believe, believed but...actually, rumors started to circulate, and...soon we knew what the name Ponari meant. By the ...end of November 41, it was...I believe, the beginning of December, I... returned to the convent for the last time. It was...just after I was present at the last Aktion of...pink certificates. And...I arrived at the convent, and asked to speak to the priest who officiated at the mass.

La: Because...you spent your time between the convent and...the ghetto? How did this happen?

Ko: Yes, with only 9 nuns I was extremely self-assured. Yes, because...we called and had meetings. We arranged meetings at the ghetto, or...at the convent and...generally what we did, is that...I went with _____, we passed as a couple, she was blond and I, I was disguised and...that allowed us to pass from the ghetto to the convent, and vice-versa.

La: But I...I do not understand it well...the reason for these go between the ghetto and the convent. But, first I would like to know who was at the convent with you. Were they only members of the _____? How many were at the convent?

Ko: In fact what happened in the ...convent...which was close to Vilna, a large part of the members of the _____ were hidden there thanks to... an exceptional woman, whose name was Irena _____, who was Catholic. She had been a member of the Polish Scouts and...in fact, she was the first contact agent to go from Warsaw to Vilna and _____ and to... transmit from one place to the other what was happening, and...she had another friend who lived in Vilna, and both helped to hide men, because at the beginning, it was mainly men who were in danger in...Vilna. She...helped to hide men, particularly leaders of the _____ Socialist Zionist Youth. In the convent we were, at the beginning, especially the members of _____, as I just told of the Socialist Zionist Youth, but little by little, men whose identity we never questioned started to flock in: the Jews. Must say, the situation

was rather difficult because it was a small convent with only 9 nuns, and...little by little, there were more Jews than nuns. I do remember, specifically the arrival of a certain _____, he was later killed, he was a member of the active resistance.

La: In Warsaw?

Ko: In Warsaw. One day, I asked the priest who came to the convent to officiate mass, at that time, I thought that in time of turmoil priests had, most likely, a wide range of relationships, therefore I asked the priest if he could answer three questions I had. First, if lines of Jews had been taken by Germans outside Ponari; then, had they seen Jews deported by train; and finally, did the peasants of the area of Ponari trade with the camp, the ghetto, the area of Ponari; if it was a ghetto, did people live there, they would have a need for food, equipment, one must have seen the use of potatoes? And... finally, the priest came back with answers to my three questions. It was then that I wrote ...my appeal. An appeal that posed mainly questions. I do not have the appeal...in my hands, but I remember...the essentials, and...I will tell you what was there.

La: No, no...excuse me, the appeal...I would like to speak later of the appeal. I would like to ask one question... Is it because ...of the fact that you spent a long time out of the ghetto that influenced you ... in some way, Is that how you wrote your appeal? What I want to say: would you have written the same appeal if you had been in the ghetto from the beginning and continuously with the other Jews?

Ko: I'll say you have asked an intelligent question. Very few in thirty years had asked me that question. It is one of the ...thousands of questions I asked myself. But...allow me to leave the question slightly aside for now. I will remember. For now, we still do not know what was in the appeal. This appeal presents... three essential points; first a direct appeal to Jews, particularly to the youth, to stop what I qualified as illusion, to stop living in illusions. Then...after long nights of reflection, I arrived to the conclusion and...this I did not say clearly in the appeal, but it is what spirited the appeal that... the main enemy of the Jews were... not the Germans, not the Lithuanians, but the illusion. Because we lived in a state of illusion, we certainly needed a type of cruel courage to clear it up.

La: I want... once again to ask you the question I posed before, and that you should answer. The question was the following: would you have written the same appeal, the same

proclamation, the one of January 1942, if you had...lived in the ghetto during the six months that passed between the German entry in Vilna and the writing of the appeal, if you had lived in the ghetto, without interruption, undergoing the actions as did the other Jews, and living in the same fear as the others?

Ko: It is a question...very logical and intelligent, and...it was very rarely raised to me. It is a question that I asked myself many times. But... let me wait a little bit and talk first of the appeal itself. I have under my eyes...the appeal, that is a printed sample of the appeal...dated January 1, 1942, I remember well to have written it in...December 41, the end of December, I am not going to read the complete text, but...there are three essential points in the appeal.

La: Wait...a second. Before you read the appeal in Hebrew, I would like to read it myself in French as not the whole text will be read... And is done in another way in the film I am making. But...I would like you to make a few comments about it. Then, what calls my attention is that you explained all that happened during those six months in the ghetto of Vilna. Yet, you said today, that is ...thirty five years later... to try to understand well what happened and...say that...in a way nothing could have been done. To know that Jews could have with great difficulties resisted and that...they were...completely divided and that, it is my own opinion, today, I think I understand them well, and that...I do not see what could have been done differently. The text of the appeal is ...very violent, and it is a condemnation of the Jews. OK. It is the first appeal...that states that...the Jews...allowed themselves to be taken as sheep to the slaughterhouse, and ...I would like him to talk about this.

Ko: Is it my last sentence that surprises you? Of which appeal are you talking? That ...in my appeal there is a violent condemnation of the Jews? Can you tell me what matter you are addressing?

La: Then... we are going to read for you...No, no, I'll read it in French first,

“Appeal to the resistance in the Vilna ghetto, dated January 1, 1942. Do not let us be conducted as sheep to the slaughterhouse. Jewish youth - it is addressed to the Jewish youth - we appeal to you at a time of unprecedented misfortune for our people. We do not have words to completely describe this tragic fight taking place under our eyes. Our language does not have words to probe the abyss that has swallowed our life and to howl the anguish that strangle us.

We cannot, it is too early, find the appropriate definition that expresses the situation where we find ourselves, that describes the extraordinary cruelty that has exterminated the local Jewish population. The Jerusalem community of Lithuania had 75,000 persons when she was shut up in the ghetto, 25,000 had disappeared, and today only 12,000 persons remain. All the others were killed. Death walks in our streets, in our homes, it is impotence.” It is here... that I find...when I speak of condemnation, it is that I would like you to translate: “but the anguish of this terrible misfortune is even bigger in view of the disgraceful conduct of Jews today. Never in its long martyrdom did the Jewish people not give proof of such abasement, of such lack of human dignity, of national pride, and unity, of so much generalized inertia and submission to the assassins. The heart hurts more when one thinks about the conduct of the Jewish youth educated during twenty years in the ideals of pioneering and defense, and today apathetic, lost, and not at the level of this tragic fight.” OK... I do not know, I was given this as the appeal of... January 1942.

Ko: But... no need to continue, this... I have never written something like this.

La: Then, what is this?

Ko: I do not know. Where...where did you find this text, where was it printed? Who gave it to you?

La: ... translated from Hebrew...

Ko: Where?

La: Translated from Hebrew, it is from...it is who gave it to us and...it is why I am flabbergasted...

Ko: Then...he never heard anybody speaking this text?

Ko: This text resembles the text, it is not the same.

Ko: This is it, this text is this one.

La: Yes, but....the other, was given to us by....

Ko: Let's not get upset about unimportant things....I have in my hands the printed text of the appeal I sent in... January 1942 to the Vilna ghetto, I remember having written it in the second half of December 1941 in the convent. I have no intention to read the whole text, but, I think

there are three essential points which are pertinent even today... that maybe should be underlined. The first thing that I wanted to say to the Jews and mainly to the Jewish youth, was ...to denounce the main enemy that stood between us and the truth, and...the enemy was...the illusion which was holding us. During...the long nights I was in the convent between an incursion in the ghetto and...my returns, I had...quite often the opportunity to think and... I understood that...illusion was factually the only comfort that Jews still had, it was...the comfort that men resort to when in bereavement, difficulties and suffering, and ...it is... this comfort that allowed us to hold on. But here, there was more than a natural human phenomenon of suffering individuals seeking consolation from an illusion. Here the illusion was the result of a concerted method which was ...put in action by both administrations: German and Lithuanian, of individuals who tried to make others believe something to avoid them to face ...reality and truth. As a member of the Jewish people...I was well aware that the Jews were not idiots to believe these lies that they were pushed to believe and... I told myself that probably, they also said to themselves that a voice should be raised, a voice that should tell the truth, and it is why...my appeal was that voice.

La: Yes, but wait, excuse me. From where did he have this...surprising prescience? Because very few persons had it at that time among Jews...When he writes this, he only had under his eyes the Vilna example, because he was there and all ghettos were isolated. And when he writes the following: "Hitler's plan is the total extermination of Jews in Europe, and we are on the first line."

Ko: I understand your question, and...you are already going too far, and I will speak about it soon. It is why my appeal is one that raises questions, questions that everybody asked: where are our relatives? Where are our friends? Where are those taken during the night of provocation? And...these questions demanded answers that could not be evasive, these... answers had to be real. And these were the questions I posed to myself. I had friends, I had relatives, I had acquaintances that disappeared during the night of the great provocation, during the night, during Aktions, of...Schein... yellow, during other Aktions, and I asked myself: what had happened to them? And, at the same time, I knew that the answer was clear, though cruel: all these people had disappeared at Ponari, which was neither a ghetto, nor a work camp, but a death camp.

La: Not even a camp, a place of...

Ko: And in fact, what I said in this appeal, was what all Jews thought and felt deep inside; it only sufficed to have enough cruelty and enough courage to ...express it. But to be able to come out of this despair, of this paralysis, it was necessary not only to say all these things, but also to propose a solution, it was necessary to reach conclusions, one had to say what needed to be done, and what needed to be done was to resist. When I brought for the first time the text of the appeal to Vilna and I read it, first to the activists, to the Jewish elite, those who thought, the youth _____, the young pioneers, and later... the whole Jewish population of Vilna had in their hands this appeal, it is sure that I served only as the mouth expressing the general opinion; we knew that Ponari was the place where...all our relatives and friends had disappeared, and that at Ponari there were not anymore, it was death.

The second point found near the end of the appeal...I know that the majority of the youth who heard me, immediately identified with it, because it represented something that youth enthusiasm could understand, it was the need to defend oneself. There is, in this appeal, a key sentence... which generated the most violent discussions among those who heard the appeal and even among our near relations. It is the sentence that states that Hitler has the intent to destroy all European Judaism, and that the Vilna and Lithuanian Jews are only the first... I remember the discussions...that took place around this idea... Everybody was ready to believe and admit that it was death, that thousands of people had been exterminated, but...even among the components of our movement, the Zionist Socialist youth, of those who later had to become the leaders, there were many of them that thought that... the massive exterminations were either a German revenge following the behavior of the Jews from the Soviet time, or...a show of German sadism, or...due to the cooperation of Lithuanians and Ukrainians, and finally, I remember a friend who was one of the leaders of the Jewish resistance in Warsaw who told us that, finally, that the existence in Warsaw was completely different. This friend from Warsaw gave us her testimony: "There it is, from 2 years ago, the Warsaw ghetto, where there were around...500,000 Jews living, knows hunger, knows sickness, but there are ways to fight hunger, sickness, and above all there was not any mass killing."

Also, we had another example. An...emissary from Bialistok, actually we sent an emissary to Bialistok, he came back with a testimony: "the Bialistok ghetto lives and survives, there are no massive exterminations, and the Jews are convinced that they are...indispensable to Germany,

for their work, and they are upset by what is happening in Vilna.” If I insist on this sentence, that Hitler wanted to end European Judaism, it is because, from this sentence, finally we can understand, we might try to decide what attitude we had to adopt, because...otherwise we could have said easily, considering the terrible situation in Vilna, it is possible to escape, to go to a better place, e.g. Bialistok; we are still young, we can still tolerate this difficult time and ... _____, everything will improve. There was in the answer of the young... pioneers, of these young...Zionists, which arose from the depth of their Jewish life, because through the history of Jewish persecutions, the answer to persecutions was always the same: take the cane of a pilgrim and leave to another country where it was possible to live until the next persecution. But I refused to accept this thought, this idea. I could not see its logic, I could not understand why the Germans, just based on ... revenge, because one day the Soviets had been in this area and ...a certain attitude was shown towards them, I could not understand that the Germans decided, suddenly, to murder so many folks, only in Vilna. Then, I remembered, that a little while before the German-Soviet invasion, - **I read “Mein Kampf.” And abruptly, I understood, that all words in that book were, in truth, a plan, and that the plan was developing under our eyes. And when I said to my friends that Hitler had the intention to exterminate all European Jews, it was because I wanted them to understand that it was not an action of a Weiss, or of another _____, but that it was a satanic plan. And... starting at that moment, starting at the point when this was understood, ... no Jewish behavior, no internal or external intervention, nothing could change this happening. And the obvious conclusion was that for the first time in Jewish history, there was no place where to flee, because there was no place to escape.** And here I must...add something; when I said that there was no possibility of escaping, I wanted...to indicate that there was no possibility of escape, not geographically nor spiritually.

La: But... what hits me... is the idea he had that what was in play... was the destruction of the totality of a people, the complete Jewish people of Europe, and that...maybe some individuals may survive, that they would survive by chance, by an accident, and this was not the problem, and what is very strong...this awareness, that...the Jewish people in its totality were to be condemned.

Ko: I think it is true. Certainly, you are right, because this sentence...on the extermination of European Jewry is the key phrase... The appeal is rather very pessimistic, it is an appeal that

ends...its last line says quite clearly that it is better to fall as fighters, that is...knowing quite surely that even in a fight there is no chance of success, it is an appeal showing a lack of perspective, because otherwise, this appeal would be like all others, calling to the barricades, there is nothing like that, and...you are right it is ...the proper key phrase of the appeal, it is why... it was so difficult to accept it.

La: Then why did you say a while ago that...if you had lived in the ghetto with the other Jews during these six months, why...did you agree with what I said, that maybe you would have written your appeal differently? Would you not have written this appeal? You have not explained this.

Translator: He was not...completely in agreement with you... almost, ...in any case, Kovner will explain in a little while.

Ko: But... if you allow me, I want nevertheless...just to finish this point which was an important one, because...it raised the most controversy at that time in the ghetto around me, and it is the...point concerning escape. If one can understand this point, one can get to understand what constituted...the universe...of the resisters, those who revolted afterwards. Otherwise, I believe one cannot explain it. What...always characterized Jewish persecution, persecutions from the middle-ages to modern time, was the fact that there was a point to escape. There was the possibility to leave the place of persecution and go elsewhere. One also had... a possibility, at least a theoretical one: it was to quit Judaism. Finally, all persecutions were directed against the Jewish faith, and if one converted to Christianity, e.g., theoretically, one had the possibility to escape persecution. Therefore, it was important to understand what I felt already, more or less by intuition, that... we were at a turn of Jewish history, at a time...that was not like any other, no comparison was possible with any other moment in Jewish history. So...the fact of proclaiming that the whole European Jewry was....destined to be exterminated, it was proclaiming loudly that no escape was possible, that only few individuals could escape, but that the whole people was condemned, and that one had to seek a solution, a general attitude for the whole people.

La: Is it...that themselves, the young Zionist Socialists...who's ideal in life was to go to Israel to create there a new state, and even for _____ the Jews, did they feel like an elite by contrast...to the persecuted Jewish masses of the Vilna ghetto?

Ko: ...I try to understand your question, but...in any case I hold to...reject one word that bothers me, and it is the word "elite".... Maybe that...in this idea of elite, there is something that one can translate in...modern terms, not "elite", but it is that us Zionist youth we considered ourselves in an avant-garde fight. That is to say that...we considered that...our attitude, our choice, our ideal to...go to Israel, to make there a society, to develop ourselves, was ...in fact the attitude that would later be adopted by the whole people. We were just the first, the pioneers, those who started; we were not...we did not feel superior to the people, we simply felt that we were the first, that we showed them the way. There had been an event...which, I believe, is unique in the whole history of...of the Nazi invasion in Europe, it is that...from the moment when we issued the appeal,...the young boys and the young girls who belonged to our movement left their hide-outs - which were safe, sometimes they had Aryan documents, or like myself they hid in a convent, anyway they were safe. And...from that instant they left their hiding places to rejoin the ghetto and share the fate of their people. La: Tell him that's why I asked the question.

Now, I would like to answer to the...question, slightly subjective, that you asked a little while ago concerning the fact to know if I would have written the appeal differently, if I had lived in the ghetto. If...up to now, I talked rather a lot of this appeal...it was in an objective fashion and because it concerned the whole of the resistance of the other ghettos, of...appeals which were to follow later and...in fact, now I am ready...to return to this question a bit more subjectively about the reason why, I wrote this appeal in this way.

Then, would I have written this appeal in the same way if I had not lived outside the ghetto during these six months? It is a question that I started to ask myself after the war, and quite frequently, and...finally I asked if in...a retrospective fashion, I cannot respond to it but by...trying to live again, what I felt at that time. In any case, it is certainly one of the elements which...led to the crafting of this appeal. There are enough elements, some objective...others subjective. This appeal is certainly special, because it is the first in its type...in the total of Europe; in any case...frequently I told myself afterwards that... the fact that I lived in this convent for those six months was for something; I will explain this. To try to define a diagnosis, to try to ...define...such large catastrophe, so...big, it seems necessary to adopt a view...a bit large, a specific perspective. And, I did not have...at that time the possibility...to have this perspective, but I had...a special perspective, as I found myself a bit withdrawn from

the big events taking place in the ghetto. But...from the other side, I was...involved in what was happening in the ghetto, I had ...my family, I had ...my friends, my acquaintances, and...the fact to be torn between on one side the loneliness in the convent, and on the other side the profound implications of these events to myself, the narrow relationships, the ties that I had in the ghetto, I think that it is this tearing that created from one side the distance, and from the other the fact of being implicated, the fact of being mixed up in the events, I believe that it is one of those things that explain this appeal. Sometimes, I also think of other things; I do not know if it is...the moment to speak about it, or...the place.

La: I think, yes.

Ko: The second thing, is a ...feeling of guilt. Very often I asked myself wanting to know if...in the Bible there is a place where... the origin of human civilization is located. I...am saying it well human civilization, and not history of man. The culture...in Hebrew, the word _____ has at the same time the meaning of civilization and culture, and here I use the word: _____ in the sense of culture; man as a being of culture. This place in the Bible, is the story of Cain, Cain did not get the death penalty. Cain was condemned to live with a sentiment of guilt. My opinion, it is at this place that that the history of the man of culture begins. Of...all places that one can define as being at the origin of...the culture of man, I believe that it is this place that indicates better than any other place the birth of culture.

And here, I... will digress which will bring us up to our time. Frequently one asks oneself the question when Germany should stop feeling guilty for what she had done. One asks oneself when will she have the right to re-enter into the family of cultured nations ?And I repeat that Germany is part of cultured nations while she has a sense of guilt.

But I, at the time when I lived in the convent, I...I was not Cain, I had not killed anybody, to the contrary, I was Abel. And in spite of this, I had a sense of guilt. And...

this sense of guilt originated from the fact that at the most tragic moment, when my family, those dear to me, were in the center of the ghetto, I was not with them. And when I tried to visualize in front of my eyes the spectacle of those who were dear to me, who at the night of the ...visas, the yellow Scheins, were led to Ponari, and that I was not with them, I simply could not ... just not sleep.

La: Did he also feel embarrassment? Not...for yourself, but for the Jews, that...

Ko: No.... Why the shame? The.....the second thing that justifies, that shows the birth of a human culture, it is....the fact of not giving up. And...it is because of this feeling of guilt, a strange feeling at the start, because I was part...of the persecuted, not of the persecutors, but from this guilt feeling and from this will...violent to not submit oneself, to not give up, I believe that from these two united elements the appeal was born.

La: OK. Abba Kovner, I would like to return to this... proclamation. You wrote in a solitary environment... this appeal for the resistance of the Jews of the Vilna ghetto, at least for...what remains; alone, in a Benedict convent, I would like to know what...sense all this had to you, because...in a certain way, it is totally laughable, to make an appeal to the resistance...in January 1942. The Germans were victorious everywhere, there were no arms....what did the appeal try to say?

Ko: ...There are a few points in your question that are not...exact. It was not that we had no arms, we had...none.

La: That's what I said, there were no arms.

Ko: We did not have any arms, not at the time when I drafted the proclamation, not... but later on. I did not know even from where ...the arms would come, who would give us arms, and otherwise I was not alone. Therefore, I was not alone, I knew I could count in the ghetto of...some... rescues from the youth movement that I directed. I knew that they were several thousands of...youngsters, from the inside of the ghetto, folks who had...the will. For sure, thousands and thousands of individuals...were no more, but... it was essential in those circumstances, it was...to know, and... - at that time, I already knew, intuitively, and afterwards, I knew it more clearly after verifying - it is essential to know that one can rely on this small loyal group of people who understood you and were ready to follow you. In fact, my voice was not alone in the desert. It was...enough that I started a spark for...this spark to become a fire. And this is what I did, ...I served only to...embrace the rebellion; then, they followed me.

La: But then, my question is this one; basically: what type of hope did they have? Did they have a military hope? Did they have the hope to save the ghetto? Did they have the hope to

save the ghetto's Jews? What did... what did they think to do? What did they expect to achieve? At that time.

Ko: No. Neither I, nor any of the heads of the resistance of the ghetto had the minimal illusion regarding...the issue of our fight against the Germans in the ghetto. I do not remember if either...I or my comrades ever had the impression that our...resistance was a simple...gesture. We were not seeking to make just gestures, what we looked for was to choose... our death. Not to find ourselves one morning led to death by the Germans, but...to be able...to resist...with honor, and above all ...being ourselves the actors of our own destiny.

La: But, did you think that...such an attitude was valid for...all the Jews? For the 20,000 Jews who lived in the ghetto?

Ko: Does your question mean: could those 20,000 Jews ...could they also raise up and revolt?

La: In a certain way, yes.

Ko: No, on this plan, I was very skeptical. Anyway...in all situations...dramatic, the mass of the people is always...disoriented, does not know how to act, tries to escape from the situation, to flee... What we tried to do, it was to...give them the awareness that our situation, did not have an out, that there was no possible exit. Factually, it...was enough for us to open a fire and then the whole ghetto would be in fire, as it happened...later on, in Warsaw. What we thought..., is that our fight, which we considered...not as...a nice gesture, or...a resistance for honor, but that we considered it as a fight born in the bosom of desperation, had nevertheless a certain use. We were convinced that...the fact of resisting, and not simply letting us be taken to death, allowed nevertheless, to save thousands and thousands of people who would not have been saved if our fight did not exist.

La: OK. you said...that after drafting the proclamation, you and your comrades decided...to enter the ghetto. Then, can he say: did they enter the ghetto for good? Didn't they leave the ghetto afterwards, during...a long period and...in what conditions did they find the ghetto? What happened in 1942? Because I think I know that...after ... 4/5 of the Vilna Jews...were liquidated, the whole year 1942 was relatively calm. Ko: First I must, before I answer you, say that your question...puts me in a situation where I cannot be ...very clear, because, when you talked to me a little bit before, of...the appeal, this appeal was situated in the time, chronologically, to the beginning of the history. In addition, your questions called for an

answer on a spiritual level, and...now, you ask me questions which...compel me...to mix a bit of the events, and to respond on other levels.

La: Oh! Yes.

Ko: OK. Then, let's put aside the chronology and let's go back to the appeal. Although only the world was created by speech, no resistance organization was created by speech. The word alone is not enough. There is a need beyond words for an organization. After the...first actions which succeeded quickly, events.....astonished the Jews, because suddenly, a certain truce seemed to happen, Aktions stopped. Jews called this period: the period of stabilization. The reality that...set in in the ghetto had multiple facets. The first one, was...a new trust, that maybe the Germans were telling the truth. The Jews...believed more and more that what the authorities of the Judenrat (Jewish police) said was the truth, that maybe if they tried to keep their efficiency in work, to answer to the needs that the Germans imposed on them, maybe, a day might come to achieve peace with this old "moloch" to whom they had sacrificed...enormous sacrifices at the beginning, but that maybe it would be lessened at present. Yes, one believed more and more that the situation could improve, one believed in the promises made by the Germans.

La: I would like to say to you Abba Kovner, that we do not have at this moment an academic discussion, nor a spiritual discussion. And...what I would like is that you try to revive for us, and I know that it is very, very hard, at the same time, what were the life conditions and what problems the people in the ghetto had? Finally, what were their problems starting at the moment when they decided to return to the ghetto, to return to the bosom of a population which they knew, because they had just proclaimed, that they were condemned to death. And they did not have any arms, were very weak. What sense did it make?

Ko: Our first aim was to create a force. To start with we tried to eliminate all differences ideological and spiritual that could exist among us. What was essential for us was to organize an efficacious force starting with all survivors in the ghetto and those who could be united. We already knew that we could not just go out in the streets. No way to go out in the streets and yell: "Resistance, resistance, come all and join us." What was needed was to try and go to existing groups. And these groups were first my own group, from which I created a kernel, the group of the Zionist Socialist Youth, the _____ but also the other groups, such as

revisionists, communists, Bund and Zionist Youth, and starting from these groups already organized we formed a force that we could use. This...kernel which had to form the resistance in the ghetto was formed little by little, and we asked each of our members to leave their families, the net in which they lived, and to get together so we could form a sort of community, a bit like a kibbutz. The idea was to try to avoid dependence on economic problems of each family, and also to create a group...a community where one could speak openly about all problems. In fact, something very strange happened, and it is necessary to know that we lived in particularly difficult conditions. We were hungry, we...had absolutely nothing to eat, we had no clothes, the...apartment where we lived was...in such a state that in winter, snow covered not only the roof, but also the walls; therefore, the conditions were very difficult, however, to us, they seemed completely secondary. What was of prime importance was the ideological position. From the moment we could define our spiritual position, it appeared that we knew where we were going.

La: How many were in this apartment?

Ko: It was not really an apartment, it was a room, we were... 15, 16; well, we have to say that it was the group, the kernel. From a given moment, this room constituted...a place for meetings, a place where one came to spend the night when needed...it became a general quarter.

La: Did they work also at the same time?

Ko: We divided the tasks among us. We formed a sort of ...commune, with a distribution of labor, those who worked in the outside, others in the inside, and...I believe that with the exceptions of families, we were the only group dividing equally the only piece of bread, or the rotten potato. I am happy that you asked the question, because often, I asked myself exactly where did the rebellion start. I think it started at the place and moment when folks were obliged to divide the small piece of bread. Because, in fact, what the Germans had searched to do, was to make of us wild animals, to avoid that we cared for each other. And... the rebellion started at the moment when we were able to reverse the steam, to the contrary, to care about others. In fact, it was very hard. I remember even today that I had the chance not to have to work for the Germans. And...I always asked myself, then and even today, how would I have reacted if I had

worked for the Germans, and a German had slapped me? Well, let's go back to our organization.

La: But... were you underground in the ghetto? Kovner?

Ko: Let's go back to our problems. With increasing study and discussions about the ideological position to adopt, the situation became clearer for us and we knew exactly what we wanted to do.

La: I want to know if you were underground in the ghetto.

Translator: You want to know how... He told you before that it was...a resistance.

La: No, no, no, no. He, as he said he did not work for the Germans, there was a need for work certificates, so, ...

Translator: Ah! He wanted to explain the question...

Ko: When we were seeking external help, we were successful in establishing contact with a small group of Lithuanians, I say: a small group, because actually, it was about individuals. It must be known that, among the Lithuanians, the ...great majority of the population collaborated actively with the Germans, particularly...volunteers for groups that participated in mass killings and...the intelligence.

La: The Einsatzgruppen.

Ko: The Einsatzgruppen, and also it must be known that the intelligence services of the Lithuanians collaborated in ...massive fashion with the Germans. It is why I remember ...with great respect and admiration this small group, the faces of each one of these Lithuanians freedom fighters. But I also remember their...surprise when they proposed help, help which in their eyes was extremely generous, very touching of course... They asked us to propose a list of 20-25 individuals that we wanted to save, ...writers, artists, thinkers, politicians, individuals who would have a place in history. They were ready... to prepare...a hide-out outside of Vilna, for 20-25 individuals, and when we refused to give them such list, they did not understand.

Do let me expand on this point, because I believe that...when explaining in detail our problem, you will understand better the situation...quite unique where we found ourselves. I believe that the Jewish resistance of the ghettos has no equal in all the history of the Resistance, and particularly in the history of the European resistance to the

Nazis. Our problem was ... absolutely unique. When they did not understand our refusal, we tried to explain to them that in fact, they were asking us to act as the Germans did. That is to do what we were rebelling against. They were asking us to do a selection, of course positive, to give them a list of 20 persons, of 30 persons, who deserved to live, but we told them: is it for this that we are rebelling? To make this selection, to decide who had the right to life or death?

La: Who has the right to live or die.

Ko: Understand at what point they had a hard time to accept our reasons and to understand them. They asked me: "But...don't you have any interest to save Jews, another Jew? Isn't every Jewish life important to you?" And we answered: "Of course, if we succeed to hide a Jew under the roof of a Russian house, in a Lithuanian house, it would be very important to us, but try...to understand that we are there as a...collective body, which represents the community. And as such, you cannot ask us to base our action with...a selection."

Among those who supported us, that supported the resistance, some asked us not to give an immediate answer...negative. They said: "Listen, at least reserve this possibility for the future. Maybe, one day you'll need this hide-out, maybe it is an option for the future."

La: But, this refusal is it not theoretical, this ...refusal ...to give a list, to save 30 individuals, to save 50, or to save 100, because they know they cannot save everybody and that...the ghetto population in its whole is condemned to death?

Ko: The question did not have anything theoretical. In certain moments, it seemed theoretical, because there were...respites, but every time that a new action took place, the question returned, more and more concrete. We said to ourselves at that moment: let's try to save at least those who must continue fighting. But the answer was always the same. We had ...formed our group starting from a precise ideology, our fight was not for self preservation. It was not question to...save myself, to save you, to save ... a neighbor. It was to fight the Germans.

I would like to add another word about despair. All our actions were born from this despair, despair in the way I understood it, that is - a situation without issue. Therefore, this despair was not something to end, definitively, factually it was a despair with simultaneous dimensions ... humans, subjectives and ... it was a despair that came from the fact that we knew that death was

in front of us, but... starting from the moment when we decided that death could be chosen, that we were those who would choose our death, I think we were the only ones in the ghetto walking in the streets with the feeling that we were free, because we knew that we would die fighting.

La: OK. No...but this, you will explain to him...I understand very well that, but...I do not know if you understand the question I posed when I asked if this attitude that said: one does not chose, we refused to chose who will live and who will die, which means we refuse to save some, well, and if one follows this idea to the end, one says: it is better if all perish rather than...to save some because we do not have the right to say: we are going to save a man, because he is a great painter, or another man, because he is an intellectual - and I agree, morally, with this position - but all this is to bring him, it is to ask him what does he think... of the Judenrat policies, because... their own situation was without end, and finally, he arrives to say that their only consolation, was to be able to choose their death, well... But...that of the Judenrat at least had a policy, they said: we are going to try to last, we are going to...give lives to save others. It was what they said. Well, then I would like to know, what he thinks about this, what is the judgment he has today on...the policies of the Judenrat. And furthermore, I want to add this: you find it is fine to speak about a resistance and an important one as Kovner was on the Judenrat, well.

Ko: I did not answer you up to now because you did not pose the question in this way.....

La: No, no, but, I know, I'll pose...

Ko: Will you allow me not to answer it just now? Because to...speak about the Judenrat, first I must explain exactly the nature of resistance, before we reach the moment when the resistance finds the Judenrat.

La: Yes, agreed, if you want it this way we can, but...it is a digression. I thought we could...speak about it now, because...you said a little while ago, in your first interview, before the professor arrived that...the Lithuanian proposition...came back...one did not touch it this way, and the Lithuanian proposition came back...to their request to act as the Judenrat did; in the second intervention, you eliminated the word Judenrat, talking only about the Germans.

Ko: It is true, I voluntarily... deleted the word Judenrat in the second answer because I realized that...if we...start to speak of the ...Judenrat, the digression would be...so wide that I would not arrive to link...to my answer and to return to the subject I wanted to talk about, and I knew

well that it is a question waiting for me. The moral, spiritual, the only foundation which allows resistance in the ghetto to deserve the name of resistance, was this: we did not seek in our fight to...save our skin. We never ceased to believe in the survival of the Jewish people; maybe we thought that no record would remain of European Jewry, but...the continuous existence of the Jewish people, we never doubted it, and ...what we wanted, was that our behavior remained as a testament in the Jewish history to follow.

La: Why? Can you explain this?

Ko: The foundation of our thought, of the...moral tradition that we received, was that ...victims can not expect salvation from anybody if they do not start to save themselves. We started too late...saving ourselves. I think that if the Jews would have been capable, at a given moment, with the appropriate intensity, with the responsive intensity to that of the German attacks, with the needed will, if the Jews would have been capable to give the appropriate response to the event, I think...that the events which developed at the time would have been ...completely different.

La: I do not understand what you are saying. How...how was it possible, to give a different response? The Germans were arriving, imposing terror over the population...with no arms, and...they are being deceived, told lies, ...how....what does it mean? In practical terms, what is to give another answer? Is the translation not correct, or ... did he not understand an essential sentence that I said: we started too late, we missed the boat. The... Hitlerism began in 1933, the...

La: Ah, OK, OK; if he is saying that we could have stopped all this before, I agree. I do speak from the time the Germans entered Vilna.

Ko: The Holocaust of 1939.

La: OK. I, I thought that you were talking about the Vilna ghetto.

Ko: Besides, I do not speak only of the Jewish reaction, I speak of the reaction of the whole world. If, at that time, people would have reacted with the same strength as do people today against the atomic bomb or...as they reacted against the Vietnam war, there too, the course of events would have changed. The testament that we tried to transmit at the time

in the Vilna ghetto, at that moment, ... we should not lose time, we should not give a late answer. We must defend ourselves at the right moment.

La: But it was already too late, when they defended themselves.

Ko: I forgot to transmit...a while ago something important. You ask me now, thirty years later to judge the events of thirty years ago, I... am completely incapable to do it and I refuse to do it, I think it is not the moment because at the time, when I was in the ghetto, I did not think what would be in thirty years, I tried to react...to what was happening at the time. Now, what did we think? We told ourselves that...seeing the revolt, maybe, maybe the world conscience would wake up; maybe tomorrow, there would not been any remembrance of ourselves, no physical remembrance, but ...at the light of the ghetto's flames, at the light of our revolt of combatants, of the dead, the world would remember what it was. And then, there was a second element. At that time, we had increasing signals that... showed us, probably true, that the more we fought, the more intense was our fight, we had more chances to save more people.

La: Yes.

Ko: Still, I want to clarify something else because, what I just said seems to contradict what I said before on the desperate situation. But, in fact, in such a situation, things were not of only one color and...it is absolutely that...if you allow me to make it more precise. A ...small example. One day, a group of 300 Jewish women, who worked on the outside of the ghetto in a military camp, were returning from work. And...undoubtedly that day, the Germans needed to take a certain number of ...hostages, individuals to be killed, and they decided to make an Aktion, they ...stopped the women on the way to the ghetto and told them to change directions. At that moment something very unique happened. In view that this Aktion developed in an unpremeditated fashion, it was not following a Schein, nothing had been prepared in advance, the women had a natural reaction, a men's reaction: they refused to change direction, they refused to leave, they sat down on the ground and said that they were not going. And, curiously, the Germans did renounce their order. This episode, for me, was an alarm signal, I felt that it was truly significant. Every...episode that they could tell me of the same kind allowed me to keep asking myself and ...to better understand the problem. Here, I would like to make... a small digression on...the extermination. When at that time one spoke

of extermination, nobody among us, and I no more than anybody else, knew what the final solution was, we had not heard anything about Auschwitz, one did not know what there was at the end of the road. But...we already asked ourselves, to know, if the victims refused to obey the orders, would ...the Germans go back? When some of my friends talked to me and were telling me: what does that mean? What about your fight? What do you think you can gain? I answered: "Listen, if the Germans would be contented just to exterminate us, they only had to enter into those six streets of the Vilna ghetto, with machine guns, and start firing around. In that way, they would not need Ponari, they would not need fences, they would not need this total secret, this organization." When I had discussions in the ghetto with individuals that ...I tried to convince to join the resistance, it was...always the same question that came back: but in fact... your fight, what is its final aim? How useful is it? The problem is...indeed this; one cannot fight only from the bosom of desperation, one needs to have faith in something, one needs...to believe in something. The fight may be something metaphysical, something religious, or must have some hope at the end. The problem that...one could pose and the answer I gave to...my comrades and even to myself was the following: if the Germans had the intention to exterminate the Jews, finally, it would be very easy just to enter the ghetto and... shoot everybody. Then, if Ponari existed? If Ponari was a secret... place? If Ponari was an external place, about which nobody knew anything? At the time, I did not know anything about Auschwitz. Why did the Germans need such a method of deceit, of lies, of hiding those things that...finally could have been performed in daylight? And...this, I told myself that they were afraid of something, I did not know yet. At the time, what it was, was it...the international public opinion, at the time, I did not know to which point this opinion was cynical. In any case, I thought they feared...if not this opinion, at least...the opinion of the local population. Maybe the peasants of the surroundings, though very antisemitic, would not have accepted those Aktions. They feared something, consequently, maybe we would make their life more difficult. And this was one of the aims of our fight, one of the objectives of our action. And once more, if we fought, we would have a better chance of saving not only some, but maybe a more important part of the population. In the inside of the fight, escape for a higher number was possible.

La: What do you want to say? It was better to be killed publicly...inside the ghetto, that is at Vilna, instead of accepting to...be killed in...a pre-established place??

Ko: No, no, the aim was to die fighting; because...in such a situation, there are victims anyway, and...the fact that there are passive victims...that fact...they exist anyway in any fashion.

Then... what was needed...is that we needed activist victims. The fact of having active victims changes something not...maybe immediately, but in any case in the eyes of history.

La: But was it ...so extraordinary, to die in combat, for the Jews? Ko: I believe that...what was in play, was first to shed this feeling of shame that had been imposed on us. To try...to recover for ourselves the feeling of dignity, of individual value, and maybe also, give one way or another an answer to the murderers.

La: Why? According to what you said, one has the impression that...to die in combat, for ...a Jew, at that time and in that country, it was something extraordinary. I would like to ask : was ...the armed fight, for you, a representation of a radical break...deep...in a long tradition of non-violence? Well, was... the recuperation of violence by the ...Jews, that is by them, do they consider it an...event of something of great novelty? And if yes, he should tell us why.

Because ...individuals who die for honor, fill up all the history of Christianity, for example.

Ko: The answer can only be very complex and I...would not like to answer with the view of...many years. I do not think...that the way that I see things today is of significance. I try to remember...what I thought then and...you would be surprised,

maybe, to hear how we celebrated the...Shabbat, the Jewish religious holidays, you know, at that time, when we...celebrated religious events - and we were not religious - we took from the Jewish tradition what could be useful at that time. As you know, there are many very different traditions within the Jewish people. You can find the...Jewish tradition that...committed suicide in medieval times, or, on the contrary, those who chose to be burnt at the stake for their faith. You had... all kind of resistance, this...form of resistance, to be burnt at the stake, I consider as active. You had...the theme of _____ who threw on...the archbishop who was trying to convert him...a knife. You have...the history of different...resistance in Russia, you have...the fact that _____ who made an... attempt on the life of...the general government of Vilna at that time, who was a sadist. You have...the tradition of...Josef _____ in Israel, you have traditions...very different in Judaism. And...on Friday evenings, in the ghetto, when we got together, we ...read selected texts, selected of this...literature which told the important facts of... _____ going through Masada up to _____, all these... texts which could, in fact, bring us comfort. But...I do not believe that this is the essential. And now, I will reach

the essential point. Violence, you know, is a term slightly...new, a modern term; the term we used was force. It was the problem: do we have to defend ourselves by force? What is force? What was basic for us, was the essential value of Judaism, that is the sanctity of all lives. Life, life in general was and is the supreme value. And here, I want to explain something that might seem contradictory, which is rather...complex, hard to explain. Very often I reflected about what had been the spiritual universe of my ancestors. When I was...told about what happened at the time of the crusades, of persecuted communities in the Rhine, and when one spoke of Jewish martyrs, it was mentioned as something passive. And I, reading back about what these communities left, what they wrote, I refused to consider things this way. Finally these Jews had been placed in front of a choice: they could burn at the stake, or give up their Jewish faith and live. And...I considered that the fact of going to be burnt at the stakes was an active reaction, that it was...courage, and that it was an act of ...struggle for the supreme value that has the name: life sanctification.

La: No, the sanctification of the name.

Ko: The holiness of life. No, no, but the expression was taken again in the Warsaw ghetto, in truth, one spoke of life sanctification, which was necessary...

La: Yes, but at the time _____ who refused to renounce and ...burn at the stake, it was sanctification of the name.

Translator: Justly, what Abba Kovner says is paradoxical. And he is trying to say that for him, their attitude was a fight to preserve this supreme value called the sanctity of life.

Ko: I see that it is hard for you to understand why, when I talk about martyrs, I use the expression: "sanctity of life". Do you know why you do not understand, because the opposite of "sanctity of life" is not murder, it is...the desecration of life, that is - to eliminate, in life, what makes its human value. The worse the situation...the most horrible, the more tragic that could be, was the ghetto, it was not Ponari. Similarly, when one speaks of Auschwitz, Auschwitz is not summarized by its gas chambers, Auschwitz is what preceded these chambers, what was there before. Because in the preceding generations, when the Cossacks, when the Ukrainians ran into homes to massacre everybody, it is not this the horror, it is something else. What was terrible in the ghetto, is that they had imposed upon you to live day after day, in a situation where you were humiliated. Now, for me, humiliation was not that we were obliged to take off our hat when passing a German, or get off the sidewalk when a German

passed by, or to wear the yellow star, it was not this, the essence of humiliation. What was absolutely terrible at that time, and here it is difficult to explain, because the border is ...very narrow between what I am going to tell you and that you may...maybe misunderstand, and...I hope I shall explain clearly. For those who thought, or tried to think up to the end what was unfolding in the ghetto, I believe that the error was to think that those surviving at that moment - survived on the back of someone who had ceased living. The humiliation, that was not...to hear the Ukrainians, the Lithuanians, the others saying that Jews do not know how to defend themselves, that they burrow themselves like rats in hiding holes of the ghetto, that they are incapable of...fighting, that was not the humiliation for us. We are exactly at the border that divides us, in our confrontation with the Judenrat ideology. What was important for me, was not the physical result of the fight, although...I hoped, and the reality proved that I was right expecting, that...in the going on of the fight, hundreds of Jews would be saved, physically, but...what I expected as changes, as a turning point after this struggle, for me, what oppressed me was...above all to feel that I would cease to be humiliated; and for the humiliation, that it was necessary for me to stop entering into the Germans' play and in the play of those who tried to chose among those who would remain alive and the others. And this is what was important for me, to get out of this humiliation. I told you, one is...exactly at the limit on the...border, narrow, which divides us, us and the individuals from the Judenrat. But...in fact, I refuse to enter directly in this issue, because finally, _____ is not alive anymore, the other members of the Judenrat are not alive anymore, and finally I ...refuse to judge, I do not want to be the prophet after the events, I cannot try today to decide what was good or bad. Therefore, I'll remain at the level...of the events and not at the level of the individuals.