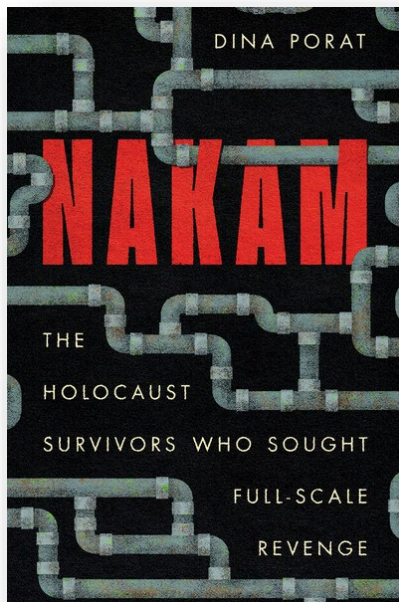


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Nakam: The Holocaust Survivors Who Sought Full-Scale Revenge

Dina Porat

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305 pp. + Notes, Bibliography, Appendices (Chronology and List of the Avengers). Illus., b&w.

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Review by Shelby Shapiro.

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In *Nakam: The Holocaust Survivors Who Sought Full-Scale Revenge*, Israeli historian Dina Porat presents the story of a small group of men and women—around fifty—emerging from the Holocaust, former ghetto fighters and forest partisans, who sought vengeance for the murder of the Six Million by Nazi Germany. There were two plans pursued by the Avengers (Nokmim): Plan A sought to poison the waterworks in three German cities (six million for the Six Million); Plan B sought to poison bread being served to German prisoners of war (mostly members of the S. S.) at an Allied prisoner-of-war camp. Plan A was abandoned; Plan B did not succeed to the point of causing deaths, and was never connected to its perpetrators.

This book is both carefully written and riveting. She thoroughly discusses the motivations, intentions and of

the actors—both those involved and those not. Vengeance—what it was, how it was to be effectuated and against whom—is discussed throughout the text. The very first chapter deals almost totally with the issue, examining it from religious and philosophical points of view. Vengeance entailed more than payback; it was seen as having future value.

“Some fifty young women and men decided to take vengeance against the German nation and kill six million of them. The book will concentrate...not on the various other acts of vengeance carried out primarily by non-Jews against the Germans.... In contrast to those acts, the Nokmim wished their revenge to go public and on a scale that, in the view of the planners, would be commensurate with the Holocaust.

They wanted vengeance that would stand as at the overt response of the victimized nation against the murderer, vengeance to be recounted around the world, visits on millions, vengeance that would strike the Germans in specific but warn the rest of the world that Jewish blood would never anion be forfeited was it had throughout history and above all, during the Holocaust.” [p. 2]

She points out that until the survivors started exchanging stories, the full extent of the Holocaust was unknown. And even with what was known, antisemitism still raged—witness the pogrom in Kielce after the war. Those who survived remembered how their “neighbors” had rejoiced in their suffering and humiliation, and then reacted in a hostile manner when they returned from the camps, the forests and ghettos. Who was to say that it couldn’t happen again, and soon? Porat conveys their sense of urgency.

The Nokmim’s leader was the Hebrew poet Abba Kovner, a charismatic personality from Vilna, who would lead not only the Nokmim, but also the effort to smuggle the surviving remnant to Palestine, not yet Israel. He also sought to unify the survivors regardless of their former political allegiances. This made him suspect to those in Palestine still loyal to their pre-War beliefs. Further, those living in the Land of Israel who had not gone through the crucible of the Holocaust could not truly comprehend those who had. Their aim was to establish a Jewish State; his was vengeance against the murderers. Kovner had led partisans in the forests near Vilna, and was credited with warning the Jews of Vilna of the impending catastrophe, urging resistance so that they would not go like sheets to the slaughter. At war’s end, he led the Avengers, as well as activities to smuggle the surviving remnant to Palestine.

Porat pays close attention to the moral dilemmas entailed by wholesale revenge (as compared with a more targeted variety). There were some former ghetto fighters and partisans who declined to become involved, for example Antek (Yitzhak Zuckerman), one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Among those rejected from the Avengers were members of the Revisionist Zionist youth group, Beitar, which saw the British as an equal, if not greater, enemy than the Nazis (78-79). Although some former Communists belonged, Kovner’s time as a forest partisan witnessing how Soviet partisans had murdered Jews led him to reject

them. Indeed, in the years following the Second World War, Stalin’s antisemitism just intensified. Whatever their ideological allegiances were before the war, their experience trumped prior beliefs.

“As ... the historian of the kibbutzim movement, put it astutely, in the Land of Israel there was a failure to realize that their identity as Holocaust survivors was deeper than their political identity, which, although dating farther back, had lost its significance to them.” [p. 173]

Although most were Zionists and most helped others to evade the British and got to the land of Israel before statehood was declared in 1948, the Nokmim decided to remain in Europe posing as anyone but Jews, going underground so that they could carry out their mission. They had to pretend to be members of the various nationalities which had betrayed them. This reviewer was reminded of Vladka Meed (1921-2012) who, as a member of the Socialist Jewish Labor Bund, acted as a courier for those involved in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, living outside the Ghetto to act as a liaison with the anti-German resistance outside the Ghetto. In her book about that experience, *Fun beyde zaytn geto-moyer (On Both Sides of the Wall)*, she recalled having to laugh at antisemitic jokes being cracked by Poles in Warsaw about those in the Ghetto, lest she give herself away to Polish “Jew-catchers.”

The Germans lived in fear of Jewish retribution [p. 104-105]. Members of the Jewish Brigade, a military force from then-Palestine attached to the British army, and survivors engaged in individual acts of revenge. But this was not what the Nokmim stood for. In deciding which cities would be targeted for Plan A, they took Hamburg off the list because of the large numbers of Allied troops that might be hurt.

“Berlin was quickly dropped from consideration. There was no point remaining in a city so thoroughly destroyed, despite the symbolic value that would redound from an operation there. [Nokmim member] Mira [Verbin-Shabetzky] explored Berlin for a day and said there wasn’t a single house left intact. It was at the happiest day of here life so far—Berlin was in ruins!” (p. 236)

Many of the Nokmim saw themselves as dead people walking, and were ready to die in the effort to exact revenge. Yehiel Feiner (later De-Nur)—better known by

his nom de plume, Ka-tzetnik 135633 [literally "Concentration Camp Inmate 135633"]—expressed his profound estrangement in his testimony at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Ka-tzetnik 135633 noted that

"Those who came away from the smokestacks of the crematoria know what they want. We want tanks demolishing city streets. Rebuilding comes later. Our job now is destruction [. . .] Who dares deny it to us? We are Frankensteins. We, who came away from the ruins, will show the world. We will snatch up the name 'Jew' in every language and uplift it [. . .] . Words of vengeance will light our way. For as long as one member of this nation remains, we shall not rest." [p. 74]

The Avengers were not the only party in play after the war. From the Land of Israel, there was the fighting detachment connected with the British Army—the Jewish Brigade; those who just wished to leave Europe totally behind; people involved in getting the surviving remnant to Israel; Jewish soldiers in the Allied Forces; the Zionists from what would become Israel in 1948. Each of these groups had their own agenda and sets of priorities. Those from the land of Israel had as their greatest priority formation of a State. Acts of vengeance in Europe would not advance that cause.

The Avengers came out of the forests where they had to improvise to survive. These various groups had their own perspectives; from the viewpoint of the Avengers it came down to whether the various sets of actors had witnessed or undergone in a very visceral way the horrors, humiliations, helplessness and soul-destroying hopelessness of those under the Nazi boot. Porat traces how these factors played out as each group jostled against the others. She notes that the reason

"[t]he reason the Nokmim consisted mostly of former partisans and former fighters might be traceable to the years of the war and to the subsequent fighting in the forests, which had demonstrated to them the worth of legal codes and procedures, whether Soviet or German, and turned them against any system of law except what they had devised for themselves." (p. 37)

Whereas survivors such as Simon Wiesenthal saw his duty as bringing his perpetrators to justice, the Nokmim felt differently, and presciently so. The number of Nazi war criminals who went free—plus those who served them (think of Operation Paperclip which brought German missile scientists to the US)—makes the mission of vengeance much more understandable. They lacked the faith in Allied judicial institutions which failed to even make the slaughter of Jewish victims a war crime.

At the Nuremberg Trials, the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever, a comrade of Kovner's in the Underground, testified as a witness. The Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenberg convinced Sutzkever to abandon Sutzkever's plan to smuggle a pistol into the courtroom to kill Hermann Goering. [p. 264]

Porat notes the factual discrepancies among members of the Avengers after decades of silence, and seeks to untangle fact from fiction; sometimes this is not possible. She presents evidence pro and con. She unravels the threads off why Plan A was abandoned, and the failure of Plan B.

Porat does not seek to judge, but rather—like a good historian—to understand, and understand while grasping all kind of complexities and contradictions. For a study in nuance and at the same time a page-turner, *Nakam* is highly recommended. Dina Porat had promised members of the Nokmim that she would tell their story. She kept that promise.

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