

The Jewish Avengers

In A Nutshell

After World War II, most of the Nazis responsible for the Holocaust escaped punishment and lived their lives in peace. However, Abba Kovner (pictured below, on the right) and the Nokmim group (Hebrew for “Avengers”) decided to take justice into their own hands. Over several years and across multiple continents, this band of Jewish vigilantes hunted down and murdered hundreds of ex-Nazis.



The Whole Bushel

Even though they tortured and murdered 11 million people, the Nazis were never really punished for the Holocaust. Sure, there were the Nuremberg Trials, but those well-publicized proceedings were just a drop in the proverbial bucket. There were over 13 million men living free in western Germany who'd contributed to the Holocaust. These were the Gestapo agents and the SS guards who'd broken into homes, dragged terrified citizens into the street, crammed them into cattle cars, and murdered them with pesticides. However, four years after Germany surrendered, only

300 of these men had been arrested. The Allies had decided it wasn't worth the extensive time, money, and effort to round up and prosecute what was essentially Western Germany's entire male population. In short, these men got away with murder.

This didn't sit well with Abba Kovner. He was a Jewish Holocaust survivor who'd escaped from the Vilna Ghetto by crawling through the sewer system. Once free, he'd joined a band of resistance fighters and fought back against the Nazis, eventually liberating the very ghetto where he'd been imprisoned. Years later, he would help thousands of Jews emigrate to Palestine, fight in Israel's war for independence and become a celebrated poet. However, before he settled down to a life of literature, Kovner planned on taking revenge against the Nazis who'd murdered six million of his people. And he wasn't the only one who wanted to take a few Nazi scalps.

In 1945, Kovner became the leader of a Jewish group of vigilantes known as Nokmim (or Nakam) which is Hebrew for "Avengers." The Avengers were from all walks of life and subscribed to creeds ranging from Communism to Orthodox Judaism. Not all of them were Holocaust survivors either. Many were previously members of a special British unit known as the Jewish Brigade who used their military connections to the group's advantage. Despite their different backgrounds, they all had one thing in common. They wanted to kill some Nazis.

During the first phase of their operations, the Avengers hunted down Nazis one by one. Disguising themselves as Allied MPs, they would make fake arrests, but their prisoners never made it to any jail cell. Often, the Avengers would break into the homes of men who'd worked in the death camps and hang them in their garages, staging their assassinations to look like suicides. And no one seemed to notice when an oddly high number of ex-Nazis started showing up dead along the sides of highways, covered in tire tracks. The Avengers were so hardcore that once they even sneaked into a hospital and injected an invalid Gestapo agent with syringe full of kerosene. These guys were not messing around. They went all over the world, from

Europe to South America, wreaking Old Testament vengeance on the men who'd done them wrong.

However, Kovner wasn't satisfied with picking off a few Nazis here and there. He believed in "an eye for an eye," and he wanted vengeance on a much grander scale. The Nazis had killed six million Jews? Well, the Avengers would kill six million Germans. Fueled by pure hatred, Kovner and his comrades developed a scheme to poison the water supplies in Munich, Berlin, Weimar, Nuremberg, and Hamburg, and the Avengers worked their way into water filtration plants, figuring out how and when to spread the poison. While his men figured out the details, Kovner went to Israel and asked the future president Chaim Weizmann for assistance. Supposedly, Weizmann helped Kovner acquire poison for the job (though there's debate on whether or not Kovner fully explained to Weizmann what he was planning), but fortunately, most Israeli leaders were horrified by Kovner's plan. They tipped off British authorities to the vigilante's plot, and as he sailed back to Europe, Kovner was arrested, his plans for a German Holocaust thwarted.

However, the Avengers had a Plan B. Under new leadership, the organization decided to infiltrate the Allied prison camp Stalag 13 in Nuremberg. If they couldn't murder six million civilians, then they would poison several thousand German POWs. When the Nokmim group learned which bakery provided the prison with its bread, one of the members began working there as a baker, all the while sneaking in bottles of arsenic. Finally, in April 1946, the group made their move and smothered 3,000 loaves of bread with the poison. However, the facts are a little fuzzy as to what happened next. On April 20, a *New York Times* article mentioned 1,900 German POWs had been poisoned. However, sources disagree over how many actually died. While some claim the fatalities reached over 1,000, most believe the Avengers were only successful in killing around 300 prisoners, far less than they'd hoped. The Avengers carried on their quest for vengeance into the 1950s although they never again attempted another mass attack. Eventually, the group disbanded, its members went their separate ways, and strangely, their story disappeared which is

unfortunate. Their grisly tale adds a unique dimension to the horrors of the Holocaust and poses several complex questions. Were the Avengers right to take the law into their own hands, or were they simply terrorists? And at what point do you become just as bad as the thing you want to destroy? Perhaps they started out as righteous warriors, but if the Nokmim group proved anything, it's that hatred isn't a quality exclusive to Nazis.