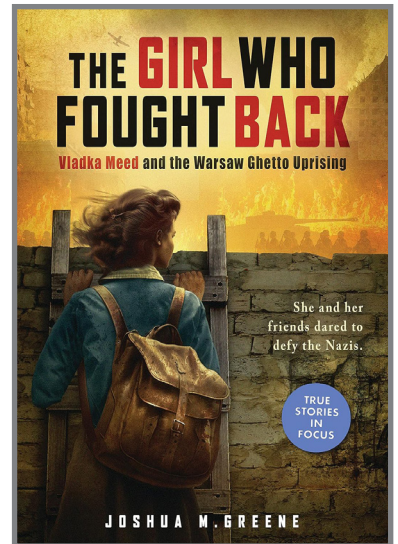


# The Girl Who Fought Back: Vladka Meed and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising



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**RECOMMENDED FOR:** Lower to Mid Secondary  
(Violence)

## SYNOPSIS

Warsaw, Poland, 1940s: The Nazis are on the march, determined to wipe out the Jewish people of Europe. Teenage Vladka and her family are among the thousands of Jews forced to relocate behind the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto, a cramped, oppressive space full of starvation, suffering and death.

When Vladka's family is deported to concentration camps, Vladka joins up with other young people in the ghetto who are part of the Jewish underground: a group determined to fight back against the Nazis, no matter the cost.

Vladka's role in the underground? To pass as a non-Jew, sneaking out of the ghetto to blend into Polish society while smuggling secret messages and weapons back over the ghetto wall. Every move she makes comes with the risk of being arrested or killed. But Vladka and her friends know that their missions are worth the danger—they are preparing for an uprising like no other, one that will challenge the Nazi war machine.

This astonishing true story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, told through the lens of Holocaust survivor and educator Vladka Meed, introduces readers to a crucial piece of history while highlighting the persistence of bravery in the face of hate.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua M. Greene produces books and films about the Holocaust. His documentaries have been broadcast in twenty countries and his books translated into eight languages. He has taught Holocaust history for Fordham and Hofstra Universities. He lives in Old Westbury, New York.

## STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the story, discuss the book cover and title. Some things to include in your discussion could be:
  - What does the artwork on the cover make you think of? Which aspects of it do you find the most evocative?
  - What do you think is likely to happen in this book?
  - Where and when do you think that this book could possibly be set?
  - What genre do you expect this book might be? What about the title and cover artwork make you think this?
- After reading the introduction, as a class, discuss what you learnt, and what you already knew. How much of the information in the introduction was new to you? What else do you know about this era in history? What was happening elsewhere in the world at the same time as the events in this story took place, and why was it important?

- What is a ghetto? As a class, discuss what you understand the meaning of the word 'ghetto' to be, then in pairs, or small groups, further research the history of both the word, and of ghettos themselves. In your research, find out where and when the word was first used, what it specifically referred to and why ghettos came into existence in the first instance. Think about what the social and economic factors were that inspired their conception in the first place.
- Measure out an area of 1.3 square miles on a map of your local area. How many people where you live do you think would be able to live in this sized area? How many people would normally have lived in an area this size in Warsaw in the 1940s? Count on the map how many different residential blocks there are in your marked area, then calculate how many people might reasonably be expected to live in this size area. (Assume for the purposes of this exercise that each block contained a three-storey apartment building containing two apartments on each level.) The Jewish population of Warsaw was 350,000 at the time. How many people would have needed to live in each apartment or building once the Nazis decreed that they all move into the ghetto? How many people would have to live in your house if 350,000 people suddenly had to move into the same size area in your local area?
- Vladka worked as a seamstress in a clothing factory. Because her mother had taught her to sew, she could do the work easily. Many of the desperate people who applied for, and got jobs, in the same factory had no experience. Individually, create a simple garment or item from a piece of cloth. How long did it take you to create your single simple item? How do you think the people with no experience managed in the factory? What would they have needed to learn to be able to do the job?
- Why did all the different resistance groups, both within the ghetto as well as in Poland, not work together?
- The reward for turning a person in who was Jewish was 100 zlotys. At the end of the novel, it states that 1 zloty in today's money is approximately 20 US cents. How many Australian dollars would 100 zloty be worth?
- Why were so many of the people in Warsaw happy or at the least unconcerned about what was happening to the Jewish population?
- When the Nazis occupied Warsaw, Vladka saw her neighbours and friends suddenly become dangerous enemies, willing to denounce her family to the Nazis for a small reward. What was the general social attitude towards Jewish people prior to the Nazi invasion, and how did this contribute to the horrific death toll amongst Polish Jews? Write an opinion piece discussing the different reasons why the Polish people acted as they did. Consider in your piece the role of fear, the role of bigotry and the human tendencies towards laying false blame and scapegoating.
- At the same time as the events in the novel were taking place, Denmark was also under Nazi occupation. In pairs, or small groups, research the fate of the Danish Jewish population, and compare what happened there to what happened in Poland. What do you think were the key factors, that caused such a different outcome, when both countries were occupied by the same oppressive regime?
  - As a class, discuss what we, individually, can do in our daily lives to help to promote an inclusive and accepting social culture where we live.
- Vladka's mother could make a meal from potato and flour alone. How easy do you think it would be to feed a family with only these ingredients? In pairs, or small groups, research recipes that use these two key ingredients, and attempt to make a meal with them.
- In order to keep up the pretence that she was a Christian, Vladka had to participate in the celebration of the appropriate saint's day. What are all the different saints' days in Poland, which saints are celebrated, and on what days?
- Before WWII, Poland had almost one million Jewish children, and only about five thousand survived (p 77). What is the most horrific thing that you learned from reading this story?
- How can we, as a society, ensure that something like the holocaust never happens again? What types of social changes are needed to safeguard our society from this type of event, and what attitudes can only contribute to an increased risk?
- Why do you think that bribery and corruption were so prevalent both within the Nazi regime and amongst the occupied populace?
- Why do you think so many of the surviving European Jews moved out of Europe after WWII?
- What effect does desperation have on an individual's social compliance? Consider the roles that desperation and fatalism played in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and compare it to the Warsaw General Uprising later on. In what

ways were they similar and in what ways were they drastically different?

- What happened to Warsaw after WWII ended? Research images online, and locate and compare photographs from before and immediately after WWII, as well as modern pictures of Warsaw today.
- Look at all the photos in the book. Write a piece exploring your emotional response to one of the photographs. Describe the picture in detail, and explain what you imagine the people shown must have been feeling at the time the photograph was taken.

AUTHOR OF NOTES  
**RAE CARLYLE**