



About 200 yards from its statue honoring Mordechai Anielewicz stands Kibbutz Yad Mordechai's museum on the Warsaw Ghetto revolt of 1943.

In Mordechai's memory

By HILLEL KUTTLER

A CONCRETE WATER TOWER angles perilously at a hill's edge on Kibbutz Yad Mordechai, testament to a legendary War of Independence battle; then-premier David Ben-Gurion credited the battle with saving Tel Aviv by stalling Egypt's advance along Israel's southern Mediterranean coast.

Enemy missile strikes punctured the tower, and a kibbutznik would call the gushing water symbolic of the spilt blood of the 26 residents and Israeli soldiers killed in the battle. Six months later, Israel recaptured the kibbutz.

Alongside the tower stands a statue of Mordechai Anielewicz, a leader of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising five years earlier, grasping a grenade to hurl at the Nazis. The statue was situated there in 1951, to project a powerful statement together with the tower: Jews will defend themselves.

The theme's dual contexts also overlay Yad Mordechai's

nearby museum, named From Holocaust to Revival. It's appropriate to recall those contexts now, with the revolt having begun on Passover, and with Yom Hashoah to be marked this year starting the evening of May 1.

Usually omitted in translation, though, is the complete name of Israel's annual commemoration: Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day. A recent visit to Yad Mordechai (meaning: Mordechai's Monument) revealed its founders' embrace of the bravery of Anielewicz and his fellow rebels, despite the Nazis ultimately quashing the uprising.

Unlike Kibbutz Lohamei Hagettaot (Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz), established north of Akko in 1949 by other Jewish heroes of the Holocaust, Yad Mordechai was founded before World War II, by young Polish Jews.

A Hashomer Hatzair youth movement kibbutz, it was located temporarily near Netanya when word came of the month-long Warsaw Ghetto revolt. The news "created

great excitement—that Jews will fight back," said the museum's pedagogical director, Tamar Herzberg. Seven months later, in December 1943, the kibbutz moved permanently to its current site near the Gaza Strip.

Herzberg walked over to a first-floor display of several reproduced documents. One, Yad Mordechai's founding declaration, states, "In contrast with the ghetto walls, we'll erect a symbolic wall of work and creativity, and we'll defend ourselves."

Upstairs, a stunning scale model of the Warsaw Ghetto is arrayed across the floor. Herzberg and another museum educator, Nofar Shimshi, pointed to the Jewish pediatric hospital, a small synagogue, the Jewish cemetery, and a handful of houses as being the only structures represented that remain standing today. The Nazis flattened nearly the entire ghetto during and after the uprising.

Among the destroyed buildings was 18 Mila Street, under which some of the Jewish fighters arranged living quarters. In

the next room of the museum is the brick-lined, reconstructed Mila 18 bunker, realistic down to the washtub secured to a trapdoor that reveals stored pistols and Molotov cocktails. Simcha "Kazik" Rotem, a Warsaw Ghetto fighter, advised the museum on the bunker's look. (He passed away in January at age 94; only one fighter is known to be alive now.)

Two deceased Polish-Catholic heroes of the Holocaust are honored with modest exhibitions. One, Jan Karski, clandestinely entered the Warsaw Ghetto and later alerted President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the killings he witnessed there. The other, Wladyslaw Kowalski, smuggled Jews out of the Warsaw and Izbica ghettos. Both men received Yad Vashem's Righteous Among the Nations award; Kowalski married a woman he saved, moved to Israel, and is buried in Yad Mordechai's cemetery.

The kibbutz has thrived over the years. A source of income going back to its Netanya days, beekeeping, has become a major industry, with Yad Mordechai honey sold in nearly every supermarket in the country. The museum and a recreated battlefield draw school groups and sol-

diers-in-training.

Along with agriculture, the kibbutz runs a catering business and a factory producing electronics parts. The descendants of approximately 100 original residents continue to live there. (The last living founder, Frumka Zeif Helfman, died in 2016 at age 101.)

As to Yad Mordechai's name: When a kibbutz-movement representative suggested that the settlement—the first one established following the Warsaw uprising—be named for Anielewicz, who fell at age 23, the members declined, considering themselves unworthy.

But following the 1948 battle, they relented, feeling "that they'd proven their valor and had been worthy of the name," Herzberg said. They commissioned the statue, sculpted by Nathan Rapoport.

Each year's nationally broadcast Yom Hashoah closing ceremony is held by the statue. On May 2, President Reuven Rivlin will attend. On a plaque near the statue's base is chiseled Anielewicz's statement on April 23, 1943, 15 days before his death: "My life's final aspiration has been fulfilled. Jewish self-defense became a reality. ... I am blessed to have been among the first Jewish fighters in the ghetto."

An army base, also named Yad Mordechai, sits adjacent to the kibbutz. ■



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