

Wittenberg, Yitzhak (Leo Itzig)

(1907--1943), First commander of the United Partisan Organization (*Fareynegte Partizaner Organizatsye*, FPO), a Jewish resistance organization in the Vilna Ghetto.

Wittenberg was born into a working class family and became a tailor by trade. He joined the Communist party at a young age, and distinguished himself as a Communist activist during the short time a Soviet government ruled in Lithuania (from June 1940 to June 1941). After the Germans occupied Vilna and deported its Jews to the ghetto, Wittenberg became a leader of the ghetto and the Communist resistance movement.

The FPO was founded in January 1942, and Wittenberg was chosen as its commander. He was the obvious choice to lead the group because of his personal qualities, his experience with the underground, and his Communist contacts outside the ghetto. He was also well liked by his soldiers.

However, Wittenberg was betrayed by one of his contacts who had been captured by the Germans, this despite the fact that the contact did not really know about the FPO's activities. The Nazis demanded that the Judenrat hand Wittenberg over. The chairman of the *Judenrat*, Jacob GENS, was willing to give up Wittenberg because he thought that the FPO and its underground activities only made matters worse for the rest of the ghetto population, but the FPO resisted surrendering their leader. The Lithuanian police then arrested Wittenberg, but armed FPO soldiers set him free and hid him in the ghetto. The tension peaked when the Germans threatened to destroy the rest of the ghetto if Wittenberg was not given up. Gens appealed to the ghetto population, many of whom who turned against the FPO. This pressure, and the realization that the time was not right for an organized uprising, convinced the FPO to surrender their leader. When Wittenberg learned that the Communist ghetto leaders supported his surrender, he accepted their decision and gave himself up to the Jewish Police. That day---July 16, 1943---was named "Wittenberg Day." Wittenberg was imprisoned, where he killed himself by taking poison. (see also United Partisan Organization, Vilna and Resistance, Jewish.)

