

# Study Guide

## Jewish Partisans Saving Jews

*"To save a Jew is much more important than to kill Germans."*

—Tuvia Bielski, Jewish partisan commander



Maurice Goldberg, a member of the Jewish underground in Belgium. Jews played a prominent role in Belgium's anti-German underground, including helping in the ambushing of a Nazi train going to Auschwitz. Source: Ghetto Fighters House archives.

### Multiple Missions

In the countries conquered by Nazi Germany during World War II, the relatively few European Jews who managed to escape the ghettos, roundups and deportations had very few places to run to. Often the very possibility of escape depended on geography: where a ghetto was situated or the contour of the areas nearby. Many fled to the forests or mountains first to hide, then to join up with partisans—resistance fighters employing guerrilla tactics to harass German troops.

Jewish partisans joined local partisan units led by non-Jews,

but also formed their own groups, since all too frequently there was vicious antisemitism among the partisans. They banded together because they also had fewer choices than non-Jewish partisans: with their homes destroyed and their families murdered, Jews had no homes or families to go back to if they tired of the struggle in the unforgiving countryside. Many spoke with a Yiddish accent that would quickly identify them as Jewish, making it difficult to hide among the general population.

Jewish partisans had several objectives: the first and foremost one was to survive. This was no easy task: it required steering clear of marauding Germans and treacherous countrymen while foraging for food and seeking shelter from harsh winter weather. They were motivated not only by the natural instinct for self-preservation, but also the strong desire to bear witness against Nazi atrocities against the Jewish people after the war.

A second objective was to go on the offensive and take an active role in defeating the enemy. Since they had all lost family members to Nazi brutality, their intense thirst for revenge gave the outgunned and underfed Jewish partisans the extraordinary courage and strength to attack the formidable German war machine. While Jewish partisans represented a small minority of the overall partisan population, they were responsible for a disproportionate amount of damage inflicted upon the enemy.

Yet another task the Jewish partisans took upon themselves was to rescue other Jews. Together with the military actions they undertook, these acts of rescue gave meaning to lives whose souls were in as much danger as their bodies. Feeling a moral imperative to save Jewish lives, Jewish partisans took enormous risks performing daring acts that pierced some of the darkness of the Holocaust. .

### Debating Priorities

Given the multiplicity of tasks facing the partisans, it was necessary to prioritize. While personal survival might seem the obvious choice for highest priority, Jewish partisans constantly put their own lives in jeopardy in order to save the lives of other Jews and to fight the enemy. Of course, every enemy soldier killed was also one less potential murderer of a Jew. On the other hand, every Jew killed while attacking the enemy was one less Jew that would survive the Holocaust, and one more victory for the Nazis' "Final Solution." This situation created a dilemma: should Jews play it safe and try to stay out of harm's way in order to remain alive and ensure the continuity of the Jewish people? Or should they take the fight to the enemy, even at the possible cost of more Jewish lives lost?

This difference of philosophies came to a head in Lithuania in 1944 when the German army was retreating in the face of advancing Soviet forces. Abba Kovner, a partisan commander from the

Vilna ghetto, wanted Jews to come back into the safety of the city that had just been liberated by the Red Army; he was sick of watching Jews die and now preferred to leave the fighting to the professionally-trained and well-equipped soldiers of the advancing Soviet army. Opposing his point of view was Shalom Yoran, who argued that Jews in particular have a special obligation to destroy



Group portrait of members of the Jewish partisan unit commanded by Yehiel Grynspan and Sam Gruber in the Parczew Forest. While disguised as a Catholic in the AK, Norman Salsitz was given the order to assassinate Sam, which he refused to carry out. Source: USHMM archives.

the Nazis: "Our moral duty is to fight," Yoran insisted. While Kovner maintained that European Jews' most sacred duty was to remain alive, Yoran stressed the need for Jews to continue to fight until the enemy was truly defeated and unable to regroup. He also felt the obligation to uphold Jewish honor and keep the promises many of them had made to avenge their loved ones.

After agonizing debate, three of Yoran's compatriots decided to go with Kovner, while Yoran and two others made the difficult decision to carry on fighting. "I want to finish what I set out to do," he resolved, determined to "win the war against the Nazis and get Nazism out of the world."

## A Dual Accomplishment

Sometimes, killing enemies went hand-in-hand with saving Jewish lives. Norman Salsitz was a partisan leader in Poland who assumed a Christian identity in order to fight with the Armia Krajowa (AK), a Polish patriotic group, many of whose members were as antisemitic as they were anti-Nazi. When AK troops learned about Jews hiding in the woods or with sympathetic Polish peasants, they would often attack and kill the Jews, even if it distracted them from the fight

against the Germans. One night, Salsitz overheard this commander assign a partisan to kill a Jewish family discovered staying with a non-Jewish farmer—and also to kill "the man who is the owner of the house, because he saves Jews."

Salsitz volunteered for the mission as well. As the two 'comrades' approached the house, "I took out my revolver, and I shot him in the back and killed him with one shot," Salsitz recalls. He extricated the three concealed Jews and warned the compassionate Pole that the AK had targeted him. Salsitz then led his new charges to safety by placing them in an all-Jewish unit, in which he also took refuge.

## Communities in the Forest

One of the most successful all-Jewish groups was the Bielski partisans, who rescued, sheltered and protected 1,200 Jews during the war. Tuvia Bielski and his brothers Asael and Zus organized many escapes for Jews trapped in ghettos. "Since so few of us are left, it is important that Jews remain alive," said Tuvia. "I see this as the essence of the matter."

The Bielskis created a partisan unit with a 'family camp' for Jewish refugees, 75% of whom were women, children and elderly non-combatants. The camp grew quickly to 250 people, then to 700; by the middle of 1944, it exceeded 1,200 "citizens" who created a temporary village complete with skilled workers (shoemakers, tailors, etc.), doctors and clinics, and even schools. The Bielski camp coexisted with nearby Soviet partisan groups: partisans would supply arms for the men who guarded the family camp, while camp residents would provide as many of the everyday necessities that they could to the neighboring partisans.

In another part of Belarus, the family camp organized by Shlomo Zorin succeeded in rescuing 600 women and children from the Minsk ghetto. Like the Bielskis, Zorin's group made itself indispensable to the Soviets by furnishing partisan detachments in the area with vital supplies and services (such as boots, clothing, laundry, hospital and bakery). In fact, in recognition of its contributions to the resistance efforts, Zorin's camp received the official designation No. 106 of the Yevenezky Joined Partisan Forces by the Soviet authorities.

### Additional Resources on Jewish Partisans Saving Jews

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Take the *Resistance Basics* video course:  
[www.jewishpartisans.org/elearning](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/elearning)

▼  
Watch the *Introduction to the Jewish Partisans* short film:  
[www.jewishpartisans.org/films](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/films)

▼  
Download additional JPEF lessons, study guides, and other materials:  
[www.jewishpartisans.org/resist](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/resist)

While the Bielski and Zorin partisans were able to maintain mutually beneficial arrangement with Soviet partisan groups, most family camps in the forest were in more precarious positions. Insisting that people who were not directly participating in the fighting were using up scant resources and complicating the situation for others, many non-Jewish commanders refused to help them. Unprotected family camps lost many members to murderous raids conducted by German soldiers, local police, and hostile antisemitic partisan factions.

Still, family camps were crucial not only for their own inhabitants, but also as part of a "safety net" for Jewish partisans serving in smaller fighting units. Jewish men and women who were fit for combat could be freed to join more active and mobile forces when they knew their family and dependents would be taken care of. Zorach Arluck was an important member of a Soviet partisan unit, but his commander would not allow his relatives to stay with them. Tuvia Bielski was happy to accept them. Jewish partisans in non-Jewish units relied on the existence of all-Jewish units or camps as possible havens if antisemitism turned deadly in their squads. "In my detachment, Jewish fighters felt OK," said Jashke Mazowi. "We knew that if something happened, we could always go to Bielski."

## Volunteering to Go Back to the Ghetto

Jewish partisans not only collected escapees from ghettos whom they found in the countryside, some even sneaked back into ghettos in order to smuggle food in and friends or relatives out. For this reason, some Jewish partisan groups tried to stay near the towns its members had escaped from. "That was the original idea of running away from the ghetto," said Sam Lato of Poland. "[The intention was to] join a Jewish partisan group, and then get out Jews from the ghetto." At the very least, it was important to be close by, Lato said, so that people who managed to slip out of the ghetto "had a place to run."

These Jewish partisans discovered that it was more difficult for them to re-enter the ghetto on rescue missions than they had imagined. Saving Jews thus became a matter of commerce: they bribed black marketers to do the job. "If they



French Jewish partisan Bernard Musmand, with Simone, a member of the French resistance, circa 1943. Source: JPEF archives.

save a Jew from the ghetto, they wanted 20 rubles. Gold rubles," said Lato.

Joe Kubryk, a Jewish partisan whose looks enabled him pass for a non-Jew Aryan, brazened his way into ghettos in Brody and Rovno in the Ukraine to take young Jewish men out and lead them to partisan units. "I was walking in as a Ukrainian, a gentile [non-Jewish] boy, and tell the Germans that used to guard the ghetto entrance, 'I'm going to rob the Jews,'" Kubryk recalls. "And they were happy to let you do that... I used to come out with some schmattes [old clothes] some junk," and at the same time smuggle out one or two Jewish prisoners. Kubryk estimates that he and his friend saved 100-200 Jews.

## One Danger Left Behind, Only to Face More

Unfortunately Jews who managed to escape the ghetto were far from free and clear. They continued to be hunted by Germans and antisemitic locals, and were at the mercy of the elements of nature. Relative safety could be found in partisan units. But even partisan groups who accepted Jewish fighters frequently discriminated against them: "The conditions were that you had to bring your own ammunition, your own equipment, a rifle, a gun, grenades, whatever, [or] you cannot get in the unit," Kubryk related. "And

## More Information on the Jewish Partisans

*The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation recommends these resources for further information.*

### JPEF Short Films

- *Introduction to the Jewish Partisans* with testimonials from Gertrude Boyarski and other JPEF partisans, archival images and rare WWII newsreel footage.
- *Antisemitism in the Partisans*: See and hear first-hand accounts from Jewish partisans who faced and overcame persecution in order to fight back against the Nazis and their collaborators.

These and many more JPEF short films about the Jewish partisans—narrated by Ed Asner, Larry King, Tovah Feldshuh, and Liev Schreiber—can be viewed online at: [www.jewishpartisans.org/films](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/films). To order a DVD of JPEF's short films, email: [dvd@jewishpartisans.org](mailto:dvd@jewishpartisans.org).

### Books / Study Guides

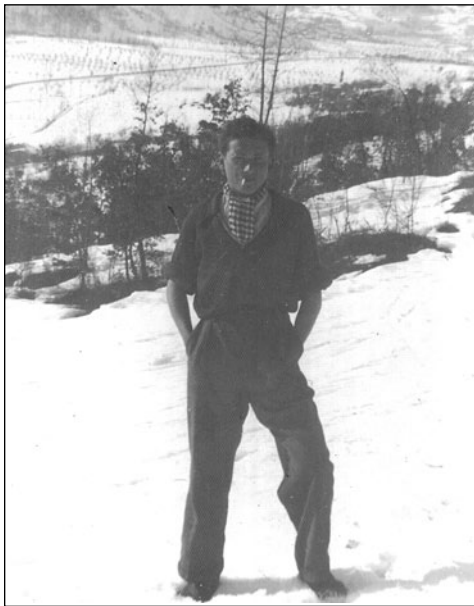
- *Antisemitism in the Partisans*, JPEF study guide: [www.jewishpartisans.org/resist](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/resist)
- *We Fought Back: Teen Resisters of the Holocaust Paperback*, by Allan Zullo. Scholastic Book Club, 2012.
- *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe*, by Reuben Ainsztein. Elek Books, 1974.
- *The Jewish Resistance*, by Lester Eckman and Chaim Lazar. Shengold Books, 1977.

we had in the unit rifles and guns, but they were not issued to the Jewish partisans."

Kubryk and his comrades resorted to subterfuge in order to beat the rigged system. After a successful ambush on an enemy, instead of bringing all the captured arms back to the camp, they would hide or bury some of the weapons. "If a Jewish guy comes in, and he's been told that he's got to go get himself a rifle, we will give him the rifle...and he comes back with a rifle, or with a gun, or with a grenade, or whatever it was or is available at the time," Kubryk remembers.

## Code Among Brothers

Other Jewish partisan units were even more proactive about obtaining guns—and intimidating those who would betray and harm Jews. Jewish partisan leader Frank Blaichman, who began his



Jewish partisan Harry Burger of the Italian First Alpine Division used his fluency in German to interrogate captured soldiers. Source: JPEF archives.

fighting career by organizing a self-defense unit for his family camp in the forest. Quickly recognizing the need for arms, Blaichman disguised himself as a Soviet agent and tell Polish farmers that he was collecting guns in order to arm local resistance units. He also made it clear that if they did not turn over their weapons voluntarily, he and his men would take them by force. Now armed, Blaichman's group proceeded to target collaborators and informers who spied on Polish civilians for the Germans or turned Jews over to the Nazis. After executing two notorious collaborators, his group

gained the reputation among villagers as armed Jews to be feared—and thus not to be refused.

Blaichman was always on the lookout for other Jews, who would identify themselves to each other by using the password "Amkha"—Hebrew for "Your people." He also devised a strategy of "watching each other's backs" when embarking on missions together with non-Jewish partisans: if a mission would require twelve men, for example, he would say, "We'll take six of ours and six of yours." According to Blaichman, "We were not naïve; that's what made us successful."

## Escape by Sea

Eastern Europe was the not the only theatre of war where Jewish partisans helped other Jews. In southern Europe, Greece was a jumping off point for Jewish refugees attempting to run the British blockade and get to Palestine (pre-state Israel). "Hundreds of Jews gathered in [the port of] Zakeus who wanted to come to Israel," recalled Sara Fortis, who organized an all-female partisan unit. "Who helped them? The partisans. Not for money, without any payment, nothing. They only wanted to grant them that opportunity to go to Palestine.... The partisans knew when the ships would come. The captain in Zakeus was informed from Athens that it was coming today, and they would bring in a ship and lead the Jews down, and sail. This is how they transported hundreds; hundreds of Jews were taken [to safety]."

## West vs. East

The attitude of the local population toward the Jews was an important consideration. Because antisemitism was less rampant in Western Europe, Jewish partisans were able to integrate more fully into the larger resistance movements, such as the Maquis in France. The Jewish Resistance in France, called the Seixieme, was in charge of sabotaging German activities, and helped Jews avoid deportation to the death camps in the East.

Taking advantage of the already existing framework and organization for large-scale child-oriented operations, the Jewish Scouts concentrated their efforts on rescuing children. Together with the Jewish health organization Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants ("Organization to Save the Children,") they succeeded in smuggling 2,000 Jews into neutral Switzerland and

## Discussion Questions

- 1. The author states on page one that the souls of Jewish partisans "were in as much danger as their bodies." What do you think this means? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.*
- 2. Describe the Kovner/Yoran debate. Where do you stand on this dilemma and why?*
- 3. Provide three examples of the different ways in which Jewish partisans saved the lives of other Jews. What choices did Jewish partisans need to make in order to save these lives? Do you agree with their decisions? Why or why not?*
- 4. Describe the role that family camps played for Jews in the forests. What does this tell you about the partisan movement as a whole and its relationship to Jews?*
- 5. Describe some of the differences between Jewish partisan experiences in Eastern Europe vs. Western Europe. What do you think accounts for these differences? How did this influence the nature of partisan activity in Eastern and Western Europe?*
- 6. Do you think this story is important to tell? Why or why not? What lessons can we learn from those who put their lives on the line to save others? Who are some modern day examples of rescuers in our world today?*

concealing 7,000 children throughout the country, placing many of them with sympathetic farm families or in boarding schools whose headmasters were in on the secret.

## A Junior Secret Agent

One Jewish youngster who was hidden in a boarding school was recruited as a courier with the French resistance at the age of 12. With the help of his school's headmaster, Bernard Musmand was sent on missions into towns where a young person might travel without arousing as much suspicion as an adult.

"Sometimes the underground of the resistance would come to me and give me a package," Musmand recalled. "Usually it would contain false ID cards, false rationing cards, and they wanted to have it delivered somewhere." Musmand was valuable because he spoke German and was able to travel quickly, by train, instead of having to travel stealthily at night on side roads. A charming and likable lad, he would make friends with stationmasters to avoid scrutiny by police on the platforms checking passengers. A year later, at the age of 13, he became a full-fledged partisan, taking part in military actions against the Nazis in France.

Another young man, Harry Berger—an Austrian Jew who joined the partisans in Italy—went on similar missions for his partisan unit in the Alps. According to Berger, the Italians living up in isolated mountainous districts were never infected by antisemitism. A delivery of money to support refugee Jews needed, "a courier, and they picked me because I looked young and innocent," Berger said. "I took a train, with false papers I had, into Genoa to the Archdiocese and got the money.... And the money was given to me in an envelope, and I brought it up and gave it to a priest and he distributed it to the poor Jews."

In France's northern neighbor, Belgium, a unique partisan group was formed by Jews and non-Jews: the Committee for the Defense of the Jews (CDJ). The CDJ found hiding places for thousands of Jewish children during the war, many of them with non-Jewish Belgian citizens. Its paramilitary wing conducted a celebrated operation that saved several hundred deportees' lives by derailing their train bound for the death camp of Auschwitz, the only such partisan action in the history of the Holocaust.

## The War Ends, But Not the Struggle

In 1945, Germany surrendered and the war ended—but the surviving Jews' problems were not over.

Most of them were displaced persons, with no money, family, or home to go back to. Having repressed all feeling during the war, they finally began to sense the magnitude of their loss. Jewish



Norman Salsitz, Poland 1939. In October of 1942, Salsitz organized an escape group of 55 people and fled to the surrounding forest to form a partisan unit. Norman's partisan unit fought through harsh weather conditions on rough terrain to dismantle and damage German railroads, mills, and police stations. Source: JPEF archives.

partisans, still in lifesaving mode, continued to play the role of rescuers. Joe Kubryk volunteered to track down Jewish children in hiding and return them to the Jewish people, if not their families.

"A lot of Jewish children who had been given away to be hidden from the Germans by Ukrainian families, by Polish families, we tried to save them and fish them out from these families and bring them back to Judaism," Kubryk said. "We used to go around the villages and find out where those kids are. Some of them were willing to come; some of them were not willing to come; some of them the families wouldn't let them go."

After that assignment, Kubryk continues, "I was working with the Israeli underground. There was no Israel then, it was Palestine. I was working with the underground, and bringing over people, Jewish people from Russia, Poland, the Ukraine, to Czechoslovakia, to Germany, from there to France; and we used to ship them on the 'illegal aliyah' [immigration]—on ships, like the Exodus, carrying Jewish survivors to new lives in the ancient Jewish homeland.

Thus, the partisan spirit carried on even after the war. Experienced leaders like Kubryk and Yoran brought their military skills to the nascent Jewish state and trained soldiers fighting in Israel's War of Independence, continuing their work of defending Jewish lives.

## Sources

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- *The Jewish Resistance: The History of the Jewish Partisans in Lithuania and White Russia During the Nazi Occupation, 1940-1945*, by Lester Eckmann and Chaim Lazar. Shengold Publishers, 1977.
- *The War of the Doomed: Jewish Armed Resistance in Poland, 1942-1944*, by Schmuël Krakowski. Holmes and Meier, New York, 1984.

For a full list of sources for the material found in this study guide, go to: [www.jewishpartisans.org/sources](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/sources)

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