



Study Guide

Living and Surviving as a Partisan

"It was a full-time job to stay alive." —Eta Wrobel, Jewish partisan

LIVING AND SURVIVING AS A PARTISAN

During World War II, approximately 30,000 Jewish men and women fought back against the Germans in organized, armed resistance units. They established secret encampments deep in the forests and mountains and hid beneath straw in barns provided by friendly farmers. They scrounged for food to eat and clothes and fuel to keep them warm in the brutal Polish and Russian winters or the cold and wet climates farther west. Despite these hardships, they found ways to hit back at their would-be killers, interrupting food deliveries, sabotaging power plants and factories, and blowing up enemy trains.



"The Search for Food". Sketch by Italian Jewish partisan Eugenio Gentili Tedeschi, 1944. Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation archives.

These brave men and women were known as partisans, Jewish partisans. Most were civilians. Many were young, and many had left their homes behind. Being young freed them from the responsibilities that tormented those with small children or elderly parents in the besieged ghettos. Their struggle to survive against an enemy whose goal was to wipe them from the face of the earth is a little-known part of Holocaust history.

Jewish partisans could be found in every Nazi-occupied country in Europe. Most joined existing non-Jewish partisan groups. In Lithuania, for example, Jews made up approximately ten percent of the partisan units. Jews also joined the French Resistance, known as the *Maquis*, and fought alongside fellow resisters in Greece and Italy.

Jewish partisans faced numerous obstacles. The German army occupied much of Europe and local police forces were under their control. What's more, enemies of the Nazis were not necessarily friends of the Jews. Antisemitism and hatred of Jews was widespread, particularly in rural areas of Eastern Europe. Traditional dress or accents often made it difficult for Jews to blend in. Jewish men, unlike many of their non-Jewish male counterparts, were almost always circumcised and therefore could be easily identified. Many villages harbored Nazi sympathizers. Turning in a Jew could earn a villager a bag of sugar or a bottle of vodka. Some collaborators hated Jews so much that they did not bother to collect their bonuses, shooting them on sight. Even in their own units, Jewish partisans were often forced to conceal their identity lest they be subject to the antisemitism of their partisan comrades. Because of these dangers, Jewish partisans sometimes formed all-Jewish resistance units.

FOOD

Of all the challenges faced by commanders of partisan units, perhaps the greatest was feeding their fighters. Finding food depended on many factors: the proximity of friendly locals, the geography and nature of the country, the size of the partisan unit. Despite wartime shortages in areas free from direct German rule, sympathetic townspeople and farmers could be relied upon to supply partisans with food and other necessities. In areas under German control or unsympathetic farmers, the search for food could end in death.

To procure food, partisans sometimes had to resort to force. "The friendly Polish peasant provided food for us—and the unfriendly Polish peasant provided food for us as well," recalled Mira Shelub. Shelub was seventeen when she and her sister escaped to the forests to join the partisans. "When unfriendly villagers prepared food for the German occupiers, we took the food and left a receipt. The receipt said: 'The partisans were here.'" More than a jab at enemy forces, the receipts were meant to save the lives of farmers whose food fed the partisans rather than the

Germans. With both sides taking food at gunpoint and threatening to punish those who supported their enemies, local farmers were often between a rock and a hard place, no matter who they truly sided with.

Another source of food was storehouses hurriedly abandoned by retreating Germans. But this, too, brought its share of danger. "The Germans left mines and hidden bombs behind when they retreated," remembered Leon Idas, a Greek-born Jewish partisan. "We saw a nice meal in front of us, and we were hungry, but couldn't touch it."

In order to survive, many Jewish partisans put aside traditional dietary restrictions. Gertrude Boyarski found herself doing exactly that after six days of eating only snow with fourteen other partisans. "We found some potato peels with worms in them, and the head of a pig. We shared this between us. And I was crying as I was eating it, but we had gone days without food.

It was a treasure."

As the war ground on, some partisan groups began receiving much-needed supplies. In Eastern Europe, the Soviet government supplied Russian and Polish partisans from the sky, airdropping ammunition, counterfeit money—and occasionally vodka and chocolate! The British did the same for the Greek and Italian partisans in the Mediterranean theater of war.

Most partisan groups, however, were quite cut off from the world, and the difficulty of feeding their troops was a constant problem for the commanders. A case in point was the all-Jewish partisan unit led by Frank Blaichman, who recalls:

"We went into a Polish grocery, we were polite, we said 'Good evening. Please, we would like to buy bread, butter, some chicken.' They chased us away with axes and pitchforks... Later, when we acquired firearms we returned. We did not point them at anyone, but they could see we were armed. They said 'Gentlemen, how can we help you?' Suddenly we were 'gentlemen'. And they gave us whatever we wanted. And it was, you know, a difference between day and night.

Here we were called dirty Jews; with money we couldn't [buy] anything. And here he gave us anything that we wanted." The shopkeeper subsequently turned down Frank's offer of payment.

THE SKY ABOVE, THE GROUND BELOW

In constant fear of discovery, partisans were always on the move. Eastern Europe's vast and dense forests seemed to have been specifically designed for partisan fighting. Many Jewish partisans who were local to the area knew these forests intimately. The Germans did not, and avoided them whenever possible—unfamiliar soldiers could get lost, be surrounded, and killed.

The forests also concealed so-called "family camps" where Jewish escapees from the German camps or ghettos—many of whom were too young or too old to fight—hoped to wait out the war, sometimes shielded by Jewish fighting groups or their allies.

Establishing a camp was no easy task. Location was all-important, as was the size of the unit. Partisan camps had to be remote, yet close enough to a village or town to secure the necessities of life. Some partisan units were small, numbering dozens; others ran into the thousands. Large or small, all faced the problems of providing life's basic necessities, food and shelter, to say nothing of protection from the enemy soldiers and civilians who hunted them.

In the larger units, everyone had a specific task. Some foraged for food, some did the cooking, others stood guard or went on fighting missions. There were bakers, weapon cleaners, tailors, and shoemakers. The bakers and cooks needed firewood year-round. Large stores of firewood had to be laid in for warmth in winter. Both were jobs for the wood gatherers. In the quest for survival, no skill or talent was left untapped.

In summer, warm weather allowed partisan groups in Eastern Europe to survive with minimal shelter. "The trees, the sky, the pine needle ground were our summer home," recalled Mira Shelub.

In France, Italy and Greece, three factors greatly helped the partisans in their search for food and shelter: the climate was temperate, the local population tended to be more sympathetic to their cause, and antisemitism was less pronounced.

Winter, however, showed an altogether different face. Freezing cold temperatures held sway in



Jewish partisans in front of their shelter in the forest, 1944. Courtesy of USHMM and the Ghetto Fighters' House.

Additional Resources on This Subject



Take the *Living and Surviving in the Partisans* videocourse:

www.jewishpartisans.org/elearning



Watch short films on *Food, Shelter, Medicine*, and *Winter and Night*:

www.jewishpartisans.org/films



Download *Activity Sheets* – video stations, Bielski camp, and virtual zemlyanka:

www.jewishpartisans.org/resist

much of Europe. Added to the threat of death by German bullet, was the threat of death from exposure. Yet partisans found a way to cope. From their Soviet counterparts, they learned to build underground bunkers called zemlyankas, a Russian word meaning "dugout". Zemlyankas took many forms—some even held small stoves—but all were thoroughly camouflaged on the outside (See photo on page 5). The zemlyankas were key to partisan survival in the winter months. Mira Shelub, who spent her first winter in such an



Soviet partisans from the Shish detachment of the Molotov partisan brigade. Source unknown.

underground hut at the age of 17 called it "our winter home."

Abandoned homes and barns could also serve as refuges. Sympathetic farmers gave what help they could, often at the risk of their own lives. Sometimes partisan units would plant their fighters in different parts of a village. If one party were caught, the others would live to fight another day. Says Shelub, "We would take over a town. We slept three in one house, three in another, and so on."

COATS AT GUNPOINT

Most Jewish partisans who fled the ghettos and camps did so with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. As with food, clothing was a scarce and valuable commodity. "I had a pair of boots that a friend found for me," recollected Polish-Jewish partisan Sonia Orbuch, "but they were too small. My blisters were as big as a fist. But I had to keep wearing them. They were all I had."

Orbuch was lucky to have shoes at all. Shoeless partisans were known to resort to extreme

measures to protect their feet, especially in winter. Some partisans, for example, made their own footwear by wrapping their bare feet in strips of cloth and soaking their swaddled feet in water until their "boots" froze solid.

What clothes partisans possessed often were reduced to rags through constant wear. Any opportunity to acquire better clothing—a coat, heavy boots, anything with fur to keep out the cold—was fair game. If villagers or farmers proved

uncooperative, the partisans "organized" (that is, stole) the warm clothes they needed, at gunpoint, if necessary. Sometimes clothing was taken from the corpses of fallen comrades-in-arms.

Enemy dead likewise might yield winter coats and boots. German uniforms were particularly prized trophies: they

were warm and served as disguises for future missions. A single item of clothing could make a world of difference, like the wool blanket Greek partisan Leon Idas gained after a successful skirmish with German soldiers. "That was the best present I ever had," Leon recalls.

BLANKETS OF SNOW

One has to go back one hundred years to find a winter as cold as the one that descended on Northern Europe in 1942. Large areas of Poland and the Soviet Union shivered in temperatures that dropped to -40 degrees Fahrenheit and lower. For partisans, the record-cold temperatures proved to be both a blessing and a curse. They helped slow down the German army's progress, as equipment broke down and supply lines snapped, stranding troops in uniforms that could not stand up to the cold. But the snow did more than that. It also helped them track down the enemy, and its brightness showed approaching figures from great distances. As Norman Salsitz recalled, "The night, the blizzard, the heavy rain, the heavy snow—these were our friends. The worse conditions were, the better it was for us."

Textual Analysis

1. Norman Salsitz recalls that, "The night, the blizzard, the heavy rain, the heavy snow—these were our friends." Why was weather an ally for the partisans? In what ways was it an enemy for them?

2. What were the advantages for Jewish partisans in joining larger units? What could these groups offer? What were the disadvantages? Dangers?

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Many Jewish partisans were teenagers when they joined the resistance. Do you think that being young was an asset or a hindrance?

Make a list of possible assets and hindrances. What character traits do you think were necessary for someone to survive as a partisan?

2. Mira Shelub said, "The friendly Polish peasant provided food for us—and the unfriendly Polish peasant provided food for us as well."

What constituted "friendly" or "unfriendly" persons and why? What tactics might partisans have needed to use in dealing with these different kinds of civilians? What might be the risks and benefits in each case?

3. In many cases Jewish partisans didn't know whether the locals were hostile to Jews, sympathetic to their plight, or had yet to choose sides. Yet, the partisans' survival required them to engage with the local people.

Sometimes we all face choices involving people whose motives we aren't sure of. What makes it possible for people to cooperate with people they don't trust? What cues can help you make a decision?

But what held for Germans also held for partisans. Footprints in the snow could give away their location. To prevent discovery, partisans would return to camp taking different routes. Some, like Jewish partisan Romi Cohn, even mastered the skill of walking backwards to avoid being tracked.

Exposure to extreme temperatures could have disastrous, even fatal, consequences. Polish partisan Sonia Orbuch's frost-bitten legs were badly burned when she sat too close to a fire that her numbed feet could not feel. Daniel Katz ran between five and seven miles each night in the Russian forest to keep from freezing to death. Partisans living in barns found an additional source of warmth in the body heat of animals. The unseasonably cold temperatures created other problems as well—fingers froze on weapons, guns jammed, and the smoke from even small fires could be seen for miles around.

Where safe shelters were at a premium, Jewish



A wounded partisan is treated in a field hospital by a partisan nurse (left) and the brigade's physician (second from right). 1942–1944, Pinsk, Belarus. Courtesy of USHMM.

partisans slept outside on the ground, huddled close together for warmth. Frank Blaichman remembered the winter as follows: "We slept in the forest, in the freezing rain and snow. Sometimes for several days we were wet, and hungry, and still we didn't give up. We were hardened, not softened."

FIELD MEDICINE

The missions Jewish partisans undertook—sabotaging German forces and supplies, handling explosives, disrupting communications—were fraught with danger. Many fell ill, many were wounded and maimed, many paid with their lives. Medical care was in short supply. Sonia Orbuch

was attached to a large unit of Soviet partisans and worked alongside the unit's doctors, caring for sick and injured fighters. She recalls, "I did whatever I could for them—bring them food, give them medicine, change their bandages. There was no means of sterilization. When someone got better, we took their bandages and washed them, to use again."

Sonia also recalled doctors scouring forest floors for herbs to supplement what medical supplies were available in nearby villages or stolen from the Germans. The most common illness was typhoid, a disease carried by lice. Because soap was scarce, partisans killed lice by boiling their clothes. But often, this was not enough. The lice spread more quickly than they could be killed and the diseases they transmitted took a heavy toll.

Most partisan groups had no doctor and treated the wounded themselves, turning to village doctors only as a last resort. Doctors, like other local residents, might betray injured partisans or even kill them, as Norman Salsitz discovered in the nick of time. Wounded in a shootout with German collaborators, Salsitz went to the house of the only available physician, a Nazi sympathizer. Salsitz pretended to be a non-Jew, and the doctor willingly treated him. But when the doctor asked him to drop his pants for an injection, Salsitz realized his life lay in the balance, for circumcision identified him as a Jew. Pulling a grenade from his pocket, he told the doctor, "If you do anything, we will both die. Just give me the shot and let me go." The doctor complied and Salsitz escaped.

Eta Wrobel survived a different challenge. Shot in the leg in the course of a mission, she went to see, "a Polish doctor who was friendly to us." The bullet had been lodged in her leg for months, causing pain and swelling. "I would go when his wife was not there," she recalled, "because he said he didn't trust her. He gave me a knife and a bottle of *spiritus* [alcohol]. I removed the bullet myself. What choice did I have?" Later, Wrobel would use her hard-won expertise to remove bullets from the bodies of fellow partisans.

4. In your opinion, what was the role of pure "luck" in partisan survival? Provide examples from the study guide to prove your case.

5. If non-Jews were caught aiding Jews, they and their families could be killed. Yet some non-Jews did help. This led to a society where people were forced to lie to and deceive one another, even to those who were closest to them. Find an example from the reading that demonstrates this. What does this tell you about what life was like for those under Nazi occupation?

Virtual Zemlyanka

Find out what partisan bunkers looked like on the inside, see videos on how they were built, and hear Jewish partisan Shalom Yoran's descriptions of life in the zemlyanka from *The Defiant* (read by Larry King) at www.jewishpartisans.org/bunker

Video Station and Activity Worksheets

Worksheets and other activities designed to complement JPEF's four *Living and Surviving in the Partisans* films can be downloaded from www.jewishpartisans.org/resist

TO COMPLEMENT THIS STUDY GUIDE, SEE JPEF'S FILM SERIES "LIVING AND SURVIVING IN THE PARTISANS: FOOD, WINTER, MEDICINE AND SHELTER", NARRATED BY LARRY KING AT: www.jewishpartisans.org/films

ZEMLYANKAS

What would you do if you had to survive a freezing winter in the woods, with no special tools or materials for building a shelter? What if you didn't want anyone to find you? How would you make your shelter without attracting attention, and then, once you'd built it, how would you disguise it?

Partisans hiding in the forests of Eastern Europe faced these dilemmas. They made shelters they called *zemlyankas*, from the Russian word for "dugout." Their building materials were taken from the forest itself and, whenever possible, from nearby villages. Careful to hide any evidence of their location, they usually did this work at night.

Eta Wrobel tells how her unit made *zemlyankas*: "We removed the earth and carried it many kilometers away. Then we would steal the doors to a barn, to make the door. We even moved trees onto the top. If anyone saw us, we had to start again."

Everyone pitched in, racing against time to get the shelters ready. Simon Trakinski recalls: "One time we built a camp from nothing in three days," making bunkers for his group of 200 people. This work had to be done over and over again, as partisans kept moving, one step ahead of their enemies.



Re-creation of a *zemlyanka*, open air museum, Bryansk, Russia

Inside the dark bunkers, the hours passed slowly. Simon Trakinski remembers that the only light came from little sticks of burning wood stuck into the earthen walls. The smoke stung his eyes and those of his comrades and soot coated their faces. Eta Wrobel couldn't forget how hard it

was to sleep. Ten or twelve people lay side by side, fully clothed and closely packed to keep warm. "When one person turned, everybody had to turn," she recalled.

Sometimes the discomfort and, particularly, the fear of being closed in was more overpowering than the cold. After Jews who were staying inside a *zemlyanka* had been murdered by Polish collaborators, Norman Salsitz resolved to never sleep in a *zemlyanka* again. "I decided I was not going to go in a bunker... because you couldn't even stand up, you were laying there—and the lice!" Instead, he slept outside, burrowed in the snow for warmth.

For most partisans, the *zemlyanka* was considered a place of refuge from the brutal cold. It was rough and cramped, but it kept them alive. The *zemlyanka* was, "as comfortable as possible under the circumstances," says Trakinski. "It could be quite cozy when it was thirty five degrees below zero." As Wrobel says: "We were glad to have some place to go to."

For more Information on the Jewish Partisans

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

Books

- *We Fought Back: Teen Resisters of the Holocaust*, Allan Zulo, Scholastic Books, 2012 (rif.scholastic.com/we-fought-back.html)
- *The Defiant*, Shalom Yoran, Square One Publishers, 1966 (hear Larry King read excerpts at www.jewishpartisans.org/defiantaudio)

Films

Please see JPEF's accompanying short films: *Living and Surviving in the Partisans*:

- *Food*
- *Medicine*
- *Winter and Night*
- *Shelter*

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THIS STUDY GUIDE WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE CONFERENCE ON JEWISH MATERIAL CLAIMS AGAINST GERMANY-RABBI ISRAEL MILLER FUND FOR SHOAH RESEARCH, DOCUMENTATION AND EDUCATION AND THE RICHARD & RHODA GOLDMAN FUND AND THE ORBUCH FAMILY