

# Who Are the Jewish Partisans?

**par-ti-san** *noun*: a member of an organized body of fighters who attack or harass an enemy, especially within occupied territory; a guerrilla

During World War II, the majority of European Jews were deceived by a monstrous and meticulous disinformation campaign. The Germans and their collaborators isolated and imprisoned Jews in ghettos. Millions were deported into concentration camps or death camps—primarily by convincing them that they were being sent to labor camps instead. In reality, most Jews who entered these so-called “work camps” would be starved, murdered or worked to death. Yet approximately 30,000 Jews, many of whom were teenagers, escaped the Nazis to form or join organized resistance groups. These Jews are known as the Jewish partisans, and they joined hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish partisans who fought against the enemy throughout much of Europe.

## What Did They Do?

Partisans were determined to do battle with the Germans. They were not powerful enough to attack them frontally; that was the task of the Allied armies. But partisans could use speed, surprise, mobility and full knowledge of the area to attack the Germans and then escape before their enemies had time to confront them. Jewish partisans blew up thousands of German supply trains, convoys, and bridges, making it harder for the Germans to fight the war. Partisans also destroyed power plants and factories, focusing their attention on military and strategic targets, not on civilians. Jewish partisans forced the Germans to expend massive amounts of resources on combating them, disrupting their focus from multiple fronts against the Allies. One German commander called the Jews a “dangerous element” for their participation in partisan units in Russia.<sup>1</sup> In Lithuania, where Jewish partisans made up approximately 10% of all partisan fighters, they were responsible for 79% of derailed German trains and injuring nearly 50% of all enemy soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Jewish partisans saved thousands of Jewish lives, in some cases literally breaking Jews out of the confines of well-guarded ghettos, and in at least one situation, digging a tunnel to free 250 people from a ghetto. It is important to note that many partisans credit three things for their survival—luck, knowledge, and opportunity—not heroism, courage, and bravery.

## How Did Other Jews Resist?

Resistance against the Germans took many different forms. In addition to the physical resistance of the partisans and ghetto fighters, spiritual resistance took the form of prayer services, and teaching children to read Hebrew. Artistic resistance produced art and poetry in ghettos and camps. Without taking up arms, these Jews stood in defiance to the Nazis, who sought to strip Jews not only of their lives, but also of their dignity and self-respect in order to facilitate the killing process. Jews countered the Germans and their collaborators in still other ways. Smugglers sent children to safety and couriers carried messages between the ghettos. Forgers created documents to ensure Jews safe passage to non-occupied countries or create fake identity cards that allowed Jews to “pass” as non-Jews. Jews in the work camps also sabotaged guns and other products they were forced to make for the Germans.

## Why Should We Learn About the Jewish Partisans?

Most students falsely believe that Jews went “like sheep to the slaughter”. They perceive the Holocaust as a piece of Jewish history only about victimization and the loss of hope. The experience of thousands of Jewish partisans who stood up to tyranny and oppression, fought courageously—and often successfully—against the Germans, and saved countless lives is an important part of Jewish history that few students are aware of. This information has the power to transform people’s perception of the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, providing a clearer picture of Jewish heroism and character. After learning about the partisans, non-Jewish teens acquire a greater understanding about the Jewish people, leading to interfaith dialog and tolerance, while many Jewish teenagers often feel empowered, developing a stronger sense of Jewish identity and pride. The story of the Jewish partisans is empowering, and demonstrates how young people can make a positive difference in the world.



A group of Jewish members of the Lenin battalion of the Lipczany forest. 1944. Location: Belorussia. Source: Museum of Jewish Heritage

## Life Lessons of the Jewish Partisans

Most of the Jewish partisans that JPEF interviewed agreed that three important life lessons must be passed on to future generations:

- *Young people can make a difference*
- *Stand up to tyranny, oppression, and discrimination...early*
- *Never give up*

JPEF encourages educators to discuss these with their students throughout this lesson.

## What is JPEF?

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation develops and distributes effective educational materials about the Jewish partisans, bringing the celebration of heroic resistance against tyranny into educational and cultural organizations. JPEF produces lessons, study guides and films for 6th–12th grade History, English, Ethics, Leadership, Jewish Studies and more. JPEF educational materials are a key curriculum component in thousands of Jewish and secular schools worldwide.

1. Documents of the Holocaust, edited by Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margalioit (Lincoln, The University of Nebraska Press, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem 1999), 441–444.
2. Fighting Back, Dov Levin, (New York, Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1985), 196.