



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, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Jewish men and women fought back against the Germans, in military style units. They

PARTISAN: A member of an organized body of fighters who attack and harass the enemy, especially within enemy territory.

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.



(1) The Search for Food. Sketch by Italian Jewish partisan Eugenio Gentili Tedeschi, 1944. Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation Archives.

These brave men and women were 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 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. Hatred or dislike of Jews was widespread, especially in rural areas of Eastern Europe. Looks or accent sometimes made it difficult for Jews to blend in. Jewish men, unlike their non-Jewish male counterparts, were 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 they did not bother to collect their bonuses, shooting them on sight. Even in their own partisan units, Jewish partisans were often forced to conceal their Jewish identity lest they be subject to the antisemitism of their partisan comrades. Because of these dangers, Jewish partisans sometimes chose to form 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 and 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. Mira 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."

Another source of food were storehouses hurriedly abandoned by Germans in the wake of defeat. 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."



(2) Jewish partisans in front of their shelter in the forest, 1944. Courtesy of USHMM and Beit Lahamei Haghetaot.

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 14 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. When entering a village store or farmhouse in search of food, Blaichman and his men could not have been more courteous. But sometimes courtesy wasn't enough, and where courtesy failed, the threat of force would succeed. Blaichman recalled, "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'".

The shopkeeper subsequently turned down Blaichman'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, and many Jewish partisans, local to the area, knew these forests intimately. The Germans did not, and avoided them whenever possible; they could get lost, be surrounded, killed.

The forests also concealed family camps where Jewish escapees from 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 and 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. Still, large or small, all faced the problems of providing life's basic necessities, food and shelter, to say nothing of protection from the Nazi hunters.

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 much of Europe. Add to the threat of death by

German bullet, the threat of death from exposure. Yet partisans found a way to cope. From their Russian 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 5) The *zemlyankas* were key to partisan survival in the winter months. Mira, the seventeen-year-old partisan, spent her first winter in such an underground hut, calling it "our winter home."



(3) Jewish partisans in the Polesie region, Winter, 1943. Courtesy of USHMM Archive.

Abandoned homes and barns could also serve as refuges. Farmers with a soft spot for partisans 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 score 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 especially highly 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 found after a successful skirmish with German soldiers.

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 –20 degrees Fahrenheit and lower. For partisans, the record-cold temperatures proved to be both a blessing and a curse. For one, they helped slow down Hitler'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 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."

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

Exposure to extreme temperatures could have disastrous, even fatal, consequences. The frozen legs of Polish partisan Orbuch were badly burned from sitting too near a campfire. Daniel Katz ran

Questions & Exercises

1. *Throughout the forests and swamps of Eastern Europe, Red Army soldiers who had escaped from Nazi captivity formed partisan units supported by the Russian government. Jewish partisans, many of whom had escaped from the ghettos, were not soldiers but untrained civilians surrounded by a hostile local population. What special obstacles did Jewish partisans need to overcome in order to survive?*

What did all partisans need to have in order to survive? Was there any difference between Jewish partisans and all other partisans fighting the Nazis? Was the struggle for survival any different for Jewish partisans? How?

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

3. *Jewish partisans may have had to abandon religious and/or moral beliefs in order to survive. Can you describe some of the moral dilemmas/ethical issues Jewish partisans may have faced? Do you think you would have reacted in the same way as the Jewish partisans if placed in the same circumstances? Can you think of an example in your own life where you may have experienced a similar conflict?*

4. *Frank Blaichman describes the extreme physical hardships he and his comrades endured as partisans and states, "Sometimes for several days we were wet, and hungry, and still we didn't give it up. We were hardened, not softened." Do you think that the Jewish partisans were exceptional individuals or were they ordinary people acting in extraordinary circumstances? What does your answer tell you about how you define and view resistance?*

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, the smoke from even small fires could be seen for miles around.

Where safe shelters were at a premium, Jewish 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."



(4) A wounded partisan is treated in a field hospital by the brigade's physician (2nd from right) and a partisan nurse (left). 1942–1944, Pinsk, Belarus. Courtesy of USHMM.

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. Orbuch was attached to a large unit of Russian 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 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 was more fortunate. 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.

"The will to live," affirmed Wrobel, "is stronger than anything." The story of the Jewish partisans, their survival against all odds, their heroic rescue of other Jews, their defiant and often effective resistance in the face of death – all of it bears out Wrobel's belief. Every moment held the possibility of capture, imprisonment, and execution – and many were. Many others went down in the heat of battle. And yet the Jewish partisans carried on: fighting, dying, living.

5. *Think back on the challenges Jewish partisans faced in order to live and fight against the enemy. How do you think the experience of being a partisan might change a person? Give an example. Think of how the experience might change you if you had to face these challenges.*

6. *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 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?*

Activity: Mock Interviews

The year is 1947, two years after the defeat of Germany in WWII. Based on the reading, conduct the following interviews:

- *A Russian POW who led a partisan unit.*
- *A local villager who aided the partisans.*
- *A towns person whose stores regularly looted by partisans.*
- *The Polish doctor that Eta Wrobel visited.*

TO COMPLEMENT THIS STUDY GUIDE VISIT THE JEWISH PARTISAN EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION'S FILM SERIES, *LIVING AND SURVIVING IN THE PARTISANS: FOOD, WINTER, MEDICINE AND SHELTER*, NARRATED BY LARRY KING, AT <http://www.jewishpartisans.org/students/films>

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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."



(5) Re-creation of a zemlyanka, open air museum, Bryansk, Russia

Every one 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 that slept six to people 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.

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 can'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 recalls.

Sometimes the discomfort and, especially, 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

Fugitives of the Forest: The Heroic Story of Jewish Resistance and Survival During the Second World War

Allan Levine, Stoddart, 1998

Fighting Back: A Memoir of Jewish Resistance in World War II

Harold Werner, Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1992

Films

The following short films are available online at www.jewishpartisans.org/students/films

Introduction to the Jewish Partisans

Partisans Through the Eyes of the Soviet Newsreel

Living and Surviving in the Partisans: Food, Winter, Medicine, and Shelter

For free educational consulting on integrating Jewish partisans into unit contact JPEF at 415-563-2244 or email consulting@jewishpartisans.org

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