

Study Guide

Jewish Women in the Partisans

Edited in Consultation with Shana Penn

Jewish Women Partisans: “I was a fighter”

“I was a fighter, I was always a fighter. Jews did not go like sheep to their slaughter,” emphasizes partisan Eta Wrobel, who began her resistance activities immediately after Germany invaded her native Poland in September 1939. “Fear was not in my dictionary!” declares Greek partisan Sarah Fortis, who organized one of the only all-female brigades to fight the fascists in World



Female Jewish resistance fighters in the forests near Pinsk, c. 1943
Source: USHMM1

War II. Women partisans like Eta Wrobel and Sarah Fortis recall their roles in the anti-Nazi resistance with fierce pride. Their boldness is all the more remarkable given that women were not readily welcomed into male-dominated partisan units. Guns were the law of the forest, and guns belonged to men.

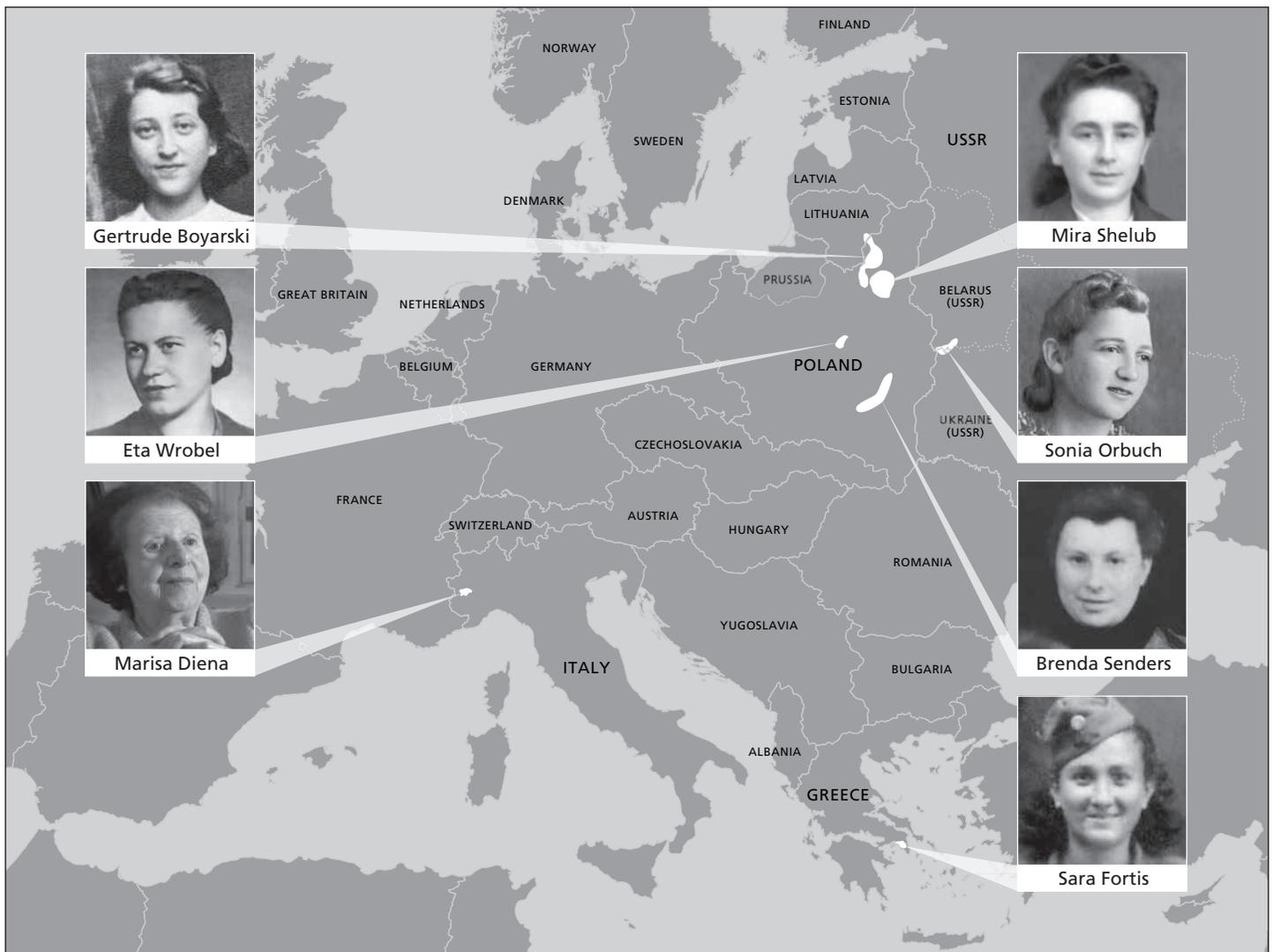
The primary role of a partisan was to take up arms and fight the enemy in guerilla-type warfare, focusing on military and strategic targets. Partisans killed Nazis and their local collaborators; they disrupted transportation and communication lines to the war front. They dynamited railroad tracks, enemy power plants and factories; they

held up police stations and stole their arsenals. They operated from hideouts made within wild, dense forests or mountainous terrain. This harsh, perilous, combat existence was ruled and populated by men.

Of the approximately 30,000 Jewish partisans who fought in both non-Jewish and Jewish resistance units in German-occupied Europe, less than ten percent were women. Some performed roles traditionally assigned to women: they tended to the sick and the wounded, cooked for and fed the troops, and acted as decoys, smugglers and couriers. Arms-bearing women like Eta in Poland and Sarah in Greece, were exceptions to the rule. Although their numbers were small and their duties often limited, women combined courage and savvy with sheer will and luck to become part of the vital infrastructure that sustained partisan movements across the war-torn continent. Despite the twin evils of antisemitic and sexist violence that threatened their survival, Jewish women partisans overcame the specific and compounded dangers they faced both as women and as Jews.

From Protected to Protector

The road to the partisans usually began in the ghettos and camps, where women were forced to develop strategies that could help them and their families survive. Some of these tactics departed from socially acceptable convention, such as the smuggling of arms; others were extensions of the traditional female caretaking role. Women of all ages – mothers, sisters and daughters – used their wits and their resources to find food, clothing, shelter, information, and valuable contacts for their families. Sonia Orbuch's mother, for example, bribed a policeman with her wedding ring to allow the family to escape the Luboml ghetto in Poland – today in Western Ukraine – in October 1942. Brenda Senders of Sarni, Poland, found refuge for a younger sister with a Christian farmer and ensured her safety by warning the caretaker: “My sister is the only one left from my family, and you better take care of her. If you betray



This map depicts approximate partisan activity of the women featured in this study guide from 1942 to 1944. The borders of this map are from Europe in 1939, before the German and Russian non-aggression pact.

▼ To see video interviews for each woman in this study, as well as additional biographical information and photographs, please go to:

www.jewishpartisans.org/partisans

click on the name of the partisan you would like to learn more about.

▼ You can also see the accompanying short film, *Every Day the Impossible: Women in the Partisans* at:

www.jewishpartisans.org/films

her, remember—I'll come for revenge." The sister survived. Such strength of mind would well serve other women who subsequently made their way into partisan units.

On the whole, traditional gender roles made it harder and thus less common for women to separate from their families and try to join the partisans on their own. Women usually chose to remain in the ghetto with their loved ones, whether out of loyalty, fear, or lack of confidence and skills. It was a hot August day in 1942, when the Germans began rounding up the Jews of the Sarni ghetto. In the midst of the gunshots, killings, and mayhem, Brenda Senders's mother pulled her daughter close: "Brenda, you must go into hiding." Brenda resisted, "Where am I going to hide? No. Whatever will be with the family, will be with me." But her mother insisted, "No, maybe one of us will survive." So at her mother's urging, Brenda was emboldened to escape and take her younger sister with her.

Some families made a point of teaching girls how to conspire against the Nazis. In the Polish town of Lokow, Eta Wrobel's father, active in the Polish underground, taught his 18-year-old daughter survival tactics after her mother and six siblings were killed in one of the first Nazi roundups of Jews in Poland. Eta recalls: "He instructed me to help the underground resistance, and constantly encouraged me. 'Don't be afraid. Only you can do it. I order you to survive!' And that's what I did."

"Only boys can go!"

Not all women were encouraged by their families to risk escape and engage in clandestine resistance. In October 1942, Meyer Orbuch was in the Luboml Ghetto in Poland. He had collected guns and made plans to escape into the woods with several other young men. His mother begged Meyer to take his older sister, Sonia, along. Meyer refused, explaining that, "No girls can go with us. Only boys can go!" Meyer went to the forest, and Sonia remained with her family in the ghetto. In

such instances, women who might have wanted to run, could not, and often were murdered together with their families. However, in Sonia's case, she and the rest of her family managed a treacherous flight during the final liquidation of the ghetto and went into hiding.



Sarah Fortis poses for a photo in her Greek partisan uniform. (Date unknown.) Source: JPEF.

Other families attempted to escape the ghettos and stay together. Mira Shelub and her family fled the Zdziedociol Ghetto in Poland 1942, just as the Germans began killing off the ghetto population. Fifteen year-old Sarah Fortis and her mother traveled a 12-hour journey by donkey to a remote village in Greece, as the German occupied their beautiful hometown of Chalkis. Marisa Diena followed her partisan brother to a hideout in the Italian mountains, where she eventually trained other young women in reconnaissance activities. In

each instance, women fled with family when no options other than death stood before them.

With the Partisans: Jews and Women are “Unfit for Battle”

Jewish men and women faced a whole new set of challenges once they made contact with partisan groups. Many Eastern European units, composed of ex-Soviet soldiers who were escaped prisoners of war, and male anti-Fascists from native populations, did not accept Jewish fugitives. They were even less likely to accept women. For Jews to join these units, they had to find their own weapons and ammunition or bring special skills such as communications, medicine, or knowledge of local geography. But the Jews who ran to the forests were civilians, not soldiers, and arrived at a partisan camp with little more than the scant possessions they could carry when they had fled. Considered too weak, unskilled, and inferior to be fighters, Jews were seen as burdens to the unit—and Jewish women were double burdens.

Brenda Senders understood that “the partisans expect you to bring ammunitions, or they won't

take you in.” In lieu of arms, Brenda brought a keen familiarity with the local forests; she also knew some of the Christian inhabitants, who had done business with her family and could supply the partisans with food and shelter. Her father, a forester, had shared his knowledge and love of the woods with her when she was growing up, and Brenda used this knowledge to beg her way into a Soviet unit: “Take me in. I want to fight.”

Sonia Orbuch and her family were admitted into a Soviet partisan unit on the Ukrainian border, but Sonia says they would have been turned away if her Uncle Tzvi had not been with them. Tzvi had been a scout in the Polish underground and could offer the Soviets his reconnaissance skills. That knowledge saved Sonia, Tzvi, and her parents.

But skilled or not, the partisans mainly regarded Jews as liabilities, not as resources, because the presence of Jews threatened the security of the secret combat units. The Nazis and their collaborators hunted runaway Jews tenaciously, and local populations, though they might be loyal to the partisans, would often betray Jews in exchange for food or other bribes. Some partisan units preferred to kill Jews than harbor them due to their own antisemitic beliefs.

“The Highest Priority Was To Save Jewish Lives”

Mira Shelub recounts that antisemitism in partisan units was a threat to Jewish survival and led to the creation of all-Jewish camps. Her husband Nochim, whom she met in a Soviet unit, established one such camp in eastern Poland. All-Jewish units, while fewer in number, accepted Jewish women readily. These units often shared a dual purpose: to rescue fellow Jews unconditionally and to sabotage the enemy. “The highest priority was to survive and save Jewish lives,” emphasizes Eta Wrobel, who helped form a Jewish unit in central Poland in October 1942. “Sure, we wanted to disturb the Germans so they shouldn't have it easy, but I think saving Jews was the most important work. It was my work. In a year and a half, we saved about a hundred people.”

Saving Jewish lives was a priority for Jewish partisan groups, which is why one in four of their inhabitants were women, compared to the one in fifty in non-Jewish units. In Ukraine's Naliboki Forest, The Bielski Brigade set up family camps for

women, children, and the elderly. From 1942 until the end of the war, the Bielski camp provided refuge to more than 1,200 Jews, who assisted in military operations or repaired weapons, made clothing and cooked for the fighters. Women made up 30 to 40 percent of the Bielski population.

Sadly, the very advantage of family camps proved to be their weakest point. By being stationary and admitting everyone regardless of gender, age or physical ability, family camps became vulnerable to exposure and attack from both the German troops and local people, who shared the Nazis hatred of Jews. Gertrude Boyarski's mother and younger siblings lived in a family camp while Gertrude, her father, and an older brother lived nearby among the partisan units. Gertrude recalls the last time she visited her mother in the family camp. A surprise attack by local Nazi collaborators killed many unarmed members of the camp, including Gertrude's mother. Lucky to survive the raid, Gertrude ran through the forest to her father's unit, where she remained until the end of the war.

Women and Men: "Select an officer, life will go better for you"

The double threats of antisemitism and sexism seemed a never-ending consequence of the war. Jewish women faced the constant danger of sexual abuse, rape, and forced abortion in the ghettos and camps, where they were targeted by the Nazis as breeders of an inferior race that had to be exterminated. The trail of physical and sexual violence followed women into the resistance units. They found themselves cornered and coerced by partisan men, who were demanding sexual favors in exchange for protection.

Sonia Orbuch remembers being horror-struck when the commander's wife took her aside for a private conversation soon after her family arrived in the Soviet camp: "You're a young girl, there are very few women in the partisans, and I would advise you to select an officer. Life will go better for you," the woman said.

The women who were the most vulnerable were those who operated alone and were usually young and unmarried. "Be my wife and I will get

you into the unit," a friend of Gertrude's father propositioned her. She refused his offer and instead stood guard duty as an admissions test, succeeding in joining the partisan group on her own.

"It was difficult for a woman in a predominantly male organization to avoid propositions and advances by male partisans," Mira Shelub acknowledges. "The female population was small. Men wanted sweethearts. I was lucky enough to be protected by my parents. That made all the difference." Mira explains that some women willingly "chose an officer" because the relationship offered protection and privileges, such as relief from combat assignments, larger food rations, and more comfortable living quarters. A man could buy a woman food, clothing, and shelter for her and her family. In a raid, a man with a gun could protect a woman and her family.

Those women who didn't pair off with men feared the consequences of their decision to remain unattached. They had no one to help them carry the heavy loads of wood and water, or prepare the huge campfires for cooking the partisans' meals. Serious problems could result if the food was not ready on time, and it became an enormous source of stress for single women, as Sonia Orbuch recounts. Every morning, she and the other women were given two short hours to "carry water, chop the wood, build a fire, prepare the food, cut, cook, and clean up. If I had no one to help me, it was impossible to do the work in two hours... We always worried that if we were not able to perform, we will be thrown out of the partisans. So you had to deal with it." Sonia weathered frostbite, hunger and the loss of her loved ones in order to prove her worth and be accepted by the Soviet partisans.

An estimated 60 percent of the adults in the Bielski partisan group lived as couples, and some of the relationships, like Mira's marriage to partisan leader Nochim Shelub, would last a lifetime. Other women coupled with men from very different religious and class backgrounds—men whom they would never have met or chosen in a peacetime situation.

Many women, however, had relationships forced on them, especially in non-Jewish units. Though it was rarely discussed openly, women had to face the bitter irony that some of them had escaped

Discussion Questions

- 1. Which of the women in the study guide or film did you relate to most? Why? Did she remind you of someone you know? What was your connection?*
- 2. What were the additional obstacles that Jewish women had to overcome as women and not just as Jews in order to join a partisan group? Rank these in order of difficulty and explain your choices. Which of these obstacles would you find most difficult to overcome? Why?*
- 3. What were some of the factors that helped Jewish women become partisans?*
- 4. Which, in your opinion, is more accurate: Jewish women were bound by and played traditional female roles as partisans or: Jewish women broke with convention and stereotype as partisans. Cite examples from the text to support your argument.*
- 5. What is the poem "Tanya" an account of? How did Tanya's path to the partisans differ from the other accounts you have read? Why wasn't Tanya's name honored after the war?*
- 6. Do you think that Jewish women partisans were ordinary or extraordinary women – or both? In other words, was there something unique about these individuals that enabled them to become partisans or were they simply ordinary people in an extraordinary time. Support your argument with a statement from the text.*

the Nazis only to be threatened with rape or murder at the hands of partisans in non-Jewish groups.

Not all partisan environs were dangerous for women, and some camps punished rape severely. In the Soviet camp where Gertrude Boyarski worked, the commander protected women from sexual assault as part of his overall effort to impose greater discipline in the combat units. "He told us to count on him for support," she recalls. After a Polish girl was raped, the commander issued a swift punishment. The instigator of the assault was held before all the partisans, and after his crime was announced, he was shot on the spot. The commander's warning to the other men could not have been more clear.

Once Jewish camps were formed, women became better protected against sexual coercion. Frank Blaichman, leader of an all-Jewish unit, says he felt duty bound to protect the women. "There were many bullies in our group... But I would say to the women: 'Don't be afraid to say 'No.' And I told the men, 'If you want to have a girlfriend, okay. But to abuse women and then go back on the partnership—no, you can't do this.'"

Women's Work: Caretakers and Couriers

Women played a variety of roles in both Jewish and non-Jewish groups, but primarily their partisan activities were extensions of their traditional caretaker roles. They were responsible for feeding their entire unit, nursing the wounded and the sick, setting up and breaking down camp, doing the laundry, and cleaning and carrying weapons—vital duties that ensured a camp's survival, safety, and ability to function.

Working in a makeshift hospital under the guidance of the only doctor, 17 year-old Sonia treated sick and wounded partisans. Her medical education was as improvised as the hospital, she recalls. After a few meager days of training, she was bandaging injured partisans. "You got thrown into the work, whatever it was. You got used to it."

It was not uncommon for women to act as spies, smugglers, and couriers as well, for they had a very useful gender advantage in these roles—a female could move about in public

more easily than a male, especially a Jewish man, whose identity could be readily exposed. Because circumcision in Europe occurred almost exclusively among Jewish men, their true identities could be easily revealed. The partisan units recognized and benefited from this fact.

When young Marisa Diena became the Vice Commander of Information Services in an Italian partisan group, she enlisted and trained peasant



Sara Ginaite stands guard at the liberation of the Vilna ghetto, 1944. Source: USHMM

women to become courier messengers. "No one suspected their involvement..." Marisa explains. "We didn't have all the things that a real army has, like communications services. Instead, we had the peasant girls, who could maintain connections and pass information back and forth."

Female Jewish partisans with blond hair and blue eyes could "pass" as Aryan. By manipulating ethnic and female stereotypes, they could move around unnoticed in public—ride buses or trains, hold meetings in parks or cafes—and thus transmit messages, smuggle supplies, or escort fugitives into hiding. They would assume Christian names and acquire false identification papers. For instance, Sarah Fortis became Sarika, and Marisa Diena became Mara. "My name was changed from

Discussion Questions for the Film *Every Day the Impossible: Jewish Women in the Partisans*

1. In her interview, Eta Wrobel said: "I was born a fighter. I was free." What do you think this means? How does being a fighter connect with the idea of freedom?

2. For what reasons do you think women were more easily accepted into Jewish partisan groups as opposed to non-Jewish ones?

3. Do you think the women partisans in this film were proud of their actions during the war? Would you consider them to be heroes? Why or why not?

For bibliographic information about this study guide, please go to: www.jewishpartisans.org/stu-sources

Visit the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation's website where you can ask a partisan a question. You will receive a response with one week. Click on "Ask a Partisan" at: www.jewishpartisans.org/ask.php.

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Marisa to Mara. It was not my nickname. It was my battle name," she explains proudly.

Partisan women who took on courier assignments had to speak the country's language fluently and with no trace of a Yiddish accent. Brenda Senders spoke Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. Sarah, who had been raised in a family that she described as more Greek than Jewish, spoke Greek just like every other native on her island. Italian was the first and only language for Marisa/Mara of Turin. Young women like these had to think on their feet, slip out of risky situations, and never get caught. Independent and vulnerable, their undercover work was crucial to partisan operations and as dangerous as armed battle. Doing this work, women transcended traditional expectations of what their role in, and contributions to, society should be.

Sarah Fortis, for one, refused to be a caretaker for the Greek partisan unit she joined. "I told them: If I am a female partisan, I will have rights, and I will do something comparable to what you do." Eta said she made sure never to wash men's clothes or cook their meals. "I refused to do it, because I had never done it at home."



The short film, *Every Day the Impossible: Jewish Women in the Partisans*, narrated by Tovah Feldshuh, was produced as an educational tool to compliment this study guide. The film features rare archival footage and interviews from several of the women here. Please note that this film and the accompanying study guide contain frank discussions of sexual abuse of women within the harsh conditions of life within the partisan units. It is suggested that educators be prepared to address these issues with their students in the way most appropriate for their learning environment.

For educators who wish to present this 15 minute film, it is suggested that the film be viewed before using this study guide. Discussion questions based on this film can be found on page five of this guide.

In addition, The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation (JPEF) has produced a 7-minute film to serve as an introduction to the Jewish partisans. The film is entitled: *The Partisans: Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust*, narrated by Ed Asner. Both films may be viewed at: www.jewishpartisans.org/films, or a DVD can be requested by emailing: dvd@jewishpartisans.org.

Rule Breakers: Women's Leadership and Female Brigades

Some women partisans were able to bend the rigid rules about gender roles. Eta, Sarika, Brenda and Mara fought alongside men. Given the unusual conditions the partisans confronted, any woman who could use a weapon was needed to fight. Brenda joined a 1600-member Soviet partisan unit in eastern Poland at the age of 17, and she recalls pleading with her unit commander for weapons training: "If I was going to die, I wanted to die with a gun in my hand, fighting my enemy. I wanted revenge."

Occasionally, women even took an active strategic role. Sarah Fortis, at her own initiative, single-handedly planned and organized a group of female partisans, whom she recruited from peasant villages on the Greek island of Chalkis. She traveled by donkey from village to village and assembled a platoon of a dozen girls, telling them and their families: "Don't look at the place of the woman as needing to be at home all the time. Women can also help and have a role in resistance."

"Capitan Sarika," as she came to be known throughout Greece, taught the girls how to behave around men. "They all came from homes in which a girl would never speak to a man and suddenly I was telling them, 'You're a partisan now! It's really difficult for a girl from an isolated village to learn to behave as an equal among men. I thought that slowly these girls would become different by the end of their service. I succeeded in teaching them that.'"

The platoon was constantly on the move, didn't have a base camp or shelter, slept outdoors, and often traveled with the male partisans. They learned to shoot handguns, torch buildings, and throw Molotov cocktails as diversionary tactics.

"In the beginning the girls would giggle, 'Ooh, will we hold that gun?' After a month went by, it was like they were completely different girls," Sarika says proudly. "They took it more seriously than I did."

Sarika was concerned that after the war, the girls in her brigade would not be taken back into their villages, which had strict rules defining a woman's proper place. But they were all accepted, as was



Brenda Senders, a Jewish resistance fighter with a Polish partisan unit that conducted ambushes and other acts of sabotage against the Germans. Rovno, Poland c. 1944. Source: JPEF.

their Capitan because the villagers were proud of them. Many of the women's lives, however, went back to the same sexist configurations as before the war, and in some cases things were a little different.

Marisa Diena was the third resistance fighter in her family. The Italian Fascists had arrested her older brother in 1943, and a year later her younger brother was gunned down and killed in the mountains. Marisa joined a communist group called the Garibaldi Brigades, which hid in the mountains but worked in the towns, foothills, and plains below. Because gas was rationed, Marisa traversed the area by bicycle, working as a communication link with the partisans.

"Young people like me didn't know how to do anything. We weren't soldiers. I was a little girl who'd just left school, but I understood that to give information, I needed to have contacts where the enemy was, where the Germans and Italian Fascists were. So I rode my bicycle everywhere."

Like Sarika in Greece, Marisa was a Jewish teenager playing a leadership role in a non-Jewish partisan group. Unlike Eastern Europe, where antisemitism was the rule and the local

population did not commonly harbor Jews, Sarika and Marisa had never experienced antisemitism prior to World War II, and neither felt persecuted by her fellow partisans for being a Jew. Each was more sensitized to gender and class inequalities in her culture than to antisemitism. Not only were both girls accepted by their respective non-Jewish partisans, they were rewarded for their abilities.

Heroes and Heroines: "Staying alive was a full-time job"

The partisans hid by day and fought or traveled by night. They lived off the land and foraged for food and clothing. They slept in makeshift dugouts during the bitter winters, and under the stars in the summer—"The trees, the sky, the pine needle ground were our summer home," Mira recounts. They begged local farmers or peasants for food, horses, and supplies, and if they were refused, they resorted to force and stole whatever was needed. They lied, cheated, and stole, Eta acknowledges, because "We had to!"

The physical conditions people faced—freezing temperatures, lack of clothing and food, frostbite, lice, and diseases—were equal opportunity hardships. They affected men and women equally. Still, as Marisa emphasizes, the partisans represented "the best possible means for survival."

"Was it possible for everybody to fight and get out to the forest and survive? No it wasn't," Sonia acknowledges. "This is the price we paid, but we paid it gladly." Jewish women willingly paid it because, as Eta says, "We knew we had our destiny in our own hands. We were free to smell the fresh air. But it was hard, let me tell you. It was a full-time job just to stay alive."

More Information on the Jewish Partisans

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation recommends these resources for further information

Books

- *Fighting Back: Lithuanian Jewry's Armed Resistance to the Nazis* by Dov Levin
- *Defiance* by Nechama Tec
- *The Defiant* by Shalom Yoran

Films

- 11 short films about the Jewish partisans, produced by JPEF and narrated by Ed Asner, Tovah Feldshuh, and Larry King, can be viewed online at: www.jewishpartisans.org/films
- *Come and See*, a film about Soviet partisans. *Last 45 minutes contains violence not appropriate for most students.* Available for rental in some independent video stores, and available in VHS and DVD through Amazon.com.
- *The Partisans of Vilna*, a film by Aviva Kempner, available for rental in VHS, in some independent video stores.
- *Resistance: Untold Stories of the Jewish Partisans*, available for purchase through PBS.org.

Websites

- www.jewishpartisans.org
- www.ushmm.org/outreach/jpart.htm

TANYA

by Peter Medvinsky

To the sacred memory of Tanya Marcus and all known and unknown martyrs and heroes of the Holocaust

The man who entered my compartment on that train
Crossing the winter-gripped Ukraine
Looked twice my age, but strong and tough;
The kind whose war-time youth was rough;
He said "Hello," then paused a bit
And took his seat.

The train was crawling; we were looking outside;
Another town was in sight;
A park, a church, a monument
To a Resistance fighter hanged...
"They honor heroes," I said,
And turned my head.

The man looked grim, a muscle was twitching on his face:
"Young man, I fought in those days;
Killed murderers, was stabbed, was shot;
Had friends: a brave, daring lot;
The most courageous of them all
Was a young girl.

I first met Tanya in the fall of 41;
Kiev had just been overrun;
I was a soldier, had to hide;
The partisans were hard to find;
Tanya and her Resistance friends
Saved me from death.

I wish I had," the man continued, "the words
To tell you what a girl she was;
Her gentle beauty to describe;
Her magnetism; her love of life...
And no photos of her
Survived the war.

Then came the day all Jews were ordered to report;
Most obeyed, Tanya did not;
I saw that eerie march of death:
Graybeards, cripples, women, babies...
The laughing Nazis machine-gunned them,
Every one.

I did not see Tanya smile ever since that day;
"For us is left only one way,"
She said and soon began the hunt;
Forged documents, a small handgun...
A one girl army she became
After that day.

When Tanya struck, her blows stunned the Nazi gang;
The ones she killed were of high rank;
Gestapo dogs were running wild;
They searched for many days and nights;
Even SS-men from Berlin
Were flown in.

She was betrayed. We tried to save her, but we failed.
We later learned that in the jail
They tortured her beyond belief;
Death came to her as a relief.
She was just twenty. Not a word
They got from her.

After the war I met some high-ups and, in vain,
Urged them to honor Tanya's name;
They made it as plain as they could:
"Jewish last names don't sound good;"
This is the world that we live in -
Cruel and mean."

The man got off the train and vanished in the night;
But not before leaving behind,
With me: his last look, long and hard;
The memories that I must guard;
The fire that has not ceased burning
In my heart.

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