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From Victims to Fighters

Jews in the Belarusian Partisan Forests

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Jewish victims into active fighters during the Holocaust, focusing on those who escaped from ghettos to join partisan units in the forests of Belarus. The study highlights the psychological shift from helplessness to empowerment experienced by these individuals, exploring their motivations, challenges, and strategies for survival and resistance. Using the Jewish partisans of the Narocz forest as a central case study, the research draws on survivors' testimonies to provide insights into the complex dynamics of this transition.

The chapter investigates the decision-making process behind escaping to the forests, the dangers involved, and the moral dilemmas faced by those leaving family members behind. It examines the acquisition of military skills, adaptation to harsh living conditions, and the formation of new communities within partisan units. Additionally, the study explores the role of revenge as a motivating factor and the impact of these experiences on post-war Jewish identity and collective memory.

Analysing these narratives contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Jewish agency and resistance during the Holocaust, challenging simplistic portrayals and highlighting the multifaceted nature of survival in extreme circumstances.

Jewish fighters played a significant role in the Belarusian partisan movement during World War II, demonstrating exceptional bravery, determination, and tactical prowess. They carried out effective sabotage operations, derailing German trains, sabotaging bridges to hinder enemy movements, conducting lengthy ambushes, and even executing acts of vengeance against Nazi collaborators. This article examines the transformation of Jews from victims to fighters, focusing on their experiences in the partisan movement in Belarus during the Nazi occupation. In the relentless struggle against the oppressors, against the prevailing injustice and humiliation, the Jews developed their defensive power. In addition to the common task of fighting the Nazis, the Jewish partisans bore two additional functions: revenge and rescue.¹ This unique position of Jewish partisans sets them apart in the broader context of resistance and partisan movements during the war.

The Nazi extermination policy in Belarus was implemented rapidly, demonstrating a brutal example of German cruelty. The Holocaust in Belarus unfolded in two primary phases: an initial wave of killings from June to December 1941, followed by a second phase from spring 1942 to late 1943. The first phase of the mass extermination was primarily executed by Einsatzgruppe B, a mobile death squad under the Army Group Centre's supervision. Other participants included police battalions and the Wehrmacht. Men were often targeted first, weakening the remaining population's ability to resist later actions. Most Jews in Belarus lived in small communities, and the Nazis employed the "Holocaust by bullets" method – mass executions

1 Shalom Cholawsky, "Jewish Fighting in Ghettos and as Partisans", *Moreshet Journal* 49 (1990): 29.

near victims' homes. Local police and German gendarmes would gather Jews, transport them to nearby locations, and execute them, aiming to create "Jew-free" areas. Initially, the Nazis attempted to keep these mass killings confidential. They deceived victims until the last moment, claiming they were being sent to work. Executions typically occurred on the town outskirts, with victims shot into large pits and buried. In some instances, Jews were forced to dig their own graves before being killed.²

1942 was a pivotal year for Belarusian Jews, with most ghettos in West Belarus destroyed. By the year's end, only about 30,000 Jews survived out of a prewar population of 375,000. Jews everywhere faced movement restrictions, forced labour, constant degradation, and uncertainty. Stripped of rights, they endured daily losses. Various forms of resistance emerged, both passive and active. Some escapees joined partisan groups, continuing the fight from the forests.³

Jews who reached the forests and sought to join the partisans faced numerous difficulties and challenges. A shortage of weapons forced them to struggle for acceptance into fighting units without weapons or with minimal armament. They wandered from unit to unit, facing dangers in the forest from non-Jewish partisans and local populations, who viewed Jews as objects of triple hatred: as Jews, as communists, and as "robbers". Jews arrived at the forests alone, in small groups, or as organised groups, mainly members of underground movements active in the ghettos. They split into combat units and family camps. This division was primarily based on whether a Jew arrived in the forest with or without a weapon.

The Book of the Jewish Partisans states that a Jew's arrival in the forest did not automatically grant them partisan status. Only when they received a weapon did they undergo a profound change, both physically and mentally. They began to see themselves as self-reliant and in control again. A Jewish fighter had to prove himself in battle, be constantly ready, and establish trustworthy and respectful relationships with their fellow fighters. If a Jewish partisan failed, they bore collective responsibility in the eyes of their non-Jewish comrades. Their failure was considered to be a "Jewish" fault.⁴ This added pressure highlights the complex interplay of individual and collective identity of the Jewish partisan experience.

The following pages contribute to the broader field of Holocaust studies by highlighting the agency and resilience of Jewish victims who transformed into active resisters. This article explores the physical and psychological challenges they faced, their motivations, and the strategies they employed to survive and fight back. By examining partisans' experiences, we gain a more nuanced understanding of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust and the multifaceted dynamics of survival in extreme circumstances.

Becoming Partisans

The partisan movement in Belarus was significant, and the topographical conditions helped partisan activity to grow and develop. Jewish participation in the resistance was notable despite many challenges. There is no exact count of how many

2 Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2014), 92–118.

3 Yitzchak Arad, *History of the Holocaust: The Soviet Union* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), vol. 1, 60; Shalom Cholawsky, *Resistance and Partisan Struggle* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and Moreshet, 2001), chap. 1.

4 M. Gefen, C. Grossman, Y. Segal, A. Kovner, and R. Korczak, eds., *The Book of the Jewish Partisans* (Merchavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1958), 20–22.

Jews were able to escape the ghettos, but it is estimated that about 25,000 Jews managed to flee the various ghettos in western Belarus. Each of these escapees had the potential, as part of their personal survival strategy, to join existing partisan groups.⁵ It is hard to determine the number of Jews among the partisans who operated in Belarus. Who is included in being classified as a partisan? Are the Jews who stayed in family camps included? Also, the Soviet policy of suppressing knowledge of one's Jewish origin makes it difficult to determine the correct number.⁶

The insurgent nature of Jews who fled the ghettos to the forests in western Belarus was shaped mainly by their life experiences in imprisonment. The daily life inside the ghetto had a profound impact on its inhabitants, exacting a tremendous toll on their physical and mental well-being. It was characterised by constant excruciating threats to one's life and the lives of one's loved ones, continuous pain and mourning of loss, unrelenting pressure designed to instil despair and weaken any form of resistance, and the nasty psychological tactics employed by the Germans to maintain a facade of hope through deception, falsehoods, and the cultivation of an atmosphere of uncertainty.

Jews fled ghettos in the western parts of Belarus, and most of them were young men and women with the best ability to survive in the swamps and forests. They knew they needed to be physically fit to be accepted into various partisan groups. Some escapees tried to join forces and create Jewish fighting units, but most attempted to contact and join Soviet groups that already existed and were much better equipped and armed. Those who were accepted often suffered from varying levels of antisemitism and often tried to hide their Jewish identity as much as possible. Jews who spoke fluent Russian or Ukrainian, or those able to conceal their Jewish identity altogether, changed their names to non-Jewish ones to conform with the group.⁷

Reuven Leonid escaped to the Kolodino forests in April 1942 and joined the partisan unit of Ivan Ivanovich. Ivanovich gave him a rusty gun and asked if he knew how to use it. Leonid said yes, although it was the first time he had held a gun in his life. Ivanovich continued, "you are not allowed to part from this gun unless you die, and now go and clean it." Leonid thanked him and described this moment as the happiest he had experienced since escaping his town, Olshany: "finally, I felt myself as a fighter", he recalled.⁸

Yisrael Barstitzki, who joined the Kirov detachment near the town of Liskovo in Belarus, recalls that he was thrilled to become a partisan: "for the first time in my life, I received a gun with 16 bullets, even though it was rusty. They told me: 'This is your wife; you must sleep with her and never be apart from her during the day ...' I kissed the gun and thanked the commander who gave it to me."⁹ He continues to describe the first days in the partisan unit: "it's hard to say that we Jews were received with open arms and warm welcomes." There were snickers and antisemitic remarks directed at the new Jewish partisans. They were accused of arriving without weapons, of handing over money, gold, and diamonds to the Germans, and of being a superfluous element in the forest rather than fighters. Indeed, Jews in the partisan units were forced to prove themselves in battle.¹⁰

5 Cholawsky, "Jewish Fighting in Ghettos and as Partisans", 23.

6 For a discussion on the number of Jewish partisans, also see Yitzchak Arad, *Under the Red Banner: USSR Jews Fighting Against Nazi Germany* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2008), 390–392.

7 Leonid Smilovitsky, "Jews and Poles in the Belorussian Partisan Movement, 1941–1944", *Moresheet Journal* 63 (1997): 88.

8 His testimony in Alexander Bogen, Abraham Biber, and Kopel Kolpanitzky, eds., *Memories of Partisans: Anthology* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2006), 190.

9 His testimony in *ibid.*, 87–88.

10 *Ibid.*

Personal accounts provide vivid insights into the transformative moment when Jews effectively changed from victims to fighters. Yaakov Greenstein, who survived the killings in the Minsk ghetto and escaped to the forests of Stare Siolo, recounts that when they reached the forest “we were beside ourselves with joy. We didn’t feel any fatigue.” They gazed in amazement at the forest after not having seen or touched vegetation for two years in the ghetto, and they felt free. “I never knew the forest could be so beautiful ... We sprawled on the ground and rolled in the moss.” He recalled that they felt as if they had been reborn and had arrived in a new world.¹¹ Such testimonies demonstrate the psychological impact of joining the partisan movement and the sense of empowerment it provided.

This transition was fraught with challenges, including a lack of weapons, hostility from non-Jewish partisans and local populations, and the burden of their recent traumatic experiences, plus the constant worry about their families who were left behind – old parents, siblings, and sometimes even children. The moment of arrival in the forest often marked a profound transformation in the Jews’ self-perception, as recounted in survivor testimonies like that of Yaakov Greenstein.

Jewish partisans, both men and women, played crucial roles in the resistance movement against the Nazis. They conducted sabotage operations, derailed German trains, ambushed enemy forces, and even carried out acts of vengeance against Nazi collaborators. Jewish women also emerged as courageous and dedicated fighters, taking an active role in partisan operations. They served as scouts, participated in ambushes, conducted diversionary tactics, sabotaged enemy vehicles, and planted mines on railways, disrupting the transporting of supplies and troops. Their contributions were invaluable, and many of these remarkable women were awarded medals of honour for their bravery and sacrifice. Zhenya Eikhbaum stands out as an exemplary figure among these Jewish women partisans in Belarus. She fearlessly engaged in combat against German garrisons and sabotage missions, planting explosives and disrupting enemy operations. Her exceptional valour was recognised with the rare honour of being granted an automatic weapon, typically reserved for male partisans. Tragically, she fell in battle just one day before the liberation of the area, on 23 March 1944.¹² Sarah Rubinovich-Shiff is another example of a Jewish female partisan who, among many combat operations she undertook in the Belarussian forests, also executed a collaborator with the Germans as she received orders to do so from her partisan commanders.¹³

In late 1941, the Bielski brothers and their relatives moved between villages and towns, finding refuge with the aid of friendly farmers. Their parents had fallen victim to a tragic *Aktion*¹⁴ in the Nowogródek ghetto in December 1941. By May 1942, the surviving family members congregated in a nearby forest and resolved to form a partisan camp. Tuvia, the eldest sibling and a natural leader, was appointed commander. His main objective was to expand the camp’s population, believing that safeguarding the lives of the remaining Jews was crucial despite the difficulties in obtaining adequate food for many people. As more Jews who had escaped from ghettos joined, the partisan “family camp” grew, expanding the community under Tuvia’s guidance.¹⁵

11 Ibid., 157–159.

12 *Partisans of Belarus* (s.l.: The Partisans’ Organization Publishing House, 2012), 200–201.

13 Sarah Rubinovich-Shiff, testimony, 1964, Yad Vashem Archive, 03-2997.

14 An *Aktion* was a Nazi operation to round up Jews from ghettos either for immediate murder at killing sites or for deportation to death camps.

15 Tuvia Bielski (1906–1987) commanded a partisan unit in western Belorussia during World War II. After his parents were murdered by the Nazis in 1941, he and three brothers escaped to nearby forests, where he led the Bielski family camp, helping to save approximately 1,230 people. Post-war, Bielski immigrated to Israel, then

Lazar Engelstern writes in his memoir that, in the winter of 1943, while he was in the Lida ghetto, he had just one thought: how could he find a way to get out of the ghetto and join the partisans in the forest? Liaisons were sent to the ghetto by Tuvia Bielski to take out Jews to the forest, and Engelstern joined them. After several days of rough journey, they arrived at their destination. “When we arrived at the base, a panorama of huts spread across a large area of cleared-out forest appeared before us. I observed Jews – men, women, and children – who were not wearing yellow patches and were smiling and in good spirits.”¹⁶ The Bielski base was located in the Naliboki forest, a large forest complex in northwestern Belarus. The area is full of evergreen forests and large swamps, which makes it easier to hide.

Shalom Zorin led a second major family camp in the Naliboki forest. Located near the village of Stare Sioło, about thirty kilometres west of Minsk, it sheltered approximately 800 individuals. These family camps represented a unique form of resistance, combining survival and active opposition to Nazi forces in Belarus.¹⁷

Jews fled to the surrounding forests from ghettos and labour camps. During the years of German occupation in Belarus, from 1941 to 1944, Jews chose to flee to the forests mainly during violent *Aktionen* carried out in the ghettos. The question arises: what caused certain people to choose the option of escape while fleeing towards the unknown, to live in the harsh conditions of the forest, and this following weighty moral dilemmas they were forced to confront? One of the difficult dilemmas was choosing to escape while leaving behind family members – parents, siblings, spouses, and even children. From the testimonies, we learn that there were youngsters who chose not to flee but to stay with their families, even when they knew they were facing almost certain death. On the other hand, others chose to flee and leave their loved ones in the ghettos with pangs of conscience. They did not recover from these moments of decision and carried a heavy burden of guilt.

Fleeing for Life: Jewish Escapes to the Narocz Forest

The case of twenty-one Jews who escaped from the Vilna Ghetto to the Narocz forests on the night of 23 to 24 July 1943 serves as a compelling microcosm of the broader Jewish partisan experience in Western Belarus during the Holocaust. This instance exemplifies the perilous transition faced by numerous Jews who, driven by the imperative of survival, fled from the ghettos to join partisan units in the forests. By examining this specific group’s experiences, we gain valuable insights into the challenges, motivations, and transformative processes undergone by Jewish escapees as they transitioned from ghetto inhabitants to active resistance fighters. This case study thus provides a nuanced lens through which to analyse the multifaceted nature of Jewish survival strategies and the emergence of armed resistance in the face of Nazi persecution in occupied Belarus.¹⁸

The Narocz forests are located north of the district city of Wilejka, on the Belarus-Lithuania border, and include the large Koziany forest complex. In these forests,

to the United States in 1956, settling in New York. He was posthumously buried in Jerusalem. On the Bielski brothers partisan camp, see Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

16 Lazar Engelstern, testimony, 1971, Yad Vashem Archives, O.3-3608.

17 On the Zorin family camp, see, for example, Fania Libfraynd, testimony, 1975, Yad Vashem Archives, O.3-3837, and Arad, *Under the Red Banner*, 347–350.

18 On this group’s escape, see, for example, Chaim Lazar, *Destruction and Resistance* (New York: Shengold Publishing 1985), 75–78.

there were many towns, each home to hundreds to thousands of Jews. The area is characterised by swamps separated by large, dry islands. Since large parts of the area were far from the main transportation arteries and lacked railways or roads, the topographical conditions were suitable for partisan warfare.

Fyodor Markov was born in 1914 in a village in the Postawy area. Before the war, he was a teacher at the Jewish school in the town of Švenčionys. In 1934, influenced by his Jewish wife, he joined the Communist Party and was imprisoned for his party activities. On 26 August 1941, he was sent to his prewar area of operation to organise a partisan movement in the district. In the fall of 1941, Volodka Saulevich, a Red Army officer, joined him and became his confidant and right-hand man. Markov's group united with the group of Grigory Kryukov, an active communist from the Danilovich area.¹⁹ In May 1942, Markov's group merged with Sergei Fronko's group, which operated in the Postawy area. Markov's battalion grew, and it was joined by officers and soldiers from the Red Army who had escaped captivity. The Voroshilov Brigade cooperated with the Lithuanian partisan movement under the Jewish command of Jurgis (Hench Ziman), whose headquarters were stationed in the Narocz forests in 1943. The first partisans in Markov's unit were young people from the surrounding towns, including a group of Jewish escapees from Švenčionys who were his former students.²⁰

The United Partisan Organisation (FPO) in the Vilna Ghetto²¹ contacted Markov, who offered to bring members of the underground to the forest. It is interesting to see the changed dynamics that made young underground members decide to go out of the ghetto and become partisans, not as they originally planned. "We opposed and explained that our primary goal was to incite an armed struggle within the ghetto, to try to retaliate and avenge the Nazis for their actions, and only then, if members survived, to try to break out to the forest and continue the struggle from there", Shlomo Kanterovich recounts in his testimony. "But in reality, something different happened that disrupted all our plans and preparations. Something that decisively influenced the continuation of our activities within the ghetto."²² This occurred on 16 July 1943 and is known as the "Wittenberg Affair". During this affair, the head of the FPO underground, Yitzhak Wittenberg, a communist, was extradited to the Gestapo after a denunciation and found dead the next day.²³ After this difficult episode and the failed attempt by FPO members to rally the masses to start an uprising in the ghetto, the underground decided to begin sending groups of its members to the forests to join the partisans.

"The incident opened our eyes to see reality as it was. The masses in the ghetto would not easily follow us. We analysed the situation and concluded that we needed to change our approach. This was not the way", Nissan Reznik, a member of the FPO headquarters, testified years later.²⁴ He further argued that the Germans carried out actions cunningly: sometimes against children, sometimes against the elderly or women. Thus, the general public, mainly those who worked, was not included in the action and did not "rush" to identify with the underground. This undermined the individual's resilience and caused the FPO to continually postpone the decision to

19 Kryukov fell into German hands, and in July 1941, before he was executed, he escaped from prison.

20 Moshe Shutan, testimony, 1993, Fortunoff Video Archive, HVT-3384.

21 On 21 January 1942, an underground was established, the FPO, which was tasked with preparing the ghetto uprising, training youth for military action, acquiring weapons, carrying out sabotage operations and, when the time came, preventing the Germans from liquidating the ghetto.

22 Shlomo Kanterovich, "With the Partisans in the Narocz Forests", *Edut* 1 (1987): 93.

23 More on Itzhak Wittenberg's affair in Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames: The Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1980), 311–320; Lazar, *Destruction and Resistance*, 95–98.

24 Nissan Reznik, "The Movement in the Vilna Ghetto and the Lithuanian Forests", *Massuah* 1 (1973): 59.

start an uprising within the ghetto. “It is our duty to leave the ghetto for the forests to join the partisans and fight there with weapons in hand. In the ghetto – it was impossible”, said Reznik.²⁵ They started preparing.

In the early morning of 24 July 1943, the first group of twenty-one FPO people left the Vilna Ghetto for Narocz. Commander Yosef Glazman, a member of the FPO headquarters, led them. The group left under the guidance of Shike Gertman, an emissary of Markov, and his partner Chaika. The FPO command equipped the group members with weapons: grenades, pistols, and a machine gun. The weapons were disassembled and distributed among them, hidden on their bodies. The command wanted to equip the first group they sent to the forest as much as possible so as not to come empty-handed to Markov. They hoped for a friendly welcome.²⁶

“We felt like prisoners who had been set free. In the first grove we came across, we decided to pause, take out and assemble the hidden weapons, remove the yellow patch – the symbol of oppression and humiliation, and be free people again”, Kantorovich recounted.²⁷ “When we sat in the grove and were divided into two groups, I took all the ghetto documents from my group members and buried them in the ground. The commander of the second group took the documents and put them in his pocket”, Chaim Lazar testified.²⁸

When they arrived at New Wilejka disguised as a brigade of woodcutters, fourteen Jews who worked there joined them. As they approached the village of Lavořiškės, about twenty-five kilometres from Vilna, they had to cross a bridge over a river. Glazman sent five scouts to check what was happening beyond the bridge. As they crossed the bridge, shots were heard from three directions. “We were only 50 meters away from the bridge. Confusion arose in our ranks”, Lazar recalled.²⁹ All five scouts were killed on the spot, along with other group members. “It was my first baptism by fire. The experience was terrible. We were in shock. We were still in the euphoria of leaving the ghetto, so the blow was even harder”, Kantorovich recounts.³⁰ “It was night, and we were standing by a farmer’s yard fence, waiting for a signal that we could move, when suddenly – as if the sky had burst open – a barrage of gunfire from all sides. Most of us had never heard gunfire in our lives. The fire was getting closer, and we started to retreat and run back to the grove. We scattered”, Lazar adds.³¹ Only thirteen people remained out of the original thirty-five group members. The two guides informed the survivors that they should split into groups of two to three people, and each group should try to make its way independently. “We opposed this”, Kantorovich recounts,

we had no idea how we should go. We didn’t have a map or compass. We wanted to stay together in the situation that befell us after the disaster. We continued to penetrate deeper into the forest, but at some point, under the cover of darkness, the two liaison men disappeared. They simply abandoned us. It’s hard to describe in words the effect this treacherous act had on us. We started to shine flashlights into the forest, shouting and calling for them to come back, but to no avail, they disappeared as if the earth had swallowed them.³²

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Chaim Lazar, testimony, 1997, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, 30235.

²⁷ Kantorovich, “With the Partisans”, 95.

²⁸ Lazar, testimony, USC.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kantorovich, “With the Partisans”, 95.

³¹ Lazar, testimony, USC.

³² Kantorovich, “With the Partisans”, 96.

Kantorovich continues:

We were exhausted, hungry, and still under the impression of the previous events. At dawn, we found a hiding place in a grove and decided to rest and spend the day there. In the afternoon, a farmer happened to be there, and we stopped him and interrogated him about what was happening in the area. From him, we learned details about our incident: It turned out that the villagers had weapons they received from the Germans, and since they couldn't alert the Germans, they decided to ambush us themselves. This is why there was no manhunt for us the next day. This time, we held onto the farmer and forced him to help us cross the Vilnelė river. We continued, and only at dawn did we thank him and pay him with the little money we had left. We kept moving forward, despite daylight, until we found shelter.³³

Three members with an "Aryan" appearance were sent on behalf of the group to knock on the doors of local farmers and ask them about the way leading to the partisans. The tragedy of the group members did not end there. The Germans found some of their documents on Izka Matskevich's body and demanded that the Judenrat of the Vilna Ghetto hand over family members of those whose documents were found. They were murdered in Ponar.³⁴

Shortly after Glazman and the group survivors arrived at Markov's partisan base in Narocz, another group of twenty-eight people from the Vilna Ghetto arrived in the forest, guided by partisans Shlomo Yechilchik and Mordechai Feigel, also natives of Švenčionys. In this group, there were Jews who had arrived at the Vilna Ghetto after the liquidation of the Grodno Ghetto, aiming to join the underground there and escape with them to the partisans. To their astonishment, they encountered a refusal from the FPO members to take their people to the forest. The Grodno group fundamentally rejected the idea of rebelling in the ghetto and continued to search for ways to escape. "We who had experienced all this firsthand knew that any such plan was doomed to failure. Not only failure to mobilize the masses of the ghetto but a failure of the underground itself", says Eliahu Yezhurski.³⁵

Zvi Lifshitz, who was another member of the Grodno group, describes the day of his departure from the Vilna Ghetto to the Narocz forests:

We gathered at 5:30 in the Judenrat courtyard at 6 Rudnitska Street. We left through a side gate ... Through the city, we walked as a group of workers, we passed towards the Provinsk suburb, then we saw that we were in great danger. Before us was a small pine grove, and we decided to enter it. We sat until dark and continued ... Our goal was to advance along the 'Black Road' that led towards the forest. All the people in the area were a potential danger to us. We were not allowed to ask them for directions. The complication arose from the fact that the guides didn't know this section of the road ... Our journey was long because we had to rely only on ourselves ... when we approached a certain village at midnight, we heard a shout in Russian, 'Stop! Who's there?' we answered that we were partisans from Vilna. They asked that two people approach them. I and another approached, and it turned out they were Jews ... Our joy is indescribable. Finally, we felt free and liberated from fear.³⁶

During September 1943, more and more members of the Vilna Ghetto underground arrived in Narocz, exhausted from the long roads and depressed from the

³³ Ibid, 97.

³⁴ *The Book of the Jewish Partisans*, 74–75.

³⁵ Eliahu Yezhurski, testimony, Moreshet Archive, A.282.

³⁶ Zvi Lifshitz, testimony, Yad Vashem Archive, O.3-1566.

failure to start a rebellion in the ghetto. “Survivors arrived without weapons, and anyone who was a partisan knows what it means to be without a weapon in the forest”, argues Yezherski.³⁷

In her testimony, Mira Verbin recounted her arrival, along with a group from the Vilna ghetto, to the Narocz forests:

Suddenly, a horseman with a huge black hat passes by and greets us in Russian. We thought we had fallen into paradise. Everything was green and beautiful around us: tall trees, breathtaking scenery; it was towards evening. He said how wonderful that you’ve come ... We were very happy. Some girls even kissed him. We came to a guard who said – ah, it’s you? Finally, you’ve arrived, I’m going to notify you. We reached the headquarters, and the commander came out and said, ‘Finally, you’ve come? Where have you been until now? Now that they’re liquidating you, you’ve come?’ We were stunned; we didn’t know what they wanted from us. This was the first blow.³⁸

Thus, it seems that the initial elation of arriving at the forest and the “dream” of joining the partisan ranks was quickly replaced by distress and an unsympathetic, even antisemitic, reception from the non-Jewish partisans.

The First All-Jewish Partisan Unit

Due to these difficult feelings, a desire arose among the Jews to establish their own independent units in the forests, also out of aspiration for acts of vengeance against the Germans and the rescue of Jews from ghettos and camps and to credit these struggles to the Jewish account. The *Nekama* (Revenge) Battalion was an independent Jewish partisan unit established at the end of 1943 in the Narocz forests. At its peak, the battalion numbered about 250 Jews, who went on operations and fought. Among them, the number of women was significant. Many of the escapees from the Vilna Ghetto joined the Nekama Battalion.³⁹

Chaim Lazar tells about the establishment of Nekama: Yosef Glazman began to establish a partisan unit. He persuaded Markov and met with the commander of the Lithuanian partisan movement, Genrikas Zimanas, who was known as “Jurgis”.⁴⁰ Jurgis promised to assist in establishing a Jewish unit and to supply weapons. At the beginning, the Jewish battalion numbers 70 people. Markov appointed Butinas as commander, a Jewish communist from Lithuania who had recently arrived in the forest from Moscow.⁴¹ The battalion was divided into two groups and was the first Jewish fighting unit in the Narocz forests. After a few days, a swearing-in ceremony was held in the presence of the commanders of the various partisan battalions in Narocz.

We swear not to rest or be quiet until we drive the enemy from the soil of Belarus. Brigade commander Markov gave an enthusiastic speech and talked about the Jewish tragedy. He concludes by saying: ‘Who else but you should fight the Nazi enemy and avenge the blood of your spilled brothers

³⁷ Yezherski, testimony.

³⁸ Mira Verbin, testimony, 1993, Fortunoff Video Archive, HVT-3536.

³⁹ See Sara Bender, “Life Stories as Testament and Memorial: The Short Life of the Neqama Battalion, an Independent Jewish Partisan Unit Operating during the Second World War in the Narocz Forest, Belarus”, *East European Jewish Affairs*, 42m no. 1 (April 2012): 1–24.

⁴⁰ On his character, see Dov Levin, “Ziman (Zimanas): The Lifestyle of a Jewish Communist Leader in Lithuania”, *Shvut* 1 (1972): 95–109.

⁴¹ Butinas’s name was Zerach Ragovsky, a Lithuanian who was parachuted into the forests from the Soviet rear.

and sisters. Try to be good fighters, brave and loyal. We will help you with all the means at our disposal: instructors, weapons, instructions ...' He suggests that our battalion be called 'Nekama.' We are a bit resentful that a non-Jew is preaching to us about revenge ... In high spirits, we return to the camp. Full of hope. The reception of the partisans made an impression on us. We are equals among equals.⁴²

The transition from ghetto resistance to forest partisan groups was a significant shift for many Jews, driven by changing circumstances and the urgent need for survival and becoming active fighters. These partisan units, such as Nekama, often operated within larger resistance movements, necessitating collaboration with non-Jewish groups and navigating complex political and social dynamics. The experiences of Jewish partisans highlight themes of resilience, the struggle for recognition and equality within resistance movements, and the psychological impact of loss and the fight for survival.

Summary

This article has focused on Jewish victims who were confined in ghettos and managed to escape, becoming fighters in partisan units in the forests of Belarus, which was an important theatre of partisan warfare. When examining their experiences through survivors' testimonies, several insights emerge. They experienced a psychological transformation, a profound shift from helplessness to empowerment. This transformation was crucial for their mental survival and ability to fight back. They had to quickly learn military skills to become effective fighters, including weapons training and forest survival tactics. By becoming fighters, these individuals regained a sense of control over their lives and fate, which had been stripped away during their persecution in the ghettos.

In survivor's testimonies, one can find fascinating stories about what they experienced in those moments of escape from ghettos to forests. For each one, the story is different. The decision to escape, the planning, the act itself, and the memory that remained from the escape – and which they tell in testimonies – are at the basis of our understanding of Jewish coping during the Holocaust. Escaping to the forests was one of the few rescue options available to Jews in the ghettos. Few could carry it out, and it contained many dangers, as shown in this chapter. The decision to escape almost always required leaving family members behind in a state of uncertainty and danger. Indeed, this fact caused many Jews to abandon the idea of escaping to the forest. Among many survivors who fled from ghettos, feelings of guilt remained until the end of their lives for having left parents, siblings, and other relatives in the ghetto and for the uncertainty about what happened to them.

The transition from ghetto life to forest fighting presented numerous challenges, requiring adaptation to harsh living conditions and the moral complexities of armed resistance. Partisan units often provided a new sense of community for these fighters, replacing the destroyed Jewish communities they had left behind. Joining armed groups was often seen as the best chance for survival in hostile environments, with the forests providing cover and resources. Many of these Jews were driven by a desire for retribution against their oppressors and against collaborators who harmed Jews, which, while complex, often provided a powerful motivating force.

⁴² Lazar, *Destruction and Resistance*, 120.

Interestingly, the stories of civilians-turned-fighters have become an important part of collective memory and national narratives about resistance and survival, playing a significant role in shaping post-war Jewish identity and Holocaust history. Though small in number, partisans and ghetto fighters became a model for future generations in Israel, changing the perception of Jews going to their death “as sheep to the slaughter”, and setting a model of the Jewish national ethos of bravery. Thus, they entered the Israeli pantheon and became a model of resistance.⁴³

⁴³ Boaz Cohen, “Holocaust Heroics: Ghetto Fighters and Partisans in Israeli Society and Historiography”, *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 31, no. 2 (2003): 197–213.

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Quotation: Daniela Ozacky Stern, From Victims to Fighters. Jews in the Belarusian Partisan Forests, in S.I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. 12 (2025) 1, 116–128.

https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0125/art_doza01

Special Issue in Tribute to Sir Martin Gilbert

S.I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 12 (2025) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0125>

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