

HISTORY LEADERSHIP ETHICS JEWISH VALUES

ETHICS OF WAR

a 45-60 minute activity for 8th – 12th grade students

Photo of Jewish partisans in forest. Date unknown. Source USHMM.



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Lesson Overview

The ethics of war are confusing. Help your students look honestly at concepts of resistance, revenge and ethics with critical thinking questions and an engaging short play (no rehearsal needed). Great for classrooms, youth groups and informal education.



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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.¹ 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.² 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 Margalioi (Lincoln, The University of Nebraska Press, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem 1999), 441–444.

2. Fighting Back, Dov Levin, (New York, Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1985), 196.

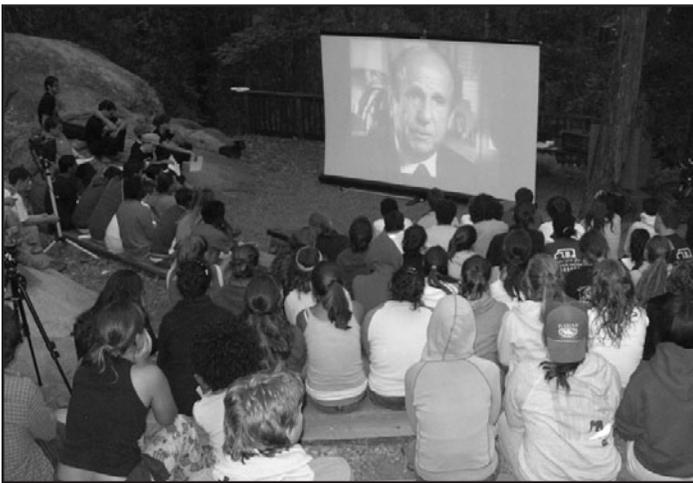
How to Use this Lesson

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation has produced a comprehensive and thought-provoking new curriculum called RESIST. The lessons of RESIST transmit values and enduring understandings arising from the stories of the Jewish partisans.

This RESIST lesson is divided into six sections. These sections provide teachers and instructors with an overview of the lesson, a guide containing background information on the subjects at hand, instructions on how to prepare for the lesson, an easy-to-follow lesson procedure, materials and attachments necessary to conduct the lesson, and an evaluation component that gives teachers and instructors the ability to assess the effectiveness and impact of the lesson. The following is a list of these five sections:



Recreation of how partisans laid explosives on train tracks. Location: Lithuania. Source: Ghetto Fighter's House



JPEF presentation at Camp Tawonga. 2005. Source: JPEF Archives

Overview

Contains a summary of the lesson and learning objectives.

Guide

Provides additional information for the teacher/instructor about the topics at hand.

Setup

Lists the materials and space necessary to carry out the lesson and explains how to prepare for the lesson.

Procedure

Lists step-by-step instructions for running the lesson. Action words are boldfaced.

Attachments

The worksheets, forms, and other materials needed to complete this lesson.

Overview

This lesson will take 45 – 60 minutes and is targeted for 7th – 12th grade students.

Lesson Summary

The ethics of war are confusing. In times of war, people find themselves in ethical dilemmas they otherwise wouldn't experience. Jewish Partisans were no different. They made difficult decisions daily about the best ways to protect their lives and the lives of others, and often had to base those decisions on uncertain information. While the ethical imperative to save life is clear, the question of how to choose the best course of action may not be.

At the heart of this lesson is a short play, *A Conversation in the Woods*, which gives teens an opportunity to look at these issues through the lens of the Jewish partisans and the kinds of ethical dilemmas that many were forced to face during the war. The play—based on an actual conversation and moment in the life of eight Jewish partisans, including Abba Kovner and Shalom Yoran—is as relevant today as it was 70 years ago. Along with the play, we present Jewish ethical texts to assist in the exploration of these ethical dilemmas.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Explore the concept of ethics and how to apply them in extraordinary situations and to our daily lives
- Study historical texts on the ethics of war, survival, and the importance of saving a life
- Discuss the ethical dilemma presented by the play and the kinds of choices that these and other Jewish partisans were forced to make

Additional objective for Religious Educators:

- Explore Jewish values and texts about war, survival, and the value of life



Portrait of Jewish partisan Sara Ginaite at the liberation of Vilna. 1944. Source: USHMM

Guide

Ethics...

Refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong which help people decide how to take action in day-to-day and life-or-death situations. It also refers to the study and development of one's own ethical standards.

The more practice we have in examining and applying ethics in our daily decisions, the better we can respond to *ethical dilemmas*: complex situations where different right actions seem to be in conflict, such as when telling the truth may put another person in danger.

Resistance...

In this context means fighting or struggling with an invader or occupier through violent and/or non-violent means. Though violence should always be a last resort, it may have been the only option available to these partisans in order to prevent the German occupiers' plans to murder every Jew in Europe.

Ethical Texts...

Explore specific Jewish perspectives on the ethical issues raised in this lesson. These texts are also *useful for Public school and Tolerance* educators to help students explore the cultural context which influenced the difficult decisions many Jews – particularly Jewish partisans – faced during the Holocaust.

Most of the Jewish texts in this lesson come from the *Torah* (or Five Books of Moses) or the opinions of rabbis as recorded in the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*: law codes and Torah commentaries from the 2nd and 5th century C.E. Other materials – ethical statements, stories of the rabbis' daily lives, fantastic tales, speculations on the afterlife, and even dream interpretation found their way into the Mishnah and the codes (written throughout the Middle Ages) explaining the Talmud.

The Play: A Conversation in the Woods...

The play is based on an actual conversation and moment in the life of eight Jewish partisans as the Germans were retreating from the Soviets in 1944, as recorded by Jewish partisan Shalom Yoran when he and his fellow partisans were waiting to re-enter Vilna with the backup of the Soviet army.



Selim Szycter (Shalom Yoran) in 1945 as a soldier in the Polish army, in Lukow, Poland. At the time Lukow was technically in Germany as it was a city annexed by Germany during the War. Source: Shalom Yoran

The Film...

Is entitled *Introduction to the Jewish Partisans*. It is 7 minutes long and can be viewed as a part of this lesson (See Procedure). The film gives students the opportunity to meet some of the 20,000 to 30,000 Jews who committed thousands of acts of sabotage against the Nazis during World War II. They destroyed trains, bridges, convoys, and power plants. These brave men and women, many of them teenagers, saved thousands of Jews from ghettos and work camps. They fought as guerilla fighters—partisans—all throughout Europe and their story is hardly known.

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation...

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation produced this film after interviewing over 50 surviving partisans. Narrated by Ed Asner, it includes rare stock footage and photographs of partisans in action. The film can be ordered through JPEF by emailing dvd@jewishpartisans.org or calling (415) 563-2244.

The film can also be viewed at www.jewishpartisans.org/films. For more information about the Jewish partisans, please visit www.jewishpartisans.org.

Setup

- A classroom or multi-purpose space
- Eight copies of the play *A Conversation in the Woods*
- Props for the play can include things to represent a piece of meat, a bottle of alcohol, a fire, etc.
- Signs for designated areas: Vilna and The Forest should be placed on opposite sides of the room
- The film that can be utilized for this lesson, *Introduction to the Jewish Partisans*, is 7 minutes long and can be viewed on a computer with internet access. A computer projector is helpful for presenting this film

The film can be viewed at www.jewishpartisans.org/films. You can also email dvd@jewishpartisans.org or call (415) 563-2244 for a DVD of this and other JPEF films.

- 1 WHO ARE THE JEWISH PARTISANS? printout per student if you do not plan to show the film (see page 1)
- 1 WORKBOOK IN THE WOODS and ETHICAL TEXTS printout per team (see *Attachments* section)

Note: You can show a video version of the prologue to the play (narrated by Ed Asner) by going to: www.jewishpartisans.org/play-prologue

This activity should take place in a large multi-purpose classroom, or outdoors.

The space should also be conducive to presenting a DVD presentation if possible.



Lithuania and Vilnius today. The play took place in the Rudnizkaya Forest just outside of Vilna (Vilnius).

Procedure

A) Core Concepts – 15 minutes

1. Seat students in a circle and ask students about the concept of "Ethics" – what is it and why is it important?
 2. Read the definition of Ethics at the top of page 4 of this lesson (GUIDE). Ask students to list ethical dilemmas they think come up during wartime among resistance fighters, such as A) risking a life and B) stealing food and weapons. Write answers on board.
 3. Ask students if there are resources that may help people make ethical choices. Write answers on board. Examples include: historical, legal, and religious texts; other people (family, historic figures, etc.); and their own internal sense of right and wrong. Make sure students list specific texts or famous quotes.
- Jewish Educators:* Ask students to name specific Jewish or other religious texts.
4. Present the short film: *Introduction to the Jewish Partisans*. If conducting this lesson outside or where the film cannot be shown, read aloud *Who Are The Jewish Partisans?* (page 1).
 5. Read the following statement: *"The Jewish Partisans faced many ethical dilemmas, sometimes on a daily basis, in order to survive. From their experiences we are able to look honestly at concepts of resistance, revenge and ethics."*
 6. Discuss ethical dilemmas that come up in the film. You may need to give examples.

B) Conversation in the Woods - 30 minutes

1. Ask for eight volunteers to play the characters in A CONVERSATION IN THE WOODS—read the *List of Roles* on the top of page 11 in the play to choose parts. Hand out scripts to each actor. *Alternate:* divide the class into small groups of eight or more to read the play to each other.
2. Read the Prologue on page 11. Answer any questions. *Alternate:* show the video version of *Prologue*, available at www.jewishpartisans.org/eow-prologue.
3. Inform students that towards the end of the play the action will stop and they will be asked to make a decision before reading on.
4. Perform the play up to the STOP sign in the script.

C) At the Break in the Play... Text Study & Discussion

1. Ask students what they think the characters in the play should do: return to Vilna and rebuild their lives, or stay in the forest to continue fighting. Designate areas for each choice and ask them to go to one or the other.
2. Divide students in up to eight subgroups, distributing one of the scripts to each.
3. Distribute one copy to each team: a *WORKSHEET IN THE WOODS* and *ETHICAL TEXTS*.
4. Say: "Your team's goal is to complete the worksheet and convince the other side that yours is the best ethical choice."

5. Allow students up to 6–7 minutes to work.
6. Ask each side to designate a speaker-representative and share their top two reasons for making that decision. After all reasons have been shared ask if anyone's opinion about what the characters should have done has changed. Allow them to switch sides if they wish.
7. Return to center of the room and resume the play to its finish.

D) Personal Ethics Dialogue & Wrap Up - 15 minutes

1. Seat students back in the circle, allowing teams to sit together.
2. Help the students realize that there was a 50–50 split in the group: three people went to Vilna and three people went back into the forest to chase the Germans. Both groups were going to save Jewish lives – Abba's group by having Jews not put themselves in harm's way, and Shalom's by stopping Germans from killing Jews in the future.
3. Ask the students: what choice did your group make and why?
4. Discuss one or more of the *Discussion Questions* below.
5. End lesson by reading the following statement: "Hopefully we never have to make choices like the partisans made. But our choices do matter – to ourselves, the people around us and to the world. The more we practice thinking about and acting ethically in everyday circumstances, the better prepared we'll be to make good choices when the stakes are high."

Discussion Questions:

- a) How does revenge play a role in war? Does it conflict with your personal or cultural ethical standards?
- b) Is vengeance heroic? If someone performs a heroic act, but it was inspired by vengeance, does this change how you look at them?
- c) Why are there ethical laws for survival situations?
- d) Is it reasonable for there to be ethics in war? Why or why not?
- e) If you changed your mind, why? What argument made you see things differently?
- f) Is the correct choice always the ethical one? When is it different? Name an example from every day life.
- g) What are examples of ethical choices you have made? Are there other ways ethics play out in your own life? If so, explain.
- h) What benefit, if any, is there to learning (or teaching) about ethics?

Additional Questions for Jewish Educators:

- a) Is taking revenge in conflict with Jewish ethics?
- b) Have you been in a situation when your own personal or religious values conflicted with other group or societal norms? How would you advise someone to deal with such conflicts?
- c) What are some ethical principles that can help you in your life?

Workbook in the Woods

NAME(S):



OUR GROUP CHOSE: Return to Vilna and rebuild their lives Stay in the forest and continue to fight

1) What influenced the people in your group to make your choice?

2) Read through the *Ethical Texts* handout your group received. Is your decision supported by any of the ethical texts or any particular lines in the play? If so, explain how they support your position.

3) Did your group agree on the same answer in #3? If not, what was the disagreement?

4) Some of the texts contradict each other. How do you deal with contradictions between different principles in your own lives?

Ethical Texts

Pikuach Nefesh

Pikuach Nefesh is translated as the "guarding of life" whether your own or another person's. The early rabbis believed that no law was more important than the obligation to save a life, meaning it is permissible to transgress other laws in order to perform it.

Humanity was created alone to teach that anyone who destroys a life, it is as if they have lost an entire world, and anyone who saves a life, it is as if they have sustained an entire world. (Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5)

But does saving your life take precedence over saving another's? What about saving your family? Opinions are split:

Two people are traveling on a journey and one has a pitcher of water. If both drink, they will both die. But if only one drinks, then that person can reach civilization ... it is better that both should drink and die, rather than that one should witness their companion's death. (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 62a - edited for clarity)

On the other hand:

One is obligated to prioritize one's own livelihood before any other person ... your life precedes the life of your fellow ... And after you ensure your own livelihood, then you should prioritize the livelihood of your parents over your children, and then prioritize your children. (Shulchan Aruch 251:3)

Perhaps the situation is best summed up by one of Judaism's most influential sages, Rabbi Hillel the Elder:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? (Pirkei Avot - Ethics of the Fathers 1:14)

Jewish Laws on Revenge

Don't take vengeance and don't bear a grudge against the members of your nation; love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

However, in the Torah (the Hebrew bible), the children of Israel are ordered to attack the Midianites in revenge for their aggression (Numbers 31:2); and Samson is granted Divine assistance when he seeks vengeance against the Philistines for the loss of his eyes (Judges 16:28). The distinction is clear: in these cases the leaders of the people are not being petty or vindictive for their own private honor, but rather are defending the honor as well as the safety and well-being of the entire people. In contrast,

the torah also says that:

Only G-d can take vengeance. (Deuteronomy 35:32)

Jewish Traditions on War

Traditional Jewish texts define three main types of permitted wars:

- **Obligatory wars:** These are wars that the Jews in the bible were commanded to fight. They include the biblical wars against the tribes of Canaanites and Amalekites.

You shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens; you shall not forget. (Deuteronomy 25:19)

- **Defensive wars (also obligatory):** If the Jewish people are attacked, they are obliged to defend themselves. This doctrine also covers pre-emptive strikes (when a country attacks an enemy who is about to attack it).

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed. (Genesis 9:6)

- **Optional wars:** These are wars undertaken when no other forms of negotiation remain possible.



Portrait of Abba Kovner holding a rifle in Vilna, after the recapture of the city to the Jewish partisans and the Red Army. This photo was taken a couple weeks after the "Conversation in the Woods" took place. Source: USHMM.

ETHICS OF WAR: A CONVERSATION IN THE WOODS

***A short play by the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation
for the Ethics of War activity***

This play made possible by the generous support of:
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LIST OF ROLES

Narrator: has large part in beginning and end, and small part throughout the entire play.

Abba Kovner (ah-BAH COVE-ner): Commander of an all-Jewish partisan unit, only appears in the beginning of the play

Shalom Yoran (sha-LOAM YO-rah): Leader of the group of Jewish partisans in this play, has many lines

Markh Kalcheim (MARH call-CHAI-yeem [like the toast 'LeChaim']): Encounters Abba in the forest and brings the choice to the group to think about, has many lines

Musio (MOO-show): Shalom's brother, medium number of lines

Yehuda (yeh-HOO-dah): Male role, small number of lines

Yuditka (you-DIT-ka): The only woman in the group, small number of lines

Bonchak (BONE-chalk): Male role, small number of lines. Bonchak and Yuditka are dating and will face this decision together

ADDITIONAL TERMS

Otriad (OH-tree-odd): Russian for a single partisan unit

Rudnitskaya Forest: (rood-NITZ-kai-ya; like kayak without the second k): 50 kilometers from Vilna, these woods were an important base of operations for the partisans

Vilnius (VIL-nee-us): Capital of Lithuania, a center of Jewish life and culture before World War II, now known as Vilna

Zemlyanka (zem-LONK-uh): A partisan bunker; from the Russian word for "dugout"

Markh and his group of partisans are chasing the retreating Germans, trying to harass and kill as many as possible. Every one of these Jewish partisans have lost the majority of their families and everyone they know; they fear that if they let the Germans re-enter Germany they might regroup and start killing Jews again.

We watch the group weigh their options and ultimately make a difficult choice between two different ways to save the lives of their people.

NARRATOR

Why was Vilna [VILL-nuh] so important to these Jews? The city of Vilna (now Vilnius [VIL-nee-us]) was known as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" because of its concentration of Rabbis and Talmudic scholars, over 100 synagogues and yeshivas [YEH-shee-vuh]—Jewish schools and universities—including some from the late middle ages.

On the eve of the Holocaust there were approximately 60,000 Jews living in Vilna. Ninety-five percent of them were killed in a series of ghetto "liquidations" or sent on to camps in Estonia and German-occupied Poland. At the end of the war an estimated 6,000 Jews returned to Vilna.

SCENE 1: RUDNITZKAYA FOREST (rood-NITZ-kaya) - NIGHT

[NOTE: Teacher reads all italicized stage directions as actors play them out]

MARKH (MARH) enters, carrying a rifle. He investigates the area, making sure it's safe.

NARRATOR — Off-Stage (O.S.)

It's July, 1944. Nazi troops have occupied most of Europe, and are carrying out their "Final Solution", systematically killing the Jewish people by the millions. But nearly thirty thousand Jews have managed to fight back as partisans—armed resistance fighters.

Markh sits down, taking a rest. He shivers in the cold.

NARRATOR (O.S.)

They've ambushed German soldiers, destroyed trains and bridges, and sabotaged power plants. In Eastern Europe, their goal is to stop the German advance into the Soviet Union by cutting supply lines. It's working. Here in the Rudnitskaya Forest, after two years of difficult partisan efforts, the Germans are finally starting to retreat as the Soviet army advances.

ABBA (O.S.)

Markh?

Markh swings towards the noise in surprise, rifle pointed. ABBA (Ah-BAH) enters, also armed.

MARKH

Abba?

ABBA

You made it.
The two embrace.

PROLOGUE

[OPTIONAL: You can show a video version of this prologue, narrated by Ed Asner, by going to www.jewishpartisans.org/play-prologue]

TEACHER (or another student)

The play takes place in the Rudnitskaya (rood-NITZ-kai-ya) Forest of Lithuania in 1944. The Allies have the upper hand and the Germans are retreating from Russia back into Germany. It is hard to imagine living in the wilderness: fighting, struggling daily for your survival and having to fight for the right to simply live—this was the reality for Jewish partisans.

Picture their excitement in meeting up with an old friend in this situation. That is exactly what happened to these people. Markh (MARH), the scout with a group of partisans runs into Abba Kovner (Ah-BAH COVE-ner), a Jewish partisan leader, in the forest. Abba invites Markh and his group to go with him to liberate Vilna (VILL-nuh) with the protection of the Soviet army in a matter of days. The decision is not so easy for the group to make.

MARKH

What are you doing here? How did you get out?

ABBA

We wanted to stay and fight in the ghetto, but... it was impossible. We fled into the woods.

MARKH

And the ghetto?

ABBA

"Liquidated." Nothing's left.

(pause)

What about you?

MARKH

I found my way into the forest and joined up with a Soviet unit—mostly Russian partisans.

ABBA

Any Jews?

MARKH

Six of us. You know how it is. Best if we stick together. A lot of the Russians are prejudiced, but they're good fighters. Some of us just knocked out a train.

ABBA

Lots of supplies destroyed?

MARKH

It was a troop transport. Dead soldiers everywhere.

Abba smiles.

ABBA

Markh eim (*ka-CHAI-yeem*), reporter for the Ghetto News. Blowing up a train.

(pause)

There are six of you?

MARKH

Yes.

ABBA

Listen. I command an otriad (*OH-tree-odd*) of partisans. All Jews, living together, fighting together. Dying together.

MARKH

All Jewish?

ABBA

You know most of us from Vilna. What are your orders?

MARKH

We're supposed to keep pushing forward and harass the Germans as they retreat.

ABBA

I have a better idea.

MARKH

What is it?

ABBA

Why don't you take a walk with me? We're camped right over here. Lots of your old friends. We've even got some vodka tonight.

MARKH

Vodka?

ABBA

Well, the taste does have an uncanny resemblance to urine—but after a few drinks, you won't notice.

They exit.

SCENE 2: OUTSIDE THE ZEMELYANKA - NIGHT

SHALOM (sha-LOAM), YUDITKA (you-DIT-ka), BONCHAK (BONE-chalk), MUSIO (MOO-show), and YEHUDA (yeh-HOO-dah) sit outside the small shelter.

MARKH enters, carrying a small lump wrapped in his jacket.

SHALOM

Markh. What took you so long?

MARKH

Look what I got.

He sits down with them, and sets down the lump. He unwraps it.

BONCHAK

Wow!

YUDITKA

Good job, Markh.

YEHUDA

I can't even see the maggots.

BONCHAK

Out of sight, out of mind.

MUSIO

What do you think? Horse?

MARKH

I prefer to think of it as oxen, although I'm in no position to verify that.

Markh hands the lump of meat to Shalom.

Shalom, will you do the honors?

SHALOM

Gladly.

Shalom takes out a knife and begins to cut the meat. He hands out pieces as he cuts them, and the others eat hungrily.

YUDITKA

Where did you get this?

MARKH

I ran into a friend from Vilna. Abba Kovner.

SHALOM

Kovner? Doesn't he command an all-Jewish partisan unit?

MARKH

'The Avengers'. They're camped real close to here.

Bonchak takes a bite of the meat.

BONCHAK

A little stringy, but I'm not complaining.

MARKH

Kovner says the Red Army is close, no more than a week or two away. They're sending the partisans in first to liberate Vilna, and Kovner's group is going. They want us to come along.

SHALOM

And after that?

MARKH

Then Vilna's liberated. The Germans are gone. The war's over for us.

SHALOM

But not for the rest of the world.

YUDITKA

We've defended ourselves. We've blown up their trains. We've attacked their convoys. We've killed their soldiers. And it worked. It worked! They're leaving, and by some miracle we're still alive. Let's keep it that way.

MUSIO

You want to stop fighting the Nazi butchers just because the Red Army is finally here to take a city?

YUDITKA

Vilna's not just a city. It's the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

(pause)

And it's my home.

MUSIO

Not any more.

SHALOM

Wait a second. We need to talk this over calmly and rationally. No need to argue. We'll each have our say. Okay?

Everyone nods or speaks their agreement.

Good. And I've got more of this fine prime rib, if you're not too full.

Laughter.

SELIM

What do you think we should do?

MARKH

I keep thinking about what Abba said. He says the war's almost over, and there are so few of us left. Why should we keep risking our lives? My family, my wife and kids, were all murdered in Vilna. Someone has to survive and bear witness.

SHALOM

The Germans are retreating now, but how do we know they won't come back? And what about all the towns and cities they still occupy?

MUSIO

If I've learned one thing in this war, it's that the impossible can happen. What's already happened to our people seems impossible, should have been impossible, but it happened. And will happen again, if we let it.

(to Shalom)

We have a moral duty to take revenge.

YEHUDA

You think resisting is just about fighting? If we go to Vilna, we can resist in other ways. Markh, you're a reporter. Write articles. Tell the world what happened. And let them know that we fought back. Right now we're just a few shleppy Jewish kids, having to prove ourselves every step of the way. In Vilna, we'll be heroes.

BONCHAK

We're not heroes, we're just trying to stay alive. And we've been lucky. Let's not push our luck.

Yuditka smiles at Bonchak, and grabs his hand.

YUDITKA

It's not just self-preservation. As Jews, it's our duty to stay alive. So many of us have died already.

SHALOM

As Jews, it's also our duty to defend our people.

YUDITKA

We and Abba's group could be the only ones left. We fought the Germans and did good work. Now let's make sure some of us live to be proud of what we did.

SHALOM

I'd say it's also our duty as Jews to take revenge. Every one of us has relatives and friends and neighbors that were killed.

YUDITKA

And we've done that—many times over. But when will the war be over for you, Shalom? Are you gonna march into Berlin and personally spit on Hitler's grave?

SHALOM

Maybe.

BONCHAK

I'd come along for that.

MARKH

There's a time for war. And a time for peace.

SHALOM

(to Musio)

What do you think?

MUSIO

This is a tough one. Before today, it was easy. Someone shoots at us, we shoot back. Our commander yells to attack, and we attack. But this is different. We have a choice. How do you even make a decision like this?

YUDITKA

You've gotta go with your gut. I feel like going to Vilna is the right thing to do.

BONCHAK

I just do what she does.

Yuditka pecks Bonchak on the cheek.

YUDITKA

Smart boy.

YEHUDA

Think about it logically. If you come to Vilna, you probably live. You survive the war. If you keep going, you might get killed. The Soviet army's coming. They have millions of men, tanks, planes. You're our scholar. Think about it scientifically. How much difference is one Jewish kid with a rifle going to make? The war's almost over, and the Nazis are gonna lose no matter what you do.

MARKH

I have a lot of respect for Abba. He thinks the war's almost over, and we should go to Vilna. Maybe he's right.

YEHUDA

So are we in agreement?

Instinctively, they all look to Shalom.

SHALOM

(to Musio)

You're my brother.

(to Markh)

And you're like a brother to us.

(to both)

Whatever we decide, the three of us decide together. Do you agree?

MUSIO

Yes.

MARKH

It'd be hard for just one of us with the Soviets.

YEHUDA

Hard? The army is full of antisemites. You won't just be fighting the Germans, you could get killed by your own comrades.

SHALOM

I know, but... This is the hardest decision I've had to make since we started fighting.

YUDITKA

Fighting in the forest is one thing. But now you'll be on the front lines. Don't do it.

BONCHAK

Outlive Hitler. Get married, maybe children. Wouldn't that be the best revenge?

YUDITKA

It's best if we all go to Vilna together.

Shalom wipes off his knife. He sets it down.

SHALOM

I remember the last time I saw our mother. It was almost two years ago, the day before Yom Kippur. It was morning, and there was a thick fog. The Germans came and started rounding up Jews. We ran into the wheat fields—the three of us, my mother, Musio, and I.

It looked like we might make it to the woods, but when we reached the edge of the fields, there was an... open patch. There were shots all around us, and Mother was afraid to cross it. We wanted her to try and cross, but she wouldn't. Then she hugged us. She said, "Go. Save yourselves. Take vengeance for us."

(pause)

The shots got worse. We crawled towards a barn, but when we got there, she was gone. We never saw her again.

Silence. Markh drapes a comforting arm around Shalom.

She said two things. Save yourselves. Take vengeance. If we go to Vilna, we save ourselves. But to take vengeance, we have to keep fighting.

YEHUDA

We've already had our vengeance. Now we save ourselves.

SHALOM

Maybe.

MARKH

We can't delay it much longer.

SHALOM

Let's take the next few hours and think it over. We decide at sunrise.

They break off. Musio, Markh, and Shalom sit together. Yuditka and Bonchak walk off, arm in arm. Yehuda lies down on the ground and looks up at the sky.



DISCUSSION :: STOP HERE
DO NOT READ ON UNTIL ASKED TO

SCENE 3: OUTSIDE THE ZEMLYANKA - DAWN

SHALOM, MARKH, and MUSIO sit against the Zemlyanka (*zem-LONK-uh*), half asleep. YUDITKA and BONCHAK enter, arms around each other. YEHUDA follows behind.

SHALOM
Have you decided?

YUDITKA
We're going with Abba.

SHALOM (*to Yehuda*)
You too?

MARKH
My wife is dead. My kids are dead. I want to go home to Vilna more than anything in the world. But there's no more Vilna for me. They destroyed it. I've got nothing to go home to.

YEHUDA
You should come with us.

MARKH
Maybe. I don't know yet.

YUDITKA
Well... Abba's waiting.

She moves to hug Markh. Everyone hugs and says their goodbyes. Yuditka, Bonchak, and Yehuda exit.

MUSIO
I'm so tired. I don't know what to think any more.

MARKH
I wonder if maybe they don't have the right idea.

SHALOM
It's not a question of right or wrong. We have to follow our hearts.

MARKH
We've spent so much of this war reacting. Reacting to everything. This is different. This is where we get to choose for ourselves. What are we fighting for?

Shalom stares off into the woods.

SHALOM
All I can think about is what my mother said. Take vengeance. If I go to Vilna, I'm abandoning my mission.

MUSIO
She also said to save ourselves.

SHALOM
I'll never feel right in Vilna when there are still Nazis out there murdering Jews. The fight must go on until the Nazis are defeated.

Musio thinks this over.

MUSIO
So we go with the Red Army?

SHALOM
Yes.

MUSIO
Markh?

MARKH
All the way to Berlin.

A moment of shared understanding between them.

EPILOGUE

ALL ACTORS, including Narrator, come to center of stage.

NARRATOR
Two weeks later, partisan units led the assault on Vilna and liberated the city with the help of the Soviet army. Ten months later, the Germans were defeated.

Yuditka, Bonchak and Yehuda survived the war and eventually emigrated to Israel. Shalom, Musio and Markh took part in the Soviet invasion of Germany, and survived to see the collapse of Nazi regime.

Fifty years later—a U.S. citizen and airline executive, with two daughters and two grandchildren—Shalom found his old war diaries. His wife Varda translated them into English and they published his memoirs as *The Defiant*. Shalom passed away in 2013 at the age of 88. This play is based on Shalom's account of actual events that took place in July, 1944.

THE END

NOTE: To watch Shalom Yoran, Abba Kovner and over 50 other Jewish partisans talk about their experiences in their own words, visit www.jewishpartisans.org/partisans.