FAYE SHULMAN

Context: Faye and her partisan unit return to her hometown during a raid on Nazi forces.

"Hurruh! Hurrah!" to unnerve the Nazis as we begin shooting. We burned their headquarters down over their heads. I am shooting blindly ahead. I do not see the faces into which I fire...

I find myself near my family's house and run inside. I am choked with emotion. This house has always been full of life, of people coming and going — relatives, friends, neighbours. And now total silence. The rooms empty, the home's rightful occupants dead. Potato peelings litter the floor where the Nazis had dropped them...

I stand in the centre of the room, transfixed, dry-eyed. In my mind I hear a strange urgent cry. It is my mother's voice. A cry with an echo. I see images of my sisters, my brother. Yes, I hear them all crying — a cry of the innocent, demanding remembrance: "Run! Fight! Resist!" That cry gives me no peace. I clench my fists. I myself cannot cry. No time for tears. The tension, the necessities of the moment overrule my inner feelings.

Another partisan runs into the house. It is Moishe, whom we have nicknamed Der Weisser, the blond. "This is your house. What do you think?" He bellows. "Shall we burn it down?"

My family is dead; my town has been occupied. I will never live here again. I do not want the murderers to have the use of our home. In less time than it takes to form these thoughts, I shout back at him "Burn it!" He pours gasoline on the living room floor. I light the matches. The house is instantly ablaze. As we retreat to the safety of the forest, I turned my head to watch the flames and smoke breaking through the sky. I feel heartbroken, devastated – something precious has been lost yet again.

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Photographed by Moishe Lazebnik, 1999 - Toronto Canada. JPEF / Faye Schulman, A Partisan's Memoir, Second Story Press.

Key Themes: Loss, suppressed grief, moral sacrifice, and the transformation of memory into motivation for resistance.

Faye Schulman (1919–2021)

Born in Lenin, Poland, Faye was a skilled photographer before the war. When the Nazis occupied her town, they murdered her parents and most of her siblings, sparing Faye only because of her photography skills the group needed in order to take identification photos. She escaped to the forest and joined a Soviet partisan unit, where she served as both a nurse and the group's unofficial photographer. Her camera became a tool of resistance—documenting Jewish survival and defying Nazi efforts to erase Jewish existence. After the war, she emigrated to Canada and spent decades sharing her testimony. Her photographs are among the only known visual records of Jewish partisans during the Holocaust.

Discussion Questions:

1. **Emotional Survival**: How does Faye balance the shock of seeing her destroyed home with the need to keep fighting?
2. **Memory & Motivation:** How do memories of her murdered family push her toward resistance?
3. **Moral Decisions:** What does Faye's choice to burn her house reveal about the impossible decisions partisans faced?

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SONIA ORBUCH

Context: Sonia and her family are trying to survive in the forest and seeking acceptance into a partisan unit.

“And ah, so we just didn't know where to go we were lost again and then this peasant [Tohund] came to us and he said look, there are rumors that partisans, Russian partisans in the vicinity, and but, I don't know whether they are friendly to Jews. They might kill you, but I might talk to them, perhaps they accept you, and we said well we have nothing to lose...
...he started interviewing us, he looked at us, skeletons were sitting there, 4 skeletons dirty, long hair overgrown and um, and he started asking questions, he says, so where are your weapons? We didn't have any weapons. So how many trains did you dynamite? We didn't. So I thought he was not going to take us in, but being that my uncle was a trained scout they ah, needed a scout to lead them into the vicinity where the partisans were. They were strangers in that part of the country so they took us in because of my uncle.”

Context: Sonia's uncle is killed in combat with the partisans.

“So there was a fight... the Ukrainian nationalists together with the Germans, started shooting and there was really a big fight, and my uncle tried to grab some weapon, an automatic weapon, and he was wounded, and they yelled at him that he should lie low, but he got up and....and he was killed. And when they came back to camp, they told my mother that her brother died. Of course she was very sad and cried, and she was hysterical... and the commander came over and he said: 'I'm sorry but here we don't cry. You can't cry here. Your brother died fighting the Nazis, he didn't die because he was a Jew; he died as a hero, and no crying is allowed here'.”

Sonia Orbuch, Oral History Testimony



Photo by Robert Tong / Marin Independent Journal (Dec. 5, 2001).

Key Themes: Desperation for refuge, antisemitism and skepticism from partisan units, the pressure to prove one's worth, the trauma of combat loss, and enforced emotional restraint.

Sonia Orbuch (1925–2018)

Born Sarah Shainwald in Luboml, Poland, Sonia fled into the forests with her family after the Nazi invasion. Desperate and starving, they sought acceptance into a Soviet partisan brigade. Sonia was one of the few Jewish women in the unit and faced both antisemitism and gender discrimination. She served as a nurse's assistant, caring for wounded fighters under primitive and dangerous conditions. Later in the war, she joined combat missions, carrying grenades and providing medical support on the front lines. After liberation, she married fellow partisan Isaak Orbuch and immigrated to the United States, where she became a dedicated educator and speaker about Jewish resistance.

Discussion Questions:

1. **Joining the Partisans:** What barriers—antisemitism, lack of weapons, gender—made it hard for Jewish refugees like Sonia to join partisan units?
2. **Identity:** How did Jewish fighters navigate being both Jews and Soviet partisans in groups that didn't always welcome them?
3. **Grief:** What does the "no crying" rule show about how partisans handled loss, and how might this have affected Sonia long-term?

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LILLIAN BIELSKY-BELL

Context: Lillian describes the daily realities and organization of life in the forest camp.

Q: What was your role as a woman or the other -- was it different than a man? Did you carry a gun with you?
A: Yeah, I had a gun. I didn't use too much, but I had.

Q: And what -- what were your every day jobs, besides being messengers?
A: You had to have -- there was -- there was hospitals, there was sick people, there was people in typhus. Look, in -- in my position, mostly I used to go is sometimes I stayed on the -- on the base, but if he used to go somewhere, not for -- for -- let's say to attacks, I used always to go with my husband. If it was to go and vi-visit somebody, or he had a meeting with the high authority, then he -- he wasn't the whole authority, they had the headquarters from the whole partisans of the woods...

Q: And when did you travel, at night?
A: Everything was at night, forget in -- in the woods about the day. We had -- we had a -- a wait for 10 days from the Germans. Nobody, not from Russia, not from [indecipherable] survived fully. Our -- we were at that time, I think, close to 800 - 900 people, and not one was missing. 10 days with no food in -- in -- sitting in water up to your throat.

Q: How did you do the cooking when [indecipherable]
A: Cookings was like this, for -- it was a general. Before each husband went on a -- some kind of operation, no matter how you watched him and how he was restricted, you had to bring -- you always brought something for his wife. So she used to prepare herself. But there was a general kitchen for everybody. Special attention to everyone, including the kids. We had rabbis, we had traditions. You could not force the people to do that, but the -- the people that wanted to observe, they did, they had no problem with it. They came to my husband, they asked they wanted to pray or they want to b -- to bake matzoh for Passover, they know the date, they were welcome to.



Interview with Lillian Bielsky-Bell by Gail Schwartz, June 25, 1992. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection.

Key Themes: Women's essential labor, community-building as resistance, endurance under extreme conditions, and the preservation of dignity and tradition.

Lillian Bielsky-Bell (1924–2018)

Lillian was only sixteen or seventeen when she escaped the liquidation of her ghetto and fled into the forests of Belarus. She joined the Bielski Otriad, the largest Jewish partisan group, which was unique in its mission to rescue and shelter Jews rather than focus solely on military operations. She married Asael Bielski, one of the group's leaders, and helped organize daily life in the camp—cooking, caring for the sick and children, and maintaining the community that saved over 1,200 Jewish lives. After the war, she learned Asael had been killed fighting with the Soviet army. She immigrated to the United States, carrying forward the memory of a resistance rooted not only in combat but in compassion, survival, and moral courage.

Discussion Questions:

1. **Women's Roles:** How did gender shape the work women did in the Bielski group, and why was this work essential?
2. **Endurance:** What does Lillian's account reveal about the mental and physical strength required to survive in the forest?
3. **Community as Resistance:** How does the Bielski Otriad show that resistance included building community, maintaining traditions, and protecting dignity?

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JEWISH WOMEN IN THE PARTISANS - TEACHER GUIDE

Grade Level: 9–12
Time: 45–60 minutes
Subject: History / Social Studies / Women's Studies

RATIONALE

During the Holocaust, thousands of Jewish men and women fled ghettos and labor camps to join partisan units in the forests of Eastern Europe. While women's contributions were often overlooked, they served as fighters, nurses, couriers, and organizers. This lesson examines how gender shaped Jewish women's experiences in resistance and how their actions redefine bravery and moral choice.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How did Jewish women participate in partisan groups during the Holocaust?
2. How did gender shape their experiences and responsibilities?
3. What do their stories teach us about resilience, leadership, and moral choice?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Describe the roles Jewish women held in partisan groups.
- Analyze how gender influenced their opportunities and challenges.
- Evaluate resistance, moral courage, and individual agency in crisis.
- Reflect on the significance of women's contributions to resistance.

TEACHER PREPARATION

- Review the profiles/testimonies of Sonia Orbuch, Faye Schulman, and Lillian Bielsky-Bell.
- Preview JPEF or USHMM testimony clips.
- Prepare copies of the Student Handout.
- Familiarize yourself with the Bielski Otriad.
- Display an Eastern Europe partisan activity map.

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Materials:

- Student Handout (profiles chart + discussion/reflection)
- Access to USHMM/JPEF resources
- Optional video: Women in the Jewish Partisans (5 min)
- Whiteboard/digital board

LESSON FLOW

1. I**ntroduction – Setting the Context (10 min)**

Teacher Explains: Some Jews resisted Nazi persecution by joining partisan groups in forests. Women took on crucial responsibilities such as nursing, gathering intelligence, maintaining morale, and survival work.

Warm-Up Questions:

a. What do you think resistance looked like during the Holocaust?
b. What roles might women have played? What barriers might they have faced?

Optional: Show intro video or images of partisans.

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2. Investigation – Learning from Testimony (20 min)

Activity:

- Students work in small groups to study 3 women's stories (shortened bios on the student handout). Groups complete the chart and discussion questions.

Three Women to Study (Short Descriptions):

- **Sonia Orbuch** – Nurse's assistant; later fought in battle.
- **Faye Schulman** – Photographer and nurse; documented partisan life.
- **Lillian Bielsky-Bell** – Organized daily life in the Bielski Otriad; vital support and survival work.

Full, extended biographies for teacher reference are moved to the Supplemental Section at the end.

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JEWISH WOMEN IN THE PARTISANS – TEACHER GUIDE

3. Discussion – Understanding Gender & Resistance (15 min)

Guiding Questions:

- What motivated these women to resist?
- How did gender shape their roles and limitations?
- What similarities/differences emerged across their stories?
- How do these stories challenge traditional ideas of heroism?

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3. Reflection & Assessment (10 min)

Individual Writing Prompts:

- Which woman's story impacted you most, and why?
- How does this lesson change your understanding of Holocaust resistance?
- What does resistance look like beyond fighting?

Assessment:

- Completion of student handout
- Discussion participation
- Thoughtful written reflection

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- JPEF: Women in the Partisans
- USHMM: Jewish Resistance
- *The Bielski Brothers* – Peter Duffy
- *Pictures of Resistance* – Faye Schulman
- Eta Wrobel Clip (5 min): Introduce key moment where she describes survival, gendered labor, and moral choice.

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JEWISH WOMEN IN THE PARTISANS – TEACHER GUIDE

3. SUPPLEMENTAL SECTION – FULL BIOGRAPHIES

Profile 1: Sonia Orbuch

- **Background:** Born Sarah Shainwald in Luboml, Poland, in 1925. After the Nazis invaded, she and her family fled into the forests and later joined the Soviet Molotava partisan brigade. The group was mostly non-Jewish, and Sonia was initially accepted only because they needed medical help.

- **Role:** Served as a nurse's assistant, tending to the wounded, distributing medicine, and maintaining morale under dangerous conditions. Toward the end of the war, she joined men in battle, carrying grenades and providing medical support on the front lines.

- **Significance:** As one of the few Jewish women in a Soviet partisan unit, Sonia's story highlights both gender barriers and the courage required for survival. Her work as a healer became its own form of resistance—preserving life where destruction reigned.

- **Legacy:** After the war, Sonia married fellow partisan Isaak Orbuch and immigrated to the United States. She became an educator and speaker, sharing her experiences to honor the memory of Jewish resistance.

JEWISH WOMEN IN THE PARTISANS - TEACHER GUIDE

Profile 2: Faye Schulman

- **Background:** Born in Lenin, Poland, in 1919. When the Nazis occupied her town, they executed most of the Jewish population—including her parents and siblings. Faye, a skilled photographer, was spared temporarily to take identification photos for the Germans. She soon escaped to the forest and joined a Soviet partisan unit.

- **Role:** Faye served as both a nurse and the group's unofficial photographer, documenting partisan life, medical care, and survival in the forests. She carried her camera on missions, developing film in makeshift darkrooms hidden in the woods. Despite limited supplies, she captured portraits of fighters, wounded soldiers, and moments of humanity amidst war.

- **Significance:** Her photographs are among the few known visual records of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. Faye's work defied Nazi efforts to erase Jewish identity—her camera became a tool of witness and survival. She once said, "I want people to know that there were Jews who fought back."

- **Legacy:** After the war, Faye emigrated to Canada, where she shared her story through lectures, interviews, and exhibitions. Her book Pictures of Resistance preserves her images and testimony, ensuring that Jewish partisans—especially women—are remembered as active resisters, not passive victims.

JEWISH WOMEN IN THE PARTISANS - TEACHER GUIDE

Profile 3: Lillian Bielsky-Bell

- **Background:** Born in prewar Poland, Lillian was only sixteen or seventeen when the Nazis began liquidating her ghetto. Her family escaped into the forests of what is now Belarus. She later joined the Bielski Otriad, a Jewish resistance group led by the Bielski brothers, and eventually married Asael Bielski, one of the group's key leaders. She recalled living "like an animal," hiding by day and moving by night until the group could establish a permanent camp.

- **Role:** At first, Lillian's role was survival itself—avoiding detection, hiding from German patrols, and enduring hunger and fear. Once the Bielski camp stabilized, she helped organize daily life: caring for children and the sick, cooking, sewing, and helping camouflage shelters. As Asael's wife, she was part of the command family but emphasized that she "never played the role of the commander's wife"—she worked alongside others, doing whatever was needed.

- **Significance:** Lillian's experience highlights how resistance extended beyond combat. Her compassion, endurance, and organization helped preserve a sense of community and dignity among the 1,200 Jews who found refuge with the Bielski partisans. Her relationship with Asael also reflects how emotional bonds—love, companionship, and mutual reliance—became essential for hope and psychological endurance.

- **Legacy:** After the war, Lillian learned that Asael had been killed fighting with the Soviet army. She later immigrated to the United States, carrying forward the memory of the Bielski Otriad's mission to save Jewish lives rather than focus solely on armed combat. Her testimony reveals that resistance was not only about weapons and warfare, but also about caregiving, perseverance, and moral courage—survival itself was a profound act of defiance.