



# Study Guide

## Gertrude Boyarski: From Frail Girl to Partisan Fighter

RECOMMENDED FOR  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

### Growing Up in Poland

"Was it possible that I lived through that?" says Gertrude Boyarski, referring to her experiences during World War II. "Sometimes I say, 'Was it only a nightmare, or was it true?'"



Gertrude Salutski in a 1938 family photograph. Source: Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation Archives.

Her family's hardships began in 1939, when war came to Poland. Gertie was sixteen years old when her country was attacked from the west by Germany, and then from the east by the Soviet Union. Her home town of Derechin, in eastern Poland, was occupied by Red Army troops and the area was annexed by the Soviet Union.

By the time she graduated from high school, Gertie had learned to speak Russian, which had replaced Polish as the official language. She was a good student and had the opportunity to pursue more advanced studies in another

town, but her parents wouldn't let her leave home because she was frail and often had been sick as a child. Instead, she stayed with her family and studied to become a tailor.

The oldest of four children, Gertie belonged to a religious family. Her mother lit the Sabbath candles every Friday night, her father went to *shul* [synagogue] to pray every day, and the family observed the Jewish dietary laws. Gertie's father made his living as a butcher for the Jewish community, and in the summer he earned extra money by painting houses.

### Germans Take Over

In June 1941, Germany broke its non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union and invaded the country. Three months later German forces attacked Derechin. Eighteen-year-old Gertie was with friends just outside the town when they heard planes overhead and the sound of bombs exploding. The German occupiers immediately

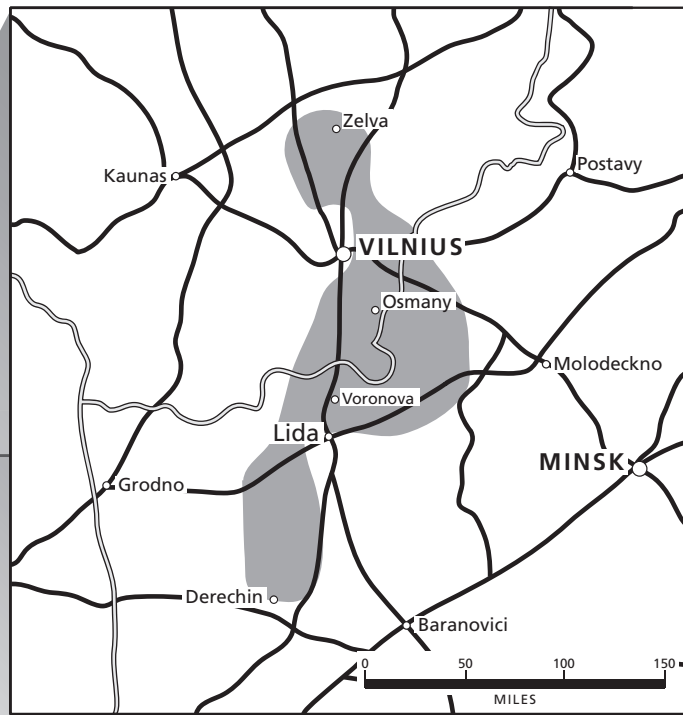
subjected Derechin's Jewish population to a series of harsh restrictions: Jews had to wear a yellow badge with the Star of David attached to their clothing. They had to walk in the streets, not on the sidewalk, and could no longer use public transportation. They couldn't enter theaters or libraries, or go outdoors at night. They had to turn over all their money, jewelry, and other valuables to the Germans, and they had to work for them whenever they were told to do so.

The Germans created a ghetto in Derechin and forced the town's Jewish population to move into it. Certain Jews who were skilled in a trade and regarded as "useful" to the Germans were placed outside the ghetto. Because Gertie's father was a house painter, her family was taken out of the ghetto and placed in a building in front of the police station, where they lived for almost a year. They couldn't move about freely, but because they lived outside the ghetto they were called "the living Jews" by those who lived inside. During this time, Gertie helped to provide for her family by using her skills as a tailor, usually receiving food, such as a chunk of butter, in payment for her work.

In 1942, Nazi Germany began to implement "the Final Solution," the plan to exterminate all the Jews of Europe. The Germans began to systematically destroy the ghettos and deport the remaining Jews to concentration camps and death camps.

Late one summer night, on July 24, 1942, Gertie's father heard a commotion in the police station and suspected the Germans were going to initiate a mass killing in the ghetto. He went up to the roof of his building to see what was happening. A friend of her father's said, "Ah, they are not going to kill us. They'll kill those in the ghetto." But Gertie's father said, "How come you don't understand the situation? Aren't you a Jew? They'll kill us just as well as they kill them."

*On September 1, 1939 Poland had a thriving Jewish community of over three million Jews. Today there are less than 10,000 known Jews living in Poland.*



The shaded area in the upper map is the approximate area where Gertie Boyarski's group was active. Map drawn using contemporary borders.

Photo at right: Dr. Yehezkel Atlas, the commander who organized the survivors of Derechin into a partisan unit and led them in a revenge attack on the Derechin police station. Courtesy of Yad Vashem Archives.

## Escape to the Forest

Gertie's mother told her four children to get out of bed and get dressed. They were going to escape. There was a guard in their back yard, but when he moved to a different post at the center of town, the family decided to make a run for it. They hurried to an underground cellar where they hid for several hours before fleeing into the cornfields and then to the outlying woods. That night, almost all the inhabitants of the ghetto—between 3,000 to 4,000 Jews—were murdered.

In the forest, Gertie's family joined up with a group of 250 other Jews who had escaped from the ghetto. The forest also contained Soviet and Polish soldiers who had escaped from German concentration camps where they had been held as prisoners of war. These soldiers formed the largest number of partisans in the area, and they were under the command of a Russian named Pavel

Bulak. It was Commander Bulak who took charge of organizing most of the Jewish survivors from Derechin.

Also in the forest was Yehezkel Atlas, a daring young Jewish doctor with a persuasive personality, who had been providing medical assistance to local farmers and partisans. Dr. Atlas formed a partisan unit of some 50 Derechin survivors. He was intent on avenging the deaths of those who had lost their lives in the ghetto and urged an immediate attack on



Derechin. Commander Bulak disagreed; he thought the partisans didn't have the experience or enough weapons to be successful.

Commander Bulak said he had been taught to believe that the Jews were not fighters, and he challenged the Jewish men to prove themselves. If they could break into the Derechin police station and bring back the ammunition stored there, he would take the fighters into his partisan units and help protect the women and children who could not fight. Some of the women cried, wondering if their men would return alive. But Gertie's mother

said, "If my husband or son will be killed, I'll be proud. At least they'll be killed fighting."

Two weeks after the Derechin massacre, 300 partisans, a third of them Jewish, descended on the town under cover of night. It was Dr. Atlas and the Derechin survivors who were the first to enter the town and break into the police station. With very few weapons, the partisans attacked and killed over 60 policemen and returned to the forest with badly needed arms and ammunition.

It was a hugely successful operation, and Gertie's father and brother returned unharmed. Once Commander Bulak saw that "we meant business," says Gertie, he assigned the Jews to various fighting units under his command. Gertie's mother and the two youngest children were placed in a "family camp" in the woods, which provided refuge for women, children, the sick, and the elderly. Gertie chose to accompany her father and brother to one of the fighting units. She could have stayed with her mother, but "sitting and hiding behind my mother's skirts didn't feel right," she says. "I figured in the fighting unit I could take revenge, I could do something good."

## Life and Death in the Partisans

Gertie's unit was made up of about 50 people and included Russians, Poles, and Jews. The few women in the group were expected to cook, wash clothes, and provide general support. Both men and women were given rifles and taught how to clean, load, and shoot them. When the men went on a mission to attack or sabotage German troops, they sometimes took women along to serve as a backup unit or to give first aid to the wounded.

Life in the woods was difficult for the women in Gertie's group, especially during the early days before Commander Bulak imposed stricter discipline on the troops under his command. Men returning from a mission with clothes and food used these items to barter for sexual favors from the women. A woman on her own often felt obliged to partner with a man for protection. Gertie felt lucky that her father and brother were there to make sure that she got the clothes and food she needed. "I didn't have to sell myself to somebody that they should bring me a coat or a dress or a piece of bread," she says.

Those who stayed in the family camp, like Gertie's mother and her two young children, relied on the partisans for protection. The family camps were threatened not only by German soldiers, but by local people who shared the Nazis' hatred of Jews and helped to hunt them down.

Gertie used to take turns with her father and brother visiting the family camp, to bring food to her mother and the children. During one of her visits, there was a surprise attack. Local collaborators raided the camp and began shooting. Gertie's mother was shot and killed, and her sister was wounded. In shock, Gertie led her brother and sister through the forest to their father's partisan unit. Once they were reunited, Gertie's father took his three children back to the family camp and remained there to care for them.

Soon after, another tragedy struck. A second attack on the family camp left Gertie's father, brother, and sister dead. Gertie even knew one of the murderers, a young Polish man who had once been her partner in a dance class. "The power of life is very strong," says Gertie. "Although I saw everybody dead in front of me, yet I pleaded for my life." Her former classmate said, "You're a Jew. You must die." He fired his machine gun at her and the men left her for dead.

Gertie, who had felt the rush of bullets coming at her, was astonished to realize that she hadn't been hit. "I'll never forget that night," she says. "It was a beautiful, beautiful night, with white snow and a blue sky—and my life was black. Here I am, all alone in the woods. I didn't know where to go, how to go . . . but I started to go with the path in the snow and I came to the family group."

Gertie's one surviving brother continued to fight as a partisan. He always made a point of visiting Gertie in the family camp before he set out on a mission. He would kiss her goodbye and say, "Don't worry, I'll come back. I saw Mommy in a dream and she said, 'Go, take revenge.'" But during one visit, he cried because his mother hadn't appeared in a dream to reassure him. He wondered aloud if he and Gertie would see each other again. He never returned.

## Test to Stay in the Partisans

"That's how I lost everybody and remained all by myself," says Gertie. "I was all alone. My life was nothing, yet I wanted to live." Desiring revenge,

## More Information on the Jewish partisans

*The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation recommends these resources for further information.*

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### Books

**Jewish Resistance in Occupied Eastern Europe**  
by Reuben Ainsztein

**The Jewish Resistance**  
by Lester and Lazar Eckman

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### Films

**The Partisans of Vilna**, a film by Aviva Kempner.  
Available for rental in VHS in some independent video stores.

The following short films are available online at:  
[www.jewishpartisans.org/film.php](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/film.php)

**Introduction to the Jewish Partisans**

**Partisans Through the Eyes of the Soviet Newsreel**

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

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### Web Sites

Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation:  
[www.jewishpartisans.org](http://www.jewishpartisans.org)

Simon Wiesenthal Center:  
<http://motlc.wiesenthal.com>

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:  
<http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/jpart.htm>



Gertie Boyarski with her husband Sam, taken on their wedding day, 1946.

she decided to return to the fighting unit. She went to Commander Bulak and said, "I want to come back because everybody's killed and I remain all by myself." Bulak was dismissive of her and said, "You girls don't want to fight; you girls want to come to the group to have a good time." But Gertie was insistent. "I want to fight and take revenge for my whole family," she said. "I had seventeen cousins, five uncles, and five aunts that were killed in the ghetto. I want to take revenge."

Commander Bulak was impressed by her conviction and agreed to let Gertie join the unit on one condition: she would have to serve as a guard for two weeks, on her own, about a mile away from the group. She would receive a horse, a rifle and a gun, and food would be brought to her once a day by a partisan who would identify himself with a password. If she heard any unusual noises, she was to notify the group. Gertie agreed. "I was all alone in the woods, in the middle of the night, dark, and each time I hear a little noise, I thought it's Germans, but it was animals. I was afraid of the animals too, but I said I'm going to do it and I did it. Two weeks—it was like two years."

By this time, Commander Bulak was making a greater effort to instill discipline in the fighting units and to protect the women from sexual threats. He told the women they could count on him for support, says Gertie. "He used to say that if you need a pair of pants, if you need a pair of shoes, don't ask anybody. Just come to me." When a Polish girl who shared Gertie's bunker was raped by several men in the group, the commander's punishment was swift. The man responsible for

initiating the rape was told to stand in front of the other partisans as his crime was announced. He was then shot.

## Daily Life

During Gertie's first year in the forest, her partisan unit had to conserve ammunition. Their weapons came from the German soldiers they killed, although they also received ammunition from sympathetic Polish villagers. Later, as the war progressed, the partisans were better organized and had radios, which allowed

them to make contact with the Soviet Army. By 1943, they were receiving weapons and ammunition through parachute drops made by the Soviet air force.

Day-to-day life in the woods was unpredictable. At times, the partisans were on the move every day and had to sleep out in the snow, wrapped up in a blanket. But when things were quiet, they might stay in one place for weeks, or even months. Sometimes the partisans would come back to their old bunkers only to find them destroyed. The bunkers they built, called *zemlyankas* [the Russian word for "dugout"], were dug out of the dirt and usually slept four to six people on beds of straw. Some had round ovens inside to provide warmth.

When the group was more or less settled in one location, they generally had enough to eat, getting butter and meat from the local villagers. The villagers were usually willing to give food to the partisans, says Gertie; but if not, "we took it with a gun." When they got a young cow or a pig, they slaughtered the animal and hung it up, then sliced off pieces as needed to cook in a big kettle. Gertie recalls the time she was traveling with a group of fourteen people and they had nothing to eat but snow for six days. They came across some garbage—a pig's head and a pile of potato peelings full of worms—and used these discarded foods to make a meal. Gertie cried as she ate pork for the first time, for doing so was against the dietary laws she had grown up with, but starvation made this meal "a treasure."

The partisans had connections with people in the villages and only went into a village when they

## Questions

**1.** Although Gertrude and her family were called "the living Jews," Gertrude's father understood that they would share the same fate as their fellow Jews inside the ghetto. Do you think that this awareness may have contributed to his daughter's survival? How? What other factors may have helped Gertrude to stay alive against all odds?

**2.** It was common practice for commanders of partisan units to demand that all forest fugitives prove themselves before being accepted into a unit. Describe the two tests Gertrude and her family undergo in order to join the partisans. What are their attitudes toward these tests? Have you ever had to prove yourself before being accepted into a group? How did it make you feel?

**3.** How did the roles of men and women differ in Commander Bulak's partisan unit? How did these differences affect women's safety and ability to stay alive? What were the special obstacles women needed to overcome in order to survive?

**4.** List the ways in which the local population aided Gertrude's family and her partisan unit and the ways in which they betrayed them. What conclusions can you draw regarding the nature of Polish-Jewish relations during this time?

**5.** Gertrude believes that it was a desire for revenge that fueled her transformation from a frail young girl into a hardened partisan fighter. What does this tell you about human nature? How has a significant event in your life transformed you?

Questions continue on following page.

knew it was safe. The units Gertie fought with "never killed people in the villages" because most of the villagers hated the Germans and supported partisan activities. Once in a great while, the partisans even entered the homes of sympathetic villagers to sleep or to take a bath.

In general, the German soldiers preferred to stay on the roads and on the outskirts of the forest. "They were afraid to go deep into the woods," says Gertie, where the hidden partisans could see them, but they couldn't easily see the partisans. When the Germans did enter the woods, they came in large groups and brought dogs with them. "The woods were our protection," says Gertie. "That's why we mostly survived."

Gertie's group sometimes joined up with other detachments to go on a mission. The aim of these large operations was to force the Germans out of the villages. Commander Bulak "was very aggressive," says Gertie, and his units "were very, very organized." When Polish informants told Bulak that German soldiers were coming to a certain town on a certain day, the commander mounted an aggressive attack. "We didn't wait that they should come to us," says Gertie. "We went to that village and waited for them. And when they came in, we ambushed them and we killed them."

On International Women's Day, an important holiday celebrated annually in the Soviet Union, Gertie and a girlfriend volunteered to burn down a small wooden bridge used often by German soldiers. At gunpoint, they got kerosene and straw from local peasants and successfully set fire to the bridge, completely demolishing it. They presented their commander with a burned section of the bridge as their contribution to International Women's Day. He was pleased because their effort kept the Germans from traveling that route for almost a month, and Gertie and her friend were awarded the Order of Lenin medal, one of the Soviet Union's highest honors.



Gertrude Boyarski in 2003. Source: Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation Archives.

## End of the War and Beyond

When the war ended in 1945, with almost all of her family dead, Gertie learned that a cousin, Sam Boyarski, had also survived by joining a unit of partisan fighters. They married that year, and lived in Italy before settling in the United States in 1949.

When Gertie thinks back to the frail girl she used to be, she herself is surprised at her transformation into a partisan fighter who withstood innumerable hardships. When asked what fueled that transformation, she says, "It's the revenge. It's the revenge that was in me."

Her message to students studying the Holocaust is that "they should not be afraid of their identity—no matter what color, race, or nationality—and they should fight for it." Gertrude Boyarski regularly talks to school audiences about her wartime experiences and feels that her talks are a way to honor her relatives. "When your father or mother dies, you have a cemetery to go to. I have no cemetery to go to. When I go to speak in school, it's like I go to the cemetery. To me, it feels like I'm going to pay a tribute to my loved ones."

## Questions continued

**6.** According to Gertrude, young people "should not be afraid of their identity—no matter what color, race, or nationality—and they should fight for it." Do you agree? What other lessons can we learn from Gertrude's experiences? How do these lessons relate to your life today?

## Hear and See Gertrude Boyarski

To see a video of Gertie and hear her speak in her own words, go to [www.jewishpartisans.org](http://www.jewishpartisans.org) and click on 'Featured Partisan.'

## Ask A Partisan

Ask a panel of partisans any question you like and get a



personalized answer on-line.

Or read the questions and answers already posted. Go to: [www.jewishpartisans.org/ask.php](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/ask.php)

## Sources

For a complete list of sources for all the material found in this study guide, please consult our website: [www.jewishpartisans.org/sources](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/sources)

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