



Gertie Boyarski
Derechin, Poland

Jewish Women in the Partisans

**“I want to fight and take
revenge for my whole family.”
– Gertrude Boyarski**

Gertrude “Gertie” Boyarski was born in Derechin, Poland, in 1922. She was the oldest of four children and was brought up in a very religious household. Gertie enjoyed reading and was a good student. She had basic schooling 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 had often been sick as a child.

After Germany broke its non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union in 1941, Derechin was occupied by the Nazis. The town’s Jewish population was forced into a ghetto. On July 24, 1942, the Nazis began massacring the over 3,000 Jews in the ghetto. The Boyarski family managed to escape into a nearby forest. They joined a group composed of 250 other Jews who had escaped the ghetto, and a group of Soviet and Polish soldiers who had escaped from concentration camps where they had been held prisoner. These soldiers hid in the forest and formed a resistance group to fight back against the Nazis.

Gertie’s mother and two youngest siblings were placed in a family camp in the woods, which provided refuge for women, children, the sick, and the elderly. But nineteen-year-old Gertie accompanied her father and brother to one of the fighting units. The few women in the unit were expected to cook, wash clothes, and occasionally assist on missions.

In the months that followed, Gertie saw her mother, father, sister, and brother murdered before her eyes in surprise attacks by German

soldiers and antisemitic Poles who hunted the woods for Jews. Bereft of family and seeking revenge, Gertie approached the leader of the detachment, Commander Bulak. “I want to fight and take revenge for my whole family,” Gertie insisted.

Impressed by her conviction, Bulak agreed under one condition: she must prove her worth by standing guard alone, for two weeks, a mile from the partisan encampment. “I was alone in the woods. Each time I heard a little noise, I thought it was Germans. Two weeks — it was like two years.” But Gertie persisted and was accepted into the group.

On International Women’s Day, an important holiday in the former Soviet Union, Gertie and her comrade volunteered for a dangerous mission to burn down a critical bridge used by German soldiers. Her partisan group was in short supply of fuel, so Gertie and her comrade had to steal the kerosene and straw from local villagers who were collaborating with the Nazis.

The teens stealthily approached their target and moved into position to light the fire. As the bridge began to burn, German soldiers spotted the blaze from afar. Under a barrage of bullets, Gertie and her comrade remained in place until the bridge was engulfed in flames and destroyed. Their efforts kept the Germans from traveling that route for almost a month.

Gertie fought as a partisan for three years. After the war, she married a fellow partisan, and they settled in the United States.



Marisa Diena
Turin, Italy

Jewish Women in the Partisans

“We were proud to have fought against injustice. We were proud to have participated in making the world a better place than it was before.”

– Marisa Diena

Marisa Diena was born in Turin, Italy, on September 29, 1916, to two loving Jewish parents. She was eight years old when Benito Mussolini became Italy's dictator. Marisa was taught to love Fascism. All children were required to be in youth organizations and wear uniforms.

Italy passed its first Racial Laws in 1938, imitating the Nazi Racial Purity laws. Jews were suddenly banned from working in the public sector and from attending public school. In 1940, Italy declared war on Britain and France. By 1942, Turin was bombed on an almost daily basis. In 1943, Italy was in a state of civil war. Mussolini was deposed in July of that year, following the Allied invasion of Sicily. Germany responded by seizing control of Northern and Central Italy and reinstating Mussolini as the head of a new puppet regime. After the Nazis occupied Turin, Marisa followed her partisan brother to a hideout in the Italian mountains.

Marisa joined the partisans after her brother was killed on a mission. The role of women in the Italian partisans was unique: since most male partisans were army deserters, only women could move around during the day without arousing suspicion. During the day, Marisa would ride her bicycle around the countryside, collecting information from local informers. Each night, she would report back to her commander.

Marisa became Vice-Commander of Information Services for her unit, enlisting and training other young women to become spies and couriers.

“No one suspected our involvement. We didn't have all the things that a real army has, like communications services. Instead, we had the peasant girls, who could maintain connections and pass information back and forth,” Marisa explained.

In addition to sabotage and guerrilla warfare, Italian partisans tried to keep order in the war-ravaged countryside. Marisa's unit created local community committees in the Torre Pellice region to distribute rations and helped organize strikes among industrial workers in cities like Turin.

In the spring of 1945, the estimated 300,000 partisans working in Northern Italy organized a national liberation committee. On April 25, 1945, Marisa's partisan unit liberated Turin, while their comrades in other major cities did the same. After the war, as Italian democracy began to blossom, Marisa was active in the country's politics. She witnessed the ratification of the new Italian Constitution in 1948. Marisa stayed in Italy after the war, sharing her experience as a partisan with elementary school children.



Sara Fortis
Chalkis, Greece

Jewish Women in the Partisans

“This is my country, I was born and raised here. The Greeks are my people, their fight is my fight. This is where I belong.”

– Sara Fortis

Sara Fortis (Sarika Yehoshua) was born in Chalkis, Greece in 1927. Chalkis was a beautiful town on the beach, with tiny houses and gardens entwined with vines and flowers. Sara's father died when she was two months old, and Sara and her older sister were raised by their mother. Sara had a passion for learning, but her mother discouraged her from going to school, believing it was more important for her to learn a trade. But Sara wanted to learn and would copy out textbooks by hand. Her mother finally relented, on the condition that Sara would learn to work with her over summer breaks.

When the Italians invaded Greece in October 1940, Sara was in high school. She volunteered for a nursing course and cared for the wounded soldiers sent to Chalkis from the Albanian front. In April 1941, Germany invaded Greece to assist Italy. The Italians did not persecute Jews in their zone, but Sara learned that the Germans and Bulgarians were deporting Jews from the north in 1943. After the war, she discovered that they had been sent to their deaths. Following Italy's surrender to the Allies, the Nazis began their persecution of the remaining Jews in Greece.

Sara and her mother escaped into the mountains where the local resistance was headquartered. The resistance settled them in the remote village of Kuturla. It was a 6-hour journey by donkey over perilous mountain paths. They were given new identities, and Sara passed as “Maria,” the new teacher. The

resistance also placed Sara's cousin, Medi, in a nearby village as a teacher. After the tragic death of her cousin at the hands of the Nazis, Sara approached the partisan unit and asked for permission to avenge her cousin's death personally. Her request was granted.

The central command agreed to form a women's unit. Sara's intelligence and aggressive leadership skills were invaluable to the unit. She was trained in the use of a pistol and the Molotov cocktail. She traveled from village to village to recruit other girls who wanted to fight and taught them to become fighters. Sara's band of female partisans became indispensable to the male fighters. On their first mission, they were ordered to throw Molotov cocktails to distract the enemy and allow the partisans to attack. Impressed by their skills, the male partisans invited the all-female group to join in many missions.

Sara became a prominent and respected figure in the Greek resistance movement. By the age of eighteen, she was known as “Kapetenissa (Captain) Sarika.” After the war, Greece descended into civil war. Left and right-wing factions inside the country battled for control. Sara's group fell out of favor with the new Greek government, and Sara was arrested. However, due to her outstanding reputation, she was released shortly after. Sara eventually immigrated to Israel, where she met her husband.



Sonia Orbuch
Luboml, Poland

Jewish Women in the Partisans

“I want young people to know we were fighting back and that you can always find a way to fight back against injustice, racism, or antisemitism.”

– Sonia Orbuch

Sonia Orbuch (Sarah Shainwald) was born in the small town of Luboml, Poland, in 1925. She lived in the center of town and grew up under the caring watch of her tightly knit family. “My older brother, Shneyer, used to take care of me all the time,” Sonia recalled. “I was so proud of him that I would sometimes deliberately forget lunch, and he would come to school on his bicycle to deliver it to me.”

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Under the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, Poland was divided between the two powers. On September 17, the Soviets invaded Poland from the east, and Luboml became part of the Soviet Union. In July 1941, Germany broke the non-aggression pact and launched Operation Barbarossa – the invasion of the Soviet Union. When the Nazis marched into Luboml, life drastically changed for the Jewish population. The Jews were forced into a ghetto and required to wear yellow stars to identify them as Jewish.

News quickly spread when the Nazis began killing Jews in the Luboml Ghetto. Sonia’s brother and several male friends escaped to join a partisan group. Sonia wanted to join them, but their group only accepted young men. The forest was the only hope for Sonia and her parents. They hid among the trees, where they survived for months in freezing temperatures.

Sonia and her parents made contact with a nearby battalion of Russian partisans through the help

of a sympathetic local peasant. Sonia’s uncle was a trained scout with the Russian partisans, and therefore, they accepted Sonia and her parents into their group. Sonia was assigned to guard duty and learned the skills of a field-hospital aide, treating the wounds of injured partisans and using whatever makeshift supplies were available.

When the Germans lost the battle of Stalingrad in February 1943, the course of the war changed. The Germans began to flee, and the Russian front advanced toward the Kovel area, where Sonia’s unit was ordered to engage them in battle. Partisan casualties were very high. Seventy wagon loads of wounded arrived at the makeshift field hospital. For ten days and ten nights, Sonia worked constantly to ease pain and suffering where she could. While treating the wounded on the battlefield, bullets flew by Sonia’s head, but she did not falter, recalling, “I did not even duck down. If I was going to be killed, I was going to be killed because I was a fighter and not because I was a Jew.”

After the war, Sonia married Isaac Orbuch, who had served in the Polish and Soviet armies and lost his entire family. They lived in a Displaced Persons’ Camp (DP Camp) in Germany before immigrating to the United States in 1949. They had two children and settled in Northern California. In 2009, Sonia published her autobiography entitled *Here, There Are No Sarahs*.



Brenda Senders
Sarni, Poland

Jewish Women in the Partisans

“Take me in. I want to fight.”
– Brenda Senders

Brenda Senders was born on August 20, 1925, in Sarni, Poland. She was the daughter of a forester, an upbringing that would help her survive during the war.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Under the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, Poland was divided between the two powers. On September 17, the Soviets invaded Poland from the east, and Sarni became part of the Soviet Union. Brenda attended a Russian school.

In July 1941, Germany broke the non-aggression pact and launched Operation Barbarossa – the invasion of the Soviet Union. When the Nazis marched into Sarni, life drastically changed for the Jewish population. The Jews were forced into a ghetto. In 1942, the Nazis sent the ghetto inhabitants to a death camp.

Someone managed to smuggle a pair of wire cutters into the camp and cut a hole through the fencing, allowing Brenda, her sister, and hundreds of other prisoners to escape. Many of the escapees were caught, but Brenda and her sister were lucky enough to be hidden by a local Christian family who knew their father. Eventually, the sisters fled into the forest.

After several months in hiding, Brenda connected with a large Soviet-backed partisan

unit, made up of 1600 people. “Take me in. I want to fight,” she told them. Though she was unarmed, Brenda’s determination to fight and her familiarity with the local forests convinced the partisan general that she was fit to join.

Brenda left her sister in hiding with a local peasant. “If you betray her, remember – I will come for revenge,” she warned. Brenda learned how to shoot a gun and ride a horse. She joined the partisan cavalry and became one of the general’s bodyguards. She also served as a courier, aided by her knowledge of Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish.

Brenda’s unit was constantly on the move. They occupied villages, conducted ambushes, shot passing German troops, blew up bases, and obliterated bridges and train tracks. “We didn’t let [the Nazis] rest day or night,” Brenda proudly recalled.

After the war, Brenda left Russia and escaped to Austria. She lived in a Displaced Persons (DP) camp, where she was reunited with her sister. In the DP camp, Brenda met her future husband, Leon Senders, a fellow former partisan. Brenda and Leon were married in 1945. They immigrated to the United States that same year. Brenda and Leon had three children and seven grandchildren.



Mira Shelub
Zdziedciol, Poland

Jewish Women in the Partisans

“In the forest, we did not only fight a physical battle, but also a spiritual battle. We were sitting around the fire, singing songs together, supporting each other and dreaming about better days and a better future — a better tomorrow.”

– Mira Shelub

Mira Shelub (Mira Raznov) was born in Zdziedciol, Poland, in 1922. She grew up in a happy home with her parents and two siblings. Mira was very studious and dreamed of becoming a teacher. She attended a Yiddish elementary school and was awarded a scholarship to attend a prestigious school in Vilna that prepared students for university. At the age of thirteen, Mira moved to Vilna. She lived with her extended family while pursuing her studies of Yiddish literature and language.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Under the German-Soviet non-aggression pact signed between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Poland was divided between the two powers. On September 17, the Soviets invaded Poland from the east, and Zdziedciol became part of the Soviet Union. In July 1941, Germany broke the pact and invaded the Soviet Union. Mira's studies ended, and she returned home. When the Nazis marched into Zdziedciol, life drastically changed for the Jewish population. The Jews were forced into a ghetto and required to wear yellow stars to identify them as Jewish.

In August 1942, the Nazis began liquidating the ghetto. Mira and her sister survived by hiding behind a false wall in a chicken coop. After emerging from their hiding place, they were

taken with other survivors to a forced labor camp in Dvoretz. One day, partisans sneaked into the labor camp looking for a doctor. Mira and her sister convinced the partisans to let them join their group.

Mira's partisan group engaged in sabotage against the Nazis and their Polish collaborators by disrupting communications and transportation to the war front. Mira was a trusted night patroller who guarded the group while the partisans slept. She was also an armorer who helped manage the weapons. Mira met her husband, Nochim, while they were both on patrol. Nochim decided to form his own partisan unit because antisemitism was common among the non-Jewish resistance fighters. Mira joined him and carried extra ammunition for his machine gun as they moved around the forests.

After the war, the couple lived in a Displaced Persons' Camp in Austria before immigrating to the United States in 1949. They settled in San Francisco, where they raised three children. Mira fulfilled her dreams of completing her education and becoming a teacher. After earning her bachelor's and master's degrees from San Francisco State University, she went on to become a Yiddish scholar, teacher, and counselor.



Eta Wrobel
Lokov, Poland

Jewish Women in the Partisans

“The biggest resistance that we could have done to the Germans was to survive.”

– Eta Wrobel

Eta Wrobel was born on December 28, 1918, in Lokov, Poland. She was one of ten children. Her father owned a bakery that supplied the local stores. Eta, her mother, and siblings participated in Jewish Theater and sang in the choir. Eta's parents taught her the importance of helping people, no matter the circumstance. She was a free spirit who defied authority. As Eta puts it, “I was born a fighter. I was always a fighter.”

After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, Lokov fell under Nazi occupation. Eta worked as a clerk in an employment agency and used her position to forge false identity papers for fellow Jews. The Nazis established a ghetto in Lokov, and it was liquidated in October 1942. Much of Eta's family members were sent to their deaths at the Treblinka Concentration Camp.

In May 1943, Eta and her father escaped into the woods to join the partisans. Life in the woods around Lokov was extremely treacherous. Eta helped organize an all-Jewish partisan unit of close to eighty people. Her unit stole most of their supplies, slept in cramped quarters, and had almost no access to medical

supplies or services. At one point, Eta was shot in the leg. The unit's only doctor, too busy treating another patient, gave Eta a knife, a bottle of “spiritus” -- vodka -- and a brief set of instructions. Eta dug the bullet out of her leg with the knife, and used a shot of vodka to sterilize the wound.

Eta's unit set mines to hinder the German Army's movements and to cut off their supply routes. Unlike the other seven women in the unit, Eta refused to cook or do the cleaning. Her dynamic personality and military skills made this exception possible. She was active on missions with the men and made vital strategic decisions.

In 1944, when the Germans left Lokov, Eta returned home. She was the only child in her family to survive the Holocaust. At the insistence of her town, Eta became mayor of Lokov. Shortly after, Eta met Henry, her husband-to-be. They were married on December 20, 1944. In 1947, Eta and Henry moved to the United States. They lived in New Jersey and had three children and nine grandchildren.