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7. Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust

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GHETTOS, FORESTS, AND CAMPS IN EASTERN EUROPE

JEWISH FAMILY CAMPS IN THE FORESTS — AN ORIGINAL MEANS OF RESCUE

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In the spring and summer of 1942, the overwhelming majority of the Jews in Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine were murdered by the Nazis. Most of those who survived this initial wave of extermination were wiped out during the first half of 1943. In several places, labor camps with Jewish internees remained, but as far as the Germans were concerned, those areas were considered judenrein.

In the course of the massive Soviet offensive which began in late June and continued through July 1944, Belorussia and Western Ukraine were liberated. Several thousand Jewish men, women, and children, who had found refuge in “family camps,” and Jewish partisans, who had fought against the Nazis for years, emerged from the forests of Belorussia, Polesye, and Northern Volhynia following the retreat of the Germans.

The family camp in the forest was a special means of rescue which has hitherto been mentioned in the stories and memoirs of many Holocaust survivors. Family camps in the forest were made up of groups of Jewish men, women, and children — individuals and families — of various ages who found refuge in the forests of Eastern Poland and Western U.S.S.R. The camps varied in size; some had only several families while others were made up of hundreds of families and individuals. The two largest camps were in the Naliboki forest — the camp headed by Tuviah Bielski, which had approximately 1,200 persons, and the camp under the leadership of Shlomo Zorin, where about 800 people found shelter.¹

¹ Testimony of Anatol Wertheim, Yad Vashem Archives (hereafter — YVA), 0-3/3861, p. 1 (hereafter — Wertheim Testimony). Wertheim was the Chief of Staff in Zorin’s camp. Sefer ha-Paritzanim ha-Yehudim, Vol. I, Merkha-
As a rule, the family camp included a group of armed men. Their role was to protect the members of the camp from the Germans and their collaborators, and from those inhabitants of the forest who plotted against the family camps. An additional function of the armed nucleus was to obtain food for the members of the camp, a task which was sometimes achieved by the use of force.

The family camp existed by virtue of its members' ability to remain alive in the forest. The major problems faced by the Jews in the forests were security, obtaining food, and the difficult physical conditions. The family camp was not dependent on the good will of the local population for shelter and food. The creation of the camps was parallel to, and in conjunction with, the formation of the Jewish partisan movement. In general, family camps could be found wherever there were concentrations of Jewish partisans, whether the latter fought in Jewish units or served as individuals in Soviet partisan units. In addition, there were several instances in which a family camp and a partisan group were combined in one unit. Family camps, however, did not exist in every place where there were Jewish partisans. Moreover, it is important to note that there were essential differences between the partisans and the family camps. Thus while the principal aim of the partisan units was to fight against the Nazis, this was only of secondary importance for those in the family camp, whose main objective was to save lives.

The existence of family camps was only possible in heavily forested regions such as those found in Belorussia, Polesye, and Northern Volhynia. The majority of the family camps — and the largest ones — were located in these areas. There were, however, several isolated family camps, comprising tens of families, in Eastern Galicia near Lvov, Stanislav, and the Lublin area.

The majority of the Jews in the family camps were originally from small town and villages, whose communities had numbered between several hundred and a few thousand Jews before the Holocaust. Most of these small towns were located near forests, thus the forest was neither faraway nor strange to the Jews of these communities. There were few Jews from the larger communities of five to ten thousand

via, 1958, p. 462 (hereafter — Sefer ha-Partizanim); testimony of Tuvyah Bielski, YVA, 0-3/3607, pp. 77, 86 (hereafter — Bielski Testimony).
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Jews, in the family camps. The only communities of this size from which Jews reached the forest were Baranovichi, Slonim, Sarny, and Lida — and the Jews from these cities constituted only a minority of the camp members. An exception is the case of the Jews from the Minsk Ghetto, which was one of the largest Jewish communities in that area.

By the end of 1941, a few Jewish families had already fled to the forests. However, the majority of those who left the ghettos and found refuge in the family camps were survivors of the wave of extermination which engulfed the cities and towns of Belorussia during the spring and summer of 1942. They were from Zhetl (Dyatlov), Zyrzyn, Novogrudok, Lida, Nesvizh, Kurenets, Gantsevichi, Sarny, etc. During and after the winter of 1942-1943, the Jews continued to reach the forests.

Jews from several ghettos fled to the forests after they revolted and burned down the ghetto during the final liquidation Akction. Thus, for example, the ghetto of Lachva was set on fire by its inhabitants during the Akction which took place in September 1942. Approximately 600 men broke out of the ghetto, but only 120 reached the forests. Others were murdered along the way by the local population. At the same time, the Jews of Tuchin rebelled, set their ghetto on fire, and fled to the forests. The majority, however, were murdered along the way by Ukrainian peasants. Jews from Nesvizh, Glubokoye, Shar kovshchina, and other communities fled to the forests after setting their ghettos on fire when the Germans tried to liquidate them.

In several ghettos — Minsk and Novogrudok, for example — families were taken to the forest prior to the destruction of the ghetto.

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3 Ibid., pp. 16-17; according to Bielski, in the winter of 1941-1942 he and 15 members of his family who were from the village of Stankevichi near Novogrudok set up a family camp in the forest. Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 424.
5 Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., pp. 682-683; Milchatot ha-Gettaot, op. cit., p. 489.
7 Milchatot ha-Gettaot, op. cit., p. 492.
8 Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., pp. 162-163.
Messengers sent from the Zorin family camp to Minsk, and from the Bielski family camp to Lida, Novogrudok, and Ivye, helped Jews flee from the ghetto.

There are no exact statistics on the number of Jews who were saved in this manner, nor is it known how many Jews found refuge in the family camps. Many Jews from the family camps were captured in German manhunts, and quite a few were murdered by the various groups which inhabited the forests: Polish underground — Armia Krajowa (A.K.) and Narodowe Siły Zbrojne (N.S.Z.) — Ukrainians (the Bandera Group and the Bulba Group), and even by Soviet partisan groups. Many were murdered by local peasants, and many died from various diseases and famine. The number of Jews who reached the forests was much larger than the number of those who were alive when the Soviet Army liberated the area in the summer of 1944. The table on the opposite page, which is based on evidence from various sources, lists the approximate number of Jews in the family camps:

We may, therefore, assume that the number of Jews saved in the family camps did not exceed 10,000.

While the family camps were being formed, there were differences of opinion among the founders regarding the optimal size for a family camp and the acceptance of additional families who reached the forests. Those who opposed the acceptance of additional members claimed that it was easier to hide and camouflage a smaller camp and to obtain food for its members. A smaller camp was also more mobile in the event of manhunts by the Germans. Those who favored the acceptance of every Jew who managed to escape from the ghettos and opposed limiting the size of the camp claimed that the rescue of Jews was above and beyond any other consideration. During the period in which the family camps were established — the initial half of 1942 — the debate on this issue was particularly sharp. At this point, the camps were set up near villages at the edge of the forest, in order to make it easier to obtain food. These locations were dangerous, however, since German units could easily reach these areas, and they did so when they had information on the presence of Jews.

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9 Bielski Testimony, pp. 24-25, 28, 53.
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#### JEWISH FAMILY CAMPS IN THE FORESTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Forest</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Number of Jews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kazhan</td>
<td>Kazhan</td>
<td>Yadov, Glubokoye, Sharkovshchina</td>
<td>400—600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myadel</td>
<td>Naroch</td>
<td>Vileika, Myadel, Kobylnik, Kurenets</td>
<td>500—700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lida</td>
<td>Nacha</td>
<td>Radun, Lida, Eishshkes, Zabolotye</td>
<td>200—300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novogrudok</td>
<td>Naliboki</td>
<td>Novogrudok, Lida, Irye, Mir, Dvorets</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Minsk and the surrounding area</td>
<td>700—800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nesvizh</td>
<td>Kopyl</td>
<td>Nesvizh, Stolbtsy, Svyezhen</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slonim</td>
<td>Lipichan</td>
<td>Byelitsa, Derechin, Slonim, Zhetl</td>
<td>300—600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volcha-Nora</td>
<td>Slonim, Kosov, Ivatsevichi</td>
<td>200—400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baranovichi</td>
<td>Svitich</td>
<td>Baranovichi, Slonim, Byten, Molchadz</td>
<td>200—400</td>
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<tr>
<td>N. Poleye</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinsk-C. Poleye</td>
<td>Bogdanovka Pohost, Lyakhovisi, Janov, Lyubeshov</td>
<td>500—700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Poleye</td>
<td>Svoricihevich</td>
<td>Sernik, Dubrovitsa, Vysotak,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kamen-Kashinski, Sarny</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volynia</td>
<td>Kokhov</td>
<td>Manevichi, Poworsk, Troyanov</td>
<td>150—250</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kostopol</td>
<td>Rovno, Rokitno, Berezno</td>
<td>150—200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kiesov</td>
<td>Korets, Rokitno</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bialystok</td>
<td>Bryansk</td>
<td>Bryansk, escapees from Treblinka-bound trains</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bialystok</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galicia</td>
<td>The Black Forest near Chelattice</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Piancha Forests</td>
<td></td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This debate also took place while Bielski’s camp was being organized. Bielski, who viewed the family camp as a means of saving large numbers of Jews, decided, contrary to the opinion of many, to accept every Jew who succeeded in reaching the camp.19 Starting in late 1942, the camps of Bielski and Zorin were ready to accept any Jew who reached the Naliboki forest.

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The daily routine in the family camps was characterized by security problems, movement from place to place to escape being discovered by the Germans, and the responsibilities involved in obtaining food and absorbing additional families. These routine experiences are described by a member of a family camp:

"...Every day we could expect to be attacked. We received information that the Germans had been informed of our whereabouts... At the beginning of April, every group was ordered to leave its hut and move on to the Barisov Forest in Stara-Pluta within twenty-four hours.

"We packed our things, loaded our rucksacks, folded our blankets on top, and set out on our way. The night was cloudy... our thoughts were gloomy... In our wanderings from forest to forest, from base to base, we lost many people... During the day the snow melted... We had to walk kilometers upon kilometers... Our feet got stuck in the mud... Everything was damp and wet... In this manner, we crossed forests, fields, and paths until we reached the Barisov Forest... We decided not to build huts... and we started to set up thatched booths.

"Within a few days, all the groups had gathered in one place. We began to live according to the pre-winter regimen. Every evening the entire unit would convene. A group was appointed to stand guard for twenty-four hours. Several groups were sent to bring food. The people were divided according to the kitchens, each group with its own kitchen. In accordance with the number of members, each group would receive its commodities from the main store.

"At the beginning of April, a group of Jews, together with their families, was transferred to us from the Iskra [spark] squadron. Their weapons were taken from them, and they were ordered to join the Jewish unit... The young men remained with the Russians."\[11\]

The large-scale German anti-guerrilla operations constituted a serious danger to the family camps. From 1942 through 1944, such operations were conducted in all the forests where there were Jews. During the manhunts, thousands of German soldiers would surround the forest to ensure that no one would escape, and additional forces would comb the area from within. The main victims of these operations were the family camps which were handicapped by their limited mobility (due to the fact that they included women and children), the absence of an early warning which would enable people to abandon

11 Ibid., pp. 70-72.
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the danger area in time, and the prohibition forbidding family camps from following the Soviet partisans who retreated or broke through the German encirclement. The sole means of rescue during such hunts was to escape to the marshlands, which were almost impassable, or to hide in underground bunkers. Thousands of Jews from the family camps were murdered during the manhunts which took place in the Volcha-Nora Forest in October 1942, the Lipichan Forest in December 1942, the Kopyl Forest in February 1943, the Kokhov Forest in September 1943, the Kazhan and Naroch Forest in September 1943, and the Naliboki Forest in the spring of 1944.

The local population was generally hostile toward the family camps. The reasons for their antagonism were the deeply-rooted anti-Semitism, which was further intensified by the Nazis' anti-Jewish propaganda, and the fact that the Jews of the camps were compelled to use force in taking food from the peasants. During the early stages of the war, when the partisans were still weak in many regions, there were many instances in which the peasants led German police or soldiers to the family camps, and as a result, many Jews were murdered.

On the other hand, there were places where the members of family camps were aided by local peasants.

In the forests of Belorussia — especially in the areas of Bryansk, Lipichan, Nacha, and Rudniki — where the population was predominately Polish, there was both an open and clandestine war between the Soviet and Polish partisans. (Most of the latter were subordinate to the Polish Government-in-Exile in London.) The units of the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa) and the nationalistic National Armed Forces (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne) began opera-

13 Safet ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 323; testimony of Efraim Szpiacki and Ruth Luminska, YVA, 0-3/1288, p. 17.
14 Samuel Burstein, Plugat ha-Doktor Atlas, Tel-Aviv, 5725 (1965), pp. 117-166 (hereafter — Burstein); Safet ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 390.
15 Ibid., pp. 584-585.
16 Ibid., p. 674.
17 Ibid., pp. 91, 187.
18 Yaffe, op. cit., p. 89; Biedek Testimony, pp. 72-73; Baruch Levin, Be-Yad'arot ha-Nakam, Tel-Aviv, 5728 (1968), p. 152 (hereafter — Levin).
19 Burstein (p. 67) writes about a family camp in the Lipichan Forest near Derechin which was destroyed by the Germans in August 1942, after being betrayed by the local residents; Yoseph Broyde, Be-Yad'arot Bryansk, Tel-Aviv, 1974, p. 84 (hereafter — Broyde).
tions in these areas at the end of 1942, and they intensified their activities during the course of 1943. The problem of Polish-Russian relations and the dispute over the future common border between the two countries, which was going to be determined following the victory over Nazi Germany, constituted the background of this conflict. The Soviet partisan movement considered all the territories of Eastern Poland (Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine), which were annexed to the U.S.S.R. in September 1939, as its area of operations. On June 22, 1943, the Central Committee of the Belorussian Communist Party discussed the intensification of Soviet operations in these areas. It decided to transfer partisan units from the east to the west and to fight against the Polish units and nationalist and bourgeoisie groups operating in these areas.19

The Polish partisans (A.K. and N.S.Z.) gradually extended their area of operations eastwards to Western Belorussia, and the Vilna and Volhynia areas, which had been Polish territory prior to the outbreak of World War II. Their aim was to gain control over these areas as the Germans withdrew and to present the Soviets with a fait accompli — i.e. to establish a local Polish government subordinated to the Government-in-Exile in London.20 The Polish partisans considered the Jews in the forests a pro-Soviet element, and under this pretext and because of their anti-Semitic attitude, they attacked and murdered many Jews in the family camps. In the spring and summer of 1943, the Polish partisans murdered Jews from the family camps in the forests of Lipichan.21 Jews were also attacked and murdered in the forests of Bryansk,22 Naliboki,23 and Rudnicki.24

The murder of Jews was not mentioned in the reports of the Polish Home Army and the Delegatura (the representation of the Sikorski regime in occupied Poland) which were sent to the Government-in-Exile in

21 Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., pp. 399-400.
22 Broyde, op. cit., p. 84.
23 Bielski Testimony, p. 86; Wertheim Testimony, p. 23.
24 Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 119; Rozka Korczak, Lehavot be-Alfer (third edition), Tel-Aviv, p. 284.
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London. However, the manner in which the Jews of the forest were presented and the description of their activities enable us to understand the background as well as the justification presented by the Poles for such acts of murder. The following report was dispatched on December 20, 1942:

"Bands of Jews and mixed bands of Jews and peasants are operating parallel to the regular partisan units... These bands are committing acts of robbery and murder, attacking farms and murdering the owners. Jews who escaped from ghettos constitute approximately 60% of these bands. There are also peasants and Soviet prisoners who escaped captivity and prefer stealing to joining partisan units. Each band is composed of twenty to thirty men who terrorize the population. The Jewish bands are particularly cruel."28

The “Jewish bandits” (bandyci Zydowscy) are mentioned frequently in reports describing the situation in the various areas, and especially in the “eastern territories of Poland” — Belorussia and the Ukraine. In addition, the reports describe acts of terror, murder, and intimidation of the population committed by Jewish bandits. These reports also contained descriptions of the situation in the ghettos, and assessments of the Jewish position in the Soviet-Polish conflict. According to these reports, 90% of the ghetto population was pro-Bolshevik.29

This evaluation regarding the ghetto Jews and those who had found refuge in the forests, and the labelling of the confiscation of the food necessary to keep alive as acts of robbery and cruelty constituted an ideological justification for the murder of hundreds and thousands of Jews by the Armia Krajowa, and especially by the nationalist and anti-Semitic N.S.Z. I do not know of any instance in which the Government-in-Exile in London reacted to, or condemned, such references to the Jews.

Further south, in the area of Southern Polesye and Volhynia, the family camps suffered from attacks by Ukrainian nationalists. In May 1943, a family camp in the Lipichan Forest was attacked by the Bandera Group, and about seventy-five Jews were murdered.30 In this

28 YVA, 6-25/128.
area, Ukrainian nationalists murdered many Poles, in addition to Jews, and there were instances in which Jews and Poles fought together against the Ukrainians. 24

Besides these enemies, the Jews of the camps faced additional dangers. Many died from famine and disease — especially typhus. 25 The key problem, however, was the attitude of the Soviet partisans to the family camps, since most of the camps were located in the areas in which the Soviet partisans operated.

The escape to the forests and the establishment of family camps took place while groups of Soviet partisans were being organized from amongst local elements, Soviet soldiers who remained in the area after the large-scale retreat which took place during the first months of the war, and soldiers who had escaped from German captivity. In some areas, family camps were organized before partisan groups were established, while in other areas, the situation was the reverse. At a later stage, groups sent from the U.S.S.R. to take command of the Soviet partisan movement appeared in these areas.

The family camps and the Soviet partisans existed simultaneously in the same forests, faced the same enemies, and had to turn to the same farmers for food. This situation led to many encounters, a certain degree of interdependence, as well as opposition and friction, between the family camps and the Soviet partisans. The latter were naturally the dominant element in the area, and therefore their policy and behavior significantly influenced the fate of the Jews in the family camps and the scope of the rescue work carried out by means of the camps.

What was the attitude of the Soviet partisans vis-à-vis the family camps and their attempts to rescue Jews? Positive reports on the situation of the Jews in the forests encouraged additional Jews to flee from the ghettos to the forests. This was especially true in 1942, when there were still ghettos in the area. On the other hand, news of famine, death from disease, the murder of Jews in the forests by partisans, and the harsh conditions which made life in the forests impossible for women and children, discouraged many Jews from risking

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flight from the ghettos. At present, we have no Soviet documentation on the policy of the Soviet partisan movement vis-à-vis the family camps. Such documents are certainly found in the Soviet archives, and may possibly be made available to us in the future. The answer to the question on the policy of the Soviet partisan movement to the rescue of Jews from the ghettos and from extermination can to some extent be evaluated by examining the condition of the Soviet partisan movement, the various stages of its development and its aims — subjects on which there are many Soviet sources available. The actual behavior of the Soviet partisans toward the Jews in the forests, and the extent to which Jews were rescued during the various periods can also be examined.

There were two stages in the development of the Soviet partisan movement in Western Belorussia and Volhynia:
1) from the end of 1941 until November-December 1942;
2) from the end of 1942 until July 1944, when these areas were liberated by the Soviet Army.

During the first stage, relatively small partisan units of tens to hundreds of fighters operated in these areas. They were not organized in partisan brigades, the ties between the units were weak, and there was no regular contact with the partisan command behind Soviet lines. No recognized regional Party institutions which maintained ties with the Soviet authorities operated in this area, and the discipline in these units was on a low level. In fact, some of these groups were not really partisan units, but rather bands of marauders.

A detailed report on the partisan movement in Belorussia was published on December 9, 1942 by the operations department of the headquarters of the Soviet partisans. It stated that partisan headquarters did not maintain contact with, or supervision over, those units operating in the Western Belorussian regions of Vileika, Bialystok, Baranovichi, Brest, and Pinsk.²⁰

On November 16, 1942, two weeks prior to the publication of this report, the Central Committee of the Belorussian Communist Party decided to set up regional and district party committees (Obkom Raikom) in the Minsk, Baranovichi, Bialystok, and Polesye areas. The

²⁰ Narodnoye partizanskoye dvizhenye v Belorussii v gody Velikoy otechestvenoy voyny, Minsk, 1967 (hereafter — Narodnoye partizanskoye dvizhenye).
letter of appointment to these party committees indicates that the mission of the committee members who were to cross into enemy territory was to establish and maintain steady contact with the partisan units and underground Communist groups operating in the area. On December 10, 1942, a special school was set up in the Soviet Union to train cadres of members of the Belorussian Communist Party for operations behind enemy lines.

In the wake of these decisions, groups of officers, combat units, and members of the regional party committees were parachuted into Western Belorussia and Volhynia in late 1942 and early 1943. This marked the beginning of a new phase of partisan activities in these areas. The local units were organized in brigades with a well-defined military hierarchy, and from this point on, they maintained contact with headquarters in the U.S.S.R. In addition, the party committees began to operate in the area and they maintained steady contact with the central institutions of the Communist Party. The contact between the partisans and the Soviet authorities enabled a flow of commands, reports, and military supplies, and consequently the level of discipline in the partisan units improved.

The transition period during which the partisan units in Western Belorussia were organized in the framework of the Soviet partisan movement lasted two months. The process began in the eastern areas and then spread westward from Minsk to Naliboki, Lipianka, and Bialystok and from Eastern Polesye to Pinsk and Brest.

The resolutions adopted by the Central Committee of the Belorussian Communist Party in February 1943 played a significant role in determining the objectives of the Soviet partisan movement in Belorussia. The resolutions called upon the members of the party to:

1) arouse the entire Belorussian nation to fight the enemy in every way possible;
2) save the Belorussian population from robbery and extermination by the enemy;
3) prevent the deportation of Soviet citizens to fascist German servitude and to increase the combat activities of the partisans in order to achieve this goal.

Ibid., pp. 435-437.

These resolutions were adopted after the overwhelming majority of Belorussian Jewry had been exterminated, so they basically concerned the fate of the non-Jewish population. It is noteworthy that the Party’s call for an increase in combat activities was part of the clause which called upon them to prevent the deportation of people to work in Germany rather than the resolutions dealing with the oppression and extermination of the population. The murder of the civilians living behind German lines would not influence the outcome of the war, but sending Soviet citizens to work in German industrial and agricultural enterprises would strengthen the German war effort, and it was therefore necessary to step up the military operations of the partisans. The basic goal of the Soviet partisan movement was to help defeat the Germans by striking at military and economic targets.

The rescue of Soviet citizens behind German lines was not one of the priorities of the Soviet partisans and they certainly did not receive orders to take action to save Jews. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the orders concerning “the rescue of the Belorussian population” and of “Soviet citizens” were also of significance for the Jews in the forests, as they afforded the good-willed partisan commanders who wanted to help Jews the opportunity and authority to do so. These orders undoubtedly had a positive influence on the situation of the Jews in the forests, a fact which became evident during the second stage of the operations of the Soviet partisan movement.²⁴

Most of the family camps were set up during the first stage of the Soviet partisan movement, in the spring and summer months of 1942. The situation of the Jews in the family camps during this period was very precarious, and they suffered a great deal at the hands of the partisans. Since the partisans were undisciplined and not under any central control, the situation of each camp depended to a large extent upon the attitude of the local commanders who, in most cases, were not favorably disposed toward the family camps. This attitude was manifest more than once in (successful and unsuccessful) attempts to confiscate whatever few arms the Jews had, a step tantamount to a death sentence for the camp, which could not exist without weapons.²⁵

In addition, partisans seized clothes, shoes, money, and gold and ac-

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²⁴ Wertheim Testimony, pp. 8-9; Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 615.
²⁵ Bielski Testimony, pp. 58-59; Burnstein, op. cit., p. 117.
cused the Jews of stealing from the local peasants and betraying the Soviets. During this stage, hundreds of Jews were shot by the partisans, a phenomenon which occurred in almost all the areas where Jews sought refuge in the forests. In fact, many Jews who wanted to leave the ghetto were deterred by the fate which had befallen others in the forest.

Many Jews were murdered in the Svitiche Forest in Northern Polesye by the armed partisan unit under the command of Zurkin. In his testimony, Bielski tells of the murder of Jews in the Naliboki27 and Lipichan forests. Alter Dvorzetski, the leader of a Jewish partisan group,28 was murdered together with a number of other people. Large numbers of Jews were murdered in the Volcha-Nora Forest in the Slonim area by Babov's partisans.29

On several occasions, the Jews of the family camps were forced to use arms against the partisan groups who conspired to harm them. In contrast to the many incidents of this type, there were cases of partisans who extended aid to the family camps.30

Until the end of 1942, the Soviet partisans had no official policy vis-à-vis the Jews in family camps in the Western territories of the U.S.S.R. since there was no central body which commanded the movement and directed its activities. The attitude of the partisan units was generally unfriendly, and this factor hampered this means of rescue. On the other hand, it should be noted that the mere presence of Soviet partisans in the forests helped Jewish families and gave them hope, since it deterred small German forces from entering the forests.

The situation of the Jews in the family camps changed for the better during the second stage of the Soviet partisan movement, which began in early 1943. The arrival of General Platon in the Naliboki Forest, General Biegma in Southern Polesye, and various commanders and high-ranking party officials in other areas brought about an improvement in the situation of the Jews, who were no longer depen-

27 Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 380.
28 Bielski Testimony, p. 43; Yaffe, op. cit., p. 49.
29 Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 380.
30 Ibid., pp. 323, 331, 644.
31 Ibid., pp. 615-616; in late 1943 and early 1944 the family camp in the Svitiche Forest was organized by partisans who rendered significant assistance in its establishment.
dent on the good will and strength of the local partisan units. In certain areas, in fact, the problem of supplying food to the family camps was settled by partisan units. Yet the situation of the Jews in the family camps remained difficult even during the second stage. Despite the reorganization and the disciplinary measures which were introduced, those elements among the partisans who wanted to harass the Jews found a way to do so. The incidents of murder, robbery, and confiscation of weapons which occurred during the first stage, were repeated during the second stage, albeit on a smaller scale. During the second stage, however, there was an address to appeal to when Jews were murdered or robbed. There were many instances in which Bielski and Zorin intervened with Platon and received a favorable response.

The difficult situation of the Jews and the negative attitude of the Soviet partisans toward the family camps throughout the course of the war were due to several objective and subjective factors. Part of the Soviet partisan movement was anti-Semitic, as was most of the population of these areas. Moreover, the hostility toward the Jews was strengthened by the Germans' propaganda, and it influenced the attitude of the Soviet partisans toward the Jews in their midst, and especially toward those in the family camps. Anti-Semitism, however, was not the only reason for the serious condition of the Jews in the family camps and for the hostility of the Soviet partisans. The aims and objectives of the Soviet partisans were different from those of the Jews in the family camps. As mentioned above, the goal of the Jews in the family camps was to rescue the thousands of Jews who had survived the massacres and found refuge in the forest. Priority was therefore given to the rescue of women, children, and other non-combatant elements, rather than to fighting the Germans, a policy which was fundamentally different than that of the Soviet partisan movement.

In a debate between Tuvyah Bielski and the outstanding Jewish partisan Baruch Levin, on what should be given first priority — the struggle against the Germans or the defence of the family camps — the former said:

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\[41\] Bielski Testimony, pp. 58, 60; Wertheim Testimony, pp. 7-8.

\[42\] Ibid., p. 5.
"I would like you to know one thing. Since so few of us are left, it is important for me that Jews should remain alive. I see this as the essence of the matter."43

The leaders of the Soviet partisan movement considered fighting the Germans their exclusive aim, and viewed their activities as part of the overall Soviet war effort. The rescue of Jews was not one of their objectives. Thus all available manpower, weapons, and equipment had to be devoted to the war against the Nazis. Moreover, the existence of the family camps created problems between the partisans and the local population, whose support was vital for the existence of the partisan movement. The partisans were forced to confiscate food from the local inhabitants, a fact which embittered the farmers and aroused their resentment. However, while the farmers were prepared to reconcile themselves to the confiscation of food by the Soviet partisans — some of whom were local residents — they opposed the confiscation of food for the members of the family camps. Thus the confiscation of food by the Jews was liable to undermine the support for the partisans since the local population identified the family camps with the Soviet partisan movement. This situation was the background for many clashes between Jewish fighters from the family camps and Soviet partisans.44

There was no room for the family camps in the strategy of the partisans, as the latter did not consider the rescue of Jews as one of their goals. According to their conception, the family camp constituted a source of manpower and weapons which were being wasted since they were not being used to fight the enemy. It is noteworthy that there were also Jewish partisans who adopted a negative attitude toward the family camps for the same reasons.45

The practical result of this attitude was the confiscation of weapons from the Jews of the camps for use by non-Jewish partisans. Situations such as this occurred several times in the Kazhan and Naroch Forests in 1943,46 in the Naliboki Forest (with a group of Jews from Lida),47 and in other places. In addition, Jewish fighters (with weapons) were removed from the family camps and put into partisan units.

43 Levin, op. cit., p. 133.
44 Bielski Testimony, pp. 67-68, 70-71, 83; Yaffe, op. cit., p. 64.
45 Levin, op. cit., pp. 133-134.
46 Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., pp. 77-78, 89, 188.
47 Yaffe, op. cit., p. 72.
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leaving the camps with either only a few or no fighters and weapons at all. An outstanding example was the removal of 150 armed men from Bielski’s camp. As a result, the camp, which had over a thousand people, was left with only a small armed force.43 Armed fighters were also transferred to partisan units from the family camp of the Jews of Nesvizh which was located in the Kopyl Forest in Polesye and the camp was left with only a few fighters.44 The practical implication of removing fighters from the family camps or taking their weapons was the abandonment of the family camps to their fate.

In this respect the situation of the Jews in the family camps did not improve during the second stage of the Soviet partisan movement. While the Soviet partisans who attempted to confiscate weapons or remove Jews from the family camps could be forcibly opposed during the first stage because they had no authority to do so, during the second stage these activities were authorized by Soviet commanders. Opposition during the second stage, therefore, meant opposing the Soviet regime, something which the Jews of the camps did not dare do.

It should be noted that in some cases when the fighters were removed from the family camp, the camp was taken under the protection of a partisan unit, which undertook to protect the camp and supply it with food. Such a case occurred in the Svitiche Forest in Polesye in late 1943, when an unit led by Grizodobov took a family camp under its protection.46

Another manifestation of the partisans’ attitude towards the family camps was their abandoning them during German anti-partisan operations. The family camps were left on their own with no means of defence, and on many occasions the members of the camps were prevented from following the partisan units, who retreated to a safer location. Such was the case in most areas — for example, the Naroch Forest,47 the Svoricevich Forest in Northern Polesye,48 the Lipichan Forest,49 and other places. In this context it should be noted that the mobility of the family camp was limited because of the women and

43 Bielski Testimony, pp. 49-50; Yaffe, op. cit., p. 107.
44 Saf-Fer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 587.
46 Ibid., pp. 90-91.
47 Ibid., p. 627.
48 Ibid., p. 390.
children, whose presence would have delayed the evacuation of the partisans from the danger area. This was one of the reasons why the partisans abandoned the family camps during the anti-partisan actions.

Despite the differences between the goals of the Soviet partisans and those of the Jews of the family camps, the latter were allowed to exist and their situation even improved during the second stage of the partisan movement. The family camps in the forest were considered a fait accompli by the leaders of the organized Soviet partisan movement, who arrived in Western Belorussia and Volhynia in late 1942 and early 1943. The camps had succeeded in organizing themselves and had survived during the difficult period of 1942, despite enemies both inside and outside the forest. The partisan leaders were forced to reconcile themselves to the existence of the camps and could not use force against them. Moreover, on many occasions, the partisan commanders refused to condone the irresponsible and lawless acts carried out against the family camps by partisans because:

1) The Jews in the camps were “Soviet people,” victims of persecution by the Germans, who were the enemies of the Soviet Union. Thus for various reasons stemming from ideology and conscience, they could not forcibly remove the Jews from the forest and abandon them to the Nazis. The resolutions passed by the Central Committee of the Belorussian Communist Party in February 1943 explicitly noted the need to extend aid to the Soviet population.

2) There were thousands of Jewish fighters and outstanding officers among the Soviet partisans. Harming the members of a family camp would have aroused a sharp reaction on the part of these Jews.

3) Many non-Jewish families, the families of partisans, as well as local farmers and their families who fled for fear of retaliation by the Germans, also reached the forests. Non-Jewish family camps were thus created, and the Soviet partisans could certainly neither ignore nor neglect such camps. In some cases, Jews and non-Jews set up joint family camps.\(^{54}\)

4) An organized, disciplined military movement cannot permit acts of murder and pillage, without weakening the discipline within its own ranks thus reducing the ability of the soldiers.

\(^{54}\) Cholawski, op. cit., p. 196; Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 672.
5) The Jews of the family camps became a productive element in the forest. They aided the fighting units and also took part in military operations.

The family camps, especially the larger ones such as those of Bielski and Zorin in the Naliboki Forest and those in the Naroch area and other locations, succeeded in organizing themselves as service and maintenance units, which helped the combat units by providing them with medical aid, repairing their weapons and equipment, and preparing food. In some locations, they were even granted the status of full-fledged partisan units. The family camps also succeeded in organizing themselves in such a way that the armed nucleus was able to take active part in the fighting against the Germans without harming its basic mission of protecting the family camp. The Jews of the family camps succeeded in becoming useful and productive elements for the partisans, who sorely lacked maintenance help.\(^{56}\)

In the sources and documents to which we have access, there is no mention of any military operations initiated by Soviet partisans to free Jews from ghettos or labor camps. In some cases, Jews were liberated from ghettos and camps, in the course of several military operations which had other objectives. In July 1943, the Kovpak Brigade liberated 100 Jews from the Skalat camp,\(^ {56}\) and in August 1943, Jews near Glubokoye were liberated by a unit led by Radionov.\(^ {57}\) These cases point to the possibilities of rescue through operations which could have been specifically planned to save Jews.

A special chapter in the relations between the Soviet partisans and the Jews who escaped from the ghettos was the transfer of Jewish families to the Soviet interior via the front lines during the middle and latter half of 1942. The Jews, survivors of the Kurenets, Dolihno and Postav ghettos, found refuge in family camps in the Naroch Forest, and were later transferred eastward in the direction of Polotsk and Vitebsk by Soviet partisans. They crossed the front in the area

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\(^{56}\) Wertheim Testimony, p. 5; Bielski Testimony, pp. 73, 77; Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., p. 1188.

\(^{58}\) Gad Rosenblatt, Aish Achatzi be-Ya'av, Tel-Aviv, 5717 (1957), pp. 202-203.

\(^{57}\) Sefer ha-Partizanim, op. cit., pp. 181-182. Colonel Radionov was the commander of a unit of Russian soldiers who fought with the Nazis. In August 1943, he and his men joined the partisans.
north of Vitebsk. We have no exact data on the number of Jews who succeeded in crossing the front. A news item dated Moscow, which was published in Davar on January 27, 1943, noted that a partisan unit which escorted 1,500 Jews across the front was awarded a mark of distinction. The testimonies we possess also mention similar figures.

This episode in which Jews were rescued by being taken across the front line was connected with the situation on the Soviet-German front. During the winter of 1941-1942, in the course of one of its counterattacks, the Red Army reached the area northeast of Vitebsk. As a result of this attack, a gap forty kilometers wide was made in the German line between the North and Central German Armies. The gap, which was located in the area between the towns of Usvyaty and Velizh, a region of forests and swamps, was nicknamed "the gates of Suraz" and was controlled by partisans of the First Belorussian Partisan Brigade. Throughout the spring and summer of 1942, there was two-way movement through this area. In fact, about 20,000 men were drafted into the Red Army from the occupied territories of Belorussia and transferred through the "gates of Suraz." The developments on this front in the autumn of 1942 brought about the closing of the "gates of Suraz" and the virtual cessation of free movement along the front.

These operations in which Jews were rescued from the family camps and taken across the front were only carried out in the Naroch Forest. They came about as a result of the initiative of the commanders of the local partisan unit, and were carried out at a time when there was still no organized movement controlled by a central partisan headquarters. These operations, which were implemented due to local

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58 Testimony of Yaacov Segalczyk, YVA, 1628/63. Segalczyk relates in his testimony that on September 12, 1942, seventy Jews, most of whom were from Dolhinov, left the forests in the area of Naroch and crossed the front lines with the help of Soviet partisans. By November 7, 1942, the group had already reached the Soviet interior. According to the testimony of Avraham Klorin (YVA, 3185/265-K), another group crossed the front with the help of Soviet partisans in the winter of 1942-1943. Also see Megillat Kurenitz, op. cit., pp. 144, 201, 258-260, 292.

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initiative and were executed by the lower echelons of the partisan command, point to the possibilities for rescue which existed, but were perhaps not fully exploited.

In summation, most of the Jewish family camps in the forests of Belorussia and Volhynia were established in 1942. The family camps were organized parallel to, and in connection with, Jewish partisan units. They constituted an independent and original Jewish means of rescue. The creation of the family camps also paralleled that of the Soviet partisan units. At times the camps were aided by the Soviet partisans, but there were cases in which the Soviets fought against the family camps. The camps suffered greatly at the hands of the Polish and Ukrainian nationalists.

The organized Soviet partisan movement which took over control of the partisans operating in the western territories of Belorussia and Northern Ukraine in early 1943 accepted the Jewish family camps as a fait accompli. Despite the differences between the aims of the Soviet partisan movement and those of the family camps, the former reconciled itself to the existence of the camps. The Soviet partisan movement did not initiate operations to save Jews, but by gaining control of extensive afforested areas it aided the family camps in their struggle for survival.

The family camps in the forest, which constituted a means of rescue for thousands of Jews, were a local Jewish initiative and they operated without any direct assistance from external elements. Their existence points to the fact that tens of thousands of Jews could have been saved had the various elements who possessed a wide range of opportunities initiated and aided this means of rescue.