

IN OUR OWN HANDS

The Hidden Story of the Jewish Brigade in World War II

The Discussion Guide



Introduction

“In Our Own Hands – The Hidden Story of

the Jewish Brigade in World War II” recovers a critical piece of history enshrouded in the shadow of the Holocaust and lost in the fateful years leading to the birth of Israel. As a story of personal conviction, conscience and enterprising spirit it stands alone as an expression of individual heroism and an uncommon humanity.

The voices in the film are those of ordinary people in extraordinary times – Johanan Peltz, Shlomo Shamir, Hanoach Bartov, Maxim Kahan, Israel Carmy, Aharon Hoter-Ishay and others – men whose actions are writ large in the history of their people. Here memories are retrieved: fighting a symbolic battle; exacting a personal brand of justice against Nazi officers in hiding; finding, caring for and bringing hope to Holocaust survivors; and helping give birth to the state of Israel.

The following discussion guide expresses the thoughts of educators in a variety of overlapping fields and different academic levels who have found **In Our Own Hands** a uniquely powerful tool for the teaching of history, evoking



discussions in many subject areas, including:

- Jewish Identity: History and Heritage
- Modern World History
- Zionism and the Creation of a Jewish Homeland
- Jewish Participation in World War II
- The Holocaust and its Aftermath
- The History of Israel
- The Current Arab-Israeli Conflict

The film also raises more philosophic questions about identity, personal resistance, conflicting loyalties, justice and revenge, and the consequences of moral decision making. As such, whether you are a public, private or religious school teacher, college-level educator or adult forum leader, the film offers compelling and adaptable subject matter for diverse groups, and applies to Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike.

In Our Own Hands is available in two versions. The first is 85 minutes in length, and is available on 16mm film or video. A shorter version, specifically created for education, runs 55 minutes, and is available on video only. For more effective classroom use, the latter can be shown in two 27-minute segments.

Answers to most of the study questions can be found in the film. There are, however, several questions on broader themes that may require background

research. To that end, the attached bibliography will aid students and teachers alike.

Preview the film carefully. Study the guide. Adapt it to your own needs. By choosing from among the many suggestions and questions offered in it, we the producers hope you will find unique and creative ways to use **In Our Own Hands**.

Chuck Olin, Chuck Cooper and Matthew Palm

Film Synopsis

The year was 1939. Hitler's armies were advancing across Europe, soon to gain control of the continent. Eager to face the Germans in battle, Jews in Palestine, living under British rule, sought permission to form an all-Jewish fighting force. The British War Office, fearful of offending the Arabs, and knowing the Jewish leadership secretly wanted military training for a future Jewish Army, refused.

For nearly five years the Jews in Palestine continued to ask, and to wait. Finally, with the horrors of the Holocaust well-known, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill overrode the objections of his War Office and in September, 1944, His Majesty's Jewish Brigade was formed. Within the Brigade, the Jewish Agency and the Haganah had their own secret leadership and a separate agenda that would not be revealed until after the war.

In the early spring of 1945, the Brigade went into action against the German Army in the Senio River Valley near Bologna, Italy. After two months of fighting, taking heavy casualties, the Brigade emerged victorious.

“After the Holocaust, and after the fact that so many million Jews went to their death without fighting, I think this is the most important facet of the Jewish Brigade. We broke a taboo. We proved to the world that we can fight. We proved to ourselves that we can fight.”

Johanan Peltz, Jewish Brigade

Within weeks of their victory, the war in Europe was over. Stationed on the Italian-Austrian border, individual Brigade soldiers, often going AWOL, fanned out across Europe to look for surviving family members. In camp after camp, they learned the worst. Saddened but also full of rage, these young Jewish soldiers returned to base and soon began forming secret vengeance squads. Though



The migration of Jews from Europe to Palestine, 1920's and 1930's.



The Brigade's position along the front line, Spring, 1945.



Brigade locations after the war (high-lighted). The movement of Jewish refugees, aided by the Brigade, 1945-1946 (arrows).

never official Brigade policy, within months the squads identified scores of Nazi officers and collaborators in the area, and executed them.

Despite feelings of revenge, the Brigade's paramount mission, carried out illegally, was to look for Holocaust survivors...and bring them hope.

“We came as an angel of life, I would say, to the Jewish people.
Soldiers are supposed to fight, kill or be killed. And what we did as soldiers,
we found dead people and we helped them to go back to life.”

Hanoch Bartov, Jewish Brigade

“We cried. We screamed. We jumped. We kissed one another.
Can you imagine, from the ghettos and the fires, to see Jewish soldiers?”

Lisa Derman, Survivor

The Allied Command, not recognizing Jewish refugees as having their own identities, was intent on returning them to their former countries where new and violent anti-Semitism had already claimed hundreds of lives. Alarmed, David Ben-Gurion, head of the Jewish Agency, designed a bold and secret plan to move Jews into camps of their own.

The Jewish Brigade, under its Haganah leadership and under the noses of the British, put the plan to work. They stole trucks, forged papers and bribed border guards to bring survivors to Jewish camps where they were fed, clothed, cared for, and made ready for a longer journey...to Palestine.

“We had a net over the whole of Europe which was then about five million people of all nations and denominations who were moving from place to place, and we directed our streams toward Palestine.”

Meir Zorea, Jewish Brigade

At the same time, increasingly concerned about their lack of weapons to effectively fight a future war in Palestine against the Arabs or the British, Brigade soldiers, under orders from the Haganah, began stealing arms and ammunition from military ordnance depots throughout Europe.

The more the British found out about the Brigade's activities, the less they could tolerate the magnitude of the continuing illegal operations. Wanting these troublesome young Jews out of Europe, in April, 1946, the British War Office disbanded the Brigade, sending its soldiers home. Some men secretly stayed

behind – and helped hundreds more refugees escape to Palestine.

Two years later, in 1948, when Israel fought its War of Independence, many Jewish Brigade veterans, including thirty-five who later became generals, served with distinction. Their military training within the British Army, their experience under fire in World War II, their help in rescuing the remnants of European Jewry, and the role they played in Israel's many struggles for survival have earned the men of the Jewish Brigade a unique place in history.

“If there is a claim to the meeting of the remnants of Europe, the major claim is survival. Survival of the people as people, survival as a group in terms of a state, of a homeland of their own. Survival.”

Shlomo Shamir, Jewish Brigade

“We had the inner-feeling that we are able to do it, that we are able to defend ourselves, that we are able to acquire this piece of land for ourselves and the remnants...Could it not have happened? It could not have happened. But it did happen, and we are here.”

Hanoch Bartov, Jewish Brigade



Soldiers of the Jewish Brigade, Italy, 1945, with Jewish remnants.

Jewish soldiers in the British Army, Middle East, 1941, carrying a Torah to a religious service in the desert.



Study Questions

Introduction & General Orientation

Q: In the opening lines of the film, Hanoch Bartov and Johanan Peltz express opposing views about the significance of what the Jewish Brigade accomplished:

Bartov: "Soldiers are supposed to fight, kill or be killed. And what we did as soldiers, we found dead people and we helped them to go back to life."

Peltz: "We broke a taboo. We proved to the world that we can fight. We proved to ourselves that we can fight, that Jews can fight and they can win."

Discuss the difference in these two perspectives. Which best captures the significance of the Jewish Brigade?

Q: The narrator characterizes the Jewish Brigade as "young volunteers from... Palestine who helped win a war and in a larger way changed history." In what sense did they achieve these two things?

Q: What does the title **In Our Own Hands** mean?

Q: As the subtitle to the film suggests, the story of the Jewish Brigade has indeed been "hidden" for decades. Why do you think this is so?

Q: What impacted you most about the story?

Zionism

Q: Discuss Zionism and the dream of a Jewish homeland. What were the European Jews who settled in Palestine looking for? What were they fleeing in Europe, especially as Hitler came to power?

1914

World War I begins

1917

November 2: Balfour Declaration
pledges British support for a Jewish state

1918

WWI ends

Q: What were the claims of the Jewish community in Palestine to a homeland of their own? Contrast this to the claims of the Arabs living in Palestine.

The Jewish Agency and the Haganah

Q: Explain the roles of the Jewish Agency and the Haganah. Why was the Jewish Agency called “the government-in-waiting?”



A Jewish soldier in the British Army, Middle East, 1942, prior to the Brigade’s formation. Hebrew writing on shell reads: “Greetings to Hitler.”

Q: What were the motives of the Jewish Agency in pressing for an all-Jewish fighting force? Why was it crucial to gain battle experience in a “regular army in a full-scale war?” How was this different from the experience of the Haganah?

Q: Discuss the significance of a distinct Jewish unit having a flag of its own.

British Rule in Palestine

Q: Explain the British presence in Palestine following World War I.

Q: Why was the British White Paper of 1939 issued? How did it change the situation for the Jews in Palestine? How did it affect Jews living in Europe?

Q: Netanel Lorch paraphrases Ben-Gurion’s statement that “we would fight against Hitler as if the White Paper did not exist, and we would fight against the White Paper as if Hitler did not exist.” Explain.

Q: Why did the British reject Chaim Weizmann’s proposal of an all-Jewish fighting force, especially early in the war when England was short of manpower?

Q: How did the British War Office and Colonial Office feel about Jews? What was

1922

July: British Mandate in Palestine begins

1929

The Jewish Agency created in Palestine

1933

Nazi Party comes to power in Germany
37,000 Jews immigrate to Palestine

Churchill's position concerning Jews, and Zionism in particular?

Q: Why, nearly five years after the first request for a Jewish unit, and with the war in Europe winding down, did Churchill finally allow the formation of His Majesty's Jewish Brigade Group?

Hitler's Rise to Power

Q: Describe events in Germany in the 1930's. How did the Jews in Palestine feel about what was happening there?

Q: In the film, Netanel Lorch says that, with the start of WWII, the Jews in Palestine now had to "choose between enemies." What does he mean?

The Brigade in Action

Q: How did the British feel about allowing Palestinian Jews to serve in senior staff positions within the Brigade?

Q: Explain the importance of the Brigade's insignia. Why a yellow star of David rather than the traditional blue?

Q: Avram Silberstein gives as his reasons for coming to Palestine from Poland his desire to escape his status as a second-class citizen, to study and to contribute to the new country. In what sense was he fulfilling these goals by serving in the Jewish Brigade?

Q: How did the Brigade soldiers react to taking their first German prisoners at La Georghetta? How did these feelings play out later in the story?

Q: As Shlomo Shamir acknowledges, the Jewish Brigade's time on the front was more symbolic than military in value. Why then was their presence in Europe during the war so important?

1935

Nuremberg Laws restrict Jews' civil rights in Germany
69,000 Jews immigrate to Palestine

1936

Arab Revolt in Palestine begins

1938

Nov 9 & 10: *Kristalnacht* in Germany

Q: Consider the statement of Johanan Peltz that because “so many million Jews went to their deaths without fighting, this is the most important facet of the Jewish Brigade: we proved to the world that we can fight.” Discuss this in light of the situation Jews found themselves in during the Holocaust, as well as the ways they did resist.

After the War: Vengeance and Rescue



The Jewish Brigade on the Italian Front, Spring, 1945.

Q: Immediately following the war, Jewish Brigade soldiers left their unit at Tarvisio, often going AWOL to look for family members. Was their absence justified?

Q: When the truth about the extermination camps reached the members of the Jewish Brigade, some formed secret vengeance squads to assassinate Nazi officers in hiding. Does the

heinous nature of the crimes against Jews during the Holocaust justify revenge? What about due process? The right to a fair trial? The accused presumed innocent until proven guilty?

Q: Oly Givon, a German-speaking member of the vengeance squad, confronted one fugitive Nazi officer and interrogated him. “At the moment that I was a hundred percent sure that he was the man who killed Jews, I said to him, ‘In the name of the nation of the Jews, I kill you. And I killed him.’” By what right did Givon speak and act in the name of the Jewish people?

Q: Despite the intensity of the urge for vengeance, the Brigade’s focus soon shifted from killing to saving. Explain.

1939

May: British finally crush Arab Revolt
May 17: British issue White Paper of 1939, limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine
Aug: Chaim Weizmann makes first offer of a Jewish fighting force to aid in British war effort

1940

Sept. 1: Germany invades Poland, World War II begins
Oct: 36,000 Palestinian Jews volunteer to British army

May: British Colonial Office declares opposition to a Jewish fighting force

Q: As Hanoch Bartov says about meeting a group of survivors in Klagenfurt, Austria, “Their reaction was as if they saw the Messiah.” What did these young Jewish soldiers represent to the survivors? Why was their impact so profound? (Consider the testimony of others in the film.)



The flag mutiny of the Palestine Regiment, 1943, Benghazi, Egypt.

Q: What was the status of Jews in the Displaced Persons camps after the war? What was the Allies’ position concerning the Jews and repatriation? How was repatriation an additional burden to Jewish refugees? Why weren’t the refugees allowed to go to Palestine?

Q: What was the Haganah’s secret agenda within the Brigade? In what ways would the Haganah use the Jewish Brigade as an instrument for the construction of a Jewish state?

Q: How do you feel about the fact that the Brigade engaged in illegal activities on behalf of the refugees? Where did the authority to conduct this work originate?

Q: While not the only group assisting Jewish refugees, Brigade soldiers were distinguished by two qualities: their Zionism, which persuaded them that Israel was the ideal destination for

the survivors; and their access to the materials and transportation of the British Army. How critical were these differences, and how essential was the Jewish Brigade’s contribution to the refugee effort in 1945-46?

Q: Many members of the Jewish Brigade were drawn from the Haganah, where they became accustomed to their role as underground adversaries of British authority. In what ways do you think this status helped the Brigade to conceive and carry out its illegal efforts on behalf of the refugees after the war?

Q: How do you feel about the Brigade’s stealing arms from British ordnance depots? Does the end – securing weapons for Israel’s future War of Independence – justify the means?

1941

Dec: Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, U.S. enters WWII

1942

May/June: Rommel’s German Army advances across North Africa, threatening Palestine

May: The Palestine Regiment formed by the British

Nov: British defeat Germans at El Alamein

Nov: Jewish Agency receives first reports of the Holocaust

Conclusions:

Q: How did the special role of the Brigade veterans in fighting Israel's War of Independence bear out the feelings of David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann in wanting a Jewish fighting unit trained by the British?

Q: Military considerations notwithstanding, Shlomo Shamir sees a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the creation of the Jewish Brigade and the founding of the Jewish state. Do you agree?

Q: Hanoach Bartov states that "we changed, in a way, the direction of Jewish history." What does he mean?

Q: What is the significance of the story of the Jewish Brigade when set against fifty years of Israeli history? Against the continuing struggle between Jews and Arabs?

Q: The film's epilogue states, "The men of the Jewish Brigade long ago realized their youthful dreams of a homeland of their own. Having a country at peace with its neighbors, a safe place for future generations, is yet to be fully realized." What does this mean in the context of present day Israel and the on-going peace process?

Q: What in the end is the greatest legacy of the story of the Jewish Brigade? Why is it an important aspect of Jewish heritage?

1943

Jan: Germans surrender to Russians at Stalingrad

May: Total Axis surrender in Africa

May: Warsaw Ghetto uprising suppressed by Germans

Sept: Allies invade Italy

1944

Mar: Weizmann pleads with British to mobilize a Jewish fighting force to take part in the liberation of Europe

June: Allies launch D-Day invasion

Sept 20: Churchill announces formation of His Majesty's Jewish Brigade

Oct/Nov: Brigade leaves for Italy, training begins in Fiuggi

Glossary

Allies/Axis

During World War II, the countries involved divided themselves into two alliances, the Allied powers and the Axis powers. The United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union comprised the major Allies fighting the German Nazi regime as the main Axis power.

Arab Revolt

General uprising of Palestinian Arabs against both British rule and the Jewish population, from 1936-1939, protesting Jewish immigration, calling for an end of land sales to Jews, and demanding the establishment of an Arab state in Palestine.

Balfour Declaration

The letter written from Arthur James Lord Balfour to Lord Rothschild in November, 1917, stating “His Majesty’s government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

Ben-Gurion, David

Chairman of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, and the first Prime Minister of the state of Israel.

Bricha

From the Hebrew word meaning “escape,” this generally refers to the mass movement of Holocaust survivors immediately following World War II, first to Displaced Persons camps in Germany and other Western countries, and later to Palestine. The Jewish Brigade played a key role in transporting and caring for Jews in the first months after the war.

Churchill, Winston

Prime Minister of England from 1940 to 1945, it was Churchill who finally overrode his advisors’ objections and agreed to the formation of the Jewish Brigade.

1945

Feb 26: Brigade is ordered to front line in the north of Italy

Mar 19: Battle of La Georghetta, a Brigade company takes 11 German prisoners

March 26: Brigade soldiers celebrate Passover on the front line

April 10: Allied Spring Offensive begins in Italy

April: Allied armies advance on Berlin

April 30: Hitler commits suicide

May 8: Germany surrenders, ending the war in Europe

May: Allies begin repatriation of all refugees, including Jews

May 14: Brigade is ordered north to Tarvisio, makes first contact with Holocaust survivors

May/June: Brigade vengeance squads form

Displaced Persons (DPs)

The roughly eight million people in Europe who had been uprooted by the war from their homelands. By the end of 1945, over half returned to their original countries while the remaining two million chose not to return to the places where their homes were destroyed and family members lost.

Displaced Persons Camps

Camps established by the Allies after the war to house the hundreds of thousands of DPs with no place to go. For Jews, camp conditions often rivaled those of the concentration and death camps from which they had been liberated.

Haganah

The self-defense arm of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, this force was organized to protect Jewish settlements during the period of British Mandate. In 1948, the

Haganah was absorbed into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).



A Jewish family during the Bricha, or flight out of Central Europe, 1946.

Between the years of 1945 and 1948 alone, more than 83,000 people reached the shores of Palestine in this manner.

Illegal Immigration

Refers to the efforts of the Jews of Europe, during and immediately following World War II, to immigrate to Palestine. Because of the British policy that severely limited Jewish immigration, Jews were secretly smuggled into Palestine against a British blockade.

Jewish Agency

The political body representing the Yishuv in Palestine during the British Mandate period. Established in 1929, the Agency was responsible for administering to all aspects of civilian life, and was the central representative of the Jews vis-a-vis the Mandatory government.

1946

June: Brigade mounts clandestine operations to care for and transport Jewish refugees; *illegal immigration* to Palestine increases

July 27: Brigade is ordered north to Belgium & Holland

Sept: Allies establish separate camps for Jewish DPs

Nov: Demonstrations in Jewish DP camps demand open immigration to Palestine

Jan/Feb: Brigade theft of arms increases

May: Brigade is disbanded, sent back to Palestine

Magen David

The shield, or star of David, the symbol of the Jewish people.

Mandate/Mandatory Government/British Mandate

Under the League of Nations Mandate for Palestine, established in 1922, the British administered the territory that now includes Israel and Jordan. The British pulled out of Palestine in 1948.

Repatriation

The Allied policy of returning DPs to their countries of origin after the end of the war. In the first months of repatriation, Jewish survivors were included among those sent home.

Sharett (Shertok), Moshe

One of the leaders of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, Sharett was among those who early on trumpeted the idea of an all-Jewish fighting force.

Weizmann, Chaim

Leader of the World Zionist Congress and first President of the state of Israel, it was Weizmann who first had the idea of creating an all-Jewish fighting force in World War II and pressured Churchill, a close friend, for its formation.

White Paper

The White Paper of 1939, a policy statement of the British Government, stunned the Jewish community in Palestine by canceling Britain's earlier promise of statehood and severely limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine just as the Nazis' persecution of European Jews was beginning.

Yishuv

The Jewish community in Palestine, comprised of the network of towns, villages and settlements established by Jewish émigrés to the land.

Zionism

An organized movement of world Jewry that arose in Europe in the late 19th century with the aim of reconstituting a Jewish state in Palestine. Modern Zionism is concerned with the development and support of the state of Israel.

1947

Nov: United Nations approves Partition Plan for Palestine

1948

May 14/15: British leave Palestine

May 15: Israel declares independence, war begins

Bibliography and Background Reading

Bachrach, Susan D., *Tell Them We Remember*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994.

Berger, Ronnee, *Annotated Bibliography of Books for Young Readers at the Holocaust Resource Center and Archives*. Bayside, NY: 1994-1995.

Beth Hatefutsoth, Ghetto Fighters' House, Yad Vashem, *Return to Life*. Haifa, Israel: Ayalon Offset Ltd., 1995. (Also a 60-minute video)



Soldiers in the Jewish Brigade with Jewish survivors, Marseilles, France, 1946.

Bethell, Nicholas, *The Palestine Triangle*. London: Deutsch, 1979.

Bloomberg, Marty, *The Jewish Holocaust: An Annotated Guide to Books in English*. San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1991.

Cohen, Michael, *The Origins and Evolution of the Arab-Zionist Conflict*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Dawidowicz, Lucy, *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945*. New York: Free Press, 1986.

Dinnerstein, Leonard, *Liberation: 1945*. Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1995. (Also on video)

Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, Inc., *Facing History and Ourselves*. Brookline, Massachusetts: 1994.

Gilbert, Martin, *Israel, A History*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1998.

Goell, Yohai, and Chava Dinner, *A Selected and Annotated Bibliography for 1995: The History of Zionism and the State of Israel*, in The Journal of Israeli History, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1996).

Gutman, Yisrael, *Fighter Among the Ruins: The Story of Jewish Heroism During World War II*. New York: B'nai Brith, 1988.

Halpern, Benjamin, *The Idea of the Jewish State*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969.

Hertzberg, Arthur, ed., *The Zionist Idea*. New York: Athenaeum, 1969.

- Jones, Philip, comp., *Britain and Palestine*. London: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Peretz, Don, *The Arab-Israeli Dispute*. New York: Facts on File, 1996.
- Porat, Dina, *The Blue and Yellow Stars of David: The Zionist Leadership in Palestine and the Holocaust, 1939-1945*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Rossel, Seymour. *The Holocaust: The World and the Jews, 1933-1945*. West Orange, New Jersey: Behrman House, Inc., 1992.
- Sachar, Howard M., *The Course of Modern Jewish History*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Segev, Tom, *The Seventh Million*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1993.
- Shavrick-Hertzberg, Claire, *Annotated Videography on Holocaust Subjects*. Bayside, NY: Holocaust Resource Center and Archives, 1994.
- Shulman, William, *Educational Resource Guide on the Holocaust, A Selected Bibliography and Audio-Visual Catalogue*. Bayside, NY: Holocaust Resource Center and Archives, 1996.
- Stone, I. F., *Underground to Palestine*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Suhl, Yuri , ed., *They Fought Back*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975.
- Wasserstein, Bernard, *Britain and the Jews of Europe, 1939-1945*. London: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Wigoder, Geoffrey, *New Encyclopedia of Zionism and Israel*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994.
- Wyman, David, *The Abandonment of the Jews*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- Yahil, Leni, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1941-45*. London: Oxford University Press, 1990.



Credits

Professor Howard Cohn

Howard Cohn teaches literature and film in the Jewish Studies Program at Purchase College, SUNY, where he is a Lecturer in Humanities and Continuing Education. His particular interests include documentary film and narrative, and he has developed courses in Holocaust literature, Jewish humor, and Jewish identity, among others.

Charles Meyers

A former Fulbright Exchange Teacher, Chuck Meyers teaches history and government at Carleton Washburne School in Winnetka, Illinois. He is a 1997 Mandel Fellow of the United States Holocaust Museum and conducts teacher training workshops for Facing History and Ourselves.

Susan Schaalman Youdovin

Curator of Education at the Spertus Museum in Chicago, Mrs. Youdovin has served in various educational and directorial positions at Jewish institutions and organizations around the country.

Funder

This Discussion Guide was made possible by a grant from The Harris Foundation.