

FIGHTER IN THE WOODS

BY JOSHUA M. GREENE

Fighter in the Woods: The True Story of a Jewish Girl who Joined the Partisans in World War II

By Joshua M. Greene

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The Story

June 1941. When the Nazi army swoops into eastern Poland, teenager Celia Cymer knows she is in danger of being captured. She runs frantically to a friend’s house, seeking shelter. And the friend says: “Get away from here, you dirty Jew.”

That, Celia would comment many years later, is when I understood what the war was really about.

On her own, Celia must try to evade the Nazis, but she winds up imprisoned in a ghetto, facing starvation, abuse, and forced labor. Eventually, she manages to escape and hide under the dirt of a barn belonging to one non-Jewish friend who is willing to help her.

But soon her life is threatened again and Celia escapes into the forest, where she joins up with a group of partisans: resistance fighters who gathered in secret during WWII to fight back against the Nazis from hiding places in the woods. When the partisans put Celia on kitchen duty, she refuses: she wants to fight. So she is given a horse, ammunition, and an assignment. Her time with the partisans will change the course of her life.

This remarkable true story, based on Celia’s taped first-person testimony and vetted by her son, is one of incredible bravery and grit in the face of unimaginable evil.

Reading Group Questions

1. Is this your first time hearing about partisan fighters during the Holocaust? Do you think it’s important for the history of these resistance fighters to be more widely taught? Why or why not?
2. At first, Celia was told to go on kitchen duty, which was much safer than going out on assignments. Why do you think Celia insisted on being given an assignment?
3. Piotr risks his life and his family’s life to rescue Celia and later, her sister Slava. What difficulties did Piotr face in sheltering Celia and Slava? Why do you think Celia never saw him again after the war?
4. Many people did the same as Piotr during WWII and sheltered Jewish refugees, risking their livelihoods and lives. Why do you think it’s important to share these stories as well? How does knowing there were people out there willing to take such huge risks to do the right thing make you feel? Can you point to a contemporary example of something similar, where someone risked everything to do the right thing?



About the Author

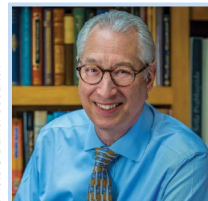


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Joshua M. Greene produces books and films about the Holocaust. His titles include *Signs of Survival*, cowritten with Renee Hartman; *My Survival: A Girl on Schindler's List*, cowritten with Rena Finder; *The Girl Who Fought Back: Vladka Meed and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, and *Fighter in the Woods: The True Story of a Jewish Girl Who Joined the Partisans in World War II*. His documentaries have been broadcast in twenty countries and his books translated into eight languages. He has taught Holocaust history for Fordham and Hofstra Universities. He lives in Old Westbury, New York.

Author Q&A

What was it about Celia's story that made you want to write it?

Celia was a teenager who wanted a life like other girls her age. But when other girls were holding the hands of their boyfriends, Celia was holding the trigger of a rifle, fighting back against the powerful Nazi army. For the so-called "crime" of being a Jew, she was beaten, starved, and left for dead. She learned firsthand how cruel people can be. She also learned how kind people can be—people like the non-Jewish boy Piotr, who risked his life to save her and other Jews, and people like her teenage friends who fought as a partisans hiding in the woods. I thought that was a story well worth telling.

What would you love for a reader to understand more after reading this book?

I would love for readers who are not Jewish to know that the Holocaust also concerns them. Hatred of anyone concerns all of us, and we need to be alert to its symptoms. It can begin with something as small as name-calling and end in horrible violence. I'd also love readers to know that young people are never irrelevant. Throughout history, young people motivated by noble intentions have made dramatic improvements in a problematic world, as Celia so dramatically proved.

What was your biggest challenge while writing this story? How did you overcome it?

One big challenge for me was imagining what it was like for Celia growing up hungry, seeing family members killed, hiding out in a country where the police might kill her just because she was not from the "approved" race of people. To imagine what that felt like, I tried remembering the time when I was ten and was beaten up for being a Jew, the time my parents were divorced and I had to be the "man" in the family, and the years my mom didn't earn much money and we had to go without food sometimes. My childhood wasn't anywhere near the tragedy that Celia went through, but when I was writing, it helped to relate moments of her story to events in my own life. I think many young readers can relate to some part of her story, and that helps to make it more real.

