

## **The Chaim Herzog Museum of the Jewish Soldier in World War II**

### **Curator's Statement**

**Dr. Tamar Ketko**



In the modern era, museums served as a kind of substitute for memorial halls and heritage-related rituals that strengthen cultural identities. About the imprint left by Jews in World War II within these contexts, many museums have chosen to represent Jewish history primarily through the story of annihilation, and far less through the story of combat and resistance. My research reveals, among other things, a deeply rooted and longstanding cognitive pattern nationally and internationally regarding so-called “Jewish” archetypal traits. According to this worldview, Jews are generally not perceived as possessing physical, martial, or active qualities, but rather as individuals distinguished by spiritual and intellectual attributes: World War II shook the Jewish people and humanity through an unprecedented ideological, human, scientific, ecological, and territorial upheaval. The war that raged between 1939 and 1945 exacted a heavy toll, shaping human destinies and political processes to this very day. While the fought over territory and worldviews often seeking to eradicate competing global ideologies, those identified as Jews and other attacked states and minorities fought for their very existence.

This weakest link in the narrative chain of World War II has come to symbolize, in collective historical consciousness, passive and defeatist associations. The data regarding the volunteering and enlistment of Jewish women and men for operational service in all the world's armies, in resistance movements, uprisings, underground organizations, and partisan activity, is largely absent from both Israeli and international narratives and has not been given its respectful place.

This is the purpose of the museum: to expose a story that remained outside the frameworks of learning and research, for whatever reasons to build a bridge over turbulent waters of alienation and denial of belonging, to restore heritage to its rightful significance, to be a “match that re-ignites hearts,” and to bring about a shift in consciousness.

One and a half million Jewish soldiers participated in World War II across all theaters, all battles, and all branches of service. They joined every arena that demanded struggle, courage, and resolve: in the air, on land, and at sea; in forests, under fire, behind enemy lines; in ghettos and extermination camps, against all odds. Young men and women, loyal both to their countries and to their national identity, reported immediately to every recruitment station and contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany and its allies, often at the cost of their lives. More than a quarter of a million fell in battles. It is important to note that approximately 150,000 Jewish women—most of them young, aged 17 to 25 volunteered and enlisted in all armies partisans , and underground groups, fulfilling every role assigned to them with remarkable courage.

After the murder of six million Jews and the injury of countless others during World War II, the entire Jewish population worldwide numbered fewer than ten million. It is reasonable to assume that only about half were fit for combat (fewer than five million). The rest, those aged forty-five and above, the elderly, women, the ill, adolescents, and children, remained behind the front lines and assisted the war effort in every possible way. In addition to many young Jewish men and women who joined the war The volunteers of the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine must also be acknowledged. They joined hundreds of thousands of their brothers and sisters across the armies of the world, especially in North Africa and Europe, while disregarding the Britain's anti-Zionist policies which were legalized by the British Paper

Upon returning from the front having endured the horrors of battle, encountered survivors and displaced persons, they extended a helping hand while wearing uniforms bearing the insignia of the Jewish Brigade and other units. They assisted in smuggling survivors as illegal immigrants, bringing them to the Land of Israel, and instilling hope - another chapter in the story of the establishment of the State of Israel must be completed: it was these Brigade fighters and other Jewish soldiers in British units who, upon returning from the fronts, laid the foundations for a more professional and organized military force, based on the experience they had gained in the global war. Most of them participated in the War of Independence leading attacks, opening supply routes, providing transport, and repelling those who refused to recognize the declaration of the State of Israel.

They laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Israel Defense Forces in all its branches, transforming daring, separate units into the "army of the state." What they had gained in the fight for the world—they proved again in the fight for their home. The museum's content and emphases fulfill our historical and moral obligation to those who risked their lives, and to those who survived to preserve the full story of Jewish resistance during World War II. We remember the Jewish youth who fought

without surrender; the Jewish commander who took charge; the partisan who charged forward; the parachutist who did not return; the pilot, the ship's captain, the gunner, the driver; doctors and nurses; engineers and logisticians; men and women of the underground and the Intelligence ; The armored troops who raced forward on every front. Alongside the faces of Holocaust victims who longed for salvation, we also ought to present faces of those who did everything to save whomever they could.

The **Chaim Herzog Museum of the Jewish Soldier in World War II** commemorates their heroism, , through their personal stories, using unique technological means and grounded in historical research. They are reflected in the eyes of the Museums' visitors.

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### **Foundational Principles of the Exhibition Structure and Routes**

The museum's staff the founders; the members of the executive board; the public council; and the curatorial and administrative teams together with the support of the Herzog family, the Government of Israel, and additional donors, have turned a long-nurtured vision into reality over twenty-five years since the laying of the cornerstone. The museums' building and the division of exhibition spaces are aligned with the core concept I envisioned: the section devoted to World War II (1939–1945) is built below ground level, embedding the message that this war dragged humanity to the lowest point, and this museum tries to make us flourish again

Descending to the lower level follows a spiral path that “draws” visitors downward at the beginning of the journey. The section dealing with the volunteering of the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine, the revival, the War of Independence, and the establishment of the IDF lifts visitors back upward, tracing the museum's narrative axis: from international and Hebrew combat to Jewish combat, and from Jewish combat to Hebrew combat in a sovereign state. This final wing leads back to the entrance, to an Israeli landscape and a special garden featuring plants chosen to represent the colors of war and revival, surrounding the museum and blending into the magnificent panoramic view visible from the rooftop.

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### **The Visitor Route**

The visit begins in a space designed as a “time elevator,” where multimedia elements provide an episodic and immersive introduction to the museum's themes and objectives, creating the sensation of descending into the war. From there, visitors walk through a spiraling corridor encircling an installation that represents a governmental and military “hurricane” sweeping across the globe during World War II and reshaping the world

order. The descent is accompanied by the shadows of male and female fighters projected on both sides, creating the feeling of joining the mobilization, until reaching a simulated passage of “Occupied Poland.” From there, visitors continue a structured route through five wings, divided according to fronts and armies and aligned with chronological timelines:

1. First wing: Early years: 1939–1941, The role of Britain and its allies.
2. Second wing: the Soviet front, 1941–1945.
3. Third wing: the United States front, 1941–1945.
4. Fourth wing, reached through a reconstructed breach in a ghetto wall: combat within partisan units, underground movements, and resistance organizations in ghettos and extermination camps.
5. Fifth wing: the volunteering of the *Jewish Yishuv* for the Mandatory British Army, their contribution to the War of Independence, the establishment of the state, and the IDF, 1939–1949.

Each wing is designed and decorated according to the characteristics of the combat zone and the figures presented within it. Every exhibition includes large screens projecting personal and distinctive stories of selected fighters, interactive maps and information displays, dioramas, generic stations, relevant artifacts, and original items associated with several of the figures.

At the exit from the exhibition route, visitors encounter two sources bearing the same title. The first is a quotation from a poem by Mordechai Zeira (a Brigade fighter, 1944), from his song “*Hodaya*” (*Thanksgiving*). The second is an original document titled “*Prayer of Thanksgiving*,” composed in 1945 to mark the fighters’ return from the war, authored by the Chief Rabbis of the Jewish community, Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog and Rabbi Ben-Zion Uziel. Their juxtaposition inspires reflection and serves as a concluding chord for the museum visit, as well as for the commemorative route dedicated to President Chaim Herzog, whose personal story is woven into the exhibition spaces. The intention was to demonstrate harmony between his personal life journey and the museum’s narrative axis, integrating it experientially from wing to wing from an entrance glass installation depicting him on one side as a British officer and on the other as the sixth President of the State of Israel, “from a Jewish soldier to a Hebrew fighter,” through documentary films and personal artifacts, to the concluding installation in the fifth wing.

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## **The Temporary Exhibition Hall – Opening Exhibition**

To mark the museum's opening to the public, I curated a special exhibition addressing other dimensions of combat, titled "*World War II Through Artistic Eyes*." Examining World War II from a gentle, human, and poetic perspective was a challenging task, especially considering its devastating outcomes and enduring consequences.

This exhibition does not focus solely on fighters who documented their experiences through drawing or photography during the war, nor only on those who painted scenes years later, but rather on the ability to find space amid destruction, death, cruelty, and life-or-death decisions for intimate expression, emotional release, and oscillation between despair and hope. These impulses led fighters to draw, write poetry, photograph, or press flowers from the battlefields. The opening exhibition presents several such works, offering insight into the profile of soldiers, men and women, who did not lose their capacity to dream and create, despite everything, and because of it. The main message is that the language of art is not only therapeutic, offering a grasp on life, but also a kind of testament: a deep desire to leave a mark, a memory etched in a pocket diary, on a torn page, or in a faded notebook. This is yet another expression of the unique connective thread linking the figures presented in the museum personal and distinctive stories chosen not only in a Jewish context, but also in universal and value-based ones.