

Finnish Jews' difficult decision

Collaboration

Ahmon koulu, Siilinjärvi, Finland

2014-2017

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INTRODUCTION

Title

Finnish Jews' difficult decision.

Age

Secondary education, students aged 13-18 years.

Duration

4 sessions of 45 min each.

Sources

- Paul Kendall's shortened article with questions: "*The Jews who fought for Hitler*". Originally published in *Telegraph* 9.3.2014.

Aims

The objectives of this Collaboration Lesson are following:

1. To understand what the concept of collaboration means.
2. To understand that sometimes you have to choose from just bad options.
3. To understand through the examples what the Finnish Jews felt fighting in the war.
4. To increase knowledge about the Finnish Jews difficult situation: Finland was their home country and they decided to fight for it with the Finnish army.
5. To learn of what circumstances led to Finland's collaboration with Germany in WWII.
6. To learn how much one's nationality meant during the war.
7. To learn about the conditions under which the Finnish Jews lived during the war.
8. To reflect on one's own opinions: what do I think about this delicate issue?

9. To realise that everything is not just black or white: actions are complicatedly motivated.
10. To see below the surface: to learn not to make rash judgements.
11. To develop students' ability to critical thinking and forming of well-grounded opinions.

Other aspects

- **Classroom arrangements.** The classroom should be arranged so that a face to face conversation with any participant would be easy - chairs in a circle or several circles.
- **Groups.** If wanted, students can be divided in groups of five to ten.
- **Equipment.** Copied sheets of the Paul Kendall's article with questions added; pieces of paper for students to write their answers; large blank sheets of paper with each question written on them to put students' answers on them.

BIOGRAPHY RATIONALE

In 1940, after Winter War Finland was in front of a difficult decision - to wait and see what plans would the Soviet Union have for Finland or to agree German troops use its areas for transport and get guns and crops in return. Finland chose collaboration with Germany but had its own war against the Soviet Union. For the Finnish Jews it had to be even more difficult. They fought for their country, Finland, that fought alongside with Germany. What problems did they have to face? How did they feel being obliged to collaborate with German soldiers?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Third Reich and Soviet Union made an agreement of a non-aggression pact in 1939. As a part of agreement there was a secret addendum, division to spheres of influence. The western part of Poland, Baltic countries and Finland were left under Soviet Union's influence. Poland was occupied by Third Reich and Soviet Union in September 1939. Shortly after that Soviet Union pressed Baltic Countries to alienate bases to Red Army. In October Soviet Union tried to press Finland to alienate some parts near Soviet Union border. Finland refused to agree and Soviet Union decided to attack.

Soviet Union attacked Finland on 30.11.1939 and the Winter War began. The Winter War got worldwide attention. The League of Nations dismissed Soviet Union. Finland got a lot of sympathy, but less help. Finland's defence fight was desperate, but Soviet Union failed to occupy the country. The main reason might have been Soviet Union's fear of the possibility of France and Great Britain sending forces to help Finland. That is why a cease-fire agreement was made on 13.3.1940 between Soviet Union and Finland.

After Winter War the Soviet influence was very strong in Finland. Soviet Union pressed Finland politically. For example, Soviet Union denied Finland to settle a defence alliance with Sweden. In April 1940 Third Reich occupied Denmark and Norway. Finland was now economically isolated. Soviet Union occupied Baltic countries in summer 1940 and that was a warning to Finland.

In summer 1940 Hitler made a decision to attack Soviet Union, so called "Operation Barbarossa" for 1941. In August 1940 German officer Joseph Veltjens came to Finland to make an offer. Third Reich promised to sell guns and crops to Finland if Third Reich was allowed to transport troops and materials to Norway through Finland. Transit agreement was signed in September. Finnish officers understood soon that this was the first step. German officers gave a hint: the non-aggression pact would end soon and the Finnish should decide on which side to stand. In spring 1941 Finland made a decision: collaboration with Germany was Finland's choice. The main aim was the possibility to restore areas Finland must assign to Soviet Union as a result of the peace treaty that finished the Winter War in 1940.

When "Operation Barbarossa" started in June 1941, Finland restored areas which must have alienated to Soviet Union in 1940. Finland also occupied main parts of Carelian area. Finland underlined the war to be Finland's separate war against Soviet Union. For example Finland refused to participate in the operation "siege of Leningrad". War was co-operated with

Germany and helped by Wehrmacht. During the war there were 250 000 German soldiers in northern part of Finland.

Why did Finland decide to collaborate with Third Reich? It is a question to be criticized, but what realistic choices did Finland have in summer 1940? To stay neutral and wait what Soviet Union decides? Or to collaborate with a country having strongest army in Europe? If Finland's decision would have been to stay neutral, Finland would have been implicated in "Operation Barbarossa" anyway. Third Reich would have attacked from Norway through northern Finland to Soviet Union. A fact to remember is that Finland stayed democratic country during WWII and was never occupied.

BIOGRAPHY

Finnish Jews were in front of a difficult decision whether to fight with the army that had agreed to collaborate with Germany or not. They were Finnish citizens so they chose to fight with their home country's army. 300 Finnish Jews, men and women served in World War II and 23 Jewish soldiers lost their lives. Three Jews were even awarded an Iron Cross which they all rejected.

Finland's Jewish population also had taken part to the Winter War in 1939. Aaron Livson who served in Finnish army, estimates that there was antisemitism in Finland before the wars but the Finns' attitudes towards the Jewish significantly changed after the Winter War - the Jewish had proved their loyalty to the mutual country. Harry Matso, another war veteran considers the relations between the Finnish and the Jewish equal in the army and the Finnish even protected the Jewish. He says nobody was thinking if they were Jewish or not when they went to war - it was the country's defence they were thinking of. After the war Finland's Jewish population was totally integrated to the Finnish population.

ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

Read Paul Kendall's shortened article about Jewish soldiers who fought in Finnish army during the WWII. There are questions implemented to the text. Write all answers on a piece of paper. Please do not write your name on the paper. You can use your mother tongue when answering. Keep it simple, use just a few words. Guess, imagine, follow your feelings.

Activity 2

Once everybody is ready with the first question, the teacher collects all the answers on a blank speech bubble of size A3. The teacher can write each question on the speech bubble. Like this everybody can see everybody's answers. All questions can be discussed after answering.

Activity 3

Read Paul Kendall's article and answer the questions:

Telegraph.co.uk, by Paul Kendall, 09 Mar 2014

The Jews who fought for Hitler: "We did not help the Germans. We had a Common enemy"

They fought alongside them, healed them, and often befriended them. But how do Finland's Jews feel today about their uneasy – and little mentioned – alliance with the Nazis?



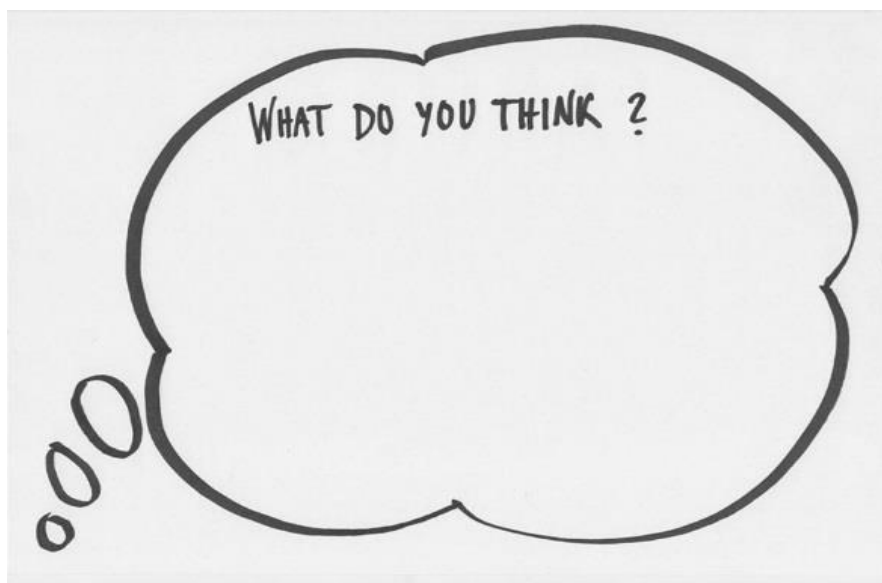
Leo Skurnik (second row, second from right), a Finnish Jewish medical officer, was awarded an Iron Cross, a German military medal.

Leo Skurnik: 1907-1976. A doctor who was dreaming about scientist career, but was forced to forget it by the anti-semitistics and due to that, he wanted far away from the capital Helsinki and made his career as a municipal doctor in Ii municipality and the Oulu city. In WW2 he was a major in medical troops. He was awarded with a German Iron cross, but he refused.

In September 1941, a medical officer performed a deed so heroic he was awarded an Iron Cross by the German high command. With little regard for his own safety, and in the face of heavy Soviet shelling, Major Leo Skurnik, a district doctor, organised the evacuation of a field hospital on the Finnish-Russian border, saving the lives of more than 600 men, including members of the SS.

Skurnik was not the only soldier to be awarded the Iron Cross, more than four million people received it during the Second World War. But what makes the recommendation remarkable is that he was Jewish. And Skurnik was not the only Jew fighting on the side of the Germans. More than 300 found themselves in league with the Nazis, when Finland, who had a mutual enemy in the Soviet Union, joined the war in June 1941.

- **Question I:** *Just with one word: what do you think about this?*



The alliance between Hitler and the race he vowed to annihilate – the only instance of Jews fighting for Germany's allies – is one of the most extraordinary aspects of the Second World War. The Jewish veterans insist they're not ashamed of what they did – perhaps suffering from psychological scars though.

Aaron Livson: 1913- Aaron was drafted to Finnish army. He served in army during Winter War and Continuation War. After war, he was leading the club for the Jewish veterans in Finland.

Aron Livson's first taste of military action came in 1939. A 23-year-old son of a milliner from the city of Vyborg, was drafted into the army when the Soviet Union invaded Finland. In common with many Jews, he was determined to do his duty to the best of his ability, laying down his life for his country if necessary. The Finnish Jews descended from Russian soldiers, who were posted to the region during their service. They were viewed with some suspicion by the Finnish. The Winter War that broke out in 1939, was regarded by the small Jewish population as a chance to prove they were loyal Finnish citizens.

Livson fought in the Karelian Isthmus and, although the army was forced to retreat by the far larger Russian force, he fought valiantly and demonstrating such great skill, that he was promoted to sergeant.

Livson had heard Hitler's venomous tirades against his people. He knew about Kristallnacht, the attacks against German Jewish homes, schools and synagogues in November 1938. But, when the orders arrived to rejoin the fight against Russia, he didn't for one minute consider disobeying.

(At the moment of the interview Livson was a man of 97, with loud voice, firm handshake and unwavering opinions.) "I had to do my duty, like everyone," he says. "We weren't Jews fighting in a Finnish army – we were Finnish people, Finnish soldiers, fighting for our country." There is no mistaking Livson's serious intent. He bangs a walking stick on the floor in unison with each word.

As well as doing their duty as soldiers and proving their loyalty to their country, the veterans insist they were happy to fight for another reason: as far as they were concerned Finland and Germany were fighting separate wars; one, a war of self-defence and one a

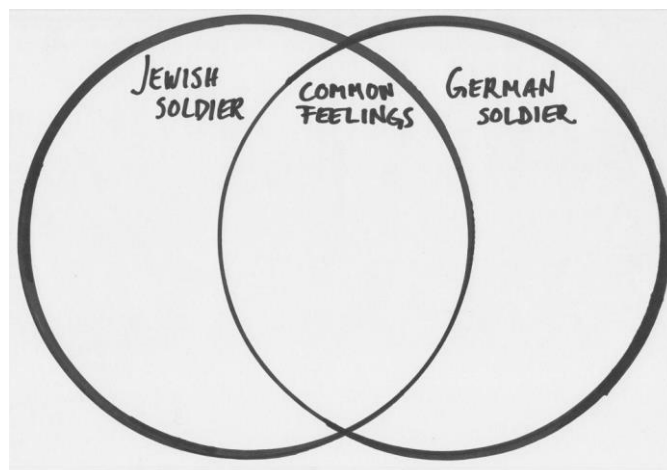
war of conquest. "I had nothing to do with the Germans," says Livson. "There were no Germans where I was serving. They were 200 km north of my regiment."

- **Question II:** *Why did Aron Livson join the Finnish army?*



In Karelia, on the border with Russia, Finnish and German troops fought side-by-side and Jews lived in permanent fear of their identity being revealed, but the German soldiers took the matter no further. The men were Finnish, they had their full support of their superior officers and the Germans – while often shocked to find themselves fighting alongside Jews – did not have the authority to upbraid them. In fact, where they found themselves outranked by a Jewish officer, they were forced to salute.

- **Question III:** *Fighting alongside an enemy:*
 1. What did the Jewish soldier feel?
 2. What did the German soldier feel?
 3. Do they have common feelings?



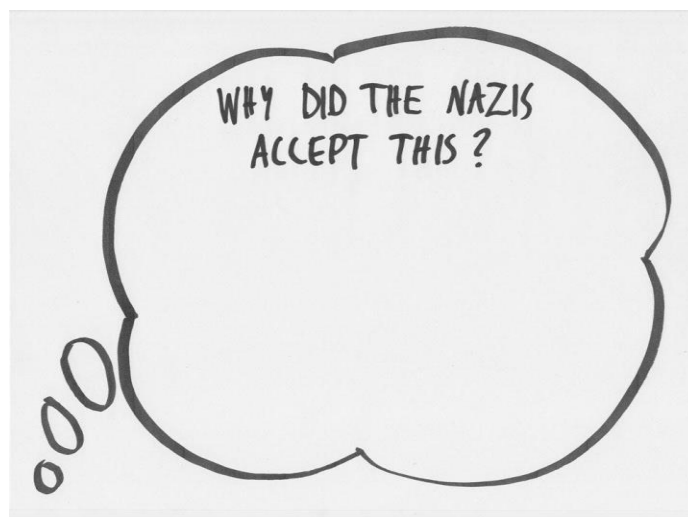
There may have been German troops in Finland and the German command and Gestapo in Helsinki, but Finland rejected Hitler's demands to introduce anti-Jewish laws. When **Heinrich Himmler**, the architect of the Final Solution, visited Finland in 1942 and asked the Prime Minister **Jukka Rangell** about the "Jewish Question", Rangell replied: "We do not have a Jewish Question."

General **Hjalmar Siilasvuo** was positively proud of his soldiers' Jewish ancestry. In the memoirs of **Salomon Klass**, another Jewish soldier who was offered the Iron Cross, Klass, who had lost an eye in the Winter War, tells a story about the general calling him to a meeting and introducing him to German officers present as "one of my best company commanders". General Siilasvuo knew full well who I was and what segment of the population I belonged to", Klass wrote. The Germans said nothing.

Salomon Klass: 1907-1985. A captain in a Finnish army and battalion commander. Was awarded by with a German iron cross, but he refused.

Hannu Rautkallio has revealed friendships struck up between Jews and ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers. "A Jewish soldier was making his way back to camp with a German of a similar rank. The Jew said to the German, "When we get back to the camp, don't tell people I'm Jewish." The German replied, "But nothing would happen to you – you're a Finnish soldier. It's me who would get in trouble."

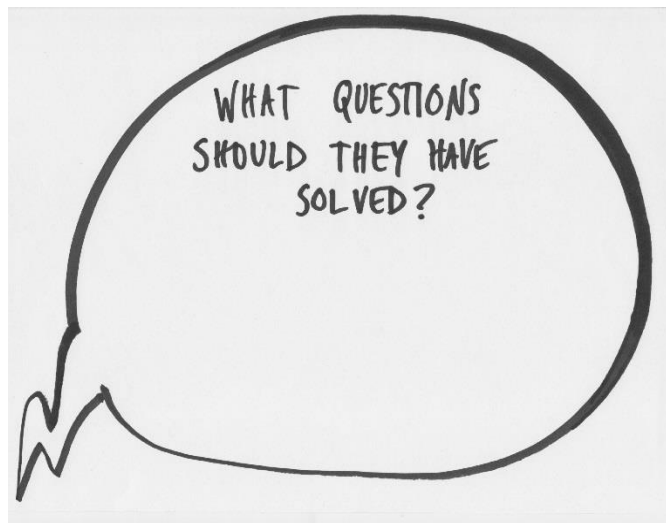
- **Question IV:** *The Finnish officers and leaders of the country gave their full support to the Jewish soldiers. Why do you think the Nazis accepted this?*



A Jewish nurse **Chaje Steinbock**'s scrapbook contains several heartfelt messages from German patients. "To my darling, what you are to me I have told you," begins a soldier calling himself Rudy. "What I am to you, I have never asked. I do not want to know it. I do not want to hear it, because to know too much may destroy happiness. I will tell you just one thing: I would give you everything your heart desires. You are the woman I have loved over everything else. Until now, I had never believed that anything like this existed.

Chaje Steinbock: 1920-1983. "Lotta" and a nurse at the main hospital in Oulu. She was very famous among the German soldiers even they knew her to be Jewish. (Lotta-Svärd was a non-military organisation for the women between the years 1920-1944).

- **Question V:** If there would have been a love story, what questions should they have solved?



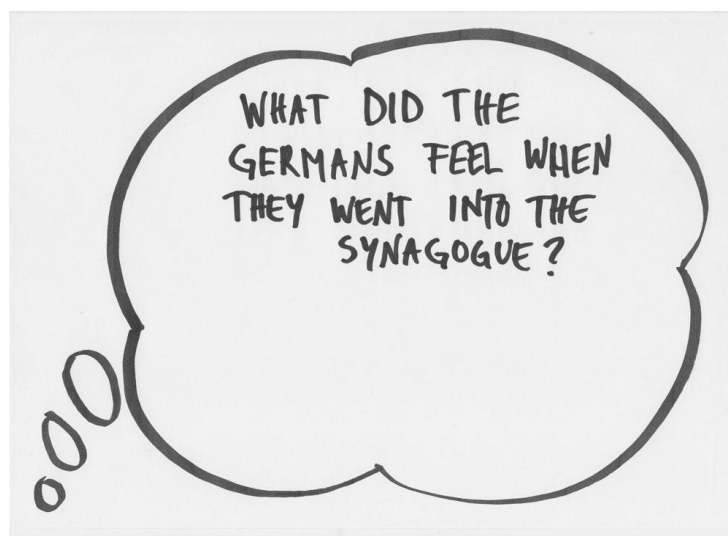
Germans are even reported to have visited a field synagogue that was erected near the front line. "It was an unbelievable picture," **Rony Smolar**, the son of **Isak Smolar**, the man who founded the synagogue, told a conference in the United States in 2008. "German soldiers in their uniforms, sat shoulder to shoulder with praying Jewish men. The Jewish worshippers noticed that some of the Germans even showed a certain respect for the Jewish service. "



Isak Smolar: 1914-1992. He was working for the business, but was taken to the military service. During the Continuation War he was the main person behind the field synagogue.

Of course, many of the details of the Holocaust were still secret at this point. The Jewish soldiers didn't know about the gas chambers and the horrors of Auschwitz, Dachau and Bergen-Belsen. But most were in contact with relatives in Poland and other countries in Eastern Europe. "They got letters," says **Simo Muir**, adjunct professor of Jewish studies at Helsinki University. "They knew about the deportations."

- **Question VI:** What did the German soldiers feel when they went into the synagogue?



Leo Skurnik was certainly aware of the dangers. Nevertheless, as a doctor responsible for both German and Finnish soldiers, he refused to discriminate. "If you want to describe my father, the one feature that came across very strongly was his humanity," says his son **Samuli**. He had taken the Hippocratic Oath and, because of that, he wouldn't turn away an injured man, whatever his nationality.

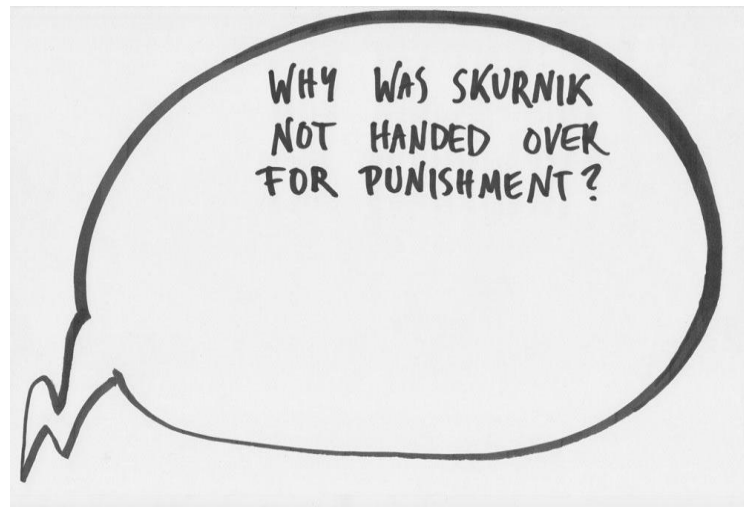
Why did Leo Skurnik help not only the Finnish but the Germans too? Try to find two reasons.

The sector where Skurnik was stationed saw some of the fiercest fighting of the war and both his regiment and the German SS division with whom they were fighting, suffered heavy losses. Skurnik never gave up. He even ventured into no-man's land to rescue wounded German soldiers. Finally, with no sign of a let up in the Russian shelling, he took the decision that the field hospital had to be evacuated. That operation, across five-and-a-half miles of bogland, won him the Iron Cross but, like Klass, who won his decoration for clearing a path for a German charge up a hill, and the third Finnish Jew to have been offered the medal - an assistant nurse **Dina Poljakoff**, Skurnik turned his award down.

***Dina Poljakoff:** 1919 Finland -2005 Israel. Worked as a "Lotta" nurse during the second world war. Was awarded by German iron cross, but she refused.*

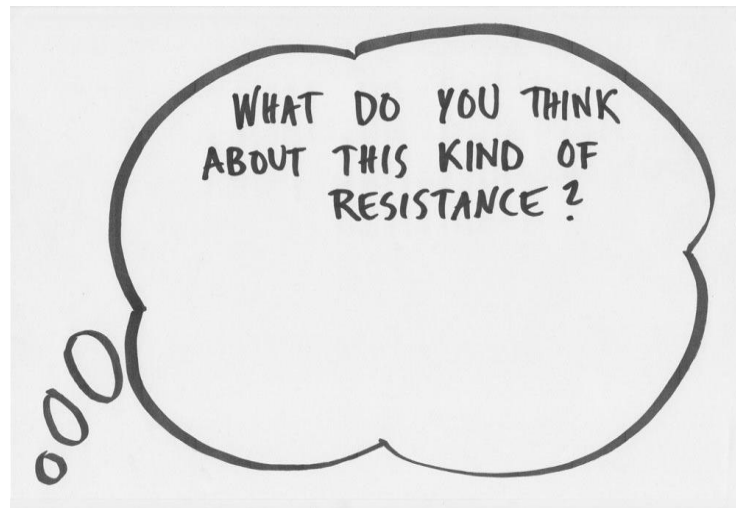
"When the Germans decided they'd like to give this decoration to my father, they told General Siilasvuo. He then told my father who thought it had to be a mistake and decided to see what happened when Berlin found out he was a Jew. But, after a while, General Siilasvuo came back to my father and told him the award had been approved. He said, "My good friend, do you think I can take that kind of decoration? Tell your German colleagues that I wipe my arse with it!" The general told them, word for word, what my father had said." The Germans, infuriated, then told Siilasvuo to hand Skurnik over for punishment, but he refused.

- **Question VII:** *Why did General Siilasvuo not hand Skurnik over?*



There were plenty of other acts of mini rebellion during the war. For example Aaron Livson's brother, who was an acting sergeant for the air defence, used to refuse to greet the Germans and his father, when the Germans came into his shop, would throw them out, says Livson. Such behaviour in another part of Europe would have meant their certain death.

- **Question VIII:** *What kind of resistance it was not to greet Germans or to throw them out of the shop?*

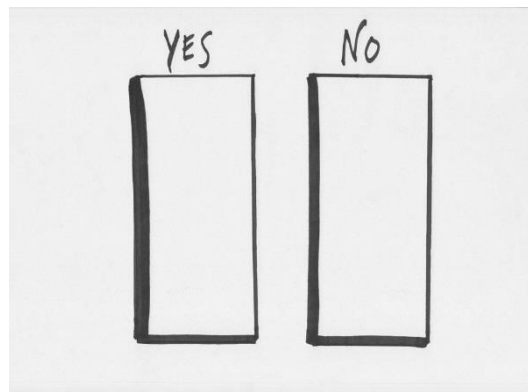


Nevertheless, after the war, as the horrors of the Holocaust revealed themselves, a discomfort about their special treatment spread, both among the Finnish Jews themselves and the wider Jewish community. That discomfort is still detectable today. When I repeat the line about Finland "helping Germany", I feel the temperature in the room drop.

"We did not help the Germans," snaps **Kent Nadbornik**, the chairman of the Finnish Jewish Veterans Guild. "We had a common enemy which was the Russians and that was it."

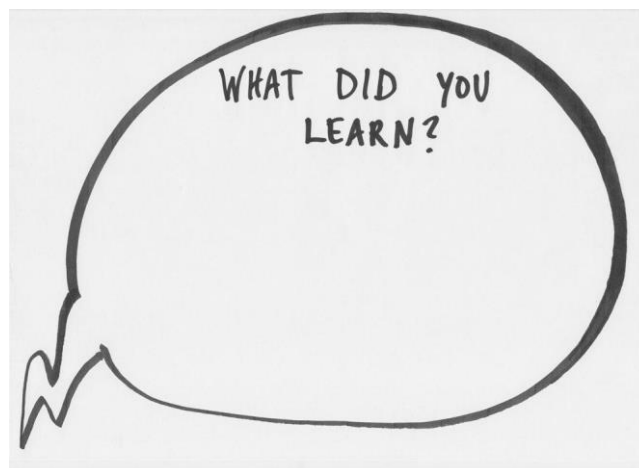
But the Finnish Jews were on an impossible mission. Whatever they did, there would always be one inescapable difference between them and their Finnish compatriots: the latter were fighting for their future, but, if Hitler had won, the Jewish soldiers would have had no future. What were they supposed to do? That is the question nobody can answer.

- **Question IX:** *Everything is not always black or white. Can you now understand better why these people co-operated with the Germans? Just write down YES or NO.*



A hand-drawn diagram for a yes/no response. It consists of two empty rectangular boxes. Above the left box is the word "YES" and above the right box is the word "No".

- **Question X:** *Please write down one thing you have learned during this lesson.*



A hand-drawn speech bubble with a jagged tail pointing towards the bottom left. Inside the bubble, the text "WHAT DID YOU LEARN?" is written in capital letters.

REFERENCES

Bibliography and other resources

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Silja Kärjä: **Biography, Activities.**

Markus Koivisto: **Activities, Biographies.**