

Ironclad Evidence uses all of these disciplines effectively in the stories it tells and the evidence it offers. But the exhibit's greatest accomplishment, perhaps, is the glimpse it provides of the new center for research, interpretation, and exhibition dedicated to one of the pivotal points in the history of modern warfare.

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*Ours to Fight For: American Jews
in the Second World War*

Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial
to the Holocaust, New York, NY. Project Director:
Louis D. Levine; Curator: Bonnie Gurewitsch

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Told almost entirely through the voices of American servicemen, *Ours to Fight For: American Jews in the Second World War* explores the story of Jewish participation in World War II. While the experience of American soldiers during World War II has been widely treated in recent years, little has been done on the experience of Jewish Americans in the war effort, both on and off the battlefield. The Museum of Jewish Heritage, dedicated to the history of the Jewish people throughout the 20th century, is an appropriate venue for this topic.

During World War II, 550,000 Jews served in all branches of the United States armed forces; 40,000 were wounded and 11,000 lost their lives. The exhibit team understood the importance of making personal connections to the individuals behind these statistics, bringing the potentially intimidating narrative to life. This was achieved by focusing on personal details through quotes, audio- and videotaped oral histories, and roughly 450 personal artifacts.



The transition from civilian to military life is demonstrated through the change in clothing and personal effects in *Ours to Fight For*, with commentary by former New York City mayor Ed Koch. (Courtesy of the Museum of Jewish Heritage)



Kiosks provide visitors with a place to record memories of World War II or impressions of the exhibit and leave pictures related to the Jewish war effort. (Courtesy of the Museum of Jewish Heritage)

Most impressive and unusual for a museum exhibition was the lack of interpretive text accompanying the narratives. The label text was almost entirely based on interviews with about 450 veterans. The exhibit developers allowed visitors to simply read or listen to first-person accounts.

The show is divided into several themes: Combat on Land, Combat at Sea, Combat in the Air, Prisoners of War, Behind the Lines, Homefront Theater, The Final Months, and Other Voices. It begins with the attack on Pearl Harbor and Roosevelt's decision to enter the war, interpreted through film and still photography. The wall text, one of the very few curatorial labels, explains the exhibit—

The bombing of Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941, catapulted the U.S. into World War II. American Jews, together with millions of other Americans, joined in the war effort at home and in Europe, Asia and the Pacific. Through the stories of these young Jews this exhibition tells why it mattered, why this war was "ours to fight for."

The next gallery addresses the experience of entering the military as a Jew. The space is filled with personal artifacts, quotes from servicemen, and filmed interviews about undergoing basic training, both the generic experience as well as that specific to Jews. The beautifully displayed civilian and military objects clearly show the care curators took to collect long-treasured, personal memorabilia.

After descending a ramp and viewing a short film clip of the Normandy invasion, the visitor becomes immersed in *Combat on Land*. One is struck by the choice of design materials: a wire-mesh, cage-like fence, rusted in parts, is used instead of traditional glass cases to house artifacts. This beautifully underscores the gritty subject and suggests possibly a military storage area. More delicate objects are displayed in cases cut into the fence. Engaging audio-visual components are everywhere, although the sounds of the audio and video clips bleed between areas.

The synergy of the vivid accounts and objects that provide rich and often unfamiliar details offer visitors a glimpse of what it was like to serve in the war. One story tells of a soldier lighting a candle in a fox-hole at night and eating his salami and wine (sent by his mother in a medicine bottle) for the Sabbath. Another tells how often Jewish soldiers were counseled to change the denomination on their dog tags from H for Hebrew to either C or P for Catholic or Protestant to protect against harsh treatment if captured by the Germans. Some of the most moving artifacts are original telegrams to parents announcing the loss of a son. However, by far the most stirring experience comes in the section called *The Final Months*, a slide show of the liberation

of the German concentration camps with the voices of the servicemen who witnessed those moments. A soldier says plaintively, "No one gave us a hint of what we were going to see."

At the end of the exhibit, the wartime experiences of other minority groups are introduced—African Americans, Chinese Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Jews who fought in other Allied armies. Through a video-capture kiosk, visitors can record their own war experiences and impressions or leave photos of relatives in uniform to be displayed.

While the exhibit relies primarily on first person interpretation, a curatorial voice is nonetheless present. One detects an underlying decision to avoid discussing the implications of being Jewish in this particular war, in which the enemy was anti-Semitic. To be sure, the exhibit includes testimony such as, "If we weren't going to fight for the Jews, who's going to do it for us?" and "My father said, 'They're killing Jews,' and I knew there was a purpose for my going." Yet, the exhibit shies from focusing on these motivations and makes almost no mention of any organized Jewish movement to enlist. Instead, the exhibit focuses on the more universal war experiences. An assimilationist stance misses an opportunity to further explore the issue of being Jewish during this time.

In the final analysis, however, there is little doubt that the exhibit is a great contribution to an understudied subject. The Museum of Jewish Heritage's wealth of archival material and oral histories from an aging population is of great benefit to museum curators and other heritage professionals. *Ours to Fight For* provides an exciting model of exhibit interpretation that hopefully many others will follow.

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