



Impact Statement

Riley Hodes, Grade 11

Perseverance, 2026

Charcoal, graphite on canvas board, 18 x 15 inches

West Anchorage High School, Anchorage, AK

Unsung Hero: Bela Ya'ari Hazan

In my search for an Unsung Hero, there were many parts of Bela Ya'ari Hazan's story that stuck out to me. I ended up choosing Bela Ya'ari Hazan because she is an example of a strong, brave woman who risked her life for the survival of others. During her lifetime, in the late 1930s and early 40s, women had many restrictions on how they could live their lives. Hazan inspires me because not only did she transcend boundaries as a woman but also made more impact than most people during that time.

Bela Hazan served as a courier for the Jewish resistance in Poland during World War II. Raised in a Hebrew-speaking household, she became involved in the Zionist youth movement and later worked as a combat instructor. After fleeing to Lithuania in 1940, Hazan adopted a Polish identity to avoid detection by the Nazis and facilitated communication between resistance groups while smuggling messages, weapons, and funds. In June 1942, she was arrested, tortured, and imprisoned but managed to escape detection regarding her Jewish identity. Hazan survived several concentration camps, contributing to underground efforts despite immense hardship. After the war, she lived in various countries, wrote her memoir, and received recognition for her bravery, including the posthumous "Jewish Rescuer Citation" in 2019. She passed away in 2004.

Bela Ya'ari Hazan showed great determination and resilience when she continued being part of resistance groups despite experiencing physical and emotional torture and multiple concentration camps. In the face of Nazi persecution, her work saved many children's lives, leaving a legacy of compassion and courage. It was women and resistors like Hazan who saved lives and helped end the violence of concentration camps. This inspires me to do what is right, even if there are risks involved, because those small decisions can make a big impact on the world around me. For example, I decided to become more involved in my community. I am president of a culture club at my school, and I volunteered to organize the arrival of the spring festival this year. In past years doing these extracurricular activities that take a lot of time seemed like too much commitment. But after learning how continued involvement can help influence people around you, even if not to the extremity of saving lives, volunteering seemed like a good idea. And over my time organizing this festival, I realized that there are many similarities between the lessons I learned and the lessons of Hazan's story. She showed perseverance by continuing to be a courier even while undergoing abusive situations and I learned perseverance by adapting to the many challenges planning takes. When I was looking for things for our silent auction, it was very difficult to find companies willing to hear out a high

school student. But I was determined to live up to the plan I had made and so in addition to learning how to adapt, I used Hazan as an example to keep trying. So, while my experience has not been as grim as Hazan's, her story has helped me improve skills like adaptability, determination, and perseverance.

In my art piece, I wanted to communicate the oppression and toughness that Bela Ya'ari Hazan experienced. I used symbols of the Holocaust and her role as a courier. For example, I drew chains around the Star of David, a prominent symbol of Jewish identity, unity, and resilience. This represents Hazan's childhood, growing up in a Hebrew-speaking household, and the characteristics of her resistance. The chains symbolize what the Holocaust did to Jewish people and other various religions, controlling and imprisoning them. In the center of my drawing is Hazan herself, dressed in the uniform of concentration camps. By using the most known dress of the prisoners, it is more likely for viewers to recognize that part of her story. But her story is not defined by being imprisoned, so I expressed this through drawing a confidential document behind Hazan as she passed along important contraband that needed to be secretive and well-hidden. I drew a Polish passport to show her adopted identity to avoid Nazi detection. Although it was not entirely successful, it's an early example of her resilience to the violence surrounding her. The crowd behind Hazan's head is the "death marches" that thousands of prisoners were forced to do by Nazis. I utilized graphite pencils to make the piece black and white because I felt that it matched the period as well as the feeling that the situation was grim and silently strong which is more easily conveyed through black and white because color can distract from details.

Bela Ya'ari Hazan's story has already impacted my outlook on life and influenced my perspective on women during the Holocaust, showing their importance. Over time, there are so many unspoken stories of people who fought against oppression and violence. Hazan is a great example of seemingly endless determination which inspires me to also keep with my goals. I see things I have previously 'failed' at and now see areas for growth. For example, the festival I volunteered to plan this year. I chose to make Hazan the center of my art piece because her story motivates me to keep trying and growing. The themes conveyed in Bela Ya'ari Hazan's life story will continue to affect how I view obstacles in life. I hope to share this art piece with others on social media and in person, hopefully at my school's show at the Nave in the fall. Social media can reach people across the world so I hope not only to influence them but also encourage others to look beyond popular heroic stories. What I learned most from this project was that there are many good and inspiring people out there, in the past and present. The world can seem depressing and violent, but there are always people fighting for what is right. And the effects of their stories can be seen everywhere around you.