

Study Guide

Tuvia Bielski: Rescue is Resistance



Tuvia Bielski. Date unknown.
Source: Novogrodek, *The History of a Jewish Shtetl*, www.novogrodek.com.

Before his death in 1987, Tuvia Bielski told his wife, Lilka, "I will be famous when I am dead." Bielski and Lilka were living in Brooklyn, New York, where they seemed to be a typical immigrant family. Bielski, who spoke thickly accented English, worked as a truck driver delivering plastic materials to companies throughout the New York metropolitan area. Bielski was in reality the man who many consider among the greatest heroes of anti-German resistance in World War II—a man who master-minded and led one of the most significant Jewish rescue and resistance operations of the Holocaust. It is a profound

irony that he would be forced to wonder when he would get full credit for his achievements.

In its outlines, Tuvia Bielski's story sounds like the far-fetched creation of a Hollywood scriptwriter. From a small village in the country now called Belarus, Bielski and his brothers Asael and Zus escaped from invading Germans into a nearby forest and then created a refuge for other local Jews there. But the Bielskis did more than hide and save lives: periodically a group of them emerged from the trees on horseback, sub-machine guns strapped to their shoulders, to ambush the enemy. In time, the forest settlement became like a small town, complete with shoemakers and tailors, carpenters, and hat makers, a central square for social gatherings, a tannery that doubled as a synagogue, and even a theater troupe. Ultimately, the Bielski brothers saved the lives of 1,200 Jews and killed more than 300 enemy soldiers.

The Bielski partisans' achievement is on par with more famous acts of wartime courage such as those performed by Oskar Schindler and the

heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In fact, their resistance was more successful than both the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the work of Schindler in both numbers of lives saved and numbers of Germans killed. Tuvia Bielski was a deeply complex man: cruel and tender, charismatic and profane, hotheaded and composed. But he was above all passionate and utterly determined, possessing a connection to the sufferings of the Jewish people that bordered on the mystical. Members of the partisan group remember him as super-human, riding atop a white horse in their forest enclave. "He was sent by God to save Jews," said Rabbi Beryl Chafetz, who as a rabbinical student took refuge in the Bielski camp. "He wasn't a man, he was an angel," said Isaac Mendelson.

During World War II, the majority of European Jews were deceived by the German's meticulous "disinformation" campaign. The Nazis detained millions of Jews and forced them into camps, by promising them safety in exchange for their work. In reality, many of these "work camps" were death camps where men, women, and children were systematically murdered. Yet approximately 20,000 to 30,000 Jews, many of whom were teenagers, escaped the Nazis to form or join organized resistance groups. These Jews are known as the Jewish partisans, and they joined hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish partisans fighting against the enemy throughout much of Europe.

Sometimes they fought with non-Jewish partisan units. In some units they had to hide their Jewish identity, even though they shared a common enemy, the Germans. Many partisan units were so antisemitic that fighters of the same unit could not openly reveal that they were Jews. Other partisan units were purely Jewish. In the case of the Bielski's, they were composed not merely of fighters, but of women, children, and the elderly.

Jewish partisans blew up thousands of German supply trains, convoys, and bridges, making it



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Part of the Bleiski unit towards the end of the War. Approximate date 1943-1944. Source USHMM.

harder for the Germans to fight the war. Partisans also destroyed German power plants and factories, focusing their attention on military and strategic targets, not on civilians. Most partisan units wanted young men who could fight to join their ranks, and many were hostile to Jews. Not the Bielskis, however. They took in hundreds of the elderly, infirm, women, and children.

IN THE WOODS, WE WERE FREE

Tuvia, Asael, and Zus Bielski were three of 12 children born to a miller and his wife in the village of Stankevich, near Novogrudek. The only Jews in a small community, they quickly learned how to look after themselves. Unlike their father, who had a conciliatory nature, the three wouldn't hesitate to fight to defend their family's honor. Their reputation was fearsome: it was rumored among the peasants that Asael and Zus had murdered a man.

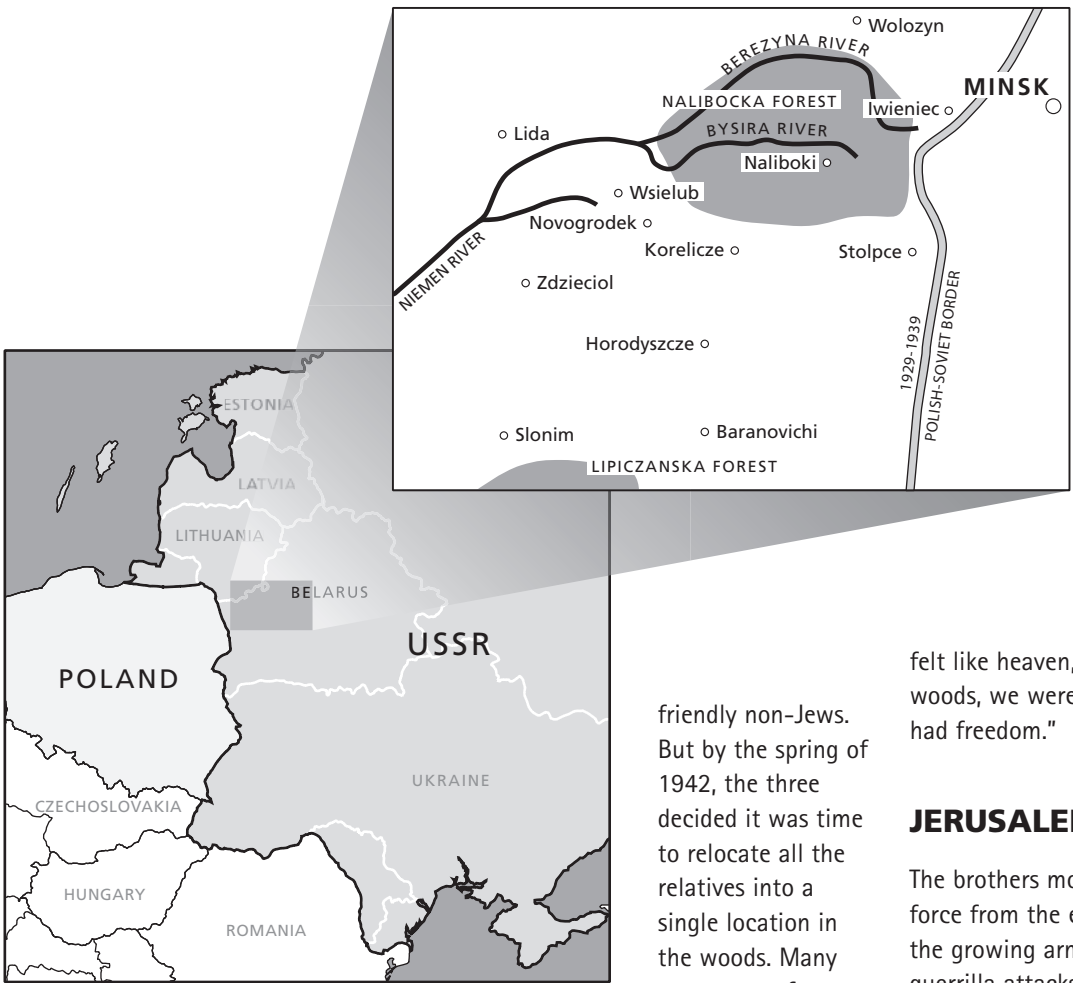
The three brothers had three different personalities, but one common purpose. Tuvia, however, was more refined than his two younger brothers. A tall, dark-haired man known by neighbors as the "Clark Gable of the Bielskis," he was an avid reader who loved to recount religious stories to illustrate current dilemmas. It was

thought by many that he was destined for great things.

Asael, the middle son, was the most reticent of the three. Hardworking and loyal, he enjoyed operating the family's business and planned eventually to take over his father's responsibilities at the mill. Zus was the brash one. He would throw punches first, ask questions later; his parents, it seemed, were always negotiating with the police to keep him out of trouble.

When the Germans arrived in western Belarus, then part of the Soviet Union, in June 1941, the three brothers were 35, 33, and 29. In the first months of the occupation, Bielski family members avoided the German onslaught, but by December 1941 the invaders had captured and killed the brothers' parents and two of their younger siblings. Thousands of other Jews from the region were either killed by the Germans and their collaborators or forced to live in the nearest ghetto.

The brothers sought refuge in the woods where they had spent time as children. Asael and Zus, who were hiding together, set about finding safe homes for a dozen or so of their surviving relatives, including their younger brother, Aron, who was 12 at the time. Tuvia, who was staying further to the north, moved relatives in with



MAP OF AREA: Approximate activity of Bielski partisans in Eastern Poland (now Belarus) during war. Source: *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, by Nechama Tec. Oxford University Press, 1993.

the wild, but the brothers were insistent. In a forest about a mile from the nearest road, they made an encampment where everyone slept under blankets propped up by tree branches. The brothers also sought to obtain weapons for the group's protection.

As the murders and torture of the Jews increased in the Novogrodek ghetto, and in others further away, Tuvia decided to expand the group beyond their relatives. Asael and Zus initially opposed the plan, thinking that it was best to keep the unit small and manageable. But Tuvia insisted. "I would rather save one old Jewish woman than kill 10 Nazi soldiers," he said. He argued that they couldn't sit idle while their people were being slaughtered.

"Asael and Zus would never have had the old people and women," recalled a younger Bielski brother, Aron, who was 12 at the time. "They would have their wives and girlfriends, but no way in hell would they have chosen to take all those people."

friendly non-Jews. But by the spring of 1942, the three decided it was time to relocate all the relatives into a single location in the woods. Many were wary of venturing into

Emissaries were sent into the ghettos to retrieve Jews or urge them to leave; despite the dangers, many were eager to risk flight. By the autumn of 1942, the Bielski group included nearly 100 members. "It seemed like a fantasy from another world," wrote one inhabitant after the war. "A kind of gay abandon filled the air; biting frank talk spiced with juicy curses; galloping horses and the laughter of children. Suddenly I saw myself as an extra in a Wild West movie."

"Compared to the ghettos, it felt like heaven," said Charles Bedzow. "In the woods, we were free. That's all I can tell you. We had freedom."

JERUSALEM IN THE FOREST

The brothers moved quickly to build a fighting force from the escapees, who joined forces with the growing army of Soviet partisans engaging in guerrilla attacks against the occupiers. In October 1942, a squad of Bielski and Soviet fighters raided a German convoy loaded with supplies, killing at least one German soldier.

"It was satisfying in a larger sense," Tuvia wrote of the first attack on Nazis in his 1955 Yiddish language memoir, "A real spiritual high point, that the world should know that there were still Jews alive, and especially Jewish partisans."

The strength and reputation of the brothers' unit—formed as a military outfit with Tuvia as commander, Asael as deputy commander, and Zus as chief of reconnaissance—grew throughout late 1942. The young fighting men, a minority of the overall Bielski population, spent long nights obtaining food—sometimes stealing it—from the local peasant population to feed everyone. They also sought out and executed Nazi collaborators, including one man who lived in the Bielski's boyhood village and was once close to the family. The brothers knew that the group needed to be feared if it had any chance of surviving in such a hostile environment. And it worked: the size of the unit increased, seemingly with every passing day.



Asael Bielski was killed during the battle of Koenigsberg in 1944 while fighting in the Red Army. Approximate date 1943-1944. Source: USHMM

With the arrival of the cold weather, characteristic of the Belarus winter, the brothers, worried about the prospect of their people freezing to death, ordered the construction of large wooden living quarters, known as *zemplankas* in Russian. Built partially into the ground, the structures utilized earthen walls to contain as much heat as possible. The dank, dark spaces were far from luxurious, but they kept the large group protected from the bitter Belorussian winter. "It also helped if we had a little vodka," remembered one survivor.

The dropping temperatures brought an increase in enemy

activity. One night, a unit of German-allied police rushed towards the camp and shot a guard. Alerted by the gunfire, the entire population fled deeper into the woods to safety. Another time, 10 Jewish fighting men from the unit were killed by a troop of German gendarmes who were tipped off by two Belorussian collaborators. The Bielskis were incensed by the act, and Asael and a crew of fighters led a revenge attack, killing both the collaborators and several others. The questions of revenge and "an eye for an eye" made for long conversations within the group. Were the Bielskis going to ruthlessly kill others, inspired by acts of revenge? Or, were they going to be different?

The group grew again in the spring of 1943. The brothers were soon watching over nearly 800 Jews, constantly moving the ragged band to new locations, to keep one step ahead of the Nazis. It was clear that the local peasants knew where the Jews were hiding, and Tuvia was increasingly worried about the unit's safety.

He had reason to worry. On June 9, 1943, the Bielski camp was once again attacked. This time, 10 Jews lost their lives. The brothers decided to relocate once again, to a dense forest called Naliboki many miles from the village of their boyhood. After an exhausting march to the forest, which was home to many Soviet partisan units, the group suffered the biggest attack yet from the Nazis. They escaped by retreating to an island in

the middle of a swamp, and although the fighting lasted more than a week, only one man was lost.

In the weeks following the attack, the brothers located a dry spot in the dense forest and began work on a new camp. "It really was something special," said Jack Kagan, an escapee of the Novogrudek ghetto who emigrated to London after the war. Completed in October and November 1943, it had a large kitchen, a bathhouse, a blacksmith forge, a small horse-powered mill, a bakery, a tailor shop staffed by 18 men, a school for some 60 children, a gunsmith shop, and even a jail. It came to be called Jerusalem. [See map on page 6]

"Everybody was gainfully employed and it was an embarrassment if you weren't working," Tuvia said in his 1946 book, *Yehudai Yaar [Jews of the Forest]*. "We spent many hours after work in small groups meeting in and around the camp. The younger people always gathered around the campfires, talking and singing. These were not official parties in the Soviet mold that we were forced by the few Communists among us to attend on occasion. Around the campfires we would sing songs in Yiddish, Hebrew and our conversations always gravitated to the present and future of Israel."



Zus Bielski after the War. Approximate date 1944-1945. Source: USHMM

Since the group was ostensibly a Soviet unit loyal to the Communist creed, outward displays of Jewish or Zionist¹ expression were to be avoided. But a profound Jewish spirit pervaded the community. "During Pesach, we prepared unleavened bread for those who wanted it," Tuvia said. "Most of the people preferred kosher² meat. Yeshiva student Avraham Shmuel Kaibovitz from Mir was appointed to oversee the laws of kashrut. Those people who wanted to observe the Sabbath were also excused from performing tasks, and in most cases their requests were granted, although there was no official reason for this."

For the inhabitants of the forest camp, Tuvia was a respected and beloved figure. He frequently gave speeches before the entire assembly, often breaking down in tears at the fate of the Jews. Zus and Asael, far from being idealistic visionaries, were more interested in leading military expeditions against the Germans and their allies. The relative safety of the new camp allowed them greater freedom to complete their tasks. For the next few months, they shot up military outposts, attacked convoys traveling between the cities, and mined rail tracks with improvised bombs.

In a typical incident, on April 29, 1944, a squad of eleven men led by Asael Bielski "blew up a German truck on the Lida-Novogrudek road", according to a report delivered to the Soviet command. According to the report, handwritten in the Russian language, Asael's fighters killed one German soldier and two Nazi-allied policemen and interrupted vehicular traffic on the road for ten hours. "There were no victims from our side and no spoils of war," the report said. In another incident, on May 20, 1944, Asael's squad attacked a unit of Polish partisans, killing six people and wounding several. There were groups of antisemitic Polish partisans who hunted down and killed Jewish partisans – members of the Polish Home Army, or Army Krajowa. There were also other Polish partisans who were allied to the Germans and wanted the post-war Poland to be free of non-Catholics and fought against Jewish partisan groups as well. For more information about antisemitism in the Jewish partisans see JPEF's study guide written in partnership with the ADL, *Antisemitism in the Jewish Partisans*. In addition, a short film narrated by Larry King on the subject is also available on the JPEF website: www.jewishpartisans.org/films

But there was also tension between the brothers. At one point Zus left the main Bielski camp to join a Russian partisan brigade that was focused solely on fighting the Germans. Asael, Zus, and Tuvia often argued on which was the better way to survive: bringing as many Jews as possible to their camp, including people who could not fight, or using their finite resources to physically fight against the Germans.

LIBERATION

In July 1944 the Red Army was winning the war against Germany and arrived to liberate the woods where the Bielski camp was located. The Bielski brothers reported to the Soviets that their group included a total of 1,140 Jews. They also reported that their fighting forces, sometimes with Soviet partisans, had killed a total of 381 enemy fighters. But few of the survivors were willing to dwell on the successes: they emerged to find their homes ransacked, their families murdered, and their communities destroyed.

As for the brothers, Asael Bielski was conscripted into the Red Army and killed in battle in February 1945. Tuvia and Zus emigrated to Israel, where both fought in the War of Independence, and then, in the mid-1950s, to the United States. Zus, who died in 1995, operated a trucking and taxi company, while Tuvia, the great commander, toiled behind the wheel of a delivery truck. When he died in 1987, he was buried on Long Island. A year later, he was exhumed and given a state funeral with military honors in Jerusalem.

It is difficult to estimate how many people are alive today because of the actions of the Bielski brothers. Many of the twelve hundred people who walked out of the woods in the summer of 1944 have since died, but their children have borne children, who themselves have borne children. By some accounts, approximately ten thousand people currently alive owe their existence to the brothers' decision, at Tuvia's insistence, to shelter every Jew who arrived in the forest encampment. It is an achievement that is literally incalculable.

1. A Jewish movement that arose in the late 19th century in response to growing antisemitism and sought to reestablish a Jewish homeland in British mandated Palestine

2. Food that conforms to Jewish dietary law.

More Information on the Jewish Partisans

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation recommends these resources for further information:

Films & Video

- To see a video of Aron Bell, the last surviving Bielski brother, talking about his brother Tuvia, please go to: www.jewishpartisans.org/partisans
- *A Partisan Returns: The Legacy of Two Sisters*, directed by Mitch Braff (2008) www.jewishpartisans.org/films
- *Defiance*, directed by Ed Zwick. A Paramount Vantage release, available on DVD.
- *The Partisans of Vilna*, directed by Joshua Waletzky (1987).

Books

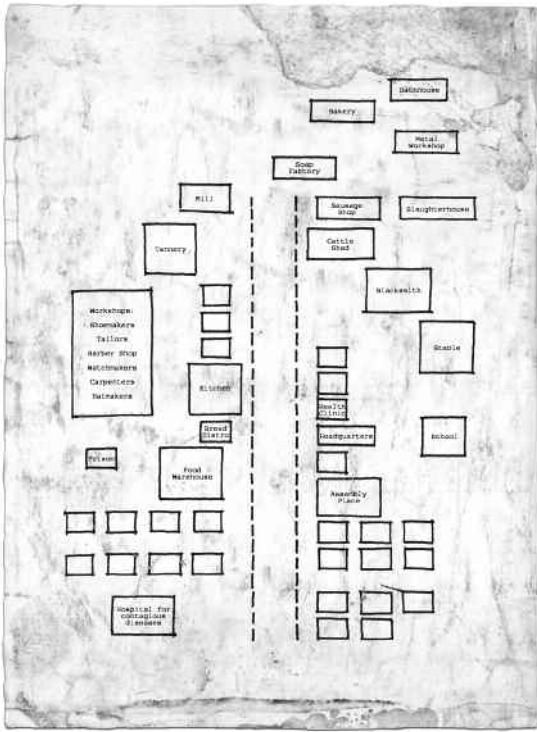
- *The Bielski Brothers: The True Story of Three Men Who Defied the Nazis, Built a Village in the Forest, and Saved 1,200 Jews*, by Peter Duffy, Harper Collins, 2004.
- *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, by Nechama Tec. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- *Daring to Resist: Jewish Defiance During the Holocaust*, by Yitzhak Mais (ed), Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2007.
- *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe*, by Reuben Ainsztein. Harper & Row, 1974.

Websites

- Teaching with Defiance & Bielski Partisans Resources: www.jewishpartisans.org/defiance
- Novogrudek: History of a Jewish Shetel: www.novogrudek.co.uk
- Defiance Film Website: www.defiancemovie.com

QUESTIONS: Textual Analysis

1. "Jerusalem" provided essential services for local Soviet partisan units in the forests. How do you think this might have contributed to the Bielski unit's survival?
2. What do you understand about the relationship between the Bielski partisans and the Soviet partisan command? Between the Bielski and the Polish partisans? What evidence do you have from the text to support your understanding?



Map of the Bielski camp in Naliboki Forest. Fall 1943 - Summer 1944. The camp had a tannery, bakery, soap factory, hat maker, school, and tailor, and had approximately 1,200 inhabitants.

Ethics

1. The Bielski partisan unit was unique in that it readily accepted large numbers of non-fighters into its units. Do you think this enhanced or threatened their chances for survival or both? Explain.
2. The Bielski partisans took severe measures against informants and collaborators. Often the collaborator and his entire family would be killed, and their home burned to the ground. Holocaust scholar, Nechama Tec quotes Tuvia, explaining, "We could neither forgive nor forget. If we do not take revenge upon such collaborators, what would become of us? Every farmer would be free to inform." Do you agree with Tuvia's argument? Why or why not?
3. As commander of the unit, Tuvia insisted that all Jews be accepted and integrated into the camp. His brothers argued against this, fearing that large numbers of unarmed people would bring disaster to all. Do you agree with Tuvia's position? Why or why not? What is the argument for Tuvia's position? How would you counter the argument and press for his brothers' concept of their mission?
4. In order to feed such large numbers of people, armed partisans were required to raid neighboring farms and villages. Tuvia describes the situation, "The peasants were poor, yet we had to do it. We were in a predicament... sometimes we would take their last cow, their last horse." Is it permissible to put others' lives in jeopardy to save one's own?



A Partisan Returns: The Legacy of Two Sisters - a 20 minute documentary film about a former Bielski partisan who returns to her hometown of Novogrodek, Belarus nearly 65 years after escaping into the forest through a 750-foot tunnel.

Watch the film at www.jewishpartisans.org/films to witness a personal story of one woman's trip with her family as they explore the former ghetto, the tunnel she escaped from, and the forests where she lived with 1,200 others in the Bielski camp. DVDs of the film can be ordered from the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation through dvd@jewishpartisans.org

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