

**Defiance - Bielski Bros. from 1**

Colonel Markov, the head of the Voroshilov Brigade, had sent an order to all divisions in the Naroch [Narocz] Forest to get rid of the Polish brigade that still had some ties with Russian partisans. On this day, all the fighters that belonged to the Polish brigade were ordered to come, without weapons, to this clearing in the forest and meet their Russian comrades. When the Polish brigade arrived, the Soviets put fifteen of the commanders in a line and, after they [the Soviets] read what [the commanders] were guilty of, which was resistance to the Soviet rulers, they were killed on the spot.

Another Jewish partisan, Peter Smuszkowicz, wrote:

*During the summer of 1943, Yacov and I were members of a Soviet partisan brigade named after its commander Ponomarenko [sic]. A large group of partisan detachments, including the Markov Brigade were assembled in the forest. The Markov Brigade was a strong force and had steady contact with Moscow, both through radio connections and airplane (Kukuruznik) drops. Nearby was a Polish partisan base known as Kmicic [i.e., Burzyński's unit]. One of their officers was Porucznik [porucznik, i.e., lieutenant] Mruckowski [Wincenty Mroczkowski]. At this time there was an atmosphere of cooperation between the Russian and Polish partisans as they fought their common enemy, the Germans.*

*There were many Jewish boys in the Markov Brigade. ... At this time the Jews and Polish partisans were still friendly. ...*

*We were curious as to the reason for the sudden assembly of so many partisan groups. We heard rumours that we were preparing an attack on the German garrison in Miadziel [Miadziół]. We lay in ambush position and within a few hours shots could be heard nearby. We soon discovered what had happened. The leaders of a unit of Polish partisans of the AK (Army-Krojowa) [sic] Land Army had been arrested by Soviet partisans on orders from Moscow. ... Their partisans had been separated and assigned to several Soviet detachments. They kept their weapons, but their commanders were arrested and though some may have escaped the rest were shot.*

*At the first chance they got, the Polish partisans deserted the Soviet brigades and reformed their own AK units. They were now our enemies.*

David Plotnik, who served in the Chkalov unit and afterwards in the Kalinin division of the Komsomol Brigade, describes various assaults on Polish partisans including the "disarming" of Pelka's unit in December 1943: "I took part ... in the attack on a Polish company under the command of Miloszewski [Miłaszewski]." According to Jewish sources, partisans from the Bielski group also participated in the assault of Pelka's detachment, but display a great deal of amnesia surrounding the fate of the Polish partisans whom they helped to "disarm". American sociologist Nechama Tec gives the following sanitized version:

*In the late fall of 1943, Russian headquarters in the Nalibocka [Naliboki] forest ordered a surprise attack on the Kościuszko group [of the Stolpce Concentration, which included Miłaszewski's unit]. Several otriads [units] were asked to contribute fighters. The Bielski unit sent fifty men.*

*At dawn the Poles were surrounded and without a single shot were taken prisoner.*

According to Jacob Greenstein, a partisan from the Bielski group:

*We went out, 200 of us, I was part of the group. We surrounded them at night and in the early hours of the morning, without one shot, we took them prisoners. There were about 400 of them. Only 50 or so of their cavalry men were missing. They were in a nearby town, Iwieniec. When they heard what had happened they united with the Germans [this claim is untrue] and fought against us. ...*

*When we took these Poles prisoners, the soldiers among them we divided into small groups and sent each group into a different Russian unit. Many of them had come from the surrounding villages and towns. Soon most of them ran away. The rest stayed with us and fought against the Germans. With the officers we dealt differently. ... I was present when they were being interrogated. We could get nothing out of them. ... I have heard later that some of them were sent to Moscow. I don't know what happened to them there. ... I know that when we disarmed them and when we took them prisoners we did not kill them.*

In actual fact, as Soviet and Polish reports confirm, many Polish partisans were executed surreptitiously. Oswald Rufeisen, a Jew who was sheltered by Polish nuns in the town of Mir after leaving his undercover post with the German authorities, eventually joined the Soviet Ponomarenko detachment in the Naliboki forest. Rufeisen states:

*When I entered the forest [in December 1943] the Polish partisans were being liquidated, disarmed, subdivided, and placed into different units. I don't know if the purpose was to finish them off or simply to subordinate them to the Soviets. Perhaps only later on someone gave an order to liquidate them. After they were dispersed they could not have become Russian enemies because they were disarmed. The few I had met in our unit were shot in the back, in an underhanded way. This happened when they were supposedly being transferred to another place. Someone who sat behind them shot them, one by one. ... This was not decent. I think that it was part of a conscious effort to liquidate the Polish underground. ... This was a dirty job of the Soviets, the same way as Katyn was or the Polish uprising in Warsaw.*

*I spent the war in Eastern Poland where I joined the German police pretending to be a Pole. I did not see Poles there murdering Jews, although I did see Poles being murdered. Moreover, I saw Belorussians, Latvians, Estonians, and Ukrainians who murdered [Jews], but I did not see Polish units doing that.*

**A frank assessment by a leading Holocaust historian**

There is no doubt that the Soviet partisans unilaterally declared war on the Polish partisans and that Jewish partisans joined in this treacherous assault. Hundreds of Polish partisans were murdered in cold blood. This set the tone for relations between Polish and Communist partisans throughout occupied Poland. Yisrael Gutman, the director of the Centre of Holocaust Research at the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem, has aptly summed up the nature of the conflict between the Home Army and the Soviet partisans including its Jewish dimension:

*One should not close one's eyes to the fact that Home Army units in the Wilno [Vilna] area were fighting against the Soviet partisans for the liberation of Poland. And that is why the Jews who found themselves on the opposing side perished at the hands of Home Army soldiers – as enemies of Poland, and not as Jews.*

The portrayal of the Polish Home Army as a "fascist" organization of Nazi collaborators that spent most of its time attacking Soviet partisans and Jews is a propaganda relic of the Stalinist era – one that should finally be put to rest. The Polish partisans attacked the Germans more often than the Soviets and armed confrontations with the Soviet partisan formations were generally defensive or retaliatory. Moreover, by eliminating Polish partisans the Soviets were in fact furthering the war aims of Nazi Germany, their erstwhile ally, with whom they were always prepared to collaborate against the Poles, as circumstances permitted.

**Raiding Villages for Provisions**

While postwar accounts stress the partisan nature of the Jewish group under

the command of Tuvia Bielski, in reality even the armed partisans among them engaged in very little combat activity with the Germans. The principal and almost exclusive undertaking of the Bielski group, who became well armed over time, was gathering provisions in the countryside for the needs of the large family camp. These incessant raids often entailed violence against "uncooperative" farmers who attempted to protect their families and property from marauders. This area was one of the poorest in all of Europe, and its inhabitants were required to turn over stringent food requisitions to the German occupiers. In addition, they were robbed of their belongings and assaulted by various partisan and forest groups. Despite the reputed "danger" inherent in these missions, casualties among the Bielski group were exceedingly few. The farmers were rarely armed and were frightened of the marauders and their Soviet protectors; German authorities and their Belorussian police were scarce; and the Home Army, which was not a strong force in this area of mixed Polish-Belorussian population, was in no position to offer much protection.

**Avoid combat with the Nazis at all costs**

Members of the Bielski group are quite candid about why they had escaped from the ghettos: it was not to engage in combat with the Germans, but to survive the occupation.

*"Our aim was to survive. When we left for the forest we felt that it was close to the end and so we wanted to live. We did not plan to fight the Germans, we thought about staying alive."*

*"If someone tells you that when he went to the partisans he was motivated by a desire to fight ... that is incorrect. All of us left the ghetto in the hope of staying alive. We hoped for a chance. ... They did not leave to fight, they left to live."*

Once in the forest, Tuvia Bielski cautioned them repeatedly:

*"Don't rush to fight and die. So few of us are left, we have to save lives. To save a Jew is much more important than to kill Germans."*

Another Jew who joined the Bielski unit wrote:

*The main actions were not fighting the Germans; instead all they aimed for was to survive until days of peace and all they took care of was supplying food and clothing for the Jewish people. I must emphasize they were very successful in their mission.*

Exceptionally, Jack Shepsman ended up leaving the Bielski camp and joined a non-Jewish Soviet partisan unit because, in his words, "I didn't like it there a bit, we didn't have any arms; I had gone there to fight, to do something, and they put me in the kitchen – I didn't survive just for that! I had to take revenge for what the Germans had done."

The Jews who lived in the Bielski family camp in Naliboki forest led rather mundane existences. They did not engage in any true partisan or military activity despite the fact that they were well armed. Dov Zalmanovicz recalled:

*When we got there we couldn't believe what we saw. There was a real town in the middle of the forest. Little huts had been built one next to the other. We were taken into an office and interrogated at length, because we were the first two of the twenty-four survivors who had managed to escape the ghetto [in Nowogródek] through the tunnel and reach the partisans.*

*The first question was whether we had any money in our possession in order to buy weapons, because the custom was that each person bought his own weapon, with his own money. We had no money, of course, but after a few months, the situation changed altogether.*

*Planes appeared in the sky and dropped weapons in large quantities, to a point where an ordinary revolver no longer had any value because we were using*

*automatic weapons. The two of us also received a weapon. I remained all the time with the friend who had escaped with me from the ghetto. We did not take part in real combat per se, but we went to the neighbouring villages to get food. Sometimes, we ran into bandits and robbers, and we simply killed them.*

The irony of using words such as "bandits" and "robbers" apparently escapes this witness, whose main activity was robbing in the surrounding villages.

Occasionally, the Jews in the much smaller partisan detachment, under the command of a Soviet commander and, informally, Zus Bielski, were called on for various tasks of a military nature. The only "face to face" confrontations with the Germans that Tuvia Bielski describes in his memoirs (published in 1946) occurred in the fall of 1942, near Nowogródek. The first incident was an ambush on a truck carrying provisions requisitioned in the village of Radziuki; the second, a failed attempt to destroy a small train station in Jacuki. In the first incident, armed with rifles (and not machine guns as depicted in the film *Defiance*), twenty-five men from the Bielski group and an equal number from a local Soviet partisan group fired at the truck which they stopped. Eight Germans and Belorussian policemen fled from the vehicle and some were hit by bullets. The partisans confiscated some weapons including two machine guns and four rifles, ammunition, and food provisions. They then fired bullets into the gas tank of the vehicle and it exploded. The second incident grew, over time, into an epic episode. According to one candid participant, there were no casualties, either German or Soviet. In a report authored by Bielski in September 1944, four Germans were killed and seven wounded. In his 1946 memoirs, Bielski claimed they had killed seven to eight Germans. The only other armed altercation Tuvia Bielski describes is liquidating a number of Belorussian collaborators and their families, including women and children.

Once in the Naliboki forest, the Bielski group avoided the Germans at all costs. Sulia Wolozhinski Rubin recalled a temporary truce between the Bielski partisans and German troops stationed nearby: "We settled our tents on one side of Lake Kroman [Kromań] ... On the other side of the river the Germans settled their posts. ... As time progressed, our men would talk to the Germans. They weren't interested in getting killed either; and so it went on."

**"Economic operations" proliferate**

The descriptions of the so-called "economic operations" carried out by various Jewish groups and partisans fully support the widely held impression of the local population that Jews were indeed the most rapacious of all the forest pillagers. They seized not only large quantities of food and livestock, but also clothing such as boots and coats, and other belongings such as blankets, furniture and even jewelry. Moreover, they frequently resorted to violence to achieve their goals. It must be borne in mind that typically a peasant's home was a tiny one or two-room wooden cottage with a thatched roof, and often lacked a wooden floor, a dirt floor being rather common.

As the size of the Bielski group grew, it became more and more cumbersome to rely on traditional methods such as begging, working, and bartering for food. The generosity of the local population was also wearing thin as the demands for provisions from all sides kept growing. The Germans in particular exploited the area economically. The fear of severe punishment that inevitably followed when the Germans suspected villagers of assisting the partisans also came to bear on the increasingly pauperized peasantry. Yet, the robberies continued unabated, with the farmers being stripped of anything and everything. It was only

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