

Bielski partisans from 14

from the Bielski and Dzienciolski families before they could safely go to the forest and continued to assist members of the Bielski group while they were in the forest.] ...

At night we would move somewhere else. Sometimes the boys would decide to stay two days. They knew all the farmers ... From the farms I was able to write Papa, Mama and Rita [in Nowogródek]. According to the Yad Vashem Institute:

Dozens of Jews who lived in the district capital of Nowogrodek [Nowogródek] owed their lives to the five members of the Bobrowski family, who saved Jewish refugees without expecting anything in return. Franciszek Bobrowski and his family were simple, uneducated folk who lived in a small cottage on the outskirts of Nowogrodek. The Bobrowskis, who were poor, hunted stray dogs and skinned them for a living. Guided by humanitarian considerations, they opened their door to Jewish fugitives from the Nowogrodek ghetto, fed them, and allowed them to rest for a while. In the dead of the night, the Bobrowskis took the fugitives to the nearby forest, where they joined the partisan unit run by the Bielski brothers. The Bobrowskis, known as dog hunters, became a household name among Jews escaping from the ghetto, who knew that they could count on them to find them a safe shelter. At the start of the summer of 1944, several weeks before the area was liberated, informers denounced the Bobrowskis to the authorities, who raided their home and killed the Jewish family that was staying there. Afterwards, the Germans burned down the Bobrowskis' cottage and pushed Franciszek and his wife, Franciszka, into the flames. Their sons, Stefan and Michal [Michal], were arrested and executed, while their daughter, Maria, was sent to a concentration camp in Germany, which she survived.

Tuvia Bielski and his family received extensive help from Christians in the vicinity of Stankiewiczze, his native village near Wsielub, north of Nowogródek:

From gentile contacts he obtained false papers, one identifying him as a Belorussian, another as a former Polish Army officer named Andzoi [Andrzej]. ...

... he moved from place to place, relying on a constellation of gentile acquaintances he had known from his years of living in Subotnik [Sobotniki], Lida and Stankevich [Stankiewiczze].

... Asael and Zus [Bielski] ... searched for safe homes for the Dzienciolski relatives ... There was no problem finding spots for the aged members. It was tougher locating a place for a baby, whose cries would easily attract the neighbors' attention. The brothers were turned down a few times before finding a Polish couple receptive to the idea. ...

... [Tuvia] visited a wealthy Pole he was acquainted with, named Wilmont, who welcomed the couple into his home and agreed to shelter them. Sonia took on a position as his household seamstress ... He gave Tuvia a pistol, a Belgian Browning, and four bullets. ...

... Things weren't helped when a selfless Polish farmer named Kot, a man who was housing a few Bielski relatives, looked out his window one morning and noticed a group of local [Belorussian] police surrounding his house. ...

During a search of the house, the officers discovered the Jewish fugitives—including the elderly Dzienciolski parents - whom Kot quickly identified as his relatives. ...

Claiming ignorance, Mr. Kot was arrested and taken to the local police station. Viciously beaten and tortured, he died from his injuries.

When Tuvia [Bielski] and his people came close to the river Niemen, a farmer warned them that the German police were on the way. ...

After the crossing, two families, the Dworeckis and the Taubs, told Tuvia that

they would like to remain in the area, in the homes of Christian friends. The Dworecki sisters [Cila and Luba] explained that "We were in a terrible condition. We had wounds, lice, we were filthy, exhausted. My father felt that maybe we should stay a while with my father's Polish friend, G. Filipowicz. ... We indeed went to the Pole. We were there for the winter. They helped us build a ziemlanka in a nearby forest. ... We went back to Bielski."

A part of Chaja's [Bielski] family, including her old parents, also made arrangements to stay in the home of Christian friends.

Lola Kline, the infant daughter of Abraham Dzienciolski and Taube Bielski, was sheltered by a Polish couple and returned to her parents, who were part of the Bielski forest group, after the war.

A small contingent of the [Bielski] unit's higher echelon (about twelve people in all) instead sought shelter in two peasant homes near Chrapinyevo [Chrapieniewo], occupied by elderly Poles. It turned out to be a tragic mistake.

... In the early afternoon of January 5, 1943, a troop of local [Belorussian] police and Germans ... marched to the houses. ... The enemy soldiers lobbed a grenade through a window ... and opened fire on everyone who tried to escape. Everyone in the house was killed. ...

At least nine Jews were killed in the tragedy near Chrapinyevo ... Three Poles who owned the houses, and who risked so much to harbor the Bielskis, were also killed.

During the first big Aktion in Nowogródek, December 1941, Luba [Rudnicki] lost her parents and all her siblings. ... Around that time a Pole, Jarmalowicz, came to her saying that he would like to rescue her and her husband. The man explained that Luba's father, before he was murdered, made him promise to save Luba and her husband. ... the man had a reputation as an anti-Semite. Suspicious of the man's motives, numbed by the loss of her family, disinterested in life, she refused the offer. [In fact, Jan Jarmalowicz and his wife Maria rescued a group of Jews on their estate.]

The proposition was followed by one from Mrs. Sargowicki, a Polish woman and Luba's friend. The woman was ready to save Luba and her husband. ...

Luba again refused. ... after the second big Aktion in Nowogródek, August 7, 1942. Mrs. Sargowicki was still there, willing to aid. Her husband was a prisoner of war in Germany ... This time the plan included Luba's brother-in-law {Meir Rudnicki} and two more ghetto inmates, Dr. Tamara Zyskind and her lover Dr. [Mark] Berkman. ...

Luba and her companions were now to stay with Mrs. Sargowicki's niece, Zosia, next to the village of Chrapiniewo [Chrapieniewo] and near the small town of Iwje [Iwie]. ... When they came to Zosia's farm they moved into the barn ... Zosia decided that her charges should spend their days in the forest and return to the barn only at night. ...

One day, Luba and her friends woke up to shooting sounds. From their Russian contacts they heard that the Germans had attacked the Bielski group. These men did not know how many had died, only that Zosia's mother was among those killed and that her farm had been burned down. The Bielski brothers had stayed at her farm.

Immediately after Zosia disappeared and was never heard from again. [The survivors of this group joined the Bielski group after a treacherous attack by Russian partisans in which Dr. Berkman and Meir Rudnicki were murdered.]

Julian and Joanna Rostkowski, who were known as upright people, lived in the village of Chutory [Hutory] Delatyckie, near Nowogrodek [Nowogródek], and were friendly with Luba Mejerson, a Jewish pharmacist from nearby

Nowogrodek. Mejerson and her husband decided to escape to the forests and join the partisans. Not knowing what to do with Fruma, their six-year-old daughter, Luba asked Julian Rostkowski, her friend, to hide her daughter. In early 1942, Rostkowski traveled to Nowogrodek with his 13-year-old daughter, Michalina, smuggled little Fruma out of the ghetto, and brought her home to his farm. Rostkowski introduced the little girl to their neighbors and the village mayor as an orphaned relative and Joanna, his wife, looked after her as if she were her own daughter. Her parents, who were hiding in the Naliboki forest with the Bielski brothers' partisan camp, used to visit the Rostkowski home occasionally to see how well their daughter was being cared for. In an operation launched by the Germans against partisans in the surrounding forests, the Rostkowskis' farm was burned down and they became destitute. For two and a half years, the Rostkowskis were reduced to working for local farmers, but despite the change in their fortunes they took little Fruma with them and looked after her. After the liberation in July 1944, Fruma's parents found her safe and sound with the Rostkowskis and took her back with them.

Gershon and Gita Berkowski had a grocery store in Wsielub (Nowogrodek [Nowogródek] district). Most of their customers were farmers from nearby villages, including the Lawskis [Lawski] of the neighboring village of Slowcza [Slowcza]. The two families had been friendly for many years ... In 1941, shortly after the Germans occupied the region, they began to move Jews from locations in the vicinity to the Nowogrodek ghetto. To accomplish this, they mobilized local peasants and ordered them to round up Jews from the villages and transport them in their carts to Nowogrodek. Jan, the Lawskis' youngest son, was one of these [forced] recruits. He took advantage of his position to place Gita Berkowska, her daughter, Sonia, and her cousin Roiza Berkowska in his cart and conveyed them to a hideout in the forest nearby. Jan and his parents [Aleksander and Helena] protected the Jewish refugees and kept them fed and clothed. When winter approached, the Lawskis moved their wards to their farm, where they concealed them first in a cowshed and later in the granary. The Lawskis continued to protect Gita, Sonia, and Roiza until December 1942 ... In December 1942, the three Jewish refugees were transferred to a family camp of Jewish partisans in the nearby forests; in the summer of 1944 they were liberated.

Now we spread who and wherever, nearly all into the forests, single ones to gentiles. ... I ran away with my son, on the 10th of August, to Jozef [Józef] Stelmaszyk, a peasant in Mir. The Stelmaszyk family, husband and wife, middle aged, have earned being mentioned here. In the ghetto, he used to be referred to as "the righteous gentile." ... During the last days of the Mir ghetto, Jews came to him, suggesting that he take their belongings as a gift. He refused, as he would not take advantage of their desperate situation. ...

We stayed with the Stelmaszyks from the 13th of August till the 23rd of December, 1942, when we went into the forest, because our presence robbed them of the last traces of peace, and those good, honest people did not deserve that. Their attitude towards us in those gruelling days was so tender, so cordial, as if towards two virtual children of theirs. ...

We arrive in the forest towards the end of 1942, where together with other Jews from Mir we start the epoch of the forest. ... Amongst all the grown-ups there was one solitary child. That was my brother's 3-year old little girl Miryam'l ... The gentiles from the village used to send her food. ...

Every morning we go to the village, looking for food. The day commences with

a silent prayer that there be no Germans, that the gentiles give something, and that all those going to the village come back in peace. Alas, this our last wish is not always granted. The gentiles are praiseworthy for keeping us supplied with everything, to an extent to which their facilities permitted. We were a hungry, poorly-clad camp, needy of everything, and daily we used to call on their doorsteps. ...

They are talking about a search. In actual fact we a group of Jews are sitting in the forest without any means of defence whatsoever. Should a few armed policemen happen to arrive, they can seize us all alive. Still, we have no alternative. The gentiles advise us to leave.

Sulia Wolozhinski Rubin mentions that, when she fell sick, she was sheltered by villagers in Kleciszczze for three weeks until she recovered her strength: "Kletishtche was a planlessly scattered, muddy village laid between two deep forests. The houses were wooden and primitive, but as clean as possible and the local peasants were good people."

In the autumn of 1943, after the bloody Aktion perpetrated by the Germans against the Lida ghetto in the Nowogrodek [Nowogródek] district, a group of six Jews -Rachela and Shmul Geler, Moshe and Pesia Golubek, Tuvia Bielak, and Chava Muksi - escaped from the ghetto intending to join the partisans in the surrounding forest. Meanwhile, they wandered through villages and fields for several days, helped by local residents who warned them of the whereabouts of the German police who were pursuing them. One day, Wladyslaw Malachowski [Władysław Malachowski], a farmer who lived in the remote village of Plesewiczze [Pleszewiczze], approached them and told them that he was already hiding a Jewish refugee named Hersh Nowoplanski from the Lida ghetto in his home. Wladyslaw told them to wait at the edge of the forest until he returned with Nowoplanski. Despite certain misgivings, the refugees did as they were told and were rewarded when Wladyslaw appeared after sunset accompanied by his brother, Franciszek, and Nowoplanski, laden with bread, food, and drink. After the refugees had eaten, the Malachowski brothers took them home and hid them together with Nowoplanski. A few days later, the Malachowski brothers persuaded a group of partisans to accept the refugees into their ranks and equipped them all with rifles. All seven refugees took part in partisan activity against the Germans until the summer of 1944, when the area was liberated by the Red Army ...

Anatol Wertheim, who also joined the Soviet partisans in the Naliboki forest, stated: "We gradually developed contacts with the peasants who lived in isolated chutors [i.e., isolated farmsteads]. We were not afraid that they would denounce us because the peasants only wanted the Germans and partisans to leave them in peace, and they therefore tried to avoid conflicts with us too even though they must have suspected that we did not belong to the regular partisan formations ... After a few encounters several families even started to treat us like old friends and invited us on their own for a drink or to spend the night under their roof."

Conclusion

Without checking into all available sources, and carefully cross-checking that information, historians run the risk of having their "history" books look like Hollywood movies. Hollywood movies based on such questionable sources, and further embellished for dramatic effect, will in turn mirror a shoddy version of history. Poor art imitating a distorted vision of life – viewers deserve better than that. □