



Defiance: The Bielski Partisans

Nechama Tec

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The prevailing image of European Jews during the Holocaust years is one of helpless victims under a death sentence, unable to fight consignment to the ghettos, to the camps, and to the gas chambers. In fact, many Jews struggled alone or with others against the terrors of the Third Reich, risking their lives against overwhelming odds for the slimmest chance of survival, or a mere glimpse of freedom. In *Defiance*, Nechama Tec offers a riveting history of one such group, a forest community in western Belorussia that would number more than 1,200 Jews by 1944--the largest armed rescue operation of Jews by Jews in World War II.

Describing the entire partisan movement in the region, Tec shows that while most forest fighters in Belorussia were rifle-carrying young men, the members of this extraordinary community included both men and women, some with weapons but mostly unarmed, ranging from infants to the elderly. She reconstructs for the first time the amazing details of how these partisans and their families--hungry, exposed to the harsh winter weather, always on the lookout for German patrols--managed not only to survive, but to offer protection to all Jewish fugitives who could find their way to them. Driven by courage born out of despair, they dug wells, set up workshops to repair guns, made clothes, and resoled shoes, supplied services to other guerilla units, and even established a makeshift hospital and school in the forest. Arguing that this success would have been unthinkable without the vision of one man, Tec offers penetrating insight into the group's commander, Tuvia Bielski, and his journey from his life as the son of the only Jewish peasant family in an isolated rural village to his emergence as a leader possessing the charisma and courage to command under all but impossible circumstances.

Tec brings to light the untold story of Bielski's struggle as a partisan who lost his parents, wife, and two brothers to the Nazis, yet never wavered in his conviction that it was more important to save one Jew than to kill twenty Germans. She shows how, under Bielski's guidance, the partisans smuggled Jews out of heavily guarded ghettos, scouted the roads for fugitives, and led retaliatory raids against Belorussian peasants who collaborated with the Nazis against their former Jewish neighbors. Refusing to turn away the weak or the old for the sake of the survival of the larger group, Bielski would warn new arrivals to the forest, "Life is difficult, we are in danger all the time, but if we perish, if we die, we die like human beings."

A scholar, a writer, and herself a Holocaust survivor, author Nechama Tec has devoted the last two decades to studying the fate of European Jewry, recording rare but vital examples of human compassion, resistance, altruism and heroism in the face of overwhelming horror and despair. Drawing on wide-ranging research and never before published interviews with surviving partisans--including Tuvia Bielski himself two weeks before his death in 1987--she reconstructs here the poignant and unforgettable story of those who chose to fight.

Defiance: The Bielski Partisans Details

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Caitlin says

I ended up reading this book after really liking which had a small chapter on the Bielski brothers. The book covers the story of these brothers, Tuvia, Zus and Asael Bielski who from 1942-1944 created a community of Jewish refugees in the forests of Belorussia who escaped from the Germans and created a haven for themselves and fellow Jews. Tuvia was commander of the group, which was linked to Soviet partisan groups and struggled for existence from both Soviet and Nazi threats. It was fascinating to see how much Tuvia focused on saving Jews by sending out scouts to find refugees, sending people into the ghettos to try to convince them to escape and accepting any who made it to his group (young men with guns as well as women, children and the elderly who were often rejected from other groups on the grounds that they would slow the group down) rather than on fighting the Germans for revenge as other rebellious Jews did. Tuvia and his followers managed to save 1200 people by the time the area was liberated by the Soviets in 1944 and the author does a fantastic job showing how the camp functioned, the struggles it faced from all sides just for existence and the conclusion. You really get a sense of these people's lives in the forest and I found it absolutely fascinating! It is written as a history book for a more academic audience and isn't necessarily for the general public but if WWII and the Holocaust interest you, I would highly recommend it!

Edit: I had to change my rating because there was no bibliography! I cannot express how incredibly frustrating it is to comb through the Notes at the back when I want to know what sources she used. I honestly have no idea how an academic history text can have Notes, a Biographical Appendix, a Glossary and an Index but no Bibliography!

Becky says

I was excited to read this book because the introduction said it wasn't a book based on the movie. The movie was based on this book. But after four chapters I finally had to stop - it was so dry. This isn't a novel at all. I thought it was going to be a novel because on the back it says "based on the extraordinary true story..." It was like reading a documentary. The style of the book was really choppy - with stories and then quotes. I was really disappointed because a novel based on these events (even if it used the direct quotes Tec received in her research) would be really interesting and intriguing.

"In an age when the term "hero" has been so overused as to become meaningless, the Bielskis remind us that real heroism is not the stuff of comic books. Rather, it is a set of decisions, sometimes impulsive, often made by simple men of whom nothing of the sort could ever have been expected. Their story is not simply one of courage or fortitude in the face of adversity; it includes any number of daunting moral decisions - whether to seek vengeance or to rescue, how to re-create a sense of community among those who have lost everything, how to maintain hope when all seems forsaken."

-Edward Zwick (movie producer)

Grace says

Fascinating. Approximately 1200 Jews survive World War II by living in the forests of Poland. I admit my ignorance of such partisan groups performing guerrilla warfare and subsistence living in order to survive and of the Bielski Partisans in particular for trying to save as many Jews as possible, even if they came dressed in rags, with no food, money, or weapons. It saddens me that this glimmer of hope during one of the darkest times in the world's history was not covered in any of my history classes during high school or college.

At the beginning of the book, I felt like the author assumed I knew more than I actually did and it made the first several pages difficult for me to get through. Oftentimes, Tec digresses to tell the histories of Otriad members or those that didn't make it. As interesting as they were, they ruined the flow of the story for me. I kept backtracking to figure out where I lost the Bielskis Otriad and then had to get back into the story when it finally picked back up. On a more positive note, I enjoyed the photographs included in the middle of the book as well as the map of the final Bielski camp.

I look forward to seeing the film adaptation.

Meaghan says

There are two books about the Bielski partisan group that I know of; the other is Peter Duffy's *The Bielski Brothers*. Both books were good but I found Tec's to be the better of the two. Her writing gave a better sense of what daily life was like in the Bielski camp, possibly because she herself was a "hidden child" Holocaust survivor. Tec was also able to interview Zus and Tuvia Bielski before their deaths, whereas Duffy didn't start writing his book until the brothers (excepting Aron, the youngest, who was only a child during World War II) were all dead.

The story is a fascinating one which deserves to be better known. The Bielski brothers are the closest thing to real-life Robin Hoods that I know of, and there ought to be a movie about them. Both books are worth reading but if you can only get one, get *Defiance*.

Chris says

Defiance paints a very good picture of what life as a partisan was like. Tec presents the life warts and all, even presenting detail about how the locals felt about the partisans. At one level the book fails. Tec seems to be trying to paint a picture of partisan life and write a biography of Tuvia Bielski, as a biography the book fails. The reader never really gets a sense of knowing any of the Bielski brothers. The only person that readers seems to know is Chaja Bielski, possibly because of the interviews. Despite this, the book is very good.

Gloria Piper says

Defiance tells the story about Jews during WWII, not as meek victims but as fighters for survival. Tuvia Bielski, a Belorussian peasant, has the necessary charisma to lead an independently minded people--not an

easy task but vital. Tec puts a human face on history as she relates the struggles and resourcefulness of individuals who must adapt or die. Unlike many partisans, Tuvia values life so highly that he welcomes all Jews, into his protection, regardless of whether others consider them useful or a burden. Initially he acts to save self and family against the growing threat of German invasion and murder of Jews. The acts expand to include friends, and finally any Jews--bringing their numbers to over a thousand. Tec, herself, a Jewish refugee from WWII, is especially qualified to address the topic of Jewish resistance, a side of history that has been neglected.

Fascinating, page by page.

Daniel L. says

A Critically Important Chronicle of True Heroes

The passivity of the Jews during the Holocaust is a hotly debated topic - why are the Jews of World War II Europe so often portrayed as being passive, even being accessories to their own extermination. Much of this argument can be put to rest in reading the about underground dairies of Emmanuel Ringelblum (the Onyeg Shabbat), the lively intellectual and artistic achievements at Terezin and elsewhere, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and the partisans, freedom fighters hiding in remote forests offering shelter to escaping Jews and fighting Nazi Einsatzgruppen passing through. Here, Nechama Tec, herself a hidden child during the Holocaust, describes the heroic rescue attempts by one of the larger partisan groups, one organized by the Bielski brothers in the forests of Belorussia, a group that would grow to comprise some 1,200 men, women, and children. The book covers events leading to the Nazi occupation of Eastern Europe, the Russian occupation of Belorussia under Stalin, the 1939 German invasion, the organization of the Bielski brothers, Ghetto escapes (a crime under the Nazis punishable by immediate death by shooting or hanging), the network of Partisan groups, the alternation of rescue and resistance, using one's wits and knowledge of local geography to elude the enemy, the forest community of the partisan group, the fate of women, and issues of self-preservation. Nechama Tec is a reknowned and respected Holocaust scholar, having written her memoir, "Dry Tears" Story of a Lost Childhood," along with such important works as "Every Day Lasts a Year: A Jewish Family's Correspondence from Poland," "Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust," "When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland," "In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufiesen," and a host of essays and articles. This book is at the top of the Recommended Reading list of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum Web site. More than anything, this is a story of desperate hope, never lost, in the most desperate times.

Westminster Library says

The book is a gripping account of the true story of the Bielski brothers who fled the German invasion during World War II and set up a village in the forest of Belorussia. Their efforts and resourcefulness saved thousands of Jewish lives. It is fascinating to learn how the group survived living off the land and stealing from nearby farmers and peasants. But they not only survived they fought against the Nazis and they started a mission to save as many Jews from extermination as they could. I viewed the movie first (not realizing it was a book originally) and I'm glad I did because it was helpful in keeping the facts straight in the book!

Find *Defiance the Bielski Partisan* at the Westminster Public Library!

Check out the movie Defiance the Bielski Partisan at the Westminster Public Library!

This reminds me of The long walk : the true story of a trek to freedom by Slavomir Rawicz.
Find The Long Walk: the true story of a trek to freedom at the Westminster Public Library!

Kingfan30 says

Mostly what I know about the Jews urging the war cones from school, which was mostly concentration camps and gas chambers, so when I saw the film a couple of years back, it was great to see a new view and one that showed there were survivors out there. On browsing the charity shop for books for an elderly aunt, I spotted this and for 75p couldn't resist! And finally I sat down to read it. It's not a story as such, more of a factual book based on interviews with people that went through this. It wasn't an easy read by any means, but was certainly an eye opener and an education to a different part of the war. And in some ways uplifting, what a hero for saving so many lives.

Lilisa says

A different angle of Jews during World War II - many of whom survived in the forests of Belarus thanks to the Bielski brothers and other partisans who risked their lives to rescue hundreds of Jews. More than 1,200 Jews comprised a forest community surviving on scant food, clothes and supplies. Their goal was to save Jews and not necessarily kill Germans if they didn't have to. The heroism and bravery of these partisans are amazing. The book didn't quite do justice to bringing alive these brave souls. It felt dry and factual - reading at times more like a history book than being in the lives of the partisans experiencing their hardship, fear and drive to survive. Still, an interesting account of a community fighting for survival and many of them succeeding - a light in the otherwise darkness of Europe.

Richard says

'Defiance' just made it to the NY Times paperback best seller list even tho it came out more than 15 years ago. The reason for its popularity now, of course, is that the film has been released and has created interest in the story and in Nuschama Tec's book.

That's why I read it. After seeing the film, I wanted to know more about the Bielski brothers/partisans and what really happened in the forest. As I suspected, the film does not do justice to the book, or, even more important, to what actually happened. But give the movie credit for stirring interest in these events.

Tec's portrayal is of a group of Jews (The Bielski Partisans) in Belarus in WWII who lived in the forest, seeking to escape the German slaughter. The story is truly inspiring and shows a different view than the one most often portrayed of helpless Jewish victims, unable, unwilling to fight the terrors of the Third Reich.

Tec, a scholar and a Holocaust survivor herself, focuses on Tuvia Bielski, an unlikely leader who eventually leads 1200 Jews to safety. The book tells the story of this truly amazing individual and describes how these Jews survived in the forest, how this group of refugees formed a community, how they lived, and how and why they were the most successful and largest group of partisans to make it to safety.

It's an inspiring story, unevenly written and told and one that still left me wanting to know more than Tec was able to portray.

But this story deserves to be heard. Tuvia Bielski and his brothers deserve a more prominent place in Jewish history than they have received. Tuvia was never truly recognized for his heroic efforts (other than by those he saved) and the remainder of his life, in Israel and the US, was apparently sad and without the honors that should have been bestowed upon him.

Hopefully this story and Tuvia and his brothers will now receive the recognition they deserve.

Mike says

This is an encouraging story about the largest armed rescue of Jews during WWII. In Belorussia Tuvia Bielski and his brothers started a group that would not submit to the Nazi invaders of Poland. Creating a Jewish community in the forests, escapees from ghettos had a place to flee before they were slaughtered in mass executions. At the end of the war the community had grown to over 1200 men women and Children.

The subject material itself was great. I longed to here about Jews who resisted the Nazi aggression. After reading countless books that only chronicle Jews by the thousands quietly going to their deaths, it was exciting to learn about Jewish Partisan groups who fought back. However, the way Tec presented the material took away some of the force of the story. She presents it not so much as a story, but as a sociological history of partisan movements with a focus on the Bielski group. She jumps around quite a bit. She follows events chronologically for the most part, but then starts exploring certain sociological aspects such as the role of women, keeping order, etc... Many times it seemed she was just relaying facts without a coherent main theme. She does get you into the action at some points and this is when the story really gets interesting. I wished she had done this more often.

Conclusion: Great historical material that suffers from poor writing and organization.

Leah says

I should begin by saying I read this book because I recently rewatched the movie Defiance about the Bielskis and the Jews who hid in the forest.

This was a book I went into expecting to love it and rave about it afterward. I ended up being both fascinated, disappointed, and ultimately let down. The fascination came from wanting to learn more about the formation, the every day struggle for survival, and the ins and outs of the "Forest Jews" and how they survived the war, evading their enemies. The structure of the Bielski Otriad was quite interesting, from the movie it appeared to be a bit more socialistic in structure, and while there were elements of such, ultimately there was a social structure that was not all men are equal, although all were equal to join the group and none

were ever turned away. How they bartered with other Otriads, produced various workshops, and made a lot of their own resources was of particular interest to me. Who Tuvia, Zus, and Asael were in the book gave, predictably, much more information on who they were, where they came from, how they conducted themselves during the war, and a small peak at who they were after the war.

Disappoints and let downs were as following: the breakdown of the moral culture. Here is this book about people who valued life enough to risk all to save it, and yet there was a normalcy of murdering unborn babies because of fear of having a baby during the war and living in the forest. To say they valued life the most out of any around, to me this was depressing. They didn't even value the littlest lives among them. The promiscuity and lack of marital fidelity was much much more pronounced in the real account, and surprisingly the hollywood rendition of this story painted a much MORE moral picture of Tuvia especially, but of the life in the forest. The man with the most integrity in this book was Asael, who absolutely adored and loved his wife, and in order to spare her from pregnancy didn't even consummate his marriage with her (Chaja), he slept with other women outside of the otriad. How mortifying. And of course, the trickiest thing of all is discerning what is legitimate war fare, and what was outright theft, taking food from peasants in order to survive.

Over all, it was an enlightening read upon the travesties that the Nazi's inflicted upon the Jews in Belorussia, the human will to survive at all costs, the development of a community, and the courage these men had to stand against all odds and protect their people.

I wish I could like it more, but too many things were disappointing from a moral standpoint. Very interesting to compare to others who stood up to the Nazi's, such as Sophie Scholl, Corrie Ten Boom, etc who didn't compromise their morals.

Lady Knight says

This was an amazing story. I've read plenty of WWII and Holocaust literature (fiction and non) and I have to say that this was extraordinary. It was a look that I'd never seen before. Before this I'd only read from the viewpoint of soldiers on the front line, germans fighting inside of Hitler's Third Reich, and from the viewpoint of Jews destined for the concentration camps. While all of those are worthy tales, "Defiance" tells the true story of Jews, led by Tuvia Bielski, who refused to become a statistic, defied the odds and were able to save 1200 Jews from Hitler's death machine, by becoming Russian partisans. A truly remarkable story, particularly because it is so different from most of the literature out there.

I recently heard that a movie was made of this true story, and I really hope it lives up to the legacy of the men and women who lived it.

Emma Kelleway says

I decided to read Defiance because last year I saw the film version of it and I enjoyed the film (even though it was sad) and found the film very interesting. So I finally brought a copy of the book and read it. I have decided to put this book into the 'A book based on a true story category' on the bingo board, as this book is based on a true story. This book wasn't quite what I had expected it to be. I expected it to be more of a story about what had happened in The Bielski otriad and the experiences of the Jewish people in it. This

book was about what happened in The Bielski otraig and the experiences of the Jewish people in it but it was written in facts and had extracts from the interviews that the author had had with the survivors of the Bielski otraig, these facts and interviews told the story. This book was not what I had expected but I was pleasantly surprised with how much I enjoyed this book despite the horrific stories it told. I found this category interesting, I liked this category and I will continue to read more that will fit into this category in the future. One of my favourite quotes from this book is 'Whatever feelings of revenge he had, these took a back seat to save lives. Refusing to become a victim, rejecting the role of avenger, Tuvia Bielski concentrated on gathering Jewish Fugitives and protecting their lives'. (Tuvia was the commander of the Bielski otraig). This is one of my favourite quotes because I think it shows what a good leader Tuvia was. Tuvia was in a position where he could refuse to take on Jewish people who he didn't like or who he thought would become a burden, but he didn't. He would take on any Jewish people, it didn't matter if they were old, sick or if he didn't get along with them, he wanted to save the lives of Jewish people, any Jewish people.

From this book I learnt that sometimes it isn't worth holding a grudge or bothering to try and get revenge. The Nazis had done horrific things to Jewish people but they didn't use that as an excuse to go and kill and do horrific things back to the Nazis, they just moved on and got on with their lives.

This book was set in Belorussia. I thought this was an interesting setting because I did not know much about Belorussia (which I believe is also known as Belarus). I learnt a bit about the towns and the kinds of people who live there.
