



INFORMATION SERVICES TEAM

JUNE 2018

## SMALL BUSINESSMAN AND PARTISAN

Tuvia Bielski is best known as the leader of a partisan group situated in the Naliboki forest in Poland (now Western Belarus) during the Second World War.

**Early life**

Tuvia grew up in the only Polish Jewish family in Stankiewiczze, a small village in Eastern Poland (now Western Belarus). He was the son of David and Beila Bielski, who had twelve children: ten boys and two girls. Tuvia was the third eldest. His brothers Asael, Alexander ('Zus') and Aron were later to become members of his partisan group.

During the First World War, Bielski served as an interpreter for the Imperial German Army, which were occupying the western territories of the Russian Empire. In 1927, he was recruited into the Polish Army, where he became a corporal. After his military service was over he returned home and rented another mill to improve his family's income. This was still inadequate, so in 1929, at the age of 23, he married an older woman, Rifka, who owned a general store and a large house. They lived in the nearby small town of Subotniki where they were conducting retail business in the store.

**Soviet occupation**

During the Soviet occupation in 1939, Tuvia feared that he would be arrested by the NKVD due to his "bourgeois capitalist" occupation, so he moved to Lida. Before Tuvia left Subotniki he urged his wife, Rifka, to join him in the move to Lida. She refused. In Lida, under Soviet control, Tuvia met and fell in love with another woman named Sonia. The love affair became serious. In late 1939, Tuvia divorced Rifka. He lived with Sonia in a common law marriage, though they were not officially married due to wartime conditions.

**WW2**

In 1941 when Operation Barbarossa broke out, Tuvia, Zus, and Asael were called up by their army units to fight against the Nazi German occupiers. Tuvia recalls: "Suddenly about fifty planes flew over the town dropping incendiary bombs. In a very few minutes the entire place was on fire. The commander called us in, ordered us to leave the burning town and regroup in a forest about five kilometers from there. We were to continue working. We carried out his command but soon after we began our job in the forest another wave of planes flew over the area and set the woods on fire. The commander called us in and said: 'Friends, you are on your own!'"

After the units disbanded, the brothers fled to Stankiewiczze, where their parents lived. In early July 1941, a German army unit arrived in Stankiewiczze and Jewish residents were moved to a ghetto in Nowogródek. The four Bielski brothers, Tuvia, Alexander ("Zus"), Asael and Aron fled to the nearby forest after their parents and other family members were killed in the ghetto in August 1941.

**Jerusalem in the forest**

Tuvia Bielski and his brothers and fellow Jewish refugees formed a partisan group. They saved more than 1,200 Jews by hiding them in the forests, where he met Lilka, his future wife.



"Our revenge is to live. We may be hunted like animals but we will not become animals. We have all chosen this to live free, like human beings, for as long as we can. Each day of freedom is a victory. And if we die trying to live, at least we die like human beings."

— Tuvia Bielski

They lived in their camp for more than two years, and built a horse-powered mill, bakery kitchen, school, hospital, nursery, bathhouse, tailor shop, blacksmith forge, gunsmith shop and jail. As leader of the Bielski partisans, his primary aim was to save Jewish refugees, though his partisans also attacked the German invaders and their collaborators in conjunction with other partisan groups. He said: "It is more important to save Jews than to kill Germans."

**Post WW2**

After WW2 he settled in the US and created a small trucking firm with his brother Zus. He fathered three children with his wife Lilka, and died in 1987.

## KEY FACTS

- Born: May 8, 1906, in Stankiewiczze, Russian Empire (later Poland and Belarus today).
- Died: June 12, 1987 (aged 81), in the United States.
- Parents: David Bielski and Beila Bielski.
- Siblings: Two sisters and nine brothers including Asael Bielski, Alexander Zeisal "Zus" Bielski and Aron Bielski.
- Spouses: Rifka (div.), Sonia (div.) and Lilka.
- Offspring: Michael, Robert and Ruth Bielski (with Lilka Bielski).
- Religion: Judaism.
- Occupation: Soldier in the Polish Army (1927-29), small businessman.
- WW2 activity: Led a Jewish partisan group which fought the Nazi invaders and the collaborators and rescued Jewish refugees.
- Post WW2: Created a small trucking firm with his brother Zus until his death in 1987.
- Film: Tuvia is played by Daniel Craig in the 2008 film *Defiance* about his wartime exploits.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

*The Bielski Brothers*, Peter Duffy, Harper Collins, 2004.  
*Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, Tec Nechama, Oxford University Press, 1993.