When Germany invaded Russia in June of 1941, Tuvia and his younger brother Zusia vowed never to be caught by the Germans. Tuvia's extensive knowledge of the area saved his life, allowing him to move around frequently to avoid being captured by the Germans, who had a warrant for his arrest.

In early 1942, Tuvia began hearing rumors about partisans, and decided that if he and his fellow Jews were to survive, he must acquire arms and organize all-Jewish resistance groups. Along with two of his brothers, Zus, and Asael, Tuvia began organizing Jews. By May of 1942, Tuvia was in command of a small group, which by the end of the war had grown to 1200 people, and was known as the Bielski otriad. Tuvia had focused on saving as many Jews as possible, and would accept any Jew into his group. Many came through the family of Konstantin Kozlovski, a non-Jew, who provided shelter for Jews escaping from the Novogrudok Ghetto and worked with the partisans to free hundreds of Jews from the ghetto.

The Bielski otriad carried out food raids, killed German collaborators, and sometimes joined with a Russian partisan group in anti-Nazi missions, such as burning the ripe wheat crop so the German soldiers couldn’t collect and eat the wheat. Additionally, the Bielski otriad would seek out Jews in the ghetto willing to risk escape to the forest, and send in guides to help them.

The Bielski family were farmers in Stankievichy (Stankiewicze) near Nowogrodek, an area that belonged to the Second Polish Republic from 1920-1939. In September 1939 (see: Polish September Campaign) the area was seized by the Soviet Union, beginning on June 22, 1941 Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Shortly after the arrival of the Nazis the Nowogrodek Jews were forced to live in a small area that became a ghetto.

Formation

The four Bielski brothers: Tuvia, Alexander Zisel "Zus", Asael, and Aharon, managed to flee to the nearby forest after their parents and other family members were killed in the ghetto in December 1941. Together with 13 neighbors from the ghetto, they formed the nucleus of a partisan combat group.

The group's commander was the older brother, Tuvia Bielski (1906–1987), a Polish Army veteran and graduate of a Zionist youth movement. Tuvia "would rather save one old Jewish woman than kill ten German soldiers".[1] He sent emissaries to infiltrate the other ghettos in the area, recruiting new members to join the group in the Naliboki Forest. Hundreds of men, women, and children eventually found their way to the Bielski camp, which ultimately numbered over a thousand inhabitants, both civilians and fighters.

Organization

The partisans lived in underground dugouts (zemlyankas). In addition, several utility structures were built: a kitchen, a mill, a bakery, a bathhouse, a medical clinic for sick and wounded and a quarantine hut for those who suffered from infectious diseases such as typhus. Herds of cows supplied milk.
Artisans made goods and carried out repairs, providing the combatants with logistical support that later served the Soviet partisan units in the vicinity as well. More than a hundred workers toiled in the workshops, which became famous among partisans far beyond the Bielski base: tailors patched up old clothing and stitched together new garments, shoemakers fixed old and made new footwear, leather-workers worked on belts, bridle and saddles. A metal shop, established by Shmuel Oppenheim, repaired damaged weapons and constructed new ones from spare parts. A tannery, constructed to produce the hide for cobblers and leather workers became a de-facto synagogue because several tanners were devout Hassids. Carpenters, hat-makers, barbers, watchmakers served their own community and guests. The camp's many children went to dugout school. The camp even had its own jail and a court of law.[2]

Activities

The Bielski group's partisan activity was aimed at the Nazis and their collaborators in the area, such as Belarusian volunteer policemen or local inhabitants who had betrayed or killed Jews. They also performed sabotage against the occupying forces. The Nazi regime offered a reward of 100,000 Reichmarks for assistance in the capture of Tuvia Bielski, and in 1943 led major clearing operations against all partisan groups in the area. Some of these groups suffered major casualties, but the Bielski partisans fled safely to a more remote part of the forest, still offering protection to the noncombatants among their band.

The Bielski partisans were affiliated with Soviet partisans in the vicinity of the Naliboki Forest under General Platon (Vasily Yefimovich Chernyshev). Several attempts by Soviet partisan commanders to absorb Bielski fighters into their units were resisted, so that the Jewish partisan group retained its integrity and remained under Tuvia Bielski's command. This allowed him to continue in his dedication to protect Jewish lives along with engaging in combat activity.

The Soviet partisan leaders split the group into two units, named Ordzhonikidze, led by Zus, and Kalinin, led by Tuvia. According to partisan documentation, Bielski fighters from both units killed a total of 381 enemy fighters, sometimes during joint actions with Soviet groups.[3]

Disbandment

In the summer of 1944, when the Soviet counteroffensive began in Belarus and the area was liberated, the "Kalinin" unit comprising the Bielski partisans, numbering 1,230 men, women and children, emerged from the forest and marched into Nowogrodek.

Asael Bielski served in the Soviet Red Army and fell in battle at Königsberg in 1945.

Post-War period

After the war, Tuvia Bielski returned to Poland, then emigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1945. The surviving Bielski brothers eventually settled in the United States.

Aharon (who changed his name to Aron Bell in USA) was accused of kidnapping and theft and jailed in 2007.[4]

Allegations of war crimes

Bielski partisans are accused of war crimes (mostly armed robbery) on the neighbouring population; particularly for involvement in the massacre of 128 people committed by the Soviet partisans from Naliboki Forest in the Polish town of Naliboki in 1943.[5] The investigation into the Naliboki case is being carried out by the Polish IPN institute.[5] Members of the brigade and other historians vehemently deny any involvement in the massacre, citing the fact that the partisans did not arrive in the area until several months after the event took place.[6]

As revealed, for example, by interviews in the film The Bielski Brothers: Jerusalem in the Woods, the Bielski Partisans felt it necessary for their survival to be ruthless. Collaborators who turned in partisans to Nazi authorities were executed after cursory investigation. A group of German soldiers who surrendered to the Bielskis were summarily executed, presumably because there was no way for the partisans to keep prisoners in the field, but also because many partisans, who had suffered the loss of family at the hands of the Nazis, sought revenge. Ruthlessness sometimes extended to their own: In at least one instance, Zus Bielski executed one of his own officers for leaving a civilian behind, because the Bielski partisans maintained a non-negotiable policy of protecting Jewish civilians.

In books and film

There are currently two books written solely on the Bielski story: Defiance by Nechama Tec and The Bielski Brothers by Peter Duffy. The group is also mentioned in numerous books about this period in history.

In a 2006 History Channel made a documentary entitled The Bielski Brothers: Jerusalem In The Woods, written and directed by filmmaker Dean Ward.

A 2008 film based on the exploits of the Bielski brothers, Defiance, was filmed by Edward Zwick and is scheduled for a December 31, 2008 release date.

The BBC series Ray Mears's Extreme Survival featured an episode about the Bielski partisans. In this episode it was claimed that some 50 Bielski partisans were killed in action.
Tuvia Bielski (1906–1987) was the leader of the partisan group the Bielski Brothers who were situated in the Naliboki forest in Polish Western Belarus during the Second World War. His aim as leader was not to attack railroads and roads that the Nazis were using as supply routes—although there were some attacks—but to save the Jews who were under persecution from the Nazis.

After the war he was awarded a high ranking job in the Israel Defence Forces for his great acts of leadership but he declined and worked as a cabbie in New York City until his death in 1987.

He is portrayed by Daniel Craig in the 2008 film Defiance.

Early Life

Tuvia grew up in the only Jewish family of Stankiewicze, a small village in Western Belarus located between Lida and Nowogrodek, (both of which later housed Jewish ghettos during World War II.) He was the son of David and Beila Bielski who had twelve children: ten boys and two girls. Tuvia was the third oldest after two brothers.

During World War I Tuvia spent a lot of time with German soldiers who occupied that part of the country at the time. He learned to
speak German from these men and remembered it all his life. In 1927 he was recruited into the Polish army. After his military service was over Tuvia returned home where he was reminded of the poverty his family lived in. In an effort to add to his family’s income, Tuvia rented another mill. This however was still inadequate, so in 1929, at the age of twenty-three, he married an older woman named Rifka who owned a general store and a large house. [1]

Sources

1. ^ Tec, Nechama. Defiance; the Bielski Partisans

Asael Bielski (1908-1945) (pronounced uh-soil) was a Jewish born Bellerussian, second in command of the Bielski otriad during World War II. He is portrayed by Jamie Bell in the 2008 film Defiance.

Early life

Asael was the fourth oldest boy of David and Beila Bielski. (Two years younger than Tuvia, his older brother who later commanded the Bielski otriad.) The Bielskis were the only Jewish family of Stankiewicze, a small village in Western Bellerussia located between Lida and Nowogrodek, (both of which later housed Jewish ghettos during World War II.) Asael was quieter than his brothers. He was very reserved and content to stay on the farm and around those he knew well. He was good-looking, though, some say not as attractive as his brothers. [1]

With his older brothers leaving home, and his father's health deteriorating, Asael was becoming the new head of the household. As the male leader of the family he had to arrange the marriage of his sister Tajba to an upper-class man named Avremale. (Tajba was very beautiful, which is why she was able to secure such a marriage.) [2]

Avremale had a sister named Chaja who was a high school graduate, which was rare for the time and place. Hearing that Asael needed help with bookkeeping, the kind-hearted, eager to help the needy, Chaja offered to tutor him. He fell madly in love with her, but she was in every way his superior, class, sophistication; he had little chance of attracting her. [3]

Although before the war, Asael had no chance at Chaja, during the war years many things changed; among them were social classes. Chaja lived in the ghetto at first, then finally fled, leaving her boyfriend there. She lived in an underground hiding spot near the home of a Christian peasant, along with her two nephews.

The War

After the Germans took over Belarus, Asael and two of his brothers, Tuvia and Zus were accused of communist collaboration. After being warned by a Belarussian policeman, they all went into hiding.

It wasn't till later that Tuvia's group joined Asael's larger group of thirteen. Before this however, Zus joined Asael, as did their younger brother Aaron. Another addition to the group included Chaja.

Asael Bielski served in the Soviet Red Army and fell in the battle of Königsberg in 1945.--