

The bielski brothers: a story of survival



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There are many forms of survival. There is living every day, surviving quietly with the rest of the world. There is personal survival, fighting in a way only you know how. And then there is survival in the face of the greatest adversity, survival against all odds. Survival as a group, when an even larger power is doing everything it can to keep you from surviving. This is the survival experienced by the troop of Jews detailed in *The Bielski Brothers*, the true story of how three brothers saved thousands by living in the forest.

With this book, Peter Duffy tells the story of one of the greatest triumphs of Jews during the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied lands. The Bielski brothers' group survived through a brutal genocide, even thrived in their forest camps, and were able to take a stand against their oppressors, fighting for their right to live. During this time in history, it was easy for most people to focus on themselves and their own personal survival. For most, it was every man for himself, but not for the Bielskis. They worked as hard as they could to save as many lives as possible.

Saving Jews was their number one priority, even above killing Nazis and destroying supplies. For them, saving these Jews was an even more powerful way to get back at the Germans. Even when it was hard, when the winter was harsh and food supplies were low, the Bielskis never turned anyone away. Tuvia Bielski, the eldest brother, is quoted as saying, "I would rather save one old Jewish woman... than kill ten German soldiers" (Duffy, P. x). *The Bielski Brothers* shows that one of the keys to survival is having a strong leader. In the effort to save Jews from ghettos, heroes were found in unlikely places.

The success of the Bielskis themselves was itself unprecedented, but they would not have saved so many without the help of others. One important hero to the Bielski Jews was Konstantin Koslovsky. Despite being a Gentile, he was dedicated to helping the escaping Jews in any way he could, offering shelter, food, and passage into the puscha. Unlikely leaders also formed among groups in ghettos, planning elaborate escape and survival methods. The biggest leader of the forest groups was Tuvia Bielski, whose commanding presence and dedication were an inspiration to the Jewish people.

He orchestrated the entire forest party, leading rescue missions and raids against Nazis and cooperators. Asael and Zus Bielski were also leaders of their own partisan fighting groups, and Asael was a liaison with the Soviets. The Bielski Jews not only survived in the forest, they thrived there. Instead of seeing the puscha as a prison trapping them in, it became a haven full of freedom and life. They turned their situation around and flourished in industry and the arts. Shops were set up to manufacture goods like weapons, shoes, foodstuffs, and furniture.

The forest camp even had a school and a theater group. The group performed songs, skits, and dances, entertaining both the Jews in the camp and visiting partisans and Soviets. This was a huge insult to the Nazis—that they had not only failed to eliminate all Jews, but there were even some that felt freedom and success during this time of oppression. Everything the Bielskis did was in defiance of the Nazis, and in protection of their fellow Jews. They gave their group of refugees a sense of security, and hope for the war's end.

Although the Bielski brothers' greatest triumph was saving thousands of Jews by living in a forest, they also triumphed against the Germans in other ways. One of the first things the Bielskis did was set up fighting groups among the escapees, who planned attacks on Nazis, the police, and German cooperators. Most people of this time followed a submit-to-survive mentality, never rising against their tormentors in the hopes that they would stay alive by keeping their head down. The Bielski Jews, however, while still focused on survival, took a completely different approach to it.

They knew that the Nazis would never let them live, no matter how much they cooperated with them. So, in order to survive, they went against the Germans and fought back. The Bielskis and their fighters were extremely aggressive in their actions against their enemy. They stopped at nothing to take down as many Nazis, cooperators, and supplies as possible. They set mines and watched the roads for approaching Nazi convoys, then, using weapons made in the forest camps, shot the drivers and guards, took as much food, weapons, and other goods as they could, and destroyed the rest of the equipment.

When they got word of incoming train shipments, they lay in wait near the tracks and took down the train, taking valuable equipment from the Nazis and using it for themselves. When peasants cooperated with the Germans by feeding them, turning in hidden Jews, and offering intelligence on the Bielski partisans, the fighting groups would visit the peasants' homes, take their food, and kill everyone living there, without hesitation. This merciless stance protected the camp from not only outside enemies, but also from dissent within the group. When Israel

Kessler challenged the leadership of the Bielski brothers, Asael Bielski did not hesitate to execute him. Even on their last day in the puscha, when a man defied Tuvia's orders to only take personal belongings from the camp, Tuvia shot him immediately. The Bielskis made it clear that they had complete control, and opposition would not be tolerated. During the Holocaust, the one thing everyone was striving toward was survival. The Bielski brothers were some of the most successful at this goal, surviving in a series of forests in Belarus against all odds.

They saved 1,200 Jews from ghettos, with the help of Gentiles and Jews alike. Even under the extreme duress of World War II, with a fierce enemy constantly out to get them, they were able to thrive in their forest community and feel a taste of freedom in the middle of a great prison. They fought aggressively against both the Nazis and the ideal that they must suffer quietly in order to survive. The Bielski brothers and their allies were an inspiration to many ghetto Jews, and they continue to inspire people with their courage and strength.