

Family Camps in the Forest

Groups of Jewish men, women, and children who fled to the forests of Eastern Europe to escape the Nazis. Most family camps were established between the summer of 1942 and the spring of 1943, during the mass exterminations in western Belorussia and the western Ukraine.

Family camps ranged from just a few families to hundreds of Jews, such as Tuvia Bielski's camp, which involved 1,200 people. Camps could only exist in regions with large forests; most were located deep inside the Naliboki Forest of western Belorussia. Most Jews in family camps came from nearby towns and villages, although there were also Jews from other areas, such as Minsk and Vilna.

Each camp had a group of armed men who protected the camp and procured food for them. The men would raid neighboring villages and seize food by force. This caused resentment and hostility towards the family camps on the part of the village peasants. However, some did help the Jews. During the winter, the family camp Jews built wooden huts, stuck deep into the ground. In summer, they lived in lean-tos made of branches. When it seemed as if they were about to be discovered, camps moved elsewhere.

The establishment of family camps happened around the time that Jewish Partisan groups began operating in the forests. In most places, where there were partisans, a family camp also existed. Sometimes family units were combined with partisan units. The main difference between the two groups was that the purpose of the family camp was to provide refuge and save lives, while the partisans' main purpose was to fight the enemy.

In most of the forests, the Jews lived alongside Soviet partisans. They both had to fight the same enemies and steal food from the same sources. This led to a strange interrelationship that included both competition and cooperation. In some areas, family camps were persecuted by non-Jewish partisans.

The Jews in the forest had to contend with a freezing climate, starvation, disease, and discovery by the Nazis. Probably less than 10,000 Jews survived in the forests.

