

## Bielski, Tuvia

(1906--1987), Jewish partisan commander who set up a family camp and a fighting unit in a Belorussian forest.

Bielski lived in eastern Poland which, at the beginning of World War II, was annexed by the Soviet Union. In June 1941 German troops invaded the Soviet Union and began massacring the Jews who lived there. After Bielski's parents and other relatives were murdered in the Novogrudok ghetto, he and his brothers, Zusya, Asael, and Aharon fled to the forest, where they set up a small partisan unit. They also sent a message back to the ghetto: "Organize as many friends and acquaintances as possible. Send them to us in the woods. We will be waiting for you." Over the next two years, 1,200 men, women, and children joined Bielski's family camp. Those who were able joined his partisan group.

Unlike other partisan commanders, Bielski did not consider fighting the enemy his only goal. Instead, he held saving Jewish lives as his highest value, and unlike other partisans, he took in all Jews and refused to abandon the weak and the old. Nonetheless, he also successfully fought the Belorussian police and local farmers who collaborated with the Nazis, and gained the trust of the Soviet partisans in his area. The Germans grew so frustrated by their inability to catch him that they offered a 100,000 marks reward for his capture.

When the Germans launched an extensive hunt for Bielski and other partisans, the region's Soviet commander ordered Bielski to cut all but essential fighters from his group and send away all women, married men, and children. Bielski refused, knowing that if he abandoned his people they would almost certainly die. His soldiers protected the rest of the group from the Germans until the region was liberated in 1944. At that point, the Bielski brothers and the 1,200 Jews from their family camp returned, alive, to Novogrudok.

Asael Bielski was killed in battle in 1944. After the war, Tuvia Bielski returned to Poland, and then immigrated to Palestine. In 1954 he settled in the United States, along with his surviving brothers and their families. (see also family camps in the forests.)

