

Defiance - Bielski Bros. from 14

Wacław Nowicki lived through the attack on Naliboki, which he describes in his memoirs.

It was 4:30, perhaps five at night. I was awoken by a powerful boom. A long burst of shots from an automatic rifle blanketed the cottage. Bullets pierced the beams through and flew above our beds. A bullet lodged in the wall a few centimetres above my head. I heard screams. We barricaded ourselves in the house, but the assailants ran further towards the centre of Naliboki. ...

What we saw when the partisans left was beyond human comprehension. Burned down buildings. Piles of corpses. Mostly rifle-shot wounds, smashed heads, lifeless eyes staring in horror. Among those killed I noticed a schoolmate. ...

Jews who lived among us before the war stood out among the assailants. They knew perfectly well where everyone lived and who was who. ...

This was a group of degenerate bandits, and not any partisans. Their main occupation was robbery and murder. Often they also committed rapes. They raped one of my neighbours. Her father, whom they forced to watch this at gunpoint, was told: "Don't worry, after the war we will come and get married." During an assault they shot Antoni Korzenko, my godfather's brother, when he did not want to hand over his horses.

Everyone was in tears. The plunderers did not omit a single homestead. Something was taken from everyone. Because he resisted, they killed the father of my schoolmate and cousin, Marysia Grygorcewicz. The "soldiers of Pobeda" and "Jerusalemites" [so called after Bielski's family camp popularly known as "Jerusalem"] took with them the pigs and chickens which they shot, flour, as well as other provisions. They wanted to live! But they took the lives of others. They did not come to fight. ...

In the space of almost two hours, 128 innocent people died, the majority of them, as eyewitnesses later testified, at the hands of the Bielski and "Pobeda" assassins.

Maria Chilicka (née Grygorcewicz), a former resident of Naliboki, also recalls the attack and the events that led up to it:

Neither my father nor our tenant nor our neighbours were organizers [of the self-defence]. They [the Soviet partisans] robbed us first. They told my father to harness his horse to his wagon and then told him to load onto it whatever was in the granary: flour, buckwheat, lard, smoked and raw meat. While my father was loading the wagon one of them struck him with the butt of a gun so that he would load faster. When the wagon was loaded they told my father to stand by the wall of the granary and they wanted to shoot him. We started to plead with them. At this time our tenant came out of the house so they told my father to remove his shoes. They led our tenant, Albert Farbatka, from the courtyard to the street and shot him near the gate. The bullet did not go through his forehead but pierced his cheeks and he fell to the ground. I can't say exactly why they didn't finish him off since I ran to rescue our cows because our cowshed was already on fire. Our pigsty with our pigs was burning down completely. When I was chasing the cows into the field one of the men with a torch went to set fire to the barn, and afterwards set fire to the granary and houses. They also killed our neighbour and burned his property. His body was also charred because there was no one to pull him away from his house. He left behind six children between the ages of twelve and one. The bandits just kept yelling "kill the belak [White Pole - a pejorative reference to Polish partisans] and let him rot," and they didn't spare anyone. ...

Before the self-defence group [was formed] armed intruders would enter homes in broad daylight and take clothing

as well. A female intruder told my sister to open her wardrobe and took whatever she wanted. ... If anyone would try not to give it to them then they would take what they wanted and destroy the rest so that nothing remained. They spared no one and nothing. ... I do not know why they exacted such revenge on us. Perhaps because we fed them? Our family helped to hide a Jew from Mir named Kaplan. He didn't stay in our house, but we provided him with food. ... After they burned us down and we ourselves had nothing to eat, he went to the partisans. ... Another Jew, a dentist who used to work in our hospital, stayed with us for three months. ... Once the Germans came to us and demanded a bicycle and started to search our buildings. My mother was really afraid that they would enter our house and asked him to leave the house for a while. But he didn't leave, and simply moved from one end of the house to the other ... When my mother saw him she got upset and told him to leave a little more abruptly. He left right away. When the Germans left he came and took his documents and left ... If they had found him in our house they would've shot all eight of us ...

They [the Soviet partisans] came mostly to the farmers to rob. The worst was when they came or rather assaulted us accompanied by women, then they plundered everything, and when there wasn't what she wanted, they smashed dishes, mirrors, and broke whatever came into their hands. Only once did a Russian come from the forest and not take [things] himself but told us to give him clean undergarments and food. ... Not only did they rob but they also killed ... Not one of our buildings remained. They took our horse and wagon. ... Every family buried their victims. ... They killed my 16-year-old cousin Jan Lukaszewicz in 1942 while he was watching his cows ... Some Jews took another of my cousins from his home on May 8, 1943 and killed him. They also killed my cousin's husband. They would have killed my father too had our tenant not come out of the house ...

The Germans came during the day and carried out round-ups for labour in Germany. ... In July there were many Germans and the partisans were afraid of them. They hid deep in the forest. They [the partisans] were heroes [when dealing] with the defenceless population. The Germans deported us on August 6, 1943. ... They took us to camps like bandits because the real bandits had hidden in the forest.

Wacław Chilicki states: "They followed their noses and burst into cottages. Everyone they came across along the way they killed in cold blood. No one was shown mercy." Bolesław Chmara, then 15 years old, recalls: "They summoned my brother, who was three years older than me, out to the porch. He came out. There was a woman among them. She raised her rifle and shot him right in the chest. It was a dum dum bullet that ripped his entire arm off. She shrugged her shoulders, turned around on her heel, and they moved on. They robbed what they could and reduced the cottage to ashes." The presence of women is a strong indication that there were Jews among the assailants, since there were very few non-Jewish women in the Soviet partisan movement in this area.

Relations with the Home Army (Polish Underground)

Poland was invaded in September 1939 by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, who divided the country between them. The Home Army - or *Armia Krajowa* (AK) in Polish - emerged as a national underground movement to carry on the fight for Poland's independence and her territorial integrity. Despite the Soviet role in dismembering Poland and deporting hundreds of thousands of her citizens to the Gulag in 1939-1941, after Nazi Germany turned on its ally and attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, Poland

resumed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, now an Allied Power. Until mid-1943 relations between the Soviet partisans and the Polish underground in northeastern Poland were, on the whole, favourable. (The Soviet partisans in this area were initially loose groups of guerrillas who were gradually transformed into an organized underground controlled by the NKVD and reinforced by forces sent from the East because of the shortage of local volunteers.) The trouble began when the Soviets demanded total subservience and the Polish partisans would not fall in line. This was essentially a continuation of Moscow's goal of imposing Soviet rule on Poland initiated in 1939. After the Soviet role in the murder of thousands of Polish officers at Katyn came to light in April 1943, the Soviet Union broke off relations with Poland's government in London, England. (In fact, the Soviets had secretly executed almost 22,000 captive Polish officers and officials in the spring of 1940.) Moscow then issued orders to liquidate Polish partisan units loyal to the Polish government in exile.

On June 22, 1943, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia issued the following circular to Soviet partisan commanders in the field:

In those regions that are under the influence of our partisan units and party centres, do not allow activities of Polish groups formed by the reactionary nationalist circles [i.e., the Home Army]. The leaders are to be eliminated in a manner that is not noticeable. The [Polish] units are to be disbanded and their arms depots are to be appropriated or, if it is possible, take those units under your secure influence. Use them by directing them to active combat against the Germans. Regroup and break them up in an appropriate way. You should do away with their significance [as] independent military units and attach them to large [Soviet] units, after which you are to carry out quietly an appropriate cleansing of hostile elements.

What resulted was a full-fledged assault on the Polish underground, initiated by the Soviet side without any Polish provocation, and carried out by stealth.

The Assault on the Kmicic and Pelka detachments

In August 1943, through the use of subterfuge, the Soviet partisans destroyed a Polish Home Army (AK) detachment commanded by Lieutenant Antoni Burzyński ("Kmicic") near Lake Narocz. Burzyński along with other Polish officers were lured to the Soviet camp on August 26, on the pretext of finalizing a joint assault on a German outpost in Miadziół. The following report on the success of this task was filed by Fedor (Fiodor) Markov, commander of the Voroshilov Brigade:

Tovarithch "Ber" [NKVD Major Jonas Vildžiūnas], the leader of the operational group which conducted the investigation, segregated the arrested Polish brigade into three groups. The first group, consisting of 50 men, together with the brigade leaders, was shot. The second group, consisting of 80 men, was disarmed and released. The third group, consisting of 70 men, was sent to a [Soviet] partisan group headed by [Wincenty] Mroczkowski ...

Sending these people to Mroczkowski's unit was a mistake. They should have been shot, but we were worried that it might be used against us by the Germans and Poles as propaganda about a second Katyn. ...

During my absence Mroczkowski learned of the execution [of Kmicic's men] and, for that reason, went over to the Polish nationalists taking 60 Poles with him. ... The 30 remaining Poles planned to get arms from us and go over to the Polish side. We had these 30 shot. In total, we shot 80 men from the Polish legion.

Groups from the Polish legion are now openly attacking Soviet partisans,

especially my brigade. ...

We are using every means to liquidate the armed Polish bandit groups in the field.

The next major treacherous operation occurred on December 1, 1943. The leaders of Stołpce Concentration (*Zgrupowanie Stołpeckie*) of the Home Army, under the command of Major Wacław Pełka ("Wacław"), were invited to a meeting with General "Dubov" at the Soviet base in the Naliboki forest. Part of this Polish grouping was a the Kościuszko unit headed by Lieutenant Kacper Miłaszewski "Lewald", with whom Tuvia Bielski and the Zorin group had always maintained excellent relations. This turned out to be yet another ploy. After arresting the Polish leadership, the Soviets then struck what they hoped would be a final blow. A surprise attack was launched on the nearby Polish partisan bases. Some 230 Poles were disarmed. Anyone showing the least resistance was shot on the spot, in accordance with Soviet orders. According to Soviet reports, ten Polish partisans were killed and eight injured in the ensuing melee in Derewna, in which one Soviet partisan was also wounded. Anti-Soviet elements were to be liquidated "quietly, so that no one would know." After a month's long interrogation, five of the ten leaders of the Polish unit were sent to the Lubianka prison in Moscow; the other five were executed locally. The remaining captured Polish partisans were inducted into the Soviet partisans. More than thirty of them were executed when they attempted to leave.

Did the Bielski partisans take part in Soviet operations against the Polish partisans?

No credible evidence has ever been presented that any member of the Bielski group was killed by the Home Army, or any Pole for that matter. On the other hand, many Jewish partisans took part in the Soviet-led assault on the Polish underground, in particular the "disarming" of the Kmicic and Pelka units. Several Jewish partisans recorded sanitized accounts of those operations.

The "disarming" of Burzyński's unit in August 1943 was described in a memoir penned by Shalom Yoran (then Selim Sznycer), a member of "Revenge" (*Mest* in Russian, *Nekama* in Hebrew). "Revenge" was a partisan unit composed of Jews within the Vorshilov Brigade commanded by Fedor Markov.

Brigade Commander Markov decided to rid the area of the AK [Armia Krajowa] menace. Our entire brigade was moved to the region close to the AK bases. We surrounded and attacked them. After three days of fighting, the entire area was free of the AK. Many of them were killed, many were taken prisoner, and the rest ran away to the areas close to Vilna [Wilno], where another AK brigade was located.

Alexander Bogen, another member of the Jewish "Revenge" detachment, recalled:

One morning, a messenger arrived from the brigade headquarters with an order: The division of Nekama had to get ready for a mission. All the fighters had to go with a weapon to a forest thicket a few kilometers away, taking position in a frontal line and then waiting for orders. ... All of a sudden, we saw a large camp of partisans walking toward the direction of the clearing. We were very surprised to see that all of these people were without weapons - they looked devastated and downcast, walking in groups of four. ... They were the Armia Krajowa (AK). Only a short time passed before we heard shots from the directions of the clearing. Then a deathly quiet descended. Headquarters of the Soviet partisan movement in Belarus and Lithuania received orders from Moscow to get rid of the AK.

To be continued in the February issue...