

Defiance - Bielski Bros. from 14

natural that they would grow to resent such treatment and that some would even take measures to protect themselves and their property. The conflict with the peasants was thus inevitable, and was not of their making. As the intensity of the hostility directed toward the peasants mounted, the Jewish partisans' deep-seated contempt for goys would come to the surface. Those who openly resented being robbed were branded as "trouble-makers," "fascists" or just plain "anti-Semites".

Below are some Jewish testimonies describing the Bielski group's increasingly more violent and rapacious expeditions in the countryside:

But Asael's group had to eat. And so, at night, a few of them would venture into a farm house, where, guns in hand, they asked for food. Those who had no weapons carried sticks in the shape of shotguns on their shoulders. Owners of these artificial "guns" stayed outside the hut but close to the windows. The idea was to make the peasants think there were many of them and that they were well armed.

By this time Asael's group grew to fourteen ... This enlarged group followed the established pattern. Under the cover of darkness a few men would venture into the village for food. Intimidated by the guns, the peasants would hand over whatever provisions they had.

Still, the resistance [within the group] to Tuvia's ideas about the enlargement of the otriad [unit] ... they felt that one could not find enough food for so many people. Tuvia Bielski would not let himself be influenced by their concerns ... "Why do you worry so much about food. Let the peasants worry. We will get what we need from peasants and let more Jews come."

At any time not more than twenty percent of the Bielski people could participate in food expeditions. ... Because of great distances, each group tried to collect as many provisions as possible at one time. Larger quantities of food required more people. Sometimes a food mission included as many as twenty-five men.

... a food mission headed by Asael [Bielski] returned to the Nalibocka base. With fifteen cows, many horses, and wagons filled with all kinds of provisions, this journey had been a success.

Shmuel Geller: "Once I got a rifle, I was sent for food expeditions. First, I did not know how to do it. Therefore, they would have me stand guard while they were collecting food from the peasants. Later on I joined the others. During one of those expeditions I saw a woman's fur coat. My wife could use such a warm coat. I turned to the Polish peasant, 'Will you allow me?' For an answer the Pole cursed me and took away the coat.

"Next to me stood a butcher from Nowogródek. He swore at the peasant, promising him a beating.

"The butcher looked at me with anger and said, 'You miserable intellectual, you don't ask permission from the peasant! Did they ask permission when they were robbing Jews?' ... The warm fur coat was soon on the butcher's wife. ... Eventually I learned not to ask for permission."

Boris Rubierzewicki [Rubin], a brave partisan, a scout, and a regular food collector, would be a good choice. ... Boris was interested. As proof of his intentions, he presented her with a fur coat, confiscated during a mission [i.e., a raid on a village]. Sulia [Wolozhinski] notes that after she took up with Boris, "Right away I was dressed. Right away, I got a pair of boots. I had a fur."

Bialobroda used his gun for robbing natives of their valuables, gold, and jewelry.

He [Israel Kesler] was well suited to life in the forest and because of his past [as a professional thief] it was particularly easy for him to confiscate goods. He had a sense for guessing which peasants had

hidden jewelry and gold.

The camp had many musicians but no instruments. Those who went on food expeditions were alerted to this need and, as a result, the Bielski otriad acquired a guitar, a violin, and a mandolin.

... the [Bielski] brothers sought to create the impression that they were a large and ruthless collection of fighters, the kind of men who would deal harshly with anyone who denied them supplies or informed to the authorities. Asael and Zus already had a reputation for roughness, but the three wanted the Bielski name to strike terror in the hearts of villagers. It was the only way they felt they could survive.

They accomplished this by sending those without guns on missions equipped with long sticks, which in the dim moonlight looked like rifles. They wore ammunition belts bulging with already used bullets. They sang rousing martial songs at the top of their lungs in Russian while circling repeatedly through a village. Zus, the most confrontational brother, resorted to more explicit threats. On several occasions, he took a peasant's son from his home, led him out of sight, and fired a shot into the air. Then he returned to the house and announced to the farmer and his family, "We've killed the son. Now let's kill another." The grief-stricken man invariably offered weapons or food. ...

[His Belorussian friend Konstantin Kozlovsky] then described the stories he had been hearing about the Bielski brothers. "It is said that you are robbing people," he said. "And that your sister Taibe Dziencielski and the women are taking part in it."

A major priority of the camp remained the dangerous task of retrieving food. The young fighters, who were only able to work under cover of darkness, sometimes spent several nights on the road attempting to complete their tasks. It was a messy job that required a willingness to be brutal, a willingness to threaten the life of a peasant who resisted giving up food.

The [Bielski] brothers knew that their success required a willingness to back up threats with the possibility of real violence. ... The peasants had to understand that their lives were in jeopardy if they informed on the Jews in the forest.

The dichotomy between friendly (pro-Soviet) and hostile (pro-Nazi) villages, pushed in many Holocaust memoirs, is largely fictitious. The "friendly" villages were generally those near the partisan base which, for strategic reasons, were treated more humanely. Their residents were granted immunity from being pilfered in order to establish a foothold in the area. Some villagers in turn played into this to safeguard their property and to avoid conflict with a formidable foe and were rewarded by the partisans with scraps from their booty. Raids on villages, which went by various code or slang names such as *bombyozhka* and *zagatovka*, would take on the following appearance:

Partisan food collections, known as "bambioshka" [sic], took place at night. From the Bielski otriad [unit], "Every night one or two groups were sent out to bring food. A group consisted of ten or twelve armed men. One of these men acted as the leader. Some of the participants had to be familiar with the side roads and the particular villages. Of course, one had to select people that first of all were not afraid and second of all to whom the peasants would give food."

When a group reached a village it would first collect provisions from the richest [of the poor!] farms. As one partisan explains, this was possible because "In each village we had a peasant, usually himself poor, he would give us information about the other peasants. This way we knew what each had, how many horses, cows, etc. Such a peasant we called 'legalshchyk.' We took nothing from him. Sometimes we would

give him some of the booty. [Wouldn't the other villagers have detected this?] Some of the rich peasants tried to hide their products ... we would search and if this was the case, we took more from them."

Toward the end of 1942 horse-drawn wagons, confiscated from farmers, were used for food expeditions. When a group left a village, it had to subdivide and prepare the goods on the way back to the camp. For example, cows had to be killed and cut into manageable portions. All this had to be done quickly. At dawn a group was expected to be back at the base – daylight was the partisans' enemy.

Some Russian partisans felt that the local population was becoming more hostile toward all guerrilla fighters only because the Jews had been confiscating too many goods. Jews were accused of robbing the local people of forbidden items.

There was a certain amount of truth to these accusations. Some Jewish partisans would take honey, eggs, and meats from villages that were friendly toward the partisans. This was forbidden. At Russian headquarters it was assumed that these luxury items could be confiscated only from [allegedly!] pro-Nazi villages.

So twice a week, during the evening, we went out to the unfriendly farmers who were cooperating with the Germans [i.e., by reporting robberies]. We asked them for food and we would take it on our own if they didn't give it to us. If we found some [abandoned] Jewish memorabilia in their homes ... we got mad and smashed up everything in their houses. Sometimes, we beat those jerks up a little. ...

I established myself as the leader of the group and always went out on food raids from the farmers in the region. ... We would break into the houses and steal lots of food and clothing. Then we would smash the windows and the furniture. We killed their dogs when they bit us. ...

We had already conducted a number of raids in this area, as often as twice a week. I figured that in one of the rich farms in that community I could find decent clothing for Rochelle and also bring back some good food to celebrate her arrival. So we went, four of us, including Liss. We all carried pistols and rifles, and in addition a pair of binoculars I had taken on one of the previous farm raids.

Things went very badly. About a half mile or so we reached the farm we had in mind, the police opened fire. ...

But then we found out about a very large farm a mile or so outside of Mir ... We figured that we could make such a large food haul from that one estate that it would reduce the need for making smaller raids so frequently – twice or three times a week, as we usually did. ...

Our advantage was that we were, by this stage, well-supplied with pistols and rifles and hand grenades and even some automatic weapons. ... We talked over our plans for the raid with two other small groups and finally we reached an agreement – each of the three groups would send four men. We would take as much in the way of food, clothing, and supplies as we could carry and split it evenly between the three groups. ...

There were about seven people at home, the old parents and some of the daughters and maybe some servants as well. Immediately they started crying and begging. We held our rifles on them ...

We opened up the trapdoor to the cellar and found down there a number of big barrels full of food – salted pork, ham, sausages, honey, bread, and more. [This was undoubtedly the family's entire food supply for the long winter months.] We hauled all of the food out of the cellar, then herded all of the residents of the house back down in there. We told them to sit there quietly or else we would kill them and burn the entire place down. ... We then covered up the trapdoor with some very heavy furniture ...

Meanwhile, three of our men ... found a

small number of calves and sheep ... [they bound] their feet to make it easier to take them along.

Then we had to figure out how to carry all of the food away. We solved the problem by finding two hauling sleds alongside their barn. We hitched two horses to each of these, then loaded them up with the livestock and the barrels. We packed in some Christmas baked goods we found – cookies and cakes. We also took lots of warm clothing and some cooking utensils and tools – any useful things we could find. Even with the four horses and the two sleds, that was all we could handle at one time.

Before we left, we debated amongst ourselves as to whether to burn the place down or not. ... one of the men found some large canisters filled with kerosene and emptied them all around the house, on the rugs, furniture, and woodwork. He was hoping that the residents might set fire to the house themselves, once they managed to push open the trapdoor and then attempted to light some lamps in the house, which we had left totally dark.

We managed to transport the loaded sleds most of the way back to our bunkers.

Dov Cohen (then Berl Kagan), a partisan from the Bielski group, recalled the harsh conditions of survival for all involved:

The problem of providing sufficient supplies for a camp of over 1,200 Jews was also complicated. Fewer and fewer provisions could be found in the villages: the partisans would often come and take what they needed in the way of clothing, footwear and food, and the German authorities also imposed ever-growing taxes. Villages suspected of helping the partisans were burned down, and their inhabitants killed. It wasn't easy, confiscating a farmer's last bit of property – his one remaining cow, horse or pig, or the stock of flour he had prepared. Sometimes they resisted violently, forcing us to retaliate in kind.

Yet his cousin and colleague Jack (Idel) Kagan shrugged off the predicament of the peasants quite aptly: "There was no room for mercy."

Oswald Rufeisen, an exceptionally forthright witness, effectively dispels the notion that robbing was an act of heroism or even defiance against the authorities.

I was in the forest because I wanted to live, and, as I did, I was robbing innocent people. ... To be a partisan was not simple. It was something between a hero and a robber. We had to live and we had to deprive the peasants of their meager belongings. These natives were punished by the Nazis and by us. ... At least if they were pro-German it would have been easier. This usually was not the case. Most of the time we took by force from poor peasants who were not even pro-Nazi. ...

For me, one of the worst things was the plunder. The peasants were anyway robbed by the Germans. They were poor. It was horrible to see how they were deprived. ... Yet we had to do it. They would not have given us on their own. We were in a predicament. ... Sometimes we would take away the last cow, or the last horse. ...

At stake in the operations against farmers were moral issues. I am thinking about the forceful confiscations of goods that belonged to other people. Sometimes partisans would take a horse in one village and then sell it for vodka in another village. I would have understood had they taken a horse in one place and sold it for wheat in another place. But often this was not the case.

Those who ran into conflict with the peasants as a result cannot blame those whom they robbed.

The dire conditions allegedly experienced by those living in Bielski's family camp, as well as in another Jewish family camp in the Naliboki forest under the protection of Semen Zorin, is belied

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