



Written by [Staff](#) on August 11, 2014

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Mystery Bielski Remembered

July marks the 70th anniversary of the triumph of the most renowned Jewish partisan group in the forests of Western Belorussia (Eastern Poland) during World War II. It began with a handful of escapees from the Nazi obsession to liquidate them, and evolved into a legendary fighting force and rescue operation that provided a haven for over 1,000 doomed Jews. This summer also marks the 20th anniversary of the death of its “mystery man” — who was my father.



Lieutenant Yehuda Bielski (shown) was badly wounded. Despite the nightmarish, rapid advance of the million-and-a-half-man mechanized German invasion, his fellow troops had fought with much skill and great courage. Relentless air bombardment such as the Earth had never seen took a heavy toll. Dazed, disorganized, and dying, the outnumbered and poorly armed Polish army held out as long as it could and then retreated. “I must get to a hospital,” Yehuda thought.

Yehuda tried to ignore the throbbing pain in his wounded leg as he limped his way to a Warsaw hospital. The long rutted roads were full of vehicles, wagons, carts, and frightened people of all ages — pedestrians and those on horseback carrying bundles, suitcases, and assorted belongings. Soldiers were still carrying their weapons.

The nuns at the hospital took excellent care of Yehuda. Early one morning a nun whispered to him that the SS were doing a building sweep for Polish officers and Jews, and he should take his belongings and follow her. He was barely recovered. She led him to a side door, and he made his escape into Nazi-occupied Warsaw. He wanted to go home, to Novogrudek in Eastern Poland. As Yehuda maneuvered his way home, he witnessed the mistreatment and shootings of Polish civilians. Jews were singled out for brutal, barbaric attacks. SS men beat terrified men and women with rubber truncheons, pipes, and clubs — smashing bones and skulls — stealing watches, jewelry, and anything they liked. Jewish men of all ages were forced into hard labor details under frightful conditions. Random shootings were common. Homes and shops were looted and demolished. Yehuda saw Jews shoved into a synagogue that was then torched. “I thought my hair would turn white,” he recalled.

The Germans brutally executed all Poles who hid Jews to send a clear message to any others who wanted to help them. Yet, at enormous daily risk to themselves and their families, who were also killed, extraordinary Polish men and women aided and sheltered thousands of Jews, including many children, most of whom survived the war. Over 6,000 of these brave rescuers, far more than in any other Nazi-occupied country, are honored and memorialized at the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, Israel, as “Righteous Among the Nations.”

Yehuda eventually made his way back to Soviet-occupied Novogrudek. He was born and raised in that large, lively town on the border of Belorussia. The war had not yet impacted the town in major ways. The Russians made some changes, and people adjusted as best they could. As Yehuda’s wound healed, he worked with his wife, Ida, in her popular beauty salon. Ahead of its time, the business catered to



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both men and women. He built an additional, smaller house on his property. People continued to live their lives as before.

The large Bielski family had lived in Poland for several hundred years. Yehuda was the youngest of seven children. His father owned a glazing business; his mother died when he was nine. He was educated at the Tarbut Zionist School and spoke several languages: Polish, Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, some German, and years later, English. He learned to play the violin and guitar. He was an excellent athlete and an accomplished ballroom dancer. Discipline, proper behavior, and good grooming were important to him.

On June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa. The Final Solution had come home to Yehuda. The Russians did not realize they would be invaded and were taken entirely by surprise. The lightning advance of roughly 3.8 million Germans was devastating. Refugees who had escaped from conquered Poland already told the Jews what the Germans were capable of, but most of the trapped Jews had no idea what awaited them.

The Germans bombed Novogrudek. Terror began immediately with continuous violent assaults, killing, and looting. Boys were shot in the main square. Men were taken into forced labor and never returned. Two ghettos were created, one at each end of the town, surrounded by fences and barbed wire. They were guarded by Ukrainians and Lithuanians.

After routine "selections" (to choose people for extermination), people were taken to the woods close to town and shot. One ghetto was liquidated. Yehuda, a prisoner in the second ghetto, had survived two selections there and knew that surviving another was very slim. "The Germans already had their eyes on me," he observed. He planned an escape.

While Yehuda was planning his escape, a Christian friend delivered a letter to the ghetto from Yehuda's older cousin, Tuvia, who had recently fled from his rural village to the nearby forest with his three brothers, his sister, several relatives, and friends. They had all played in the forest as children and knew it well. "Bring your wife, a few good men and we will build something together," Tuvia wrote. He urged Yehuda to join him without delay, for he needed his military expertise.

The Mystery Man

One night, leading his wife and eight carefully chosen potential fighters, Yehuda approached the ghetto fence. Avoiding the guards, they removed fence boards, cut through the barbed wire, and escaped into the forest.

After several days walking through the woods, the group met up with his cousins. Yehuda was dismayed by the lack of structure and discipline he observed. At a meeting held shortly after, according to Peter Duffy in his book *The Bielski Brothers*, he addressed the group: "We have come here into the forest, my dear ones, not to eat and drink and enjoy ourselves. We have come here ... to stay alive. We must think only of one important thing: revenge and revenge again on the murderers." Armed resistance was his answer.

When Yehuda's plan to secure weapons and attack the enemy was agreed upon, he continued: "We must choose a commander and we must give our unit a name." He nominated his cousin, Tuvia, to lead the group. With Yehuda's military focus, the Bielski Partisans emerged.



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Tuvia wanted to allow desperate Jews of all ages to join the group. His younger brother, Zus, wanted to turn away these doomed outsiders seeking refuge and keep the group small. Tuvia wanted to avoid contact with the Germans and hostile locals, hoping to save as many people as possible. His brother wanted to fight the enemy. Disagreements intensified. Zus, who was a bold, fearless fighter, left the partisans and joined one of the Red Army/NKVD (secret police) controlled partisan units that were fighting behind German lines. "He'll find out the Russians can be worse than the Germans," Yehuda said. Zus later returned to the Bielski Partisans camp.

The partisan family camp grew rapidly as more Jews of all ages arrived. The base camp — comprised of the Bielskis, their wives and girlfriends, relatives, and friends — was surrounded by smaller camps. People worked during the day and slept at night in camouflaged bunkers built underground. Everyone's skill was utilized. People improvised and endured hunger and thirst, frigid winter weather, illness, forest surgery, and personal hardships. Supplies were procured by any means possible. The small, but highly effective, military wing evolved into a group of daring guerrilla fighters and saboteurs. Collaborators who turned Jews over to the Germans were hunted down and killed.

The rules of the camp were made and strictly enforced by the three Bielski brothers. For those who broke them, there was a jail. Challenges to the leadership of the brothers were sometimes resolved through the end of the barrel of a gun. An unyielding hierarchy existed, and those who did not understand their place learned quickly if they wanted to remain. Only the foolhardy would take on these explosive brothers in this secluded, remote, and unlawful environment of dense forests and swamps. A primitive forest village evolved where those under their protection and the protection of other commanders survived as tens of thousands were massacred around them.

Yehuda was known as the "eydl" (refined) Bielski by fellow partisans because of his demeanor and attitude. Despite their different backgrounds, dispositions, and proclivities, Yehuda and Tuvia nevertheless worked well together in the forest. They both understood their precarious situation, responsibilities, and the natures and motives of their many enemies. They knew the Russians could provide them with much-needed weapons and ammunition. "It is better to die with a gun in your hand," Yehuda said, "than be slaughtered like sheep."

The entire partisan camp was always at risk. The Russians were very suspicious of everyone, and it was crucial to convince them that this was both a Soviet and Jewish fight for victory over the Germans. During vodka-fueled meetings, Tuvia, with his diplomatic skills, continually managed to persuade them that the Bielski fighters were a trustworthy and reliable asset to Soviet success in the forest. As a result, Russian planes dropped large quantities of automatic weapons to the partisans.

Meanwhile, Tuvia protected Yehuda from Stalin's dreaded NKVD, which regarded all Polish officers as enemies of the Soviet regime. The Russian dictator ordered them to be shot on sight. Yehuda was able to elude the Russians and became known as "the mystery man."

Yehuda Meets Lola

During a German ambush, Yehuda's wife was killed. Her body was recovered in the forest lying face down over her revolver, shot in the back. The following year he met and befriended Lola Hudes, who had recently joined the Bielski Partisans, her fourth partisan group.

The friendship between Lola and Yehuda grew. She was struck by his good manners and quiet, calm



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behavior. "He had a powerful, slender body and the erect bearing of a military officer," Lola observed. She was impressed. She noticed that he could disappear quickly and reappear unexpectedly. He was unlike his cousins. And he was a mystery to her.

Yehuda respected and appreciated Lola's intelligence and bravery: "First-class and first-rate." In fact, Yehuda always said Lola was more intelligent, braver, and tougher than most of the partisans and some of the fighters he led — all in a 110-pound, slender package. "She was a sheltered, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan young woman who knew nothing before the war about survival against all odds, especially in strange towns and dangerous, dense forests. But she learned fast, especially how to use guns."

Yehuda perfected her shooting skills with pistols and rifles. Eventually, Lola was assigned to do night guard duty. "Before the war I knew as much about guns as I knew about poisoned mushrooms," Lola would comment. "But as the war progressed, I realized how important it was to learn to shoot in order to defend myself and the partisans. Whatever I learned, it still wasn't enough."

After the War

By 1944, the massive Russian army was on its victorious drive toward the final showdown in Berlin, and in the summer of 1944, the Bielski Partisans were told they could return to their homes. The area was clear of Germans, and for the partisans, the war was over. They had endured and prevailed in the woods for almost three years under extraordinary deprivation. Most partisans walked out of the forest with minimal possessions. Without systematic records, the exact number of partisans (over 1,000 people with a loss of about 50) was undetermined.

The survivors went their separate ways. They had lost many beloved family members, swept up by the Nazis and their collaborators. They lost their homes, belongings, and savings. Some lost much-desired educational opportunities. Some developed physical ailments that they endured for the rest of their lives. Some developed psychological disabilities, and many bore emotional scars. Despite any limitations, most of them pursued a new life with great energy and determination.

Yehuda and Lola returned to his house in Novogrudek and married. The Soviet NKVD, a precursor of the KGB, finally caught up with him, and he was summoned to their headquarters. He never forgot their words: "We know who you are. We know where you are. We know what you did during the war. When we're ready for you, there's no place you can hide." Yehuda understood his days were numbered. Leaving everything behind and carrying a few meager possessions, they fled. Climbing atop a coal train heading west and holding on for dear life to the black slippery coal, they reached Lodz, Poland. Lola wanted to go home to find out if any family was still alive.

Lodz had become a registration center for returning Polish Jewish survivors. Lola discovered the extent of the German-caused horror and believed that no one in her immediate or extended family had survived. Hoping somebody might one day return from the ashes, she signed her name onto the registration log: Lola Hudes Bielski — destination Palestine.

To Palestine and Beyond

Yehuda, who had also lost his entire family, always planned to go to Palestine after the war. "We have to build a Jewish country," he asserted. He felt it was a historic responsibility. In Budapest, Hungary, Yehuda was recruited by the Jewish Agency in Palestine and offered a job. From Bari, Italy, he was



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assigned to escort about 200 Holocaust survivors on a cramped, dilapidated vessel across the Mediterranean to British-occupied Palestine, while avoiding the Royal navy sea patrols and blockade.

Yehuda joined the Irgun, an underground army formed to defend Jews from Arab terrorism and pressure the British out of Palestine. Once again, he became the mystery man. He engaged in activities that could have put his neck in a British noose. Sometime later, Tuvia and Zus and their wives arrived in Palestine; their brother Asael had been killed. Their teenage brother, Aron, arrived soon after. Aron always admired and respected Yehuda, and the two became lifelong friends. "Yehuda was considered the fifth brother," Aron said. "I loved him."

Commissioned an officer in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Yehuda was the only Bielski commander to be so recognized. He fought with bravery and distinction in Israel's War of Independence in which five Arab states — Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Transjordan, and Lebanon — attacked the tiny fledgling Jewish state. Additional Saudi and Yemeni fighters joined their Arab brothers. The Arab League's secretary-general vowed, "This war will be a war of extermination and momentous massacre." Once again, Yehuda was wounded in battle and survived complicated field surgery; only this time it was an Arab bullet.

Yehuda and Lola and their two children, Leslie (myself) and Eric, came to the United States in 1952 and settled in Manhattan. The Bielski brothers and their families came sometime later and settled in Brooklyn. Aron and his family lived in Manhattan. Yehuda became a businessman; Lola became a painter. Two more children, Harriet (who died in infancy) and Stuart, were born. Yehuda and Lola Americanized quickly, became proud citizens, and were known as Julius and Lola Bell.

"America is a blessed land," Yehuda said. "I love it." He appreciated its freedoms and abundance. However, he soon became concerned about the social upheavals he saw around him and the new strain of anti-Semitism cloaked as anti-Zionism. "I saw this before, and the ending was not good," he said. Prophetically, he warned, "The American dream can be taken away from you. Always be informed and know what is going on. Choose your leaders carefully. And never forget."

Yehuda and Lola were very private people and always avoided publicity. They turned down all interview requests by media, including the *New York Times*. They remained ever fearful that they might have to testify one day about what they had witnessed in the forest during the war.

Yehuda owned a successful business until his late 70s. "How lucky to be able to come to America with only pennies in your pocket and if you work hard, you can become secure," he gratefully said. He enjoyed ballroom dancing and loved to be with his family. Yehuda died in 1994 in New York City, exactly 50 years after walking out of the Eastern European forest.

Lola became an avid Bridge player. She knitted intricately designed, beautiful sweaters for her family throughout her life and continued to paint in her studio in the family's Manhattan Lincoln Center-area apartment until well into her 80s. Lola died in 2009 in New York City.

The Bielski Legacy

"Some people say Jews did not resist during the Shoah [Holocaust]. We know this is not true, but it is very important to spread knowledge about the Jewish armed and civil resistance movement. In 2009, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews started the [online] Virtual Shtetl portal with information about Jewish life in Poland. A very important part of Jewish history is the Jewish resistance," said Krzysztof Bielawski, chief specialist of the Virtual Shtetl. (Shtetls were small towns with predominantly



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Jewish populations in Central and Eastern Europe prior to the Holocaust.)

Preserving the history of the underreported Jewish partisans is precisely what the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw is doing with the noted Bielski Partisans, specifically the “mystery man” of the group, Lt. Yehuda Bielski; his wife Lola Hudes and the Bielski high command led by Tuvia and Zus. The museum features their histories, captured in an earlier issue (July 20, 2009) of *The New American* in the article “The Bielski Forest” by my brother Y. Eric Bell, the son of Yehuda and Lola, who crystalized the spirit of the leadership.

The museum, which opened in 2013, also traces the pre-war history of Polish Jews. “This museum is not another Holocaust museum. It focuses on 1,000 years of Jewish life in Poland,” Bielawski proudly asserted.

Other Jewish museums — The Sydney Jewish Museum in Sydney, Australia; many American Jewish museums, including the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.; and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel — are also chronicling and exhibiting the legacy of the Bielski Partisans, including Yehuda and Lola, with dozens of their historical photos and many articles in addition to “The Bielski Forest.”

“The personal stories of the survivors are the vehicle by which we can learn about these inspiring deeds. The testimonies, memoirs, and personal documents of the Jewish partisans, along with those of other Jews who went through the Shoah, must continue to be collected, disseminated to the public and preserved for posterity,” said Shaya ben Yehuda, director of the International Relations Division of Yad Vashem. “Today, we are seeing growing interest among people of different backgrounds from all over the world in learning and engaging with the events and many of the core issues raised by the Shoah. Yet very soon, many of the survivors will no longer be able to share their stories firsthand, making Yad Vashem’s efforts to document and disseminate information all the more important.”

Personal stories still to be told in a comprehensive manner include the tremendous contributions of Jewish women partisans who were instrumental in raising children, teaching, providing medical attention, cooking, sewing, and even guarding family camps. “Definitely the role of many women has been largely overlooked,” Eric insisted. “They were always more vulnerable than men, especially in the woods. Those who survived were remarkable, courageous, and unusual people.”

The Bielskis’ shining story in the annals of Jewish resistance during World War II has become legendary. The Bielski Partisans personify the resilience and triumph of the human spirit that can emerge when unceasing murder is let loose. They provide an inspirational lesson and guide for generations yet unborn. It is to be hoped that Jewish museums will remain in perpetuity — so too the photographs, columns, interviews, testimonials, videos, and articles about Jewish partisans and the Holocaust. Because articles with meaningful and insightful information, such as presented in *The New American*, are archived in the museums, they provide a significant and valuable resource for all interested people — people who wish not to forget the past and therein repeat the tragic events that occurred during World War II. The availability of such resources can only be a sobering lesson of what can happen when we shut our eyes to totalitarianism.

For more information about the Jewish partisan resistance during the Holocaust, go to the museum’s website: <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/>. For information about Yehuda and Lola specifically, see: <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/article/nowogrodek/16,accounts- memories/40430,yehuda-and-lola-bielski/>



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