

## Bielski, Tuvia

(1906-1987), Jewish partisan commander. Bielski's family were farmers in Stankiewiczze, near Novogradok. At the age of seventeen he joined the Zionist pioneering movement, and in 1928 he was mobilized into the Polish army, where he rose to the rank of corporal. He married in 1930 and settled in the village of Subotnik, where he opened a textile store. In September 1939 the area was annexed to the Soviet Union.

With the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Bielski was mobilized. When the Germans invaded the region he fled to the forest, and from there to his village of birth. After their parents and other members of their family were slaughtered in the Novogradok ghetto, Bielski and his brothers Zusya, Asael, and Aharon, escaped to the forests. Securing arms, they created a seventeen-member partisan core there, consisting mostly of members of Bielski's family. Elected as commander, Tuvia Bielski sent emissaries to the ghettos in the vicinity, inviting the inmates to join his group. Hundreds of the surviving Jews in the ghettos of the Novogradok region - men, women, and children - streamed into Bielski's camp, and his partisan band grew daily.

Bielski learned to wage partisan combat, and he considered the saving of Jewish lives a supreme objective. His band inspired terror in the Novogradok region as it took vengeance on the Belorussian police and on the farmers who massacred Jews. The German authorities offered a reward of 100,000 marks for assistance in capturing him.

With the creation of the band of Jewish partisans in the Naliboki Forest, Bielski won the trust of the Soviet partisan unit in the vicinity, and particularly of its commander, General Platon (Vasily Yehimovich Chernyshev). Bielski opposed the unit's intention of taking away his 150 fighters, leaving him with a civilian camp of refugees, and in order to frustrate this aim he made his camp a maintenance base for the Soviet fighters. His group was not a partisan band

in the regular sense but a Jewish community in the forest, with a synagogue, a law court, workshops, a school, and a dispensary (see family camps in the forests).

In the summer of 1943, the Germans initiated a massive hunt through the Naliboki Forest in order to destroy the partisan forces, and in particular Bielski's band. The partisans retreated to the densest part of the forest, and the commander of Bielski's area ordered Bielski to pare down his unit to include only single people with arms; married men, women, and children were ordered to abandon the area where the unit had been staying and not follow the fighters to the center of the forest. Knowing that this instruction was a death sentence for the civilians in his group, Bielski disobeyed, retreating to the thickest part of the forest with his entire band. The fighters protected the civilians until they were able to emerge safely from the forest, evading the Germans who surrounded it. In the summer of 1944, with the liberation of the area, Bielski and his 1,230-strong partisan band, known as "Kalinin," marched into the town of Novogradok. Asael Bielski was killed in battle as a soldier in the Soviet army at Königsberg in 1944.

After the war Bielski returned to Poland. That same year, in 1945, he immigrated to Palestine, and in 1954 he settled in the United States with his two surviving brothers.