

ACTIVITY 1 WHAT IS HEROISM?

“...the Holocaust did not start with a concentration camp. It started with a brick through the shop window of a Jewish business, the desecration of a synagogue, the shout of racist abuse on the street.”

— Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair

Defiance tells the extraordinary true story of three Jewish brothers from western Belarus—Tuvia, Zus, and Asael Bielski—who escaped the ghetto where their people were being incarcerated, and fled to the forest, fought the Nazis and their supporters, and saved more than 1,200 people known as the Bielski Otriad. They overcame the challenges of finding food and shelter and obtaining weapons, while dealing with overwhelming anti-Semitism that made it difficult to trust even locals who seemed sympathetic. *Defiance* is a story not found on timelines or in history books. It is a story of reluctant heroes who were plunged into an impossible world of inescapable evil and who found the resources—within themselves and in one another—to fight back, fight on, and finally win the war for survival.



- To strike back at the Germans.
- To retreat and attempt to rebuild their community elsewhere.

What are the practical considerations associated with each option? Which would hold out the most chance for survival? What personal abilities would someone have to have to succeed at these choices? How might that influence the decision? What are the moral considerations? To what extent is each option a potential path toward “heroism”?

PART 1:

DISCOVERY

The period from January 1933, when Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, until May 8, 1945, when World War II ended in Europe, was a time of agonizing change and incredible hardship for the Jewish people, who had been targeted for extermination (the Nazi term for mass murder). To understand what Jews like the Bielski brothers were subjected to, it is necessary to put the major events of the time into context. Review the timeline in the sidebar to understand the Bielskis' unimaginable situation. Do research to learn more about the significance of these events.

DISCUSSION

Consider some of the options the Bielskis could have chosen in their struggle for survival. For example:

- To abandon the life they knew and go into hiding in the forest.

PART 2: Consider the current, ongoing genocide campaign in the Darfur region of Sudan, where hundreds of thousands of Sudanese have been killed and several million have been herded into refugee camps. Award-winning director Paul Freedman, whose film, *Sand and Sorrow*, is about the atrocities being committed in Darfur, said, “During the Holocaust, the rest of the world turned its back. Since then, we have said, ‘Never again,’ but it is happening again in Darfur.”

Why—when all the world is watching—has this situation been allowed to continue? What are the differences and similarities between what took place during the Holocaust and what is taking place in Darfur today? Consider other parts of the world today in which these kinds of atrocities are taking place.

- **August 1, 1936**—Summer Olympics open in Berlin.
- **November 9, 1938**—*Kristallnacht* or the Night of Broken Glass—deceptive name for the riots led by Nazis—where windows were shattered in synagogues, Jewish-owned businesses, schools, homes, and community centers. Synagogues were set aflame, stores were looted. Some 30,000 Jewish men, ages 16-60, sent to concentration camps. A turning point and the end of Jewish life in Germany.
- **August 23, 1939**—Germany and Russia sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (also known as the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact).
- **September 1, 1939**—Germany invades Poland and World War II begins.
- **October 8, 1939**—First Jewish ghetto is established in the Polish city of Piotrkow.
- **October 18, 1939**—Hitler signs an order authorizing the killing of mentally retarded, physically handicapped, and chronically ill Germans, so-called mercy killings.
- **By 1939**, six large concentration camps have been established: Dachau (1933), Sachsenhausen (1936), Buchenwald (1937), Flossenbürg (1938), Mauthausen (1939), and Ravensbrück (1939).
- **Spring, 1941**—Operation 14f13, the selected killing of prisoners, begins in concentration camps.
- **June 22, 1941**—Germany invades the Soviet Union and betrays the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Accompanying German troops are the Einsatzgruppen with an assignment to murder all Jews, Gypsies, and Soviet Commissars. Implementation of the Final Solution—the systematic state-sponsored murder of all Jews—begins. More than 1.2 million people are killed over the next 18 months.
- **July 31, 1941**—Hermann Goering orders the planning of a “Final Solution to the Jewish Problem in Europe.”
- **December 7, 1941**—Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor, US enter the war against Japan and Germany within days.
- **December 8, 1941**—First gassing of Jews at the death camp of Chelmno.
- **January 20, 1942**—Wannsee Conference of 15 Nazi leaders to coordinate and implement the Final Solution to the Jewish Problem.
- **Summer 1942**—Six killing centers (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmno, and Majdanek) in operation.
- **January 27, 1945**—Soviet liberation of Auschwitz.

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ACTIVITY 2 WHAT IS RESISTANCE?

“One resists with a gun, another with his soul.”

— Rabbi Ephraim Oshrey, Kovno Ghetto and concentration camp survivor

Below are profiles of eight people who became part of the Holocaust resistance, like the Bielski brothers in *Defiance*. Go to www.jewishpartisans.org and www.ushmm.org to learn more about them and the contributions they made.

- **Sonia Orbuch** fled her village in Poland to join the partisans in the forest, where she worked as a doctor's assistant and helped save and comfort partisans in battle.
- **Vladka Peltel Meed** was smuggled out of the Warsaw ghetto and became an active courier in the Jewish underground. She brought the first word of the death camp of Treblinka to the west.
- **Israel Kanal** founded the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) in Warsaw.
- **Henryk Lubelski** escaped a German ghetto and joined Czech partisans in the Carpathian Mountains; they sabotaged Germans by supplying Soviet troops with information about German artillery positions.
- **Chaja Kozlowski** escaped the ghetto in her hometown of Iwie and worked in a partisan hospital hidden in the woods. She used “appropriated” medical supplies from captured German stores.
- **Eta Wrobel**, the only survivor of a family of 10, led a group of Jewish partisans who set mines to hinder German movement and cut off supply routes.
- **Miles Lerman** escaped from a forced labor camp and fought with the resistance as a Partisan for 23 months. He immigrated to the United States in 1947, and was later a major figure in creating the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
- **Frank Blaichman** was just 16 when the Germans invaded Poland. At 21, he was the youngest platoon commander in a group of resistance fighters who had strong ties to the Polish underground and the Soviet army. They killed German collaborators, destroyed telephone lines, damaged factories, and ambushed German patrols.



In *Defiance*, the Bielski brothers escape imprisonment or immediate death at the hands of the Nazis by fleeing into the dense forests of Belarus, which is located east of Poland. The Bielskis' knowledge of the land provided them with the cover they needed to remain free to fight for their survival and the survival of their fellow Jews. It was, perhaps, the only advantage they had over their enemies.

PART 1:

DISCOVERY

Not all Jewish partisans (a member of an organized body of resistance) were fighters. Some provided food, weapons, and information. Some smuggled Jewish children to safety. Others resisted the Nazis by practicing their religion to keep their Jewish identity alive. Regardless of the path of resistance, all who chose to resist can be considered heroes.

Swiss historian Werner Rings has categorized acts of resistance as follows:

- **Symbolic and personal resistance**—maintaining dignity, identity, and continuity
- **Polemical resistance**—disseminating information about German crimes
- **Defensive resistance**—protecting and aiding one's own
- **Armed resistance**

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DISCUSSION

- In what ways did the individuals in the sidebar demonstrate resistance? Which type of resistance?
- How much did they hurt the Nazis? And at what cost to themselves?
- In what ways do you believe these actions affected their inner resources and drive for survival?
- In what ways do you think these actions clarified (or obscured) the “moral field of action”? How might this have affected the fighters?
- Do you think these individuals would consider themselves as “heroes”?

PART 2: Like the individuals in the sidebar, each of the three Bielski brothers encountered situations where the choices they made caused them to become “reluctant heroes.” Consider these examples from the film:

- Tuvia chooses to stay in Belarus and risk his life organizing the Jews to fight the Germans, rather than accept the forged documents his wife offers to provide—papers that will allow him to pass as a gentile and escape to a better life.
- Zus puts his life in peril by confronting the Soviet officer Viktor Panchenko when he realizes he is expected to betray the location of Tuvia's camp or be considered a counter-revolutionary.
- With the Germans moving in on the Bielski camp, Asael stays behind, slows down their progress, and gives members of the group time to escape.

Do you agree that each of the brothers, in his own way, was a reluctant hero? What might the consequences have been if each of the brothers had made a different decision? Do you think that any of the three believed he had a real alternative?

ACTIVITY 3 WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

“If I was going to die, I wanted to die as a fighter, and not as a Jew.”

— *Sonia Orbuch*

Like the Bielski brothers in the new film, *Defiance*, most Jewish partisans in Eastern Europe became active after Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. As a result, they found themselves in an uneasy alliance with Soviet partisans, most of them Soviet soldiers who had escaped capture when the Germans marched on the Soviet Union and who were now hiding, like the Jews, in the forests and swamps of Belarus. They shared a common enemy. In a polarized world, the enemy of one’s enemy is an ally.

The alliance between Soviet partisans and Jewish partisans was uneasy because of anti-Semitism and because of Soviet Communist ideology that often viewed Jews as capitalists and bourgeoisie and that opposed all religions. A Jewish partisan who asked for help always risked betrayal to the Germans or their collaborators. Partisan groups, such as the Bielskis, had to devise their own moral codes to separate themselves from the enemies they were fighting.

PART 1:

DISCOVERY

Lawrence Langer, a distinguished literary scholar, introduced the term “choiceless choices” to describe the circumstances that victims faced during the Holocaust. In ordinary life, he said, we can choose between good and bad or even the lesser of two evils. During the Holocaust, however, Jews faced making decisions, “not between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victims’ own choosing.”

DISCUSSION

With the above background in mind, imagine that you are a part of the Bielski resistance group. Consider each of the following scenes from *Defiance* and discuss how you would deal with each one.

Scene 1: *When a captured German SS scout is brought to the camp, other members of the group see an opportunity to take revenge for all of their murdered family members.*

Imagine that you are a member of the group who saw your parents and baby sister shot on the street in front of your house by German soldiers, and you are now in a position to take revenge. Discuss your moral choices. Your emotional choices. Why didn’t Tuvia participate in the revenge? Why did he do nothing to stop the attack?

Scene 2: *As the Bielski group grows to more than 1,000 members, the meager amounts of food must be stretched further and further. Fighting members of the group argue that those who risk their lives to secure the food should have a larger portion. Tuvia declares that everyone will share equally.*

Imagine that you are a fighter who has seen other members of the group mending clothes and gathering firewood while you face danger every day. Give the strongest argument for each side in the debate. Who would you support? Why?

Scene 3: *The struggle between Tuvia and Zus for leadership comes to a climax when they argue about how many Jews can join them. Both brothers want to save lives, but their perspectives are different. Tuvia believes their camp should be open to anyone, while Zus believes they are putting their family’s survival at risk each time someone joins. Tuvia prevails, and Zus leaves the Bielski camp to join Panchenko’s Russian partisans, where he feels he can truly make a difference and where he won’t have to watch helplessly as his brothers are hunted down and killed.*

Make the strongest argument for Tuvia’s position. Make the strongest argument for Zus’ position. Would you stay with Tuvia, or would you leave with Zus? Why?

PART 2: After you have viewed *Defiance*, consider these three scenes again. Having seen what the Bielskis and the others endured, would you change any of your decisions? Take into account the fact that when they made their initial choices they had no idea they would survive. They gambled their lives on the decisions they made. Would you consider any new or different factors in the course of the decision-making process? Be prepared to defend your decisions in a class discussion.



Tuvia Bielski (Daniel Craig)

By the summer of 1944, the group Tuvia led numbered 1,200—primarily elderly women and children. The fact that most of them survived the war was due to his strong and effective leadership.



Zus Bielski (Liev Schreiber)

Zus Bielski believed that the Otriad had to do whatever necessary to ensure that his family survived. He left the group to work with the Soviet resistance because he felt he could make more of a difference.



Asael Bielski (Jamie Bell)

Asael fought bravely alongside his two brothers. He was one of the few who stayed behind to fight on-coming Germans and give time for other members of the Otriad to escape.

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