

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Sonia Boldo Bielski
July 11, 1994
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Sonia Boldo Bielski, conducted by Sandra Bradley on July 11, 1994 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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Sonia Boldo Bielski
July 11, 1994

01:01:12

Q: Okay, Sonia, the first thing I want you to do is tell me your full name, and when and where you were born. And then just tell me a little bit about your growing-up years, your community.

A: I was born in a small town there in Poland, this was a big town, Novogradok. They had 10 or 15,000 people there. I was born in April 15, 1922, to a very rich father and mother. I had four brothers, two older and two younger than me. And I had my education there. I was studying in a liceum, with languages. I finished gimnazjum, and then I went for two years in liceum where I studied Latin, French, Polish, and History. When -- before the war broke out, I was two, three months before finishing my studies. I was dreaming to go to Paris, because we had a family there, to study dentistry in Sorbonne with the whole family. My mother's was there. But the war came in, and my dreams finished. The German came to the city in December 1941. We didn't know nothing about the war. You know, it was small town. We know only that very bad will be for the Jewish people. But we couldn't imagine it should be so, so bad, because when the first German came, they were dancing with us. And one -- I was a pretty girl, and one told my parents, "Make her papers that she is Polish and let her go from the city, because it will be very bad."

01:03:13

And that's what -- when they went, they came, the S.D. and the S.S., and the war began. In the beginning it was not so bad, because they begin -- After two months, they began to organize the ghetto. So all the people went out from the houses, and they put us on -- in a small -- in a couple of houses. Pereseka. They're called, Pereseka. This was like Brooklyn, New York, and Queens, like one of the city. And we were staying there till they said we have to go out in the streets, and this began the Aktion. When the Aktion began, my father saw that is very bad, so he took me, and -- I had a brother -- Jay, and he said, "Come on. I will show you something." And he ran away. He knew the policeman, the Polish, and they let us go. So I ran away to a village where my mother was born. And we stayed in a church because my father know there the people. We stayed there about seven days under the church. They had a place in Poland where the potato -- they were holding the potatoes should not freeze. And we staying there for a whole week. He let us stay. It was very nice. And after a week, he said, "The action is gone and you can go to the ghetto." We didn't know where my mother was. But my mother was a very intelligent girl. She was a rabbi's daughter. And she saw from far that my father went away with me, with my brother. She understood that he will take care, too, on us. So she took care on herself. She run to the village where she was born, this was Barabevit. And there friends of hers, what she was studying with them in school, he keep her for 10 -- or two weeks.

Q: Was he Jewish or not Jewish?

A: The friends? Not Jewish, no. The people -- they were very good people, too, not Jewish. Not every Jew is good, too. There is certain people what are better than Jew. They were keeping us, and if they would find them, he would be killed together with his whole family. But he was keeping us. After two weeks, when I was already with my father and brother in the ghetto, he came in and he said, "You know what, I would like to know if Mr. Boldo is alive." He didn't say that he has my mother. So they said "yes." They let him in. And he said, "You know, I have your wife." This was a shock for us because we were sure that she is not alive. And after a couple of days, she came and she was with us in the ghetto.

01:06:21

Q: Will you tell me -- go back a little bit to the action and tell me what happened, and how your father got away. I mean, were you right there or did--

A: We stayed near my father. My father was a tall, strong guy, and everybody knew him. So he sneaked in and he took me and my brother away from the line. And you know this small houses, so he keeps us in the house for two hours or three hours till they took away everybody for killing. And we went out. The policemen saw him, but he didn't hold us. They let him go because he knew him from before. He was a Polish policeman. And that's how we survive for the couple of months. After the action, we came back to the ghetto. We didn't -- we were not hungry because the villages, the people, knew that we are there. They were bringing us food, bread, meat, everything. They were beautiful, wonderful people. And till today, we are sending them packages. They are not alive, but we send them packages to give to the kids.

Q: Those -- the first actions, were they for specific people or -- I mean, in your town?

A: In our town, the first action was before the ghetto. They took all the doctors, the intelligent people, and they killed them in the marketplace -- 50 of them. They took away the head of the city. And then in the month -- in December, this was a regular action for whoever was in the street they took. This is the -- first of all, they took the men. They said that they are going to work on a -- work in a camp, a working camp. But they never came back. Nobody knew about it. But the paysans, that means people from the villages, they knew because they saw it. And they were coming to the ghetto and they were saying, "There is no camp. They are all killed." This was the first action.

01:08:56

Q: That's how your father knew what was happening?

A: Right. Right. He knew everything.

Q: Okay. So you came back to the ghetto. And then tell me a little bit about living in the ghetto, and how long you were there, what it was like.

A: We stayed in the ghetto, I think, a couple of months they came to the ghetto -- after the couple of months, this was a regular living. You were working. I was working in the hospital, and the others was working in the street because the street were bombardment, bombard. Everything was broken, so they were cleaning up. And this was not so bad. Nobody -- they were thinking, you know -- people were thinking what's good is for me. They were thinking, "I will survive. They are not touching us no more." And they were sitting. Then one day, a son of friends of ours came in. And said, "You know what? I saw 11 people from the ghetto that went out at night and I know where they went. They went to the forest, but nobody survived. Because they told them where to go, and the Germans were staying there already and waiting for them." And this was the first group for the trying to went out, and they were killed. So, you know, that's very difficult to go out. We can go out, but we will not be alive. So this was first time. This was -- I think this was already after the winter. The winter was very bad. In Poland, the winter is terrible. So this was probably in March or April another group went out, and we never heard about this. The German came and the they were gave -- they went to segregate the young and the healthy, and they took them to the court there. In Novogradok, there was a court. And there in the court they were working, and the rest stayed in the ghetto on the Pereseka. There were the kids, the older, and the sick. They didn't kill all of them right away, but after a couple of months, yes. They begin to talking about in the court that something is wrong. They're preparing something, the Germans. Nobody knew what and where. My parents stayed in there, in the ghetto, in Pereseka. And my father said, "I don't want her to be there," to my mother. So they paid. We had money. We had gold. We had many things. And they paid to a Polish man what he was bringing the bread to the ghetto, to the court. So he paid him. And he bring in -- one night, he bring the bread to the court, and he put me in the basket from the bread. And he brought me to my parents. I was there not a long time, because my parents began to receive letters from the partisan, from my husband, from Alex. And he wrote him -- he didn't know me, I didn't know him.

01:12:22

There is a big difference between from the village. He was from a village, very small, Stankiewiczze. There were five houses. One of the house, one Jewish family, the Bielskis. And they had, I think, about 10 brothers and two sisters. And his sister was married to uncle of mine, but I never knew him, too. It was great uncle, whatever. And she said -- she was too, in the forest. And she said to him, "You know what, I saw by the Boldos' a beautiful girl, and I would like you to send somebody after her." And he was a very good -- he had two -- he had a wife and a three-month-old child. But he didn't go -- after she gave birth to the child, she didn't want to go to the forest. So this day when he send after her was the liquidation of this house, and she got killed with the child. So he was by himself. And he wrote a letter to my parents that he will guarantee my safety. But I didn't want to go. I was afraid for the tree. I was afraid for the forest. I was afraid for everything

because I never were there. But when my parents saw what is here, they said, "Listen, I want you to go. I would like you -- better to die there than I would see you dead here." And he send a couple of men with rifles. And at night, my father paid again to the police, Polish. And I went out with the friend of mine, Leah,¹ to the forest. I came there -- we went out there about 12 o'clock, we came there about four o'clock, to the forest where we saw already about 18 people with rifles. I was afraid of them, too. I was not used to that, but I got used to that. And then I met my husband. So it was very nice in the morning, about 6 o'clock in the morning, my friends Chaya² that was already the girlfriends from mine other brother-in-law, Asael³. She said, "You know, I have a commander and I am with him and I am very happy." I said to her -- I was looking on her -- and I said, "Can you tell me maybe there's another commander?" She said, "Yes. One is Alex, his brother, the younger." I said, "Who is he? Where is he?" She said, "Don't worry. About seven o'clock you will see him." And really about seven o'clock I saw a man with rifles, all over. I saw a man, a giant. He was six-two, and a young handsome -- I had afraid of him, too. But life is life. After -- He was very good to me from the beginning. He was very good to me. And he said to me, "You know, you came here. I would like you to stay with me." I said, "You know what, I will stay with you, but I want you to take out my parents."

01:15:35

And I made with him like, "You know, you have to take them out, then I will stay with you." And it took him all about seven or six days and my parents came. After my parents came, after a day, the whole ghetto went in flames. But I came to the forest end of August. August 15 was the second Aktion. And my brother died there, got killed. He didn't get killed in the action, but he saw that they were taking away my mother. My father was staying with me. So he went to work. My mother, so he wanted to take care on her. So he took her out from the lines, dead, to the lines of living. You understand what I am talking? And the German -- the people were counted. And he knew that somebody is missing, but he couldn't give out my mother. So they took him in on the truck, but he was killed when he was running from the truck.

Q: They were doing a selection?

A: Selection, sure. Sure, a selection. This was August 15, and in this selection my brother was -- got killed.

Q: August 15, '42?

A: Forty-two. In this selection, my brother was killed. That was my youngest brother and he was 17, whatever. That's it. Then my mother said, "You have to go." When the bread came

¹ Leah Berkowski

² Chaya Bielski

³ Asael Bielski

in, he took me to my parents. This was after August 15. He send -- my husband send a letter and I went away to the ghetto. That -- what I met him, in the morning, seven o'clock in the morning. And whatever he promise, he delivered. He delivered my parents. He took care very well on them. My mother was very fragile, but in the wintertime, she wouldn't stay in the forest. So he took all these men and they were putting her every day in another house by the, by the villages. And she survived the winter. In the summertime she went to the forest.

Q: So, talk to me a little bit about... Should we tell people to be quite?

[Technical conversation]

01:17:57

Q: Tell me -- You know, it's unusual, this situation where a tremendous number of the people, the peasants and maybe even the people in the towns helped, but also there were collaborators. So tell me a little bit about how that worked?

A: The people from our city, they were very good to us. They knew us. And when the German came, my father and mother give away everything to the people. So they took care on us. And they were very nice, because their life was the same thing, in jeopardy like our life. And they did everything. And they were very good. I know after the war when I came to the city, to the house. They recognize me right away, and they said "Sonia, tell me what you need." And to my parents the same thing. They give the first food. They said, "You can stay with us." They were very nice. They were people, beautiful. If not the people nobody survive, too. They gave us help. You cannot tell that everybody was very bad, but there were people very good, too.

Q: This situation where the actions happened, and they happened, small actions, but many, many. And the news spread of them, that's somewhat unusual. There were a lot of areas where people didn't know what was happening.

A: No, nobody knew. In the morning, they came about six o'clock when the people are going to work and they right away they took them to the trucks, so how did you know? You didn't know nothing. When you knew, already it was too late.

Q: When you got taken out of the ghetto and went to the forest, when was that? Was that August or was that in the Spring?

A: This was end of August, beginning of September.

01:20:38

Q: Okay. Do you know about a man named Anton Schmidt?

A: Schmidt?

Q: Yeah.

A: No.

Q: He was a rescuer who was executed in April. I was going to ask you about him.

A: No, I don't know.

Q: Okay.

A: I know about Kozlowski⁴. Kozlowski.

Q: Tell me.

A: Kozlowksi was a wonderful man. He born not far from my husband's village. He were coming -- He went to the German, to the Polish, and he will bring all of the news to the brother Bielskis. They knew everything. If you need something, medicine or something, he went to the city and he bought it, or stole it, whatever. But the medicine we got. We got the salt and the sugar, whatever we needed from him. He was wonderful. Now the children become -- his children are alive and we are sending them money and packages and everything. He was one from the first. But he was bringing us everything. I know about him, because if somebody came from the ghetto -- people were coming from the ghettos -- they didn't know where to go. So the first house was Kozlowksi's house. So he was keeping them. And he said, "Don't worry, somebody will come and they will take you to the forest." They were beautiful people. You don't have to forget this. You cannot say that everybody was bad.

01:22:14

Q: Tell me what it was like in the forest. Tell me about the setting up of the community, and tell me how it changed from that first --

A: When I came into the forest, they had only 75 people. That was the group of the Bielskis brothers. That was the four brothers -- the three brothers and they had their brother, Aaron, 13 years old. And they have a sister, what she was married to Chaya's brother. So that was the Bielskis and the Dzienciolskis. This was the whole thing. But later came another seven men and they made 70 people, 70 or 80 people, when I came in. This was the beginning of the partisans because people were -- went away from the forest -- went away from the ghettos. They didn't have a place there. And they -- the doors from the Bielskis brother were open for everybody, for old, children, sick people. And they had always food. They didn't

⁴ Konstanty Kozlowski

have steaks, but they have bread and water. They were very good. They were no different, but later, then many people came in. So there were men that said, "Listen, why do I have to go and grab food and risk my life? My wife is not here, my children are not here. Why should I risk the life for them?" But the Bielskis brother said, "Everybody who is coming has to have a place here. And everybody will have a piece of bread." They will not have maybe something else, but bread they will give everybody. This was one kitchen, one big kitchen and they were cooking potatoes with a piece of bread. And this was the food. Later, when the people came in more and more, they went out and knew that the Germans were in this village. And the German came into the village and knew they will collect bread and butter and milk and meat, whatever. So we were putting ambushes -- ambush is that the right word?

Q: Uh-huh.

A: ...and they were taking away the food from them. And that's what we had the food for the partisans. We made ambush on them and got their rifles. We got everything from them. Nobody was sending us. They were killing the German. They took away the food, took away the rifles, and we were in business.

01:24:59

Q: Do you know about -- I think it was probably soon after you came -- the big harvest, when the Germans were going to get a percentage of the harvest, and so they burned the -- tell me about that.

A: The villages told us everything. Not us, to the Bielskis brother. They were afraid of them, terrible. One cannot fight, but if you three brothers, six-two with rifles and you knew you cannot live, you knew that he will touch something, whatever, you will not do the right thing, they will be killed. So they did everything. They were telling us that in a couple of days they have to pay to the German so much and so much. Not in money, but in food. So the Bielskis knew that the food is coming. The villages are giving them. We need it, too, the food. So that's what we took away. That was the harvest. That's what you mean, right? And we took away and we told to the villages, remember one thing, you giving them because you don't want, because Germans, too, they were killing them. They were killing them. They put everything on a fire and they went away. So you have to give them, half them and half to us. And that's what they did. They were not always friendly, because you see, there were Aktions. The Bielskis were fighters. Not everybody, but they had a group of fighters. They had, the beginning, they had about 50 fighters. Later, the number went up and up and up. And they were not only fighting with the Polish police, they were fighting between the partisans, too. They were Polish -- not Polish, but German partisan -- German -- Russian partisans. They were against us, too. First of all, because we were Jews. Second, because we knew better the neighborhood and we knew the people. So this was a plus, a big plus for us. And they were saying that we are taking away all of the food. Remember 1,000 people in the beginning. You have to feed them. And they were not sitting all of them in one place. We had afraid for that. So in groups, this was about 20 people in groups, they were sitting in the

summertime up. In the wintertime, we had under the -- underground they were sitting. And when you are in the snow, every little thing you can see. So we were very careful, but you know you cannot take away from the villages. They knew very good.

01:27:49

The Bielskis knew the place, but they knew, too. So we have to be in peace with them. You cannot take away everything. You have to leave them, too, for the family, something. But we managed. We managed. In the wintertime, I never were in the forest. I was always -- it's called a hutor. This mean a farm from one house or two houses. So I went with my husband and another 15 people. They were riders. And went there, sleep over about four or three hours and we went back to the forest. But they were very good to us. I cannot say it. Nobody would survive if not the people from the villages. They had afraid, but they give us whatever we needed. Later, already in -- this was in '43. In '44, we got already the rifles and everything from Moscow. They were sending us by planes. And they were bigger commanders than the Bielskis. They were commanders what they put on the front from the Russians, from Moscow. And they were good. They said to us like that. We were complaining always. You know, they have took a group of ours, 14 people. They took away their rifles, took away their food, and let them go without shoes even. They said, "Remember Mr. Bielski -- brother Bielski, remember one thing, this is life. You have to fight for them -- for that." Not once my husband -- My husband was always between the German and the Polish army. The Polish, they were working together with the German, the Kozaks. He was always on the horses. He was giving everything to the all partisan and from the Naliboki puszcza. You know what is a puszcza, puszcza is the biggest forest, you cannot live there. This is only for the animals. This is not far from Novogradok. This was between Novogradok and Minsk. But we were there in the beginning. And they couldn't find us because you have to go by foot or by horses. They were afraid. They cannot go with the tanks there. They were surrounding us and we heard them talking and shooting. And we were sitting on mud without food for 10, for 12 days, till my husband -- I am telling you everything in one story -- till my husband said, "They cannot take no more hunger." This was the only brother he said, "I cannot -- I have to go fight myself." So he took 150 people -- not 150, 90 people, and I was, too, in the group by my husband, and he opened the forest. We come in after the German who saw the fire still burning. They were warming the food, but nobody touch it. When we went out to open the forest, after a day, another 100 people went out and another hundred people because the Germans left us alone and we went away from there. And then we went to get organized again. This was the life. We were fighting them not in the open. You cannot fight a German soldier in the open. We were surrounding them. We know where they are and we were fighting them and took off everything from them. And that's what this was life of the partisan. Not only us, there were the Russian partisan. The same thing, they were fighting, not in the open field, because in the open field you got killed from them. They had better everything.

01:31:48

Q: So you hid in the woods and waited till they came?

A: Yes.

Q: And when you rode with your husband, that time when you first left the thick forest, were you carrying a gun, too?

A: Yeah, I had a gun. I had always a gun. But I never shoot the gun, no. When I was with my husband, I was not afraid of nothing, nothing at all. But when I didn't see him, I was afraid of everything. I had a gun for myself, for my protection. He gave it to me. Nothing else. This is it. I had a very good life in the forest. He gave to me everything. I never cooked. I never did nothing. I was the commander's wife. You met my sister-in-law, Lilly. There were three brothers. The oldest was Tuvia. You know, in a small villages in small cities, the older brother is the head of the family. And when they got together, they put him, Asael, his older brother, and Zusia⁵, they made him a hero. They made him the head of the partisan. He was a very nice man. They, all of them, they were very nice.

01:33:15

Q: If they hadn't been there do you think that things would have worked out the way they did?

A: Never. Never. Nobody knew the forest. They were born there. They were born in a small village, and they knew the forest and they knew the people. They knew everything. How could I survive, or somebody else? All 1,200 people, nobody would survive. Because there were people from other city, too, not only from Novogradok, from Lida, from Baranovichi, from Vilna -- the people never were in the forest. You know, Jewish people, they are not going to the forest. They are in the city. Only they survived because of the Bielskis brothers. I cannot say because of Tuvia, because of Asael, because of Zusia. No, the three of them, they were one. Because nobody did something where the other one didn't want it. All of them, they work together. Whatever they had between them, nobody knew, but they were together. And that is what we survived.

Q: How do you think they knew that the only way to survive was to go to the forest?

A: Their instinct, instinct. You know, when you are born in a village, yes, you think that is the whole world. That is the whole world for them, for the people. They knew that if they would go to the ghetto they will get killed because once Tuvia got to the city to take something and they took him. The German took him, hit him so, so much. And he -- I don't know how he survived. At night we were sitting, and he said, "What I am sitting? What am I waiting for?" And he ran away to the forest. The first in the forest was my husband and his brother, Asael. How come the first? My husband, when the German came, he was in the Russian army. They took him. You know, the Russian, when they came in '39, they were taking the young

⁵ Aleksander Bielski

people to the army for work, whatever. So he was in the army. But he saw on the road going home, he said that was terrible. Whoever came and they were asking him, "Are you a Jew, or you are Polish?" whatever, they got killed. So he said "no." He was speaking very nicely Russian and speaks beautiful Polish. And He doesn't look like a Jew, he looks like a Russian. So he said that he will not get in the Russian -- in the German and that's what he did. He came home at night. He was in Bialystok in the army there. He came at night. He was swollen in the legs and everything. So his mother said to him, "Stay for a couple of days home." He said, "No, Mother. I am not staying. I will stay in the forest near the house."

01:36:31

And that's what happened, because in this time when she said to him, "stay in the house," and they came in the morning and took away his mother and his father and two brothers. And they never see the light of the day. And they were sitting not far away. And by now the girlfriends -- he had a girlfriends, a Polish, and she made a place for him in the house. So the first to went to the forest was my husband and his brother, Asael. When they were already in forest, then came Tuvia. This was -- didn't take a long time, probably about a week or two. So and they had a sister in another village, Tajba. She was married to the Dzienciolski. When they heard about the German, the whole Dzienciolski family ran away and they left her with a small baby in the house, the sister, Tajba. So my husband went and he took her out with the baby to the forest. She had the baby of nine months. She is still alive today. And they went in the morning to the people -- they didn't have children. And they said, "Listen, at night" -- This was wintertime already -- "at night I will bring my sister's daughter, Lola.⁶ Please take care. If you will not take care and something happen to her, you will not be alive." And that's what happened. He put -- my husband, he put the baby onto the door. It was winter. And they were watching and they didn't hear nothing. They were sure that the baby is already in the house. They forgot about it. So the baby was already frozen when they took her into the house. And they took care on her. And they said, "God sent us a baby daughter." And they took care till after she was three years. They didn't want to give her back after the war. No. But you know they took away and they appreciate very much, too. The daughter is alive. She is now 50 something. And last year, she was there and she saw not the family -- the family's dead already -- but the children of the family. And this is -- she is alive today. That's it.

01:39:12

Q: Let's talk about the community in the forest and when it got big, and the ziemplankas?

A: Ziemplanka⁷, ziemplanka.

Q: Tell me about building those for the winter. Tell me how they were made and how many there were and who stayed in them, and what they were used for.

⁶ Lola Dzienciolski

⁷ Earthen hut (Yiddish)

- A: I never stayed there. I went only to visit, because I had my parents there. This was for families, for sick folk, for children, for old. They had two fighters, because they went for food. And they stayed there the ziemplankas – they called them ziemplankas -- for the winter. It was like small rooms. And many -- this was one row with houses, second row, third one. They had a factory. They made there – bakers they had -- they had bread they made. They made other foods. They made for the saddles for the horses. They made boots for people. And the Russian partisans, they were coming there. They were living there. They had a good dinner there, because you know, you had already everything. The people were giving you, because they had afraid of their lives. And they didn't give. So they send people out, and the people was bringing. They were not hungry. They had about 1,000 people. My husband was always in between the German and the Polish police. He never stayed there, he came only to visit them. So it was about 100 miles away from us. This was the big puszcza, Naliboki.
- Q: How long did that community exist?
- A: This was staying till the end, till the end.
- Q: From – but when did it start?
- A: It started after the Germans surrendered there. It was in '43, I think, they surrendered there. And we were not still there, we were on in the rajon⁸. That mean between the houses. Between the forest, the small forest, not big. And got killed, a couple, and I think five or six people got killed. And then we didn't have already a place there. It was too many. So we went to the Naliboki puszcza. And there we were settled and built the houses and the ziemplankas and the factories and the bakeries and everything. And the Ge-- and the Russian partisan came to us and they took, they took boots, they took for the horses, whatever they need to drive, too, saddles. And they were very happy with us. They had a good time with us there.
- Q: And you gave them --
- A: We gave them everything.
- Q: ...anything they wanted?
- A: Everything you wanted. Everything, because they were higher than us. There in the puszcza, they had like people what they would send from Moscow. And this you had to give it to him.
- Q: But you were respected, the Bielskis?
- A: Oh, they were respected all over. They were respect very much, because when they heard

⁸ area (Polish)

that the German are making, they wanted to surrender puszcza. They called right the Bielski brothers and they said, "What to do, how can you help us?" They wanted to take away Asael and wanted to take away Zusia -- Alex, and Asael didn't want to go. And Zusia went because he saw that we have no other way. So he took 150 people, but they were only the fighters. And they put him in a new otriad. This mean a new partisan. They called Ordzonikidze. And he was bringing them to Platon. Platon was the head of all partisan. He was bringing all of the news, my husband was, like, you know, intell- -- like -- You know what I mean?

Q: Intelligence.

A: Intelligence, right. He was the intelligence. And you were bringing him everything. And that is what we stayed -- not in the puszcza, he stayed always but five or four miles from the German, four or two miles from the police, the Polish. And were always fighting. Always.

Q: Did you and your husband trust General Platon or --

01:44:14

A: Not always. Not always. But remember, he was a very tough guy, my husband. He was -- till he went out, he would send the people to see if this is correct. But we didn't have too many things that they said to us that's true and was not true. Maybe a couple of times, but not too many. They had afraid of them. They had one partisan Victor Panchenko. He was a Russian commander. He began the partisan when the Russian people -- the soldier run away from the German, so he had the couple, and he began to be bigger and bigger and bigger. He was fighting us, too, in the beginning. Because he said, "You taking away everything; there is nothing for me." But they made it okay. If they will take about 50 -- sometimes Tuvia and Asael sent out about 15, 20 people for bread. So the Russian partisan, they were taking away the bread. The were talking aywat the bread and the salt. They were taking away the shoes and rifles. And we came in on that action where they took away everything. I came in with my husband. I was -- I didn't go always with him, but this time I went with him. And he saw that everything, the horses stays, he said, "Where are the people? Where are Tuvia's partisan?" He said, "They are in the house. They took away everything from them. Panchenko people took away everything from them." He went into the house, and he said, "Who gave it to you? Who gave it to you the right to take away everything from them?" So they put the rifles to my husband. And he took right away the gun and said, "Come on. Come on, we will fight." After 15, 10 minutes, another Russian partisan came in and said, "Okay. That is nothing. Come on. Take away everything." They give him away everything, because they had afraid.

Q: How did they work that out? How did it end up working out that --

A: The Russian and the Jewish partisan?

Q: Yeah.

A: They have places, and they said, "Let's divide this. The west is yours, the east is ours." And that's what they are fighting. You cannot go in all the places yourself because you have to give a chance to the other one, too. And then it was quiet. They were coming to the puszcza, and it was good. They were drinking vodka, they were eating. And everything was, again, in order.

01:47:25

Q: Tell me about the friction with the other partisans because the Bielskis took in children, the old people, people who couldn't carry guns. Tell me about that.

A: I remember today there was a time that too many people came in. They were sick, and old, and children. So the other two brothers said, "Listen, we are taking too many. What will be the end? Now is summer, is not too bad, in the winter" -- so Tuvia said like that, "I don't care. I have to give place to everybody." The other partisans, they didn't want them, because when -- if somebody was going away from the ghetto and you were a Jew, sometimes they were killing them. They took away the boots. They were killing them. They took whatever they had.

Q: You mean the partisans?

A: The partisans, yes. But once they took away and somebody told us, so they did the same thing to the Russian. And they stopped. They said, "What are you doing? What are you doing? What for you need these people, they can't bring nothing." But we did -- the Bielskis didn't listen to them. They took in everybody. This was like the angels. Where would I go, and hundreds of me? I didn't know where to go. I didn't know the forest. I even didn't know how to take care of nothing. I was sitting maybe -- there were people were sitting under the tree and waiting somebody should come to take them. Didn't know where to go. I have a partisan of ours, he is in London -- Cohen.⁹ He was with frozen legs. This was wintertime. And he was sitting three days with frozen legs under the tree till he saw from far away horses. So he covered himself with the snow. He had afraid. He heard somebody talking something Commander Bielski. So he went out. My husband took him on his horse, and took him to the place where he was in the hospital. And he is today without the fingers, but he is alive. And he's in London. There another thing, we went to Israel a couple years ago, a couple -- about 10, 15 years ago, and when we came, we have there two people what they were in the partisans, and they said to us like that, "You know what, one child wants to see you." So my husband said, "How old is the child?" "The child is about 35 years old." He said, "Who is she?" "You maybe don't know, but you met her under the tree with her mother. She was a baby, small baby. And she was sitting and crying. She didn't know what to do." My husband said, "Don't cry. You will be all right." And he went and put her under the horse, the mother and child and they still -- they are alive today with families. So you cannot

⁹ Jack (Idel) Kagan

remember everything what you did, but you did one thing, you gave them survivals. You gave them life.

01:50:38

Then people were not so happy, too, in the partisan, because maybe somebody when he went to take the food, he had more food than somebody sitting the forest. So -- but he had a piece of bread and the potato. The other one, maybe put a piece of butter or something else in pocket. He bring to his girlfriends, so maybe the other one was not happy. There were command, she -- partisans, but they were the head of 10 or 20 people. So they had better than somebody else, but that's life. That's life. There were many complaints, but this was nothing. Because the life for them, they were alive. They went to sleep, and didn't have afraid of the German for a long time. And this is what they did, the Bielskis. They will go into history like not many people, because Jewish partisan, Jewish were very little. There were Jews in other Russian partisan, but not like the Bielskis brother. They took anybody had the place, anybody had the place. And that's what they did. The name -- I know my son. I have three sons. They are all born in Israel were. One is already a doctor, 45. I have another son, he is 40. And my baby -- no, the other one is 42. This one is 41. And this one, wherever he hears something, he is staying tall. He is six-two, too. "That is my father." And the fighters, the same thing, like the father. My son the doctor, in '56 -- no, '73, he went to Israel. He left his studies and he were fighting there on the Jordanian border. My middle one is not so, but the baby, he finish college, and he went and he was a parachute. You know what is parachute? And he finished the parachute, they ask him to stay in the army. He say, "No, I have to go home, because I didn't say goodbye to my parents."

01:53:00

Q: Okay. I will ask you something specific. You saved a person named Daniel Ostraszynski.

A: Yes, Ostraszanski.

Q: Tell me about him.

A: Daniel Ostraszanski was a friend of mine. We studied together in gimnazjum and liceum. And he was very intelligent guy. I took French, he took German. So when the German came, they ask, "Who knows German?" So he said he. And he was in the Judenrat¹⁰. So everybody, you know, you have a family, and you are expecting if you know somebody, he should take care on yourself. But he couldn't. He even couldn't take care of his mother and two sisters. He lost them, too. After the liquidation of the ghetto, he came to the forest. I, with my husband, went to sleep, to a village. And in the morning about seven o'clock, we came with the horses. My husband, he didn't go by himself, always with 10 people, riders.

¹⁰ Jewish council (German); term used for Jewish administrative boards appointed by the Nazis to oversee Jewish communities and ghettos.

We came in. I see my friend is here. And they took off his boots and they put him on the tree for shooting. I said, "Listen, Alex. That's my friends." He said, "What do you mean your friends?" I said, "I study with him." And I told him the story, he couldn't take care of his mother and sisters, too. So my father – my husband took him out from the tree. He gave it to him the boots. And he said like that, "Whatever he did, this will be after the war. Not now. You cannot -- you cannot kill him now, because we will hear his story. We heard your story, but he has something to say, too." And this was -- they took him off of the tree, and he is still alive in Israel. He is accountant, 20 people working for him. Whatever he did, I don't know. I don't know. My brother was, too, was in August 15 died. Maybe if I would see something, I would have said, "You could save my brothers." But he couldn't save. He couldn't save his own family. How could he save somebody else? But the people, you know, they looking for something. You know, when you losing a child, you losing a mother, you losing a brother, you want to say, "that's his fault," but that is not true. Not in my book. And he is still alive. And he is my best friends. He was my friends, and he is my friends.

Q: Did he also rescue anybody?

A: Ostraszynski?

Q: Yes.

A: No.

Q: It's just that he -- they thought he was a collaborator?

A: Yes.

Q: and you think he couldn't have been—

A: He never was. No, no.

Q: Because if he had been, he would have saved his family?

A: Right. No, he was not.

Q: Okay. Well, we're almost out, so we should break. Okay. We're going to change roles. It's 10:30.

01:56:53

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

02:01:18

Q: I want to talk about the food collections. Did you ever go on the food collections, or was that just a specific --

A: Never.

Q: Tell me about the rules with the food collections?

A: Mostly for the food, when the boys -- you have to mention, too, because there were heroes. Not everybody was going and eating the food, because they were collecting the food for the whole people. And they were wonderful young people. They gave lives away. I have to mention their names. You don't mind? Okay. One was Pesach Friedberg. One was Boris Rubin. One was the "Aloshki," they called him. They were from the -- our city. They were not so -- you never knew them, but they were very good boys. They went and collect the food and they give the food to the place where everybody has to give. Janek Rudniski. Olek Peck. Alexander Peck. They were the best guys. The best. They didn't have afraid for nothing. They knew that they have to go collect the food, because if not -- if they will not collect, they will die from hunger. That's not when you live in a small village and you are not far, 500 mi-- 500 feet, and you can go in and ask for a piece of bread. This was far away from the villages. This was in a puszcza, Puszcza Naliboki. If you will go out yourself, the animals will kill you. So they knew what they were doing, and they did a marvelous job. They were fighting and they were taking the food and they were bringing the food. And nobody should forget the Bielskis brother -- without the people, they will not be Bielskis partisan. They were the heads, but they have to work with something. And the young people made the partisans. That is what you have to give credit. There is no commander without the army. And not everybody likes to mention this, but I have to mention. Eisenhower would never win the war without the young people from the United States, without the fighters. They made him whatever he was. The same thing with the Bielskis. The people that were surrounding them, the young boys, they were not afraid of nothing. The commander sent them and they went. You have never to forget this. I think so.

02:04:18

Q: Tell me about the food collections, did these -- they go every day?

A: No.

Q: Tell me how big of a job it was and how long they spent and tell me, could they just take anything they wanted?

A: No. They went out like every second week, every week. They didn't have bread. Later, they

had bread. They bake bread by themselves. But in beginning, no. They couldn't grab meat. They couldn't grab whatever. If the villages had something too much, they took it. But you cannot grab everything for them. Because once you take away and the other one, they will send the German on you. So you had to be afraid, too. You have to let them survive, too, the war. The war was a very bad war. And that is what the Bielskis did. You cannot take away the pillow, the last one from them. They were people, young, they didn't know. They took the pillow, they took the cover. What for? But they took. They were complaining to the Russian partisans that, "They took away my pillow. They took away my last piece of meat." So the Bielskis took care on that. You couldn't take away everything. You take only that's what you have to. Bread we needed, that's what you have to take, nothing else. You have to be very careful. But they went out every two weeks, every three weeks. Whatever they needed went out. They were fighting the way to go out, too. So it's not so easy. That's what you have to remind the young guys.

Q: So how big of a group? And then, would they be gone --

A: Ten. Ten people. Minimum 10 people.

Q: Overnight?

A: They went overnight. Sometimes they were three nights away, too. And they were thinking they will never see them, but then later they came.

Q: Do you know about the time when they -- Do you know about a guy named Belarus? Belarus? They took a coat.

A: No. I don't know that.

Q: You don't know that. Okay. You say that you didn't sleep in the forest. You came in?

A: Not always. In the summertime, sometimes. In the wintertime, never. My husband didn't like it to sleep outside. And the same thing, in the same house. He was always one night a couple of hours in one house, and then five miles away in the other house tomorrow for another day. He had afraid. He was always with people, because they were looking for us. They gave thousands of marks to -- only to find the Bielskis -- a head. So they have -- the people, the Polish people, they have two people what they were looking for the Bielskis to give them the head.

Q: How exhausted were you from this? How tired were you all of the time? I mean, you must have had not gotten much sleep or--

A: You see, I cannot say that I was always tired, no. You cannot say that, because there were weeks, two or three weeks that you didn't hear about the German. But later when we left puzzcza, yes. When I was with my husband already between the German and the Polish,

there was no sleep. You were always watching yourself every step, because you didn't know from where is it coming. You had to go for water and you have to wash yourself. Because all over the water was divided between the villages. And there were washing the things there and drinking the water and bathing themselves. So all over there were people and ice. And we have to watch ourselves. The worst thing was in the winter. The worst thing, because it was cold. And the snow will tell you where the people are. And to take the food was very bad, because you couldn't go off it -- you have to take the food on a wagon or something. So you left always -- you saw every step, you were watching. I was very lucky. You see, I was never afraid when I was with my husband. Never. But as soon as I didn't see him, I was dead.

02:09:20

Q: How -- do you know about how they got weapons in the beginning?

A: Yeah.

Q: Tell me about that.

A: In the beginning, the Bielskis brother had -- they've lived always in a village, so they were feel more secure when they had something with them. So they had small things, small rifles. They were went to a paysan, the villages, and he said, "You know, when the Russian ran away, they left a lot of rifles, in this and this house. You get." So they went to the village and said, "Listen, how many you have?" He said, "I have only one." He said, "Give me the one." When he went for the one, they find more than one. So they got the rifles from the villages. Later, they made -- 10 or five German, they went for the food. German were always looking for food, for eggs, for chickens, whatever. So they made an ambush on them. They saw them going and coming back. They made an ambush of them. They kill them. They took the boots. They took the foods and the rifles. And this was the beginning. Later, with the Russian -- in the beginning, they were fighting together with the Russian, the Bielskis. They didn't have so many people, so they were fighting together. And they were dividing the rifles, whatever they find. But the German, that they find, they had them, so they had enough. They didn't have enough, in the beginning, people. And they have enough rifles. And you had people what came from the ghetto, they knew how to clean them, how to take care of them. So the rifles was very good. This is the beginning. Later, the Russian in '43, the beginning, they were sending them us by plane. But we were paying them. Nobody knew about it, but I knew. I knew it. They preparing -- they took from everybody whatever they have, a ring, or a watch, whatever they had. They giving away and they give to the Russian commander, to Platon, or whatever. And they give us for that the rifles. This was not easy, but they managed.

02:11:40

Q: Tell me, were you involved in the move when they moved to the Naliboki forest in 1943? Were you there for the whole moving?

- A: I were, but not for a long time, because the Russian commander, Platon, told my husband he is the head of the intelligence and he has to go. So he took 150 people, but they were young, with rifles. They were fighters. And he took me, too. And I went with him.
- Q: Tell me what you know about the move. What--
- A: The move was very bad. I will tell you why; because nobody knew what to expect. You know, when you are sitting in a place, you are moving from one place to another one, only a couple of -- not miles, but kilometers was there, so you know what to expect. Yeah? But now you have to go to a puszcza, to Naliboki puszcza. From where will you take food so much? How will you survive there? So not everybody was happy with that, but they didn't have nothing to say, because Platon said this is the only survival. "You have to go. I don't want him here. I don't want him here between the German and the Polish police. I want him there, because they are in the way for fighters." That's what Tuvia and Asael did. They didn't have nothing to say. Because over them--
- Q: They didn't move because they wanted to be in a--
- A: No, no. Platon told him, "The kids and the women and the old are in the way. You cannot -- you have to take them away." So that's why they took them to the Puszcza Naliboki. And the fighters stayed outside. So from time to time, every once in two, three weeks, or four weeks, it was quiet, so my husband took the 10 or 15 horses with him and me and we went to visit my parents. We went to visit the people, but we knew them all.
- Q: And it was far?
- A: It was far. It was, I think. There, 50 miles was far. That's not when you are sitting in a car going 50 miles is nothing. But on horses, you have to be quiet when you are going. At night you couldn't go either, you didn't know how to go. But in the daytime, you know. My husband was looking on the tree and he knew where he is.
- Q: So when you would go and visit, it was a big -- it was three days?
- A: Oh, sure. We went, we stayed three days or four days, whatever.
- 02:14:42
- Q: Tell me about when Regina Ticktin got the flu and you --
- A: Yes. Chrapiniewo this was '43, in the beginning, I think. Right, '43?
- Q: Yeah, I think so.

A: They got -- came once a man and he said -- not the man, it was the villages, and he said that the German preparing for Iwje. It was a city, Iwje. Iwje. Preparing action for Iwje. So they got in touch with the people there, the Bielskis, and they said, "We will come and we will take you out from the ghetto." This was not too many already, you see, because there was action and action. And over staying in Chrapiniewo -- this was a village before Iwje. It was two houses. One house I was staying with Chaya, and the other house was Grisha¹¹ and the Ticktins. This was Tuvia's girlfriends, Sonia, and her sister, Regina. She had the flu so, they were staying in another house, not with us together. And they let us stay in the two houses with a couple of men with rifles, with pulemyot,¹² you know, and it was the automatic, everything. And they went for -- there were about 60 or 50 people to take out the people from the ghetto, Iwje. But when they came already, it was too late. It's not like you are going a mile or two and that's it, but they were surrounded, the German and everything. But the Germans were very smart. They knew that we are in the two houses, so they surround us, too. I was in the first house near the forest, and Regina with Sonia, Tuvia's girlfriends, were in the other house. When they surround us from in the back, we heard already they came in white. You know, was winter. The snow with the white things, you couldn't know that somebody is moving. But a commander in Russia, a Russian commander, a Russian partisan, he knew that we are staying there. And he came and said, "Go out right away from the house, because you will get killed. The German are around." I was out without boots, without a coat, without nothing. And I said to Chaya -- Chaya was the wife of Asael -- I said, "Go. You will tell how I died." She said, "I am not going with you -- without you." And she took me for the hand. I fall in snow. The snow was so deep. Fall in snow 'til end. I said, "I am not going. Okay," I said. "So I will die together with you here. I am not going." She took me for the hand and led me to the forest. They were near our noses and we survived. She gave me the hand and she said, "Sonia, you are not staying. I cannot come to Zusia and say that I let you down." And this was all of them that dying, only me and Chaya survive, and another partisan. What is his name? It was "Aloshka," "Aloshka." "Aloshka" they called him. He took us out. We were in the forest till at night. At night, he went and took a sled and we came to the Bielskis. But they were fighting very hard the first round. There was fighting, and they were fighting, we could survive. We couldn't run away. And when the Bielskis came, they didn't know that we are survived, nothing. They saw only the two houses in flame. That's it. They were thinking that everybody is gone.

02:18:46

Q: So it was a Russian partisan that warned you and saved you in that case?

A: Yes. He said, "Go out because this is the end of that," and he show us how to go out, the way, because this was the first time that we went there. We didn't know where to go.

Q: Oh, there was a secret way out?

¹¹ Grisha Meitis

¹² Machinegun (Russian)

A: Yes. Yeah, he knew. He knew the secret, how to go out. Because when you are surround, you have to know a place where -- how to go out. If not, you are finished. And he told the partisan, the "Aloshka," where to take us. And he took us like that, and we survived. There were very beautiful people, too. Beautiful people. You should never forget they were beautiful Russian people and Polish people. They were.

Q: Well, you talked about the commander's nothing without his army, but did the Bielskis need to do what they did?

A: No. No.

Q: Why did they do it? Tell me about it.

A: I think because of the good heart. They are wonderful people with a good heart. If he had a piece of bread, he will divide it between -- if there is four people there, or six people there, he would divide it. He will give you the last bite. They were wonderful, wonderful people. I don't know how. They are not born no more like that. Maybe they are born, but we don't know them. Only because of the good heart. Because they could survive like the best people. They could survive by the ladies. They took care on them. And they choose not to. They choose to take her out some people. And remember, 1,500 people they took her out, and 1,200 people, I think, survive. They lost about 300 people. But they did a very good job. I think in the history you cannot find like that. Maybe, but I don't know. I know the Polish history. I know the Jewish history. I know the French history. But I didn't know something like that. People should divide their lives with people what they didn't know even. They were great, great people. And good people.

Q: And they left a legacy?

A: Yes. I know one thing, that people came out without boots from the ghetto, without clothing, nothing. So the first thing what they did, the commander go and bring her pair of boots, bring her something to wear it. And they did. They did everything they were told. Sometimes there were people that they didn't hear, so they taught them a lesson. Next time he didn't go. And he was young, he wanted to go. But they changed. In the beginning, not. They were robbing. They were taking many things. But later, they learned their lesson. They took only what they told them. I think the history didn't forgot them.

02:22:26

Q: Now, there was an incident in November of '42 with a group that left to go to a puszcza, the Lu---

A: Lipiczanka.

Q: Lipiczanka.

A: Yes. In the beginning, everybody wanted to be a commander. So in the beginning, it was – I think it was maybe about 20 people or maybe 25, maybe 30. I was already in the forest. And this was Motke Berger, Lubczanski brothers and another 10 people. And they said, "Why are you a commander? Who gave to you the right? We don't want to go there. We don't want to do that." So the Bielskis brother said, "Okay. You don't have to be. You came here. Now you have to go. You leave everything what took here, the rifles, and you can go." And they left. After two days, they came begging. "We don't know where to go. We want to be with you." And this was the end of the Lubczanski. They didn't go -- they didn't stay, I think, more than three days and they came back begging. We know the people. But everybody is entitled to a mistake. They made a mistake. "I don't want to go fight for them or for her or for him. My father and mother died. My sister died. My wife is dead. I don't want to go." "You don't want it? Go ahead." They didn't touch them. They only leave the rifles and go. And they were very good partisans. And a couple of them, they are alive now. There were more people, other ones what -- that didn't work, not so good and not so fine. They went to Platon and they said that the Bielskis brother are communist. And when the Bielskis brother came there to Platon, he said, "You have people what are there that are no good." They said, "We know that." But they didn't touch them. A couple of times they killed them, other ones. But this was a must already, you know, so it was too much. But otherwise, no.

02:24:41

Q: Tell me about order and rules within the otriad. Tell me how --

A: It was order. And they said -- they came out in the morning and they said, "Listen, today this three, this seven, these 10 people are going for food. These are staying and watching the camp." The camp was always watched by the people. So once he said, "I cannot go. I have a cold. I have a bad headache. I have something." This was only in the beginning, but later it was Malbin.¹³ He was an old fighter, a Polish fighter. And he knew how to give the order. And he helped a lot, to the Bielskis. They were another couple of people, what they were helping them, and they had the army. They were in the Polish army. So they knew how to give the order. And Tuvia by himself was in the army. Zusia was in the army. So they knew how to give the order. And there is no such a thing, "no." Everything is "yes, yes, and yes." Because if everybody would do whatever he wants, it was bad. Nobody would be alive today.

Q: Well, what happened if somebody didn't do it? I mean, tell me.

A: There were a prison in the camp. They were sitting in the prison. They couldn't get the food. And this was a very big help. But very minor incident like that. Everybody was -- knew that

¹³ Lazar Malbin

you cannot get away with something like that. You have to listen. And they were listening. There were people very sick with typhus. With everything in the forest, in the puszcza, we had doctors, we had nurses. We have everything, but what you need is in one city.

02:26:48

Q: Didn't some people just want to kill the first people who had typhus for fear?

A: Yeah, but they didn't let them. They wanted. This was a couple of people that got typhus. And the doctor said, "It's no good because everybody will get. So maybe you should put them away." So they said, "Oh, no. We will take." The hospital was far away a little from the camp, and the doctors and the nurses worked with them together, and said "They can die by themselves, but we will not kill sick people." And then -- but there were people that said, "We have to kill them." But nobody get killed and everybody got well because of the hearts, the Bielskis heart.

Q: What about babies? Were there any babies?

A: Not too many. Not too many. Were a couple of babies. They came with babies. Because if you were pregnant, we had a doctor what he did what he had to do. And there were six or 10 babies that came with the parents, but that's all. We didn't let her go pregnant. This was not the place for pregnancy. And they said, "You have to be very careful." Because if you were a girl, young, 16 or 17 years old, if you were by yourself, you couldn't get everything. You wouldn't -- you didn't have shoes. You didn't have nothing. So everybody was looking for somebody, a partisan, who should take care on her. So that's what happened. And many people are still alive together. They got together in the forest and they went out from the forest with them. And they have children and families and everything. And other ones went away. They were looking for something better. I don't know if they made it better or worse. This is after then. But this was mostly all the girls, whatever they had, they were with a partisan, with somebody should keep them company and to watch on them.

Q: Protect them?

A: Protect them.

Q: From --

A: Protect them from everything, from cold. Nobody went to a girl and said, "You have to sleep with me." No. If she slept with him, she wanted. He couldn't do something to her what she didn't want it. No. Nobody tortured. It's not like today, you going out, you don't know if you will coming home. There you knew that if you don't want it, nobody will touch you. It was an order, and they were listening very careful to everything.

02:29:50

Q: The big hunt, do you know about the big hunt? Were you --

A: This was in '43. Right? We were surrounded with the army, the German army. And we went till here in water [interviewee gestures]. And in --

Q: Mud?

A: Mud. And it was hunger. We were sitting there 10 days, and we heard the German talking to each other. We heard the dogs barking. And they were shooting over our head and nobody opened their mouth. Somebody opened, "I am dying." So my husband came, "You are not dying yet, but you will die now. I will kill you." And this is the big hunt was. They didn't kill too many from us, because we were sitting in the mud. And my husband opened -- I told you that he open the road. He went out the first because he couldn't take the hunger. I went with him. I think 100 people were. I mentioned that when we went -- when the German only left five minutes ago, the fires still was burning. They saw the cans of the food, they didn't touch it.

02:31:10

Q: Tell me -- go back to the beginning and explain to me what happened. The Germans came close and surrounded the whole, the whole --

A: Right, the whole. The German couldn't go -- 10 there Germans, or 20. It was a big place. They took it the whole army, the German army. They surrounded the whole puszcza. In the beginning, in the forest, too. If they were surrounded in the forest, we were sitting, they would kill us all. But they didn't surround it. There were not so many Germans. They were busy on the fronts. Later, when they run away from the fronts, when they went away already, they took of whole army of German and they wanted to kill all of the people that were in the puszcza, in the Naliboki. But it was very difficult, to do it, too. Because they didn't want to lose their lives, too. They couldn't come with tanks. That's a forest, a wild forest. So who wants to risk their life when they see everything that's going kaput? They were seeing everything is going kaput. You know what that's meaning? Everything is gone to the end. Hitler is gone. Everything is going down. So he was looking by himself to survive. So he didn't go to forests, because if he would go 'til the mud, he will kill us all. He didn't go. He knew that's will be the end of his life, too. That was the big hunt. Many people die. Many partisan died, but from the Bielskis, nobody had brains to sit in the mud. And they said, "that's the only survive, to sit in the mud, because they will not come here." And that's how we survive.

Q: Who decided to go to the swamp and sit in the mud? How did--?

A: The Bielskis brothers.

Q: And how did that happen?

A: Happen we had one man, what -- I don't remember his name, and he was working always there, in the puszcza. And he was from Naliboki. And he said that he remember that not far from the beginning of the puszcza there is mud. Nobody can go into the mud. So the Bielskis brothers were talking to each other and they decided that we have to try this way, because we couldn't go out from there. We were surrounded with the army and this was their decision. We went to the mud and was sitting in the mud, I think, about 7, 10 days.

02:33:42

Q: Tell me the details of that. How did families stay together in the mud and everything?

A: They were staying and sleeping in the mud. And they are not talking because nothing was to talk about it. You couldn't talk, because we heard the German talking. And they didn't have nothing. You know, everybody has a piece of bread. That they knew there would come a moment that they will not have nothing. So they had a package -- a small package of bread, so they were mumbling about the bread till the bread ends. How long can you hold a piece of bread? They kill one horse. In a minute, the meat went away. They were eating the horse, dead. And this is it -- listen, there is no -- people get used to everything. How could you eat a piece of meat raw, meat from a horse, from a dead horse? But they were eating. We see now, too, in the United States, some days friends went out and a plane fall. I don't remember when was it. And the friends eat the meat of the other friends. I don't remember, but it was like -- something like that. So this is it. You are trying. The survival is so big that you want to do everything to survive. Same thing was in the partisan. You were thinking that you will survive. You will see a world. You will see somebody. Maybe somebody is still alive. So they were hoping, always hope that something will happen good with you. And that's was holding us all together. When we were sitting at night and they were singing -- far in the puszcza, nobody was there, only us -- so we were singing and -- you know -- and talking, so they said, "You know what?" this is already a couple of years like that -- "I am sure that this will be a break. Roosevelt will send somebody here and we will survive." Only hope. Nobody was thinking that, "I will die." When I was asking my husband some place, "Tell me, will we survive?" He said to me like that, "I don't know about me, but you will survive." And I was quiet then. I was so sure that whatever he said to me this will be. This is the hope. He gave it to me, the hope.

02:36:16

Q: Did anybody drown in the swamp?

A: Yes. Yes, but this was nothing. Nothing. The sick, the old one couldn't take it, the hunger. But it was not too many, probably about five or six, whatever. We didn't talk about it. This was the day and this is it.

Q: And then when you went back to the puszcza, but it was gone, the Germans destroyed it?

A: No. You cannot destroy the puszcza. The puszcza stayed.

Q: No. No, but the ziemplankas, the villages?

A: The villages around?

Q: No, the thing you had created, the partisan village? Your--?

A: No. It stayed, because in the last days when the German was running so we went out from the ziemplankas because they had afraid. The Germans came on the ziemplankas. They were keeping themselves there – they were keeping, so -- and we left. We left everything. Many were killed by us, but they killed, too, a couple of us. We left everything. I know last year -- two years ago a group went to see them. There is some ziemplankas still staying. Yeah. They were built beautiful. In the winter was not cold. They live like that.

Q: In the winter, how did you heat them, the fire in the middle of them? Tell me about--?

A: Yes. In the ziemplankas, was a small fireplace. Like here, you have a fireplace. And this was warm. They were cooking, because everybody was cooking for themselves later.

Q: With a hole in the roof?

A: Yes. Yes. Mostly they were cooking at night, not in the daytime. They should not see the fume from there. They knew how to behave. They knew.

02:38:29

Q: Tell me about the tunnel.

A: The tunnel was built in the court.

Q: Tell me when we are. This is near the end, right? This is when there weren't many Jews left?

A: No many, not many.

Q: Describe to me the situation.

A The situation -- I was not there, but I will tell you. Ostraszynski, Daniel, and my best friends Bursztyn,¹⁴ they were planning this and they did it. Nobody knew about it. But the ones they

¹⁴ Moshe Burnstein

called the Bursztyn -- I don't know how else -- this my friends. And they took him to the prison and he wrote with his fingers with blood that they asking him, but he told them he didn't know nothing. They killed him. But Ostraszynski went out, too, from the tunnel. And many friends of mine Oshmans, Sonia, Aaron, another couple, they went out from the tunnel. Not everybody, because the first group went out, but the second group got killed. They caught them going out from the tunnel. But a couple, when they went out, they saying and they telling us how was it. They were working at night. Nobody knew about it till somebody told them that -- they heard something is going on so quiet. So this is the story from the tunnel. They survive. This was -- you know, when I am looking now, when I am thinking about it, you see the Japanese who are in the prisons camps. People what they were in the army that dig tunnels. Not everybody survive from there, but they did. And this is only young people, young Jews that they never were in the army, in the Polish. And they made such a plan. This was something very smart. Not too many survive. They were beautiful friends of mine. Girls. Beautiful. So they caught them, and they did whatever they did, and they killed them.

Q: So the tunnel, do you know how long it was in the building?

A: I don't know, but it was not too long because it was under the building, and right away was the surrounding. They went out to forest, not far. So who was running fast or knew how to run, ran out. Now, they were looking where to go, they didn't know where to go, so they caught them.

Q: And some stayed inside and got caught inside?

A: They caught, yes. Everybody was killed. I think about 20 people, whatever 25 went out. They had the plans. They have in Israel the plans. I think here in the Holocaust Museum is too, they have too the plan, how did they go out, and how was they planned it -- the tunnel made.

02:41:34

Q: When the group left to go to the other forest, the Lubczanka, didn't they have a group of people with them who didn't come back, who died?

A: Die, on road, yeah. This was not too many. Not too many. No. Not too many, 10, about 15 people. Not too many. They didn't want to be with the Bielskis. They were looking for something else. You think always the grass is greener on the other side. But they got killed. Who wanted that Jew, that old Jew? Who want it, between me and you? When you are young, something else, you may be a fighter or whatever. But they didn't go. The fighters didn't go for a couple of them. But they got killed on the road. The only survivors mostly were by the Bielskis.

Q: The partisans who fought with the Bielskis?

A: The partisans. We had many partisan Russians near us. Iskra was very good. There were other small Jewish otriad, but they didn't survive. And the Jew were what they were, but the Iskra were the best fighters, the best. They went all over. They were fighting, but nobody even mentioned them because this was a Russian partisan. Iskra. They were the best fighters for the Jewish people there.

02:43:28

Q: You talked a little bit about good people. There are good people and bad people in all groups. By and large in the forest community, were people pretty generous and pretty selfless?

A: Not too many. Not too many.

Q: Tell me.

A: Not too many. Mostly they were very good people. You know, they were always giving a hand to the other ones. If I had another pair of shoes, I would give to the other one, the ones that didn't have. They were not grabbing everything for them. No, there were not too many like that. If you had a couple of people, so they were not with the groups, they were lonely. And if you were good with all of them, you work together, you were not so lonely. You spoke about your families. You spoke about your future, what it will be. You were singing. They were dancing. They were waiting for a plane from Moscow, like -- I don't know -- like angels were coming. And they knew everything. I know when my parents were alive with me in the partisan, came a plane. And I had a cousin, a doctor in Moscow, my mother's cousin. So my mother wrote a letter. She knew the family. She knew that they were doctors. And she sent a letter to them and, "Please, if you're alive, I have two sons in Israel. Tell them that we are alive, and I hope to be alive still." And you know what, when we came to Israel -- we were the first in '45, in October '45, we were already in Israel because Sharett -- this was a minister, an Israeli -- Israeli was not then in existence. It was Palestine. Israel came alive in '48. So he heard about the Bielskis when he was sitting in Israel. You know, people from Europe, they were talking about the Bielskis. And he said when we came he send us the first papers to Romania, with legal right to go by plane -- by boat to Israel. When we came into Israel in '45, my brother said, "I knew about you. I got a letter from Moscow. And I knew that you are alive, that my brother, Jay,¹⁵ is not alive. But I knew about you and the parents." So you see, everything you cannot -- everything you knew about. Everything. You knew in Israel about the fighters. You knew about the Jewish partisan. You knew about the people, the leader -- the fighters -- the Israeli came to Europe to fight the German. They each know about the other one. And when we came to Israel, they took us on beautiful -- they gave us right away a house. They gave us everything what they could, what they had. And

¹⁵ Jacob Boldo

we made a living.

02:46:52

Q: What did -- did you know anything else that was going on in other parts of Europe then? Did you know about concentration camps and death camps?

A: Sure, we know. We know about the concentration, because the people were telling us about Majdanek, Treblinka. The Polish people, they were saying to each other what happened there. We knew everything. We knew even -- we didn't know how many, we didn't know -- but we know about the concentration camps. We knew everything. There was no secrets. You know, we didn't have so many telephones, but the people are telephones, living telephones. One was saying to the other one, and the other one was telling the other one, and that's what we knew about everything. But we couldn't help nothing. The helping hands was that the Bielskis gave so many people life in the forest. They were keeping them and feeding them. And you know that from the people when they came to the forest from Lida, they were people came were 15 years, 16 years, 17 years, young boys. And then now, they went out in the forest, they came to the United States, to Canada, they billionaires. And they were helping other ones here, too. Because they learn a lesson, that you have to help somebody if you need. And they give many, many, many thing to help people to stand on their feet. All over the world you have partisan house, in Australia, in Canada, in Johannesburg, in Africa. Many, many. When we have -- they are coming some place every five years, every six years, they coming Israel for a reunion from all over the whole world. And they asking, "You need something?" This is something what you put it in when they were young when you will not put it in, you will not have it. The same thing like parents. You have children, you teach them what is good and what is bad, and even if they are not doing this right away, they will do it later, because they remember what mother and father taught them, how you have to behave. And if you are not teaching this to the children, they will not do it.

02:49:44

Q: Tell me about an average day in the forest for women and children. What would they be doing all day?

A: The day begin at six o'clock in the morning. They were cooking, and feeding the children, and feeding the old. Everybody did something. They went after the forest to take off to take the -- to put the fire. They were preparing for the kitchen, the potatoes, the soup. They were baking the bread. So it was a long day, a very long day. But everybody did what he had to do. Not everybody ate the same thing, no. The commander, they eat something else, but nobody was hungry. That is the main thing. They complaining. They were complaining. Not everybody -- the children had milk, the old one they had milk. And this ones that came from the houses they said, "Where is the milk I brought in? I want a little milk." "You cannot have it. That's for the children, for the old, for the sick." And they didn't touch it. Women were working, too. Sometimes, not too many went with the men, but not always. Not always.

Mostly they were working on the -- in the puszcza near the kitchen, near the children, near the hospital. They were sewing. A regular work day, six o'clock in the morning. The men would tell them at night they went for three, four days.

Q: And repairing guns and--?

A: Everything was in the puszcza. We had people, they were working. They knew how to repair, and the other ones, they teach to each other. And they knew everything was working in very good shape. You had to have -- to prepare the everything.

02:52:00

Q: In the puszcza, in the community, were people unafraid or were they afraid most of the time?

A: No, they were not afraid. They were very happy to be there. In the beginning, they didn't know what is it -- how will be. But later, the German were far away. They heard only when they came -- the boys came with the food that they say this village was attacked by the German. This and that. But they lived a very quiet life. They were working and did what they's told.

Q: What about recreation? I mean, what about having fun?

A: The fun was, they were sitting together near the fire and singing and talking. That was the fun. Whatever they did in the ziemiankas we don't know. Probably, you know, the young people. But that was the fun, what we knew about it. Everybody was getting near the fire. Everybody was looking for somebody, for a little warm talking, remember the house, remember the parents. It was -- most were from the city of Novogradok, Lida, Baranovichi. This was not far away from each other. In the summertime, in the good times, they were meeting each other in Novoyelnya, this was like here you coming to Florida. So they knew mostly each other. If didn't know personal, so they heard about them. And this was nice to talk, to remember. Not to forget.

02:53:48

Q: Did they -- did people get to go back to their homes after the war ended?

A: Yeah, they came to the houses. The houses were already occupied by the Polish people. And nobody wanted to stay in the family, to remember. Everybody was killed there. So this was not in their interest. If you were from Novogradok, they went out to Lida where they didn't know them. They didn't want to stay in the houses no more. They were empty. When you came to the house where you lived, what will you see there? Nothing. So they run away from there. And everybody took the easy way, to go away to another city, to stay with other people. This is it. But nobody stay in the same city, in the same houses. I don't think so. I know now people went to Novogradok about two years ago. There is only one from the

partisan. He marry a Polish girl and has his children and he stays. No more else. There were marriages, many, after the war where they marry – where a Jew marry a Polish, a Polish girl marry a Jew. You know, like all over the world. But they were not staying in the cities. They went away -- they went away to Europe, they went away to Israel. Not too many.

Q: I think we're about to run out; am I right? Why don't we stop now.

02:55:34

End of Tape #2

Tape #3

03:01:11

Q: Now, Sonia, we're going to talk a little bit about various things. And so first, why don't you tell me a little bit about the Bielski parents, the parents of the three brothers, or really it was many more.

A: I really didn't know them, but I know them from my husband what he is repeating, what he is telling us. They were very honest, poor family. He fell in love with a girl which she didn't have money. Once upon a time, you couldn't marry if you didn't have money. But the husband, David, the father, he fell in love. She was a beautiful, a tall girl, a blonde. All of them looks like their mother. And she was working with him, hand-in-hand. And they had a woman -- they had 12 children, and all of them a year, two, three, four, five, six, whatever. So they had -- they were working in a place where they making for the corn, flour. What is it called?

Q: A mill. A flour mill.

A: Yes, very small, on the water, and everybody was working there till they grow up a little. When they grow up, the first one, the father of this girl, Walter¹⁶ was the oldest. He went to school in the city. Then, Tuvia, the second one, was too, in the city for a couple of years. And another sister was too in the city, were going to school. The other ones were small children and they were in the house. They had always a teacher for them at home. They couldn't afford to send them out. And mother was working, and father was working, and the brothers were working. And they made a living. They put -- made the flours and market it with another boy, with the son, took the flour to Novogradok. And they were selling the flours. This is the living. They had a garden near the house. They had water enough, so they have a garden and all the vegetables they had. I don't think they had fruits, but vegetables. And they had a little fish in the water, and a chicken and eggs -- plain, but healthy living. You see, when you are living like that, if you can -- if 10 brothers can grow up, six-two, so probably food was good. They had always a woman from the village which she was helping her -- the mother. And there was a lot of love between them. Father was crazy about the mother. And he should be, because she was working very hard, more than him. This I know. I never saw them.

03:04:21

I once asked my mother, "Mommy, do you remember this lady from the village?" She said, "I never knew them, but I know they were a very honest family." And everybody who came to the mill to ask for something, they were helping them. Because in the village there were only five houses, four from the villages and one house was their's. So they were very poor,

¹⁶ Velvel Bielski

the people from the village, the village -- five houses. So they were always coming to ask for a little flour, for a couple of pennies to lend them. He was -- always had a open house for them. Maybe they stood. They were a member. But there were many from other villages that were a little farther. They came first to tell them that the brothers beat up somebody when the German camp. Came to beat up them and they tell them that the brothers are Communist. And they were not Communist, but they wanted, you know, to take away the mill with everything, and they brought in the German. And they took them away, the mother and father and two brothers. But they're not alive no more. When they went already to the forest, they took -- they invited them and killed them all with their children with everybody. They were -- everybody had afraid of them. They knew what they did. You understand? I was very sick in the partisan. I was so sick. I was not prepared for the winter. I was not prepared for the living. And I had blood in my bladder. And the doctor said that I have to have a warm bed. I have to have a couple of times, because I was so sick, I couldn't walk, I couldn't talk, nothing. So there was not far a big mill from flours with a family. And there they had a beautiful daughter and to the daughter they came, the Germans. And Zus took me there to the mill and said to her, "This is my wife. You have to take care of her. She is very sick." And they took care of me. They put me in a place that nobody saw me. And she brought me - - she cooked for me, she gave me beds, the mother. And I heard the Germans laughing and drinking and eating. And I was there 10 days and nobody touch me. I am still alive. They took care of me only because they had afraid of the Bielskis. If not, I would not be alive because I had blood all over. This is from the winter.

03:07:34

Q: Belarus.

A: Belarus?

Q: Belarus.

Q: Yeah.

Q: Tell me the story of Belarus.

A: Belarus was a very rich family, too, not far from them, I think, about 10 miles, whatever. And the boys, the young boys, they went to take bread and poultry and eggs, whatever. And they had a very good day then, because they took away all the food from the German. Yeah and they kill about four, five German. And they were already tired, the boys. And this was already night, so they decided to sleep over by the Belarus. In this time, one from the villages saw that the Jewish partisan are by the Belarus, so he gave it to him a letter to the German, the Belarus. "You should come right away." They drink a lot, and they were very tired. They had a very good day. So the German came and they killed them all. Only two -- one from the boys, when he saw the German and were -- blood all over. You know, in the villages you have a big, big stove, and under the stove are the chickens sitting. The chickens are sitting

under the stove because there is warm. So he saw that he doesn't have nowhere to go. So he went into the place where the chickens are and he -- they spared him. The German went away. And he got out and he said, "What did you do with my friends? Why did you went to the German?" "What we did to you?" So he took and he killed them, too, the Belarus. This another man from the villages came and he said -- repeated this to Kozlowksi. Kozlowksi was our man. Whoever came from the ghetto, he was holding him till somebody came to pick him up. And he told this to the Bielskis, because we didn't know nothing. Everybody were died. So this took only about five or 10 days and the Bielskis, Asael, his brother, I don't think Zus was -- Zus was not, I think. Anyway, the Bielskis, they came and they said to him, "Boys, what did you do?" He said, "I didn't do nothing. The German find out and they kill them." So they took all, about two, three houses from there. Yes? And they fix them up, all of them. One of our partisans, he took a jacket. A fall jacket, you know, like they're wearing. And he was looking for something. So he find a letter from the German. "Mr. Belarus, thank you very much what you did. And here is 500 German money, whatever. And whatever you will find another Jew partisan, you will get it more." This was Belarus.

03:10:51

Q: So the partisans executed him?

A: Yes, and the whole family. Yes.

Q: The reprisals like that, do you know if they made a di-- did they get -- were there fewer and fewer incidents? Did it?

A: Less and less.

Q: So it did some good to--

A: Yes. This was a lesson for the all the villages, for all the people. "Don't do that." Everybody has the right to live. They had, they had to do it.

Q: Okay.

A: Lilly's father was there, too, my sister-in-law's. He was within this partisan what executed the Belarus. He died there.

03:12:01

Q: Can you talk to me a little bit about the military hierarchy?

A: Yes.

Q: Just sort of any way that you want.

A: You see, there were not too many Jewish -- Jews when they went to the Polish army. First of all, they didn't want it. Because the antisemitism was very high there. So they tried to not to go to the army. They did something, or bought something that -- but few of them they went to the army. And they -- when they came to the partisan, they were already -- they knew how to behave in the army. So when the people who had already about 1,200, 300, so the Bielskis, they divided them in groups. It's was too much one group. So everybody was the commander of a group. A group had about 20 people, 25 people. So the people what they were in the army, they were the commanders of the group. And they were listening to them, because they had afraid. This was a discipline. Because without the discipline, you couldn't do nothing. They were complaining, sure, they were complaining. Who is not complaining? If somebody is eating a piece of meat and you are watching him to eat meat, and you eat only a piece of bread, so sure they were complaining. They said, "He went for a -- for to take the food, and he was eating the food by himself." That was not true. But maybe he put a little more for him. So they were complaining. They were complaining that at night nobody were asleep. There were a couple of people near the groups; they were watching if the German are not coming. There were about five or six people, they were watching. So they were complaining, "How come he didn't stay a whole week at night? He was asleeping, and I was staying." This was, too. So they said to him, the Bielskis, "He is the commander. Whatever he will say, that what you have to do it." And they got used to that. They had trouble, too, there. They had. All the groups had trouble, sometimes. But this is minor. That's nothing.

03:14:20

Q: What about relations with other partisan groups and what about when Platon came in and Russians were assigned to all of the high po-- tell me.

A: Yeah. We didn't know about the other Russians, they were partisans. All of them, they were Russian, but Platon was head of the puszca Naliboki. He was sent from Moscow. So the Bielskis was complaining. "They took away our food. They took away our horses. They took away some, some other things what we were taking this for our partisan." So Platon was very smart. He said, "Listen, you Bielskis, you are a Jew. You have to remember that you have to fight. You have to fight with them for your survival. After the war, we will then see what we can do." So -- but we had trouble, too, with Platon. He said, "Are you grabbing too much food?" "What are we grabbing? Grabbing only bread. But we are fighting the German." The same thing, maybe more than that. But later, in '43 when they separated, the 150 whatever, and they make Ordzonikidze with Zus. Zus went to them -- Aleks. So they didn't believe that he will be partial to the Bielskis otriad. You see, this is the boys were from the Bielskis otriad, from Bielskis Brigade. You understand? But they didn't believe him that he will be more partial to Platon than the Bielskis brother. So they put Panchenko -- not Panchenko -- yeah, Panchenko, I think. Right? Panchenko, and he was the commander and Zus was after him. But they were working very hard and very good. Once they had incident with another group of partisan. I told you about it. They took away the horses, and the rifles,

everything. And Panchenko came in and he said, "What happened?" One Russian commander, he took the rifle and wanted to shoot to Alex, so Alex took out his revolver and Panchenko came in between and he pushed them together. And he was very nice with him, Alex. They did everything together, and very good. They were working very good. We didn't have -- only that's was the only one, Panchenko. Then when Zus, he was the commander of the intelligence of the whole forest for the Russian, and for everything. So they were working very good.

03:17:13

Q: What did he do in that role?

A: Who?

Q: Alex.

A: Alex went 20 yards from the police -- from the Polish. He went half a kilometer, it's about three-quarters of a mile from the German. And he was seeing where are they going, and what they are doing, where is the concentrations from them. This was his doing. And he reported this everything to Platon. He did a very good job, and a very big job, because you could not go to fight them if you didn't know what they doing there. He never go get by himself. He went always with 10, 15 people on horses. They were killing. They were running away. They had many things. You cannot say that you were always the best of them. No. They were very good, too, the German. Who is stronger, then, is the winner.

Q: What else did Alex do? Did he do -- did he have something to do with keeping roads open?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me about that.

A: Yes. The roads are not like here. They have one road what is going one direction, and the other direction. And you have smaller road that the German didn't know. But Alex knew. If this road was closed, he was saying to them, "You have to go." He sent a man to tell him where to go, how to go out from this. Because one day, I remember this was in the beginning of '44, Platon came with commanders from Moscow. And they went to look for the partisan, how they were working, and how they were doing and everything, and the German came in. They were surrounding them around, around, and around. They couldn't go out from there. So then Asael, his brother, and Alex, they went to see something. And they saw what happening, so they took him out, but 10 people from the Moscow. This was because they knew how to go out from the roads. You cannot -- you would not be able to use one road. Because even not the markets there was a road, but they knew. I am telling you, they knew. They were looking on the tree and they knew where to go out, how to go out. And they had a small brother, Aaron. He is 13 years old. He knew better than them. He knew everything. He

was only 13 years old. He is now 60 something. He would tell you stories.

03:20:12

Q: Where is he?

A: In New York.

03:20:26

Q: Do you know about the early incident in Novogrudok where Tuvia saw the action?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell me about that.

A: Yes. I was still in Novogrudok. This was only the beginning. This was like -- the ghetto was already -- no, the ghetto was not. This was December. And they took her out the first 50 people were this; druggists, lawyers, doctors. Fifty of them. That was the intelligence of the city. And they killed them, all 50 of them, in the middle of the marketplace. This was a small city, Novogrudok, with a marketplace where everybody is coming, Thursday and Wednesdays. And they killed them. The other ones should be afraid. Tuvia was there in the city, in Novogrudok. He went for something. And the German never killed before. So they ask him who are you? They didn't have to ask him, because the other one -- somebody told he is a Jew. They hit him very well. They beat him up terrible. He had the first thing that you saw the German. And they told him to sit here, not to run in no place. It was a little dark, and he said to himself, "What am I doing here? If they will kill me, let them kill me when I will not see it. But to sit and wait for them?" And he run away. So this when he came in, already Alex and Asael saw him the first time after two, three weeks. They were already in the forest. He came into the forest and he said, "I am not going no more. I am staying with you." This is the first encounter with the German. He never went. And he saw only a German when he kill them or a dead. Zus -- Alex is wearing still a comm-- jacket for a commander, a German. He took him alive. He were looking for eggs, for chickens, him and another three. And he saw him from far away when he went out from the farm. And he took them alive. So he said, "Who is the commander?" He said, "I am the commander." "So take it off the jacket." He took it off the jacket, and the other ones, two, three killed and him, he said, "Listen, don't kill me. I have a wife and children." He said, "No, no. We will not kill you. What did you do with us?" So he is wearing now the jacket, in all of the books, he is in the jacket from the German.

03:23:14

Q: Did he -- Alex have an incident where he was called a "dirty Jew" on the street?

A: Yes. In Novogradok.

Q: Yeah. Tell me about that.

A: In Novogradok there was a store for meat. I don't remember, he told me once what his name was, but I don't remember. I will not tell you what I don't remember. And he was -- before the war, he was very good with him. You see, Alex's house was -- they didn't eat meat what is not kosher. They had a brother, what was a rabbi. And the other ones, they were eating, you know. But he was very good with him. I forgot his name. I don't remember. So they were friends, but when the German came, the friendship went by. And he had pains in his teeth. So he went to a dentist. Still the dentist were alive there, so he went and he saw him from far away. So you called him, "You dirty Jew. How come you came here?" He didn't answer. He went away, but he was running after him. He run after him. And he that saw he doesn't have where to go, so he didn't kill him, but he hit out -- he hit him so much that he was unconscious. And he went away to the forest. That was the encounter with his best friends.

Q: Was that a common situation or uncommon, would you say?

A: It was common, yeah. Yeah, this was happening, many things, many. Because in the times -- in the last times, in the last year in '39, there was the young Polish, the youth, like the youth, the German youth. That was the same thing in all Europe, the Polish had too, the youth. And they were very antisemitic and they were trying -- they didn't know yet to kill, but they were beating up. So who was more, you know, had more force? So they hitting back and the other ones went away. But this was in the last year, very common, yes. It was very uncomfortable.

Q: And it wasn't out of fear, it was out of antisemitism?

A: No, they didn't have fear, no. No, no.

03:25:56

Q: I was going to ask your husband about getting young fighters, Koscik?

A: Kozlowksi?

Q: I don't know. Koscik, K-o-s-c-i-k.

A: Oh, Kozaks, yes. This was his -- Moskva¹⁷ asked for a language, a live language. They didn't want to kill all of the German. They wanted more the majors and the captains. They wanted to talk about it with the German, to know how the positions and everything. And the -- that's

¹⁷ Moscow (Russian)

there are places in Russia, near Belarussia and Ukraine, the Kozaks¹⁸ were alive there and they were working with the German. So this came from Platon, a word that, "Alex, you have to prepare about two or three Kozaks alive, and you have to bring them to us and we will ask him how is – how are they doing, the German, where they are staying, how many people, and everything." So this took him probably about three or four days till he caught up with the Kozaks. They were terrible fighters, terrible, but they took them alive. They were washing themselves, cleaning up. And he with the horse on them, so he took three of them. He couldn't shlep them, the three of them, so he took only the oldest. And he brought him to Platon. And they said everything, and everything true. And this it is. That's was Kozaks. He did a good job.

03:27:42

Q: Describe the three Bielski brothers each individually.

A: The best for nature was Asael. The best. The strongest from them all, that he -- you cannot buy him with nothing, was Alex. You couldn't buy him for no money. If he said that's has to be done, has to be done. Tuvia had a golden heart. He said, "I don't care how many will come. Let them come. There will be a place for them, all of them." But the strongest of them was Alex, the strongest of them. I will tell you. This was a story when we went out from the forest, from the jungle. Yes? And I came in with him when the groups were already out, and they were organized and everything. And we saw one woman, a young woman, I think about 32. And she was standing and crying. So Alex said to her, "Why you crying?" She said, "The whole group went by and, you know, the commander, he told me they don't have a place for me." He said, "Who is the commander?" He called the name of this commander and he said, "Where he is?" He said, "Maybe about 10 kilometers, not far. Because, he told me not to move. He doesn't want me." So he run away by himself, on the horse, he took the commander and brought them in where we were staying. We were staying probably 20 people, the fighters. He said, "You know her?" He said, "Yes." "Why did you let her stay here?" "I don't have nothing to do with her. I don't want her." "What do you mean you don't want her? You had to take 20 people and she was the 21, so what?" He said, "I am not taking." He said, "Okay. You not taking? Okay, so you not alive either." That's was the first killing of his. He killed the man. And this was, you know, this was like from God. Because every woman and every child had already a place where to go. Whatever you took her, you have to take her with you. He was sorry after that because he is not a killer, but he had to do it. He had to do it. This was a big accident because he couldn't sleep, and couldn't eat, but this was a very good medicine.

03:30:15

Q: It meant that a lot more people got rescued afterward?

¹⁸ Cossacks (Yiddish)

A: Yes, absolute. Absolute.

Q: Well, tell me more about the brothers?

A: The brothers were very good together. Nobody can go in between. Nobody. You cannot decide by yourself and no one from them could decide. They went to the side, the three of them and the baby brother, the 13, he went, too. And they were thinking up of something and whatever decided is done. Nobody, not Tuvia by himself, not Asael, or Zusia could decide by himself. The three of them decided what to do. And this was the blessing.

Q: And they were all fighters?

A: They were fighters, very good fighters. They were young, 29, 30, 32 – six-two. Everybody had afraid of them. You will look on them you know that they mean business. And were good in heart, very good. Sometime they went out for a couple of days, there were not food, so they had -- whatever they had they were dividing between them. They were good. I think the smartest one from all of them, may be not the smartest, the smartest -- more sophisticated was Tuvia. He was the oldest. He made his living already, you know. He went to school more than there. So maybe, but the hearts was the same.

Q: They were heroes.

A: They were heroes. Each of them were a hero. They never had afraid for nothing. We said "We are surrounding," because we were surrounded not once. "So what," he said. "We are only dying once." I was dying every minute of that. And they were dying only once. He said, "There is nothing to be afraid. You are not with the German now. We will see who will die and who will live." They not – they were never afraid. They were heroes. They not coming no more like that. I don't know. Maybe that's because they were healthy, from the village, from the nature, whatever. They not coming no more.

03:33:10

Q: There was a sad incident with a man named Kaplan. Do you know what I am talking about?

A: Kaplan?

Q: Yeah. Do you know what I am talking about? He, he said, "Those who take the gold can take the people, too." Do you know about this?

A: No.

Q: I asked you at the beginning about a commander named Shematovietz¹⁹?

¹⁹ Ivan Shematovietz

A: Shematovietz. He was a Russian guy. He was a very nice guy. He was a politruk²⁰. You know what is a politruk? A politruk is a man what is teaching the communism. And he was teaching Communism. He came from Russia. So one of the Lubczanski brother what they wanted to be the commander. So they said to them, "Go ahead. You can go ahead and take another couple of people and make yourself a commander." So he came to Platon and he said to Lubczanski, "They are not Communists." So he said, "How do you know they are not communists, the Bielskis brother?" "Because I never saw them reading Stalin's words, or Lenin's words." So the call Shematovietz and he said, "Who said they are not Communists? All of them are Communists. They are praying every morning for the health of Stalin and Lenin." You know, we had the Orthodox Jew so they were in the morning five o'clock, six o'clock, they were standing in group and praying. So he said that is the praying for Stalin and Lenin. He was a very good guy, an honest guy, a good guy. They were a couple of very good guys. Yeah, they're nice guys, Russian guys, very good ones.

Q: Are there any things that you would have done differently or that you think Alex would have done differently?

A: No.

Q: Or Tuvia?

A: No. They did a great job. Nobody could match them. Nobody could match them. If you would find in this time, in the time of the war, a terrible war, a place to go in and to sit quietly for three, four years. I would sit quietly two and three years. Nobody should see me. I would not think about nobody all but myself. Many people are doing like that. I know a group of people, they were sitting, 10 people, they had a lot of money and they were paying to the village soltys²¹, that's mean like a mayor. They paying him money, and he was cooking for them and attending them, and everything. There were not thinking where nobody -- another man to put her in, in the group he should survive, no. So who could do it without money, without nothing? They did only for the good hearts what they had. And they were saying that they were taking money. They took money, they took jewelry, everything. We had to pay for the rifles what came from Moscow and we send everything to Moscow, and they sent it. But they didn't put nothing, money, in the pockets. We send for salt, you have to pay this. You didn't have money, so you paid with jewelry. You had to buy medicine. You pay this with jewelry. But they didn't keep nothing for themselves. If they would keep so much money, they would be millionaires. They came out from the war with nothing, with not a penny. We came to Israel in '45 in October. We didn't have for what to buy a piece of bread. So there this the Jewish -- that was not yet -- Israel was in '48. In '45 it was not Israel, only the people was working there. So they gave us a room, and they give us 25 dollars each and till you will find work. So if we would have had money, we would do

²⁰ political instructor (Russian)

²¹ village administer (Polish)

that? We didn't have nothing. We kept out nothing. We had only a pair of shoes. They did for the greatness of their heart.

03:38:04

Q: Tell me how the otriad came to an end. Tell me about the --

A: Okay. This was '45, '44.

Q: Forty-five?

A: Forty-five in June. I was sitting in the forest and we heard trucks. So we were sure that the German army is going to surround the -- around -- to take us around. So we were sitting quietly. So then Tuvia was a little farther than us. Zus said, "No, that is impossible," because they didn't go by trucks. They went by tanks, the German, around. That's not like a truck -- not like a tank. That's much lighter sounding. So he went with another couple of men more to the -- to this road. And he saw the Red Army. When he saw the Red Army, he said, "Come on, the German are gone. The Red Army is already here." And they saw him, so they came with the rifles like that to us. "Who are you, traitors? You not? Who are you?" and took about two, three hours till they recognize that we are partisan. And we went after them right away. They went to the front and we went to the city. We went to Novogradok and there we were staying there for a couple of days, maybe 10 days. And the Red Army came in and said, "You have to go to the army. You are partisan. You are fighters, but now you have to fight with us on the -- across -- against the German." Then they took Asael he was-- because they saw him a first. So they took him right away to the army, and he died in the front in Prussia. And they let Zus and Tuvia to stay with the people. They should stay with the children, with the woman, whatever. That's what -- how we survived. We came to the city together with them. And they tried to give us papers that we are partisan. And this was the end of that. Later, they came from Russia. They came, and they organize whatever they have to organize for the people what they stayed there. This all the end of that. Whatever they saw the Russian, you had a watch or something, they took it away by themselves. They were robbing, too. You know, like a front.

03:40:59

Q: Did you tell me everything about -- did we do everything we should about Lubczanski?

A: Lubczanski, they were a very bad boys. They were two brothers. There were always, always, you know, complaining. They said, "They are not Communists, they are fascists. And they are taking money and jewelry from the people." And they went in to Platon even. So they called the Bielskis brother, the three of them they went, and he told them what are the Lubczanskis doing. So Platon said, "Kill them. Kill them." But, you know, we saw already the end of this everything, so they didn't touch them. They didn't touch them. They told them only, "Go away we should not see you." This is it. And they still alive. They are still alive in

New York.

Q: Are there any other things you want to tell me?

A: We talk about everything. What can I say more? You went through everything.

Q: You don't have any remembrances of stories you should tell me that I didn't ask?

A: No. You went over everything. Everything. There in the partisan were these two friends of mine, they were writing everything every day, a diary. And now, she will write a book about it. They were mostly not – you know, they were sitting in the forest and only thinking how to survive, how to survive. That was the only thing.

03:43:01

Q: And it was a very unusual situation where you fought. Everywhere else people didn't know in time or only the young unattached people fought?

A: Correct.

Q: There weren't heroes that rescued?

A: No, no, no. The heroes was only the brothers Bielskis. Alright, they had help. I said before, they couldn't be a partisan Bielskis if they didn't have the all people. They were young people. They were fighting with them. They were doing everything what they told them. And because of them, there are the Bielskis partisan otriad. Because without them, I don't know. What do you think? Nothing. Whoever will survive, survive, and that's the end of that. And like that a whole generations, two, three generations are still alive because of the Bielskis brothers. And all over the world are they, all over the world. And sometimes we are coming in touch with them for a wedding from the grandchildren. The wedding. And they said, "Listen to me, what would be without the Bielskis? What would -- we would not have children, and grandchildren, nothing. We have to thank them." But not always was like that. No. But when you getting older and smarter and you see many things in other perspectives. You didn't see this before, but now, when you going to bar mitzvah, you going to a wedding for your grandchild and you think, "Listen I did it. I did it with the help of the Bielskis." This is something. Something. They are in the army, they are all over, professors, doctors. Everything you have. Every -- many, many doctors. And they said, "I am giving all of my life for the poor, for the old." And they are like that. Many. They going away to Israel in a kibbutz. You know what's a kibbutz? And they working there and they trying everythin. They put everything aside here the money, and they working there, "because I have to remember what they did for my parents once. People -- brother Bielskis, what they didn't know even us." And this something. Something when you are going out and you see all of them on a wedding or something. How the young generation is dancing and singing and comes a professor from Harva-- or from this – or from Columbia University and said, "Wait

a second" -- we had a 50 anniversary, me and Alex, two years ago and came two professors, I never heard about them, I never knew them -- "I have to remind you of something. Remember one thing, because of" -- the other brothers are not alive. He said, "Because of the brothers, and Zusia, we are still here. And we have our families, and thanks to him." This is something, you know, when you are sitting and you hear this. You know, your heart is pounding, pounding. You think, "Really, was it like that?" And this was really like that.

Q: Well, thank you, Sonia.

A: It's an honor to be with you.

Q: It's an honor to be with you.

A: It's an honor to be with you. You making this so easy. I am not a nervous person, but in the morning, I said to my son, I said, "You know what, I am afraid." He said, "Mommy, what are you afraid? You be only you." And this is the true. You are only you. Tell whatever you know. And you making this easy. Not everybody has it -- some, you know.

Q: Thank you.

A: Thank you again.

Q: Okay.

03:47:40

End of Tape #3

Conclusion of interview