

## foreword

An inevitable rite of passage in any Jewish child's informal initiation to adulthood is to study, with grim fascination, the grainy, out-of-focus images of hollow-eyed survivors in striped pajamas, the amateur photos of corpses piled high in freshly dug pits, or possibly the 16mm handheld GI footage of living skeletons clinging to barbed wire during the liberation of the camps. Such grisly iconography of passivity and victimization was, during my childhood, and probably is still today, not only an article of faith, but also a source of secret shame. As an assimilated suburban kid growing up in the Midwest, I had thrilled to World War II stories about John Kennedy and PT 109 (Cliff Robertson in the movie version), the leatherneck marines at Guadalcanal (John Wayne), the flying fortresses over Germany (Gregory Peck), and so many more. In feeble contrast, Jewish heroes were the ancient biblical warriors evoked by uninspired Sunday school teachers—Bar Kochba and Judah Macabee wielding spears and jawbones, or young David with his little slingshot.

So when my friend and collaborator, Clay Frohman, came to me with a book called *Defiance*, I was skeptical.

“Not another Holocaust movie,” I said.

What was to be accomplished, I asked myself, in telling yet another story of familiar and unspeakable horror, especially when an entire canon of literature, not to mention films both documentary and fiction, have already dramatized it in the most exacting and harrowing detail?

What's more, the greatest historians and philosophers of our time have devoted entire careers to plumbing the roots and magnitude of its evil. What could I possibly add?

But Clay was insistent. Here, he said, was something fresh and utterly provocative. And so, somewhat grudgingly, I plunged into Nechama's Tec's remarkable book and found myself deeply moved. That was ten years ago. And the feelings I had upon that first reading have only grown stronger with time. To read of the Bielski brothers and their fight to create a safe haven in the midst of a hell-on-earth evokes in me something utterly primitive and deeply personal, a roiling wave of fear, awe, humility, and admiration. And outrage, too—that such a story was not better known.

Here, clutching captured Schmeisser submachine guns and “potato-masher” grenades, were Jewish fighters whose deeds were as stirring and brave as any I had ever encountered.

And what's more, it was all true.

In an age when the term “hero” has been so overused as to become meaningless, the Bielskis remind us that real heroism is not the stuff of comic books. Rather, it is a set of decisions, sometimes impulsive, often made by simple men of whom nothing of the sort could ever have been expected. Their story is not simply one of courage or fortitude in the face of adversity; it includes any number of daunting moral decisions—whether to seek vengeance or to rescue, how to re-create a sense of community among those who have lost everything, how to maintain hope when all seems forsaken.

Those of us who make films are forever searching for heroes. Most often we are obliged to invent them. Luke Skywalker battles the alien menace; Frodo Baggins duels with the Dark Lord. Even when we choose a contemporary setting, the protagonists are usually more Jason Bourne than Tuvia Bielski. Yet, presuming to adapt a work of such great complexity and nuance such as *Defiance* involves confronting a host of issues the likes of which one rarely contemplates in making a movie. To anyone with a serious interest in the historical record, a fiction film

purporting to tell a “true story” is a contradiction in terms, if not something much worse. Movies are not just reductionist—compressing months, even years, into a tidy two-hour experience (not counting time out at the popcorn stand); they also attempt to impose order and shape on events that were, in their moment, chaotic, complex, even random. In the name of drama, events are rearranged, ideas are simplified, and perhaps worst of all, the maddening, often unfathomable messiness of human behavior is made knowable for the sake of emotion.

Once before, I had confronted such a challenge. It derived from another little-known moment of history (and became the film *Glory*) in which African Americans had been willing to fight and die for their freedom in the American Civil War. While the stories of the 54th Massachusetts regiment and that of Jewish partisans are analogous only in part, one thing is true of both. Each of these histories presented an opportunity for some necessary historical redress. The iconic image of a black man in Union blue charging up a hill was long overdue, adding deserved complexity to the conventional textbook view of the Civil War by suggesting that freedom was not simply bestowed, but also fought for. Similarly, to see Jewish men and women standing shoulder to shoulder in the snowy woods, brandishing automatic weapons in their own defense, flies in the face of the most pernicious oversimplification of the Holocaust—one that minimizes the impulse of its victims to resist. And it is this impulse that Nechama Tec details with such ferocious clarity. Indeed, as contemporary scholarship has now revealed, resistance in fact found its expression in almost every city, town, and shtetl in Eastern Europe over which the shadows of extermination had fallen.

There is one caveat I feel obliged to offer by way of introduction. Anyone picking up this book in the hope of reading a tacky “novelization” of *Defiance*, the movie, is bound to be disappointed. This is a brilliant narrative, written with an insight and analysis that only a lifetime spent studying its subject can provide. Its rewards are for those who seek the

richness and complexity a film can only suggest. But if the film has led you here in search of a deeper understanding of its source material, then it accomplished more than I might have ever dreamed possible. I am grateful to Nechama Tec for her guidance, her generosity, and most of all her forbearance. From the very outset she understood the dilemma of trying to put her book on film. Even more important, she understood our intentions in trying to do so. I like to imagine a boy like myself, growing up in search of his identity and coming upon this story. And I'd like to think it is in that spirit that she has graciously forgiven us any number of exaggerations, compressions, and omissions, not to mention the limits of our imagination in capturing, on film, the extraordinary spirit of her work.

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