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Area man lived life depicted in 'Defiance'

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The young Jewish man spied on German guards stationed outside the ghetto's gates, noting their schedules and patterns. He and others intent on escaping dug a shallow trench where a building met a barbed-wire fence.

On a moonless night in the fall of 1942, Moshe Baran crawled under the fence and escaped into the darkness with a woman and her two children. He doesn't remember her name, only that she led him to a civilian camp in the dense forest outside Krasny -- then a Polish town, now part of Belarus -- where other Jews hid from the Nazis. The next morning, he walked to the camp's edge and stared at a blue sky.

"When I was in the ghetto, I never looked up. We were hunted like animals," said Baran, 88, of Squirrel Hill. "Then I looked up and saw a bird flying. I wished I was one of them."

Even more, though, Baran wanted to join one of several bands of escaped Jews and former Russian soldiers burrowed in the forest, fighting Nazis and disrupting shipments intended for the German front lines. The efforts of some of the 30,000 to 40,000 Jews who joined the resistance are depicted in the film "Defiance," starring Daniel Craig as Tuvia Bielski, and now in theaters.

"It's part of my story, but in a different way," said Baran, who spoke Monday with a group of young Jewish adults at Beth Shalom synagogue in Squirrel Hill before they set out to watch the movie.

Bielski organized a partisan group that focused more on saving Jewish civilians than fighting. They conducted food raids, provided armed security and killed Nazi collaborators, when necessary. By the end of the war, the Bielski partisans numbered about 1,200.

Fewer than 300 such partisans are alive today, estimates Mitch Braff, director of the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation in San Francisco.

The young people who met with Baran represent "the last generation who will have an opportunity to talk to partisans," Braff said. "The window is closing."

Baran and several collaborators working at a Nazi labor camp hoarded dismantled Russian weapons, mostly pistol parts, he guessed. He never saw
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dismantled Russian weapons, mostly pistol parts, he guessed. He never saw them; he only plucked them from a junk pile, smuggled them into the ghetto and hid them until they could be traded for something better.

When he escaped the ghetto, he had to leave the weapons behind. He later persuaded a farmer who had access to the ghetto to retrieve the cache.

Weapons were prerequisites for partisan membership. Baran's weapons parts -- and recommendations from two Jewish Russian officers he met in the woods -- earned him acceptance into a partisan group known as the "Mstitel," or "The Revenger."

Baran, then 21, was the only Jew he knew of in his group. If there were others, they hid their Jewish roots. Anti-Semitism ran high even among those fighting the same enemy, he said.

Baran rode a horse on night missions, lighting signal fires to show Russian pilots where to drop crates of weapons. He provided cover for partisans ambushing German soldiers, and he witnessed bloody retributions.

"I saw German captives that the Russians took care of in very harsh ways," Baran said, offering no details about the killings. "I don't like to talk about it."

Baran said he never killed anyone. While blockaded in a village, he said he sneaked around the corner of a barn and came face to face with a German soldier. The two took measure of each other and decided it wasn't worth it.

"We looked at each other, then we turned and we each went the other way," Baran said.

In the spring of 1944, the Germans mounted an attack on the partisans, fanning out across northeastern Poland. Baran and other resistance fighters fled into the swamps, taking only weapons and bread. They trudged through the wetlands for 11 days before deciding the only way to survive was to fight and break through the German lines. The plan worked.

"It was for survival," Baran said. "You didn't think about surviving for life. It was minute by minute. ... Sometimes I have to ask myself, 'Is it truthful? Did I really survive all this?' "

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