



Screenwriter Clay Frohman also played an extra on the *Defiance* set. Photo: Iddo Goldberg.

## Tzivi Chats with Clay Frohman

By Jan Lisa Huttner

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Clayton Frohman spent 12 years developing his *Defiance* screenplay in close collaboration with director Ed Zwick. After watching *Defiance* and reading the source book (*Defiance by Nechama Tec*), I called Clay in LA and asked him to reflect on this challenging process.

**Jan Lisa Huttner: What's the one thing you most want Chicago *khaverim* to know about *Defiance*?**

Clay Frohman: In the fall of 1996, when I first started doing research on the Bielski Partisans, I went to the National Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. When you get out of the elevator leading to the museum's permanent exhibition, there's a photo mural showing American Army officers gazing upon a charred pyre of human remains at Ohrdruf Concentration Camp?

**I've seen it, yes.**

Well, I had never seen this image before, but it still hit me with a shock of recognition; one of these soldiers was my father, Lieutenant Colonel David Frohman, April 4, 1945.



From Left: Jamie Bell as "Asael," Liev Schreiber as "Zus," and Daniel Craig as "Tuvia."  
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I was a WWII buff because of my Dad's experiences, but the first time I heard of the Bielski brothers was when I read Zus' obituary in the *New York Times* in 1995. So is there a message? If you see *Defiance*, then you'll come away understanding something—not all Jews perished in the Camps, some of them resisted. Some people fought back. That's my message.

For virtually every Jew in Europe, it was the hardest and the most tragic of fates, but the Bielski brothers, well, they had the courage, and they had the physical prowess, and they had the luck to have been peasant boys who grew up playing hide-and-seek in the forest.

Jews will come into the theatre knowing what they know about the Holocaust, but most of them are not going to know about this: three brothers were not only able to survive in the forest, but they had the vision to understand what was happening, and they rescued a lot of people who would clearly have died otherwise. Old people, children, women, they all would have died without the Bielski brothers, but their story is almost completely unknown.

### **Hollywood has certain rules, so what compromises did you make?**

You've read Nechama Tec's book, so you know it's sociological, not narrative. But I read it, and I was fascinated by it. Ed Zwick? He was once my Hebrew School buddy at Beth El Synagogue in Highland Park. One day Ed and I were at a Dodgers game, and I had nine innings, so I started telling him about the Bielskis.

Ed said: "Why do we want to do a movie about 'nice Jews'?" That nice, noble thing, we'd both run away from it. But I said: "Ya know what, Ed, these are not 'nice Jews.' These are tough guys who fought back, and that's what makes them unique."

We decided that our central dialectic was rescue versus revenge: Tuvia represents rescue, Zus represents revenge, and the third brother, Asael, is the arbiter. So was a certain dramatic license taken? Yes, but it was our choice. This is our version of the Bielski story. We've made the movie we wanted to make.

### **What have you learned, personally, from all this?**

I often reflect on what would've happened to the Bielskis were it not for the war. They met events and then they created events; they rose to a level of courage and individual responsibility because of the war. Tuvia was not born a hero, he became that, and then, after the war, he went back to being the same size as most other people. I think that's the story of a lot of people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances, whether it's WWII, Iraq, Afghanistan, or wherever. I just think that that's how people behave, and I'm fascinated by it.



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