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SURVIVORS

“Defiance” and “The Secret of the Grain.”

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Daniel Craig and Liev Schreiber in Edward Zwick’s film of a true Holocaust story.

In Edward Zwick’s “Defiance,” the beautiful light—a little dryer than life—has obviously been digitally altered. Yet apart from this minor shading there’s not much in the film that could not have been done forty years ago. Zwick’s film, a true Holocaust story that most people do not know, suggests some startling new ideas about resistance, sex, and class in the doomed provinces of Jewish Eastern Europe. But the moviemaking is resolutely old-fashioned—as square as an Arthur Miller play or an evening of Tchaikovsky. Does it matter? In this case, it does not. Zwick’s conservative, humanist-sentimental style still has life in its aging limbs. “Defiance,” as it turns out, makes insistent emotional demands, and those who respond to it at all, as I did, are likely to go all the way and even come out of it feeling slightly stunned.

Zwick based the movie on Nechama Tec’s excellent 1993 book, of the same title, which chronicles, in great detail, an anomalous corner of history. In the late autumn of 1941, in Nazi-occupied Belarus, where Jews were being executed by the thousands, four brothers from a large Jewish farming family named Bielski, along with a few others who were determined to survive, went into hiding in the forest. Gradually, more ragged, hungry, and dazed people from the ghettos began to show up in the woods. In 1942, Tuvia Bielski, the oldest brother and the leader of what became known as the Bielski Otriad (Detachment), made two extraordinary decisions. First, he sensed that the best

way to resist the Nazis was not to form a corps of, say, fifty young killers with machine guns but to take into the group every Jew who wanted to join, including the *malbushim*, the useless ones—the children, the elderly, the sick, the unskilled, the physically incompetent intellectuals—and to fight on so many fronts that survival itself became a weapon. Second, he realized that the group wouldn't last unless it actively collaborated with the ragtag remnants of the overwhelmed Red Army that were forming units to harass the Germans. Some in the Bielski group, joining the Soviets, became partisan fighters; some repaired clothing and weapons for the soldiers; the rest miraculously improvised a civil society, complete with a hospital, a bathhouse, and a tannery, even though they were often on the move. Eventually, some twelve hundred people gathered in the forest, and, by 1944, when the Soviets swept westward and liberated the area, only fifty or so had died. It was by far the largest and most successful Jewish armed rescue of Jews during the war.

At the beginning of the movie, some standard, blurry black-and-white documentary footage of German troops killing unarmed people glides smoothly into the staged action, filmed in sharp-focus full color, which is Zwick's way, I think, of telling us that the dramatization and the fictional invention are about to begin, but that they will remain close to the facts. The movie was shot (by the cinematographer Eduardo Serra) in forests near the ones inhabited by the Bielski group, and, despite the digital shading, I don't know when I've seen so much raw fresh air, so much rain, snow, and damp, so tactile a rendering of trees and earth. The movie is a kind of realistic fairy tale set in a forest newly enchanted by the sanctified work of staying alive. Zwick grounds the story in the labor and in the physical discomfort and irritability of townspeople living out of their element in ratty clothes, their skin withered and discolored from malnutrition. Everything is on a human scale, including the partisan battles. Those in the audience who remain eager, even after "Munich," to see Jews tear apart their enemies will not be disappointed. But the clashes with German troops, though excitingly staged, are presented not as an occasion for glory but as either a grim necessity of survival or an open expression of revenge.

"Defiance" is a Hollywood product, with decades of storytelling know-how behind it, and Zwick and the film's screenwriter, Clayton Frohman, have compressed and transposed events, defined and sharpened tensions, and, in general, shaped the material for emotional effectiveness and suspense. As the community grows, the dramatic center of the movie shifts to a Biblical struggle between two of the Bielski brothers: the touchy and aggressive Zus (Liev Schreiber) resents Tuvia (Daniel Craig), who takes control and suppresses any challenge to his authority. Zus wants to kill Germans, and Tuvia, milder (though hardly mild—he kills when he has to), wants to save Jews. After nearly destroying each other in a vicious fight, the two split up, and Zus joins the Soviets, while Tuvia becomes a kind of forest-world Old Testament king. You may think, Not another warring-brothers cliché, but there's real emotional power in those Biblical stories, and this secular version is tersely written and incisively played. Daniel Craig, it turns out, can embody a Moses figure without losing his sex appeal, which may be the highest compliment I've ever paid an actor. Craig's powerful, compact body, the flattened vertical planes of his face, the baleful stare, the arrogant trim to his lips—this working-class Brit is more than convincing as a Jewish partisan leader, and his dry, shivlike voice allows him to get away with thematic moral statements like "We have all chosen this—to live here free like human beings for as long as we can." The strong-looking Schreiber matches him. His Zus is surly, a bit of a thug but, in this context, a hero, and highly attractive. In fleeting moments, the filmmakers develop one of Tec's most fascinating observations: that, in the forest, the Jewish social and sexual hierarchies were turned upside down. The farmers or working-class men who could shoot, gut an animal, and build a shelter were sought out as protectors by the women, including the educated, upper-middle-class women; the formerly desirable scholars of Hegel, Marx, and the Talmud were not.

"Defiance" is not without melodramatic flourishes, and, now and then, the movie seems mightily impressed with its own nobility. There's one rousing speech too many, and I could have done with less of James Newton Howard's music, which pounds away at us when the action starts up and turns cloyingly plaintive at times of mourning (Joshua Bell plays a lachrymose violin theme). There are bits of overly theatrical staging, as when everyone in the group talks at once and Craig silences them with a shout, and they turn to him in awe. But Zwick pulls off many of the high-tension scenes deftly and easily—such as the detachment's murder of Nazi collaborators, or its treacherously unstable relations with the Red Army partisans, who occasionally knock Jews around when they are drunk or just

bored. Zwick has made an obvious swipe from “The Godfather”: a climactic moment in which a joyful, Chagallesque wedding in the forest is intercut with a bloody attack on the Germans recalls the baptism of Michael Corleone’s child, which is intercut with the slaughter of Michael’s Mob rivals. But the meaning of the juxtapositions is quite different. The first is sardonic—Corleone is a hypocrite. This one is resolutely existential: if Jews want to marry and produce another generation they must learn to kill, a lesson that’s bound to elicit a mixed response, especially now. One Jewish friend characterized the movie as “Fiddler on the Roof” meets “The Dirty Dozen.” But “Defiance” is shrewder than that. The picture offers the most moving account we’ve ever had of how an ordinary, rather disagreeable man, challenged and then electrified by catastrophe, grows into a great leader—in this case, a man possessed of an uncanny sense of timing, authority, and force. After the war, Tuvia Bielski spent a quiet decade in Israel, then moved to Brooklyn, where he and Zus ran taxi and trucking companies. He was largely uncelebrated in either place—perhaps because some Jews took his success in saving people as a rebuke to their own helplessness. After Tuvia died, in 1987, Nechama Tec rescued him from obscurity, and Edward Zwick and Daniel Craig have now sealed the case for his immortality.

The award-winning French movie “The Secret of the Grain” is another example of big-hearted humanist filmmaking, but the director, Abdellatif Kechiche, works not with Zwick’s carefully staged groupings and closeups but with a handheld camera devouring a tumultuous overflow of life. In the port of Sète, on the Mediterranean coast (near Montpellier), in a heated atmosphere of rivalry and sexual jealousy, a large family of Tunisian immigrants and their French-born children gather together to eat and to quarrel. The patriarch (Habib Boufares), a laid-off dockworker, desperately wants to leave something to the next generation, so he opens a couscous restaurant on an old ship. Boufares, a handsome square-shouldered man who is not a professional actor, ducks away from the camera. As a protagonist, he’s a little distant, but Kechiche digs a good story out of the flux, and, in the movie’s final forty minutes, the suspense is terrific. Will everything be ready in time to impress the local French nabobs assembled for the opening? A feat of heroic dancing (by the beautiful Hafsia Herzi) not only saves the occasion but may permanently alter the erotic tastes of Westerners who have made a fetish of the flat, lean belly.



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