As the clock ticked away at the mantel, a family of four sat in their living room. The Nazis would be coming soon and they had nowhere to run, nowhere to go. Cold fear was creeping through their skin, holding them there and keeping them silent, as if staying silent could save them from the fate that awaited so many Jews like them. But unlike thousands of other Jews, this family would have a happy ending. Unlike so many other Jews, this family would be visited by a small group of fighters who would escort them to safety.

Standing in the middle of a forest surrounding the Belorussian towns of Novogrudek and Lida, you might not see much of interest. A few decades before this, it would be quite different though (Duffy, x). In these woods was a thriving town where Jews could go for safety. Often called the “the Jerusalem in the woods”, this was a place where Jews could stay and raise families, under the noses of the Germans (Duffy, book flap).

The town was founded by three brothers who had the misfortune of watching their parents and two of their siblings getting led away by the Germans. A lot of Jews saw this happen or were with their families being taken away, and most people who saw their families being led away would have tried to stay safe, hiding out and surviving. These three brothers, the Bielski brothers, were a much different case. They wanted to save other Jews from similar fates and they found a great way to do just that. These three boys, Tuvia, Zus, and Asael, had the advantage of knowing a lot about the dense forest near their home. This dense forest would soon become a safe haven for many of the people who would have been the Nazis victims; they ended up saving 1,200 of these Jews (Duffy, 262).

They could mostly provide for themselves since they happened to have people from most necessary professions and they were able to improvise often. They managed to build a bathhouse close to the flour mill (to keep the residents clean, which would keep them from getting some diseases). The doctors had to improvise much more often than the other professionals; because they didn’t have the proper medications, they had to learn to make them from the things in the
woods. A female dentist realized that people were lacking salt so their teeth were rotting away and falling out; she solved the problem by having people boil chestnuts and wash their mouths with the juice, which contained salt. The two village physicians came up with a remedy for healing skin infected by mites and other parasites; they used pig fat and dynamite sulphur (Duffy, 215).

They still had to feed these people though, and managed to get all the food they needed from a large circle of people who would bring them food (Duffy, 215) and the food and supplies the soldiers managed to find during raids. The seamstresses and tailors would turn the random cloth found into clothes (Duffy, 215). They also had a supply of grain and potatoes saved up in case they were cut off from their food providers, along with sixty cattle and thirty horses near the end of the war. (Duffy, 249).

The forest town wasn’t peaceful by any means. Despite their duty to saving lives, they did intend to kill Nazis while they were at it. “The Bielski troops destroyed thirty-four train cars, eighteen bridges, and eight German-run farm-supply buildings,” writes Peter Duffy. Additionally, “Zus submitted his personnel file, in which he noted that he personally killed fourteen Nazis, seventeen policemen, and thirty-three pro-Nazi spies and provocateurs.” (Duffy, 264-265).

We don’t have to make the same sacrifices the people in the Holocaust had to; our lives aren’t as dangerous as the Jews’ lives during the Holocaust. We do make our own sacrifices against things that are wrong. Our biggest fight for what’s right is the fight against bullying, some of us have to sacrifice popularity, friends, and social aspects to stand up for what we believe in.

We don’t have to strive to save thousands of lives, but we should strive to stop bullying and make people’s lives more enjoyable and to keep them from harming themselves. Everyone has probably been bullied once in their life, and they respond to it in several different ways: some kids decide to start bullying other kids to make up for the times they got bullied, some people start to feel bad about themselves and can end up hurting themselves, and some people try to stop other people from feeling that kind of pain, much like the Bielski brothers.

The victims of the Holocaust often were chosen because they were minorities, which is how people choose someone to pick on. Children choose people such as homosexuals, different religious groups, and people with disabilities. Bullying is even worse than TV portrays it. A
lesbian twelve year old was the scapegoat of her class and the other kids told her they would bring a BB gun to school and kill her. She was so afraid she didn’t come to school for a week. That girl doesn’t even have sanctuary at home, where her homophobic father and stepmother don’t know that she’s gay, which puts her under even more stress. Another teen, a sixteen year old girl had severe burns covering her body, and every movement was painful for her. Yet, her father treated her horribly and let her younger siblings make fun of her for how she looked. She wasn’t treated any better at school, except that she had two friends who didn’t care how she looked--two out of several hundred at her school. Shouldn’t soon-to-be adults be more mature than that?

These teens came into my acquaintance when I created a website for people who liked to write, or that was the idea of the website when my best friend and I created it, but it soon grew into a sanctuary for kids with lives like these. I became a friend to each of them, treating them as beautiful and urging them to write to express their feelings. They used it as therapy and it has seemed to help a lot of them. That was my biggest step in combating bullying and what opened my eyes to how bad the situation really is.

Bibliography