



BRAVE: Paul and Ann Monka. Below, Daniel Craig who will star in *Defiance* as Tuvia Bielski



JAMES BOND STAR TAKES ON THE NAZIS

Ann owes her life to defiant brothers

BY ROBERT CLAYTON

JAMES Bond star Daniel Craig takes on the Nazis in his next film. *Defiance* focuses on the Bielski Brigade, a group of underground Jewish resistance fighters who saved more than 12,000 Jews from the Nazis.

Ann Monka — who features in the book on which the film is based — was a young girl when she was saved by the Bielskis and their band of heroic warriors.

Born Ann Stolowitzki in Lida, Eastern Poland, on August 27, 1929, she was just 10 when war broke out in 1939.

Ann was at a summer resort with her mother and siblings when her father unexpectedly showed up to announce that the war had started. He told his young family that he had been drafted into the army and their vacation was cut short.

She said: "Poland was defeated in one week. We then lived for two years under Russian rule.

"Everything was confiscated and all the stores were closed. The system was unacceptable to me because I wasn't used to it.

"I was worried about my father and the Russians sent lots of families to Siberia, which was like a death sentence."

One day a Polish man from Lodz burst into Ann's home claiming that the Germans were killing Jews and sending them all to concentration camps.

"We just couldn't picture this being true or real," she admitted. "Then my father showed up and he told us that he had escaped from prison. Every hour that night people came round asking my father if he had seen this person or that."

Ann spent two years dashing in and out

LIBERATED: Ann Monka's father, mother, sister, brother and cousin gather for a family photograph after their liberation in 1945. From left, Sarah Stoll, Leon and Bella Stoll. Standing are Vivian Stoll, Michael Stoll and Ann Monka



of bomb shelters until a near-miss saw her escape from her house just moments before a direct hit.

She said: "All hell broke loose. We had no where to go and remained in the streets homeless. We went to stay on my uncle's small farm for two days while the Germans occupied the city.

"As children, we still didn't fully understand what was going on and were told that it was a fun place to be.

"Then rules came out that said Jews have to go to concentration camps and that is when the problems really started."

The family was sent to Lida Ghetto, which Ann says was "not big enough for the 10,000 people living there".

She added: "Mass graves were prepared, the people were segregated and 6,700 people were shot. My grandma and my uncle were both killed and my first cousin only survived because he joined the wrong line by accident. The rest of my family was spared because my father worked in a brewery that the Germans wanted to use.

"We didn't realise how close it was all taking place to us. We could just hear screaming and crying and shooting."

They remained in the ghetto until 1943, when cattle carts were prepared to take the families of the brewery workers to Majdanek concentration camp, from where there were no survivors on record.

However, Ann avoided the death journey by hiding in an attic while German soldiers searched the building below her.

Ann's father, brother and sister weren't so lucky, and were boarded on to a train. She said: "My brother, Michael, made his mind up that he was going to jump off the train once it got going."

"The door was locked on the outside, so he managed to push himself through a small window and forced the door open.

"But only my brother, father, sister and eight others jumped. Everyone else froze on their spot. I consider my brother one of the biggest heroes I've ever met."

Having escaped from the ghetto by climbing down rope from a second floor window, it was now that Ann first came into contact with the Bielski brothers, Tuvia, Asael and Zus.

She said: "Three brothers ran a partisan movement and they sent messengers telling people to run away. It was a difficult journey as we were in the woods for a week before we managed to make contact with anyone.

"But as we prepared to go back to the city, a man saw us and came running towards us, saying that he had been circling the woods looking for missing people.

"We weren't alone any more.

We shared their food and made fires to keep warm."

The Bielski brothers were the only rebel group who took in the young and elderly and Ann was to live the next two years of her life in their makeshift dwellings in the woods.

"They built an entire city in the woods. They baked bread, had skilled people to fix things and had their own synagogue.

"The three brothers had a regular army of 300 set up to go on missions as a way to obtain ammunition and German uniforms."

She added: "Each brother was a hero and it is only because of them that I am alive today. It is just too bad that too many people in the ghettos ignored their message. The spirit and mood in the woods was so great and all I did for two years was sing and dance and try and raise people's spirits.

"As we all sat around the fire, I'd pretend we weren't in the woods and would tell people to raise their heads and pretend the stars were our chandelier. I tried to dream and hoped that I'd survive so that I could tell the world our story."

She added: "My mother had been crying constantly for three months because we thought my father, brother and sister had been killed.

"Then one day I saw my sister, who came running towards me and said that my father and brother were still alive.

"She told us the story of how they had escaped from the train and she ended up becoming a liaison for the brigade because she spoke such perfect Polish and German."

Although she lived in the group, Ann was too young to be an active member and admitted "there were a lot of things going on that [she] didn't understand".

After the war, Ann settled in the US, where she met her husband, Paul, who had also been a Polish underground fighter.

In 1994, author Nechama Tec, who was writing a book about the Bielski brothers titled *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, approached Ann to capture her memories.

And it is this book that provides the basis of *Defiance*, directed by Edward Zwick. The film will open later this year.

She said: "The world has to see this movie. They were the only Jews that were able to save other Jews and it should go into history that they didn't all follow like sheep to their deaths."

Craig will portray Tuvia Bielski, while the other two brothers, Zus and Asael, will be played by Liev Schreiber and Jamie Bell, respectively.

Ann lives in Montville, New Jersey and has three children and seven grandchildren.

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