



## Flick audience gets behind-scenes take on epic story of resistance

By Jane Whitehead  
Photographs by Leo Gaskell

Lexington, February 28—On a freezing Saturday evening, moviegoers thronged the sidewalk outside The Lexington Flick, waiting for the doors to open at 6.00 p.m.

Some hoped to catch the Oscar-sweeping “Slumdog Millionaire,” but most had shown up for a special screening of “Defiance,” a story of Jewish resistance in World War II, starring Daniel Craig and based on the 1993 book of the same name by award-winning author Nechama Tec.

Peter Siy, The Flick’s owner, was gratified by the sellout crowd of over 200. With pre-show refreshments catered by Neillios, and a post-screening panel discussion and book signing with Tec and her son, filmmaker Roland Tec, a co-producer on “Defiance,” this was the sort of community event Siy had in mind when he bought the cinema six months ago.

“We want to do more of this kind of thing,” he said. “I think Lexington’s hungry for this kind of interaction with artists.” The idea came from the author’s daughter, Lexington resident Leora Tec.

In introducing her mother to the Flick audience, Leora Tec described her as a noted Holocaust scholar who has written seven books on the subject. “Eight!” corrected her father, psychiatrist Leon Tec, from the audience. The first was a memoir, “Dry Tears,” (1982) in which Tec described how she and her Jewish-Polish family escaped the Nazis by taking refuge with a Polish Catholic family and “passing” as Christians, after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939.

“Defiance” is based on the true story of the Bielski brothers, who led Jewish partisan resistance against the Nazis during World War II from forest hideouts in Belarus (formerly Belorussia), and in the process saved some 1200 Jewish men, women and children from deportation and death. Directed by Ed Zwick, who also made “Glory,” and “Blood Diamond,” the

movie stars Daniel Craig, of James Bond fame, and Liev Schreiber, whose 2005 directorial debut “Everything is Illuminated” explored the legacy of the Holocaust in Ukraine, immediately south of Belarus.

For many in the audience, the movie’s subject matter had personal resonance. Among them was Julian Bussgang, who was born and grew up in the city of Lwow in Poland (now Lviv, in Ukraine). “I’m very interested in resistance activities,” said Bussgang. Two weeks after World War II began, on September 17, 1939, when he was 14, he fled south to Rumania with his family, and later fought in the Polish Free Army in Italy. “I wanted to fight,” said Bussgang, who contributed a chapter on his experiences to the volume “We Shall Not Forget! Memories of the Holocaust,” published by Lexington’s Temple Isaiah in 1994.

“Defiance” begins with scenes of Nazis and local collaborators rounding up and killing civilians in the area around Stankiewiczze, the village where the Bielskis own a mill and farm. Three of the Bielskis, Zus (Schreiber), Asael (Jamie Bell) and Aron (George MacKay) escape into the forest, and are joined by older brother Tuvia (Craig). Others who have eluded the Nazis gather round them, and the group, which eventually grows to over 1000, builds makeshift shelters, lives on food bartered for or stolen from local farmers, and carries out armed raids on the Germans

and local collaborators.

Life in the forest is precarious, with the constant threat of discovery, starvation and deadly disease. Zus and Tuvia fight over the right course of action, with Tuvia arguing for protection and survival above all – “Our revenge is to live,” he says at one point – and Zus supporting military action against the invaders. After a violent quarrel, Zus persuades a group of fellow fighters to join a band of Red Army partisans, who are also using the forest as a base for guerrilla attacks on the Nazis. But anti-Semitism among the Russian soldiers poisons the alliance, and Zus rejoins Tuvia at the film’s dramatic climax.

After the credits rolled and the applause died down, the lights went up and Nechama and Roland Tec took questions. What happened to the youngest brother, Aron? “He survived, and he’s now living in Florida,” said Nechama. “Of course he is!” said Roland, to laughter. Was the grainy black and white footage at the beginning authentic archival footage from the period, or a recreation? The images of Adolf Hitler were archival, explained Roland, but the footage showing the initial attack on the Bielskis’ village was shot on location in Lithuania and digitally treated to match the archival material.

Asked how much control she had over the way the movie script developed, Nechama Tec explained the options

process, by which filmmakers buy limited term rights to material. She has learned not get too excited when her work attracts this kind of attention. “Options come, and options go,” she said, in her richly accented mid-European English. (She’s also fluent in Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew.) So when Ed Zwick approached her to renew his option on “Defiance,” which he had taken nine years ago, and allowed to lapse, she made the deal, but “didn’t give it much thought.”

“But then it happened, and it’s like a miracle for me,” she said. Hollywood films attract more attention than scholarly books, after all, and Tec wants the core message of “Defiance” to reach the widest possible audience. She wants to correct the view that European Jews were victims who went passively to their death.

For all Zwick’s interest, said Roland Tec, the film would not have been made without Daniel Craig’s support. “Without him we frankly wouldn’t have had the funding,” he said. Craig’s commitment was also clear from his intense questioning of Nechama Tec when she visited the shooting location in Lithuania in November 2008. The actor – and all the actors she met – impressed her by their seriousness and thorough approach to research.

Tec made copious notes on the script, and found Zwick open to her suggestions and corrections. “At the same time,” she said, “He always explained: ‘Nechama, a movie is not



Clockwise from top: Author and Professor Emerita of Sociology, Nechama Tec, University of Connecticut at Stamford, takes questions from the audience. The crowd at the Lexington Flick screening the powerful film. Lexington resident and survivor, Julian Bussgang who at 14 fled to Rumania with his family, and later fought in the Polish Free Army in Italy. Roland Tec, Co-producer of the movie Defiance. The cover of the newly released paperback edition of Defiance which made the New York Times non-fiction bestseller list in January.

a book, and a book is not a movie. So it has to be different. I cannot put everything that comes from years of work into two hours.”

“Did you actually talk to Tuvia?” prompted Leon Tec. His wife introduced him to the audience as “The troublemaker, my husband.” After the war Tuvia Bielski moved first to Israel and then to New York, where he built a trucking business with his wife Lilka, (played in the film by Alexa Davalos). Nechama Tec had spoken with him by telephone while researching her book “In the Lion’s Den,” but all attempts to meet in person had been stymied by Lilka Bielski’s excuses.

Finally, Tec secured a meeting at the Bielskis’ Brooklyn home in May 1987. She hired a driver for the two-hour drive from Westport, Conn., and was greeted by Lilka, who told her that Tuvia had had a bad night, was very sick, and could not see her as planned. Tec said that she was leaving for Israel the next day on a research trip, and was politely insistent. “I want to get a sense of the man before I go,” she told Lilka.

“So we’re going back and forth on the doorstep and she doesn’t let me in, and we hear a voice from the other room, ‘Let her in,’” recalled Tec. Tuvia Bielski, clearly weak and very sick, came out to meet her, dismissed the hovering Lilka, and sat down with Tec and her tape recorder.

Speaking Yiddish, he began in a faint whisper that Tec could barely hear. Then, “Gradually, gradually, his voice became stronger and stronger as if before my eyes he became the big hero, the great charismatic leader that he was during the war,” said Tec. After two and a half hours, when she suggested they finish the session, Bielski said, “What’s the matter, are you getting tired?” Tec assured him that she would be in touch after she returned from Israel. “I’m not sure I will be here,” he said. He died two weeks later, at age 81.

Audience reaction to “Defiance” was generally positive. “You wonder how many other stories there are like this that never got out,” said pediatrician Athos Bousvaros, calling it, “An amazing movie, an amazing story.”

Actress and singer Merle Perkins, from Roslindale, who features in Roland Tec’s new movie “We Pedal Uphill,” regretted that the film’s publicity had sold it as a war movie, “when it’s so much more than that.” “There was so much about humanity in the film,” she said.

Ian Schneiderman had the impression that the filmmakers had taken a “phenomenal” true story and molded it to fit Hollywood conventions. Former Bridge School principal Barbara Manfredi said that she had never heard of the Bielski partisans, and had found it interesting if a little alarming that “as you get really caught up in the movie, you root for violence.”

“Audiences have been very moved by it,” said Roland Tec. “What’s really powerful and moving to me is that it shows people making something out of nothing, managing to band together to cooperate and survive.” And, noted Leon Tec, “It’s been fantastic for the book,” which has been reissued in paperback and made the *New York Times* non-fiction bestseller list in January.

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Author, Nechama Tec signs copies of her book Defiance at the Lexington Flick.