

Preface

The Holocaust is often defined in sets of numbers. We read, for example, that six million Jews were killed as the Nazis brutally and methodically carried out “the final solution” across Europe. Reading further, we learn that this number represented fully two-thirds of the entire European Jewish population at that time. Yet numbers like this can become staggering, almost too difficult to wrap our minds around.

We agree that the numbers, the statistics, must be remembered. At the same time, we’re certain that a proper education of the Holocaust can only be gained when we combine those numbers with the personal accounts of survivors. The statistics remain in rote memory; but it is the personal accounts that make the terror of the Holocaust very real in our minds. It is worth insisting we pay attention to these accounts.

We began this project in 2010 as a way to introduce readers to the Holocaust as it transpired in the Soviet Union. The Nazis moved so swiftly across Belarus and Ukraine – Soviet Republics – that there was little time to establish a streamlined way to deport Soviet Jews to camps in the west. Undeterred, the Nazis found new ways to maintain their mandate: Jews unable to evacuate deeper into the Soviet Union were executed by firing squad or rounded up to be burned in barns. At Babi Yar, a ravine in Kiev, the Nazis and local sympathizers executed nearly 34,000 Jews in just two days. In Belarus, 90 percent of the Jewish prewar population was destroyed. Another statistic – but one you should keep in mind when reading accounts written here by Belorussian Jews living now in Southern Arizona.

As the project expanded, we determined to include the personal accounts of Eastern European Jews as well. Most of us are better informed as to what occurred in the Polish extermination camps, and how Jews from a wide swath of Europe were transported, selected, and summarily murdered upon their arrival at a camp. For this reason, these

particular accounts will seem more familiar to you. You'll also learn about less-organized concentration camps established in the Soviet Union, places such as Akhmetchetka and Domanevka in Ukraine.

We ask that you keep one important fact in mind as you read these histories: if you are a Southern Arizonan, these survivors are your honored neighbors. Some stories here are simpler than others, and some are more plainly written; all are the memories of childhood or teenage years. And all will touch your heart in various ways.

David will tell you, for example, how his grandparents were tossed into a well and left to die; Boris will explain his mother's dilemma when forced to choose which child she'd save; Valeria will describe being a twin and a test subject in a death camp; and Walter will show you the ingenuity it took for a teenager to survive a labor camp.

We are not experts on the Holocaust; our normal function is to provide support to survivors in Southern Arizona as much as possible. However, as this project took root, we gained a tremendous amount of information related to the cold precision the Nazis used in implementing the destruction of millions of families.

One note: Germany's invasion of Europe occurred in various years. They invaded Poland, for example, in 1939, but waited until 1941 to invade the Soviet Union and 1944 to occupy Hungary. This explains why survivors from varying countries use different dates when describing the Nazi onslaught in their country.

70 years have passed since World War II ended. We are fortunate and grateful to have this last generation of survivors in our midst to provide us the gift of their stories. We are convinced that every Holocaust survivor's personal account represents one piece of a vast puzzle, and we thank those survivors who agreed to share their stories. We are, all of us, obliged to educate ourselves and our children, in any way we can, to the dangers of thinking less of another human based simply on belief and prejudice.

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