

AS WE DESCENDED TO BABI YAR

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Elena aged 3 with her family, 1938



*Pre-March 1938

Any Jewish family that survived the Holocaust has reason to describe that survival as a miracle. Miracles such as these consist of a number of aspects: luck, coincidence and particularly in having good people in the right place at the right time.

This happened to my family and me as we were heading down towards Babi Yar, a ravine near Kiev where we didn't realise massacres were taking place.

We were moving in a crowd made up of our Jewish neighbours and townspeople: old and young, even babies. Most people assumed we were going to be evacuated into some sort of detention camp or area.

This would not have been the first time the Soviets moved whole populations for political reasons, but this time it was different. This was happening in collaboration with the Germans, our supposed enemies. We had no idea what was about to happen.

Totally unexpectedly, Mum's school friend Marusya Bantysh came running up, trying to find us to warn us not to go there. That was one of these miracles!

Just prior to the occupation of Kiev by the Germans, there were daily radio announcements with the same message: 'Kiev will stay ours. Kiev will stay Russian!'

My grandfather, who hated the Bolsheviks, told me, 'Lena, switch off the radio, I am sick and tired of this propaganda!'

He tried everything to persuade us not to evacuate. He kept telling my mother, 'Hana, don't you remember the Germans when they were here in 1918? They are a civilised nation! We don't have to fear them.'

Another reason we didn't leave was because Lyuba, my oldest sister, had graduated from medical college as a doctor on 20 June and had begun working in a hospital. They wouldn't have allowed her to leave.

We were a close family; my paternal grandfather, my parents and their three daughters: Lyuba, twenty-three, Dina fourteen and me, aged six.

On the day of the German invasion, our father was away working in his mail-van. We lived on the outskirts of Kiev, in Borschagovska Street. Four other Jewish families lived in this area, as well as some Ukrainians, Poles and Russians.

I clearly remember the day the Germans entered Kiev — or more precisely, how they roared in on motorcycles with cameras in their hands. They moved from Stalin Square along Kreschatik Street, where we had been staying at our grandfather's place for the past week, to be near an air raid shelter.

From there they travelled on to Shevchenko Street to Lenin's monument. The city's self-appointed 'deputies' were waiting there to welcome their supposed 'liberators' with bread and salt. The Germans were literally dragged off their motorcycles to receive the triple kiss.

People started coming out of the air raid shelters. A German soldier walked into a block of flats, and a crowd gathered round him. They asked, 'What is going to happen now?'

I stood nearby and could see him gesturing and explaining: Communists and Komsomol members are 'plif-plaf' (finished). 'Juden' (crossing his hand over his chest) — 'arbeiten, arbeiten' (they will work).

That seemed to be sufficient invitation for the local marauders to start looting. They smashed shop-windows and took away whatever they could carry.

I have always believed that Babi Yar was no accident. I know the German government had issued an order to kill Jews, but the strong anti-Semitic mood in Ukraine definitely played a role too.

I do not wish to blame the whole population; in fact, what I am about to relate proves this was not the case. Our friends and neighbours, a mixture of Poles, Russians and Ukrainians, did not betray us. Yet they could have been shot for helping us, or jailed, not for a couple of days or weeks, but for two whole years!

But a great many were ready to help the Germans kill us. Leaflets in Russian were printed and posted on fences saying, 'Kill Jews — save Russia' and many people took pleasure in pointing out 'suspicious persons' and Juden to the Germans.

I myself witnessed an execution on the street opposite the opera house.

Some did it because of racial hatred; others, for greed. This scum betrayed Jewish people then took over their homes. Many willingly joined the German police.

At the end of September 1941, the Gestapo arrested nine leading rabbis in Kiev and ordered them to send out a proclamation to their communities:

All Jews and their children, as an elite nation, will be transferred to safe places.

On 27 September, orders were posted around the city:

All the Jews of the city of Kiev and its vicinity must appear on Monday, 29 September by eight o'clock in the morning at the corner of Mel'nikova and Dorohozhytska streets near the Viis'kove cemetery. Bring documents, money, valuables, and also warm clothing, linen, etc.

Any Jews who do not follow this order and are found elsewhere will be shot.

In the early morning of 29 September, the Jews in our neighbourhood were getting ready to leave. They had cooked chickens and were packing Primus stoves and warm clothes.

'It's going to be a long trip,' they were saying. 'The kids should have something to eat on the way.'

Manilov, a close friend of my father, was walking around, holding up a stick and saying, 'Jews, today is Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). God is calling us, so get ready quickly!'

Grandfather Moshka was eighty years old and couldn't move on his own, so they brought a wheelbarrow for him.

Manilov came to my mum and asked, 'Hana, why aren't you getting ready like everyone else?'

Mama replied, 'Itsik, I am not going anywhere without Volodya (my father). We'll lose each other, so I'll wait for him and we'll go together.'

Manilov left my mother a tallit (a white prayer shawl with black stripes) as a memento of his friendship for my father.

Everybody left, but we stayed. The next day the radio announced, 'Anyone who conceals Jews will be executed'.

Mama decided we would go, after all, as she did not want to jeopardise the lives of our neighbours. We joined a crowd of people who, like us, had originally stayed hidden at home.

A few streets before the descent into the ravine of Babi Yar, we heard somebody calling out to us. It was Marusya, mother's friend. She had come searching for us.

'Hana, girls, where are you going?' she shouted. 'There were machine guns in action all night down there. They're killing people!'

My sisters started to cry. 'Mama, we don't want to die!' I started crying too. 'I don't want to die either!' So we returned home. Nobody stopped us.

That same night our father returned. He had been coming home on a train that had been bombed. He survived, but it had taken him ten days to reach Kiev. We told him everything, and he found it impossible to believe. He sat with his hands over his head muttering, 'This cannot be true. This is monstrous!'

The next morning he decided to go and check for himself. He was Polish, and not Jewish. He came back after five or six hours looking lost and pale, his hands shaking.

‘Yes, it’s true. I went through the fence and could see what the policemen were doing. They were searching the people for any valuables, then stripping them and piling up all their warm clothes. I went down and said to someone, “I have a Jewish wife. What am I supposed to do?”’

He answered, “Bring the Jewess here. You must bring her here!”

From that day onward he seemed to be affected by a quiet and growing insanity.

I remember my parents lying in bed with ropes around their necks, the conversation going something like this:

‘If they come for us at night, we’ll tighten the ropes.’

‘What about the kids?’

‘They have red hair, so they’ll survive. The Germans are looking for people with curly black hair and crooked noses. That’s their idea of what Jews look like.’

Fortunately, our apartment was on the ground floor, so we were able to dig a big hole near the stove. We covered it with wooden boards reinforced by metal plates, and we hid in that hole during the day.

Our neighbours helped us by exchanging our belongings for food.

A young Polish man, who had been mobilised by the Germans for construction work, moved into our apartment. He was fond of us girls, especially my pretty sisters. He knew we were in danger from the Germans and he wanted to help us. He was not actually told we were Jewish; perhaps he guessed.

He brought us Konder, a soup made with millet and pork fat, part of his own modest food allotment.

Our former maid, Ustina, who lived in a nearby village, also helped us. She supplied us with milk and some vegetables. We were often very hungry, but we did not starve.

During raids by the SS soldiers in search of Jews, Mama would hide in the cellar. Meanwhile, my sister Dina rubbed her cheeks with a brush to redden them. She would then lie in bed, moaning, and I would tell the Germans, 'Typhus, typhus!' and they would disappear at once. We all admired Dina's courage. She was so scared, but she had to be a good actor for all our sakes.

In March our grandfather died, and our father committed suicide that same night by hanging himself. He had twisted the tallit Manilov had given him a few months earlier, creating a noose. The ironies of this world never cease to amaze me!

We buried them together, father and son, taking their coffins to the graveyard on the same cart. My mother covered her curly black hair with a scarf.

After our father's death, mama tried to commit suicide several times, but each time my sister, being a doctor, was able to save her. Looking back I can understand her state of mind ... the murder of our fellow Jews, our father's horrifying suicide and her fear for us. Every day could have been our last.

Kiev was liberated in November 1943. This should have been our greatest moment of relief but, incredibly, mama was called in to the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) headquarters, where they interrogated her for several hours, asking questions like, 'How did you manage to survive?'

Did they think that we were spies for our murderers? In the end, mama started sobbing, 'How can you ask me such a question?' They let her go.

We returned to a 'normal' life despite the heavy consequences of the war: the terrible memories, the devastation, the loss of our father and most of our community. We later learned that one hundred thousand Jews were mown down at Babi Yar.

Our mother died in 1953 at the age of fifty-eight after five years of illness brought on by all the hardships of our existence and antisemitism. But we, her daughters, wanted to live again and did not give in to despair.

Lyuba became a respected pulmonologist, and Dina a sales-agent for a big factory. I continued my studies, did well, and in 1949 I enrolled in the Technical College of Communications. I graduated and worked as an engineer-designer in the Scientific Research Institute of Communications.

It must be said we were not considered Jewish because we had a Polish father, otherwise the ongoing, underlying antisemitism would have made it harder for us to obtain access to good educational and professional opportunities.

My sisters and I remained close, even after we all married and had children. We got together often. Invariably, we recalled the destroyed lives of our beloved parents, but we also celebrated the miracle of our survival. We came out of what was an unimaginable horror because of a number of brave people. They simply saw us as fellow human beings and friends. They did not believe the vicious Nazi propaganda about Jews. They put themselves in daily danger for two long years. Our generations of children will remember them.

The Talmud tells us: 'Whoever saves one life, it is as if he saved the whole world'. Among our children are doctors, engineers, librarians and nurses. More importantly, they are good people. They exist only because of the compassion of others.

My sisters' families live in Ukraine, but fate brought me to Australia. My two daughters and their families left our place of birth in 1994 because they feared for the future of their own children in the collapsing Soviet Union. My husband and I joined them in 1998 under the Family Reunion scheme.

We found peace and prosperity in this wonderful country. When I stop to think, I truly believe that miracles keep happening to me.

Excerpt from **Courage to Care Vol 2: 22 further remarkable stories of rescue during World War II.**

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