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DOCUMENTATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND HEROISM: LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO ENHANCE THE FUTURE

Barbara Gutfreund Arfa Professional Development Conference on Holocaust Education

The Education Department of the American Society for Yad Vashem and its Young Leadership Associates held its nineteenth annual professional development conference on Holocaust education on March 19, 2017. This year's program was generously supported by the Barbara Gutfreund Arfa Endowment Fund for Holocaust Education.

This program is a collaborative effort with the Association of Teachers of Social Studies of the United Federation of Teachers, the Educators' Chapter of the UFT Jewish Heritage Committee, and the School of Education of Manhattanville College. Participants in this year's program, which included educators from all five boroughs of New York City and from the tri-state area, received in-service credit for completing the conference. The program also included a display of the educational unit developed by the International School of Holocaust Studies, "The Legend of the Lodz Ghetto Children." This educational resource, along with our array of Traveling Exhibitions, is available to schools to enrich their educational programs on the Holocaust.

Through teaching we warn about the consequences of extreme and baseless hatred and prejudice. We educate to promote tolerance, in the hope that through our efforts, future generations will make sure that the

Holocaust, a tragic chapter in human history, will not repeat itself. This conference, organized by Dr. Marlene W. Yahalom, director of education of the American Society, has proven to be a strong vehicle to promote the mission of Holocaust remembrance and mem-

about the creation of this program and the establishment of the Barbara Gutfreund Arfa Endowment Fund for Holocaust Education in memory of her mother, Barbara Gutfreund Arfa, z"l. Marlene W. Yahalom, PhD, Director of Education of the American

claims.

President Eisenhower's ability to foresee the era of Holocaust denial, and thereby plant the seeds to ultimately meet the challenges presented by these false claims, is a testament to his sharp understanding that by ordering the creation of this visual evidence, his actions would shape the course of Holocaust memory and the conduct of future leaders. By creating evidence, President Eisenhower ensured that the behavior of future leaders would be accountable.

Mary Eisenhower, granddaughter of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and CEO of People to People International, was our keynote speaker this year. She spoke about the importance of ethics and responsibility, and the role of documentation and the obligation to accurately document the Holocaust so that the information taught is verified, authenticated and recorded for present and future generations. She emphasized that the lessons of the Holocaust need to be mandatory education for students, to enable them to be

proactive in their lives to be a part of the effort to ensure this part of history does not repeat itself. Dr. David Silberklang, senior historian at Yad Vashem, shared his remarks on the topic of "Does War Have a Moral Compass: Reflections on Allied Responses to the Shoah."

Dr. Yahalom presented a workshop to participants on the role of postage stamps in documenting the Holocaust, and provided teaching strategies to introduce students to learn about the Holocaust, and preserving its memory through postage stamps.

Our program and theme this year, Documentation, Accountability and Heroism: Learning from the Past to Enhance the Future – Role Models for our Children, represents an opportunity to reflect on our obligations to

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(left to right) Mary Eisenhower, keynote speaker, Caroline Massel, Executive Board member; and David Silberklang, senior historian at Yad Vashem.

ory through education over the years. The conference was created by Caroline Arfa Massel, Founding Chair of the Young Leadership Associates of the American Society and Executive Board member of the American Society, in 1999.

Caroline Massel opened the program with very poignant remarks

Society, spoke about the importance of this program in its efforts to raise Holocaust awareness through education, and acknowledged the heroism and foresight of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in documenting and verifying the atrocities he saw in his visit to *Ohrdruf*.

In April of 1945, then General Eisenhower toured *Ohrdruf* — a subcamp of the *Buchenwald* concentration camp. It was as result of this difficult visit that President Eisenhower ordered army photographers and filmmakers, members of the news media and legislators to create visual evidence of the atrocities that his visit revealed to the world. His thinking was that if ever in the future there should develop a tendency to call this "propaganda," then this visual evidence, supported by affidavits, would meet the challenges of those

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DOCUMENTATION, ACCOUNTABILITY AND HEROISM: LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO ENHANCE THE FUTURE

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honor the memory of Holocaust victims, create and preserve the accurate record of the events of the Holocaust through education, and sustain this education in a post-Holocaust world. We also recognize the need to understand the foundation laid by the events of the Holocaust that underscore the importance of these themes.

programs for studying the Holocaust to the public schools of New York City."

This award also acknowledges that the ATSS/UFT commends the American Society for implementing best educational practices in using documents, inquiry, and critical thinking and action in studying the Holocaust.

In her remarks to participants, Dr.

but also to offer connections between this subject and other fields of study. In this way we hope to raise awareness and make the information more relevant to students. As educators we are aware how the events of the Holocaust include a wide array of challenges to teachers and students because of their complexity, horror, content and obligation to remember that the subject presents."

She added that "our own awareness of Holocaust survivors should include the changing image of Holocaust victims who survived and who perished. For those who perished, we need to consider how they want to be remembered. For those who survived, we should realize how they have been transformed from victims to heroes. They are our eyewitnesses to history, and their resistance efforts are symbols of the strength and of the resilience of the human spirit."

Dr. Yahalom told the participants that "as educators, by sharing the responsibility of teaching the lessons of this event to

future generations, you make a positive and meaningful contribution to Holocaust education and remembrance since your efforts help secure the historically valid memory of this event for the future. Documenting the

complexity, horror, content and obligation of remembrance that this subject presents. To meet these challenges, we offer teachers connections between this event and contemporary issues. In this way, we hope to raise awareness and make the information more meaningful and relevant to our students."

She also acknowledged the inspirational leadership of Leonard Wilf, chairman of the American Society, and how "through programs such as the conference, we can teach participants about the many themes to consider in this undertaking: the multifaceted contours of human behavior, the dangers of extreme and baseless hatred, the role of the Holocaust in public memory, the lives of the heroes and the victims, and the overarching challenge to make sure neither group is forgotten."

She concluded, "Our responsibility as educators includes that we teach our students the meaning of accurately recording historical events as a way to honor the memory of the victims. This process calls for the need to explore and introduce to our students how historical events may be presented and re-presented over time. It is exactly during this transformation of facts that we need to sustain the accuracy of the information."

"President Eisenhower's unusual foresight and sense of history laid the foundation for establishing evidence for the future to ensure history is properly recorded. His actions carved a path for educators to be instrumental in meeting these responsibilities."



Participants at the 2017 Arfa conference.

The workshop topics complemented the theme of the program: "Teaching Social Justice through Survivor Testimonies;" "Documenting History – Survivors as EyeWitnesses;" "Liberation and the Efforts of DDE to Document What Happened for the Future;" "Diaries and Documentation – Creating Historical Memory through Testimonials."

Carolyn Herbst, past president /past chairperson of the ATSS/UFT, emphasized that this conference is a valuable resource for increasing awareness and sensitivity to intolerance and injustice. Carolyn remarked on the challenge of teaching this topic without reducing the topic to numbers and statistics, and emphasizing the human elements of the events – victims, rescuers, perpetrators and bystanders. She added on the importance of educators realizing how this topic must be taught and sustained in our educational communities.

The American Society for Yad Vashem was awarded the 2015 President's Award by the Association of Teachers of Social Studies/United Federation of Teachers for the Society's contributions to social studies education nationally. This is the first time this award was given to an organization.

"The ATSS/UFT presented the award in recognition of the valuable part the American Society plays in social studies education, and of the American Society's turning to the ATSS/UFT for assistance in bringing

Yahalom spoke about the "importance of empowering educators to transmit the lessons of the Holocaust to their students through education. As an institution, Yad Vashem is a symbol of both destruction and rebirth. Through



Dr. Marlene Yahalom, Director of Education, presenting "Holocaust Memory through Postage Stamps."

education, these parallel messages are conveyed to the community at large. One of the ways in which we provide teachers with enrichment about this subject is to provide resources to teach about this subject,

Holocaust and preserving its memory is the driving force behind Holocaust history. As educators, we are aware how the events of the Holocaust include a wide array of challenges to teachers and students because of the

For more information about ASYV educational programs and events, and Traveling Exhibitions, contact Marlene Warshawski Yahalom, PhD, Director of Education – mwy@yad-vashemusa.org.

THE HOLOCAUST'S GREAT ESCAPE

BY MATTHEW SHAER,
SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE

Shortly after dawn one January day in 1944, a German military truck departed the center of Vilnius, in what is today Lithuania, and rattled southwest toward the fog-laced towns that ringed the city. Near the village of *Ponar*, the vehicle came to a halt, and a pale 18-year-old named Motke Zeidel, chained at the ankles, was led from the cargo hold.

Zeidel had spent the previous two years in German-occupied Vilnius, in the city's walled-off Jewish ghetto. He'd watched as the Nazis sent first hundreds and then thousands of Jews by train or truck or on foot to a camp in the forest. A small number of people managed to flee the camp, and they returned with tales of what they'd seen: rows of men and women machine-gunned down at close range. Mothers pleading for the lives of their children. Deep earthen pits piled high with corpses. And a name: *Ponar*.

Now Zeidel himself had arrived in the forest. Nazi guards led him through a pair of gates and past a sign: "Entrance Strictly Forbidden. Danger to life. Mines." Ahead, through the gaps in the pines, he saw massive depressions in the ground covered with fresh earth — the burial pits. "This is it," he said to himself. "This is the end."

The Nazi killing site at *Ponar* is today known to scholars as one of the first examples of the "Holocaust by bullets" — the mass shootings that claimed the lives of upwards of two million Jews across Eastern Europe. Unlike the infamous gas chambers at places like Auschwitz, these murders were carried out at close range, with rifles and machine guns. Significantly, the killings at *Ponar* marked the transition to the Final Solution, the Nazi policy under which Jews would no longer be imprisoned in labor camps or expelled from Europe but exterminated.

Zeidel braced for the crack of a rifle.

It never came. Opening his eyes, he found himself standing face to face with a Nazi guard, who told him that beginning immediately, he must work with other Jewish prisoners to cut down the pine trees around the camp and transport the lumber to the pits. "What for?" Zeidel later recalled wondering. "We didn't know what for."

A week later, he and other members of the crew received a visit from the camp's *Sturmbannführer*, or commander, a 30-year-old dandy who wore boots polished shiny as mirrors, white gloves that reached up to his elbows, and smelled strongly of perfume. Zeidel remembered what the commandant told them: "Just about 90,000 people were killed here, lying in mass graves." But, the *Sturmbannführer* explained, "there must not be any trace" of what had

happened at *Ponar*, lest Nazi command be linked to the mass murder of civilians. All the bodies would have to be exhumed and burned. The wood collected by Zeidel and his fellow prisoners would form the pyres.

By late January, roughly 80 prisoners, known to historians as the Burning Brigade, were living in the camp, in a subterranean wood-walled bunker they'd built themselves. Four were women, who washed laundry in large metal vats and prepared meals, typically a chunk of ice and dirt and potato melted down to stew. The men were divided into groups. The weaker men maintained the pyres that smoldered through the night, filling the air with the heavy smell of burning flesh. The strongest hauled bodies from the earth with bent and hooked iron

amplifies the horror.

"From the moment when they made us bring up the corpses, and we understood that we wouldn't get out of there alive, we reflected on what we could do," Zeidel remembered.

And so the prisoners turned to one thought: escape.

Richard Freund, an American archaeologist at the University of Hartford, in Connecticut, specializes in Jewish history, modern and ancient. He has been traversing the globe for almost three decades, working at sites as varied as *Qumran*, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, and at *Sobibor*, a Nazi extermination camp in eastern Poland. Unusually for a man in his profession, he rarely puts trowel to earth. Instead,



A proposed museum in the former Jewish ghetto in Vilnius, Lithuania, features portraits of families who once lived there.

poles. One prisoner, a Russian named Yuri Farber, later recalled that they could identify the year of death based on the corpse's level of undress:

People who were murdered in 1941 were dressed in their outer clothing. In 1942 and 1943, however, came the so-called "winter aid campaign" to "voluntarily" give up warm clothing for the German army. Beginning in 1942, people were herded in and forced to undress to their underwear.

Double-sided ramps were built inside the pits. One crew hauled stretchers filled with corpses up the ramp, and another crew pushed the bodies onto the pyre. In a week, the Burning Brigade might dispose of 3,500 bodies or more. Later, the guards forced prisoners to sift through the ashes with strainers, looking for bone fragments, which would then be pounded down into powder.

All told, historians have documented at least 80,000 people shot at *Ponar* between 1941 and 1944, and many believe the true number is greater still. Ninety percent of those killed were Jews. That the Nazis charged a brigade of prisoners to disinter and dispose of the bodies, in the most sickening of circumstances, only

Freund, who is rumped and stout, with eyes that seem locked in a perpetual squint, practices what he calls "noninvasive archaeology," which uses ground-penetrating radar and other types of computerized electronic technology to discover and describe structures hidden underground.

One day this past fall I walked the grounds of the *Ponar* forest with Freund and a couple of his colleagues, who had recently completed a surveying project of the area.

Although he was raised some 5,000 miles from Lithuania, on Long Island, New York, Freund has deep roots in the area. His great-grandparents fled Vilnius in the early 20th century, during an especially violent series of pogroms undertaken by the Czarist government, when the city still belonged to the Russian Empire. "I've always felt a piece of me was there," Freund told me.

Which made him all the more intrigued to hear, two years ago, about a new research project led by Jon Seligman, of the Israel Antiquities Authority, at the site of Vilnius's Great Synagogue, a once towering Renaissance-Baroque structure dating to the 1630s. The synagogue,

which had also housed a vast library, kosher meat stalls and a communal well, had at one time been the crown jewel of the city, itself a center of Jewish life in Eastern Europe — the "Jerusalem of the North." By one estimate, at the turn of the 20th century Vilnius was home to some 200,000 people, half of them Jewish. But the synagogue was damaged after Hitler's army captured the city in June 1941, and herded the Jewish population into a pair of walled ghettos, and then sent them, in successive waves, to *Ponar*. After the war the Soviets razed the synagogue entirely; today an elementary school stands in its place.

Lithuanian archaeologists had discovered remnants of the old synagogue — evidence of several intact subterranean chambers. "The main synagogue floor, parts of the grand Tuscan pillars, the *bimah*" — or altar — "the decorated ceiling," Freund explained. "All of that had been underground, and it survived."

Freund and his colleagues, including Harry Jol, a professor of geology and anthropology from the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, and Philip Reeder, a geoscientist and mapping expert from Duquesne University, in Pittsburgh, were brought in to explore further. They spent five days scanning the ground beneath the school and the surrounding landscape with ground-penetrating radar, and emerged with a detailed digital map that displayed not just the synagogue's main altar and seating area but also a separate building that held a bathhouse containing two *mikvaot*, or ceremonial baths, a well for water and several latrines. Afterward, Freund met with the staff at the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, named after the famed 18th-century Talmudic scholar from Vilnius, and a partner on the Great Synagogue project. Then, Freund said, "We asked them: 'What else would you like us to do? We'll do it for free.'"

The next day, a museum staffer named Mantas Siksniunas took Freund and his crew to the forests of *Ponar*, a 20-minute drive from the city center. Most of the nearby Nazi-era burial pits had been located, Siksniunas explained, but local archaeologists had found a large area, overgrown with foliage, that looked as if it might be an unidentified mass grave: Could Freund and his colleagues determine if it was?

As Siksniunas led Freund through the woods, he told an astonishing story about a group of prisoners who had reportedly tunneled to freedom and joined partisan fighters hiding out in the forest. But when Freund asked to see exactly how they made it out, he got only shrugs. No one could show him; no one knew. Because a tunnel had never been definitively located and documented, the story had come to take on the contours of a

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THE CLANDESTINE HISTORY OF THE KOVNO JEWISH GHETTO POLICE

The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police.

Translated and edited by Samuel Schalkowsky. Introduction by Samuel D. Kassow. Indiana University Press: Bloomington 2014. 389 pp. \$28.56 hardcover.

REVIEWED BY DR. DIANE CYPKIN

How do you survive Hell? Do you fight your way out or die trying? Do you react with nonviolent civil disobedience? Do you follow orders hoping that even the devil has a heart or that, in time, you'll be rescued by some hero in this world or one coming from the next? According to highly respected Holocaust historian Lucy S. Dawidowicz, the reason most Jews caught in the Nazi maelstrom chose the third alternative was because they had no experience with an enemy whose goal was their total annihilation. They only knew that just as they had survived earlier pogroms, they would survive this one . . .

Interestingly, *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Ghetto Jewish Police* found in the ruins of the Kovno ghetto and translated and edited here now by Samuel Schalkowsky, was written by anonymous members of the Kovno Jewish ghetto police who were frequently accused by Kovno ghetto dwellers of being traitors to their own. However, what we come to learn by way of this unique volume — which if discovered by the Nazis would have cost the life of its leading author and the lives of contributors to the document (all police) — is how a community struggled to survive and how, in fact, a majority of the Kovno

ghetto Jewish police tried their best to help in that life-and-death struggle.

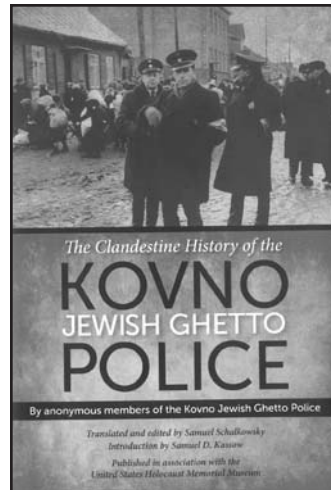
Thus this work, translated from the Yiddish, and “cover[ing] events from the start of the German attack on Russia, on June 22, 1941, through most of 1943,” begins with the story of the “terrible turmoil” that gripped Jews as they witnessed the Soviet army fleeing Kovno, occupied by them in consequence of Hitler’s earlier Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Stalin. It chronicles how the terror-stricken Jews of Kovno, having heard horrifying rumors about the Nazis, tried, unsuccessfully to flee as well. We read about how the anti-Semitic Lithuanians took full advantage of the chaos, looting, raping, and savagely “butchering” Jews, even before the Germans took control of Kovno. Indeed, this last was so awful that Kovno Jews welcomed the German creation of a ghetto. Ironically, Jews felt it would protect them from their bloodthirsty “neighbors”! Of course, it only made it easier for the Nazis to do their “organized” dirty work vis-à-vis the Jews, even as the Lithuanians continued their attacks. In sum, by late October 1941, the Jewish population of Kovno was approximately half of what it had originally been. Only 17,400 Jews remained in the Kovno ghetto.

Could anything have been done to prevent or mitigate this bloodletting? Could the ghetto’s Elder Council or its

respected head, Dr. Elkanon Elkes, chosen by trusted leaders in the Kovno Jewish community “to relay German orders” and to represent them to the Germans, have done something? Could the ghetto’s Jewish police, the organization that would act on decisions made by the Council and its head, and led by respected individuals chosen by the same aforementioned trusted leaders, have taken some action?

Unfortunately, totally helpless, completely unfamiliar with this new enemy, and with the survival of the community its overwhelming concern, the Council and its head tried their best to appease the Nazi overlords, hoping,

undoubtedly, that time would see this evil pass, as so many others had passed before it. This meant that when demands were presented to the Council and later the Jewish Labor Office — generally for workers or some such excuse — demands were fulfilled for fear of reprisal. This also meant that the ghetto police charged with enforcing these demands and rounding people up, were soon hated by the general ghetto populace. Still, neither the Council, the Labor Office, nor the Jewish police could have imagined that any of their actions would result in the merciless murder of so many. But then the Nazis were masters at subterfuge!



With the growing realization of just whom they were dealing with, the Elder Council and the Labor Office continued fulfilling German demands. They had to. And some of the German demands for workers were real. But, we learn, they also began to do more — often with the police acting and the leadership and Labor Office sanctioning these acts, something not so common in other ghettos. In sum, food was smuggled into the starving ghetto and children smuggled out. Bribes were given where they would do the most good — to Lithuanians and even Germans. Weapons of all kinds were smuggled into the ghetto, fixed, and smuggled out again with those who wanted to fight and join the partisans.

True, there were scoundrels to be found even among Jews. This work doesn’t deny it. But there were also heroes, even among the hated police. The proof: “On March 27, 1944, the same day that the German command launched an action against the ghetto’s children and elderly inmates” almost forty policemen, indeed, the Jewish ghetto police leadership, gave their lives rather than divulge where ghetto hiding places were or “any information useful to the Germans.”

Needless to say, *The Clandestine History of the Kovno Jewish Ghetto Police* is an exceptionally important work!

Dr. Cypkin is a Professor of Media, Communication, and Visual Arts at Pace University. Her parents and brother survived the Kovno ghetto to be liberated by the Russians, August, 1944.

MISCHLING, A HOLOCAUST TALE OF TWIN SISTERS IN MENGELE’S GRIP

Mischling.

By Affinity Konar. Little, Brown and Company: New York, 2016. 352 pp. \$16.26 hardcover.

REVIEWED BY MICHIKO KAKUTANI

“During the period of the past century that I call Night,” Elie Wiesel wrote in a 2005 essay, “medicine was practiced in certain places not to heal but to harm, not to fight off death but to serve it. In the conflict between Good and Evil during the Second World War, the infamous Nazi doctors played a crucial role. They preceded the torturers and assassins in the science of organized cruelty that we call the Holocaust.”

The quintessence of that evil was embodied in Josef Mengele, the Auschwitz physician who not only sent countless men, women and children to the gas chambers, but also performed grotesque experiments on selected prisoners — especially twins, whom he eagerly sought out upon arrival.

Though the children he selected were spared immediate death, they were subjected to monstrous surgeries and deliberately infected with diseases; he injected chemicals into eyes, in an effort to change their color, and kept some of his subjects in tiny cages. Of about 1,500 pairs of twins in Mengele’s “Zoo,” fewer than 200 individuals survived the war.

Mengele’s crimes form the backdrop of Affinity Konar’s affecting new novel, *Mischling*, which takes its title from the term the Nazis used to denote people of mixed heritage. The novel draws heavily — even in granular detail — on the 1991 nonfiction book *Children of the Flames*, by Lucette Matalon Lagnado and Sheila Cohn Dekel, and on Robert Jay Lifton’s *The Nazi Doctors*.

Its 12-year-old twin heroines seem to have been partly inspired by the twins Eva and Miriam Mozes (whose story Eva told in *Echoes From Auschwitz: Dr. Mengele’s Twins*).

Yet for all her novel’s indebtedness to source material, Ms. Konar makes the emotional lives of her two spirited narrators piercingly real, as they recount, in alternating chapters, the harrowing story of their efforts to survive: Pearl, once the more outgoing of the sisters, becomes more methodical, more focused on memories to get through each day; while Stasha grows feistier and more cunning — “a creature capable of tricking her enemies and rescuing her loved ones.”

What is most haunting about the novel is Ms. Konar’s ability to depict the hell that was Auschwitz, while at

the same time capturing the resilience of many prisoners, their ability to hang on to hope and kindness in the face of the most awful suffering — to remain, in Mr. Wiesel’s words, humane “in an inhumane universe.” The world Ms. Konar depicts is straight out of Hieronymus Bosch — a place of torture, cruelty and anguish, where death is everywhere and the sky is literally red with fire and ash. It’s a place that robs Stasha and Pearl of their innocence and childhood, and threatens to indelibly change their very sense of who they are.

The girls, inseparable in their past life, find themselves growing apart — fiercely devoted to one another, but broken in different ways by Mengele’s hideous experiments, which damage Stasha’s hearing and sight; and leave Pearl in a cage, her ankles snapped and her feet smashed. Mengele, who alternates displays of avuncular concern with chilling sadism, seems to take plea-

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TREASURE IN A SUITCASE

After both his parents died, André Boers took the suitcase his mother forbade him ever to open and found a family treasure: his parents' wedding video. After he watched it, he realized that nearly all of the guests had perished in the next few years.

BY OFER ADERET, HAARETZ

For decades the home movies from the wedding of a Dutch Jewish couple, Mimi Dwinger and Barend Boers, lay in a suitcase that no one was to open. The bride and groom, who miraculously survived the Holocaust, did not tell their children about the special keepsake from their 1939 nuptials. It's possible that they were afraid to look at the film in light of the fact that, grimly,



Barend Boers on the left, with a rifle.

based on the survival statistics of Jews in their town, 80 percent of the people who appear in it, including relatives and friends, would not have survived the Holocaust.

"Most of the people that you see in this wedding movie were not alive a few years later," says André Boers, one of the couple's children. "As children, we knew that there was a suitcase that we wouldn't touch. We weren't allowed to." Ultimately, in 1979, when his father died, he asked his mother to allow him to open the suitcase. "No, no need, there's no time," she told him repeatedly. "I eventually understood, of course, that it was hard for her to deal with what was in the suitcase," he says.

A decade ago, in 2007, his mother died as well, shortly before her 91st birthday. It was only then, with fear and trembling, that the son approached the suitcase in the company of his sisters and opened it.

What they saw included letters, documents and even medals that their father, who participated in the invasion of Normandy, was awarded. But the real treasure awaited them underneath everything else.

"On the bottom of the suitcase I found little boxes that had the name Kodak written on them," André

recounts. When he opened them, he found 8-mm film — movies from his parents' wedding on April 18, 1939 in the Dutch city of *Leeuwarden*, the capital of the province of *Friesland*. "I saw so many people in it that I didn't know, aunts and uncles that I couldn't identify," he recalls with emotion.

In the years that elapsed since they opened the suitcase, André Boers and his sisters deliberated over what to do with their historical family discovery. "On one hand, my parents never spoke about the war and didn't want to deal with what happened," he explains. On the other hand, the movie was an extraordinary and rare item from the period and the region.

In the end, its historical importance won out. Boers, who is now the chairman of the Center for Research

Jewish weddings from the Holocaust.

Watching Boers' parents' wedding movie is a jarring experience. It provides a fascinating glimpse at the good life of the Jewish community in the Netherlands shortly before almost all of it was destroyed. As noted, most of those in the movie would not have been alive to attend André's *brit milah*, his Jewish ritual circumcision.

Those who perished included André's mothers' parents and his father's two brothers. "All of them were murdered in the camps. I never met them," he says.

The movie also features a prominent figure — the chief rabbi of North Holland, Abraham Salomon Levisson, who officiated the wedding. At the end of World War II he was liberated from the *Bergen-Belsen* concentration camp on a "freedom train," but died on the train on May 5, 1945, the day the Netherlands was liberated from Nazi occupation.

Talking to *Haaretz*, André Boers rattled off the history of his family with ease. Mimi Dwinger was born in 1917 to a family that had been living in *Friesland* since 1542. Barend Boers was born in Amsterdam in 1910, to a family that could trace back its roots there to 1620. The two families knew one another, as both were in the textile business.

When Barend Boers was 14, he left school and was sent as an apprentice to learn the trade with his future father-in-law in *Leeuwarden*. His future wife was just 7 at the time. Years later, in 1938, on his parents' advice, he returned to *Leeuwarden* to take Mimi as his wife. He was 28 and she was 21.

The wedding, in 1939, in keeping with local custom, took place in the bride's hometown, at the city hall and in the synagogue, after which the couple settled in Amsterdam. The ceremony is well documented in the film, which features not only the wedding couple but their families and friends, the rabbi and the synagogue.

In 1940, the Nazis invaded the Netherlands. Mimi was arrested and imprisoned. From there, it would have been expected that she would be sent to a transit camp and from there to her death. But despite great difficulty, her husband managed to get her released from prison. "He

may have been assisted by the Dutch underground. He may have paid money to have her freed. I don't know," his son recounts.

From that point, in August 1942, their amazing escape began, which



Mimi Dwinger and Barend Boers on their wedding day.

was to take them through Belgium, France and Spain and included crossing the Pyrenees mountains, arrests, flight and liberation, ending in Jamaica, where the Joint Distribution Committee set up a camp for Dutch Jewish refugees.

Barend Boers left there for Canada, where he joined a Dutch battalion. After military training he was sent to England and later participated in the invasion of Normandy. When he returned to the Netherlands, he discovered that his brothers had been murdered, but he found his mother alive. She had hidden in a closet for three years in the home of one of the employees of the family plant in Amsterdam.

Mimi stayed in Jamaica for a year and then moved to England. Her two brothers were pilots who fought the Nazis. One of them, who served in the British army, appears in the wedding film. The second, who was in the Dutch army, missed the wedding because he was in a flight course at the time.

On May 5, 1945, Mimi received a telegram from her soldier husband. "Holland is liberated. You can return," it read. Barend Boers decided to reopen the family textile factory that the Nazis had burned. He worked there until he was 60. Mimi was a housewife and raised three children. One of them, André, emigrated to Israel.

THE FORGOTTEN HOLOCAUST: THE FILMS OF BORIS MAFTSIR

BY IZABELLA TABAROVSKY, TABLET

In a series of spellbinding documentaries, Boris Maftsir, an Israeli filmmaker, has been racing to prevent the last traces of the Holocaust in the USSR from vanishing for good. He went deep into the forests of Belarus to film the remnants of Tuvie Bielski's partisans' camp and document instances of Jewish resistance that have not been widely known until now. While it is hard to imagine anything remains to be said about the *Shoah*, that, says Maftsir, is because we keep retelling half the story — the story of the destruction of Western European Jewry, from ghettos to gas chambers and everything those stand for: the merciless, mechanized, industrial-scale killing machine that organized the murder of millions into a precise, assembly-line-like operation.

While half of all the *Shoah* victims died in the Soviet Union, they died very different deaths. Here, people died in mass executions in ravines, forests, and village streets, at the hands of Germans or local collaborators. They perished right where they lived, in front of people who had been their neighbors.

Because the Nazis put Soviet Jews, whom they called Judeo-Bolsheviks, in a separate category and viewed them as particularly dangerous (and because they expected a quick victory here) with a few notable exceptions, they almost never bothered with organizing the Jews into long-term ghettos or transporting them to far-away places. Jews began dying the moment Germans invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941.

"By the end of 1941," writes Timothy Snyder in *Holocaust: The Ignored Reality*, "the Germans (along with local auxiliaries and Romanian troops) had killed a million Jews in the Soviet Union and the Baltics. That is the equivalent of the total number of Jews killed at Auschwitz during the entire war. By the end of 1942, the Germans (again, with a great deal of local assistance) had shot another 700,000 Jews, and the Soviet Jewish populations under their control had ceased to exist. ... By 1943 and 1944, when most of the killing of West European Jews took place, the Holocaust was in considerable measure complete."

A different set of numbers throws this into even sharper relief. An estimated 25 to 27 percent of Amsterdam Jews who found themselves under occupation survived — the lowest rate in Western Europe. In France, 75 percent of Jews survived the Nazi occupation. By contrast, of the conservatively estimated 2.61 to 2.75 million Soviet Jews who found themselves living under Nazi occupation, an estimated 103,000 to 119,000 sur-

vived, for a survival rate of between 2.7 percent and 4 percent. (Estimates of victims include only those who died as a result of direct anti-Jewish actions by the Nazis; they do not include hundreds of thousands of Jews who fell in battle while serving in the Red Army or died during sieges of *Leningrad* and *Odessa* from bombings, hunger, illness and other causes. These are estimated to constitute several hundred thousand.)

Maftsir doesn't mince words when he talks about the near-erasure of the eastern half of the Holocaust. "The place of memory of the Holocaust is already taken up," he says. "There is



Aleksey Kizeev, *Righteous Among the Nations*, in *Lubavichi*, today's Russia.

the Victim — Anne Frank. There is the Saint — Janusz Korczak. There is the Villain — Adolf Eichmann. There is Hell, it's Auschwitz. There is heroism — the Warsaw ghetto uprising. And that's it."

I met Maftsir in September 2016 in Kyiv, where I was attending a series of events commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Babi Yar massacre. At one of the events, Maftsir showed the first film of his Holocaust in the USSR project, *The Guardians of Remembrance*. It was the first time in my life that I, who grew up in the Soviet Union, saw people I could recognize and relate to — survivors from Belarus, Russia, Ukraine — speaking to me from the screen, in Russian, about the horrors of the Holocaust. They told the story of a Holocaust that happened in places where my family had lived.

Maftsir has been working on his project since 2013, but its roots go back to his time at Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, where for seven years he headed up the effort to recover the names of the Soviet victims of the *Shoah*. When he took the job in 2006, he was shocked to discover how many were still missing.

"I knew that in Soviet times, for ideological and political reasons, there was neither documentation, nor memorialization, nor the study of the Holocaust," he told me. "But I couldn't imagine that out of the 1.5 million Jews we believe died in Ukraine, we

had only 10 to 15 percent of the names." This figure stood in contrast to the names of Western European Jews who died in the Holocaust, 90 percent of which were known at the time.

Maftsir spent the next several years traveling to some 160 *Shoah* sites in the former Soviet Union, a mind-boggling number that is nevertheless only a fraction of the total of 2,000 sites connected to the Holocaust. Today, these sites are spread out across several post-Soviet states. Step by step, he built a network of local volunteers who sought out Holocaust survivors, non-Jewish witnesses, and local

materials became evidence in the *Nuremberg* trials.

But the findings of the commission were never published in the USSR. Many of those who worked on the *Black Book* were executed a few years later, charged with disloyalty, as the campaign against "rootless cosmopolitanism" unfolded. It would have been ideologically uncomfortable for Stalin to emphasize Jews as a particular target, for doing so could have detracted from the special status of the USSR as a whole as a target of Hitler's aggression. It could also have given credence to Hitler's propaganda about the Judeo-Commune and rekindled anti-Semitic tendencies among the local populations that needed to be reintegrated — and indoctrinated — after prolonged periods of living under the German occupation.

In the vast majority of cases, there were no monuments or other works commemorating the execution sites. In the few cases with some sort of memorial, the inscriptions referred to the victims as "peaceful Soviet citizens." Relatives were not permitted to gather at the memorial sites. Those who did were often arrested. Western scholars were denied access to the archives to conduct research.

"What do deniers of the Holocaust say?" asks Maftsir. "They say: Look at the USSR. Show us the corpses. But everything there is burned down, everything is ground down, everything is destroyed. The forgetting by the Soviet power for 40–50 years has led to the fact that there is no direct connection anymore. And that is how memory goes away."

As Dr. Inna Gerasimova, the founder of the Museum of Jewish History and Culture of Belarus, tells her story in one of the opening scenes of *The Guardians of Remembrance*, the camera pans across a square garden in the center of Minsk, where she and Maftsir are discussing the events of November 1941.

"This is where the gallows stood," she tells him, motioning with her hand. Around them is a street scene that is unremarkable in its normalcy. Passers-by are going about their business, some with the habitual urgency of a city-dweller, some just strolling. Most are oblivious to the cameras. It's a gray, rainy afternoon in late November, and pedestrians are studiously avoiding the puddles. You can almost feel the chill in the air.

"It is precisely here that once in a while they hanged people," Gerasimova continues, and the growing dissonance between her words and the humdrum, quotidian reality on the screen sets off a barely detectable alarm bell of internal discomfort in the viewer.

(Continued on page 13)

memory activists — the so-called guardians of remembrance. "We did not work with archives," Maftsir emphasized. "We were looking for living memory."

His team collected hundreds of thousands of names. And at the end of his seventh year on the project, Maftsir realized that he needed to bring this story before a larger audience. As a professional filmmaker, he chose film as his medium. In 2012 he resigned from the project at Yad Vashem to make *The Guardians of Remembrance*.

"What does it mean to shoot almost everyone or to destroy nearly 3 million people across a span of a given territory?" asks Maftsir. The question is only partly rhetorical. In the USSR, it meant there were virtually no survivors left to tell their stories. Those who had managed to evacuate before the German invasion or who had served in the Red Army came back to find empty homes and mass graves. Their grief was suppressed under the blanket Soviet policy of silence and denial of the specificity of the Jewish nature of the Holocaust.

The Soviets, of course, knew exactly what had happened to the Jews in their territory. Even before the war ended, a special state commission began investigating German crimes, including those against the Jews. A group of Soviet Jewish writers began collecting witness testimony and preparing it for publication in a work that became known as the *Black Book of Soviet Jewry*. Some of these

THE HOLOCAUST'S GREAT ESCAPE

(Continued from page 3)

fable, and three-quarters of a century on, it seemed destined to remain a legend without any verifiable evidence to back it up — a crucial piece of the historical record, lost to time.

So the following year, in June 2016, Freund returned with two groups of researchers and using a collection of aerial photographs of *Ponar* shot by Nazi reconnaissance planes and captured during the war, which helped give the researchers a better sense of the camp's layout, Freund and his colleagues turned their attention to finding clues about how the camp's fabled survivors were able to find a way out.

Relying on a surveying device known as a total station Reeder set about measuring minute elevation changes across the land, searching for subtle gradations and anomalies. He zeroed in on a hummock that



Ponar is dotted with new monuments to Jewish victims, after the first was demolished by the Soviets in 1952.

looked like the earthen side of a bunker, long since overgrown with moss and foliage, and roughly 100 feet away, a telltale dip in the earth.

They were looking at a tunnel.

The digging got under way the first night in February 1944, in a storeroom at the back of the bunker. To disguise their efforts, the prisoners erected a fake wall over the tunnel's entrance, with "two boards hanging on loose nails that would come out with a good tug, making it possible to pass through," Farber recalled in *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, a compilation of eyewitness testimonies, letters and other documents of the Nazi campaign against Jews in Eastern Europe.

The men worked in shifts throughout the night, with saws, files and spoons stolen from the burial pits. Under the cover of darkness, they smuggled wood planks into the lengthening tunnel to serve as struts; as they dug, they brought sandy earth back out and spread it across the bunker floor. Any noise was concealed by the singing of the other prisoners, who were frequently forced to perform for the *Sturmbannführer* — arias from *The Gypsy Baron*, by the Austrian composer Johann Strauss II, were a favorite.

After a day of disinterring and burning corpses, "we returned [to the bunker] on all fours," Zeidel recalled years later, in a series of interviews

with the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, today held at an archive at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "We really fell like the dead. But," Zeidel continued, "the spirit of initiative, the energy, the will that we had" helped sustain them. Once oxygen in the tunnel became too scarce to burn candles, a prisoner named Isaac Dogim, who had worked in Vilnius as an electrician, managed to wire the interior with lights, powered by a generator the Nazis had placed in the bunker. Behind the fake wall, the tunnel was expanding: 10 feet in length, 15. Gradually, the entire Burning Brigade was alerted to the escape plan. Dogim and Farber promised that no one would be left behind.

There were setbacks. In March, the diggers discovered they were tunneling in the direction of a burial pit and were forced to reroute the passageway, losing days in the process. Not long afterward, Dogim was on burial pit duty when he unearthed the bodies of his wife, mother and two sisters. Every member of the Burning Brigade lived with the knowledge that some of the corpses he was helping to burn belonged to family members. And yet to see one's wife lying in the pit was something else entirely, and Dogim was consumed with sadness and fury. "[He]

said he had a knife, that he was going to stab and kill the *Sturmbannführer*," Farber later recalled. Farber told Dogim that he was thinking selfishly — even if he succeeded, the rest of the prisoners would be killed in retribution.

Dogim backed down; the diggers pressed on. On April 9, Farber announced that they'd reached the roots of a tree near the barbed-wire fence that encircled the camp's perimeter. Three days later, he made a tentative stab with a makeshift probe he'd fashioned out of copper tubing. Gone was the stench of the pits. "We could feel the fresh April air, and it gave us strength," he later recalled. "We saw with our own eyes that freedom was near."

The men selected April 15, the darkest night of the month, for the escape. Dogim, the unofficial leader of the group, was first — once he emerged from the tunnel, he would cut a hole in the nearby fence and mark it with a white cloth, so the others would know which direction to run. Farber was second. Motke Zeidel was sixth. The prisoners knew that a group of partisan fighters were holed up nearby, in the Rudnitsky Woods, in a secret camp from which they launched attacks on the Nazi occupiers. "Remember, there is no going back under any circumstances," Farber reminded his friends. "It is better to die fighting, so just keep moving forward."

They set off at 11 p.m., in groups of

10. The first group emerged from the tunnel without incident. Zeidel recalled slithering on his stomach toward the edge of the camp. He scarcely dared to exhale; his heart slammed against his chest wall. Later, Farber would speculate that it was the snap of a twig that alerted their captors to the escape. Dogim attributed it to a blur of movement spotted by the guards.

The forest burst orange with gunfire. "I looked around: Our entire path was filled with people crawling," Farber has written. "Some jumped up and started running in various directions." Farber and Dogim cut through the fence and tore off into the woods, with Zeidel and three others in tow. The men ran all night, through rivers, through forests, past villages. After a week, the escapees were deep inside the Rudnitsky Woods. Farber introduced himself to the partisan leader. "Where do you come from?" the man asked.

"From the other world," Farber said.

"Where's that?"

"*Ponar*."

The escapees spent several months hiding in the forest. In early July, the Red Army, having launched a new offensive against the Germans, encircled Vilnius. Zeidel joined with other partisans to fight alongside the Soviets to liberate the city, and by mid-July the Germans were driven out.

Once the war ended, Zeidel traveled overland before smuggling himself in the autumn of 1945 to what would become the State of Israel. He was among the estimated 60 million people unmoored by the seismic violence of the Second World War. He had no family left: His parents and siblings were presumed killed by the Nazis or their collaborators. In 1948, he married a woman he'd first met, years earlier, in the Jewish ghetto at Vilnius. He died in 2007, in his sleep, the last living member of the Burning Brigade.

This past fall, I reached out to Hana Amir, Zeidel's daughter, and we spoke several times over Skype. From her home in Tel Aviv, Amir, who is slight and spectacled, with a gray bob, told me about how she learned of her father's story.

"My father was of a generation that didn't talk about their emotions, didn't talk about how they felt about what they'd been through," Amir told me. "This was their coping mechanism: If you're so busy with moving forward, you can disconnect from your memories." But there were signs that the past wasn't done with Zeidel: Amir believes he suffered from recurrent nightmares, and he was fastidious about his personal hygiene — he

washed his hands many times a day.

When she was 17, Amir took a class about the Holocaust. "How did you escape, Papa?" she remembers asking afterward. He agreed to explain, but what he recounted were mostly technical details: the size of the bunker, the number of bodies consumed by the flames. He explained that in addition to the five men who had fled with him to the Rudnitsky Woods, six other members of the Burning Brigade had survived the escape. The rest had perished.

Over the years, Zeidel's recalcitrance melted away. In the late 1970s, he sat for interviews with Lanzmann, a few minutes of which were included in the 1985 documentary *Shoah*. To Lanzmann, Zeidel confided that after his escape, he was sure he stunk of death. Later Zeidel agreed to participate in the making of *Out of the Forest*, a 2004 Israeli documentary about the role of Lithuanian collaborators in the mass killings at *Ponar*.

In one of the most affecting scenes from *Out of the Forest*, Zeidel circles the area of the old bunker, looking for the entrance. "Everything was demolished," he tells the camera, finally, shaking his head in frustration. "Everything. Not that I care it was demolished, but I was certain there would be an opening, even if a blocked one, so I could show you the tunnel." As it turned out, Zeidel had been standing very close to the tunnel; he just couldn't know it.



The Ninth Fort museum in *Kaunas*, Lithuania, includes this 1984 memorial to the more than 30,000 Jews killed there by Nazis in 1941.

Last summer, Amir returned home from a trip to the store to find her phone ringing. "Everyone wanted to know if I'd heard about my father," she recalled. She booted up her computer and found an article about Freund's work. "I started to shake," she told me. "I thought, 'If only he were here with me right now!'"

In a Skype call this fall, Amir cried as she described Zeidel's final trip to *Ponar*, in 2002. He'd traveled with Amir and her brother and three of his grandchildren, and the family clustered together near a burial pit.

Cursing in Yiddish and Lithuanian, Zeidel shook his fist at the ghosts of his former Nazi captors. "Can you see me?" Zeidel asked. "I am here with my children, and my children had children of their own, and they are here, too. Can you see? Can you see?"

ON THE RUN FROM THE NAZIS

BY EMILIA MINCHEVA, BBC

Judy Wertheimer has had to live with the legacy of the Holocaust all her life, even though she was born long after it happened. Now she tells the story of her mother Helen Taichner, a Polish Jew, who spent years alone and in hiding from the Nazis.



Helen Taichner, born as Rachel Rosenberg.

When she was a child, most of Judy's friends went to the seaside for their holidays. But for her, as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, summer breaks involved trips to find out what happened to her relatives in the Nazi war camps.

Her mother, Helen Taichner, spent years evading capture by the Nazis in Poland — hiding anywhere she could find, including in a toilet and a coal cellar.

She told the BBC: "Nowadays chil-

dren are taken to Disney in Paris as a trip to entertain them, but I was taken to *Terezin* to look for a family that may have died."

Judy's childhood was punctuated by the "burden" of hearing stories about the Holocaust and the relatives she had lost.

Her mother spent the first part of the war with her first husband and their young child, fleeing from town to town. Malnourished, she was unable to feed her baby, who died in around 1939 when Helen was 25.

In 1943, the couple decided to separate to maximize their chances of survival. It is not clear what happened to him after that, but they never saw each other again. He died during the war.

Later that year, when she was 29, Helen stayed with a family who gave her a missal and taught her how to behave in a church and how to pray.

"She was pretending to be a Catholic," Judy said. "If anybody stopped her, she knew the blessings, she knew the prayers."

Helen slept under trees and in churchyards until she met a maid who offered to shelter her in the house where she worked — a building divided into apartments.

The maid allowed Helen to sleep in one of the toilets without her employer's permission.

Judy said: "Anybody who looked after a Jew was putting themselves in a very great danger. These people were putting their lives on the line to save my mother. If they had been caught, they would have been killed."

But that was not the end of the struggles for Helen. She hid for five

months in a coal cellar, where she survived mainly on bread and water.

Soon after the war ended, Helen moved to Manchester to live with relatives. She had holidayed in the city before the war and wanted to start a new life.

She remarried and a few years later gave birth to her daughter.

Judy, who lives in *Cheadle Hulme*, Greater Manchester, said the Holocaust has cast a long shadow over her life, but she is determined the same should not happen to her family.

"I can't pass it on to my children," she said of the family history. "It wouldn't be fair. They have to know, but they mustn't feel the burden."

Helen died in 1993, and Judy has now decided to donate some of her mother's possessions to the Manchester Jewish Museum, where they will be permanently stored and passed on to future generations.

It is a part of the museum's appeal, which aims to "find those treasures" that could tell the stories of Jewish people in Manchester.

Alex Cropper, curator at the Manchester Jewish Museum, said: "The appeal is really about going out to the community and finding out if there is anything in people's attics and back rooms that could be in our galleries in the future."

She added that Helen's story was "really special" and the museum would be privileged to store some of her belongings.

"The items are incredible. Helen's story is not the survival story many people think about. She is not in a camp. She is not in a ghetto.



Judy said she wanted to raise more awareness about the Holocaust by donating some of the possessions her mother had during her life on the run from the Nazis.

"She is by herself and she really relies on other people to help her hide throughout the war. It is an incredible story."

The donated items include a sock Helen wore while in hiding, a dress she wore on trips out of the cellar, a missal she used to disguise herself as a Christian, and wooden shoe stretches hollowed out to hide gold.

Judy is concerned that people do not know enough about the Holocaust and there are many "nonbelievers who say it never happened."

"One of the main reasons to give my mother's things to the museum is so that it can be there as a permanent record and people can go in and actually see it," she said.

"The bottom line is, this should not happen again. Nobody should rise up and try to take over people and just kill them for the sake of their religion."

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS' GRANDCHILDREN CALL FOR ACTION OVER INHERITED TRAUMA

BY JEAN WEST, THE GUARDIAN

Jewish activists in Scotland have started a campaign to support the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors across the world, saying the trauma of the extermination camps continues to haunt the descendants of those who suffered there.

Dan Glass, 29, from London, said he heard constant tales of the Holocaust as he grew up, which have deeply affected him into adulthood.

"All four of my grandparents narrowly avoided the gas chambers in Auschwitz, and countless of their friends met with this fate. For my father, it was a daily conversation in my teens and early 20s, and even though I very profoundly understood his pain, one day I had to say to him, 'Dad, I can't talk about this anymore.' My father had a whole wall of books on the subject of the Holocaust — it was all he wanted to talk about, but it was so harrowing for me."

Glass began speaking to other children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, initially for an academic

He said he soon realized he was not alone in being scarred by the traumatic pasts of his relatives.



Dan Glass of the Never Ever Again! group wants a move away from the "melancholic memorialization" of the Holocaust, and is calling for mental health provision to treat inherited trauma.

thesis, then later as part of the group he founded Never Ever Again!, a reference to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights pledge.

"I have been privileged to hear so many stories from young people who should now be able to live with joy — but their lives are damaged and they

weren't even there," he said.

Glass adds that other grandchildren of survivors have experienced clinical depression, anxiety, addiction and eating disorders, which they blame on the impact of their families constantly retelling stories of the horrific events their relatives endured.

Ken Feinstein, a second-generation family member, whose parents were Holocaust survivors and who grew up in Boston, Lincolnshire, told of how his school teacher, who also survived, insisted that children as young as eight watch documentaries on the subject.

"When kids would look away from it she would yell at them, 'You have no right to do that. I buried my family.' We must have been about seven or eight years old. How do you prepare children of this age for something like that? They just showed it to us and kind of traumatized us. It was definitely meant to shock us into never for-

(Continued on page 13)

GLOBAL INITIATIVES VIRTUALLY COMMEMORATE THE HOLOCAUST — IN A VERY REAL WAY

BY AMANDA BORSCHEL-DAN,
THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

It is remarkable to feel a connection with someone you've only met online. Even more so when he has been dead for the past 75 years. And yet, a random matching program on Yad Vashem's IRemember Wall connects between a Facebook user and victim of the Holocaust in a deeply personal way.

For this writer, the name Chaim Gindel was drawn from the museum's Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names. He was born to David and Leja in Olyka, Poland, in 1928. He was a 14-year-old student when he was murdered in the Shoah. His cause of death is unknown.

The too-short story is recounted on a Page of Testimony that was submitted in 1997 by a surviving cousin in Woodmere, New York. If one is interested, that handwritten page can be viewed, as well as the names of his siblings who also perished in the Holocaust.

Somehow, after pairing with this once anonymous stranger, the concept of the "six million" is less about a quantifiable number and more a shorthand for a collective of individual humans.



Yad Vashem Internet Department Director Dana Porath.

"Many, if not most, people don't have a particular person or name that they know and commemorate," said Dana Porath, Yad Vashem's Internet department director.

Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial, is one of several museums and institutions tapping into the potential of online presence and social media campaigns to raise awareness among an audience that increasingly has little first-person contact with the horrors of the Holocaust.

"We realized in the last couple of years, particularly in social media, that people want to do something more participatory. It's fine to read, learn and explore, but with the opportunity to engage with a particular topic or issue, people really want to do something," said Porath.

Porath, who was a Jewish educator for 15 years in North America before

moving to Israel, began working at Yad Vashem in 1994 and joined the fledgling Internet department in 1999.

Singer said that through the tools of social media, WJC hopes to engage the youth, "because, soon, it will be



An undated photo of the Gindel family taken in Poland before the Holocaust.

Today, the museum's online presence is robust and growing.

"In 1999 I don't know that we really had any expectations, we couldn't envision what could happen and what the possibilities were," said Porath. In addition to the myriad of educational materials, the museum has presented some 150 curated online exhibitions — currently "Last Letters from the Holocaust: 1941" — and dozens of social media projects.

Five years ago, Yad Vashem began the IRemember Wall project in which participants are linked with specific names of victims. The algorithm is purposefully random, because, said Porath, "Every victim deserves to be remembered."

The project is held only once a year for International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Said Porath, it becomes "a collective experience" that combines the wall and the comments it garners. She said she expects to reach at least 3,000 participants this year.

"The possibilities created by technology have allowed us to reach out and engage in ways we couldn't imagine," said Porath.

PROMPTING THE NEXT GENERATION'S MEMORY

Leading up to International Holocaust Remembrance Day, some 250,000 posted on social media using the hashtag, "#WeRemember" — from New York Senator Chuck Schumer to Dr. Ruth Westheimer to French philosopher Bernard Henri-Lévy. Some 120 million were reached in the World Jewish Congress campaign, according to a spokesperson. The international organization represents Jewish communities in 100 countries.

"The goal is to reach those who don't know much about the Holocaust, or who might be susceptible to those who deny it, and to remind the world that such horrors could happen again," said World Jewish Congress CEO Robert Singer.

their responsibility to tell the story and ensure that humanity never forget."

The project was adopted by Jewish schools around the world, with many pupils creating short films that were posted and shared widely.

Stefan Biologuski, the public relations officer for World ORT, said that well over 1,000, "perhaps in the thousands," of students in schools and colleges across the former Soviet Union, Israel and Europe took part. World ORT claims to be the largest global Jewish education and vocational training NGO.

"The energy which World ORT students have devoted to the

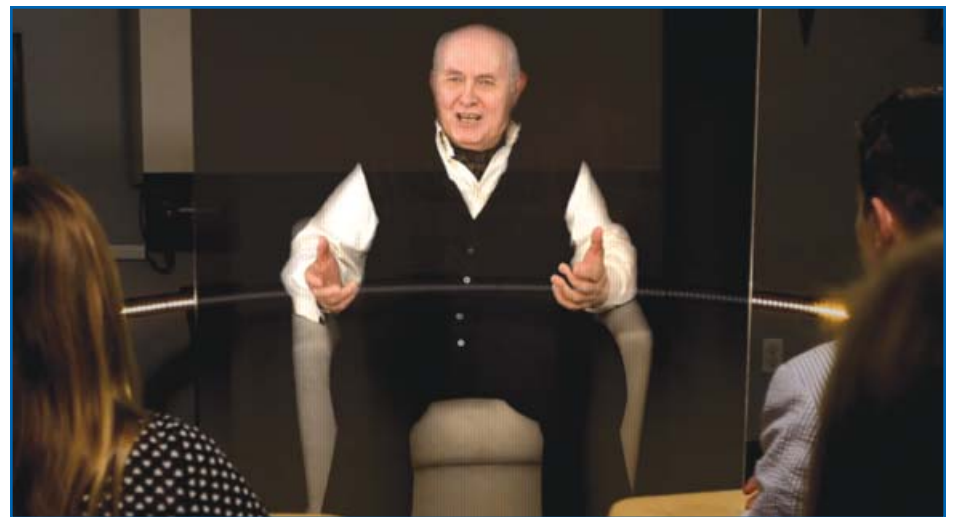
Foundation. Using some 50 cameras at once, a dozen Holocaust survivors have individually been filmed giving 10 to 25 hours of testimony in an effort to create a 3D virtual "eyewitness to history."

Set to launch in two museums this year, New Dimensions was in beta stage for some five years and had a 2015 trial run at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, with the first completed interactive testimony of Holocaust survivor Pinchas Gutter of Toronto.

In addition to recounting the horrors of the Holocaust, the interactive hologram survivor can be asked questions and prompted to sing songs and tell of life before the tragedy. For many who wouldn't dare ask personal questions for fear of insulting, interacting with this artificial intelligence can be freeing.

According to project literature, a survey of the Illinois pilot found that over 95 percent of visitors felt the technology "enhanced their ability to connect" with Gutter's story. Additionally, 68% of students reported "above-average critical thinking ability after the interaction."

"Everything is now in post-production to meet expected deployment in 2017," state project materials, and the project should open at the first two confirmed museums: the Illinois Holocaust Museum, and in Terre Haute, Indiana, the CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center.



Holocaust survivor Pinchas Gutter as appearing on the hologram-like interactive presentation developed by the USC Shoah Foundation.

#WeRemember project should reassure us that not only has the history of the Holocaust been passed on intact to a new generation, despite the worst attempts of deniers, but also that our children are unbowed by the weight of what happened to our people within living memory," Biologuski told *The Times of Israel*.

A 3D VIRTUAL "EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY"

It is this same impulse to preserve historical continuity in an era of fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors that has propelled another unusual project, the New Dimensions in Testimony by the USC Shoah

In an era of technological leaps and bounds, the ability to engage a new audience is vastly magnified and the impulse to ride social media buzz is strong.

To capture the world's attention, said Yad Vashem's Porath, her team strives to make the commemoration of the Jewish victims and their life before the Holocaust accessible through contemporary issues such as the Olympics or International Women's Day.

"We are always trying to have meaningful, relevant and respectful content," said Porath. "But to make the Holocaust respectful in 140 characters — that's a challenge."

DIARIES OF A NAZI MONSTER

As the architect of the Nazi Holocaust, Heinrich Himmler was in charge of a mass slaughter that included the murder of six million Jews.

Now diaries have been discovered which show he was more concerned with what he was having for lunch, than the monstrous massacre he was masterminding for his Führer, Adolf Hitler.

And in 1944, at the height of the Nazis' Final Solution, the head of the SS and Gestapo recorded how he had a massage, before personally overseeing the shooting dead of 10 Polish detainees.

After the end of the war, his 1938, 1943 and 1944 diaries were assumed to have been lost. In fact, they had fallen into the hands of the Soviet Red Army and had been gathering dust in a military archive in *Podolsk*, near Moscow.

Filed under the single word *Dnewnik* — meaning diary in Russian — there are more than 1,000 pages of entries.

They reveal that between 1943 and 1945 Himmler officially met 1,600 people.

But it is the entries which cover the minutiae of his life which are most chilling.

Of a visit to the *Buchenwald* concentration camp in Germany, he writes: "Took a snack at the cafe in the SS-Casino."

Researchers from the German Historical Institute in Moscow have been sifting through the diary entries for months.

The director, Professor Nikolaus Katzer, described the collection as "a document of shudderingly outstand-

ing historical significance."

And Himmler researcher Dr. Matthias Uhl said: "Himmler is a beast of contradictions.

"On the one hand, he was the ruthless enforcer who pronounced death sentences and planned the Holocaust.

"On the other hand, he was, for his SS elite, family, friends and acquaintances, a meticulous carer.



Himmler in 1936 before the true horror of Nazism was revealed.

"The archive documents are the key to fully understanding Himmler and all his cruel works."

Himmler was known to be squeamish at the sight of blood, despite having personal control of the Nazi death camps.

In August 1941, when witnessing the mass shooting of Jews into a pit outside the city of Minsk, in modern-day Belarus, he almost fainted when the brains of one of his victims splattered on to his greatcoat.

But he was quite happy to order atrocity after atrocity, if not to witness them in person.

In a 1944 diary entry, he records having a massage from his personal doctor...and then ordering the shooting of 10 Poles.

On the same day he calls for new guard dogs at Auschwitz "capable of ripping apart everyone but their handlers."

In 1943, he writes about witnessing the "effectiveness" of the diesel engines at the *Sobibor* death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, where 400 people were put to death purely as an exhibition of the new technology for Himmler's benefit.

Later the same day, he records that he was "feted" at a banquet thrown by SS men.

The journals are dotted with references to Puppi, Himmler's nickname for his daughter Gudrun, who is still alive at 86.

Himmler was obsessed with astrology and the Aryan myths and legends on which Nazi propaganda was founded, and also devoted time to studying strange diets.

The diaries chronicle how, early in 1943, he recommended to Hitler that trapped SS men fighting with the German 6th Army at *Stalingrad* should be fed dried rations, like those Genghis Khan gave his warriors.

The diary also mentions Himmler's favorite leisure activities, including curling, watching movies and stargazing.

On June 3, 1944, three days before the D-Day landings, Himmler wrote about the SS general Hermann Fegelein's marriage to Gretl Braun, the sister of Hitler's mistress Eva Braun, at the Führer's holiday retreat in Bavaria.

Himmler describes the wedding day, from 9 am to 7 pm, beginning with the greeting of guests and going on to tell of a lunch held at the home of Hitler's secretary, Martin Bormann.

He then moves on to the wedding celebrations held at the *Berghof*, Hitler's mountain residence.

The wedding day was to culminate with a trip to the tea house at the top of the mountain, a relic from Nazi times that still exists to this day.

In May 1945, Himmler fled Berlin disguised as an ordinary soldier with false papers, only to be captured by Allied forces in northern Germany

Recognized later, he was taken for interrogation, but soon bit down on a cyanide capsule contained in a tooth and was dead within minutes, aged 44.

Auschwitz survivor Leslie Kleinman, 86, of *Westcliffe-on-Sea*, Essex, said: "I am not surprised Himmler was able to write about his life and then at the same time be responsible for Auschwitz and the other concentration camps."

Leslie, whose parents and seven brothers and sisters were all put to death in the gas chambers, said: "All of Himmler's SS men shared the same ability to slaughter Jews without becoming upset.

"I, of course, never met Himmler, but we all knew he was the man responsible for Auschwitz.

"I remember how the guards enjoyed what they were doing as we heard the screams and wails of those who were about to die.

"They were quite happy to do it, and that must have come from Himmler. They had no emotion."

First published in the Mirror.

UNCOVERING MY FAMILY'S HIDDEN HOLOCAUST STORIES

BY NOAH LEDERMAN,
THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

Growing up, I had always heard the names *Otwock* and *Karczew*. Both are neighboring towns near Warsaw.

Before the Holocaust, *Otwock* was home to some 14,000 Jews. *Karczew* had about 500 Jewish residents and became home to a Nazi forced-labor camp during World War II.

While both places may have little name recognition around the world, in my family the names loomed large. They were as common to all of us as the names of Poppy and Grandma's murdered siblings.

My grandparents had grown up in *Otwock*. They fled to the Warsaw ghetto following the summer of 1942, when they were teenagers, after the Nazis had murdered 12,000 of the 14,000 Jews living in their town.

Years later, having survived the war and immigrated to the United States, my grandparents had children. They raised their two kids as best they could, often falling back on their

Holocaust stories. But because of these grim bedtime tales, my father slept with a packed suitcase beneath his bed. The Nazis, he assumed,



The Jewish cemetery in *Otwock*.

would inevitably storm his Brooklyn apartment. My aunt developed an eating disorder. Nightmares were constant.

But Poppy and Grandma learned

from their mistakes — by the time the grandchildren were around, their Holocaust stories were reduced to whispers. Discussions about *Otwock*, *Karczew*, the ghettos and the camps were off the table. Though I constantly pressed them for stories, they kept silent.

In 2004, however, I traveled to *Otwock*. I discovered the four synagogues had been dismantled, the town hall had no records, Grandma's street had vanished from the map, the supposed "Jewish Center" had no Jews.

While the trip was disappointing, my visit broke Grandma's silence. For the next six years, Grandma shared her stories. I also interviewed other survivors, pored through texts, wrote to tracing services, begged for records and watched my grandparents' Shoah Foundation testimonies.

The research left me with questions unanswered — there were, I realized, concentration camps without records and histories that had vanished without a trace.

Karczew was among those myster-

ies. In April 1942, 400 Jewish boys from *Otwock* were sent to a labor camp set up in *Karczew*. The "Karczew Boys," as they were known — Poppy, my grandmother's father and two brothers among them — dug irrigation channels.

But once the murders happened — 4,000 Jews were massacred in *Otwock's* forest, in addition to the 8,000 who were rounded up and sent to *Treblinka's* gas chambers — they received new orders: bury the dead.

My grandparents eventually escaped *Otwock*, ending up in the Warsaw ghetto. They nearly died in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and were later persecuted in Auschwitz and *Majdanek*.

But at least these places had museums or memorials. Even *Otwock*, a town that forgot its Jews, was mentioned in American Holocaust museums and in literature documenting the Nazis' crimes.

Facts on *Karczew*, however, seemed nonexistent.

In 2000, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial
(Continued on page 12)

LOVE LETTERS OF THE HOLOCAUST

This is a story about the power of letters to span both years and miles, and to unite the hearts of children and their parents when powers they can't control force them apart.

More than a dozen years ago in Worcester, Massachusetts, professor Deborah Dwork got a letter from a man in Switzerland she'd never heard of. Ulrich Luz told her about something he'd discovered, packed away in a suitcase among his late aunt's belongings, that might be of interest to Dwork.

Indeed it was — so much so that she is now writing a book about his aunt's quiet heroism and the lasting treasure she managed to preserve.

It turns out the nephew, a retired professor of theology in Switzerland, had heard about both the work of the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University, for which Dwork is the founding director, and Dwork's book *Children with a Star*. So when Ulrich Luz discovered more than 1,000 letters his aunt Elisabeth Luz had sent back and forth between hidden children and their parents from the time of the Holocaust, he had a hunch Dwork might find the collection to be of value.



One of the more than 1,000 letters that Ulrich Luz sent to professor Deborah Dwork.

"He began sending packets of the letters...over 1,000 in all," says Dwork, who is also the Rose Professor of Holocaust History at Clark. She was ready for the fragile old sheets of paper, having assembled white cotton gloves, archival paper, acid-free sleeves, and tweezers.

"It was such a treasure, and an amazing thing to hold them," she recalls. Then began the long process of translating the letters, which had gone from parents in Greater Germany to their children hidden in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and England.

In all, several hundred families are represented in the collection. Many of the letters were from parents and kids

reassuring each other that they were all right, as both sides walked gingerly across the land mine of loneliness and worry.

The letters' dates span the years beginning in late 1938, when the *Kristallnacht* pogrom and the general anti-Semitism of the time mobilized the Jews in Greater Germany to try to send as many children as possible to safety.

When war broke out the following year, civilian mail stopped moving freely and Luz managed to keep the correspondences going by taking a more central role as letter writer. "Dear Tante Elisabeth," a child might write to her. "Please tell my mother I am fine and doing well in math." Or a father might ask her to convey, "Dear Elisabeth, please tell my son to dress warmly and that we send our love."

Most of the families' correspondences stopped cold by 1945, by which time the majority of the parents were presumed murdered; others continued into the 1960s. It is still unknown how many of the children survived, but presumably far more than the parents, most of whom were unable to escape the Nazis' murderous net.

But one of the enduring mysteries about the collection of letters is that they are all originals, written by these parents and children. No one knows for sure why, in the era before Xerox, Luz rewrote each of the 1,000 letters by hand and sent them out.

The prevailing theory? "Trying to fool the censors," says Dwork, who included several of the letters in her book *Flight from the Reich: Refugee Jews 1933-1946*.

"This churchgoing Christian lady, who often spoke about the importance of giving aid and help, spent years doing this painstaking work and at no small risk to herself," she says.

The Strassler Center at Clark University is still scanning, sorting, transcribing and translating the letters, and the public should be able to access them by early 2018, but several of them are going to be used at the center's Summer Holocaust Institute to help high school history and literature teachers integrate the Holocaust into their curriculum.

"The letters are a great opportunity to engage with this time period firsthand and understand some of the concerns these parents and children had," says Sarah Cushman, who directs the summer institute.

Cushman also expects the letters to resonate with high school students.

"The average American kid will understand these kids' concerns with their futures, and even petty gripes" (Continued on page 12)

SPLIT UP BY HOLOCAUST, TOP COLLECTION OF YIDDISH WORKS WILL REUNITE DIGITALLY

BY JOSEPH BERGER,
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Like a family split apart by the upheaval of war, what is now known as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, considered the world's foremost collection of Yiddish books and cultural artifacts, was torn apart as a result of the German occupation of Vilna, Lithuania, in 1941 and the Nazis' plan for studying a people they determined would be extinct.

Much of the prewar collection was soon turned to pulp. But a large part was shipped to Frankfurt for an anti-Semitic institute for "the study of the Jewish question."

The American Army recovered that material and sent it to YIVO's new home in New York. Still, much of the collection remained in Vilna, now Vilnius, where in a gripping saga it was rescued during the war by enslaved Jewish laborers who risked their lives to squirrel away precious books, diaries, paintings and sculptures in underground bunkers, attics and crannies.

Now, 70 years later, YIVO has announced a \$5.25 million project to reunite the scholarly treasures, digitally.

The Lithuanian government did not want to surrender what it considers

part of its national heritage, but it has agreed to assist in having all 250,000 pages of documents and 4,200 books digitally copied and integrated into a Web portal, where they will be available to scholars around the world. The YIVO collection — an archive of 24 million items that includes the immigrant Jewish experience in America as well as the almost van-



Jonathan Brent, the executive director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, in the institute's archives in Manhattan.

ished Jewish culture of Eastern Europe — will also be digitized. The project is expected to take seven years.

"These materials are Holocaust survivors," said David E. Fishman, a professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary who is working on a chronicle of the YIVO collection's rescue. "Like a survivor, these materials were controlled by the Germans. Like a survivor, they were in hiding. The fact that they were saved is miraculous."

Vilna was known as "the Jerusalem" (Continued on page 14)

MISCHLING, A HOLOCAUST TALE OF TWIN SISTERS IN MENGELE'S GRIP

(Continued from page 4)

sure in watching what effect separation will have on the sisters.

The second half of *Mischling* largely takes place after the advance of the Soviet Army and the liberation of Auschwitz. Pearl is taken care of by Miri, a Jewish doctor whom Mengele forced to work as his assistant, while Stasha finds herself wandering, with a friend named Feliks, through a blasted, war-torn landscape that can't help but remind the reader of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Survival — simply finding food, water and shelter — is paramount, but Stasha becomes increasingly obsessed with hunting down Mengele and exacting revenge.

Such plot points can seem melodramatic and contrived, and Ms. Konar's prose occasionally eddies into self-consciously pretty writing: "For eight months we were afloat in amniotic snowfall, two rosy mittens resting on the lining of our mother." These passages call to mind the philosopher

Theodor Adorno's warning of the dangers of making art out of the Holocaust ("through aesthetic principles or stylization," he argued, "the unimaginable ordeal" is "transfigured and stripped of some of its horror"), but these doubts are steamrollered by Ms. Konar's ability to powerfully convey the experiences of her heroines: their resourcefulness and will to survive; their resilience and faith in a future even in the face of extermination; and Pearl's remarkable determination to embrace forgiveness.

Forgiveness "did not remove my pain or blunt my nightmares," she says. "It was not a new beginning. It was not, in the slightest, an end. My forgiveness was a constant repetition, an acknowledgment of the fact that I still lived; it was proof that their experiments, their numbers, their samples, was all for naught — I remained, a tribute to their underestimations of what a girl can endure. In my forgiveness, their failure to obliterate me was made clear."

UNCOVERING MY FAMILY'S HIDDEN HOLOCAUST STORIES

(Continued from page 10)

Museum tasked researchers with creating an encyclopedia that would be the most comprehensive, single-source record to document the thousands of Nazi-established persecution sites. At the time, they estimated 5,000 sites existed, including forced labor camps, military brothels, ghettos, POW camps and concentration camps.

But by 2001, their estimate doubled. When all seven volumes are published, the *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945* will contain more than 42,500 sites that the Nazis had used to persecute, exploit and murder their victims.

"Quite frankly," Geoffrey Megargee, the project leader told me, "you could put it much higher than that."

According to a 2013 *New York Times* article on the project, "The numbers astound: 30,000 slave-labor camps; 1,150 Jewish ghettos; 980 concentration camps; 1,000 prisoner-of-war camps; 500 brothels filled with sex slaves; and thousands of other camps used for euthanizing the elderly and infirm, performing forced abortions, 'Germanizing' prisoners or transporting victims to killing centers."

Two volumes have been published, totaling nearly 4,000 pages and more than 2,200 camps and ghettos.

These discoveries shocked me. Last year, I started writing an article about the project. For the story, I would travel to Germany and visit some sites. Since only two of the seven volumes have been published, I asked to preview forthcoming entries. I asked for *Karczew*, which will be part of Volume 6, slated for publication in 2020.

The entry was shocking. Poppy's name — Leon Lederman — appeared in the text. I changed my itinerary to

include Poland. I had to stand in the horrifying place where my grandfather, barely out of boyhood, worked past exhaustion as a gravedigger.

* * *

I stood along the fence at the locked *Karczew* cemetery, staring at the assemblage of Jewish tombstones atop the hill. I was grateful it was protected but saddened I couldn't visit the graves. (I was told the key had gone missing.) By contrast, the Jewish cemetery in *Otwock*, hidden deep in a red pine forest, where tipped tombstones were accompanied by smashed beer bottles and deserted campfires, had no gate.



The defunct mill in *Karczew*, where there once was a Nazi forced-labor camp.

Since my first visit 12 years before, *Otwock* had made some changes. A stone was placed to remember the site of one synagogue, now a shopping mall; another stone memorialized 2,000 Jews killed at one location in the forest. There was also a small museum with a modest exhibit about the local Jews. (It had actually existed in 2004, but none of the residents or employees at the town hall, where the museum had originally been housed, knew about it.)

This time, I met with the curator, Sebastian Rakowski. He showed me

a photograph of the *Karczew* Boys. Somewhere in that roll call, I knew, stood Poppy.

Rakowski showed me a book he had written about the persecution of Jews in *Otwock* during the war. It contained a photograph of an old mill — when I reached this mill, he said, I'd be standing on the site of the *Karczew* camp.

I headed there by car immediately. The mill was defunct: windows smashed, concrete chipped, grass overgrown. Grapes grew in the shade like smoothed amethysts. Next to the mill was a scrap-metal yard with everything crushed beyond recognition. Fences and climbing plants hid homes, as if no one wanted a reminder.

As I stood there, my family's *Karczew* stories came flooding back to me: Grandma, who had hidden in the boys' camp after her mother was murdered, once told me about the time the Nazis came searching the barracks. A small boy hid in the bunks. Grandma begged him to follow her, but he wouldn't.

"They killed him," she said.

I thought of Poppy's escape from the *Karczew* camp during the liquidation of *Otwock*. He was attempting to save his family but ended up on a train to *Treblinka*. Using a wire he hid around his waist, however, he sawed through the bars of the cattle car, survived the fall and the Nazi gunners, and watched his friends and family journey to their deaths. He ran back to *Karczew* and was put to work digging graves. Until the grim task was complete, the camp was one of the

last places in *Otwock* or *Karczew* where a Jew could survive.

I looked around *Karczew*. The barracks and irrigation channels were gone, but this time I knew the record — however small — remained. I pulled up the encyclopedia entry on my phone.

"The 400 Jewish forced laborers," it read, "were put to work digging drainage channels along the Jagodzianka River."

I felt chills. Poppy — an unnamed fighter in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, a Jewish teen who stuck a pitchfork through a Nazi's neck — was no longer overlooked.

"According to Leon Lederman," the text said, "those working in the camp were watched mainly by around 30 members of the Jewish police from *Otwock*."

I tried to picture the *Karczew* Boys.

"Leon Lederman also recalls that when his own family was deported to *Treblinka* from the *Otwock* ghetto, a group of Jews from the *Karczew* camp was taken there to dig a mass grave for the Jews killed locally during the *Aktion*."

I tried to imagine the horrors of that task.

"Leon Lederman also noted that [in the fall of 1942] around 300 of the remaining inmates of the *Karczew* camp 'were sent to the Warsaw ghetto,' although he says he went into hiding first for a while and then went to the ghetto."

To read these words reminded me that Poppy mattered, and that *Karczew* mattered. Every single one of these encyclopedia entries — chronicling the tens of thousands of places like *Karczew* — all matter. They will paint a picture of what was lost — and encourage remembering by all of us.

LOVE LETTERS OF THE HOLOCAUST

(Continued from page 11)

between them and their friends," she says.

This often comes as a surprise, says Cushman, explaining that with "our 20/20 hindsight, we know all too well the outcome for most of these families, but the letter-writers of course could not. The number six million is an abstraction, but one document from a real person can make the Holocaust real for today's teens."

Dwork agrees.

"These personal letters are a compelling way to teach aspects of the Holocaust because they relate how families dealt with the problems and pain they endured," she says.

Indeed, the letters just may serve another function.

"Google 'Holocaust' and the first sites that come up are all deniers," says Janet Stein, president of the American Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and their Descendants of Greater Boston.

"These letters are positive proof that it happened."

The letters could also be a healing force for any of the children who remain alive, adds Stein, whose own father survived Auschwitz to emerge as the only member of both his family and his community in Hungary to live on.

"So many of the kids grew up never even knowing they were Jewish so these letters could be a reminder of who they really are. As all that is left behind of their parents, how precious these letters would be to their children," she says.

Indeed, even the flimsiest paper letter can contain great power, says Professor Amos Goldberg, who teaches Jewish history at Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

"Especially in times of war the mail could bring a warm message from a loved one very far away," Goldberg says. "You watch for the mail and when the letter arrives you gather the

family to hear it. It was so reassuring."

Or of course, it could be tragic, as is the case when one receives a wartime letter from someone who had been killed during the time it took the letter to reach its destination.

Professor Alexandra Garbarini, who teaches modern European Jewish history at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, says she's looking forward to seeing the letters. Having studied parents writing diaries for their children during the Holocaust years and written about it in *Numbered Days: Diaries of the Holocaust*, Garbarini says "there's a newfound respect for the original documents from those who lived history, not just studied it. And here you actually get to read the words of the children, which is very rare."

Elisabeth Luz's quiet actions had immense influence, she adds.

"Because she was willing to play the role as messenger between hidden children and their parents, they could

maintain some semblance of a relationship," says Garbarini. "And it was all done for the sake of the child whose life depended on maintaining the fiction they had all created — the parents, the child, and the adoptive family too. It reminds us that very small acts when done in such numbers means it's no longer a very small act but a big one."

"As they spiraled into different worlds, the children pined for their parents and the parents yearned for the children," says Deborah Dwork. "This allowed them to keep close. It was a quiet but poignant example of resistance."

Janet Stein mused, "On some level did this woman have the foresight to think about history and that people might discover these someday? Could it have occurred to her that these were valuable not just to the families then but to people in the future too?"

First published in *The Algemeiner*.

THE FORGOTTEN HOLOCAUST: THE FILMS OF BORIS MAFTSIR

(Continued from page 6)

“The people began to panic from the very beginning. They felt frightened because right away they realized the most scary thing — the complete permissiveness that was indulged in by those who kept them here. They raped women, they raped girls, and they did it openly.” As she speaks, the camera cuts over to a well-dressed young woman with two school-age sons. The boys look back at the camera, giggling the way pre-teen boys anywhere might do. Gerasimova’s narrative of the horror that took place in these very streets clashes with the visual of the weirdly normal, peaceful scene playing out on-screen.

And suddenly it hits you. It was people just like these — regular, ordinary residents whom any one of us could identify with — who became swept up in the horrible events she is describing. Suddenly you can visualize and feel in your gut the shock and horror of seeing the gallows erected in the heart of your city. It could have been anyone who happened to be a Jew. It could have been you.

It is Maftsir’s ability to create this presence that makes his films so powerful. To achieve this, he films on location, at the same time of year when the events his informants describe took place. This means that he’s had to film in 1 degree F in *Sukhari* in Belarus, 104 degrees F in *Zmievska Balka* in the south of Russia, and in the pouring rain in Minsk. His films are based entirely on witness and survivor testimony, and he takes his witnesses to the places where they experienced the events. He asks them to tell their stories in the language they spoke in their childhood, whether it be Russian, Yiddish, Ukrainian, or Romanian.

This produces a lot of difficulties. “Physically, it’s very hard,” he told me. “You come to *Berezhany* in Western Ukraine with a witness. He is over 80, he is afraid of getting sick. And the rain starts, and he thinks, naturally — what will happen to me? And you have to work with people so they don’t cry, so they can tell the story.”

And they do tell their stories. They tell their stories all over the Holocaust country of the former Soviet Union, from *Nalchik* to *Khatyn* to *Lubavichi*, the birthplace of Chabad. The relentless narrative of Maftsir’s films, in which each episode of annihilation unfolds chronologically as one story builds on another, paints a picture of what he refers to as “the organized chaos” of the Holocaust in the USSR. In many ways, it can be said that it was here that the Nazis invented, practiced, and perfected techniques

of mass executions; learned to manipulate and control crowds of future victims to prevent panic from setting in too early; learned what incentives worked to supply them with streams of local collaborators. It was out of the chaos of these early months of the Holocaust that the well-oiled extermination machine of later years arose.

To be sure, Germans had their orders to annihilate Soviet Jews, but, in Maftsir’s view, there wasn’t an organized plan.

“Take the example of the Romanians,” he says. “Why is it that



Holocaust survivor Shoshana Noeman at the train station in Chernivtsi. From here, she and her family were deported to Transnistria in October 1941.

in *Zhmerinka* you have an ‘exemplary’ ghetto, and in *Bershad* hundreds are dying each day? That one is run by Romanians and this one is run by Romanians. In *Bogdanovka* there are executions taking place locally, but in the northern part of *Vinnitsa* region people are basically told to live or die any way they wish.”

This lack of organization and pre-planning, in his view and that of many historians, extended even to such massive events as *Babi Yar*.

“*Babi Yar* was a horrible tragedy,” says Maftsir. “But it wasn’t the first. And it wasn’t even unique in its scale.” He rattles off several notorious mass execution sites. *Kamenets-Podolsk*: two days, 23,600 people, a full month before *Babi Yar*. The Rumbula massacre in Riga: 25,000 Jews over two nonconsecutive days in late November and early December 1941. By then, he says, “they already knew how to do it.”

So far, Maftsir has completed four of the nine films he has planned. All four — *The Guardians of Remembrance*, *Holocaust: The Eastern Front*, *Beyond the Nistru* (parts 1–3 and 4–5), and *Until the Last Step* — are available online. Of particular interest in *Until the Last Step*, which is shot in Belarus, are stories of little-known instances of Jewish resistance.

How reliable are the accounts he presents? Witness testimony is a contentious issue among historians. One problem is that people’s memories can be unreliable, especially many

decades later. Bystander testimony can be particularly problematic, Dr. Kathleen Smith, a professor at Georgetown University focusing on issues of memory and historical politics, told me: “Bystanders are people who perhaps weren’t specifically targets of repression. They were there, and one might ask, well, what were you doing? Were you a collaborator or were you just someone who was scared? Were you someone who tried to help the victims? It’s much more messy when you try to pull information out of people who were bystanders.” In fact, it is well known that neighbors often benefited from the Jews’ misfortune.

When I put these questions to Maftsir, he is careful to emphasize that his witnesses were children or teenagers when the events took place. “Each of them talks about what they saw. And they do it sometimes very honestly,” he says. “It was a terrible time. It was occupation. I don’t know how people lived and how they survived. Even the righteous who saved people did not do it for free: they had to get food for the people. Those who saved themselves had to pay for it.”

Not a single historian who has viewed his films has ever raised objections about the veracity of testimonies, says Maftsir. “I don’t make things up and I don’t uncover anything new,” he stresses. “All the events that are described are well documented. I simply recreate these events. Each witness talks only about what she saw.”

In fact, a number of organizations in Israel use his films in their Holocaust education programs, including the Ghetto Fighters’ House museum.

“To what extent are these testimonies history? I don’t know,” he says. “It’s memory. And my entire project is about the restoration of memory about the Holocaust in the USSR. I collect imagery to convey the scale, the prevalence, the uniqueness, the systematic nature of what happened through personal stories.”

In a strange way, Maftsir’s films give one a sense of hope. After all, these are the stories of survival and resurrection of memory; stories that defied the intended triple annihilation of death, burial in mass graves, and forgetting.

One of the most emblematic scenes in the film is one of a Soviet World War II veteran, Emil Ziegel, who now lives in Israel, coming back to *Mineralny Vody*, Russia, with his Israeli grandson to show him where he came from and tell him the story of losing his family in the *Shoah*. “By the time you have children, I probably won’t be alive,” he says to him. “You bring them here, tell them what I told you today.”

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS’ GRANDCHILDREN CALL FOR ACTION...

(Continued from page 8)

getting,” said Feinstein.

A young woman from London told Glass of how her grandmother, who was in the Dutch resistance, avoided starvation at times by digging up flower bulbs and sucking out the nutrients. The woman later developed anorexia and believes it was related to the war stories that had been passed down the line and never processed.

Trauma research about the impact of the Holocaust on subsequent generations varies; some studies conclude there is no effect of trauma two generations on, while others claim that breast milk of survivors was affected by stress hormones that impacted on the physiology of the next generation. Some in the field of epigenetics say the intergenerational effects of the Holocaust are very pronounced and that the atrocities altered the DNA of victims’ descendants, so that they have different stress-hormone profiles compared to their peers.

Psychologist Ruth Barnett, whose Jewish father fled Germany for Shanghai, narrowly escaping the Holocaust, says she has witnessed inherited trauma in some of her clients.

“Constantly talking about events like the gas chambers to grandchildren is a way that traumatized people try to get rid of it — by sucking it up. But unless it is processed properly, they make even more anxiety for themselves and other generations.”

Never Ever Again! wants to move from what it calls “melancholic memorialization” to “positive action,” and is calling for mental health provisions to treat inherited trauma, as well as campaigning on various issues, including increased surveillance of Fascist groups across Europe, supporting the Human Rights Act and challenging anti-immigration legislation.

Glass says that while it is essential to preserve historical facts, the traumatizing effect of memory should be addressed now. “Our grandparents went through one horror, but it is important that we learn to process and debrief from their story to bring about wholesale recovery for this generation and the next.

“We should be releasing these old wounds to something beautiful, rather than staying paralyzed in memory and fear. Until then we cannot properly celebrate their lives or any kind of victory.

“What would our grandparents have felt if they had known we have had to carry their torment through generations? Wouldn’t they have wanted us to find the peace that was robbed from them? Wouldn’t they want us whole and living lives that they lost?”

“I realized that if they could speak to us from beyond the grave, many would have agreed the mourning has to stop and be replaced with something more constructive.”

FACEBOOK POST HELPS POSTHUMOUSLY HONOR DUTCH COUPLE FOR HOLOCAUST HEROISM

Nadine Wojakovski tells the incredible story of tracing relatives of those who saved her mother during World War II.

In 2015 I published a memoir, based on the true story of my mother Renata Bitterman's life in hiding as a child born in wartime Amsterdam — *Two Prayers Before Bedtime*.

It is the story of the bravery of Aad and Fie Versnel, a childless couple in their thirties who took in one-year-old Renata and nurtured her between 1942 and 1945. They risked their lives, loving her and treating her like their own flesh and blood, in their home in *Wormerveer*, just twelve miles away from Amsterdam.

For the last fifty years my family had lost all contact with the Versnel family, as the older generations had died out. But when the memoir came out my family felt that, in spite of my mother's previous attempt to find the Versnel family, we had to redouble our efforts. My mother presented my sisters and me with a box of black-and-white photos, of the Versnells and the Bittermans, spanning twenty years — from 1942 up until my parents' wedding in 1962 — reflecting a most special relationship that extended well

beyond the war years.

My sister uploaded a photo of Aad and Fie Versnel and posted it on Facebook, asking if anyone knew this couple. I thought little of it, as the chances of success were unrealistic,



Renata with Aad and Fie Versnel, circa 1945.

especially given the fact that we lived in different countries. However, I shared the post with a handful of Dutch friends. One of the friends shared it with her friends...and in an incredible turn of events, within just three days the post had reached a certain Hans Versnel, who turned out

to be the great-nephew of Aad Versnel.

We learned that Aad Versnel and his older brothers were God-fearing Protestants. Another brother also hid a child, while a third brother, Klaas (grandfather of Hans), owned a lithography studio and was a forger of ID cards and food stamps for the *Z a a n s e* Resistance. He was arrested in 1944 and died in a German prison a few weeks before the end of the war.

In 1945 Aad and Fie Versnel, who were childless for many years, found it too painful to return Renata to her parents and brother, who had miraculously survived the war. Five out of seven Dutch Jews were killed in the Holocaust — so a family reunion was no trivial matter. Renata's mother Cilla begged to

have her daughter back and prayed for the couple to have their own child. Exactly a year later, in June 1946 Aad and Fie were blessed with a daughter, Els Renate (named after my mother), followed by another daughter, Cobie, in 1948.

After we made contact with Hans, following the Facebook post, he put us in touch with Els and Cobie. We secretly invited them to London in 2015, where they were guests of honor at a huge family celebration. A surprise emotional reunion took place between my mother and Els and Cobie after more than fifty years.

Thereafter I applied to Yad Vashem for Aad and Fie Versnel to be recognized as "Righteous Among the Nations." The special committee is chaired by a retired judge of the Supreme Court. The process was a lengthy one, as Yad Vashem needed to verify information going back to the war years. Finally, in January 2017 we received the long-awaited news: after 75 years, Aad and Fie Versnel have been awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations "for help rendered to Jewish persons during the period of the Holocaust at the risk of their lives."

SPLIT UP BY HOLOCAUST, TOP COLLECTION OF YIDDISH WORKS WILL REUNITE DIGITALLY

(Continued from page 11)

of Lithuania" for both its intellectual and religious eminence, though members of a nationwide community that once numbered over 200,000 Jews — half in Vilna — sometimes speak of it as if it were the Jerusalem of all of Europe. Indeed, YIVO, which was started in 1925 to foster consciousness of the rich 800-year-old history of Eastern European Jews, housed materials from across the continent.

Among the materials that will be made available are many that offer a flavor of how Jews lived: Yiddish theater posters; student geometry notebooks from a Yiddish school, complete with rough sketches; records of synagogues, rabbinical schools, charities, fraternal and professional associations and Zionist movements; early editions of Hebrew books, some dating from the 1500s; the original script of Jacob Gordin's *Mirele Efros*, a classic of Yiddish theater sometimes known as the "Jewish Queen Lear"; missing script pages from another dramatic classic, *The Dybbuk*, by S. Ansky, in the author's own hand; and two etchings by Marc Chagall.

Some of the materials had been hidden, crumpled into balls and covered with earth. Those will now have to be flattened, cleaned and paired up with their missing pages.

"This is cultural paleontology," said Jonathan Brent, YIVO's executive director.

Arranging the project involved a delicate diplomatic minuet and included meetings in Vilna with Mr. Brent, government officials and leaders of the Jewish community, which now numbers 5,000.

Mr. Brent wanted Lithuania to send the materials to New York, since it felt YIVO was the owner. But when Lithuania balked, he said: "I proposed to Lithuania that we hold moot the question of ownership. Our job is to preserve materials for future generations and make them available to



Items in 1947 after their rescue; some remained in Lithuania.

scholars worldwide who can make sense of these materials. We're able to create an electronic bridge over a troubled stream."

"The Litvaks' culture and history constitute an integral part of Lithuania's culture and history, so we

are interested to preserve these documents because they are part of our heritage," Mantvydas Bekesius, a vice minister in Lithuania's foreign affairs ministry, said in an email, using a term for Lithuanian Jews.

The Lithuanians, perhaps eager to cement their image as an enlightened democracy in the wake of the Soviet Union's breakup, have been extraordinarily cooperative, Mr. Brent said.

The breakup of the collection started with the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The Nazi ideologue

Alfred Rosenberg and his subordinates rounded up Judaica collections for their so-called research institutes, but they needed people who could expertly analyze Yiddish works, and so forcibly drafted intellectuals like the Yiddish poets Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski to sift through the material and pack it. Just as

the Jews were selected for deportation to concentration camps, books and documents were selected for shipment to paper mills.

But over several years Sutzkever, Kaczerginski and others stuffed thousands of books and documents —

including works from another important Jewish collection, the Strashun Library — inside their clothing and smuggled them into the Nazi-demarcated Jewish ghetto. There, they were hidden behind apartment walls, beneath floors and in a ventilated bunker 60 feet underground that had been constructed by an engineer for his paralyzed mother. After Vilna was liberated by the Soviets in July 1944, those workers who had not been killed at the *Ponar* mass murder site unearthed the hidden papers.

But they had to rescue them all over again because the Soviets under Stalin, trying to wipe out any ethnic chauvinism, started to destroy the collection. Some items were smuggled to New York, and some were hidden in the basement of a Catholic church by a gentile librarian, Antanas Ulpis.

Starting in 1989, about two-thirds of the surviving collection in Vilna was shipped in crates to New York for copying and then returned. But that was the age of Xeroxes and microfilms, which are not permanent and cannot be easily disseminated worldwide, and the new project will include the material that was not sent over then.

Worldwide access, Mr. Brent said, is the beauty of digitization, something the scholars who assembled YIVO decades ago could never have imagined.

THE TRUE STORY OF THE ZOOKEEPER WHO HID JEWS IN HIS ZOO DURING WORLD WAR II

The director of the Warsaw zoo and his wife always carried cyanide during World War II. Danger was ever-present, but they were ready to take their secret to the grave.

The couple hid nearly 300 Jews and resistance fighters on zoo grounds during most of the war, under the noses of the German Nazis occupying Poland.

It sounds like a Hollywood movie, and now it is. But *The Zookeeper's Wife* is based on actual events.

Inside the zookeeper's villa, whose windowless cellar had a secret tunnel leading to the garden, Jan Zabinski and his wife Antonina gave refuge to the mostly Jews smuggled out of the city's ghetto.

"I remember squatting under this concrete shelf in the basement and keeping my hand over my sister's mouth to muffle her cries because she was constantly crying, day and night," said Moshe Tirosh, aged five at the time.

"When someone slammed the door upstairs, fear would pass through me, lest they find us," the 80-year-old told AFP in a telephone interview.

The retired businessman and grandfather of seven, who has lived in Israel since 1957, still cannot believe what he lived through.

"I saw children's dead bodies on the street. Terrible things. I remember wondering why everyone wants to kill us. I couldn't understand it," he said.

All but two of the zoo's hidden guests survived the war, and Nazi troops stationed on the bombed-out zoo grounds never unearthed the subterfuge.

"My parents figured that it's always darkest under a lamppost," the zoo couple's daughter Teresa Zabinska said, citing a Polish saying according

to which it is best to hide in plain sight.

"My father knew that it wouldn't occur to the Germans that so many people could be hiding in a place like this with open windows and no curtains," the 73-year-old told AFP.

Most hid in empty animal enclosures or the villa's basement. Others were able to stay with the family upstairs by taking on fake identities as Antonina's tailor or their son Ryszard's tutor.

Between 1940 and 1944, nearly 300 people found refuge, some for just a few hours or days, but others remained months or even years.

"Around 30 people would stay here at once," said Olga Zbonikowska, 38, who works for the Panda Foundation, which takes care of the villa now.

The stakes were high. In occupied Poland, even offering Jews a glass of water was punishable by death.

Whenever a Nazi soldier got too close for comfort, Antonina would warn everyone by playing an operetta on the piano.

The hidden guests would escape through the tunnel or hide in a wardrobe upstairs that opened on both sides like a magician's trunk.

The couple also hid the Jews from their housekeeper out of fear she could give them away.

"The hardest was explaining away the increase in daily meals" to the housekeeper, Antonina wrote in her 1968 memoirs, saying the family fed

the extra mouths by faking ravenous appetites.

"I can't believe how much they eat! I've never seen anything like it!" she recalled the housekeeper muttering.

Tirosh had suffered two years in the ghetto, marked by hunger, typhus and near deportation to the *Treblinka* death camp.

To escape Warsaw's Jewish quarter, his family paid off the guards, and Tirosh and his sister were thrown over the wall in sacks while their parents climbed over.

On their arrival at the zoo, Antonina's empathy and reassuring calm told them they were in good hands.

"She was extraordinary. I was a



small boy who was very afraid of everything. But when I saw her face, I calmed right down. I still remember that feeling," Tirosh said.

Before the family moved on, Antonina tried to make them "look less Jewish" by bleaching their hair lighter.

"She locked herself in the bathroom with us and dyed our hair. She rubbed

and rubbed and when we came out of the bathroom, Rysiek (nickname for the Zabinskis' son) cried out, 'Mum! What did you do? That's squirrel color,'" Tirosh said, of the inadvertent reddish color.

The family became known as The Squirrels. Others also had animal nicknames, including The Starling, The Hamsters and The Pheasants.

"Theirs was a house where both animals and people always found help," said Teresa, who was born at the zoo and had a raccoon-like coat from Mexico as a childhood playmate.

Aptly, her mother's memoirs were entitled *People and Animals*.

They describe how Antonina pushed to raise funds to reopen the zoo after the war while Jan was in a Nazi German prisoner-of-war camp, having fought in the 1944 Warsaw uprising.

American author Diane Ackerman relied heavily on the memoirs when writing her own 2007 nonfiction book *The Zookeeper's Wife*, which inspired the movie. Directed by Niki Caro, it stars Golden Globe winner Jessica Chastain.

The Zabinskis died in the early 1970s.

The villa is now a museum where visitors can make an appointment to see the life-saving secret tunnel and basement.

Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust remembrance center later recognized the Zabinskis as Righteous Among the Nations.

"They believed it was the right thing to do," Teresa said, of her parents' wartime actions.

"My father always said that's what a decent person should do."

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RIGHTEOUS ALBANIA

In preparation for the Wannsee Conference in 1942, Adolf Eichmann, the head of the Jewish department of the SS, was asked to make a list of the number of Jews in each and every European country. While the decision on the Final Solution — the extermination of the Jews of Europe — had already been made, the conference members still had to discuss a plan of action.

One of the countries on Eichmann's list was Albania, and next to it stood a number. At that time, according to the records of the Reich, 200 Jews lived in Albania. After the war, however, there were about 2,000 Jews, ten times more. Albania, a small Southeastern European republic with a predominantly Muslim population, thus became the only country in Europe where the number of Jews after World War II was higher than before the war.

During the war, under Nazi and Italian occupations, the Albanian pop-

ulation protected the Jews. In 1944, the Nazis ordered all Jews living in the capital, Tirana, to register with the Gestapo, forcing them to flee to friendly villages outside the cities. Many found refuge with Albanian families and the partisans. Albanians not only hid the Jews but also provided them with local names, clothes and education and treated them as part of their family. When the Nazi authorities demanded that Albanian officials give them a list of Jewish families living in the country, the Albanians refused and instead warned the Jews and promised to protect them.

One of the principles that explains the willingness to protect the Jews is the Albanian code of "besa," which literally means "to keep a promise." Because of this code, Jews who were taken in by Albanian families could have complete trust in them. To this day there are streets in cities like Berat and Vlora that are known as "the streets of the Jews," recalling the

days when Jewish families lived there in friendly and synergetic relations with their Albanian neighbors continuing after the war ended. In recognition of their heroic acts in saving Jews, Yad Vashem honored 70 Albanians as Righteous Among the Nations.

The Jewish community in Albania has its roots in the 15th century, when a large group of Jews arrived in the region following the expulsion from Spain. According to some historians, the first Jews settled in Albania during the first century of the Common Era, after being exiled from ancient Israel by the Romans, and their descendants are the ones who built the first synagogue in Saranda 400 years later. As in other areas near Albania, this community consisted of these Romaniotic Jews and Sephardic Jews who arrived in Albania from Spain.

In a census conducted in 1930 only 200 Jews were registered in Albania. In 1937 the Jewish community

received official status from the government. With the rise of Nazism in Germany and Austria and throughout World War II, hundreds of Jews from those countries and other countries in the Balkans and Europe found refuge in Albania. After the war, as mentioned, about 2000 Jews were living in Albania.

Today, Albania is a small developing country with a population of about three million people, of which around 70 percent are Muslims.

The brave connection between the Jewish and the Albanian peoples continues today and grows even stronger. They cooperate with Israel in a variety of fields, often under pressure and criticism from Arab and Muslim states.

Nowadays, the Albanians are putting a lot of effort into commemoration and perpetuation, and have recently joined the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.



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DR. NA'AMA SHIK, Yad Vashem Jerusalem

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