

MY MOTHER

WHAT I HAVE BEEN TOLD

What is history's truth? Who knows for sure? Is it based on firsthand accounts? Or, faded, hazy, second-hand, revisionist, or fragmented and fragile memories? Or, is it the spoken word passed down a hundred times and later put to pen as factual first-person accounts? Sometimes that is all there is for what we call history. In the end, all I can tell you is what I have heard and what I perceive to be true.

BABI YAR

Knowlton, Quebec, Saturday, 13 August 2005:

Browsing through a yard sale, I pulled a book from a stack, turned it over, and saw the words "Babi Yar." I stared at the cover, transfixed and transported back into time. I remembered sitting with my mother several years earlier when she became very emotional and said with a shaky voice, "We were forced to watch. They lined up women, children, men, and shot them." Almost crying she walked out of the room. I remembered she said, "Babi Yar."

My hands shaking, I slowly opened the book and read the introduction. "Anatoly Kuznetsov's documentary novel complete, as published in Russian. Here is the first extensive account of that terrible time from 1941 to 1943 in which the Germans systematically murdered some 200,000 people, beginning with the barbaric massacre of

50,000 Jews at the ravine on the outskirts of Kiev know as Babi Yar.”

My mother’s name was Helen Kiwa. Her mother’s maiden name was Tkachenko. They were Russian Orthodox Christians from the city of Kiev, located in the Ukraine, Russia. Her mother was a nurse and her father was a civil engineer when World War II broke out. When I was a young boy my mother had told me that initially those who hated the communists welcomed the German army, but then (as in many things in life), darker days followed. During the occupation she was about 17 years old and at that time all citizens were required to support the war effort. Everyone—men, woman, children, the infirm, the old, and the young—were all required to work. One day in her naiveté she

decided that instead of reporting to work she would go to the cinema. While inside the theater the German Gestapo and Ukrainian collaborators referred to as Polizei suddenly cordoned off the area and lined everyone up. Because she was in the movie theater and not at work, my mother was taken prisoner. Later, she was processed and placed on a train, in a cattle car, and shipped as slave labor to a farm near Berlin.

I opened to page 211 of Kuznetsov’s book, which read, “The Arbeitskarte (labor card) was introduced on March 1, and soon became more important than a passport. It was stamped at the bearer’s place of work each week. Documents were checked on the streets, and those who had no Arbeitskarte or who had not kept the stamps

up to date were seized on the spot for deportation to Germany.”

The following are some passages from girls' letters, which were cut out by censors and later discovered in German files:

...If anyone lagged, paused or moved to one side, the police opened fire. The father of two children jumped off the moving train on the way from Kiev. The Polizei stopped the train, overtook the man, shot him in the back and killed him. We were taken to the toilet under armed guard, and anyone who tried to escape was shot. We are slaves, and they do what they like with us. There is no food. Nor is there any hope of ever coming home

...As we walked by, people looked at us as though we were animal. Even the children held their nose and spat.

...They treat us like animal, dear Mama.... I don't think I'll ever get home

I remember my mother telling that us she had been a city girl and was not used to waking up at four in the morning, cleaning manure from the stables, and working in the hot fields of a farm. She said that ever since that time she disliked being around farms. My father said my mother did not talk much about her time as a forced laborer, except that she told him that the farmer was a mean, hard-working slave driver.

Kuyznetsov's documentary novel provided a wealth of information, include the following: "Others told of being taken to special market, where their prospective German master, the Bauern (farmers), walked up and down the line, inspected teeth, felt muscles, made their selections and paid out five to fifteen marks for each man or woman. Work on the farms lasted from dawn to dusk. And one could be beaten or killed for the slightest infraction, because slaves cost next to nothing, not nearly as much as a cow or horse: the livestock lived ten times better than the slave."

When my mother was taken prisoner in Kiev she was not allowed to speak with or contact anyone. She had simply disappeared one day. Her parents were frantic in their search for her. For a

year they visited police stations, German Command, Russian authorities, and their network of friends. They agonized not knowing whether their daughter was dead or one of the disappeared from Kiev. A weird, ironic aspect of the war is that the Germans were very meticulous in their record keeping of the exterminations, forced labor, executions, and their other wartime abominations. Eventually and fortunately for my mother's parents, her arrest and transport to Germany was actually documented by the occupying authorities; there was record of it. The information was released to them with a price that would forever change their lives.



Picture of Mother taken on 23 January 1943 - About 100 days before her Labor Camp photo



Mother's Labor Camp Photograph - Taken in Berlin on 7 May 1943

Since my mother's father was an engineer whose skills were sorely needed to support the war effort, he was forced to relocate to Germany and work for the Germans, so he could be reunited with my mother. My father recalled that my mother's father was assigned to work in a factory in the region of Silesia. At the outbreak of the war Silesia was officially a region of Poland, which the Germans reclaimed as theirs. My father told me that my grandfather never spoke of those years.

Once the family was reunited in Silesia, their fate was sealed. They would be forever considered as traitors to mother Russia. As the war ended and the German lines retreated from Russia and across Germany, the family had to move with the

German lines or the advancing Russian armies would have summarily executed them all.

My mother told me that as the Eastern Front moved westward, she and her parents walked on foot pushing a small cart that held all their possessions. Along the way her father fell, hurting his ankle so badly that he could not walk. They jettisoned their meager possessions and placed my grandfather in the cart. Like cattle, my grandmother, my mother, and her younger sisters pulled their cart westward with nowhere to go except with the retreating Germans. Fear, chaos, and panic ruled that time. People did not know how or even if they would live to the next day.

I remember as a child, I would listen to my mother tell stories of the war. But as I grew older the memories faded and I had no interest. So many from her generation spoke little of what they had endured and seen. Life goes on. As my mother was dying of cancer she told my sister many stories of the war years. My mother said she wanted her to know the truth so that we would know what had happened.

My grandfather was born in 1896. He was a White Russian who survived the Revolution; the great famine, which took the lives of twenty million people; the Stalinist purges, which resulted in millions either disappearing or being executed; the Second World War; and finally, exile. My grandmother said that during the purges when one heard a knock on the door at

night there was great fear. Her friend, Olga, lost her whole family when farms were collectivized and the ensuing great famine. Living as a refugee in Germany in 1948, my grandfather was accepted by Canada as a displaced person, a man without a country. The Canadians accepted this survivor, who was an engineer by profession, as a domestic helper. He never complained— God bless him and all those who suffered.

I think of today's teenagers and then of Mother, who at age 17 experienced Babi Yar, slave labor, and war.

I wish my mother were alive to tell me her story.



Mother's parents, Fedor and Nadia Kiwa (nee: Trachenko) and her younger sister, Roxana.

Photo circa. Mid-1930s.

THE TRUTH?

“Go see Kateryna, she knew your mother,” my father told me.

Kateryna Krychevsky was a childhood friend of my mother in Kiev. After I visited Kateryna I felt a great sense of doubt. What actually happened during those terrible war years? Did I know the truth? What was the truth? Or did I only know fragments of faded recollections whose meaning has changed over time? Or was the truth something that still lay hidden sixty years later? In the end I can only repeat what I have been told, and that leaves me uncertain. During our visit Kateryna told me much about my mother’s background and family that I did not know. But, when I mentioned that my mother was taken

away as a slave laborer, my impression was that Kateryna seemed surprised. Although, she had described a close friendship between the two young women, she seemed to not recall that one day my mother disappeared, and that my mother’s parents spent a year trying to find out what had happened to her. Kuznetsov noted in his book that because of the German propaganda at the time, many people at first volunteered to go to work in Germany. Later, as the war became more desperate and conditions harsher, many people were simply rounded up and carted away as slave laborers. Was my mother actually a volunteer at the age of 16 or 17? That does not seem likely. What is the truth? How could my mother’s best friend not know this?

I felt as if I were at a portal and that if I stepped through it, I might learn something I did not want to know. And so I stepped back.

I asked Kateryna about Babi Yar. Kateryna remembered the day that all Jews were ordered to report to certain locations and then forced to walk to Babi Yar. Kateryna showed me a map of Kiev and pointed out the route to Babi Yar. I was actually surprised that Babi Yar was not a far-away location, but at the edge of central Kiev. Kateryna said she recalled hearing ra-tat-tat sounds during the evening and for many nights thereafter. She asked her father what the sounds were. Gunfire, he said. Kateryna showed me on the map where she and my mother lived. She said my mother would have seen the long procession of people being marched to and then

executed at Babi Yar. But, Kateryna never spoke a word about my mother's disappearance and forced labor. I did not pursue the matter. Later, I learned that during the turmoil of the German invasion many people lost contact with each other and that was the case between my mother and Kateryna. Each person had their own story of personal survival. And so in retrospect it was actually my own fear of hearing something that I did not want to know that stopped me from asking more details about my mother from Kateryna.

SAVED

Kateryna told me my mother had saved her life. Apparently, my mother was very good with



Mother (left) and Kateryna - Picture taken on the balcony of Mother's parents' apartment in Kiev. Note street in background; Babi Yar procession would have been seen from this vantage point.

languages and had learned several Hungarian phrases from Hungarian soldiers stationed in Kiev. As the war was ending Kateryna and her parents moved westward ahead of the Russian front. While escaping the Russians in Dresden she and her parents found themselves in the main train station as the Russians were entering the outskirts of the city. There was a mass exodus of soldiers and refugees and as the last train began pulling out, there was absolutely no room for anyone else. People were on the roof of the train, hanging off its side, undercarriage, and anywhere else they could possibly hold onto. From the platform Kateryna saw a young Hungarian officer inside the train looking at her through a window. Using the only Hungarian words she knew, the three my mother had taught her, she said to the soldier, "I love you." He

reached through the open window and pulled her and her parents into the last train leaving Dresden. Kateryna's father was an artist; and as was the case with many Russian citizens fleeing the communist system, the family would have been summarily executed had the Russians captured them.

Mother told me that as she fled westward with her family that she was on the last train leaving Dresden as it was being bombed. She recalled that the whole city was aflame and that her younger sister, Roxanne, was screaming in horror. My mother said she thought that Roxanne's instability later in life was as the result of the trauma she had suffered during the war.

MY MOTHER – THE INTELLIGENCE AGENT

My mother was the only non-Soviet citizen working for the Russian delegation of the United Nations International Civil Aviation Organization, which was headquartered in Montreal and where foreign members to the delegation were afforded diplomatic status. As such, she had a great deal of access to the Soviet Consulate in Montreal, as well as the inner workings of the Russian delegation. Unbeknownst to the Soviets my mother also worked with the Canadian Intelligence Service (CIS). She was responsible for trying to identify KGB agents within the delegation and provide a contemporary analysis of the Soviet perspective on their views and thinking regarding events as they occurred

during the Cold War. I recall that years ago my mother befriended a family from the Soviet Embassy. His name was Vladimir and I recall that he and his family visited our home on several occasions. I remember meeting Vladimir several times after I returned from Vietnam. Later, my mother confirmed to me that he was actually a KGB agent. The irony in these situations is that although my mother loved her native country and being with her people, she despised the communist system and what it had done to her homeland. This is a phenomenon that many refugees experience: They appreciate their newfound freedoms, but their hearts and roots always remain with their homeland. My father recalled that after my mother's near-fatal second bout with cancer she seemed to experience a revival of nostalgia for her

motherland. This created within her a sense of sadness. Fortunately, the KGB never uncovered her actual role as a very valuable and well-placed asset for the CIS. She had played a key role in the expulsion of ten KGB agents from Canada during the Trudeau government years. Several years after my mother's death I found a poem behind a picture frame she kept at her bedside. I also found information that identified her CIS contact. Later, when I shared my Babi Yar story with my sister I found out that she was aware of our mother's work with the CIS, but that she had not shared this with anyone else in the family. Mother worked with the CIS until nearly the end of her life. My sister would drive her to certain rendezvous points where my mother would leave to meet with her contact. As my mother's health deteriorated the CIS agent who

worked with my mother telephoned my sister to see how my mother was doing. After our mother's death, the CIS agent who'd worked with her told my sister that our mother was a wonderful woman who had done great things in service to Canada.

Writing about her, I began to cry thinking of my mother's life: what had happened in her youth, her pain and suffering through reoccurring cancers, and a love for her home country all the while living in exile fighting a lonely, heroic, and secretive battle against the Communist system. As I mentioned earlier, in the end our mother started telling Helen much about her life, things we had not heard before. She said she wanted us to know the truth. But, to my great regret, I know almost nothing—and this saddens me

greatly. My sister told me that during our mother's last days she recalled how her homeland and family had suffered through the Russian Revolution, then famine where millions died, then communism under Stalin where millions more disappeared, then through World War II, and then a life in exile. In her final days my mother cried out asking why God had brought her so much suffering.

THE POEM

Montreal, Quebec: Several years after my mother passed away I was visiting Montreal and staying with my sister. One of the things my sister had kept from our mother's old apartment was a small frame that held a photo of our

mother, which she had kept on a nightstand by her bed. This picture frame was now on a nightstand in my sister's guest bedroom. One evening I picked up this small picture frame. As I held it in my hand and looked at the photograph of our mother I felt the back cover of the picture frame move. Out of curiosity I turned it over and took off the backing. Hidden there was a small strip of paper, with a poem titled "The Time Is Now."

I was moved by this poem and have always wondered why it had been hidden—and what it had meant to my mother.

The Time is Now

If you are ever going to love me,
Love me now, while I can know
The sweet and tender feelings
Which from true affection flow.

Love me now
While I am living
Do not wait until I am gone
And then have it chiseled in marble
Sweet words on ice cold stone.

If you have tender thoughts of me
Please tell me now
If you wait until I'm sleeping
Never to awaken
There will be death between us
And I won't hear you then

So, if you love me even a little
Let me know it while I'm living
So I can treasure it.



Photo of my mother taken in Tuttlingen, Germany, in 1949
The year and place where I was born