

### **Malka Levine - "Look after the Children"**

I was born in 1939 in a town called Vladimir-Volinsk in western Ukraine. I am one of three children and my two brothers, Chaim and Shalom, also survived the Holocaust. The rest of my wider family – 78 people in all – were all killed, including my father. My mother also survived and this is very unusual: she is the only woman I know of who managed to bring three children through the Holocaust.

When I was only three years old, in 1942, we had to go into the ghetto, leaving our home and all our possessions. The Germans gathered all the 25,000 Jews in our town and put them into one quarter. They surrounded it with fences and put notices outside, saying that the people in the ghetto were suffering from typhus. This made sure that the Christian population would have no contact with us and would not try to come in or bring help. So we were cut off from the rest of the world.

Many of the Jews in the ghetto prepared hiding places because they could see what was going to happen. But my father didn't believe that anything would happen to us. He just thought it was a terrible time that would eventually pass. Every day, he was taken out of the ghetto to work.

One Friday lunchtime, we were all sitting at the table – my grandparents on my mother's side, my other grandmother, my two brothers, myself and my mother – when the SS and Gestapo suddenly rushed into the ghetto and started shooting at random. We hadn't planned a place of shelter, but our house in the ghetto stood on stilts, about a foot off the ground, and there was a trapdoor leading to the area underneath the house. My mother grabbed a satchel, put in a bottle of water, some honey and a loaf of bread, and ushered us all down under the stilts. My mother's sister and her husband decided not to come with us and went instead up into the rafters of the house because they thought that if their newborn baby started crying, everybody would be discovered. So they went into the roof of the house and we hid under the floor on the earth.

The Germans meanwhile were looking for people in the ghetto, shouting and shooting. They came into the house, tore and broke everything and looted people's possessions. For three days, we lay there under the floorboards. We had run out of food and water, so when things were quieter, my father decided to go up and search for some provisions for us. He also wanted to see if my mother's sister was safe.

He went back up into the house and when he returned, he passed another jar of honey, another loaf of bread and more water through the trapdoor entrance. My mother asked what had happened to her sister, her husband and three-day-old baby. Father didn't reply at first, but then he said that they were no longer there. Suddenly, as they were talking, the trapdoor was quickly shut. That was the last time we saw my father. We heard footsteps above. Father knew that if he jumped back through the trapdoor, we would all be discovered, so he sacrificed his life for us. His last words to my mother were, "Look after the

children,” and this became her mission, the only thing she could cherish. I was three years old, my middle brother eight and my older brother ten.

We stayed there under the floor for 15 days. From time to time, the SS, Gestapo and Ukrainians came back to the ghetto and were still looting, screaming and shooting. But they did not even think that someone might be hiding under the stilts because it was so low, with so little room. The Germans even came with their dogs, but they never sniffed us out. We could see the hems of their coats, the bottom of the Gestapo’s boots, but were not discovered.

When things had quietened down, mother crawled out surreptitiously to try and find us some food. She knew the town very well; before the war, we had owned some land that we let out to farmers, so she knew where to go at night, and she would bring back a tomato, a beet or raw potato. Every time she crawled out we were always worried that she might not come back, but she always did. In the dark at night, she couldn’t see what she was picking and sometimes the fruit was unripe. To this day I can’t eat red tomatoes. I only like them green because I didn’t know they were supposed to be red!

When the shooting seemed to stop after we had been hiding for 15 days, mother decided it was time to come out. She hoped that the Nazis had quenched their thirst for Jewish blood. We had lost our father and many members of our family. In that first pogrom, the Nazis had shot 15,000 people.

When we crawled out of our hiding place, there were Germans everywhere, and about five miles out of town, they were making Jewish people dig holes and trenches. They were told the trenches were going to hold ammunition for the war, but they were really pits into which people were shot. Those trenches became three enormous graves: 25,000 people were taken there and shot, layer upon layer of people, machine-gunned into the pit.

After this, the Germans created two ghettos – one for the living and one for the dying. The people who were still useful to them were given work permits and they were sent to the “living” ghetto, but the older people, the children, the weak and the sick were put into the other ghetto. This meant that at any time, day or night, the Germans could come up and round them up and kill them.

My mother was a real fighter and went straight to the “living” ghetto. When she was asked what work she could do, she replied that she came from a farming family and could work in the fields. At first, they didn’t want to give her a work permit – they only wanted to give them to the men. But my mother fought and fought, and eventually succeeded. She was really determined to live. She was the only woman in the ghetto with a work permit.

She was taken away every morning at 5 a.m. and worked either in the fields or barracks. When she came back at night, she always brought a beet or potato from the fields, which she had hidden under her clothes for us to eat. That was how we lived for another nine months.

Then, suddenly, the shooting started again in the ghetto in the middle of one night. We children always slept with our clothes on because we never knew when we might have to flee. That was the start of the second pogrom, the second Action. While all this shooting was happening, we just tried to weather the storm. We tried to hide in one of the buildings:

my grandmother and middle brother in one room; my mother, older brother and I under the bed in another.

This time, we were not so lucky. The Germans discovered us when they were looking for items of value. But they didn't find my older brother and mother begged him to stay hidden and save his life. They were rounding people up and taking them to the prison, where they lined everyone up in the yard. From there, people were taken by lorry, 33 at a time, men and women separate, to the killing pits, where they were shot. When the Germans found us, they took us to the prison – mother, my middle brother and me.

My brother then came to the prison looking for us. We were standing there in the prison yard. It was a bitterly cold winter, blowing a gale. I had no shoes on, my coat was undone and we had had nothing to eat. There were some political prisoners in the prison who were not Jewish. One of them saw my mother, recognised her from the bicycle shop and asked her what she was doing there. Mother replied that she was doing just the same as the rest of the Jewish people – being taken to be killed. And I remember to this day how that man threw down a loaf of bread and some garlic to us. We were so grateful. We were so hungry that we ate that bread very quickly, even though we expected to be shot in an hour or two.

Men and women were separated when the Germans took people to the pits. At first, they wouldn't allow the boys to go with mother and me, but she begged them. "Please let me undress my own children and, if they die, let them die in my arms." Eventually they allowed us to stay together. Then we were lined up and they counted the next victims, one to thirty-three to a lorry load. My grandmother was number 33 and my mother 34: the groups divided between them. I was number 35 and my brother came after me. So we saw grandmother taken on the lorry to her death.

While we were waiting for the next lorry to come for us, we suddenly saw my uncle (my father's brother) arrive at the prison yard. He worked in a factory and knew a high ranking German *Wehrmacht* army officer. His own wife and children were already dead, but he had appealed to this army officer for help, saying that his wife and children were in prison and were going to be shot. The *Wehrmacht* officer and my uncle rushed to the prison and that's how he was able to save us. Nobody could believe it. It was an absolute miracle because if my mother or I had been number 33, we would have been on the previous lorry. My uncle asked where his mother (my grandmother) was, but she had already been taken on the lorry. It was too late to save her. You could see his agony. What was happening was beyond human comprehension. In that massacre, they killed another 10,000 people in those trenches.

My uncle took us back to the ghetto. There were now only about 500-600 people left and we were among them – my mother, my two brothers and me. Again, mother had to go out to work. The ghetto itself was run by Jewish police and some of them were very vicious: they beat people up – including my brothers. So my mother took the boys out of the ghetto to a Christian friend of hers, who kept them hidden in a cupboard for a while. But when it was quiet again, they came back to the ghetto.

After a time, the Germans started some rumours, telling all the Jewish people who were in hiding that they should come back to the ghetto; they would be repatriated and nothing would happen to them. But my mother did not believe this and sensed that something awful was going to happen. They were going to make the area *Judenrein*, free of Jews, a kind of ethnic cleansing. One of my mother's cousins, Rachel, still lived outside the ghetto

because she had foreign papers stating she was a Christian. Mother appealed to her for help, asking if she knew anybody who would hide us. Rachel said it was difficult with three small children, but she would try to help: she would take my middle brother to live outside the ghetto and my older brother would go with the uncle who had saved us. At the time, a group of men, ten or twelve of them, were making plans to escape from the ghetto and hide in the marshland near Pinsk, a very harsh terrain where they thought they would be safe. My older brother was going to go with them and they suggested that mother and I would perhaps have a chance to survive there as well. Mother thought about it for a day or two, but eventually she decided that we should all stay together as a family.

So she talked again with Rachel and asked her to try and find a place where we could all be hidden together, where she could perhaps work on the land or in the house. Rachel thought of a Ukrainian acquaintance of hers called Ribke who had relatives who were farmers in a village called Biskovich. That family agreed to hide us until the war ended.

Very early one morning, mother then smuggled us out of the ghetto, through the wires, all three of us. We went to Ribke's house and waited for the farmers to come. But when they arrived and saw us, they didn't want to take us at first, especially the old man. Mother begged him. The farmer's wife was a religious woman who believed in God, and she told her husband "Listen, if you don't take them, I will. They'll be my responsibility. If they're caught, I'll tell the Germans you didn't know a thing about it." There was a lot of arguing between the farmer and his wife, but eventually the wife won and they took us to the village hidden in a wagon.

We had only been in their house for a few days when suddenly, there was a knock on the front door. We were in the back room. We heard Germans talking, the SS and the Gestapo came in and we were sure that somebody in the village had seen us. We knew that if the Germans found us, they would kill the whole village. We really thought they had come for us.

The farmer made a sign to his son to take us through the back door into the barn, and we waited there for a few hours, in terrible anxiety. Then the old man came and told us that we would have to leave. He wanted to help us, but had to think of his own family and the rest of the village. Mother started begging him and asked what had happened. It turned out that the Germans had not come looking for us, but they were going to establish a school right there in the farmhouse, to train Ukrainians to work with them.

While we were talking, the farmer's wife came in; she knelt down and made the sign of the cross. The arguments started between them again: the man kept saying that we had to go and the woman insisted she would take responsibility for us. He asked her, "What are we going to do with them? The Germans will be in the house." And she replied, "We'll dig a hole in the ground, in the barn, and cover it with twigs." The old man told his wife she was absolutely crazy, and he started screaming and shouting again. But she had the upper hand.

So they dug the hole in the barn and we hid there, covered with twigs. It was freezing cold because we didn't have many warm clothes, no blankets. I was the only one small enough to stand up in the space – I was only five years old. We hid there, not knowing what was going to happen to us, for nine solid months. The Germans were all round us – we could hear them. One day, when they brought their horses to the barn where we were hiding, the old man told them, "Oh, no, no, no. You can't put your horses here. You're very important

people. You must have my stables!” So the Germans put their horses in the stables and the old man put his in the barn.

Then one day, the horses started galloping right on top of us and the hole was completely demolished. We felt as if we were being buried alive. Luckily, the Germans were away on manoeuvres that day. The old man took us into the house and said they would dig the hole out again. As we ran into the house, a little village boy saw us and told his parents that the old man was hiding Jews. The boy’s parents came to the farm and complained, and the farmer was afraid that the little boy would tell somebody. But they took him to the priest and made him swear before the Madonna that he would not say anything. If he did, he would be killed – and the rest of the village as well. And the boy kept it secret.

We were in the house for a few days, then we had to go back to the barn to hide because we knew the Germans were returning. We were in that living grave again. Then my mother became very ill with bad pleurisy, and for days the farmer and his wife couldn’t bring us any food or water because the Germans were everywhere, preparing for the last fight. Mother crawled out at night and brought us a little basin of snow to eat, and for a few days, we ate just snow and ice. Mother had a terrible cough, but she couldn’t even risk coughing because the Germans would have heard her. So we all had to sit on top of her so she couldn’t cough and give away our hiding place. We all thought she was going to die.

After that, things got a bit quieter and the Germans went away for another day of manoeuvres. The farmer’s daughter-in-law came and mother begged her to help. The only thing mother had left was her wedding ring, and she gave it to her, asking her to bring some medicine – hot water with dried camomile – so she could inhale and breathe better. That was how mother gradually got a bit better. But when the farmer’s wife saw the ring her daughter-in-law was wearing, she asked her where it came from. She made her take it off and came to apologise to my mother. If there was an angel on earth, it was that old lady.

We had grown to recognise the footsteps of the old woman and the old man as they came towards the hole. Suddenly one day, we heard strange footsteps and our hearts stopped. Then there was a very quiet voice, calling my mother’s name. It was Ribke, the man who had found the hiding place for us. He told my mother, “I know the conditions you are living in here are awful, but there are no survivors at all in the ghetto. At least you’re still alive, just try and hold on.” He gave us some hope that day.

We carried on hiding there for another two or three months. Then one day, we heard somebody coming and this time we recognised Ribke’s footsteps. He told us, “The town had been liberated, you can come out, but I think you should stay another week or two because there might still be some Germans or hostile people about.”

About a week later, after nine long months, we crawled out. My mother came out last and she was wearing a scarf. She threw it in to the air and, as if she was speaking to our father, she said, “Here are the children! Here they are!” She had kept her promise to him.

This testimony is dedicated to my mother.

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