

Survivors of a Vanished World

. My parents – Mordechai Ya'akov and Chana Landau - came from Carpathian Ruthena, a region now part of western Ukraine that has described as a borderland, where there has been a Jewish presence for over 500 years and where sovereignty changed so often it was said that you could live in multiple countries without ever leaving your home. When my parents would tell me stories of their childhood, they would mention the poverty, but mostly, with love and Yiddish humor they would talk about their large family and their close knit religious community. Listening to their stories I would imagine a place very much like that captured by the stunning photographs taken by Roman Vishniac of A Vanished World. My mother came from a small shtetl called Tereblia, where there was no electricity and no running water and my father from a village a little more than 20 kilometers away called Tiachiv.

In November 1938 that world ended. The region was handed to Hungary and as Hungary increasingly aligned with Nazi Germany, it adopted a series of anti-Jewish measures. One of these was the forced labor service for Jewish men of military age. Along with many Jewish men of the region, my grandfather, and then my father, were forced into these battalions. The day my father left for the labor battalion was the last time he saw his parents, his home and most of his 10 siblings.

My father said that they were forced to work 12 to 14 hours every day doing heavy manual labor building roads, bunkers, and bridges, given little food and always under the watch of the Hungarian guards. He also described how, to his surprise, one of the Hungarian guards would hand him his plate after he ate his midday meal and order him to clean it, and as my father did, he saw that the guard left uneaten food. It wasn't only once, my father would say, he kept doing that. When I would ask why he thought the guard was doing this – he answered, maybe I reminded him of someone, or maybe he had a son my age, and he felt sorry for me, but the food he left on his plate helped to keep me alive.

My father, 19 at the time, eventually escaped from the work battalion along with two other teenage boys. He remembered how they were chased by guards and dogs but hid in the forest under thickets and leaves and made their way east. They were captured by a band of partisans, accused of being Germans or Hungarians and nearly killed, but were

able to convince them that they were Jews escaping from the Hungarians, and were allowed to stay.

Which they did until word came out that a General Svoboda was forming a Czechoslovak brigade as part of the Soviet Army and was recruiting Czechs who had escaped the German invasion to join him. My father along with his two friends were eager to join the fight, and they found themselves in the 1st Czech Army Corp, provided with uniforms and guns, the only three Jews in that unit. When I asked how the three of them were treated by their commander and fellow Czech and Ukrainian soldiers – he would say that he never felt that being Jewish made a difference. Then added - as long as we were willing to follow orders and fight, no one treated us any differently. So, for the remainder of the war, my father was in uniform fighting the Nazi's on the eastern front with that dwindling unit as they experienced heavy losses. I thought that my father story of being in the Czech Army Corp was unusual, but then I read Erich Kulka's book titled Jews in Svoboda's Army in the Soviet Union and learned that there were hundreds if not thousands of Jews who fought in Svoboda's Czech army and that they played a significant role in major battles liberating Ukraine.

My father never said much about his time in the Czech Army, but that changed when we were on a trip to eastern Europe with my parents for my father's 80th birthday. We were traveling by train from one city to another when my father began telling us how he got to be in Svoboda's 1st Army, how he along with others in his battalion were sent out on dangerous reconnaissance missions behind enemy line and how many in his unit did not survive. He described how he carried an automatic rifle and emphasized that it had 75 rounds and how he was wounded in the leg, treated in the field and sent right back to the front. He then continued saying that one day he and a few others overpowered a nest of German machine gunners, the German soldiers came out with their hands up holding a white flag, I asked him what happened next – pop,pop,pop (make the motions and sounds of a machine gun) broke the silence in our train compartment, I killed them, he said, I had to, they would've killed me.

All my life I knew my father as a somewhat quiet and gentle man with a beautiful davening voice, who managed to survive a horrible time, but at the age of 51 I learned that my father fought against the Nazis, survived against all odds, and mowed down German

soldiers who were holding up a white flag. I am not sharing this to judge or justify, but to consider what war does even to those who are its victims.

My father was with the Czech brigade when Svoboda's and the Soviet armies liberated Prague in May of 1945. That spring and summer, before he was discharged from the military, my father would meet trains coming into Prague from Soviet liberated areas; he was constantly searching for anyone he would recognize from home and looked for concentration camp survivors. During the Nazi occupation of Prague apartments belonging to Jews had been confiscated, my father would greet survivors coming off those trains take them to one of these apartments, open closets and pantries and tell them to take what they needed. This is where he was and what he was doing when my parents met in Prague.

My mother's journey to Prague was quite different. My mother's father was also forced into a Hungarian labor battalion leaving my grandmother to take care of six children – 5 girls including my mother and the youngest, a boy who was not yet 4 years old, as well as elderly parents. She managed the household until July 1941 when my mother and her family were among some 18,000 Jews randomly assigned by the Hungarians as "foreign nationals" despite having lived in the region for generations, and were kicked out of their homes and deported to Kamenetz-Podolsk. The Hungarians handed them over to the Nazi killing brigades known as the Einsatzgruppen, organized by Himmler and Heydrich for the sole purpose of exterminating Jews and others deemed undesirable.

My mother would tell me of that late July day when Hungarian soldiers came to order them to pack, they were being relocated; they were to pack lightly, take food for three days and not to worry, they would be given what they needed when they got to where they were going; they had no idea where they were going. My nearly 17 year old mother, along with her family and most of the Jews living in the town, were trucked 11 kilometers to Bushtyna where there was a railway station, there they were herded onto trains along with other Jews from the surrounding region.

I wish I knew more of what that train journey was like as my mother and her family were taken east. What I know is that my mother said they were frightened and didn't know where they were being taken. They traveled for two days and three nights, it was dark when they got on the train and dark when arrived at their destination where they were herded through a line of guards and barking dogs as they left the train.

Although according to my mother, there was a sense of foreboding, they had no way of knowing what was awaiting them in Kamanetz-Podolsk; that in a few weeks, on August 25, 1941 their fates would be sealed when the SS Obergruppenfuhrer pledged to finish murdering, by September, all Jews turned over by the Hungarians. Kamanents-Podolsk had a munitions factory where prior testing of explosives created large craters located on the outskirts of the town; so, unlike other places where these massacres would take place and pits had to be dug, the slaughter could begin whenever the Einsatzgruppen were ready. On August 26-27 the Einsatzgruppen implemented the first mass killing of this scale where it is estimated that 23,600 persons were murdered; the 18,000 Jews handed over by the Hungarians and the remainder, local Jewish residents of Kamenetz-Podolsk. These massacres conducted by the Einsatzgruppen, sometimes with the help of local police, have been described as The Holocaust by Bullets in a moving book of that title written by Father Patrick Desbois. While Kamanetz-Podolsk was the first of these massacres, it was certainly not last, the largest occurred at Babyn Yar a month later when over 33,700 Jews were shot and killed on the outskirts of Kyiv. It's been estimated that 1.5 million Jews were murdered in this way with Ukraine and other countries bordering Russia peppered with similar sites.

My mother would tell me how worried and frightened her mother was about what was to happen to them; she was especially worried for my mother because word spread that the guards raped and then murdered young girls. My grandmother begged and pleaded with my mother to run away, saying that one of her children must survive; that someone had to tell the world what was happening. Years later my mother's voice would still shake as she would tell me how the two of them cried and argued. My mother didn't want to leave her family, didn't want to abandon her mother or her siblings. But her mother was insistent and finally, along with two others, they planned an escape. They didn't have a map, and didn't have a clear idea of where they were, or how they would manage, but my mother was told to runaway to Budapest and one night, the she and two other young women ran into the forest.

It took them nearly 3 months to travel the 750 kilometers to Budapest. They foraged for food, took clothes from clothe lines along the way so that they would blend in with local peasants, and moved mostly at night. My mother told me of a time they hid in the loft of a barn; their presence unsettled the cows, and the farmer and his wife discovered them hiding. The wife told her husband to send them away; she was too frightened to help them

and reminded her husband of how people were being killed for helping Jews. But the farmer wanted to help, and his wife finally agreed to give them food; they were sent on their way with freshly baked bread and other provisions.

Not long after their escape from Kamanetz-Podolsk they encountered several men who managed to survive the massacre; the men somehow escaped being shot but were pushed into the craters by the falling bodies of those around them who were. During the night they climbed over dead or dying bodies, retrieved some clothing and made their way to the forest. This was how my mother learned about what happened to her mother, her sisters and her brother; many times she would tell me how the ground shook and heaved for three days following the massacre.

My mother and her companions made her way to Budapest, connected with the Jewish community, received help finding temporary lodging and work, and eventually was taken in by a wealthy childless Jewish couple. When the Nazis began rounding up the Jews of Budapest in 1944, this couple arranged and paid for my mother to be taken in by a Christian family in the outskirts of the city and in this way she escaped the transports to Auschwitz.

After Budapest was liberated my mother was eager to search for any surviving family. She returned to the shtetl to find that her father survived Auschwitz and began a new life with a woman who helped him and wanted to remain in the shtetl. My mother not seeing a life for herself there left feeling alone, restless and unsettled. She continued moving, traveling by trains all over areas liberated by the Soviet army and eventually wound up in Prague where my father was meeting trains.

My father claims that he recognized my mother immediately as someone from near his home and within a week he began introducing her to his friends as his kal'le – bride. When I asked what attracted him to her so quickly, he laughed and described her long black hair and how she was a bit zaftig, which my mother adamantly denied, but then he would add in a more serious tone - she was from my home. My mother described him as thin as a rail with red hair and freckles, and claimed that she was on the rebound from a Budapest romance and not really interested, but then she added more seriously, she was alone in the world and needed to belong to someone, to somewhere – so they married, and were together for the next 63 years.

After initially settling in Sudentland, they quickly realized that they did not want to live under Soviet control, and left for Paris connected with the Hagganah and were sent to Marseille to await the next ship departing to Haifa as part of the clandestine immigration to the then Palestine Mandate.

My mother, by then nearly 7 months pregnant, and my father, along with 754 other Holocaust survivors boarded the Yagur in late July, 1946. The Yagur was the first ship to set sail under a new British rule that required Jews – who were considered to be illegal immigrants - to be taken to a newly created camp on the island of Cyprus. The Yagur was captured at sea and escorted to the port of Haifa where everyone on board was transferred to a vessel that took them to Cyprus. They were among the first to be housed at Famagusta, in tents surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers; these survivors lacked basic sanitation, housing and electricity. A few months later my brother – named after our grandfather - Menachem Mendl, was born in a British hospital in Nicosia. He was one of an estimated 2200 babies born to post-holocaust detainees in Cyprus. Eventually my parents were allowed to sail to Haifa and were at Kibbutz Ramat Rachel in the hills near Jerusalem when Israel became a State and another war broke out. A few years later I was born in Tel Aviv and given an Israeli name.

My father learned that his older brother Leibish, survived the death march from the death camp at Mauthausen and that his sister Elana, was among those rescued by Raoul Wallenberg and survived the war in Sweden. They, along with some of my father's cousins and an uncle made their way to the United States several years after the war. My father was desperate to join them, he wanted to be with family and so my parents moved once again to the US. My father, his brother and sister were the sole survivors of the 10 children in my father's immediate family. The handful of cousins and an uncle were all that remained of my very large Landau family that once lived in towns and shtetls in Carpathian Ruthena. Other than her estranged father and a distant cousin, my mother had no surviving family. After my family emigrated to the US my parents spent nearly the rest of their lives within close proximity to my father's family.

By the end of the war, it is estimated that almost all 120,000 of the Jews living in Carpathian Ruthena were killed; most sent to Auschwitz and murdered there, others like my mother's family, killed in massacres.

For over three decades I've had the privilege of serving on our Chevra Kaddisha along with the most amazing group of thoughtful, respectful and kind people. People come to participating in this mitzvah for a number of reasons; for me, the most compelling has been the desire to provide for our community what many members of my family, as well as so many Jews during the Holocaust, were unable to receive. There was no tahara, there were no tachrichim and no mournful chanting of the El Ma'alei Rachamim as my grandmother and her children went to their deaths experiencing unspeakable horror.

As they became increasingly frail, my parents moved to be near me and Steve. They spent the last few years of their lives in our community. At the end of their lives my parents were taken care of by our Chevra Kaddishah, by those I have known and respected for decades. My family and I were comforted by our community, by our rituals, and by the knowledge that they are buried in a Jewish cemetery.

I would like to end with a quote from a recent article about Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors and a Reform Rabbi in Paris who so eloquently speaks what I've always felt:

"I was brought into the world with an unspoken knowledge of tragedy. I was clearly aware even as a child that ghosts haunted my life....I think I am trying to attend funerals that never took place. It is definitely haunting that the Shoah left us with millions of unburied souls and it should continue to haunt all of us."

I wish all of you a Gmar Chatima Tova