

Interview with Bettya & Michael Kurkis, January 23, 2011

Attending: Mara J. Fulmer, Mott; Irina Yufa, JCS; Sara Yufa, High School student/ translator.

S: I am Sara Yufa and I will be translating and interviewing. What are your names?

B: My name is Bettya Kurkis.

M: My name is Michael Kurkis and I was born in 1933 in Moldova in the town of Kishenev (capital and largest municipality in Moldova).

S: Can you tell us about the beginning of the war and where you were?

M: I grew up in a family of five with three brothers and one sisters.

B: Four boys.

M: There were four brothers (including myself) and also a sister. We weren't rich. We were "average".

The war started in the summer of 1941. I was 7 1/2 yrs old at the time. One day in 1941, we woke up to an explosion. June 22, 1941 at 5 in the morning, we woke up to explosions. We realized what had happened. They were already broadcasting on radio that the war had started.

My dad took the horses that we had with a cart and we left in what we were wearing. They loaded all the children and the pillows and left. Everyone was thrown out (of their homes). We headed towards the Dniester River.

Mara: Were you both in the same village?

B: I am from Ukraine. He is from Moldava.

Michael Kurkis: On the second day, the ferry across the river was bombed by Nazis. Someone replaced the ferry using barrels that could float on the water. So we crossed the river on these barrels. There were lots of people trying to escape, hundreds and hundreds. About 100 meters after we crossed the river. The Nazis dropped bombs and blew up the barrels. The river was red with all the blood.

We continued our journey. We stayed mostly in back roads and avoided cities. After the jails were bombed, all the prisoners escaped, creating gangs that robbed many of the people passing by. We had been advised not to go through the cities. We would travel by night. And by day we hid in the forests.

And this is how we continued on. We were constantly being shot at by the Nazis, and bombed. For about a month and a half, we travelled this way.

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We received food from Russian soldiers who gave us packages with food and water. And if we passed military kitchens or cafeterias we would stop and eat there. If we passed a well, we would stop and get water for our journey.

One night, when we were traveling there was an open field, open skies. All of a sudden Nazi planes came and started shooting at everyone. The field was covered in blood from everyone who was hurt or killed. God saved us. None of us (our family) were injured.

[Note: Sara struggles with translation.]

For a month and a half, we travelled towards Rostov. But when we finally got there, we weren't allowed into the city because soldiers were preparing for battle. So instead we went to small villages and they dispersed us amongst apartments in the different villages.

My dad and my second oldest brother worked as carriers. My youngest brother brought food for horses. And my sister worked on a farm. My oldest brother and I did not work. In this way, we come down a little, we started working, we lived like this for about a month in this village.

After a month, they woke us at night and took my father and oldest brother into the army to the war front.

Two days later we saw soldiers marching through the village. It turned out that Nazis had occupied Rostov, 26 km from our village. The leader of the village had been very nice when we'd first arrived. He gave the refugees water, food and horses. But when this happened (Nazi occupation), he forced all the refugees to leave.

So again we were on the road, being bombed, and hiding in forests. At this point there were (in my family) the three boys, one girl and my mother. We traveled for about a month until we got to Oktubinskya (sp?).

From Oktubinskaya, we went to Goriv. There they took away our horses and gave us food. So we were stuck in this port on the Caspian Sea. They told us that a ferry would come and transport us to a different place.

So we waited for this ferry. And about three days later the ferry came. But we couldn't board it. There were already a lot of people ahead of us, and it was already very full. There were people inside of it, on top of it. It was completely filled, and it left. Every day more refugees came. The whole time that we waited, we lived outside at the port.

One day Nazi planes came and started bombing. But they didn't bomb the people, instead because there was an oil reservoir not far from the port. They bombed the

reservoir and everything was on fire. It was scary. There was no one to put the fire out and so it just burned for days.

Two days later a barge came. And we climbed aboard. There were so many people. And we left on the barge. We were on this barge all night. It was sailing all night long. And around morning the compartment with the motor detached from the part with the people. All the people were left on the boat out in the middle of the Caspian Sea, just drifting.

For days we were stuck on this barge, under the sun. There was very very little to drink, and no food except for herring. When things became desperate enough, people started to drink the saltwater around them just to wet their lips. After awhile, malaria (cholera?) started to spread amongst the people. Thanks to God neither me nor my mother were sick. But my brothers and my sister were very sick, and it was horrible.

On the third day that we were just sitting there, Nazi planes came and started bombing. Thank God they didn't hit us. The bombs fell 30-40 meters all around us. But we were all right. And the next day they came again and started bombing again. We could only sit there and wait for death.

Two days later, a boat came, tied us to it and towed our barge to the city of Ostrahan on the Caspian Sea. From there we boarded a train and we headed to Uzbekistan.

Once we got to Uzbekistan, they gave us a place to live. The people were very nice to us. We lived with one Uzbek citizen whose job was to watch for trains and notify others when they were near.

My mother went to work in a store, my brother went to work in a factor and so did my sister. Me and my other brother were too young to work. We didn't go to school because we didn't have any clothes to wear to school. During the summer we were fine. But in the winter, we didn't go outside for lack of warm clothing.

We stayed there until the beginning of 1945. When Kishinev was liberated, there was a teacher who wrote to the archives to find out what happened on the war front to find out who had survived. We found out my father was killed and my brother was missing. First they told us that both were killed. Two weeks later we learned that it was my brother who was killed and that it was my fathered who was missing.

When Kishinev was liberated, the army gave us these tickets that allowed us to board a train to go back to Moldavia. Once we boarded the train, the train did not stop, but passed a scene where the roads were a mess. It was horrible. There were military supplies all over the roads, overturned wagons, destroyed cars. It was horrible. Then we got to Stalingrad. We were stopped in Stalingrad for about five hours. It had been bombed and completely destroyed, left in ruins.

We stood there in Stalingrad for a long time because hurt and injured soldiers were coming from the war front. Two trains filled with these soldiers passed by and then we were allowed to continue. These trains with injured soldiers were like mobile hospitals.

After awhile, they stopped the train again. There were soldiers heading TO the war front, and also more trains of injured soldiers heading back from the war front.

It took us 15 days to get to Kishinev. They kept stopping us to let military trains go by. And then we would continue. We got to Kishinev. It was covered in ruins, it was destroyed. There was no train station, just one little train. When we got off, there was nowhere to go. Our house was destroyed. Only the gate was left. Everything else was in ruins. We sat down next to a wall while my mom and brother went to look for somewhere we could live. They found a basement for us to live in.

This basement house wasn't like American basements. There were no windows. It was dark, damp, dirt floor. But everyone lived like this. Kishinev was destroyed and completely in ruins. Later on, when Nazis were taken hostage, they weren't killed. They were forced to rebuild everything. They built banks, train stations, opera houses...

Irina: They practically rebuilt everything they destroyed.

Michael: My mother went to go work.

Irina: I don't know American words for person who carries heavy packages from one place to another...like on their back. [Discussion back and forth on how best to describe her work.]

Michael: My mother went to go work as a delivery person carrying heavy packages on her back, going back and forth. My brother went to work as a paper boy selling newspapers. My sister went to work in a factory. And I went to school at age 11 years old for the first time.

Around 1946 when we were just sitting outside of our apartment, our father walked by and didn't even realize who we were. We didn't recognize him either. But our friend who lived two houses down did recognize him. Our father asked our neighbor where we were, and the neighbor said "they're right there, you'd just passed them."

A couple days later, my father started working, too. I finished about four grades and due to hard family circumstances, I started to work in a movie theatre.

Bettya: My name is Bettya Maysaiva Kurkis. I was born May 5, 1939 in Vinitския region in the village of Chernovtsy in the Ukraine.

My father came back from the war in Finland in 1938 and I was born! I was a very weak child, skinny, always sick. So the doctors told my mom that they should have another child. My mom became pregnant. But in 1941, they drafted my father again for another war. They took my father in June 1941. In September 1941, my mom gave birth to my brother. I was about 2 1/2.

In the Vinnitskian region, all of the Jewish villages were turned into ghettos. They were sealed off and no one was allowed to leave. They were shtetls (Jewish poor village ghettos).

My mother had complications while giving birth. Her placenta didn't come out and she was hemorrhaging. Since there were no doctors, they put her on a cart and road across the rocks trying to shake it out of her. The entire way there was blood all over the rocks in the road from her.

My brother was born. My father was gone. My mother survived the birth. We moved into a basement apartment. There was one rabbi in the village and my mother wanted my brother to be circumcised. So the rabbi dressed up like a woman and went down into the basement apartment and circumcised my brother. All the aunts and women couldn't understand why my mother was making a big deal of this. But my mother said that if he was killed, she wanted them to know they killed a Jewish boy. And she says that this is the reason that we survived. He now lives in Israel.

In our village, there was a river called Murafa. The Nazis took all the men, tied rocks to their chests and threw them into the river, and then shot them there.

After the war, as a village, we all came together and made a monument which had the names of all the people who died in the river. We placed the monument next to the river.

When the Nazis occupied the village, we were kicked out of our house because the Nazis now lived there. We moved into a basement apartment. My mom would wander around from house to house looking for something to eat, looking for anything we could use.

[Note: flip video stops here. New recording starts... possible missing parts of story. Look on DVC for any missing parts of story.]

(from DVC)

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My mom would take flour and mix it with water and fed it to my brother. She did this because there was no milk. There was nothing to feed him. I didn't eat anything, I was a skinny little twig.

(both tapes pick up from here)

There were lots of bombings. Horrible, loud, destructive bombings. Everything that was bombed blew up into the air and fell back down on the people. My uncle thought that they were Russian planes but they were Nazis. He was shot in the spine and he died. After the bombings, my mother went outside to survey the damage. There were people, horses, children, elderly people laying on the street, dead, blood everywhere. It was horrible.

My mother had to go out in search of food or some place where she could make some money. So she was out most of the day looking for food or work. One day she came home and found me trying to poke my brother's eye out. At 3 years old, I was not a babysitter for this little baby.

There was absolutely no school or education. You can't learn if you're hungry all the time. You were lucky to get one piece of bread. There were Nazis in the village where we lived. And any men who weren't fighting on the war front, the Nazis killed them. They were scared of a resistance of any kind.

For awhile, Nazis lived in our house. We lived in the basement. My mother would clean for them all day, do everything for them, make sure the house was heated, cook and clean. And every now and then they would give her one mint candy for one of the children.

In 1946, I tried to go to school. But they said that I was so small you wouldn't be able to see me over the desk. So I waited another year and then went to school. I was 8 years old. I was a child from the war. I had no vitamins, minerals. There was no bread. There was nothing to wear. Children ran around half naked. In 1947, there was a horrible famine. People just dropped on the street and died.

[Michael adds to the story in Russian.]

In 1946, they were scared.

[Note: Flip video stops. New recording start.]

In 1948, there was a very good harvest and we finally had food to eat.

Mara: When did you come to the USA?

B: We came on March 5, 1993 as refugees. My oldest daughter came with her family in 1991. Two years later, we came with my other daughter.

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Mara: So all are here?

B: Yes. 3 months later I started working at a plastic factory for \$4.25/hr. In 1995, we went to visit my brother in Israel, and Michael's brother in New York.

M: All of my remaining family died in one year (after we moved to USA).

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