

Covenant

Remembering Through Dolginov What the World Has Forgotten

By Barry Rubin*

Abstract: The Jews of Dolginov, Belarus, commemorate in Israel their once thriving community, the rescue of a remnant after most had been massacred by the Nazis, and the tragic loss of their family members on one day in 1942.

Why is this shtetl unlike all other shtetls? Once a year, the children of Dolginov and their descendents gather to remember the reason.

It is the anniversary of the destruction of the town's last ghetto. There were 3,000 Jews living in Dolginov when World War II began, amounting to 80 percent of the population. On June 5, 1942, those still left were massacred by the Nazis and their helpers, who included Poles, Lithuanians, and Latvians. On June 6, there weren't any Jews left alive in Dolginov at all.

Then how is it that the long, low-ceilinged hall in Tel Aviv's Vilna House is full to capacity, with about 150 people, the survivors and descendents of the Dolginov Jews in the town on June 5? Why has this particular shtetl been kept alive with a special kind of communal spirit? "There are more people here," said Ariel Rubin, one of the survivors, "then at the Vilna memorial meetings," even though Vilna had many times more Jewish residents.

The answer is one of the many remarkable stories of the Shoah, in this case the heroism—or perhaps it should just be called human decency—of the Soviet Red Army and in particular of three individual soldiers.

Dolginov is a small town once in Lithuania, later in Poland (until 1793), Russia (until 1918), Poland again (until 1945), the USSR

(until 1991), and then Belarus. North of Minsk, there was absolutely nothing to distinguish the place, except a grinding poverty which could compete with the more ragged precincts of the contemporary Third World. On the eve of World War II, it was walking distance from the Polish-Soviet border. There were five synagogues; a couple of market places for the small Jewish merchants and peasants selling their produce; a Zionist-run school; and a Bund-directed loan society. No intelligentsia, nor famous rabbis. Even in 1939 there was hardly a telephone or an automobile.

On September 17, 1939, the Soviet army marched in, as part of Moscow's partition deal with the Nazis. And on June 28, 1941, the Germans arrived. The Jews were forced into a tiny ghetto, overcrowded in a small part of the town. There were a number of murders by the regular German troops. As one survivor recalled, they beat and killed people during the day, especially in March and April 1942, but at a certain hour they regarded themselves off duty and stopped.

Then on May 21, SS troops, including Lithuanians and Latvians helped to some extent by the Polish police, wiped out the ghetto. By the end of the day, only around 250 to 300 Jews were left alive, some who had been outside the town when the killing began, or fled at the last minute, or hid in concealed

underground chambers they had prepared in advance.

Somehow it seems even more horrible that not a single Dolginov Jew was deported to a concentration camp; most weren't even taken out of town and shot. They were gunned down inside and in front of their own homes. The SS left and the survivors were free to enter the town and see the bodies of their families, or in a few blessed cases to find them emerging from tunnels.

But what could they do next? Into the forest they went, begging food from peasants, who sometimes helped but were badly frightened. Ultimately the survivors joined the Soviet partisan fighters in the forest. But what could the Soviet fighters do, saddled with around 250 Jews, few of them of military use, and having to forage for food themselves?

Perhaps they would have chased them away to their ultimate deaths. Yet the commander of the partisan unit, "Revenge," was Timchuk. He had been sent by Moscow as part of the Soviet occupation army to run the confiscated estates and, in this capacity, had dealt with the Jewish livestock merchants and artisans of Dolginov. Timchuk decided to ask Moscow what to do. Headquarters sent some paratroopers for the mission and Timchuk asked for a young officer to lead an escort party to take the Jews across the front lines to safety. This meant a two-month journey, traveling only at night, of more than 750 miles through German-infested territory, leading a column of 300 people clearly unfit physically for such a march. Two men turned down the mission, the third, Lieutenant Gregory Kisilev, accepted.

To tell the story briefly, Kisilev and a young woman partisan scout named Anna who also volunteered were sent along with two professional soldiers and a group of partisans. For 30 nights, they walked, skirting the Nazi-held cities, usually avoiding German patrols. There were several German attacks. A few people were left behind because they simply

could not continue. When Berthe, a two-year-old girl cried continually, and everyone feared the sound would give them away to the Germans, her parents decided she must be drowned to save the group. But they simply couldn't do it. Kisilev then took the girl and carried her himself.

Finally, they came to the front line. A few people were killed trying to cross over but in the end 218 of the original 300 arrived safely. They said goodbye to Kisilev and none of them ever saw him again. He survived the war, married the scout, and had a nice career working in international trade for the Soviet government. His daughter explained, long after his death, that he only mentioned the experience once, to say that he wondered what happened to all those people he saved.

Sometimes, it seems that too much emphasis is put on those who survived—about 200 people related to me died; perhaps a dozen escaped. My great aunt, Haya Doba Rubin, her husband Aharon Perlmutter, and their sons, Haim, 12, and Jacob, 10; my great uncle, Samuel Grosbein, his wife, Rivka Markman, and their children, Leah Rivka, 18, and Lev, 23; my great aunt, Rahel Grosbein, her husband, Yirimayahu Dimenshtein and their son Moshe, 21. All murdered on the same day and practically within sight of each other.

At any rate, though, there is much more that can be told about these events and what happened to the Dolginov refugees immediately afterward. One young man returned to the town, tried to reclaim his family home, and was murdered. Virtually every single survivor made his way to Israel, though it took some of my cousins ten years.

But I am telling you about this not primarily to recount another story of the Shoah but to explain something very profound about Israel. It has been rightly said that for a long time after its founding, Israelis did not want to talk about these events, partly for ideological factors (the focus on the new Jew and on the

building up of the land); partly for psychological reasons (it was just too painful).

This era is long past. If Kisilev was one example of how much difference one person could make, the same is true of Leon Rubin who founded the Dolginov Cemetery Project to build a memorial in the town to those who perished there and organized three visits by Israeli delegations. Similarly, one of the speakers was Ziva Lisitzki, a kibbutznik, whose mother had left Dolginov a few years before the war to the land of Israel, recounted the stories about Dolginov she had heard as a little girl. Yuval Rubin, who seemed to be about as typical an Israeli as one could find, told about his discoveries of his own family's experiences, including a trip to Dolhinov with a group.

A Russian film was shown about the story, made by a Soviet Jewish filmmaker named Yaakov Kolar who, by coincidence, had met Kisilev's daughter in school in Moscow and heard her father's story. It was a shock to see a rather jovial and very well-preserved man I had met before, describing on the screen how he had survived three years in the forest as a wild child, living on snakes and live fish he caught by hand. The little girl who had come so close to death because of her crying was shown with her children and grandchildren, now living a few minutes away from me.

Watching all this, my elderly aunt, who had seen the bodies of her parents and older brother, able only to snatch three photographs from their house before fleeing, dissolved into tears, to be comforted by my teenage daughter. In Dolginov, some of my relatives had been in Hashomer Hatzair, the left-wing youth group, and in Israel had worked at the Histadrut, the trade union federation. Others had been in Betar, the right-wing youth group, and Menahem Begin had attended their weddings. The differences weren't so important after all.

These people sitting in the hall were the people who make up Israel, along with the Sephardic Jews who have their own stories of

dispossession and flight. Almost 90 percent of the Jews of continental Europe were murdered; well over 90 percent of the Jews of the Middle East were turned into refugees.

And these are the people daily demonized around the world as monsters, told by well-paid academics, intellectuals, and journalists, that Israel had no right to exist or was some kind of mistake.

The meeting ended with Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem. When we sang the words, "As long as the heart of a Jew beats and his eye is turned to the east," I thought of these people who had marched—unarmed, impoverished, pursued, close to friendless—750 miles eastward. They had rebuilt their lives and brought up their families, not wasting time on bitterness or seeking revenge but acting constructively.

When we sang the lines, "Our ancient hope is not lost, the hope of two thousand years," I thought of what these people had hoped as they trudged through the forest, with horrors in their thoughts and trying to believe there was some hope at the end of the journey.

Professor Yehuda Bauer, the great historian who practically founded the field of Holocaust studies, once told me about a conversation he had with one of Israel's founding leaders, a man frequently in government cabinets during the country's early years. He explained to Bauer that he could simply not believe in his heart that six million Jews had been murdered in Europe, that somehow they were still out there and would some day arrive.

It is important to understand that Israel is not merely a product of the Shoah, a consolation prize handed to the Jews by a guilty world, but rather the result of its people's desires and labor. For what marvels couldn't we have achieved, Bauer's interlocutor continued, if we had the energy, strength, and either presence or support of those murdered millions?

Similarly, for the Dolginov Jews, stuck in the corner of the corner of a forgotten back alley of Europe, Zionism and the land of Israel was not something they dreamed up merely as a result of the Shoah. They thought of their lives as good before the war but knew where their future lay, and they had already sent about 50 of their children there.

Nahum Lenkin, one of those who escaped through the forest, later recalled how parents often “went without food so they could pay the tuition for their children” to go to the town’s Zionist school. “They made these sacrifices because the school provided young people their first preparation to one day go as pioneers to Eretz Israel, the land of the workers, and the renewed land.”

Or in the words of the song, they would go there in order “To be a free people in our land.”

Standing there in the hall of Vilna House--amidst photos of vanished places in Europe;

next to those who had survived, rebuilt, and fought; alongside those who had such a varied set of lifestyles, religious views, and character—never had the words of “Hatikvah” seemed more meaningful, nor living up to that heritage more essential.

About the Author

**Barry Rubin is director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center and editor of the Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA) Journal. His latest books are The Israel-Arab Reader (seventh edition), with Walter Laqueur (Viking-Penguin); the paperback edition of The Truth About Syria (Palgrave-Macmillan); A Chronological History of Terrorism, with Judy Colp Rubin, (Sharpe); and The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East (Wiley). To read and subscribe to MERIA and other GLORIA Center publications or to order books, visit <http://www.gloria-center.org>.*