

VICTIM OF TWO TYRANTS

[Interview of] Nelly Gerbovitskaya

The book “Memory and Time”, first issue, was compiled by: Akopyan V.N., Kirilchenko E.M., Murakhovsky Y.M., Treister M.A., and Shulman A.L. Published in Russian in 2014 in Minsk, Belarus, “Memory and Time” unfolds recollections of and testimonies about the Minsk and Belarusian Ghettos, told by witnesses and family members. “Victim of Two Tyrants” is one of the stories in “Memory and Time”. It is an interview of Nelly Gerbovitskaya, conducted by Semyon Liokumovich. This story was translated into English by Hollis Rammer in 2020, with permission from Nelly Gerbovitskaya.

Nelly Gerbovitskaya

Victim of Two Tyrants

The farther into the history of the events of the 30's and 40's of the past century, associated with the annihilation of millions of innocent people, the more acutely the pain from these losses is felt. Today, it is difficult to imagine that the center of the Belorussian capital was transformed from July 1941 - October 1943 into a gigantic ghetto for almost one hundred thousand people.

When Red Army units entered Minsk in July 1944, they met only a few dozen Jews, survivors in this hell. One of those who survived in the Holocaust meat grinder was Nelly Maximovna Gerbovitskaya. We are chatting in her cozy one-room apartment, similar to the Museum of Applied Arts. There are lots of artificial flowers and embroideries, made by the hostess. I became interested in her rather rare surname.

"It is the surname of my mother, Rebekah Moiseevna. She was born in 1905 in the Chernihiv region. She worked as an elementary school teacher. Besides me, she also raised her son, Felix, who was three years older.

My father, Max Yakovlevich Yarkhon, was the same age as my mother. He was from Kobrin, in the Brest region. Early on, he was carried away by socialist ideas, which was unsafe in the Polish republic. In the mid-1920's, he asked for political asylum in the USSR. He studied in the Moscow University of National Minorities of the West, named Julian Marchiewski. There were departments of almost all nationalities of European countries. Yarkhon chose the Jewish department. Upon graduation, he received a diploma in journalism."

Nelly was born in Moscow in 1933. Three years later, the family moved to Minsk. Her father was offered a job at the "October" newspaper. They lived on Ratomskaya Street (near the Pit).¹

There was a bookcase in the room. There was a gramophone with records: "March of International Brigades," the Jewish song "Mehuteneste Mine," and others. There was a sewing machine. In the middle of the room, there was a stove with a bench attached. While her father was alive, they put up a Christmas tree on New Year's.

"I, of course, know about my father's work very vaguely," says Nelly Maximovna, "and indeed, about that time. Mother told me little. I know that on December 9th, 1937, a trial was held of my father, who was accused of spying for the Polish Republic, and, after

¹ Translator's note: The "Pit" in Minsk is a monument memorializing Belarusian victims of the Holocaust.

three weeks, he was shot. We were told he was sentenced to 10 years, without the right to correspondence.

When he was exonerated in July of 1958, they sent a certificate of his death. In the column 'Cause of Death', it said 'execution'. Only half a century after the murder of our father did we receive his photograph from the Moscow Party Archive.

After my father's arrest, a black streak appeared in the life of our family. Mother, it's true, continued to work at school, but, as the wife of an 'enemy of the people', she was humiliated in every way, and many of those who were previously close to us pretended that they did not know us. I lived with my grandmother for a while on the outskirts of Minsk. There, I found out about my Jewishness because my mother spoke Yiddish with my grandmother and, before that, I had mostly heard Russian speech."

Nelly remembers her nursery school, where she learned to read and write. She practiced embroidering and modeling clay. But, because she was left-handed, the teacher sometimes would beat her hands, ordering her to do everything with her right hand. Because of that, she writes with her right hand, and does everything else with her left hand.

In 1941 Nelly was to go to elementary school. But war prevented this. Nobody really believed that the Germans would capture Minsk so quickly. After all, there was the constant lively song "If Tomorrow is War," in which it was assured that the enemy would be immediately defeated. Their pre-war home turned out to be in the ghetto area, which included the streets Ratomskaya, Obuvnaya, Shornaya, Nemiga, Kollektornaya, Sukhaya...the ghetto was surrounded by barbed wire.

"A lot is written about the conditions of existence in this death camp," says Gerbovitskaya, "I remember terrible hunger and cold. It is hard to imagine how we survived. Forty people lived in our apartment. Mother went to work in the morning, scooping up rubbish near the destroyed homes. They fed us something, sometimes it was oat bran grout, in the summer we ate grass. Many exchanged things for food, but we didn't have things either. In winter we often did not get out of bed.

Ghetto prisoners were doomed -- if not to death from a bullet or in the gas chamber, then from hunger. Gradually, due to the endless roundups of people, it was becoming smaller. But the worst thing happened on March 2nd, 1942. My mother died in the pogrom. I am very sorry that I do not have her photograph. I keep her bright image only in my memory."

Nelly, who recently had turned 8 years old, and her 11-year-old brother, Felix, were orphaned. Nelly and her brother survived, thanks to the cache that her mother had made. Having fenced off part of the room with a plywood partition, she sealed it with wallpaper and the entrance to the shelter was under the bed.

The girl sometimes crawled under the wire to get out of the ghetto. It was easier for a fair-haired child to hide from the Germans and the policemen. It was necessary to beg.

Once, in the summer of 1942, she was returning to the ghetto and was a witness to a terrible murder. A policeman stopped an elderly woman and asked her in Hebrew where she was going. She answered in Yiddish that she was going home. The policeman shot her point-blank and killed her. Two boys stood nearby. One of them, pointing to Nelly, said that she was Jewish. Thankfully, the other boy objected and said that he knew the girl: she was Russian. Nelly waited a little, and returned to the ghetto.

"But a miracle happened in August of 1942," Nelly Maximovna recalls, "I left the ghetto to search for food. A woman walked towards me. The woman stopped me, she understood everything from my exhausted look. And I honestly told her about my life. Maria Iosifovna Martsulianis (that was the name of the woman) took me by the hand, brought me home, washed me, fed me, and changed my clothes, and let me spend the night. The next day we went to the city council. We were greeted by a grey-haired man. Later, I found out that it was Vasily Semenovitch Orlov. I told him a legend invented by my savior: that I am Russian, I came from Leningrad to my aunt, my parents died.

Near Orlov sat two women, who asked all sorts of provocative questions, but he interrupted them and wrote out directions to the orphanage on Shirokaya Street, where there were many Jewish children."

After the war, Orlov was accused of aiding the occupiers. A group of rescued children wrote a letter to the NKVD in his defense. Among the signatories were Nelly Gerbovitskaya, Zina Greenberg, Rosa Davydova, Vilya and Emma Livshits, Lena Schofman, Larisa Frenkel, Sonya Furman, and others. The letter played a decisive role in exonerating Orlov. After many years, he was awarded (posthumously) the rank of Saint of the Nations of the World.

Sometimes, they brought some clothes to the shelter. These were the belongings of Jews killed in the ghetto. In the orphanage on Krasiva street, typhoid raged. At the entrance hung a poster with the image of large lice. The Germans and the policemen were afraid to enter. This saved the Jewish children, who miraculously managed to survive. They did not believe that they would wait until release.

Nelly Maximovna remembers that shortly before the arrival of Soviet troops, one girl asked the nanny, "when will the war end?" She replied, "when all the Jews are beaten."

Nelly's heart sank from fear. She thought that, because of her, the war would not end. But the day of liberation was approaching. The panicked actions of the Germans felt like they did not have much time left to occupy. She remembers July 3rd, 1944.

"We emptied the flowerbeds to give flowers to the soldiers of the Red Army. But they arrived in dusty tunics and did not pay attention to our flowers. Battles thundered around, but it was no longer scary for us because Soviet soldiers were nearby. The long-awaited freedom had arrived.

For a long time, I did not know anything about my brother. I thought that he had been killed. Fortunately, Felix escaped. Having left the ghetto, he went to the railway station. He managed to get onto a freight train that brought him to Lida. He found a farm, where he was sheltered. He labored there for almost a year. At the end of the summer of 1944, his host brought Felix to Minsk.

Nelly found out about him when she was called to the teacher. There was a woman who had worked in the same school as her mother before the war. "Your brother is in the orphanage on Shiroka," she said.

Felix did not grow up during the war years; he looked younger than his age. Before the war, he had finished two grades. Later, he externally completed fourth grade. After seven years, he studied at a vocational school. Then he entered the Electromechanical College, after which he worked as a mechanic and tool maker at Integral for his entire life. He lived for 67 years.

Nelly was in orphanage No. 7. She had to study, to catch up on lost time. She went straight to second grade. She was fond of music, and learned to play the violin with the famous teacher, Mikhail Ionovich Rykin. She also practiced artistic embroidery, and had great successes.

At 13, she embroidered a portrait of Stalin. For this work, in 1946 she was awarded admission to "Artek" and the portrait of Stalin was sent to Moscow. Then Nelly was summoned to the capital of the USSR, where they shot a documentary film. Her work was on display at the Museum of the Revolution.

After seven years, she needed to choose a profession. She entered the teacher training college, since they had a dormitory. After graduation, she was sent to the village of Smilovichi, where she worked for four years as a Pioneer leader in an orphanage. Then she worked in an orphanage for preschoolers in Minsk. After four years, she went to a school with a sports profile, which was then transformed into the Republican School of Olympic Reserve. She enrolled in the evening branch of the Faculty of Philology at Belarusian State University. At 36 years old, she defended her diploma and soon moved, finally, to her own apartment.

For more than 20 years, Nelly Maximovna taught children Belarusian language and literature. She knows and loves poetry. She reads poetry by Yakub Kolas and Maxim Bogdanovich for hours.

Many famous athletes are among her students. There are Olympic champions Vitaliy Shcherba, Marina Lobach, Elena Ksenzhik (Shvaybovich) and others. At the Republican School of Olympic Reserve, Nelly Gerbovitskaya, along with her students, grew fresh flowers and, also, made flowers from fabric in elective classes to decorate the interior of the building.

Nelly's work earned her the title of "Excellence in the Enlightenment of Belarus," and many more awards. But, most of all, she values the attention of her students, who love her for her deep knowledge, kindness, and dedication.

At the end of the conversation, I asked Nelly Maximovna, "what are you dreaming about now?" "I have a treasured dream: that my savior, Maria Iosifovna Martsulianis, was awarded the title of Saint of the Nations of the World."

Interview conducted by Semyon Liokumovich

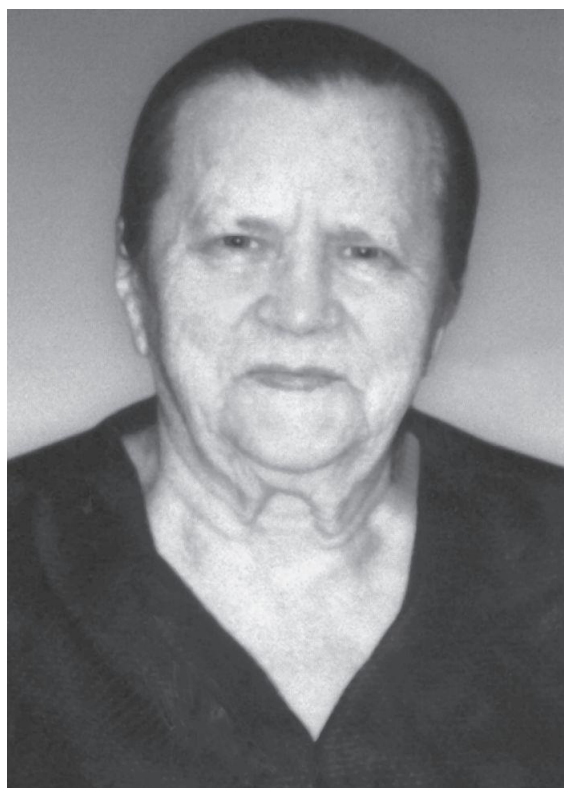
Translated by Hollis Rammer



Nelly Maximovna Gerbovitskaya



Max Yakovlevich Yarkhon (1905-1937)



Maria Iosifovna Martsulianis (1904-2000)



Felix Maximovich Gerbovitskii (1930-1997)



Nelly Gerbovitskaya with students at the Anapa pioneer camp, June 1998



Nelly at the Republican School of the Olympic Reserve, with the garden she raised.