

# BROOKLYN/STATEN ISLAND

Reunited: Reva Friedman, right, meets Branislava Mikhalevich in Poland. Six decades ago, Mikhalevich's family saved Friedman's mother from the Nazis.



*Child survivor Reva Friedman of Sheepshead Bay seeks recognition for Poles that saved her family.*

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## A Righteous Obligation

Ten years ago Minka Angiel, a Holocaust survivor, wrote a letter to Yad Vashem asking them to honor two righteous Gentiles.

Though she passed away without receiving an answer, her daughter Reva Friedman recently took up the cause. She still awaits the museum's response, pending further research by the committee. In the meantime, the Sheepshead Bay resident paid homage to the Mikhalevich family herself this summer by visiting the people who saved her life.

"I just can't express the feeling I have that I went and saw the love Branislava [the surviving daughter] still has for me," said Friedman, a 63-year-old who traveled to Poland for 10 days last month with her two sons, Sam and Kevin. "It was a magnificent trip but the highlight was definitely the day we spent with Branislava and her family in my hometown of Ivye."

Born in 1937 in Poland on the Lithuanian border, Friedman was only 3½ years old when she and her mother, aunt and cousin went into hiding. "The details," she said, "are foggy. What I know, I know from stories my mother told me."

When the Germans liquidated their ghetto, all the Jews were placed on a line, herself, her mother and her grandfather included. Her father, Tzvi, had already been killed. Somehow, she and her mother managed to run away, leaving her grandfather who was later killed, "a guilt my mother lived with always," she said. The forest hid them; the snow reaching their knees, until they came upon a hutta, an isolated house, and knocked.

Ivan and Katerina Mikhalevich were eating dinner with their four children and immediately pulled the women in, warming them by the fire and giving them food. "They sent us to the roof and Branislava, who was the oldest child, and her father, built a wall to hide us from the Germans who came around often," said Friedman. "They harbored us, bringing up food and taking out our waste, until the war was over and even then didn't let us leave until they were sure it was safe."

After living in a displaced persons camp for a while, Friedman and her newly married mother and new stepfather and sister, found themselves in Brooklyn. "We had no money then," said Friedman, "but my mother sent the Mikhalevichs money, clothing and food for a long time until we lost touch about 30 years ago."

A recently retired school secretary, Friedman found she had a desire to rekindle her mother's wish to honor the family that saved their lives. She wrote to Yad Vashem again and to the American Red Cross, asking both agencies if they could help locate the Mikhalevichs. With the help of a Russian woman who lives in her apartment building, she then wrote to the family herself using the address from 30 years ago. Surprisingly, she received a response.

"My mother died in 1983," read Friedman, from the translated letter, written by Branislava. "I'm 72 and live in Ivye with my son. My sister lives in the house where you were hidden. I never knew your names, only that we were hiding you, but I'm so glad you didn't forget and look forward to the day we

meet." The trip was planned.

"You can't imagine how simply they live," said Friedman, "but they treated us like kings and queens. They couldn't do enough for us." Set apart in the country, in a house without running water, with pigs, rabbits and chickens running around, Branislava looks and lives like she is in a world gone by. In the heat of the summer, the toothless woman "who looks like she's 104," said Friedman, wore a heavy sweater, thick wool socks, boots, a scarf and uses a walking stick. She has diabetes and a hernia, but is treating herself with herbs. Despite the appearance of poverty, "the house was so clean you could eat off the floor," said Friedman.

They were received with kisses, vodka, wine, herrings, salad, kielbasa, breads and cakes. "It was very festive," said Friedman. "Her son played the accordion, she sang for us and we all danced. It was a little numbing, meeting up with this person who saved my life. I'm not sure how I felt but my sons couldn't stop crying, saying the experience changed their lives."

Friedman wrote to Yad Vashem of her visit, and she now awaits news. They must further investigate Branislava's story personally and then bring it before a committee. If honored, righteous Gentiles also receive a small stipend.

"With all her hardships Branislava said God gave her a good life because she did a good deed," said Friedman. "I think the righteous Gentiles are truly unbelievable people. Without them, I wouldn't be here and that is why I think they should be honored." □