

MY ESCAPE FROM HITLER'S CLUTCHES

By Miriam Federman Angiel

Submitted by Reva Friedman (born in 1937), who survived along with her mother Miriam Federman Angiel. Translated from the *Yizkor Book of Ivey*, once a Polish shtetl, now a village in Belarus.

My parents came from villages near Ivey. As a young, unmarried man, my father, Zelik Federman, lived at a nearby estate, Krasovshtsizne, where he leased a farm from the *polets* [landowner], Letunke, and where he produced cheese. After he married, he settled in Ivey. He was murdered, along with the entire Jewish community, at the hands of Hitler's death squads.

I was born in Ivey, where I studied at the Hebrew elementary school. I was for a time a member and a leader of Hashomer Hatzair [The Youth Guard, a Socialist-Zionist organization]. After my marriage, we had a small fabric store and earned a modest living. But the quiet times did not last long. The Christians became infected with the spirit of Hitlerism and said openly that they were waiting for the day when they would get their revenge against the Jews. They were already dividing up the Jewish possessions, each one picking out a house that he would take over on the long-awaited day. We felt as if a great storm was about to engulf the world.

On September 1, 1939, Germany attacked Poland and conquered it in a matter of weeks. Under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, our area became part of Soviet White Russia. On September 18, 1939, the Russian army entered Ivey. Despite the Soviets' oppression and the disruption in our way of life, their regime staved off Hitler's reign of death for a year and a half. Private businesses were nationalized, and everyone became an employee of the state. Those who received a Soviet passport identifying them as "bourgeois" did not get work and lived under the threat of deportation to "the white bears." ["White bears," or "*vayse bern*" in Yiddish, sounds like "*vays Siber*," and became a pun for Siberia.] Still, we managed to live under the Soviets and hoped the war would spare us.

The German attack on Soviet Russia on June 22, 1941, struck us like lightning out of a blue sky. A few days later, the German army occupied Ivey. For the Jews, there began a horrific reign of end-

less murder, robbery, bullying and insults. We felt helpless as our Christian neighbors added even more humiliation and mockery.

Six weeks after the invasion (Tishabov 1941), the Germans carried out the first slaughter, later known as "the slaughter of the intellectuals." Merchants, shopkeepers and primarily the religious and secular intellectuals were gathered in the marketplace. Two hundred twenty men were loaded onto trucks and driven to a place near Stanievitsh, where they were shot. Among them was my husband. For months, we widows did not want to believe our husbands were lying in a grave just a few miles from our town. Instead, we believed the rumors that they had been sent to forced labor. Only later did we become convinced of the sad truth.

When the Jews from the surrounding small towns (Lipnishok, Trab) and villages were forced into Ivey, in the fall of 1941, we crowded together, suffered together, and waited for better times. The oppressive decrees, robberies and murders of individual Jews did not cease and the mood of panic did not subside. We constantly heard appalling news from nearby towns about murder *aktions*. We anticipated a horrible catastrophe.

Right after Pesach (May 8, 1942), I woke up and saw that we were surrounded by German soldiers and police. We were not allowed to go outside and were confined to our houses. On the fourth day (May 12, 1942), at dawn, everyone was driven out of their homes, and forced to go to the marketplace. There we sat in family groupings, on our knees, waiting in fear for orders from the police and gendarmes (civil police), who surrounded us in a deep cordon. Later we were sent in groups to Bernardiner Street.

The murderers' selection committee stood near Shishke's house. We were sorted out: "right" or "left" meant you would live, and "straight ahead" meant you would die in the graves near Stanievitsh, which the Jews themselves had to dig the day before (May

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Baby Reva with her cousin Mushka, who was killed during the Holocaust. c. 1938.

11, 1942). I, my father, my child—held in my arms—and my cousin were sent straight ahead. At that point, I called out, “Let’s run away. Better to be struck down on the road than to go to the graves.” But no one answered me. They were frozen with fear!

With my child in my arms, I ran between two policemen into an empty house. I hid under a bed, trembling in fear, thinking that soon I would be killed. But a miracle



Reva Friedman with sons Sam and Keven at entrance to shtetl of Ivye. July 2001.

happened; no one pursued me. After lying there an hour, I dared to go out into the courtyard. I saw in the distance the people who had been chosen to live. I saw how the Germans were searching and taking everything they found, and how they were recording the names of those who remained alive. I wanted to go over to them and be recorded as one of the living, but they noticed me at once and sent over a policeman who pointed his rifle at me.

I immediately ran into an outhouse and locked myself in. Holding my breath, I peered through the cracks to see what was happening. The policeman went past the out-

house, searched for me in the neighboring houses and courtyards, and then went away. I sat there in the outhouse until it became very dark outside. I wanted to leave, but where should I go? I didn’t know if they had taken away the people who remained alive, or if they had stayed in Ivye. I didn’t know what to do. At that point, I envied the Jews who were already dead. I decided to go into a nearby stable, where a goat was bleating, and there I spent the night.

The next morning, I was overjoyed to hear people speaking Yiddish. Through the cracks, I called to some of them by name, and asked how I could join up with the Jews who remained alive. They advised me to keep quiet, and promised to come back a little later to take me to the ghetto. These were the Jews who had collected the bodies of those who had been shot along Bernardiner Street on the way to the graves. Two hours later they came to get me, and we all went back to the ghetto.

There I saw for the first time the enormity of the disaster. Out of more than 4000 Jews before the slaughter, there remained about 1200 to 1300. We felt disoriented and went about in turmoil. Everyone was searching—perhaps someone else from their family was left? Perhaps someone would come out of hiding? But it was in vain.

I went to the *Judenrat* [council of Jews who ran the ghetto] to have them register me among the living. I gave them some fabric and a couple of suits of clothing and they registered me. Life in the ghetto was horrible. We knew that our fate would be the same as that of the others who had been sent to Stanievitsh. The young people prepared to join the partisans in the forest. I also began to think it was the only way to save myself. But what would I do with my little child? Where could I leave her?

I looked for Christians with whom I could negotiate and entrust my child. Finally, I found a farmer, who had nine children, and thought that perhaps my child would blend in with the others and thereby survive the war. I gave him fabric, gold and money to hide her. He kept her for just one week and brought her back, saying that she hadn’t stopped crying and he was afraid to keep her. Of course, he kept the valuables I had given him. I then made a firm decision never again to part from my child. Whatever happened to me would happen to her.

People were saying that the ghetto would soon be liquidated. I tried to per-



Former synagogue of Ivye.

suaude my uncle, my Aunt Rochl and her child, that we should all leave, go stay with a Christian, or in the forest, not far from the village of Dud, where they had lived until the war. [Dud is about 6 kilometers from Ivye.] But my uncle didn’t want to hear of it. He said that the Christians themselves would kill us.

Then came the decisive day. We were told that the next morning the ghetto would be surrounded and everyone would be taken to Borisov. Again I urged my Aunt Rochl to escape from the ghetto. We took what we could and at midnight, along with our children, we left the ghetto, slipping through the [barbed] wire. A few hours later, the ghetto was surrounded. Everyone was shoved into wagons. This was in January, 1943. It was very cold. From the stable outside the ghetto, where we remained in hiding the entire day, we could hear the screams and weeping of the children.

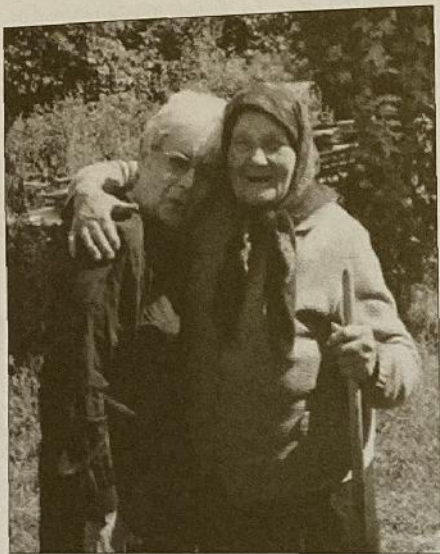
When it got dark, we went to a *keyder* [no translation found] and asked him to lead us through the woods to the village of Dud. He dressed us in non-Jewish clothing and for a large sum of money he led us to a place not far from the village, in the middle of the forest. The snow was deep and it was hard to take a step. We entered the house of a Christian whom we didn’t know. He gave us something to eat and ordered us to leave. We didn’t know where to go. The snow was above our knees, and we kept falling and helping one another get back on our feet. My child begged me, “Mama, let’s go back to the Germans. Let them shoot us, and put an end to our troubles.”

I felt that my strength was about to give out. I was carrying a sack full of things on my back. I emptied it and put my child in the sack. She was frozen and half dead.

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We walked a bit with the sack on my back in deep snow until I was totally exhausted and had to sit down to rest. We prayed to God for the night to come. We approached a farmhouse in the woods. We knocked on the door and asked to stay the night. The Christian woman let us come in, served us food, and said that we could stay there overnight only. We were of course very happy. We lay down on the floor, our limbs numb, frozen and soaked, and fell asleep at once.

Suddenly, her husband came home. It was midnight. He told us, "Do you know what people do to you Jews? They take



Reva with Bronislava, daughter of Ivan and Yekaterina Mikhalevich, in front of her house. July 2001.

everything you own, and turn you over to the Germans." My aunt said to me, "Quick, let's get dressed and get out of here, because our lives are in danger." We woke the children and half-dead, we left the warm house.

The freezing cold cruelly enveloped us as we walked through the snowy forest. It began to grow light. In despair, we sat down on a stone near a bush, not far from another farmhouse. We saw an old Christian woman going to get water. My aunt knew her to be a good person and a pious Christian. She told me, "We'll stay out here during the day and when night falls, we'll go to her house; maybe she'll agree to hide us."

We kept moving our hands and feet to keep from freezing. Impatiently we counted the hours until evening. Finally, when it became a little dark, we snuck up quietly to the little house and knocked on the

door. Frightened, the Christian woman opened the door and immediately crossed herself. "Oh, God! How awful you look. Come right in and climb up on the oven to warm up. I'll get you something to eat."

She quickly brought us baked potatoes and we gobbled them up. She told us to take off our clothes and sleep on the oven. "In the morning," she said, "you'll go up into the attic and spend the day there in the hay. I'm afraid to keep you in the house



Reva Friedman with her mother Miriam Federman Angiel, 1975.

during the day, because the Germans come to the village very often to get chickens and eggs." At hearing her words, we were very happy. I told my aunt, "God has taken pity on our children. Perhaps we'll live through the war here."

Our hopes were in fact fulfilled. The Christian woman hid us for an entire year and a half, from January, 1943, to July, 1944. She was like a dear mother to us. I had money to support us for just six months. I would give her money and she would buy food for us. The rest of the time, a whole year, she provided our food. As poor as she was, she shared her last bit of food with us. There is no pen, no words to describe this fine soul, this woman named Yekaterina.* She put her own life in danger, as well as the lives of her husband and four children, to save four Jewish lives.

She erected a wall in the attic, and we

lived behind the wall. When you entered the attic, you couldn't detect it. Just one board opened into the house, through which we were given our food, and our waste was taken out. She did everything alone. We couldn't go out because of the Germans, who circulated in that area. She also created a hiding place in the house, behind the oven. In that small, cramped space, we could only sit one on top of the other. We would run in there from time to time, when the Germans would surround the house and conduct a search. And in this manner we passed one and a half years, in constant mortal fear. More than once, we despaired of surviving the war and prayed that death would come soon to release us from our troubles.

Sitting there in despair, we began to hear that the Germans were under attack and were beginning to retreat. Of course, our joy was great and I began to have a glimmer of hope that we might survive the war. Despite knowing that no one else in our families was alive, the will to live was strong. We wanted to see the downfall of our murderers and to get revenge.

Then came the day we had long dreamed of. The Christian woman ran up to the attic and said that the Russians had already entered our town, Ivye. Nevertheless, she advised us not to come out of hiding. She went to Ivye and came back with the bad news that she hadn't found any Jews there. Several days later, she returned to Ivye, and this time she found several Jews. She said to us, "Now you can come out."

One morning, at the beginning of July, 1944, we left our hiding place. We went fearfully through the forest. Still afraid of people, we spoke quietly among ourselves, as we had become accustomed. Fear had not yet left us. We came to Ivye. The town was deserted. We encountered a few Jews, most of whom had survived in the partisan-controlled forest. We were very happy to have found these few of our Ivye Jews.

I doubt whether I have succeeded in portraying even a small part of my horrific experiences; after all, I am not a writer. I only ask that this be published so that I, my children and everyone else may read it, so that we never forget and never forgive the murderers of our people. ■

*Ivan and Yekaterina Mikhalevich, and their daughter, Bronislava, were recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations, in July 2001.