

## **Anya Kagan Kornhauser \***

I was born in the Polish Ukraine. As far as antisemitism is concerned, I come from the worst part of the world. I was a young girl. I am a grandmother now. I may look to you like any other grandmother, but I am not. I am different. I'm different because deep down I have a story that presses at my heart. My story has pain, and I would like to share my story with you. I am a Holocaust survivor, but not a concentration camp one. In comparison, I feel very lucky that I did not go through the shocking horrors of the concentration camps.

As we all know, the majority of the non-Jewish world stood by and did nothing when Nazi Germany was exterminating the Jews during WWII. But I am living proof of a very small percentage of some wonderful human beings, real Christians who endangered their lives to save mine. Although very few in number, nevertheless, there were some. When the Second World War started in 1939, I was fourteen years old. Poland was divided in half between Germany and the Soviet Union. We were lucky to be in the Russian sector. My parents were business people and I had two brothers and one sister. In 1940, my older brother, Lazar, was drafted into the Russian army. I never saw him again. June 22, 1941, Germany attacked Russia without warning. The Ukraine was never an independent country; in Russia, it was a republic. We had lived with the Russians and with the Poles, went to school with them, grown up with them, but nevertheless, to them we were always foreigners. Along comes Hitler and offered them an independent Ukraine for their collaboration to help them with their Jewish problem. They were only too happy to oblige.

August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1941, we were told we were to be relocated and to take only what we could carry. That was the first lie. We called it the first *axtia*. They herded us up in the square. The sick were taken on stretchers from the hospitals. We were told to leave everything and to start marching in the middle of the street because Jewish people were not allowed to walk on the sidewalk. Then we noticed young Ukrainian men with shovels on their shoulders singing. When we came to a big field, there was a selection, the sick and the old to one side, the young and the children to another. We couldn't find my father. I urged my mother to go with the sick. Maybe they wouldn't send her to work. I wanted to spare her. She didn't want to go, but she finally went. When my sister noticed that my mother was not there, she started to scold me. "Why did you let her go?" and my sister can scold. So to get away from her, I went to the selection line, limping and bending down, pretending to be a cripple and hoping to go to the sick line with my mother. A young SS straightened me up and said "You are young. You can work," and did not allow me to go with the sick. As it turned out, the old and the sick were held back, and the young and the children were sent home.

When we came home, we found my father. He was hiding. That night, we heard shots. At midnight, there was a knock on the window. My mother walked in with her long hair down and only a slip on her body. She couldn't talk. She embraced my father for a long time. In the morning she told us what happened. When we left, the Ukrainians dug graves to put ten in one. They set them in lines. One person backed up behind the next person as they killed them and buried them while the ground was still moving. My mother was in front of one of the last two graves. Her sister and brother were with her. Suddenly my aunt said to my mother, "Pearl get up, they're calling us." My mother said, "I don't want to see." When she finally got up, there was an SS standing up in a jeep, calling them. He asked them, "Do you believe in God?" and when they said yes, he let them go, but the three men from the two graves were held back and shot. One of them was my uncle, my mother's brother. That was the first '*axtia* (action)'.

The second *axtia* was a few months later. With the help of the Ukrainian collaborators, they rounded up many of the young people, put them on trucks, took them out of the city, killed them and buried them in one big mass grave. The rest were told to go home. We were hiding. My mother felt very guilty that most of her friends and relatives had no more children and she still had two daughters. She felt very bad and afraid that I did not have a working permit. Without a working permit, you did not get any bread and might be taken away. So one day I went to the Judenrat to see if there was any work available. The Judenrat was a council of elders that was elected to run the ghetto. I saw a few of my friends signing up to go to an estate twelve kilometers from our city to pick hops and so I too signed up. We worked there from sunrise to sundown, eating only potato soup. I got

very sick with dysentery. Crippled with cramps I couldn't work and was sent me back to the ghetto. I'm the only one of the 150 workers that survived, and sometimes I asked myself, "Why me?"

In October, 1942, there was the third and last aktia. People had started to build hiding places, getting ready... a double floor, a double wall. We were supposed to be in a certain place at noon. That's when we went into our hiding place which was under a twin bed in my aunt's house. When gentiles found a Jew and turned him in, they got a kilogram of salt as a reward. And many did. When the Ukrainians were no more useful to them, they were told that there was not going to be an independent Ukraine. That is when the Ukrainians formed a partisan group, fighting the Germans behind the lines and disposing of a hiding Jew whenever they could find one. They were called Banderas after their leader Bandera. Our hiding place was very small, like I said, as big as a twin bed. There were eight of us...my aunt, her five year old granddaughter, my two cousins, my father and mother, my sister and I. One day the five year old said, "If you not going to give me a drink of water, I'm going to scream." Having no choice, we gave her urine to drink. She never asked for another drink. It's really much easier to get along without food than without water. After three weeks being under ground, we had to get out. We decided every night two would go out in pairs so that the rest could stretch.

My sister had been a country teacher and had worked 14 kilometers from the city. Whenever the farmers would come to the city, they would eat and sleep in our house. My mother was very good to them so we figured if we could only get to that village, they know us, are our friends, and will hide us. We were dreamers. Somehow my sister and I got out of the ghetto. That was quite a sight to see because the ghetto was covered with all kinds of religious articles, the things that the Ukrainians and SS had no use for. Everything else they took away. We managed to get to that village where my sister used to teach. People we knew chased and threatened us. We heard there were partisans around, but unfortunately there were two kinds of partisans: Russian partisans who would welcome us and Ukrainian partisans who would kill us. The languages are very similar, and we spoke both. One night when nobody would let us in anymore, we heard them. We were frightened and hid. We were very cold, wet, and hungry.

We decided to walk to the forest. Maybe it would be warmer there. When we approached the forest, we saw a little white house with smoke coming out of the chimney. What a beautiful sight to see. How we envied the people inside that small, warm house. My sister suddenly said, "We can't go there. They are drinking. They are singing. We started to run, snow to our waists, about a half a kilometer. I sat down and refused to go any further. I said to her, "You do as you please. I'm going back to that little white house." Something was pulling me there. She followed me reluctantly. We knocked on the door and a lovely woman opened it and said, "Welcome. Please come in." We were quite a sight to see. We couldn't figure out what's happening here, but I didn't care anymore.

The majority of the people in the Ukraine are Greek Orthodox. There are some Catholics, but I had never heard of Protestants. In this village you might find one Protestant family, maybe two. These people had two rooms including the kitchen, three children, and the couple and then they took us in. We all slept in the same room. When her husband came home, she said to him "I took in two young girls for the night". He had a deep voice and I was frightened. He said, "You did the right thing." We still couldn't figure it out. When the couple got ready to go to bed, they both knelt and prayed in their own words, "Dear God, save the Israelite remnants." That was the first time I had heard anybody refer to us as Israelites and that is how I learned that not every Gentile is a Christian. These people were real Christians. People from neighboring villages would come to their two-room house to worship every Sunday. They were people from different denominations; Pentecostals, Baptists, Sunday Adventists, Evangelists, and others.

The next day, a Polish Baptist farmer came and took me to his farm. When the Ukrainians started to kill the Poles, for whom they had no love either, the family I was staying with decided that they had to leave for the city. I followed them a few days later, but they couldn't keep me there. So one day, on a Sunday, they took me to the big city to the meeting house, that's what they called their church, to see if somebody would help me. As we parted company with these people, pretending not to know each other, we went into the church. I waited for the reverend to finish his sermon, went over to him, and asked him if he could help me get some work. I told

him that my parents were killed by the partisans and I was an orphan and alone. He called over the director of a candy factory and asked him to give me a job. The director said that he would be glad to, just come tomorrow to the factory. Well tomorrow is a long time from today and where was I going to sleep. I told him that I had no place to stay. He called over to another man and said "This sister is going to sleep in your house today. Bring her with you to the factory tomorrow." I learned not to be afraid of these people, to tell them who I was. If they couldn't or wouldn't help me, they always found somebody that would.

The next day his wife made sandwiches for us and we went to work, he to his job and I to the office to look for the director of the factory. When I reminded him of the promise he made to me the day before in the church, he told me that he was very sorry, very busy now, and please come back in two weeks. Well, two weeks was a life sentence. Having no choice, I said to him, "May I speak to you in private?" He took me into his office and I said, "You know, I am Jewish." His eyes popped out. He said "You are an Israelite! If so, must help you." You have to come from the Ukraine to appreciate that. As a Polish orphan girl, he wasn't helping me, but as an Israelite, he felt it his duty to help me.

I lived with that family, I went to church with them, I even sang in the choir. One day when I came back from church on a Sunday, there was a neighbor visiting. She took one look at me and she said "you are a hajka." A hajka is a name for a Jewish girl. I said, "Don't be silly," and walked out through the back door and never came back. I went to the director of the candy factory and told him what had happened. He said to me, "You sleep in the factory. The city is no place for you so I will try to find a place for you on a farm or with a Protestant family. I will also make a passport for you." I still had my father's gold pocket watch. I gave it to him, he sold it, and he gave me back the rest of the money. All I had to do was take a picture. That was the worst thing for me because I have very natural curly hair as did most of the Jewish people in that part of the world. I always wore a kerchief. For some strange reason you had to show your left ear in the picture. I stayed up all night, pulled my hair, straightened it, made pig-tails, and went to take a picture. The director of the candy factory had a friend in a village and he told him about me. He came to see for himself that I didn't look too Jewish and then took me to his village. I was registered there because I had papers. I had many names in those years.

I was liberated there on February 2, 1944. I thought I was the only Jewish person left in the whole world. My brother, Mendel, tracked me down. My sister, Kayla, tracked me down. There were three of us, then. When the war was over, the Russians allowed the Polish citizens to legally go back to Poland. From Poland we went illegally to Austria. In Austria, I met my husband who was a concentration camp survivor, a survivor of seven camps. He was the only one left from his family. There were seven children and he was the oldest. We fell in love and got married. We came to the United States February 2, 1949. We have two devoted sons, two lovely daughters-in-law, and like any grandmother would say, four gorgeous grandchildren. .

Looking back on my teen years, I have often wondered how we managed to emerge from the Nazi hell with our sanity intact. The world was silent and we were doomed. Whenever I hear of the so-called historical revisionists that deny us, deny the Holocaust, I get very angry. How dare they. I'm still alive and I'm a witness to this terrible part of history. And the Holocaust is already being denied. It never happened? I am very disturbed by this. That the Holocaust happened is not debatable. Thank you.

Anya Kagan Kornhauser\* died in 2008