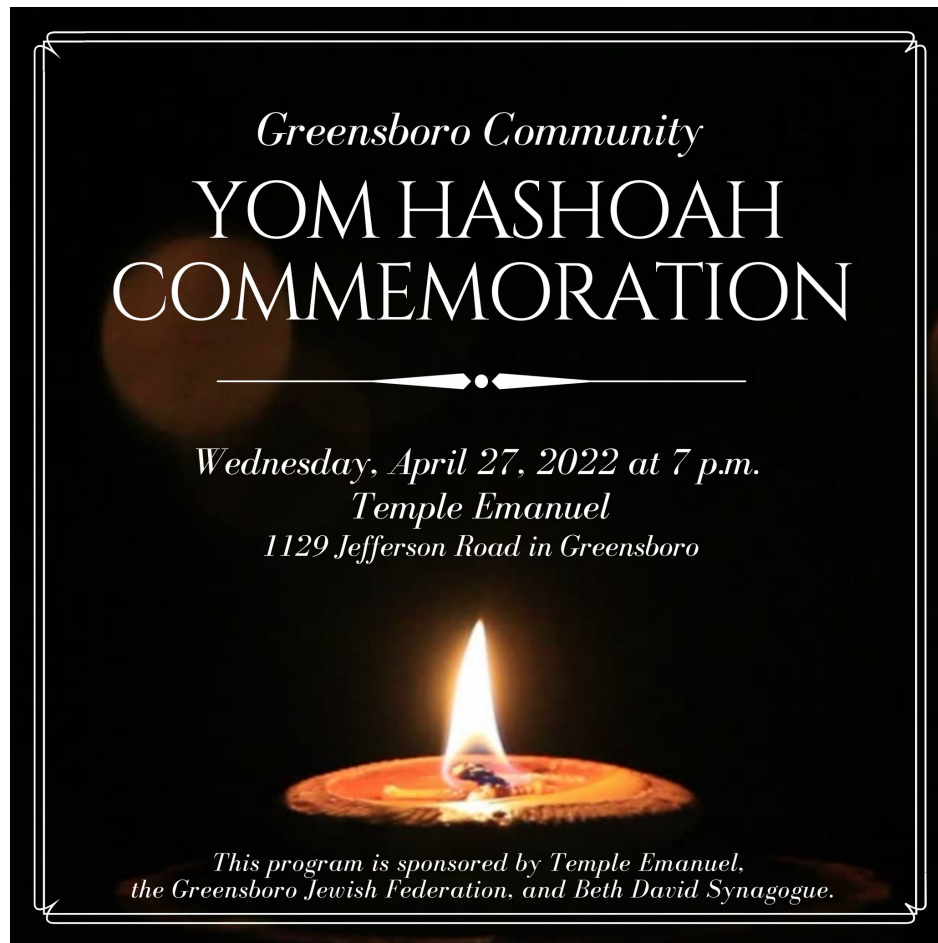


תְּכִנִּית עֶרֶב יוֹם הַשׁוֹאָה וְהַגְּבוּרָה
YOM HASHOAH VE-HAGEVURAH PROGRAM

April 27, 2022 - 27 Nisan, 5782



**Transcript of presentation by featured guest,
Natasha Kobeleva**

**Topic:
Personal Reflection from a Kiev Native**

I am not a crying type of a person. Still, I cried in 1995 as I stood at the Western Wall, on a beautiful sunlit Jerusalem day. I recognized how very privileged I was to stand in that holy place, in my Jewish holy land.

I cried again, in September 1998, as our plane took off for the United States and I stared through the blurry airplane window. Far below me was Kyiv, my beloved hometown, the place where I was born and spent the first 40 years of my life.

I knew that leaving behind everything and everybody was not going to be easy. But I didn't realize quite how hard it would be. Still, my trepidation was tempered by excitement - I was realizing my grandmother's dream. I was coming to America.

What does your mind conjure up when I say the word Ukraine? Do you think of it as a place that your ancestors fled because of pogroms and religious persecution? Is this a place you have visited recently so you can trace your family's history? Unless you have been living under a rock, you probably think of the current catastrophe in Ukraine - the atrocities in Bucha, tens of millions of refugees fleeing for Western Europe, the destruction of Mariupol, maybe even a prospect of a nuclear war with Russia. The daily barrage of news is relentless and terrifying.

Ukraine's history and the history of Ashkenazi Jews are inseparable. The word "pogrom" originated in Ukraine - it's Yiddish word.

From 1835 to Russia's February 1917 Revolution, Kyiv was the center of pogroms. In pogrom of 1905, 100 Jews were killed and several hundred injured after Russian authorities falsely accused Menahem Mendel Beilis of the ritual murder of a Christian boy in Kyiv. That was the infamous "Beilis Affair".

In 1920, the Bolsheviks conquered Ukraine and incorporated it into the newly established Soviet Union in 1922.

Many Yiddish writers and poets lived and worked in Kyiv during the 1920s and 1930s. There were several Yiddish periodicals, three Jewish theaters, and many Jewish schools and clubs.

In the mid-1930s, the Soviet Union decided to promote the domination of Russian culture and the suppression of all others. So, most Jewish organizations and institutions were closed. Many scholars who worked in these organizations and institutions were imprisoned, while some were executed.

During the Second World War, Kyiv was under Nazi occupation for over two years. Many Jews who remained in the city were massacred by the Nazis at the Babi Yar Ravine over two-day period in September 1941.

The 33,771 human beings, who were massacred there, were murdered because they were Jews, in the same planned campaign of extermination that spanned the entire continent.

An estimated 2 million of the 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust were Soviet Jews, who faced what Western scholars call the "Holocaust by bullets" —the version of the Holocaust carried out by Nazis in the Soviet Union, was mass shootings, not death camps. That was the predominant means of extermination.

Nobody in my family had prisoner numbers tattooed on their arm. Nobody died in a Nazi labor or death camp. After the war, my paternal grandfather, who served as a military surgeon in the Red Army, and his family, who were from war-torn Ukraine, returned to Kiev to find most of their extended family missing.

What happened to them? Some died during the war, others were killed in the Babi Yar. There were rumors that Nazi collaborators were among their neighbors and had helped make that happen.

When I think of Ukraine and Kyiv, I remember it as a place where at least five generations of my family, including me, were born. It is a place where I went to school, where I fell in love, where my son was born, and where I traveled back several times to visit my grandparents' tomb. It is a place where I still have friends, relatives, and classmates.

It is also the place the German Nazis bombed on June 22, 1941, two days before my mother's tenth birthday. Instead of having a birthday party she had to flee the city with her family.

In my lifetime, I fled Kyiv twice, on my own. Once when I was 27, escaping the radiation from Chernobyl to save my 5-year-old son, and again, in 1998, when I finally had a chance to go to the US.

As I think about this new war, I cannot help but return to the last one - World War II. Its memories are embedded in my bloodstream. I would like to share a few stories as they were recounted to me by my parents.

My Dad, Ilya Tanklevskiy, of blessed memory- recalled:

"...I remember long days in the cattle car of evacuation train headed to Ural. I couldn't wait to get there, somewhere, anywhere. My father was not with us - a military surgeon, he was in Red Army.

The cattle car was dark. It was stifling hot during the day and freezing cold at night. The spaces were subdivided into two levels, and our seats were up on the second "floor." A bucket by the door served as communal toilet. The large cattle doors would only open during "official" stops - at different railroad stations along the way.

My biggest fear was that my mom's breast milk would run out. I knew that Mila, my infant sister, born during evacuation, would not survive without it. It was a miracle that she was alive in the first place. Another big worry was to make sure we could make it back into the car during the stops. The train would not wait for anyone, although we had to run to the station to boil water and get something to eat using food coupons. One time, the train started moving unexpectedly when my mother and several others from the train car were still outside. I remember a crippling fear that I would never see them again. Luckily, my mother was able to hop on the next train and found us at the next stop. "

Despite all deprivations of the war, and all other challenges and difficulties that life had in store for him, my father's greatest nightmare was this memory - being left behind with a 2-week-old sister and elderly grandparents. My dad's hope was that one day he will find the grave of his grandfather who died in the Urals from hunger just six months after the family got there, giving all food to his grandkids and finally put a headstone there.

My mom, Raisa, may her memory always be a blessing, wrote:
"I thought it was thundering when I woke up at 4:00 AM on that day. I went to the window but the sky was clear. Someone turned on the radio; it was war.

My uncle was able to arrange a truck to take several families. The driver refused to stop for bathroom breaks. He had several large canisters filled with gas and stopped only to refill his tank. We were headed east, first by car then by train, aiming for Turkmenistan.

Our journey was perilous. The trains were very crowded, and we faced constant threat of bombardment by Luftwaffe, the German air force. Things didn't get much better after we arrived at our final destination. Spiders and mosquitos were everywhere. We were not exactly welcomed by the locals.

In 1942, malaria came and it looked like the end. Everyone was sick. Although she was terribly ill, Mom had no choice but to continue looking after us. It was at this moment that she wrote a letter to my dad's family in the distant Urals - "Save us," it said.

It must have been sheer luck that we survived. You can be as brave and as determined as you like but malaria does not care. My mom had malaria fever attacks till the rest of her life. "

Those are the words by Raisa Bialik-Tanklevskaya - my late mom.

The scars from the war never fully healed. My paternal grandmother, a talented pianist, a student of Heinrich Neuhaus, never returned to concert activity, with frostbitten hands, she worked at a meat-packing plant and later as a music teacher.

My maternal grandmother suffered a mini-stroke after the news that her two sisters and their families died in Babi Yar, and she almost completely lost her eyesight at the age of forty.

I am happy that I was able to fulfill her dream - to go to America, the only country where she knew I would be safe.

My parents also came to the US. They are buried here at our Hebrew Cemetery.

I still mourn their deaths but, for the first time, I am glad they are no longer alive to witness the horror that has befallen their homeland.

Not long before his death, my father said that things he wished most were simple: walking in Kyiv hand-in-hand with my mom. My parents always kept a framed photo of Kiev's skyline on their bedside table. It was a reminder of their youth, their love for each other, and their love of Kyiv.

When I first heard that a missile struck a TV tower close to Babi Yar in Kyiv, I thought: "That was close to my son's school."

My second thought was: "They tried to kill them again..."

Just across the road from Babi Yar and the now destroyed TV tower, built on the site of the old Jewish cemetery ruined first by Nazis and later by the Soviets, is a children's amusement park and railway. My parents refused to take me there.

All my girlfriends told me about the park wonder and what delicious ice cream was sold there.

I did not understand why my parents, who gladly took me to theaters, excursions, concerts and fulfilled almost all my whims, came up with endless reservations just not to go there. Many years later I realized. that this place was built on bones...

For me, this war feels immediate, violent, and traumatic in a way I had not anticipated.

I came to North Carolina when I was 40. When asked where I was from, I frequently said that I was Russian. Russian is my native language, after all, and the word Ukraine meant little to most Americans. It took too long to explain how one could be Jewish, Ukrainian-born and Russian-speaking.

The war in Ukraine feels both far away and very close. One night I saw footage of a missile strike in Podil and it hit me hard. Podil was the place where my great-grandfather owned a house, a place where my grandparents lived right after they got married.

I open Google Maps to check distances between different sites, how close the shelling is to where our friends live.

Of course, my feelings are nothing compared to what people in Ukraine, who are experiencing this firsthand. My friends and family members are spending sleepless nights crowded in Kyiv subway stations, or hiding in the bathrooms of their apartments. They are watching the night sky light up with explosions. When I call them, they tell me not to worry. "We hear the fighting, but it has not hit us directly."

Is what Russia doing in Ukraine a genocide? President Biden thinks it is. One of the major Russian news outlets published an article called "What Russia Should Do with Ukraine." It provides crucial evidence of genocidal intent — linking the actions of Russian soldiers in towns like Bucha to a broader aim of exterminating an entire "national" group.

Millions of lives in Ukraine are affected, including those of our fellow Jews, as Ukraine is home to one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe. The entire world order is disrupted.

May the Merciful One fill our hearts with compassion and guide our hands to diminish the immense pain and suffering in Ukraine. May we, one day soon, be privileged to sit together with our brothers and sisters there, Jews and non-Jews, in unity and peace.