

While in Germany we were housed in a displaced persons camp at Kassel. The city was a shambles. The American Joint Distribution Committee cared for the refugees. We lived in barracks previously occupied by the German military. I wrote to the New York Jewish newspapers to help me find my uncles. Then we got in touch with my Uncle Henry and explained that I was the only member of the family to survive the war. We asked him to send us affidavits so that we could start the formalities necessary to come to the United States. My relatives replied with love and encouragement for both of us, saying that America was a land of opportunity where anyone could succeed.

We immediately registered to go to America, although we had to wait for our quota. I knew that no other country could offer what America could, especially to new immigrants. I remember dreaming about America, the golden land, when I was a little girl visiting my grandmother in Annapole and reading the letters she received from her two sons in America. I would admire the pictures of the people in their fine clothing.

With all my free time waiting, I thought about my past life in Germany: the months of frustration when I worked long and strenuous hours in the steel factory, the cruel farmer Gearhardt who treated me like a slave, the evil SS Obergrupeer fuehrer Schregler who hounded me . . . and whom I felt should be brought to trial as a Nazi War Criminal.

In fact, the idea of finding Schregler haunted me. I told this to Abe and we decided to seek him out. On June the twelfth we bought tickets and went to Bad Kreuznach, an all-night trip. When we arrived there I was amazed how devastated it was, full of rubble and ruin, a paralyzed city. We registered at the Muller hotel and after resting a few hours, we went to the local police to ask for Schregler's address. We knew that we would have to be careful, that he could be dangerous.

Schregler's house was on quiet, residential Ludwig Strasse. I rang the door bell. A woman in her late forties, wearing a yellow house dress, opened the door and introduced herself as Frau Schregler. I could see two boys, perhaps eleven and thirteen years old, playing in the parlor. The older boy saw us and asked his mother, "*Mutti, ist die frau eine Vervante* (Mother, is this woman a relative)?" When I asked to see her husband she told me he was dead.

After I left the house I spoke to some people in the street. They told me that Schregler had died of a dose of poison, not wanting to give himself up to the new German police. He was found dead on a roadside, several miles away from Coblenz. I also learned that all the nuns from the Evangelisches Heim had been evacuated to nearby villages during the last months of the war.

There were other young couples in the D.P. camp. Most of our conversations were about children, about how we needed someone to fill the emptiness in our lives. When I became pregnant, Abe and I were overjoyed. I admired as well as loved Abe and hoped that our baby would be like him.

Like her parents, the little baby had to strain for its freedom. On October the 29th, 1947, Abe took me to the Eshwegen Hospital near Kassel, walking tensely nearby while giving me moral support. There was only a midwife in attendance and the labor was long by natural childbirth. Finally, I heard the nurse cry, "The baby's on its way—it's a girl!" And so, on the 30th of October, Abe and I were blessed with a baby girl—a tiny five pounds, six ounces—with black hair and a round face. After what seemed like a long time but was only fifteen minutes, the nurse placed the baby next to me and I held her tightly.

As new parents, we thought of the baby day and night. What should we name her when there were so many names to choose from among our relatives who had gone to their deaths so prematurely? We decided on Chana, after my mother, and picked the middle name Sheindel for Abe's mother. If only our mothers could have lived to see their granddaughter!

I rested in my hospital room alone, receiving no messages of congratulation, no visits from relatives. Many of the other patients had relatives who brought them flowers. Still, we were fortunate: many of our neighbors in the camp were unable to have children.

We had a special love for our first-born, our small daughter. Abe and I were sick with worry about how to bring her to America. But we wrote Uncle Henry and soon received the necessary affidavit, with a letter of congratulations.

In February, when Chana was almost four months old, we went to Frankfurt for a medical examination and to work out the papers for our trip. The worst part was deciding what food to take for the baby. I was not able to breast feed her because I was still tense from the war years, and we did not have any baby formula. The only food that I made for her was a mixture of milk and water; later I fed her cooked oatmeal.

Finally, we left Bremen harbor on the huge military steamship, *Marine Flasher*. Late in the afternoon, we passed the coast of France. Once we reached the ocean, the weather became stormy, and Abe became sea-sick and went on deck to breathe some fresh air.

We found ourselves among many other people who were poverty-stricken for a new beginning to their lives. We were all frightened about our uncertain future in the new land. We could not speak English and we were going to a place where life would be totally different for us.

One afternoon there was a knock on the door of our compartment and a girl in her late teens entered. She had heard a baby cry and wanted to see it. She told me her name was Sally. She was the prettiest girl I had ever seen—her eyes were blue as the sea, her teeth like pearls, and she had a dimple in her left cheek. She bent over Chana in the cradle and cried silently. When I asked her why she was sad, her face was ashen as she whispered, "I'll never know motherhood. I was sterilized."

She told me she had been born in the city of Lvov, Galicia, the eldest child in her family. Her father had been a Zionist. The Nazis found her family hiding in the basement of their house and ordered them to leave at once; but one of the Nazis, a high-ranking SS officer, ordered her to stay behind, and be his personal servant. The rest of the family was taken away by truck to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Sally cleaned and ironed the Nazi's uniform and polished his boots. He called her Ursula and took advantage of her. She became pregnant and after three months, he took her to an abortionist and had her sterilized. She suffered for two years with him often begging him to kill her. She told of witnessing teenage girls being attacked by trained dogs while the Nazis roared with laughter. She spoke, haltingly, "We have our freedom now—well, yes, the darkest hours of my life are behind me, but—a part of my body is missing, gone forever." I was not able to speak. I could only put my arms around her. That night I slept very little.

We had sailed during Passover, the holiday that celebrates the flight of our ancestors from the bondage of a cruel Egyptian pharaoh. And truly, each of the passengers felt as if he had left Egypt in an exodus from bondage.

I, too, was free now. I no longer had to draw the window curtains as I had done in the Ukraine during the seder, fearing that the N.K.V.D. might observe me and break down the door to my house.

On April 28th, our ship approached the Lower New York Bay. I stood on deck gazing in wonder at the lights of New York and the Statue of Liberty. After disembarking, we went through Customs. While we waited on line, we sat on our shabby suitcases, completely exhausted from the trip. But we were soon greeted warmly by Uncle Henry and his wife Betty and cousin Bobby. Poverty and pogroms had driven my uncle to emigrate to the United States more than a half century earlier. Now our rejoicing was also painful as I spoke to my uncle of the death of his mother (my grandmother) and two brothers (one of whom was my father).

I became very excited as we rode in our taxi through the Lower East Side and saw old men in skull caps—I had forgotten how that looked. And riding north, I was flabbergasted at the hundreds of cars on the street, the huge buildings, and the fancy store fronts. Seeing nursery school children in a playground, I thought how wonderful it was to be young and not to know about wars.

Everybody in our new family showed us kindness—it was a fantastic dream for Abe and me. Uncle George and his wife Blanche gave us temporary shelter in their apartment in the East Bronx near Crotona Park. The next day, a friend of the family, Mr. Faigenbaum, took Abe to Manhattan to look for a job. Abe did not know English, so it was difficult for him to find a job especially because newcomers were thought of as inferior, "green-horns." But Abe did get a job at \$34 a week as a checker in Uncle Henry's cafeteria, "The Colby," and I soon opened a savings account at the Jerome Avenue Post Office and saved \$5 weekly at 2% interest. And one day Cousin Abe Bain paid us a visit from Lowell, Massachusetts, and brought us gifts from all the distant cousins who had emigrated from my native town of Krasnostav after World War I.

Abe and I were happy and grateful for just being free to walk the streets of New York. I loved the United States from the mo-



Henry and Betty Meister (Donna's uncle and aunt), who sent Donna and Abe an affidavit to emigrate to the United States.

*George and Blanche Meister
(Donna's uncle and aunt—
Donna's father's brother
from New York).*



ment I stepped on its soil, and I eagerly looked forward to the time when I could become an American citizen, which I did in 1953. When I was handed my citizenship certificate, I felt as if I were somehow holding the whole United States of America in my hand. And I shall always be grateful to America, my home where I am enjoying freedom and hope.

This is my story: it is a story of determination and survival. It is filled with tears and pain, but it has a happy ending. Writing this book will, I hope, help peace-loving people gain a better understanding of the Holocaust. I hope that it will not let people forget what happened, that it will help to stamp out anti-Semitism and better reveal the evils of racism. We, the survivors, will scream the horrors from our rooftops, so that others will not forget. Many times I have asked myself how the conscience of the human race allowed the Holocaust to happen. If we forget what happened, it could happen again.

The scars of the war will never heal. I write this as I commemorate the 41st *yahrzeit* (memorial day) of my family. It was forty-one years ago that the Nazis and their helpers destroyed the Jewish people of my town and wiped my birthplace off the map. Today I light a memorial candle—my eyes are not dry.

How many different emotions come to me. I also cry in thankfulness for being in the United States where I am optimistic for the future of my children. But the martyrs plead with us not to forget them. Our children shall remain on guard day and night that this horror will never happen again. I write down what has happened so that future generations will know the abominable crimes which occurred in the middle of the twentieth century.

Abe Bain (Donna's cousin).



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Even though I was happy to leave Russia, I retained a deep interest in its progress and, particularly, in how the Jews who remained there have fared. I wanted to meet with Jews and find out why they want to leave. I also hoped to find some relatives who might have survived the war.

So in September, 1979, we travelled to Russia. Our group with General Tours consisted of thirty-nine people from many states. We were scheduled to visit Moscow, Kiev, Yalta, and Leningrad. I was the only person on the tour born in Russia after the October Revolution. It was a damp summer night when our Finnair plane landed in Moscow. As we stepped off the plane, I saw six KGB members sternly observing us. Passing through customs I was singled out and taken to a different room. There a woman made me undress and searched me thoroughly. She confiscated a small prayer book from my bag. I naturally was unnerved by this rude welcoming.

An Intourist guide, Tania, escorted our group to the Hotel Russia along the Moscow River. Tania was fluent in English and well-briefed. Her main job obviously was to show us Russia at its best. She lectured to us about Czarist Russia, about the decadent lifestyle of the Czar and his family, and of changes made since the Revolution. She shepherded us closely and discouraged us from making contact with other Russians.

Among the sites we visited was Red Square, the heart of Moscow. Big signs praising the Communist Party and predicting fulfillment of the current five-year plan hung from buildings around the square. At Lenin's tomb we stood on a line that seemed to stretch for miles. We were not particularly happy when two KGB agents, a man and a woman, broke the line in order to stand next to my husband and me. I recognized the woman as the one who searched me at the airport. They tried to

catch every word of our conversation, staying close to us as we went downstairs to see Lenin's body. They left us only when we returned upstairs.

Later, as our bus took us around Moscow, I noticed that the streets were dimly lit to conserve energy. I saw many women repainting and refurbishing churches and architectural monuments in preparation for the 1980 Olympics. I also saw long lines of people waiting for food. In the food shops I saw mostly empty shelves, and I wondered how Moscow's population of eight million was being fed.

One morning, my husband and I skipped breakfast and took a taxi to the old synagogue in Moscow on Arkhipova Street. About twenty worshippers, all old people, were present. A short man with a black skullcap welcomed us. Soon he opened his heart and mind to us. With tears in his eyes he told us that Jewish life in Russia was growing weaker and weaker and anti-Semitism was noticeable everywhere. Jews were not trusted. Only a handful, mostly old Communists, had positions of importance. As an example, he cited the Leningrad Gorod Soviet (City Hall) where there is not a Jew. Many Jews, he said, had lost awareness of their rich Jewish heritages and there had been much assimilation. But these days even assimilation could not protect people from the anti-Semitism that was current. On the other hand, some young people were thirsting for Jewish knowledge and books.

While we were talking about the plight of the Jews, another man in a neat gray suit came over and introduced himself as the president of the synagogue. He switched the subject to China, who, he claimed, was very ungrateful towards Russia after receiving so much help from her. The short man with whom we had been talking stepped on my husband's foot, signalling that we should stop talking to the man in the gray suit.

We left the synagogue with a lump in our throats and tears in our eyes. The short man followed us out and walked us to the corner. He told us that Misha, the other man, received a salary of three hundred rubles a month from the government to spread propaganda against Israel and the "Zionist aggressors." He said, "We don't trust him. He tries to sell us out."

The next day our group was taken to the Moscow House of Friendship. There we participated in a round table discussion with three Communist party members. One of the men introduced himself as Mr. Levine, pronouncing his name very quickly. He wore dark glasses, and was always nervously fixing his tie.

Of the three, Mr. Levine answered most of the questions we asked about life in Russia. He explained that Russia had been destroyed during World War II and that much energy had to be spent to rebuild it. He said that in Russia there is no unemployment – pointing out that the United States had a high unemployment rate. The discussion lasted for two hours. The party members refused to discuss the quality of life of the ordinary Russian. They refused to acknowledge that their system could be improved. They tried to shift the discussion to the problems of the United States. Our group left the House of Friendship dissatisfied with the answers it received.

When I lived in Russia before World War II there had been two Jewish newspapers, *The Stern* and *The Emes*. I tried to find a Jewish paper during this visit and the only one I located was *Der Veg*, a Communist journal printed in Tel Aviv. On the top of the front page, in small letters, was written "The cooperation between Begin and Sadat was dangerous for Israel." The newspaper also claimed that Israel had been bombing Lebanon with help from the United States. The article that most disturbed me was one by Abraham Newman about World War II. He believed that the cause of the war was the politics of the United States, England and France. In discussing the number of war casualties, he paid no attention to the large number of Jews murdered.

Russian trip. Mr. Levin (center) answered questions during the round table discussion.



While we were in Moscow an international conference on children was being held. Participants came from all over the world. We spoke with one of them, a pretty Israeli woman who was with her ten-year-old daughter. She said that she had been sent to Russia by the Israeli Communist Party and that she was most interested in observing the Soviet Union and admired what she saw. On the other hand, she was ashamed of her native country, Israel. She considered Menachem Begin an enemy of Israel. "He does not care about the welfare of his people." No matter how much we tried to persuade her that she was wrong in her evaluation of Russia, she continued to maintain that it was superior to Israel. After an hour she left us in anger.

Soon our group travelled to the ancient city of Kiev, about 170 miles from my native Kranostav. The airplane was dirty and flies bothered the passengers. I wanted so much to see Kranostav, where my family was buried, but the Russians would not hear of it. They preferred that we confine our travels to visiting historic monuments on the Dnieper.

One Friday, my husband and I again left the tour. This time we went to visit Babi Yar, taking a city bus with two other couples to get there. On the bus we asked a woman where we should get off. She said that we should go with her because she too was headed there. She held a wreath of flowers that she planned to put on the graves of her relatives who were killed during the Nazi war. She told us that in 1941, when she was three years old, her parents and sister fled Kiev to go to Siberia, where they stayed during the war. Her maiden name was Grinberg and after the war she married a Ukrainian who was a war hero. Her father had been a colonel and was buried in the National Cemetery in Kiev. Her mother now lived with her in a two-room apartment. Mrs. Grinberg had two girls, aged twelve and seven. She felt that her husband, a member of the Communist Party, was anti-Semitic and he frequently reminded her daughter that their mother and grandmother were Jewish, Zionists. Mrs. Grinberg said, "When the girls reach the age of sixteen, they will take out a passport with "Ukrainian" stamped as their nationality. They will not have anything to do with me. Even now, they do not want to play with Jewish classmates in school." Mrs. Grinberg added somberly, "If a war ever starts again, my husband will shoot all of the Jews of Kiev, starting with me." I was aghast.

We saw a tall monument at Babi Yar which said that thousands of people are buried there, but there was no mention that many of the people were Jews. I looked down at the green velvet

ravine and thought of the Jewish men, women and children who had been buried alive here.

On a cool autumn morning we went to a synagogue at Podol. An old rabbi invited us to pray with the congregation. "We shall pray together as the new year 5740 approaches. We shall pray for the end of the suffering of the Jewish people. We shall pray for a lasting peace for the state of Israel."

The synagogue was in poor condition, and littered. The chairs and tables were broken. There were few prayer shawls. The prayer books had torn pages. I could hardly see the alter. The few people who were there, all old, clustered around us to hear news about Israel and America. They were friendly, but afraid to talk to us. Instead of saying that they wanted to go to Israel, they said, "We should like to go to the Jews." One man told us, "The HIAS should do more for the Jews in Russia."

I watched Russian television during the evenings. Some programs were devoted to women and to the young pioneers. Other programs dealt with sports, especially ice skating. I did not hear any bad news. "Antonina Baskakova, a metal worker in a tool cutting plant, finished her five-year-plan in four years."

Babi Yar, Kiev.



There also were shows about the United States. The theme of one such program was the plight of the elderly—how their limited income could not cover food, clothes, medicine, and housing. "Many old people in the United States want to work but are unable to get jobs. Many of the elderly buy dog food and are compelled to steal food from supermarkets."

From Kiev we went to Yalta. While relaxing near the Black Sea we met a Jewish man of about fifty-five years, also on vacation. He came from Moscow where he worked as a dentist. His wife was a doctor. Together they made about five hundred rubles a month. His only son, Boris, did not know anything about the Jewish religion or culture, yet he was denied admission to medical school because the word "Ivrei" was stamped on his passport. He told us he feared that Boris did not have a future in Russia.

Our trip to the Soviet Union and our meeting with many Jews has helped us to better understand their situation. Now we know why they wish to leave the country where they were born. The anti-semitism in Russia is intolerable now and there seems to be little promise of improvement. Our trip also left us more grateful than ever for the freedom that we enjoy in our own country, the United States.

Abe and Donna on Russian trip, 1979.

