

A world destroyed, a world to remember. The story of Ranana Malkhanova

1	In 1918, after hundreds of years of Russian dominance , Lithuania became an independent country . An old country was born again.
2	But it would lose its independence only 22 years later in 1940, when the Soviet army accupied the country , followed, a year later, by Nazi Germany .
	In 1944 the Soviets returned to Lithuania and occupied the country until 1990.
3	Among all the tragedies that befell Lithuania during the 20 century was the genocide committed against its Jewish population. More than 95% of Lithuania's 220,000 Jews were murdered by the Nazis and their local collaborators.
4	This is the story of one Lithuanian Jewish family, and all the things history threw at them.
Chapter One: There once was a world	
5	Here you see a pretty young woman—her name was Ester Solomina,
6	She came from Pilviskiai .
7	This man, his name was Moses Kleinstein.
8	He was from Vilkaviskis .
9	Ester and Moses were married in 1923 and a year later, their son Zayev was born.
10	I came into the picture in 1932 as their daughter.
11	This is where I grew up--Vilkaviskis.
12	I remember small houses, surrounded by beautiful green trees.
13	The streets went down to a small river: Sheshupa, where children used to have fun on a small beach.
14	Dad worked at the Jewish school in Vilkaviskis — he was the headmaster.
15	All the children had to wear uniforms—it was very nice.
16	In our town there was a great wooden synagogue.
17	In fact, there were around 7,000 people in our town, and more than 3,000 were Jewish.
18	The Lithuanians were mostly farmers they grew things and brought them to town.
19	And many of the shopkeepers were Jewish.
20	In other words, people lived together, got along together, and helped each other out.
21	I was not quite eight years old in the summer of 1940 when the Red Army occupied Lithuania .
22	I'm sure some of the poor people—Jews and Lithuanians—thought life would improve for them under Communism .

23	But our family didn't feel that way.
24	In no time at all, some Soviet officer was sent to live with us.
25	In the shops food vanished, while the Soviet soldiers and their wives took just about everything.
26	But there were worse things to come because rich people, even middle class people, were arrested and sent away by the Soviets. So were Zionists , too.
Chapter Two: The destruction of our world	
27	On the night of 22 June 1941 the Germans invaded , and bombs started falling on our town. We were so close to the border we were one of the first towns hit.
28	As dawn came up, there was panic everywhere with people running to get away.
29	My father found us a cart and my mother, Zayev and I got on it.
30	But it was too late. The Germans had surrounded the town and sent us back. "Schnell, schnell" —those were the first words I heard in German.
31	We returned to Vilkaviskis and as soon as we arrived, the men were separated from us and they were all arrested.
32	My dad and Zayev were taken away with the others.
33	My mother and I moved in with another family
34	and we had to sew a yellow star on our clothes.
35	My dad and Zayev were locked away in the printing house.
36	We lived in fear.
37	And then the most horrible things happened—things you cannot believe.
38	On 28 June, 1941—only a few days after the Germans arrived, they shot 600 Jewish men and boys .
39	The rest of us were put in a ghetto.
40	Then on 8 July, 1941 they took the men and boys out of the printing house.
41	They had to then dig a pit—they dug their own graves.
42	That is how I lost my father, my brother and my grandfather.
43	As for the ghetto, we women were organized to do some work. The Germans ruled over us, and yes, they had Lithuanians who helped them.
44	It was after about a month and a half that we were taken to Pilviskiai, my mother's hometown.
45	A small ghetto had been set up and my mother worked as a seamstress.
46	On the evening of 13 November 1941-- it was getting dark early as winter was coming--and on the street, I saw the Germans and their Lithuanian polizei knocking on doors, yelling at all the Jews to come out.
47	And there I was—nine years old but I was no longer a child after all I had seen since that summer. Immediately, I knew what to do.
48	I ran into our house and I just said, Mother, let's run! And we ran!
49	We didn't know where we were running to, but we knew what we were running from.

Chapter three: Running, hiding.	
50	We walked through the night. We saw a barn and we crept in and we slept there. At dawn, my mother knocked on the door of the farmhouse. Would they feed us? Would they turn us in?
51	I am still surprised at human nature under these extreme conditions. Life could have ended for us at any minute, but throughout this region, no one turned in this Jewish mother and her little girl.
52	We slept in attics, barns and basements. People gave us the same food they had on their tables.
53	The best place we hid in was in a hamlet where the Strimaitis family lived.
54	Mr Strimaitis was an agronomist and he and his wife simply opened their home to us.
55	Best of all, they had a daughter, Milda, who was my age. Finally I had a friend.
56	Every Sunday, the Strimaitis family and I would go to church, and they told everyone I was a relative from Kaunas . My mother stayed behind in the house.
57	This went on for days. The days became weeks. The weeks became months.
58	Would we really be able to survive without anyone turning us in? And then one day our luck ran out.
59	We had been near Barzdai and a man arrested my mother and me. He was taking us into town and coming from the other direction was a man—a total stranger—who figured out what was going on.
60	He started talking to this man, and while they were talking, he motioned to us to slip away—and we did. I never learned the name of this man who saved us.
61	In October 1944 we were staying not far from the Strimaitis home.
62	Not long after that, we saw the Russian Soviet troops. The war was over for us.
Chapter four: Starting over	
63	No one was waiting for us in Vilkaviskis.
64	So my mother and I hitched rides on trucks and trains and headed for Vilnius.
65	And what we found in Vilnius was devastating .
66	Here had been this great Jewish community, famous throughout the whole world and now there was almost nothing left.
67	The story was no different in the rest of Lithuania .
68	And while we were glad to be freed of the fascists, another occupation was upon us— that of the Soviet Union .
69	I started school as soon as I could and I learned Russian. I even got a degree in Russian literature.
70	I met a Soviet soldier called Matvey Malkhan. Matvey was a Buryat from Novosibersk .

71	Matvey went to work as an engraver and I became a translator at a Russian language publishing house.
72	We had two children, Alexander and Ilana, and at first we lived with my mother.
73	She was devoted to her grandchildren. But she was a wounded soul. She had lost so much. I lost my mother in 1964.
74	And I lost beloved Matvey in 1988.
75	Tragically, I lost my son Alexander in 2002. He was married with two children.
76	But I am very close to my daughter Ilana and her family. They mean everything to me.
Chapter five: Rebirth	
77	Our country, Lithuania, had a tragic, horrible 20 And I was shocked at the way the Soviet Union treated us when we rightly called for our independence.
78	In 1990 when we declared our independence , I was called out of retirement to do simultaneous translation for the first seating of our new government. What an honor that was!
79	Even though it is a very small one, our Jewish community has been reborn. We have a Jewish school, Social clubs and cultural activities too.
80	But there was something I needed to do personally.
81	I started filling out forms and writing letters in 1994 to Israel's Holocaust Museum .
82	They have this very high honor for those brave people who would rather have died than to say no to a Jewish friend—or in the case of my mother and me—a couple of strangers.
83	I was so pleased in 1994 when Milda, and her parents who have since died, received this award.
84	I believe that in life, you always have a choice. During the Holocaust in Lithuania, some people made the wrong choice, a horrible choice. Others made no choice at all.
85	I hope that young people today will use the Strimaitis family as a model. Now that would be the brave choice.