

Farewell To Emiliya's Relatives Who Died In The Pogrom



This is a photo of the farewell to our relatives that were cruelly murdered in the pogrom in the village of Zagore, Chechersk uyezd, Gomel region, Belarus in May of 1922.

In the foreground on boards lie the bodies of the cruelly tortured victims. . Above the body of Grandfather Borukh sat Grandmother in mourning (first row from the bottom, first from the left), next to her sat her children: daughter Galya (my Mama), and son Emmanuil. Next to the body of Grandfather Borukh (to the right) lies the body of a young girl. This is the raped, then murdered little sister of my mother, Fira. In the second row from the bottom, the third man from the right (with a beard) is David Bolshun, next to him with her head bowed is his daughter Galya. Among the victims are Klara Bolshun, mother of Galya and wife of David, and David's 9-month-old grandson Yosif. Yosif's parents aren't in the photograph because his mother Hannah was paralyzed when she saw the scene of the pogrom and the tortured body of their firstborn. Hannah's husband Miron, my father's brother, had gone after the bandits.

From childhood I had heard of the tragedy that took place in our family before my birth, in 1922. However, I only learned the full details in 1970 from Mikhail Davidovich Bolshun, the son of grandmother's brother David, when I was visiting relatives in Pyatigorsk. Evidently it was too difficult for both Mother and Grandmother to speak of it.

In the spring of 1922 the Savitzky brothers' band, former timber traders, tried to leave for Poland. Along the way the bandits would suddenly attack a village and knife the Jews with howls of, "Yid! Give us a grosz (Polish penny)!" They fell upon the village of Zagore on May 2nd.

On the eve of the pogrom, there were many guests at Grandfather Borukh's house. Relatives had arrived from the Caucasus where there was a drought and famine. With them was a young couple—bride and groom to be.

Early that morning, Grandmother, along with her niece Hannah, David's daughter, and Miron's wife left for the woods to "koponichit' lyado" (to prepare a new field for planting) and to collect strochka and morels, spring mushrooms. When they were preparing to return home, Hannah noticed horsemen on the road. She said to Grandmother, "Aunt Mera! Here come riders. One of them is on your horse. And there's the cart full of things." The women sensed the threat and hid themselves, not going on the road.

The horsemen rode past. The women ran to the village. Already on the way they could hear screams and weeping. Around the house there was no one. The bandits had frightened the neighbors, Belarussian peasants. No one had come to the aid of the victims because the pogromists had promised to kill all those who helped the "Yids."

When the women opened the door to the house, blood trickled out in rivers. The bandits had beat to death with muzzle-loading guns 17 people—13 Jews and 4 Belarussians - "kombednoti" (members of the poor committee). The women were raped before death, even nine-year-old Fira, Mama's younger sister. The nine-month-old baby, Hannah and Miron Goldberg's first-born, was put in a sitting hen's basket and beaten with the gun, strokes in the form of a cross.

Grandfather lay wrapped in the "tales." He was murdered last. Before his death he prayed, watching the tortured death of his closest relatives.

The first to come help was Uncle Misha Bolshun who had spent the night in a neighboring village. He returned to Zagore in the morning and instantly sent his Belarussian friends to warn the Jews in the village of Belyaevki. Thanks to the warning, those managed to organize defenses and didn't let the bandits into the village. The band was forced to turn off the fields and get to the Polish borders through the woods.

Most of the peasants were terribly frightened which didn't help their suffering neighbors. Grandmother and Uncle Misha loaded the bodies of the murdered onto 2 carts themselves. In accordance to Jewish tradition the men and women were laid separately. In the darkness of despair, Grandmother harnessed a cow to the second cart. Thus they left in order never to return.

On the road to Chechersk a crowd met them. All already knew of the tragedy and showed true solidarity. Among the group were my mother and her brother Monei. They were studying in Chechersk and had stayed for the holidays with their Uncle Abram, grandfather's brother. This saved their lives.]

Miron Goldberg was a member of the group of Chekists that organized the pursuit of the bandits. They found the band. Under the demands of the residents, they were given the death sentence and shot.

The victims of the pogrom were buried in Chechersk.

That was a documentary witness to the tragedy. In the foreground on boards lie the bodies of the cruelly tortured victims. Their death united those who came to display their grief and decisiveness in revenging the murderers. Above the body of Grandfather Borukh sat Grandmother in mourning (first row from the bottom, first from the left), next to her sat her children: daughter Galya (my Mama), and son Emmanuil. In the second row from the bottom, the third man from the right (with a beard) is David Bolshun, next to him with her head bowed is his daughter Galya. Miron and Hannah aren't in the photo. Hannah lay paralyzed and Miron had left to apprehend the bandits.

Another account of these happenings was given by another of Hannah and Miron's granddaughters (their son Yakov's daughter), Anna Piotrovskaya, who now lives in Tver. She wrote her father's story word for word when she was 15. According to her, she knew little, at the time, of the persecution of our nation, and this history was written down in order not to forget the details.

Here is the record:

"At that time in Belarus there were many bands, including nationalistic ones. One of them was the band of the Savitzky brothers. The Savitzkys were Polish gentry. The elder was a true monster, evil, savage, without pity. His wife Yadviga was the same as her husband. The younger Savitzky was faint-hearted, completely in the power of his older brother, obeying his commands without question. There were about 40 cutthroats in the band, soulless, evil and whose sense were clouded by the glitter of gold and the need for profit which they obtained through robbery and violence. The band eliminated Jews in a brutal manner: demanding gold, they tortured the members of the homeowner's family in front of him. There was no pity for the elderly or children.

This is what happened in Zagore in 1922. That day, when most of the residents were working in the forest (including Miron), the Savitzkys came into the village. In Grandfather David's house, was Grandmother Klara Bolshun, Miron's mother in law, with the 9-month-old baby, Miron's first-born Yosif. After not getting any money from Grandmother, as there simply wasn't any, the bandits chopped off Yosif's head with an axe, in front of her, then they hit Grandmother in the stomach. In other houses the attacks on the residents were just as cruel. In Borukh Kosoi's home, his daughter was raped, the household members were killed and the males were violently attacked. Borukh prayed and wept, he was tortured last. Miron said that there was absolutely nothing of worth for them to take. Everyone lived on his or her own work.

So, when Miron and Hannah returned from the forest (Miron was the head of a brigade in the woods while Hannah and Aunt Mera worked to make clearings for sowing), and came up to the house, they saw in the window a basket that had held a laying hen, but now held the expressionless head of their child. Hannah's legs deserted her and she was instantly paralyzed. She lost her ability to speak. They carried her into the house between the two of them. Miron announced for all to hear that he would find the bandits and kill them with his own hands. And he left on their trail. The Savitzkys had done as follows: they robbed the post-office, tortured and killed the elderly postman. It was a miracle that his 15-year-old grandson who was present during the execution was left whole. He told Miron that the Savitzkys had commandeered a cart and left for the river in a great hurry.

Miron rode to the river. He was lucky because the man who ran the ferry, shaking from what he had just gone through, said that the bandits were planning to get to Kiev. He heard this when the

brothers, not afraid to speak in front of him, had been discussing their further route. The elder Savitzky ordered his brother to kill the ferryman. After going into the woods to deal with the ferryman, the younger brother couldn't handle the man's pleading, pitied him and let him go. This, in the long run, led to the damnation of his brother.

And so, all roads lead to Kiev. In Kiev, in the Cheka at the time, worked a detective Legre (or Lengre, I can't answer for the exact name). Miron came to him and told what happened in Zagore. They then began to search for the Savitzkys. It seemed that they had stopped in the most expensive hotel in Kiev, and all three were staying in one room. They only left the room 3 times a day, armed to the teeth including Yadviga, they went down to the restaurant to eat.

The detective, for the longest time, couldn't think of a way to arrest the bandits, take them alive, so that they couldn't start a shoot out and injure innocent bystanders. He was also afraid that they would unexpectedly hide the last of their travel to Poland. The detective's plan was such: the trio always ate together, heading single file down a long corridor. The windows on the corridor were curtained. Behind the curtains Legre hid the Chekist trap and captured all three.

Miron attended the trial. The elder Savitzky conducted himself defiantly and impertinently. He blamed his brother for his capture, accusing him of faint-heartedness, saying that he had destroyed them all. He asked for permission to say some last words. Upon being given permission, he admitted to the crimes and answered the prosecutor. He also said that Yadviga was completely innocent. The brothers and many members of their band that had been rounded up were shot, and Yadviga was given 25 years. The elder Savitzky was shot right in the courtyard before the courthouse. The numerous crowd of people were barely contained. They demanded Savitzky for themselves to deal with.

In total, out of three families-Bolshun, Kosoi and Maron- 22 people were cruelly tortured and murdered.

For a long time Hannah lay paralyzed, deprived of speech. She couldn't be cured. An acquaintance told Miron that he knew of a witch doctor that might be able to cure Hannah. Miron put Hannah in a cart and took her to the doctor. The doctor said that he would try to return her to life, but asked Miron not to enter the house so that he wouldn't hear. Miron sat on the porch and waited for a long time. Finally his patience snapped and he tried to enter. However the door was well locked and Miron, even with his great strength, couldn't open it. Then he heard a soul-rending cry. Hannah was calling for his help. Miron went mad, destroyed the door and suddenly realized: "she spoke!" He came in, Hannah was sitting up, and she left the house on her own."

These descriptions of the tragedy differ only in the number of victims. All the rest is in agreement.

Anna Vladimirovna Novikova, Hannah and Miron's granddaughter, their daughter Sofia's daughter, found a photo of the farewell to the victims in the archives in Minsk. She sent the photograph to my sister Anna in Gomel who, after a request from our American relatives, sent the photo to Denver. From there a copy was sent to me. In this convoluted way that photograph came to me.

The victims of the pogrom were buried in the Jewish cemetery in Chechersk. The government paid for two memorials on their graves. The Germans destroyed the cemetery during the war, but after the war we found their place of burial: a row of birches had been planted between the two long

graves and the trees were saved. When my mother left Chechersk, with the money that we received from the sale of the house, we put up two memorials of sandstone and wrote a modest epitaph: "perished during the pogrom on the second of May, 1922." They say that the monuments are now in bad shape seeing as limestone crumbles quickly.