

Voices of Remembrance

By Philip Berroll

The massacre began on September 28, 1941, and continued over the following two days. Scores of Ukrainian Jews were rounded up by Nazi storm troopers and their Ukrainian sympathizers, marched into a clearing in the middle of a wooded area, and shot, their bodies dumped into a mass grave.

As many as 35,000 men, women and children – the exact number has never been determined – were killed in the Babi Yar massacre, which could probably be called the first mass atrocity of the Holocaust. It took some time for news of the slaughter to reach the world, and even longer for its full significance to be acknowledged by the Soviet leaders on whose territory it had taken place.

But the Soviet Jews who survived the war have never forgotten Babi Yar. And those who have settled in Brooklyn have made a point of raising their voices in remembrance.

For the past seven years, they have gathered on the anniversary of Babi Yar to commemorate the tragedy. This year's ceremony, held this past Sunday at the East Midwood Jewish Center on Ocean Avenue, was a mixture of music, poetry, and dramatic testimony, expressing both the sadness of shared memories and the assertiveness born of survival.

About 600 people filled the EMJC sanctuary for the three-hour program, conducted mainly in Russian, which was organized by the Center, UJA-Federation, and the Association of Holocaust Survivors of the Former Soviet Union, a 700-member local group. "Previously, they had held it at various other locations," said Dr. Bernard Metrick, a former president of EJMC. "But it kept getting bigger – that's why they came here."

Metrick had helped bring the program to EMJC for the first time last year. At the time, admission was free; this year, it was \$3, in order to raise money to expand the new museum of Jewish history in Battery Park. The program's organizers were hoping that with additional funding, the museum, which focuses on the European Jewish community before and during the Holocaust, would have more space for materials and exhibits about the fate of Jews in the USSR.

Many of those Jews, if they were not sent to death camps, died in Warsaw-style ghettos created by the Nazis or were killed by local anti-Semites who were happy to do the Nazis' bidding.

This sad history was mentioned repeatedly during Sunday's ceremony. The stage was draped by a banner reading (in Russian), "Soviet Jewish Holocaust Memorial Day." And the ceremony began – after the singing of "The Star Spangled Banner" and "*Hatikvah*" – with a candlelight procession of about 30 survivors, bearing placards with photos of loved ones and names of various locations where thousands of Jews had perished: Minsk, Odessa, Kishinev, Moldava, among others.

Later, Malka Budilovsky of the Soviet Holocaust survivors group, who was leading the ceremony, called on audience members to stand up and give their names and the towns where they had originally lived, in the hope that they could re-establish some long-broken connections. "Last year, two survivors from the Minsk ghetto recognized each other," explained Lydia Vareljan, coordinator of the Russian division of UJA-Federation. "They hadn't seen each other since the war. When they saw each other across the room, they gave a great cry, and the whole ceremony stopped."

Nothing quite so dramatic happened this year. But there were still numerous poignant and dramatic moments, from the musical performances by popular singers Boris Pevsner (in Russian) and Marina Buchina (in Yiddish) to the address by Robert Kaplan of the Jewish Community Relations Council, who described his visit to the scene of the massacre.

"Most of my family had been buried in Babi Yar," Kaplan told the audience. "I don't think there were enough tears among myself and the students I brought with me to fill Babi Yar, because Babi Yar is a valley of tears." But he ended on a note of hope: "We (later) visited a *refusenik* family – I saw my mother's face in one of the women's eyes. It turned out that they were my cousins. *Am Yisroel Chai.*"

Other speakers included Rabbi Aaron Kass of EMJC, who said that Jews "must not give Hitler a posthumous victory by abandoning all that you and your parents struggled so hard to preserve," and Assemblyman Jules Polonetsky (D-Brighton Beach), who praised the audience: "The only

way I and my generation can understand what happened is by sitting here and listening to you. For that, I am deeply grateful.”

Indeed, the idea that survivors not be silent -- so that the world will not be allowed to forget -- echoed throughout the ceremony, as when two actual survivors of Babi Yar, Ludmila Tkach and Manya Greenberg, recounted their stories to the audience. Tkach, who now lives in Los Angeles, was four years old at the time; she had been pushed into the mass grave by her mother's falling body, and had later crawled out from under the corpses after the killers had left the scene. Greenberg, now of Philadelphia, was twelve. She was spared when a local policeman took her out of the line of march when he decided that she did not “look Jewish.”

The program ended with Pevsner leading the audience in a Russian song about peace. The title roughly translates as “Buchenwald Choir,” after the inmates in the camp who organized a singing group.

But as much as the audience could feel a strengthened sense of group solidarity – and of progress in telling their stories to the world – they knew that one great challenge remains: to get a full accounting of the tragedy from their former rulers.

The former Soviet government had for many years refused to acknowledge that most of those killed were Jews; the official line was that they were unspecified “victims of Fascism.” But in 1962, the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko protested that policy in his now-famous poem, “Babi Yar.” In the years that followed, the Soviets were increasingly pressured to change their version of the massacre; this finally happened during the Gorbachev years. (Yevtushenko, who now lives in New York and teaches at Brooklyn College, was originally scheduled to appear at Sunday's ceremony, but had to cancel due to a scheduling conflict.)

More progress has been made since the breakup of the USSR. According to Russian-language journalist Joseph Richter, who attended Sunday's program, Israel and Ukraine are currently negotiating the construction of a new memorial. “The Ukrainians are saying, ‘we have a wonderful tradition of friendship with the Jews,’” said Richter, with a laugh.

Another reporter, Arkadiy Kagan of the *Russian Forward* – whose grandparents were among the 400,000 Jews who died in the Minsk ghetto – was even more hopeful. “I have heard that Jews in Kiev have been able to do something similar (to Sunday’s ceremony),” he said. “As recently as 1980, such commemorations were not allowed.”

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