

The Dzina Ghetto

An Account by Sonia Dreisenstock Czernia of Israel,
Translated from the Yiddish by Cy Levine.

Read by Cy Levine at the Dreisenstock /Levine Family Gathering
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Much has been written about the ghettos and concentration camps of Germany and Eastern Europe during the late 1930's to 1946. Each person has his own terrible tragedy and can write volumes about his experiences because his heart is so full of emotion and {his} mind is so full of remembrances. One needs talent to write a detailed book about this.

I would like to remind you of the harsh and fatal moments of the destruction of the Dzina Ghetto. I found myself there from the very first day to the very end of its liquidation - its final destruction.

I write this account so that future generation remember. Man likes to forget, but certain things in life must be remembered, so that we learn what history can teach us. When you read this, please remember that there are a few people alive who went through such terrible suffering and such horrible tragedy. Those people who succeeded in living through this Nazi inferno were mostly the young and this little book tells their story.

My parents lived in Loshkie.

My father's parents lived in Dzina

My grandfather, Asher Dreisenstock and his daughter Gitle Kunkes, who was my mother, did live in Dzina as a youth.

With the start of World War II, we left our home in Loshkie as refugees but were unable to get very far because of the swift advancement and arrival of the German troops. We were forced back into town. The very next morning The Germans began a pogrom against the Jews. They allowed the local gentile community to run rampant for two full days during which time they stole whatever they wished, looted our homes, beat us up, took all of our belongings, killed for no good reason, etc.

My brother had his head smashed and {his} hands beaten when he went to aid our father who was also being punished for absolutely no other reason than he was a Jew.

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The next evening, under darkness, we decided to leave our home in Loshkie, despite the fact {that} a curfew was in effect. Anyone found wandering outside after dark was shot immediately. We ran through the fields towards Dzina. We were all hungry and beaten up and so dejected; our spirit broken; things looked so hopeless. We walked through the night so that no one would see us. We came to a town called Wilkove and stayed with a Jewish family until we regained our strength and courage to go on towards Dzina.

As we approached we could see Dzina burning. We remained in the outskirts of town for a few days and then decided to chance going in. Dzina was a sad and tragic sight. Everything was burned. There was no place to stay. Few homes remained from the devastating fire. The Germans did a thorough job of igniting and destroying the entire town. It was sad {that} they did this because the Russian Army was in the region and had been engaged in one of the first Russian - German battles of the war.

The Germans, in thorough fashion, collected all the Jews a short time later and placed them in a Ghetto on the other side of the city - a suburb called Disenke. They selected a Jewish Committee and Jewish police and that was the beginning of the Dzina-Disenke Ghetto. We Jews tried salvaging what we could from the fire and brought to the Ghetto what little clothing, belongings and food we could carry. It was extremely scant. We left practically everything behind; our homes, our personal belongings, our businesses and whatever wealth we had accumulated in a lifetime of living - all gone. Our concern now was with food and we had so little of it. It was hopeless. We were resigned to our fate and in a broken state faced the future.

The Jewish Committee and the Jewish Police, under direct supervision of the Germans, started to register all young men and women for work detail. The German Commander demanded a certain number of workers be supplied each day and the Jewish Committee was required to turn these people over to be used as forced labor. The men cleaned the streets of the burned out town and were also used for whatever other work demanded of them. The girls were forced to sweep the streets, trim the grass, wash floors in the Gymnasium where the Germans were stationed, etc. With the arrival of colder weather, we were sent to pick vegetables such as carrots, potatoes, onions, etc. Hunger was constant and we risked death by eating these foods while working. It was terrible to be caught stealing food and eating on this labor - for you were shot - as some were.

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The hunger in the ghetto was ever present. The food people had brought with them was dwindling quickly and near the end people with no food were issued 100 grams of flour and this not on a regular basis. This would be about a slice of bread a day. Again, not on a regular basis. The winter was so difficult with no heat, no wood or kerosene, no food, little proper clothing to wear and such low spirits. Three or four families lived in one room. We were all so preoccupied and concerned with our own survival that, therefore, out of necessity, we could not think of the needs and survival of our neighbors. This was bad and bothered us all. Our lives had always been in concern of our neighbors and, yet now, our own survival was uppermost in each and everyone's mind.

The food situation was so bad I thought of sneaking out of the ghetto to look for food. My mother, my older brother Tzalka and my two sisters, Fruma and Gitel were against my doing so. Mother cried and pleaded with me not to go for she was sure I would be shot. I told her dying from hunger was much worse than being shot.

I left the Dzina ghetto one morning by foot. I walked toward Loshkie, a distance of 38 kilometers (about 24 miles). It was cold, windy and a frost was on the ground. I eventually entered the Loshkie ghetto where they all knew me. I found my old hair dressing tools and quietly and cautiously started to work again. What little I earned, I bought food, such as bread, potatoes, etc. These food items I sent to Dzina with a gentle person who had a pass to enter the ghetto. His name was Habrutski and he was a chauffeur. A kind gentleman that helped many Jews. This arrangement did not last long since someone informed on him to the Germans.

At this point I was living outside the ghetto. I also was not receiving money for my hairdressing work but bartered it for food supplies. One day the mayor of the town, Melovitch, and two Germans came to my living quarters and arrested me. I was in jail two days and two nights frightened, and closed into a single small room. Thoughts in this confinement raced through my mind. I was so young, 16 years old, and had experienced so little in life- and yet, so much in life- and I felt I did not wish to die. I did so want to taste the pleasures and good that life should bring but where were they in this mad world? The second night I heard a noise outside the jail house and I thought they were coming to shoot me - soon. The jail door opened and the police officer told that Melovitch had orders to shoot me in the morning. Melovitch knew and respected my parents and therefore gave the jail keeper orders to quietly let me escape. I was now 12 midnight. The watchman, the jail keeper asked me to please fix his daughter's hair before I left. This I did. Food was offered to me while doing so but I was so nervous and frantic about where I would go and how I would get there that I could not eat - yet I was so very hungry!! So hungry!!

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I left and just ran to get away from the Germans. At 4am I came to the house of a gentile family who I knew and asked that he return me to the Dzina ghetto. We had been neighbors when I was younger. He was at first frightened to cooperate with me but when I gave him all the German marks I had collected and saved, it seemed the money convinced him to help me.

I hid in his hay wagon and we left Loshkie. He warned me of few German check points and that I must be quiet and not move when we came to any such points or German patrols. He would warn me at the proper time. My heart beat so fast, I was terrified and full of alarm. Although I questioned God's existence because of all the hardship we were going through, I did, however, pray to him, at this hour of need to please help me. We did arrive in Dzina where I was dropped off and the gentile returned home. When the Jewish workers returned from their day's forced labor activity, I just entered the ghetto with them.

During my absence, the Germans had shot 15 Jews and some of these included my uncle Abraham Hirsh Konkes, my friend's sister, Nora Fishman, Joseph Fuks, one of the other Fuks brothers and a sister and others. Talk had been going around that I was shot in Loshkie. No one could believe I was still alive.

I soon began to work for the German Commander, washing clothes, cleaning house, peeling potatoes, etc. After work each day we waited at the dining hall to be taken back to the Ghetto. We now had a Jewish Orchestra in the ghetto and although they played music, we girls often cried because we were so young and fate had played such a cruel part in our young lives. None of us seemed ashamed to cry since we had lost our youth, we had lost our tomorrow, and we never knew what the next day would bring. Everything was so bleak.

In about two weeks we heard rumors that the Loshkie ghetto had been liquidated. The next morning Hannah Tzupalovitch and Bierele Berson came to us having escaped from the destruction of the Loshkie ghetto. They had good friends in the Dzina ghetto and we were anxious to seem them. I spoke with them and learned the horrors and tragedy of the final days of the Loshkie ghetto.

The next morning I was luck to meet the chauffeur, Habrutski, and he too told me the entire story. He was very disturbed by the beastly manner in which the Germans conducted themselves. He saw with his own eyes the barbarity and warned me to be careful and immediately plan to run away to Russia where I might have a chance to survive. He felt that the Dzina ghetto would be the next to go up in flames and its Jewish inhabitants killed. "Run away quickly" he said. He gave me a package of tobacco for my father whom he liked and respected.

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At this time, I was working with and living with Bertha Dworman as a hair dresser. She gave me a little to compensate me for my work. For some reason, the Dwormans were allowed to live in their home which was outside the ghetto. It had not been destroyed by the fire. Her mother, Fannia, had died and Bertha lived with her father. They had talked off and on about escaping Dzina but really this was a dream - only talk.

My grandfather passed away in the Dzina Ghetto. Although he was religious, he chose to take his own life as an escape. We young ones did not want to die. The more difficult the situation became, the more determination we assumed not to die. We would get together to discuss our plight and how we might escape this nightmare. We felt that we must act and not sit and be slaughtered. We felt strongly the need to do something - but what? Our parents chided us about false dreams; that our minds were not realistic. There was no encouragement from the older generation to escape. My brother and I tried convincing our parents to run away with us. My mother, a quiet and good looking woman, chose not to think of such things. In a passive way, she did tell my brother and me to save our lives by whatever means we could. She said that she had lived long enough and did not wish to suffer any longer. Father would not hear of leaving her and we all thus awaited our fate.

Our younger sister, Fruma, suddenly disappeared into the ghetto and we heard nothing again - till this day. Rumor has it that she was shot.

Expecting something to happen soon, we posted nightly sentries-lookouts - to watch for German activity. This activity against us generally came at night. Finally on the night of 15 June 1943 at 3am, Tzipora Fuks came running in screaming that the shooting had started in the Ghetto. Bewildered, we started to run toward the synagogue which was on the other side of the ghetto. In the darkness before leaving, I had looked out the window and a hopelessness came across me - my eyes teared and my throat and chest choked up. I could hardly swallow. I couldn't even cry out loud. I could see a group of Nazis and police had surrounded the ghetto. Looking out another window, I saw a woman with a child cradled in her arms who had been shot and were laying on the ground nearby. People were running in all directions and being shot at. The scene was one of terror and tumult and people were being exterminated for no other reason that they were Jews.

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My brother pulled me and we began running toward the river, toward the mill, Bimbotz's mill. Many shots were fired at us and my brother kept yelling as we ran to run in a zigzag fashion so that the Nazi bullets were more apt to miss us. We reached the river and started to swim to the other side. I had the feeling that I was going to die-or drown. My shoes were full of water by my coat had created an air pocket and that, fortunately, kept afloat. Also, my brother, a good swimmer, helped me move along and we reached the other side. Wet and frightened, we ran into the woods and met some gentiles who were also in a state of fever. They asked us what was happening "over there." Some were helpful giving us bread and nourishment. They encouraged us to keep on the move. We thus ran further into the woods, tired, exhausted and completely spent. Our strength gone, we just fell upon the grass not able to think or cry or even talk. All day we heard shooting and explosions which sounded like grenades going off.

At night we began walking during the dark periods, never knowing what to expect the next day. We compared ourselves to fugitives running away. We hid in the woods during the day, traveling at night. We also hid in cemeteries so that they would not find us.

The first encounter we had was at a road 10 kilometers from Dzina. A gentile found us and was anxious to arrest us since the Germans promised a package of tobacco and one kilo (2 1/2 pounds) of salt to anyone returning a Jew. My brother picked up a huge stick and threatened him at which point the gentile chose to walk away saying we had better "be careful." We continued walking toward what we thought was the Russian boarder. Although the Germans were in the villages and roads, we did occasionally meet Russians who gave us good treatment and direction and information to where we might find safety.

Once we met some Dzina Jews, who like ourselves, were lucky enough to make it out of the destroyed ghetto. We met a father and son. The son's clothing had many bullet holes. The father continually talked about going back to try to live with his gentile friends. With all our pleading and trying to convince him not to go, he refused to listen and both father and son were caught and shot.

Later, we met two Soviet soldiers who were really Jewish partisans. They too had been residents of the Dzina ghetto - Shuskin and Yushkin. While in the ghetto, they tried to give us courage and support. They encouraged people to leave Dzina and find the partisans and to join with them in fighting the government. There were many Jewish partisans like themselves. They worked very hard to try and bolster our spirits so that we might survive to fight the Nazis.

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I thought how we could fight back with no arms, no training etc. How could we defend ourselves? I later learned that many Jewish did learn to fight and defend themselves as part of the Partisan army, fighting behind German lines. These two men Shuskin and Yushkin were the last to leave the destroyed ghetto of Dzina. They hid in an attic for two weeks and witnessed the inhumane Nazi German treatment.

A short while later we met another group from Dzina. We were now too many people, too large in numbers to travel safely and decided to split up into smaller groups. We would try to find our way toward the Russian Partisans. We now felt we should be fighting with them and wanted so to take revenge on the Germans. We wandered in the woods and swamps losing our sense of time but finally, some weeks later, we did succeed in meeting some partisans. It was a small group with little ammunition and they were not anxious to be burdened with us. They directed us to the rear where we might meet a larger group, a more powerful group that might help us and take us in.

We continued walking, our feet swollen and blood encrusted - hungry, clothing in tatters and shredded and ripped. It was springtime and looking for nature's food, we found an abundant supply of blueberries. It was, fortunately for us, the berry season. This sustained us and really saved us. We were reduced to drinking dirty water and it was sometimes not uncommon to find a worm floating in it. What could we do? We wanted desperately to survive by whatever means. After a long while, my brother made up his mind not to be afraid and decided to walk into a nearby village and ask for food. I did not agree and had a difference of opinion. We did, however, go into the village. A gentile approached us and asked where we were going. We said to the bazaar - to the market place. He looked at us suspiciously. We continued on. I told our group I was going into a house to ask for bread and water. A Dzina boy, Berle, the shoemaker, would not allow us to go. He took my water bottle and said he wanted to go. I agreed saying that "you go first and I will go the next time." It did not take five minutes before we heard yelling and shooting. Looking back we could see Berle being held by both arms in the middle of the road. There were people on foot, on horseback and on bicycles. They began chasing us.

With the last amount of strength, we started to run. A horse ran me down and I thought surely this was my end, but I quickly got up and dashed for the forest which was on my right. I thought during all this commotion that the forest would save me - run -run. A policeman on a bicycle was chasing me and shooting at us. He almost succeeded. I did, however, make the forest and kept running at the utmost speed until I heard no more shooting. I fell, exhausted, on a grassy area, under a tree and prayed to God to help me. It soon began thundering and raining and lightning. I was so wet and dejected I thought God was mad at the world. I could not understand how he could allow people to kill one another in such a horrible fashion and even with all these thoughts felt God would somehow save me.

At night I left the woods and approached a house on the outskirts of the village. I knocked on a window but the gentile woman refused to let me in. She was frightened and told me to "go away." I left running, not knowing where I was going and hoping to meet someone from our Dzina group. Daybreak was arriving and I must find a suitable hiding place. I saw some boxes near a tree a little outside the village and climbed inside one and soon fell asleep. The sun's warmth awakened me and I realized I was in a cemetery. I waited here all night, regaining what little strength I had, not being afraid in the least of the dead all about me.

After some time, I approached another house and begged for bread. Then I continued walking. I can remember hiding in an empty horse barn that had no roof. Rain awakened me and looking about, I found another horse barn that did have a roof and which would give me some shelter. I quietly opened the door and hid in the hay and fell asleep quickly. Suddenly the door squeaked open, and, awakened, I found a scared gentile woman observing me. I asked her to allow me into her home and requested food. She was kind to me and while I ate she told me the story of her life. The Germans shot her son and chased her out of her house. Her daughter and her daughter's husband ran away deep into Russia. I soon became confident in her and her house and fell asleep in an area over the store. Refreshed, with thanks, I crossed over the railroad tracks and proceeded in the direction this good woman showed me.

I now traveled day and night, but mostly nights and soon came closer to the real Partisan zone. My only problem was that the Germans were still in these little villages between the partisans and me. I had to be most cautious. I slowly and carefully walked for several weeks until I finally reached my Russian destination - a partisan village. I begged to talk to the Partisan commander. After a short talk, he sent me escorted to another close by village where I was accepted. They wondered how I was able to survive such a trip and asked many questions. I tried hiding the fact that I was a Jewess. They thought it remarkable that I was thus rescued from the hands of the Germans.

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The Partisan Commissar was named Druzof. I am thankful to him for not sending me on any military missions. He watched over me like his own child. He told me that I looked so much like his daughter whom the Germans shot. As the fighting line drew closer, he was anxious to send me back to the rear. I voiced my objections to this decision since I was still looking for some of my Dzina group. But, orders were orders and he told me that I must go. He said by my following his orders, I would keep alive and since I had already lived through so much, getting deep into Russia would be the safest place. He said maybe someday I would remember the old Commissar "Druzof".

So, back we were sent into Russia and finally came up to the Russian Army in a town called "Terufchi." Here we were interviewed and interrogated by the Russian Secret Police, the intelligence people, who asked us in detail how we managed to get away. When it came to my turn, I found I was the first person from the ghetto to reach this area. The office immediately asked, "Are you Jewish?" I said "yes" and then asked him why that question? He asked me if it were true that the Germans were killing all the Jews that they had concentration camps and were systematically liquidating all Jews. I said "Yes." He found it hard to believe the newspaper accounts of the horrors in those camps. I told him that it was even worse than the news stories- much more dreadful than what was being reported.

He said that he was Jewish with a wife and a child in Vitebsk. Tears welled upon his eyes. He wrote out a note which allowed me to get a piece of soap, a loaf of bread and 100 rubles. He then sent me even deeper into Russia- into the Ural Mountains. This was so far from the fighting that life appeared normal.

So, after months of running, of travel and suffering, of great fear, of tattered clothing, of bloody and swollen feet, I again started to live like a human being. One must try and forget the tragic ghetto and the fear of tomorrow and the hardships endured. Twenty five years have passed. I now have grown children and I still find it difficult not to think about this period of time. One cannot forget.

Those who ran away from the Dzina ghetto whom I have met are Sonia Rasilzion with her two little brothers; Rubin Memechis; Rifke Kurnitze, Tzsapora Fuks, Leila with her son, Shmuel Zalmin's daughter Avromson; Reizele; Yushkin and Pushkin.

END

Editor Note:

I typed and edited this story from the hand written translation that was given to me by my cousin Cy Levine. Cy was given the original document in Yiddish and he translated it into English.

The name “Dreizenstock” has been mentioned many times in discussions with other family members who are tracing the Kramer family history. It seems that the Dreizenstocks and the Kramers are definitely related. Based on our best information:

Elke Pesche Kramer was the sister of:

Nechema Draiza Kramer, who was Cy’s maternal grandmother;

Gabriel Kramer, who my great grandfather; and

Lazar Rubin Kramer who was Ed Cantor’s maternal great grandfather.

Elke Peshce Kramer married Meier Zalmon Dreizenstock of Dzina. The writer of this document was most likely their niece or grand niece, but we are not sure. Nevertheless, Cy and I both felt that this story should be preserved for all of our family members to read and remember.

Harold Kramer, Cheshire, Connecticut May 22, 1996 Revised to pdf Oct. 2007

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