

HOW IT HAPPENED IN KLIMOVICHI

By Shmuel Ryvkin¹

Since I was a child, I knew that I had just one grandfather and one grandmother, my maternal grandparents, and no paternal grandparents because the Nazis had killed them. My father's little brothers, younger than I am at the time I am writing this, were also killed. They were killed along with all the other Jews in the small Belarussian town of Klimovichi, where they had lived all their lives. Actually, my grandfather was born in nearby Khotimsk, but he had to escape from there before the Revolution because, as a member of a Jewish self-defense squad, he hit some thug with a metal rod while fighting back during a pogrom. In 1941, this metal rod would be of little help, and there was nowhere to run...

How did it happen? How was it possible that half of the town's population to be killed? How was it possible to let others kill you?

My father, who spent the entire war at the front, could not answer these questions. Neither could books about the war. Those books tell us about soldiers, partisans, Jewish ghettos in big cities, and death camps. However, they do not say what happened in hundreds and hundreds of small towns inside the former Pale of Settlement. Is the history of these tragedies destined to sink into oblivion, without any way of preserving it?

It turns out that there is a way to preserve this history. You can just take a train there, talk to people, and record their stories on tape. Thirty people told me stories about Klimovichi. Among them were Russians and Jews, their relatives, witnesses, and some who managed to evacuate. We now know how the Jews of Klimovichi vanished.

Klimovichi is located near Belarus' eastern border with the Smolensk and Bryansk regions of Russia, sixty miles from the city of Mogilev. It has been a district administrative center since the time of the Tsars, with a long history going back to at least 1581. It has even its own ancient coat of arms depicting a golden bee on a blue background, which symbolizes the local abundance of honey. A contemporary wrote that Klimovichi was one of the poorest towns in the province – only its park, which was founded in 1872 and was beautiful enough to have graced even the provincial capital, stood out. There were numerous wineries, gardens and wood-processing shops in the town. Most businesspeople were Jews who bought forested land from landowners for logging. In 1880, the Klimovichi population was comprised of 1531 men and 1466 women,

¹ The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews (headed by Lynn Singer) for the author's field trips in late 1980s.

including 731 Jewish men and 853 Jewish women. Thus, more than half of the town's inhabitants were Jewish, yet just 210 of the town's 534 houses were owned by Jews; the average Jewish household of about 7.5 people was almost twice as large as the average non-Jewish household of about 4.4 people. By 1913, the town's population had nearly doubled to 6700, and about half of it – 3400 – consisted of Jews.

World War I, the revocation of the Pale of Settlement, the Russian Revolution, and the Russian Civil War slowed the town's population growth to half its pre-Revolution rate and changed its ethnic composition. According to the 1926 Survey, about one-third of the town's population (2600 out of 7600) were Jews. There is no data on how many of Klimovichi's 9600 inhabitants by the time of World War II were Jewish. Most likely, no more than 2600 Jews lived there by then—before the war, Jews, especially young ones, had left most of Belarus' district administrative centers and other smaller towns for large cities.

Just as they had from time immemorial, after the Revolution Jews in Klimovichi worked in all known crafts. They were butchers and shoemakers, tailors and coachmen, merchants and tanners. Most smiths were Jews, and when a Russian would ask them for the secret that made them so muscular, a typical answer was “because we eat kosher food.” Jews also worked at the two town factories—the distillery and the brickyard. In addition, it became possible for Jews to work in agriculture in the village of Mikhalin located on the outskirts of town. This village consisted of two parts—the distillery and the Energy agricultural co-op. About fifty Jewish families founded the co-op after the end of the Civil War, on the former land of a landowner named Schatsky that they requested and obtained. They were well off, worked hard, and readily expelled lazy workers. It was rather challenging to become a member of the co-op. They made decisions collectively, and there was no pressure from the authorities. A witness explained their success in farming, an occupation that had been foreign to them, by noting their acquaintance with peasants from nearby villages, whom co-op members would ask for advice. In 1933, when all farms became communal, the authorities tried to integrate Russian families into the co-op and to turn it into a communal farm named after Karl Marx. However, this attempt was unsuccessful, as the Russians soon left the co-op and established their own communal farm under the same name.

There were several public schools in Klimovichi: two schools for children in 1st to 7th grade, one school for 1st to 10th grade,² and a Jewish school. However, religious parents were reluctant to enroll their children in the Jewish school. First of all, anti-religious and, more specifically, anti-

² Back then, public school education in Russia consisted of ten grades.

Judaism propaganda was stronger there; second, education there, especially, in Russian, was inadequate for those who wanted to subsequently enroll in institutions of higher education.

In 1933, representatives of the Mogilev Jewish Agricultural Vocational School came to town to enroll students. Graduates of this school were destined to be sent to Birobidjan.³ Komsomol⁴ leaders pressured those who resisted enrollment and threatened to expel them from the Komsomol. They even expelled temporarily one resister, Boma Mindlin.

Before 1917, there were five synagogues in the town, two Hasidic and three Misnagdic ones. During the antireligious campaigns of the late 1920s, the authorities converted the main Hasidic synagogue at Zelenaya Street into a community center, and the Misnagdic synagogue at Komsomolskaya Street into a technical school for children. Nevertheless, Jewish religious and social life went on. Two renowned cantors, Matusov and Bobrik, visited the town and gave ticketed concerts in addition to participating in prayer services. As before, some children were educated in cheders that continued to operate in secret.

Mones Chazanov:

“I was a student of Peisha, a melamed. Once, authorities learned about the cheder, and an inspector came in. *Der rebe hot gezogt, “Antleyft,”*⁵ and we ran away.”

Many of the Jews from Klimovichi whom I met were nothing like the fat complacent men of wealth or the poor subjugated wretches found in many books about Jewish shtetls. Quite the contrary, they were full of energy and always busy. Back then, many of them were real Hassids, but you could find Komsomol firebrands among them as well. Looking at them, Meyer “Katok,”⁶ a town jokester, would skeptically shake his head and say: “*Ir klapt latkes?—Vart, vart, ir’t klapn kop on vant!*”⁷ Many people would have the chance to recall his words later.

My Dad told me that the authorities started herding artisans into co-ops and seizing their property:

“They seized houses and valuables from the richest ones. Once some officials visited us. We had a big house but there were eight children in the family. They just snatched Grandpa’s fur coat.

³ The capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region located at the Far East near the border with China.

⁴ Young Communist League. [In Russian]

⁵ The Rabbi told us, “Run.” [In Yiddish]

⁶ Roller-packer. [In Russian]

⁷ “Are you clapping hands?—Wait and you will slap your heads against the wall.” [In Yiddish]

They wanted to take away our only cow but we, the children, fought with a policeman, tore buttons from his uniform, and stood up for the cow.”

Then a “Gold Rush” took place in the early 1930s.

Boma Mindlin:

“In the course of the gold seizure campaign, the authorities tormented people, kicked them out into the cold and kept them in cramped cells. Izya Bas’s father, a barber, broke under the onslaught and hanged himself. Gvozdev, the NKVD⁸ local head, was in charge. He was a portly man with a big Mauser pistol at his side.”

It turned out later that Gvozdev’s efforts were not entirely selfless—he was caught embezzling gold and was executed by firing squad in 1935.

Lin’kov, the head of a Jewish peasant family who lived in the nearby village of Girevichi, died of grief a year after losing his property to government seizure. The family moved to Klimovichi and resided at Kolhoznaya Street just before the war. A Russian family, the Komkovy, stayed with Raya Lin’kova and her husband Leva Kats while moving from the countryside to a neighboring lot. The families befriended each other. In general, all Jewish witnesses recall that there was no antisemitism or ethnic hatred before the war. An adolescent who stared at pig slaughtering could get his lips smudged with lard, but that was the worst that could happen to a Jew back then.

Being widely represented in the town population, Jews had never felt like a minority. Mixed marriages were not common back then. However, Zalman Berlinsky and Yuzik Kubatsky, both Komsomol members, and Boris Chemodanov, a Communist, married non-Jewish girls. The 10th Engineering Battalion had been quartered in Klimovichi since 1930, and several Russian girls married Jewish servicemen. Polina Stel’makova married S., a Commissar, and Tatyana Nemkina married Grigory Feldman, a musician. Remarkably, in most mixed families the husband was Jewish and the wife was not. Just one Jewish girl married a non-Jewish man. His name was Bobrov, and he was a physician’s assistant.

⁸ The Soviet Ministry of the Interior. [In Russian]

Then World War II started in 1939. Many young men enlisted, and several refugees from Poland came to the town. They had already found out the hard way what the “New German Order” was bringing to the Jews, and had fled to the East as soon as Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. Why didn’t the Klimovichi Jews believe the refugees? Why didn’t they follow them to the East? Why didn’t they escape from inevitable death? There are several answers to this question.

First, they did not know what they were facing. Prior to June 1941, the Nazis had already demonstrated their anti-semitism through looting, the disenfranchisement of Jews, bullying, pogroms, the establishment of ghettos with subhuman living conditions, and carrying out killings for minor misdemeanors. However, after the signing of the non-aggression treaty with Germany, Soviet mass media was very restrained in its coverage of everything that was happening to Jews in the Third Reich’s territory. Moreover, life had taught people to be skeptical of everything they read in newspapers.

Systematic massacres of Jews in occupied areas started immediately after the Nazi invasion of the USSR. Thousands were killed in Kaunas and Vilnius, Bialystok and L’viv, and the Belarussian capital of Minsk simply for being Jews. But who in Klimovichi, which had not been occupied yet, knew what was happening behind the frontlines? Sure, there was gossip, but people did not believe it, just as they did not believe the refugees’ stories. Instead, they trusted their own experience and the views of old hands. Moreover, their memories of the Germans during World War I were warm. For example, Iosif Chertkov, a smith who had been kept as a prisoner of war by the Germans, came back alive and well, and had even brought many valuable things home. Moreover, Mindlin, a distillery coppersmith, had been in Germany before the Revolution and always recalled the Germans as honest, business-minded people. Finally, several German families lived in Klimovichi, and there was nothing scary or unusual about them. So, in light of their experiences before the Revolution and under the Soviets, many people were not scared of the new German order, and thought: “we are not politicians, the Germans will not touch us.”

The second reason the Jews stayed put during the first days of the war was their lack of awareness about the actual situation. Nobody believed that the front would move eastward so quickly; everyone expected “to fight the enemies on their own soil.”

M.G.:⁹

“When leaving to the front, my brother told us: ‘Do not evacuate, we will kick the Nazis away and come back.’”

⁹ Some witnesses requested that only their initials be published. In order to help distinguish Jewish witnesses from Russian witnesses, the author has used two initials for Jewish witnesses and three initials for Russian witnesses.

Dora Stukalo:

“At first, we did not evacuate because we believed that the Germans would be stopped at Dnepr. Only a few people guessed right about how the war and the German occupation would go.”

Shifra Chernaya:

“While departing to his military service before 1941, my older brother Lazar, a mathematician, told us: “do not expect mercy from the Germans. Please leave as soon as the war begins. Leave by whatever means you can, on your feet if necessary.” He was killed at the front.”

Finally, the almost complete absence of young people in the town was the third reason for the delayed evacuation. Some of them had gone to big cities to study or work (many of them had to leave as they were disenfranchised at home), while others were enlisted.

For example, three brothers from among the seven siblings of the Stukalo family were at the front, leaving only the girls—thirteen-year-old Bella, eleven-year-old Rachel, and a daughter-in-law with a baby—still living with the parents. In my own grandparents’ family, only the youngest two children, fourteen-year old Rahmiel and eight-year-old Mordkhe, were still at home. My father and three of his brothers were at the front. Grandma cried that there was no one there who could help her to evacuate.

On June 29, the Germans took Minsk. The “Soviet Belarus” newspaper office was evacuated to Klimovichi—there was no war there, just a few bombs that had fallen near the railway station. In early July, authority started mobilizing local folks to dig defensive barriers near Krichev.¹⁰ Some Komsomol district committee officials visited local Komsomol members, and City Council officials visited other residents, giving them the following order: “One person from your household should go dig trenches.” Trench-diggers had to live on-site. On July 10, heavy bombing of Krichev began, and people started asking to be allowed to return to their families. The authorities released them, and they hitchhiked or walked back to Klimovichi.

There was a new wave of refugees in the town by that time, and folks’ mood changed. Everyone who did not want to live under occupation understood that it was time to go. The City

¹⁰ A neighboring district administrative center located 13 miles northwest of Klimovichi at the Warsaw – Roslavl – Moscow highway.

Council started issuing permissions for evacuation on July 5. Some people took them, but by July 10 almost no one had left yet.

One of the drivers recalled that families of “Communist Party and City Council officials” left on July 14 in thirteen trucks. Common people had to choose between leaving by rail or in horse carts. Not everyone was willing to take a train, and the last one passed through Klimovichi in mid-July.

Dora Stukalo:

“It was scary to take the train. Trains were shot at, and 150 to 200 bodies and wounded people were taken from the flatcars of each train.”

Moreover, bombs were not the only danger.

Maria Levertova:

“Our family traveled with two young children, Vova and Anya, on a flatcar without a roof or any cover. Our ride was long and slow as military trains were given priority. In addition to people, there was machinery on our train. I did not see Russians among the passengers—just Jews, mostly from Kostyukovichi.¹¹ We did not know where we were going, and we had no documents at all. Terrible thing happened on the journey—an epidemic began. My baby girl, whom I was still breastfeeding, became ill. We got off the train—our entire family got off. There was no one to talk to—a tiny station, one small house. Our girl passed away. There was no way to bury her. There was a shed where people brought bodies—women, men, the elderly, children—as though they were firewood. They removed the bodies from passing trains. Many succumbed to the chill and rain on the open flatcars. The next day my six-year-old son asked:

–Mom, where is Anechka?

–She will be back soon.

–No, Mom, our Anechka will not come back. She has died, and I will die soon.

¹¹A small town with large Jewish population at about 20 miles from Klimovichi.

When we arrived at our destination in the Kostanay Region,¹² he fell ill. He passed away while we ran to get a doctor. The young children—families usually had two or three—all of them died. We learned later that it was diphtheria.”

It is understandable that many folks tried to leave on their own. They bought horses or found them somewhere. Some families even used cows to pull their carts. By early August, almost all the town’s Jews, except for two or three old people, had left. Even individuals like Moishe Natapov, who used to say “Germans are people too,” had left.

Basya Shapiro:

“My Dad worked for a public grocery, and there were seven girls and one boy in our family. We did not leave early as we had pity for Grandpa Yankev-Elye Mindlin, who did not want to go. However, on July 10, Dad came home and told us that some officials, maybe from the Communist Party district committee, had visited and told him that the Germans were coming fast, and that he should evacuate as he had grown-up daughters. He said to Mother, “you’re busy worrying about the elderly, but you will see how the Germans will abuse your daughters.” He watched the whole night as his superiors at the grocery distribution department put their families on horse-pulled carts that were public property. When they were ready to go, he put one of his daughters on each cart, and off we went. We came to Khotimsk and decided to wait it out there. The atmosphere was uneasy there, but we heard no sounds of war and stayed for about three weeks.”

All roads led to Khotimsk, another town with a significant Jewish population about 30 miles southeast of Klimovichi. Hundreds of Jewish families gathered there. Some of them came from Klimovichi and the surrounding villages, while others came from such far away cities as Gomel or Minsk.

There was just one small factory there, and no railroad. Many people expected to sit the war out there.

¹² Today, a region in Kazakhstan.

Basya Shapiro:

“We lived in a school and slept there on the floor. We sat and waited for the Germans to be chased away in order to return to Klimovichi. August came, it became chilly, and the children had no clothes. Malka Katz and I decided to take her horse cart and go to Klimovichi for our belongings. We did not know that everything had already been stolen by then. From Rodnya, a village located 10 miles from Klimovichi, we saw the glow of fire above the town. We entered the town and saw that it was engulfed with fire, but there were no Germans in sight. We slept there and heard heavy gunfire at night. We went to Grandpa Yankev-Elye. He was sitting and crying because he believed that all of us were dead. Nevertheless, he did not go with us because it was Shabbat. He did not know where all the Jews had gone. I entered my house, and saw that looters had taken everything except for some clothes that I found in the dirty laundry box. They had even stolen jars with preserve. I then met Kozlovsky, who later became a partisan commander, and we had the following exchange.

–Basya, what are you doing here?

–We came to pick up our belongings.

–Get out of here, the Germans are already at the resort!

Troops were mining the roads leading back and had already closed them. Somehow, we managed to reach Rodnya. There were many people around. Folks who gathered in the forest were not in a hurry and cooked at bonfires, as though were spending time at a country house. We made haste and arrived to Khotimsk in three days via a bypass road. Everyone had left by then except for bandits. We barely escaped from them and caught up with our families in a week. We learned where to go from graffiti Father had left at various walls and intersections indicating where they were heading.”

I learned from Basya that she met my Grandma Riva and her children in the forest. Like most of the Jews from Klimovichi, my grandparents decided to evacuate when it was too late. If only they had known on that Sunday, August 10 morning that they should leave behind everything and rush or even run south to the Belynkovich railway station beyond Kostyukovich, rather than east to Khotimsk; they could have caught the last train at Belynkovich. Raya Lin'kova and Leva Kats were lucky enough to go there; Karp Ivanovich Komkov gave them a horse-cart ride. They stayed overnight with his sister Maria in the nearby village of Kanichi—she baked them bread for the road, and the next day they boarded the last train.

Even those who left Klimovichi in mid-July and reached Bryansk Region were unable to evacuate—the front had moved eastward very fast, especially along the highway that passed through Krichev and led to Moscow.

Dora Stukalo:

“We reached Khotimsk and decided to rest. We were ordered to dig trenches. Then the bombing began there, and we decided to go further. There were a lot of people in the forest beyond the Inut’ river. There was panic in the morning that the Germans were near... When some troops came along the highway, we joined them. We came under mortar fire and scattered, even leaving sleeping children in horse carts. Several horses were killed. Then we came back and took everyone away. A few families managed to reach Starodub despite artillery fire, but most stayed hidden in haystacks in the field. Rodin, a fire chief, was among us (later the Germans would appoint him head of the Judenrat in Klimovichi). He convinced us to come back: “As we were not able to evacuate, we should go back. We are Jews. We have some gold and will pay ransom.” Many people went back immediately. We did not—we were afraid because our sister Leana was a Communist. She worked as a teacher, and everyone knew her. There were troops among us, and they persuaded us that girls should not stay there. First, two of my cousins left with three soldiers. Then, Sima Matskovskaya and I left with two others. David, my fifteen-year old nephew, begged to go with me but my brother-in-law told him that they were men and should care for their family that was left behind.”

Leibe Gurevich:

“There were six people in our family before the war—my wife Grunya-Dvoshe and four children: Eva, Lilya, Mosya and Anya. I was sent to dig trenches near Krichev. By the time I came back, we had already acquired a horse to help us evacuate. My father-in-law Simon Levant bought it. We rode with his family, there were six of them as well (*twelve people on a single horse cart! – Sh.R.*). Grunya was pregnant and she went into labor on the road. We stayed in the village of Pozhar’ with Vasily Petrovich Yazymenko, my acquaintance. Our daughter Raya was born, and we went further over the next two days. We came to Starodub in Bryansk Region. It was Shabbat. Some Jews who traveled with us kept moving and stayed alive. However, my father-in-law was religious. He, the family of Moishe Natapov, and another family did not want to go. Natapov had the *Teyre*¹³ with him. He said, “I will show it to the Germans and they will not touch me.” This was the day the German showed up. Our people immediately packed to go.

¹³ A Torah scroll. [In Yiddish]

I asked, "How dare you, on Shabbat?"

"It is urgent now," they said. "We can go."

"No," I said. "It is too late to rush now, you had to rush earlier."

Natapov showed the Teyre to the Germans, but they kned him and ordered all of us to go back. They gave us a pass and even flour for the way back. No, they had no pity to us; that just happened to be their policy at the moment."

Jews who tried to evacuate too late returned to Klimovichi and their burglarized houses from Starodub and Khotimsk, from Surozh and Khutor-Mikhailovsky in Bryansk Region, and from the nearby villages of Rodnya and Pavlovichi. There was nowhere else to go, and in any case they had been ordered to return by the occupiers. Then new orders were issued.

A. L.:

"As soon as the Germans came, their commandant issued an order for anyone who went beyond the town border to be executed by firing squad along with his family. In general, though, it was possible to leave, and there were such cases. However, I could not even think about going and leaving my parents behind. The order was posted on walls everywhere. It was also written there that Jews could not go here or enter there... Both adults and children were forced to wear yellow patches—six-pointed stars—on their sleeves.

When we returned to Mikhalin, we were sent to do all types of work at the collective farm. I had to work in two shifts, day and night, for some time in order to be able to help my parents avoid forced labor. We reported to Scherbakov, who was appointed the village community head. He was a former carpenter and the only Russian at the collective farm, and he became the boss."

Tatyana Semenovna Deyneko:

"Jews were sent to work and prohibited from leaving their homes. It was forbidden to visit other Jews under penalty of execution. However, us children visited the family of Zelda, a friend of ours, and brought them food. All deals were made through a neighbor.

All the Jews, except for the elderly and children, had to work. The Germans, as well as Russian policemen, supervised their work. Each evening they told us where to come the next day. Even if there was no work to be done, people were forced to sweep the streets."

I am trying to imagine the Jews of Klimovichi sweeping the pavement while being guarded by their former neighbors, but I cannot. Yet this happened!

A. L.:

“At first, the police caused more harm than Germans, until Gestapo men arrived. [Police] would enter a house and ransack everything looking for gold. I remember the two Osmolovsky brothers very well. They were the first to become policemen.”

Witnesses gave me the names of about twenty other people who were policemen in Klimovichi. In addition to policemen, there were also police agents; there were many people who took these jobs. A witness who spoke with me saw a multi-page list of such people at the military commissariat after the war. Jews and their property were deprived of legal protection, and everyone immediately felt the impact of that. Mikushkin, a policeman, came to Chaimore Chazanov and wanted to take away his cow. Chaimore did not give him the cow but was forced to let Mikushkin come and milk it daily.

According to the general Nazi approach to Jewish Question, Jews were to be, time permitting, robbed first and killed second. The Nazis had time in Klimovichi, so the robbing started.

A. L.:

“They selected 11 or 12 people from among the respected Jews. Those selected went house-to-house with Scherbakov, the community head, and said that it was mandatory to give up gold and money by a certain date. But what gold did we have? Just potato and bread.”

Mordkhe Chernigoivsky, a smith, Chaimore Chazanov, a stove builder, Danovich, a pharmacist, the brothers David and Isaac Slutskers (nicknamed “Borushenyata” after their Grandpa Borokh), Yankev Krengauz, Velya Kopylov, Isaac Zack and Krasik were among them.

Rodin, a former fire chief, was the chief Jewish supervisor. He was a tall and imposing man who wore glasses and looked down at narrow-minded Jews. He had convinced others to come back instead of evacuating by alleging that it was possible to pay ransom to the Germans.

Now he could do just that. Following German orders, he collected valuables, warm clothing, socks, and mittens in addition to money. Gold was certainly of utmost importance.

Oh, Jewish gold! It haunted both Stalin and Hitler. They were certain that each Jew, even the poorest, had gold, and it went without saying that rich ones possessed it. This myth caused so much suffering and torture!

In Karpachi, a small Jewish village located about 7 miles from Klimovichi, enraged policemen slowly tormented Rita Gaft, the beautiful fourteen-year-old daughter of the chairman of the Jewish collective farm,¹⁴ demanding: “Show us where you father buried the gold!”

It seems that the Germans were not happy with the slow pace of this robbery. At the end of August, they arrested 11 Jews, including Rodin, and held them as hostages. They were kept in jail for a few days, then marched to the Jewish cemetery for execution by firing squad.

Valentina Aleksandrovna Stel'makova:

“We lived at Kommunisticheskaya Street, where there is a store now. Our house stood at the corner and was the last on the street. Our neighbors were Jews, and the man’s name was Mordukh. I remember that my father greeted him respectfully, “How are you, Mordukh?”... We watched as Mordukh and the others were led to the cemetery for execution. They were brought there. His wife came to us. She wrung her hands and cried. The fence was not solid and had holes in it; we watched from our shed as they dug their own grave. It was a small group of about ten people. Policemen executed them. A German gave the orders, and the policemen fired.

Watching how deftly Chaimore Chazanov worked with his shovel, the German asked, “*Werist der alte Mann?*”¹⁵

—“He is a bricklayer and handles his trowel deftly,” explained Mikushkin, a policeman.

—“*Ah, Maurer—nicht schiessen.*”¹⁶

¹⁴ In September 1943, the Nazis obliterated this collective farm, killing 61 residents and burning 15 houses to the ground. A brand new village called Konohovka, with an exclusively Russian population, was built there after the war.

¹⁵ Who is this old man? [In German]

¹⁶ Ah, a bricklayer—do not shoot. [In German]

Chaimore stepped aside. Velya Kopylov took money from his pocket and threw it to him, "*Gib op der vayb!*"¹⁷

However, policemen grabbed the money."

A. L.:

"[Executioners] forced everyone to strip naked, brought them one by one to the pit, and shot them. Then they ordered Chaimore to bring the clothing to the police station. On his way back, a Jewish woman took the watch of her murdered husband. Then he met a Russian who told him, "Chaimore, go back." He meant that Chaimore's place was there, in the pit."

Apparently, after the execution of the hostages, many thought about leaving. A few left. No one has the right to blame those who stayed for indecision. They were given a terrible choice. On one hand, they could starve and be coerced but still live in Klimovichi; a few believed rumors about mass and total murder, but no sane person could comprehend the reality of what the Nazis were doing, and the Nazis took advantage of this. On the other hand, running away meant the almost inevitable death of helpless relatives left behind and, for the fugitive, either roaming between nearby villages where there were policemen as well and everyone immediately knew that you were a Jew, or else wandering through a cold forest in autumn where there were bandits rather than just partisans—and even the partisans could be dangerous...

Leibe Gurevich:

"I was standing guard for my partisan unit with a Russian. Someone from another unit came and asked, "Do you still have Jews in your unit? We do not have any. As soon as they show up, we send them where they cannot come back from." There were many Jews in our unit, about 20 out of the 100 total members."

Nevertheless, some people tried to escape, but these attempts usually ended tragically. There is a small town called Khotovizh about 6 miles from Klimovichi.

¹⁷ Give it to my wife! [In Yiddish]

K. H.:

“My first cousin Grigory Sorkin lived there, he married a rural Jewish girl, and [they had] two kids. He came back, probably by breaking through the encirclement, then decided to escape. A policeman shot them to death on the road to Hodun’ village, on his own, without Germans. First, the children, then, my cousin. He ordered them to take off their clothes, and hid them... Russians escaping from the encirclement were hiding somewhere nearby and watched as he pulled my cousin from under the bridge and shot him, his wife and his children.”

Grigory Feldman came back to Klimovichi to his children and his Russian wife Tatyana Nemkina.

Tatyana Fedorovna Nemkina¹⁸:

“My husband came back in August. He broke through the encirclement. He was hiding in a cellar. Then the house was seized, we moved to the kitchen, and he had to hide in the attic. We had no choice and decided to walk him to Khotimsk, which bordered some woods where some small groups (not partisan units) were hiding. I left the children at home and we walked with him to a village—it was probably Vos’kovka. We stayed there overnight at a woman’s house, and asked her to introduce us to someone. She said that my husband could stay but that I had to go home. I did not want to leave him but he sent me away too, saying: “Go to the children, I am a man, it will be easier for me.” In a couple of weeks, he came back hungry—he found nothing and no one. We hid him in the attic for nine or ten more months. He became sick of it and said again not long before summer, “I will go, and that’s that.” “Well, Grisha, there is one cup for everyone,” my father replied to him.

There was a jail near the bank, and Jewish craftsmen who worked for the Germans lived there. A messenger came to them, I guess he was from the “For the Motherland” partisan unit, and started talking to my father. He said that it is necessary to liberate those Jews and alluded to my husband—he knew that we were hiding him. Grigory stepped in and joined the conversation. When we woke up in the morning, Grisha was not there. Meshkovsky, a policeman, lived next to us. He came and told my father, “your Grigory is in jail and he suffered so much that he would be better off if he hanged himself.” I ran to the jail but they chased me away and did not accept the care package I had put together for him.

¹⁸ This interview was conducted by Daniil Romanovsky.

They were executed by firing squad at Vydrinka. 10 or 12 people were killed. We came there with my sister, and they all laid there like oak trees. We started digging with sticks trying to bury them. It turned out that this site was guarded, and they chased Tamara and I away.”

November 6, 1941. This day will live forever as the most horrible day in the history of Klimovichi.

A. L.:

“In the morning, my father said that knowledge of more executions had spread. Three families had been killed in their homes in Mikhalin. The Levikov family—there were two old people there—the Levenchik family, with two seniors as well, and a third family with four people. The wife was paralyzed and weak in the legs and arms. They shot and killed her and her husband. The children hid under the bed but were pulled out and shot to death too.

The head of the community came to us and said that I had to go to work at the distillery. My father told me, “Do not put on any good clothing. You go to work, who knows what might happen.” I put on a coat that was a bit worn, and felt boots with rubber overshoes—it was autumn already. Sure, we said farewell to each other just in case. They thought they would never see me alive again.”

However, people who stayed home were the first victims. As soon as young people went to work, policemen commanded by Germans started pushing seniors and children out of their homes. They ordered them to bring winter clothing and valuables. Some Jews still did not understand what is going on yet.

Anna Voronova:

“Haya Natapova came to Rummyantseva, her neighbor, to pick up her grandson Aron with a child’s coat and a winter hat, and said ‘They are sending us somewhere.’”

Some people tried to hide.

Galina Mikhailovna Gvozderova:

“A Jewish woman worked as a pharmacist at the drugstore. Her husband was taken among the first hostages. When the November 6 manhunt was taking place, she jumped with a baby into the well at the corner of MYuD¹⁹ and Sotzialisticheskaya streets. They pulled her out and whisked her away to be executed. Two other children of hers, a three-year-old and a five-year-old, were killed in their home.

Galya Stukalo was another one who jumped into the well with her baby son Misha and died there. Wails and sobs hung over the town. Groups of Jews were marched from all directions to garages located next to the hospital. Russian neighbors watched all of that, each in their own way. Some watched with compassion, but others with curiosity and readily helped the policemen.”

Natalya Gavrilovna Nikolayeva:

“Sure, our neighbors turned old Yewel in. His wife was younger than him, and she went to work. The house was locked from outside, and there was a back door leading to vegetable gardens. Who could have known about it? Just locals.

Some people could not wait to loot. Dunya Pusenkova ran to Tsilya Stukalo and snatched a white wool headscarf from her head.”

Polina Aleksandrovna Stel'makova:

“A garage that all the Jews were packed into was located behind the hospital before a small bridge on the road to Pavlovichi. There, in the garage, policemen and Germans frisked them looking for the best clothing.”

An enormous fuel cistern used to be buried on the outskirts of Klimovichi, beyond the Kalinitsa river, next to the old airstrip and opposite the village of Dolgaya Dubrava. The cistern was moved somewhere else shortly before the war, and a huge pit was left where it once was. This pit became a mass grave for the town's Jews. A line of those who were to be executed stretched from the garages, across the bridge, and up along the road all the way to the pit.

¹⁹ Transliterated Russian acronym for International Youth Day.

900 people.²⁰ I spoke to a woman who saw this line. There was an open field around it. Nowhere to run.

K. P. T.:

“At the time of war I lived in Klimovichi next to Proletarskaya Street. I saw from my window how Jews were marched to their execution along the street, came to the pit, and fell there. I heard shots, one by one like from rifles. Policemen and Germans carried out the execution. I had a baby back then and fainted, and my mother did not let me watch and chased me away from the window. The executions lasted the whole day. Those who went to work in the morning were brought there as well.”

Polina Aleksandrovna Stel'makova:

“People were saying that SS men did not shoot, policemen did. A POW who buried Jews told us that it was pure horror. Blood everywhere. When they buried bodies, the grave would heave because some people in the grave were still alive. I was also told that when the pit was filled, blood flowed over the earth, and children were killed with shovels.”

As was reported immediately after the liberation of Klimovichi from the Nazis, “guards were posted heavily around the mass grave to prevent anyone from helping victims who were buried alive there.”²¹

Each time I visited Klimovichi, on the third or fourth day the same thing would happen to me after hearing all of these stories, over and over again. Walking along those quiet streets on a warm August evening, you suddenly realize that there is blood there, left and right. You feel a lump in your throat, and you want to drop everything and not visit any more people tomorrow, and ask them the same questions ringing in your head: how were the Jews killed? Who killed the Jews? Where were the Jews killed? You want to get on a train and go back home. When you finish what you started and finally come back home, for some reason it remains very difficult for a while to look at your own children...

²⁰ See “Za Rodinu” (For the Motherland) newspaper, No. 71 of June 22, 1944.

²¹ M. Tsunts, “The tragedy in Klimovichi.” “Eynikayt” newspaper, November 18, 1943 [in Yiddish]. See also https://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/writtenAccounts.asp?cid=395&site_id=506 [in English].

Were there any Jews who survived in Klimovichi on that day? Yes, there were. About 80 people, in addition to a few tailors and shoemakers the Germans left alive. Close to one out of ten. Still, there were people who did not understand that they were being marched to their death. Listening to stories about people who tried to survive, I recalled another myth that Jews did not hide or run, and meekly and submissively let others kill them.

Nina Kozlova was just 10 then.

Nina Kozlova:

“On the day everyone was shot and killed, my father and my sisters went to work while I stayed home with Mother and my baby brother, because Mother was nursing and could not go to work. When Mother heard that [the authorities] were gathering Jews, she hid with me in a shed in the vegetable garden. When my baby brother cried, she covered his mouth. We stayed there until dark, and then walked by night to the village of Skolin in Kostyukovichi District, where Mother was from.”

Some people attempted to escape even during the executions. Fanya Manevich ran away from the garage where Jews were being kept while the pit was prepared.

Iosif Manevich:

“My mother picked up on the vibes from one elderly German (Germans and policemen took turns guarding the Jews, and it was impossible to get past the policemen), and pled with him successfully to let her go. He let her pass between his rifle and his arm.”

Mones Khazanov:

“My sister Manya ran away with Manevich but she was caught later on and brought back, while Manevich escaped.”



A memorial installed in the late 1950s at the mass grave of 900 Jews on Biryuzova Street beyond the hospital on the outskirts of Klimovichi by relatives of the victims. The parents, brothers and sisters of my father Boris (Borekh-Tsodik) Ryvkin (left) and of Yola Stukalo (right), both war veterans, are buried there. (Photo by the author, 1988.)



Inscription on the memorial plaque in Yiddish and Russian: *"Victims from Klimovichi executed by Nazi killers on November 6, 1941 are buried here. May the memory of the kedoshim²² live forever!"*

(Left) The original plaque. (Photo by Ithzak-Mordechai Pevzner, 1963.)

(Right) The same plaque with the Magen David missing. It was erased in 1967 after the Six Day War by order of local authorities. (Photo by the author, 1988.)

²² Holocaust victims. [In Hebrew]

Iosif Manevich:

“My mother came running home and saw Nad’ka Zabelo, her neighbor, who picked up their belongings and froze in surprise—she expected everyone to have been executed by then. My mother said her, “Nadya, take it, everything is yours, just give me this wool headscarf—maybe I will stay in the woods at night.” “OK, Manevichiha, take it,” Nad’ka responded, and went immediately to the police to make a report. However, my mother managed to flee through the orchard and the vegetable garden before it was too late.”

Not everyone was as impatient as Nad’ka Zabelo, because soon it became possible to obtain Jewish belongings “legally.”

Z. K. K.:

“I will remember forever that after the mass executions the Germans gathered all Jewish belongings in a “shop” to be given away for free. And what did people do? They jammed into four lines [so they could get free goods].”

Some people who were marched to engage in forced labor were able to escape.

Etta Natapova:

“The Germans marched my father and I to work at the railway. The policemen were worse than the Germans. We were released from work earlier than usual, around 3 p.m. We walked home without guards. The old Stukailo woman ran towards us. “Where are you going?” she said. “They’re executing Jews!” She ran into the nearby home of her acquaintances. We did not go back to town and stayed in the field overnight. We came to my neighbor’s house in the morning to find out what was going on. She did not let me in, so we went to the bathhouse. Another neighbor came, gave me a piece of bread, and told us that Jews were being killed and we had to get away. And away we went. On the second night, we slept on hay in a shed. The owners caught us and raised a ruckus. My now-deceased Father took off his suit and gave it to this man to keep him quiet and get him to let us go. We went away through a field and through a forest, as best we could.”

However, survival on November 6 merely gave a temporary reprieve to most Jews. They were caught and gathered in a small house next to the jail, which was located in the bank building. Avrom-Osher Belinov, nicknamed Avrom-Osher der hinkediker,²³ my Grandmother's brother, worked in a store before the war and knew almost everyone in Klimovichi.

Etta Natapova:

“He hid under the stove, but they found him and beat him severely for hiding. Then they marched him to the jail. His daughter Zlata also hid at the time of the executions. The next day a neighbor named Orehov took her away in a horse cart. Then he came back alone with her belongings. He either killed her or turned her in to the Germans.

Sometime the nightmare they were experiencing was paralyzing.

Natalya Gavrilovna Nikolayeva:

“There was a lame smith, his name was Haim. He was taken away with his daughter. They were marched to work and did not return. His wife, together with their little boy, stayed alive in a trench. People told her: “Come stay overnight, then run away!” She refused: “They died here, and I will die here too.” She was found eventually.”

Someone walked A. L., a fifteen-year old Jewish girl from Mikhalin, to the small house near the jail.

A. L.:

“There were about fifty of us who worked at the distillery on that day. Usually policemen led us to the work site, and Germans guarded us. When we finished working, a young German called me, two of my first cousins, and two other girls. He gave each of us a loaf of bread and said, “Do not go home because you have no families anymore. Go where the wind blows, we did not see you and do not know you. Go if you want to live.” I said to the others, “Do as you wish, but I must see it with my own eyes.” When darkness fell, I went. My cousins Luba and Basya and another girl from a religious family went with me. They were much older than I was but they followed me so I had to lead them. I told them not to follow me, because maybe each of us would have a

²³ A lame man. [In Yiddish]

better chance on our own, but they persisted, saying “We go where you go.” The distillery was far away from the town, and we stayed overnight in an empty house along our route. In the morning, we proceeded through the field rather than on the road because snow was falling and our footprints would have been visible. Osmolovsky, a policeman, caught up with us and fired a shot just over my ear, rupturing my eardrum. I did not feel it when I was young but it is going from bad to worse with the years. He yelled at me, “Lead us! You were well-off—where is your gold?” We walked home to Mikhailin. He rode by and hurried us. We entered the house where baked bread was left in the stove. I opened a pit with potato and told him, “Here is our gold.” He waved the butt of his rifle and marched us back to town. The other girls each took something, a loaf of bread or a blanket. I did not take anything. He led us to the Germans so that they could look one more time for where we supposedly hid gold. In the commandant’s office, they frisked us and then walked us to the house across a tiny park near the old bank where they gathered everyone whom they had not executed yet. The tiny room was cramped. Some prayed, some cried, some tore their hair out. Policemen guarded us. They threw a loaf of bread into the room for all of us, as though we were dogs. They sent us to do all kind of work, such as plowing snow. Over the next three to four days, they assigned us to various duties. We stayed in a big house that was vacant—Jews used to live there too. There was nothing left there, and we slept at night on the bare floor. I do not remember how many people were there, but the whole floor was occupied. They did not guard us at night; they just told us that we would be executed if anyone ran away. They came in the morning, counted us, and told each of us where we had to go to work. They always sent me to the fire station. I milked cows, filtered milk and washed floors. There were German officers, Czechs, and people of other nationalities. Some young Czechs told me:

–Hey girl, why don’t you run away? Anyway, you all will be executed.

I told them, “Where can I run to? I have no parents, everyone was executed—I have nowhere to run to, haven’t I?”

–You are so young; you can live and live again. We will give you bread, and this and that...

–I don’t need anything. Give me a piece of bread, but I am not going to run anywhere.

I felt total apathy and such emotional alienation. I could not cry and had no tears. You cannot even lament something so horrible. Everything was petrified and frozen.

I was sent once with others to plow snow next to a small park. We were hungry like dogs. Some Germans and policemen were standing around us, but Nadezhda Nikolaevna, Galya Gvozderova’s mother, was brave enough to come and give me a big slice of bread with butter.

Some time later, all of us were gathered and sent to wash and clean a big house next to Sotzialisticheskaya Street. We were told that some big shots, officers, were coming. Among us there were young and old people, but no children. Some of us washed, some of us cleaned. Then someone said that SS men were coming to execute us. At that moment, the will to live arose in us as if from nowhere. When I first returned here after the war, I kept looking—how could I have cleared this fence to run into someone’s vegetable garden across the street? There was an outhouse there. I do not remember this street or this house—nothing is left in my memory. Just the outhouse. My two cousins and the third girl that had been with us earlier followed me again. I told them, “This outhouse is our only chance for survival. Don’t close the doors!” When I recall it from time to time, I wonder whether I read it somewhere or maybe saw it in my dreams. Where did this determination and acumen come from? Maybe because I read a lot?

When the guards started counting everyone after work in order to march them to the chalk hill and shoot everyone there, they found that we were missing. The same Osmolovsky started running around everywhere looking for us. He entered the same yard where we were hiding. He came to the outhouse and relieved himself outside. The door was open but he did not come in. That saved us. We stood in the corners, and I told the others not to breath. This was a moment between life and death. He finished and left. We stood in the outhouse until dark and then went to Galya Gvozderova. Her mother and aunt Raya were both Communists; Galya left later to join the partisans. They hid us in the potato cellar. They gave us food and asked us to hold our breath there. Sure, who wants to risk her life? Everyone knew that those who hide Jews could be executed. In the morning, Galya’s mother told me: “You know that I love and respect you, and I am sorry for you to the depth of my heart... If you were alone, I would probably hide you somehow for a day. And who knows for how long it would be necessary to hide you...” She gave us food and showed us a road to Karpachi. “There are Jews there,” she said. “Maybe they will tell you what to do. Maybe you will go to the woods to hide there. If you survive, please come and tell me.” You know, they gave me a second life by supporting me in my time of need.”

Indeed, all Jews caught after November 6 were eventually killed. My father told me that my grandfather Shmuel-Mendel Ryvkin was among them. They were marched to the chalk hill for execution. This was an area on the outskirts of Klimovichi, rather than the actual hill near the Labzhanka River. There used to be a real hill there, but nothing was left of it as over time people had gathered all the chalk to bake it into lime in pits.

It happened in late November. They were led through the entire town along Sovetskaya Street.

Galina Mikhailovna Gvozderova:

There were several beautiful young women. There were women with little kids. There was a woman who said that her child was from a Polish man. The Germans did not care, they picked up everyone. Berl Entin, Simon Levant, Bella Vasanskaya with her two little kids... Avrom Osher-Belinov was there also.

Leibe Gurevich:

He walked making a fig sign behind his back. A Russian man asked him, "Abrasha, why are you making a fig sign?" He responded, "Because we will be executed immediately while you will be tortured before your own execution."

But that is not exactly how things transpired after the war. Some of the killers from among the policemen have not been found. Many were given sentences and pardoned in the 1950s. Many were sent to disciplinary battalions and returned home as heroes.

After the executions at the chalk hill, no Jews were left in Klimovichi except for a small ghetto for Jewish craftsmen who lived in a small house near the jail. No one has been able to tell me how many people were there or when and where they were executed. Most likely it happened in the Vydrinka wilderness located about a mile from the town before the Germans retreated in 1943. It is only known that the one-legged shoemaker Indin and his family were among those who were executed then.

Sometimes Jewish soldiers returned home, but there were only a few houses where they could knock on the door. Yakov Kats and Perchin, a teacher, were executed, as was Grigory Feldman. Abram Suranovich, who did not look like a Jew, hid for a long time in a village but eventually he was executed too. Iche-Boruh Karas' was the luckiest: his neighbors Azarova and Logvinova did not turn him over, he joined the partisans, and made it to the end of the war.

G. M., a girl who did not look Jewish, arrived in Klimovichi in June 1942 from faraway Belynichi District. She worked in the cafeteria and made it to the end of the occupation.

G. M.:

"I was afraid. One time at the market, I saw a girl who knew me, and I could not sleep for two weeks out of fear that she had noticed me. Just a fleeting moment—if someone had said, not even proved it but just said, "She is Jewish," it would have been the end.

My appearance played an important role in my life. It was great that Klimovichi was liberated early, otherwise my heart would have ruptured. I adapted. I was afraid to speak with Germans because a discerning German could have caught my Jewish accent—[for instance,] the difference between “*Brot*” and “*breit*.”²⁴ While I was walking through Belarus, I felt that no Jews were left at all. Everyone everywhere was saying that Jews were not being drafted, that partisans were killing them, that Germans were executing them.”

One would imagine that it was over. No one was left to be hunted down and executed. Nevertheless, black SS uniforms reappeared in Klimovichi in spring 1943, and the last act of the tragedy of genocide played out. Sensing a retreat coming soon, the Nazis were in a hurry to implement “the final solution for the Jewish Question.”

According to the Wannsee Protocol adopted at the conference called by Heydrich in January 1942, only those Jews of mixed ethnic decent who were useful for the Reich would be granted the right to live. Three-year old Rayechka Kurbatskaya, six-year old Grisha Berlinsky and other Klimovichi children of mixed decent who had one Jewish parent were of no use to the Reich. In April 1943, they were gathered inside the jail with their Russian mothers.

Polina Aleksandrovna Stel'makova:

“At first, we stayed in a large cell together with children. There were about ten of us Russian women, together with three or four Gypsy women. There were many children, about fifty, who had been gathered from all over the district. Some were without their mothers. We were assigned to be taken to Germany and were told that the children would be sent to Warsaw.”

The only way to save a child was to prove that one’s Jewish husband was not his or her actual father; the Germans demanded the signatures of twenty witnesses.

Galina Mikhailovna Gvozderova:

“Berlinsky, a Komsomol member, had a Russian wife and two children, a seven-year-old girl who looked exactly like her mother and a six-year-old boy who took after his father. People collected signatures attesting that the children were not his, for both the boy and the girl. Everyone signed,

²⁴ Bread. [In German and Yiddish]

whether they knew or did not know. However, [the officials] crossed out the lists with signatures and threw them right back in people's faces. They took the boy anyway and left the girl."

Ageyev, a policeman, acknowledged that one of the two daughters of Boris Chemodanov, a Jew, was his own.

Galina Borisovna Chemodanova:

"Tamara was brunette. She took after our father while I took after our mother and was blonde. Once we were playing at the home of our acquaintance, and suddenly my mother burst in running, and said "Let's go." The head of the community, two Germans, and a policeman placed us on a horse cart and rode to the jail. Our mother was a skilled craftswoman, and she dressed us exactly the same: pleated skirts, embroidered blouses and cashmere headscarves. Then they took Tamara away and told us to leave. When we were leaving, I asked, "Why isn't Toma with us?" and Mother cried. Later on, people said that our relatives had persuaded Ageyev to say that I was his daughter.

Everyone knew that Tamara Nemkina's husband was a Jew.

Tatiana Fedorovna Nemkina:

"I asked Gomolko, a policeman, to save my children and asked him, "What are children guilty of?" He answered, "No, we are not going to leave any Jews for breeding, it is necessary to eliminate all of them including you."

Different mothers behaved differently.

Galina Mikhailovna Gvozderova:

"There was a woman in a rural area who brought her child without being asked. She said that the baby's father was a Jew and that she did not need the baby. She was not sent to Germany.

An'ka Baranova had one child from a Russian and the other from a Jew. When [the authorities] came to pick him up, she said, "No! Who gave them birth? I did. They will die and I will die with them." They took all three of them and later executed them."

All children who had one Jewish parent, several Russian mothers, and all Gypsy families were executed on April 12, 1943 in the Vydrinka wilderness about one mile from Klimovichi.

Polina Aleksandrovna Stel'makova:

"Children were killed in the jail. Maybe, to collect their blood. "They were loaded like firewood," a woman who grazed her cows at Vydrinka that morning said later."

Klimovichi was liberated in September 1943. Peaceful life began without Germans... and without Jews—a thousand men, women, elderly, and children were left forever in four mass graves: behind the hospital, on the chalk hill, at the Jewish cemetery, and at Vydrinka. From those who had remained in Klimovichi at the beginning of the occupation, fifteen had survived. Bela Stukalo, Fanya Manevich, Leibe and Grunya Gurevich with their daughter Raya, Chana Kozlova with her children Nina and Leana, Etka Natapova and her father Moishe-Gades, Raya Shkol'nikova with two of her first cousins, Nina Vinokurova and Chaimore Chazanov.

Their paths to survival were different. Chaimore Chazanov, Chana Kozlova and the Gurevich family joined the partisans. Raya Shkol'nikova was adopted by Yefimov, a policeman. Nina Vinokurova, who pretended to be a Russian, was sent to work to Germany. She ended up in the American occupation zone, married a serviceman, and went to America.

What they lived through! Thousands of kilometers, hundreds of days only a step away from death!

A. L.:

"They did not waste bullets on children. A jab with a bayonet, and throw into the pit. I saw it with my own eyes... I came to a tall German and told him, "I am not Jewish." He grasped my chin and scanned my face as though he were looking for [Jewish] traits. I kept my composure and looked at him. At that moment, all the Jews stopped praying and waited for the resolution. "Go," the German said. And not a single Jew betrayed me."



A memorial at the mass grave at the Klimovichi Jewish Cemetery where hostages were executed. Jews killed at the chalk hill were reinterred there after the war.

(Photo by Alexander Frenkel, 1988.)

Inscription on the plaque in Yiddish and Russian: *"Fascism's victims, smitten by the hands of killers on November 6, 1941,²⁵ are buried here."*

²⁵ Actually, the victims originally buried there and those that were reinterred there from the chalk hill were executed on different dates.

Leibe Gurevich:

“Once some Germans came to the village for food. I left quietly, and then they took about ten Russians and said, “If you do not find this Jude, we will execute you.” I came back to save them. But the Germans did not touch me, because they were afraid that I could tell the partisans about them. I went back to them quietly but later, when they let me go, I hurried three times to the nearby village and back—I thought that I went out of my mind...

...It was very cold. I followed a trail to look for partisans while Grunya, with Raya on her lap, sat on a stump to wait for me. When I returned with some others, Grunya was pale. A wolf had come out of woods, stood still, and stared at them. It had stood for a while and then left.”



Leibe Gurevich and his daughter Raya, two of the Jews from Klimovichi who were able to flee the occupied town and reach a partisan unit. Raya’s mother Grunya-Dvoshe Gurevich always took her baby daughter with her when she went on reconnaissance for the partisans.

(Photo by the author, Simferopol, 1989.)

Fifteen people out of a thousand, one chance out of a hundred. They had this chance and they seized it.

What helped them withstand everything and survive? Sheer luck. Their own will. Russian people like Pavel Aksenovich Pozdnyakov, who took the Jewish children Nina and Lenya Kozlov into his big family, and Vasily Petrovich Yazymenko, who hid the Gurevich family and Girsh Sinitsky for several weeks.

I do not believe that Klimovichi was a special place. There were Jews elsewhere who had the same chance to survive. This means that folks who are still among us know stories that are still waiting to be told. With each passing year, fewer of these people remain, so we have to hurry. Even those of us who do not have literary gifts should record these stories—many others who had a greater talent for letters are buried in countless mass graves.

Folks whom I have interviewed often did not understand, saying “what is the point of writing about all of that?” I would answer that we should record the truth about everything that happened, good or bad, for our children and their children to read.

Everyone knows that people who forget their past have no future.

The Jewish people are alive.

We remember everything.

Mir gedenken alts.

Leningrad, 1986 —1989

Translated by Michael Reyz