

Faces of The Survivors



MEET RITA

Faces of The Survivors

MEET RITA

3	<u>A DANGEROUS BRIDGE</u>
5	<u>POEM: HOW TO FORGET</u>
6	<u>REFUGE IN THE FOREST</u>
9	<u>VIGNETTE: A GREAT MIRACLE</u>
10	<u>SACRIFICE OF A FATHER</u>
11	<u>FINAL BRIDGE - ISRAEL</u>
12	<u>TODAY</u>

AS TOLD BY RITA

**WRITTEN BY
ELLA BESTER, JOE BUNTING, SUE WEEMS
& SARAH RISARD-GASIOROWSKI**

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY
HARRI SKAREN AND SARAH RISARD-GASIOROWSKI**

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY
STINA SKAREN**



The face of a survivor
Margarita Illarionovna Gudzenko



Rita tells her story.
Illustration by Stina Skaren,
a volunteer from Finland.

|
**A Dangerous
Bridge**

Rita was born in 1934 in Kyiv, the capital of Soviet Ukraine. Her father, Illarion Antonovich Gudzenko, was an army officer and her mother, Olga Moiseevna Markman, was a primary school teacher. Their family moved to Bialystok in eastern Poland in 1939 when her father was relocated for service after a land transfer agreement between Germany and the USSR.

On June 22, 1941, without any announcement, Germany began military action against the Soviet army, and Rita's father was sent to the front. As bombing began in the towns and settlements, seven-year-old Rita and her mother, who was seven months pregnant at the time, fled along with other military families and civilians in the region. Her father couldn't leave his division, but he sent a car and they were driven out of Bialystok. Rita's mother held tight to her hand as they watched the home where they expected to greet a new baby fade in the distance.



Within moments, a whistle sounded in the air and Rita's mother covered her with a shout as a bomb landed on their car, blowing fragments of steel in every direction. They ran into the cover of the woods, the smoke and shouts rising behind them. Rita clung to her mother's hand, the one solid thing she had left.

They quickly reached the Bug River and the driver stopped. Rita strained to see through the window what was wrong, and she heard voices grumbling outside. Her mother squeezed her hand as the announcement came.

"Everybody out. The bridge has been destroyed and can't carry cars. We'll have to walk across."

Rita scrambled out of the car after her mother. They walked toward a wooded area as the driver and others who'd pulled up short began to discuss a way around. Some had begun tentatively picking their way across the remains of the plank bridge, determined to get across.

Within moments, a whistle sounded in the air and Rita's mother covered her with a shout as a bomb landed on their car, blowing fragments of steel in every direction. They ran into the cover of the woods, the smoke and shouts rising behind them. Rita clung to her mother's hand, the one solid thing she had left.

"We have to cross the bridge. We'll go through it," her mother said.

One step at a time, they plodded, sections of the bridge snapping in protest, threatening to drop them any moment into the rushing water below. They picked up their pace at the sound of a vehicle. Rita looked back.

GERMANS.

They emerged with long guns, shouting at those crossing the bridge. People screamed as the first shots rang out. Her mother hurried her forward, ignoring the creaking planks and screams and bodies falling into the river.

"Run, Rita," her mother tugged her from the bridge to the cover of the forest.



HOW TO FORGET?

*How to forget? How to erase
the fears of that war?
The horrors and troubles
stay with you, speak with you
Even now, I stand before the bridge
over that Polish river
We must reach the forest,
but the way is a plank-broken bridge
The plank holes beneath our feet
revealing the river
We must follow the path,
follow the good news
Along the shore behind,
the Germans appeared
Shouting, shooting, screaming,
the water claiming fleeing souls
“You need to move forward
while you see that shore”
My mother urged, her belly heavy
with my soon-to-be-born brother
How can we reach the shore? How?
Her steps are so heavy
But God knows.
He couldn't do otherwise.
We found the other side
and he led us into the forest.*

**Rita is an accomplished poet,
and her poems reflect vivid memories of this day.**

Refuge in the Forest

Once in the woods, the sounds of gunshot far behind them, they walked on foot from village to village, seeking food, water, and shelter. Each day, they darted out long enough to make their meager requests before retreating again to the safety of the woods. All the time, her mother's pregnant belly led the way. Her hand often rested beneath it, as if to relieve the weight even for a moment.

On July 3, 1941, her mother sent her ahead with another group of people. "I'll stay here and have a rest," she said.

"No, we must keep moving, Mother," Rita cried, urging them forward. But her mother could not and she leaned against a tree. Rita knew she needed help. She rushed from group to group, begging for help. Finally, a woman took pity on her and ran back to the forest where her mother was on her back breathing heavily.

Rita did just as the woman said, and before long, her baby brother Gary was born. The kind woman wiped him down and wrapped him up, handing him to Rita.

"This is your brother. Take good care of him." Rita looked from the towering trees in the heart of the Belarussian forest to the face of her new brother. She held his tiny hand the way her mother had held hers crossing the bridge.





They couldn't rest long, as the German army was on the move, and they heard shots in the distance compelling them to keep going. The days were spent traveling from village to village, keeping to forest as much as possible. Finally, with some help from retreating Soviet soldiers, they arrived in the Belarussian town Gomel where they were able to ride on a train car until it was bombed and they again fled.

It took them thirty days and numerous disrupted train rides to make it to Kazakhstan, where they stayed for two years. It was a difficult time, full of hunger and cold. Her mother worked ceaselessly to feed them, all while longing for news of their father and the end of the war.

In Semipalatinsk where they were finally able to settle, Rita couldn't go to school because she babysat her brother. Her mother worked long hours to bring in the meager food they could afford. The cold and hunger was so invasive, their jaws bled.

Rita honored her mother's sacrifice and hard work in a poem she wrote remembering the end of the war:

MOTHER

*An exhausted mother works hard at home
To give a piece of bread to her children
The hard years of war forever entered their souls
Their husbands, sons, and fathers by courage
Saved them
But did not return home*

There wasn't time to linger on the injustice. Life was unbearably hard for all of them in those days.

Life in Semipalatinsk revealed the ugliness of anti-semitism for the first time in Rita's life. Her father's surname, Gudzenko, protected her from much of the hatred, but she saw firsthand how the Jews were neglected and treated as the scum of society. No one wanted to help them. They were stingy with information and treated the Jews with disgust.



In May 1944, Rita, her mother, and brother returned to Kyiv. She graduated from high school in 1951 and the Institute of Foreign Languages in 1956. When Rita was 21 years old, she married her husband Alexander. They would soon have two boys: Viktor and Konstantin.

Rita worked as a teacher, first at the Institute of Physical Culture and Sports and later at an English school where she worked for thirty-five years, earning honors for her excellence as a teacher and senior teacher.

Gudzenko Illarion Anton

VIGNETTE

A Great Miracle

Rita tells a remarkable story about one day during their flight, they were sheltering in a ditch, waiting for the gun and bomb blasts to pass when a bomb landed near them. They tucked in as it landed, hoping against hope that the ditch would provide enough cover.

BUT NO BLAST CAME.

When they peeked out to see what had happened, they saw the words written in Russian down the side of the bomb, "We'll help if we can."



Such bombs were made by captive Russians who worked in the bomb factories for the Germans. When those shells were eventually cleared, they contained sand, which kept them from detonating. "It was a great miracle," Rita said. "The wonder of the world and how we were left alive."

Sacrifice of a Father

Meanwhile on the battlefield, her father organized a partisan detachment in the Khinelsky forests of the Bryansk region. When German soldiers took over houses and farms, villagers began to join the partisan movement against the Nazis.

His heroic leadership sought to end the cruel march of the Germans who brutally shot those in their path, much like Rita had seen that day on the bridge.

Her father was never able to come home to his family. He died in battle on October 7, 1943, a commander of a large partisan regiment.

Rita commemorates her father in a poem, inspired by a monument in his honor:



FATHER

*Strong, brave, beloved. Our pride and honor
Who saw suffering and grief, too much to count
He walked through the forests of war
Beating every bush and covering every hill
The son of the Soviet country, over the river and road
the warrior stood watch against death
He gathered the men in the forests, his battle school raised
Taught them to fight, how to stand their ground*

...

*My father, brave in battles to the last
Defending our country, with who knows how many more
The earth has hid the bodies, accepting their souls
All orders and honor, the obelisk shows
We bow our knees and heads low to remember*



FINAL BRIDGE

ISRAEL

Eventually, her extended family received calls from cousins who had moved to Israel. In 1993, Alexander and Rita decided to move with their family to Jerusalem. She found various part-time teaching positions at schools, clubs, and private homes.

Today, Rita and her husband have two sons, two grandchildren, and two great-granddaughters. Her eldest son lives in Jerusalem and works as an electronic engineer. Her younger son is a programmer who lives in the United States.

Her mother died in Israel in 2000 at the age of 91. Rita continues to pay homage to her experiences during the Holocaust by attending a club near her home with about twenty-five other Holocaust survivors. She reads them her poems and shares in their memories.

Today

Rita Illarionovna Gudzenko welcomed us warmly into their modest apartment overlooking the West Bank, her joy filling the room. The world just outside is a dry desert landscape dotted with scrub brush. It is enclosed by a fence for security purposes.

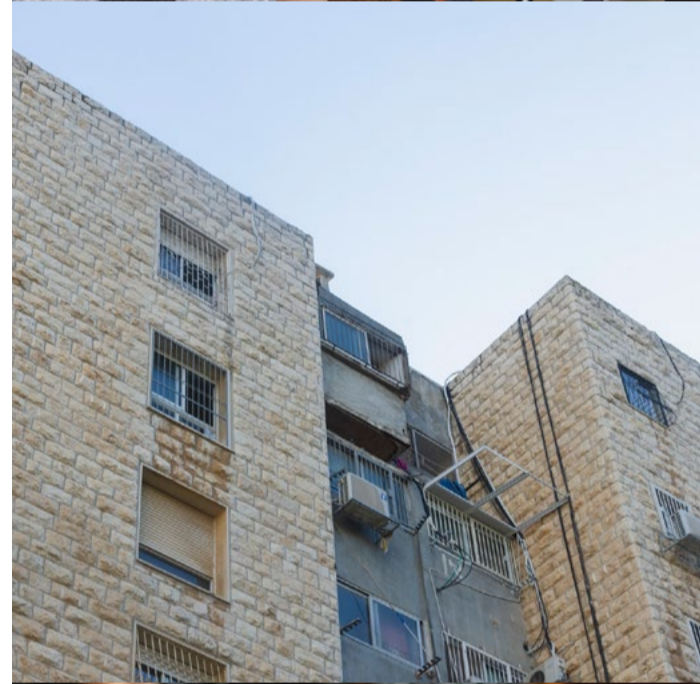
Alexander, her husband of 63 years, perches on a stool next to her rocking chair, his adoration evident as he gently smiles through her vivacious storytelling and poignant poetry. When we ask to hear their love story, she says they were friends first and later decided to marry. They laugh together. Marriage was a practicality in Russia. They might have loved each other, but that usually came later.

Her story of unrelenting hope in the face of such dire circumstances is an inspiration to all who hear it.

When asked about their secret to a good marriage, she says justice. As a teacher, she expected herself and her students to be honest, just, and disciplined. That's what she sees in their marriage. Alexander says compromise has been their secret.

It is her poetry that entrances us – her descriptions of the war, the trains, the bombs, the perilous bridge – all beyond belief, except for her singular voice which breaks as she reads from her two published poetry books.

Her story of unrelenting hope in the face of such dire circumstances is an inspiration to all who hear it. Their move to Israel, while a blessing to be near family, left Rita and her husband without a pension. Because she only worked part-time in Israel, they depend on a small income from social security that barely covers the apartment and utility bills. They cannot afford restaurants and even necessary replacement wardrobe purchases have to be carefully planned and often delayed





As Holocaust survivors, the State provides them with limited access to medicine, but even the medicine they can afford has offered little relief. Her husband has hearing loss and cataracts, along with difficulty walking. He has a surgery planned to remove the cataracts, but doctors do not promise it will help. Rita suffers from cystitis, and the various treatments have not yielded any relief.

Their one desire is to be a part of the activities available in Jerusalem, from museums to celebrations, and various community projects like those of Helping Hand Coalition. Rita's infectious life-of-the-party personality would make her favorite in any room she enters.

When asked if we could pray for her, she lit up and says that she believes in God. The miracles that she lived through proved that there is a God. She prays to him everyday in her own prayers and it's easy to see that she draws her optimism and positivity from Him.