

# Faces of The Survivors



MEET EVGENIA

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## AS TOLD BY EVGENIYA

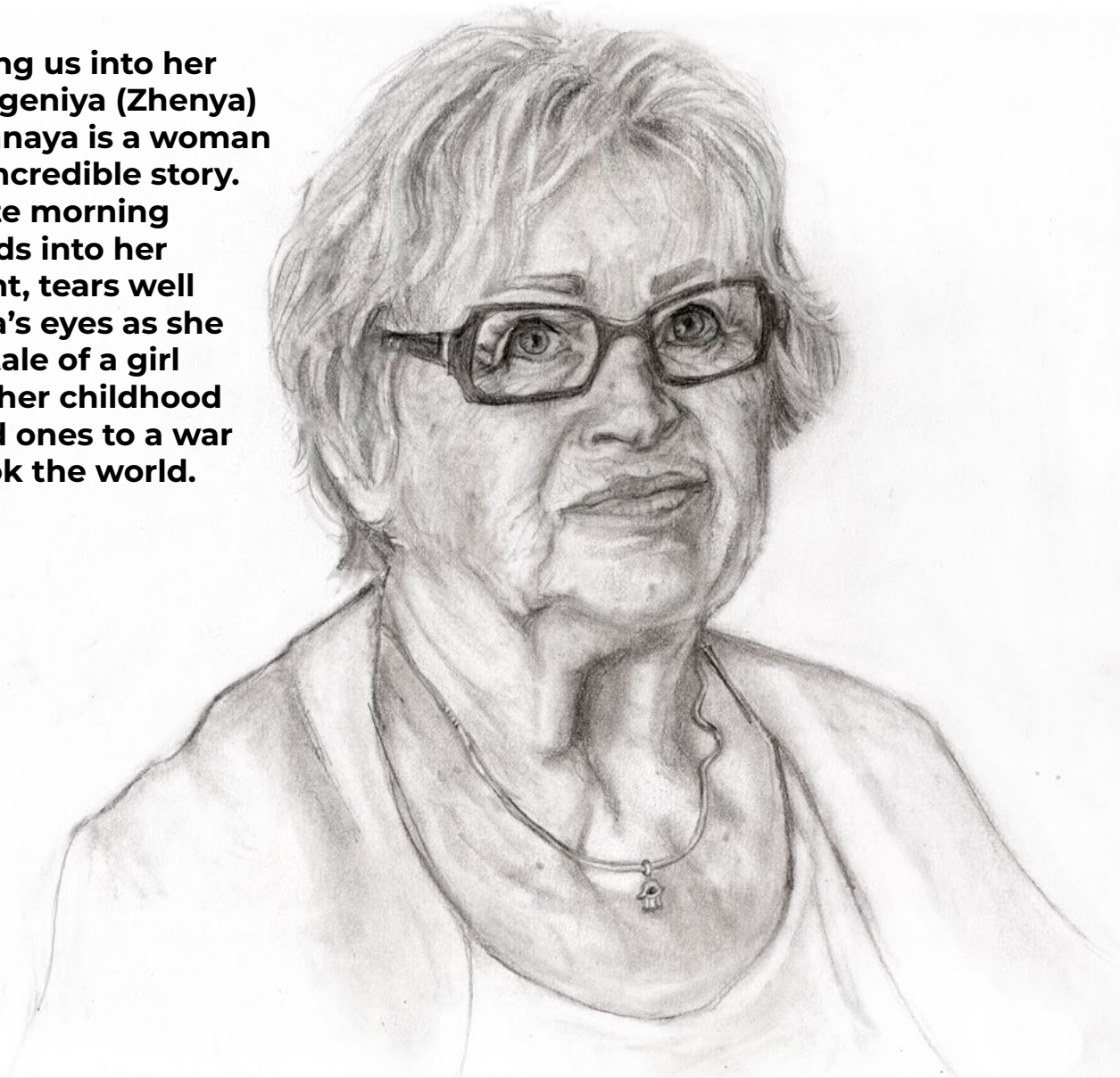
WRITTEN BY  
HANNAH-ROSE RUSSELL, ELLA BESTER, & SARAH RISARD-GASIOROWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
HARRI SKAREN AND SARAH RISARD-GASIOROWSKI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
STINA SKAREN



**Welcoming us into her home, Evgeniya (Zhenya) Derevyannaya is a woman with an incredible story. As the late morning light floods into her apartment, tears well in Zhenya's eyes as she tells the tale of a girl who lost her childhood and loved ones to a war that shook the world.**



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

## The face of a survivor **Evgeniya Derevyannaya**

### ZHENYA'S CHILDHOOD- FARM LIFE INVADED BY NAZIS

Before the war, Zhenya came from a family of 6 children, with 3 sisters and 2 brothers. They lived a simple life on a farm with chickens, cows, and other animals. Her father was a mechanic at a sugar factory where white beets were grown and processed, while her mother was a housewife. But in 1941, Zhenya's life changed forever.

At just three years old, Zhenya's father and older brother were swept off to war, drafted by the Red Army to fight against the Germans. Nazis came and occupied her village of Nizhny Olchedaev, Vinnytsia region of Ukraine. Choosing her family's small farm to be their headquarters, Nazis moved into her nice home and forced her family to live in their barn.

Soon after the Germans' arrival, rumors began to spread of killings and massacres happening in the village streets. Fear coursed through their veins, and Zhenya's mother began to worry about her family's protection. Then, one evening, an elderly German officer came into the barn with words of warning. Speaking in Yiddish, he told Zhenya's mother that she and her family needed to leave right away because the Germans were going to kill all the Jews living in the village that very night.





**Sitting in her living room, Zhenya recalls the feeling of these conditions as a naked, hungry, cold, and barefoot little girl. She tells us that she can still taste the terrible food her mother would gather from the scraps left by the Germans, who also lived in the ghetto.**

Collecting a small bundle of food and their belongings, Zhenya, her four remaining siblings, two grandmothers, and mother ran into the night, attempting to escape the fate that would await them if they stayed.

As they were on the run, the other half of their family was being killed. How many? Zhenya does not know, but she was told that her Uncle Itzik had returned home to find Nazis in his village and his family missing from their home. Upon asking his neighbors about them, he was told that they were led to a ravine to be killed. He immediately ran after them, and hiding from the soldiers, helplessly witnessed his wife and daughters shot and thrown into a ravine. He could not survive this horrifying experience. Filled with guilt from being unable to protect them, he physically broke down to insanity, and died very young.

Crossing the dried-up river in their escape, Zhenya and her family made it to the other side only to be captured by the Romanians, who also fought alongside the Germans. Taken into the Romanian's custody, her family was transported to a ghetto on the border of Romania, where they spent the next three years.

## **The Ghetto – Life within the barbed-wire fence begun**

Inside the ghetto, Zhenya's family was assigned to the stables where two other families from Chernivtsi and Moldova also lived. Her mother and older sisters, who were thirteen and twelve at the time, went to work in the laundry room and dining room while the other siblings would scavenge for food. Conditions were harsh. There was no water, toilets, food, clothing, nothing.

After two years in the ghetto, new orders arrived, stating that all the children must work. Zhenya, who was five years old at this point, and her brother, who was ten, were taken to the barracks where they cooked, cleaned, washed, and prepared vegetables for the Germans. They had no childhood, as children had to become adults to survive in the ghetto. The clothes they were given came off the backs of those who did not make it. No one was killed in the ghettos because everyone was already dying.

As Zhenya worked, her mother's words rang in her ears, "Zhenechka, you must work; otherwise, we will not be allowed to eat." Hungry and desperate for a mere morsel, the dream of food pushed Zhenya to work hard, though her dreams also got her into trouble. In an attempt to steal vegetables from an unharvested

field, Zhenya and her older sister were caught and chased back under the ghetto's barbed wire fence by an officer and guard dog. They survived, but not before the dog took hold of Zhenya's leg, ripping the rags off her legs during her struggle to get free.

Experimentation on those imprisoned in the ghetto began in 1943.

**Though Zhenya was too young to recall the specific details, she can still see an image of her grandmother lying on the straw, covered in her blood, when she closes her eyes.**

Only years later, one of her sisters, who was ten years older, would retell the reason for these experiments. The Nazis had been searching for a vaccine that would fight a disease called dysentery, and they would use the prisoners in the ghetto as their test subjects. Many died from these experiments, including one of Zhenya's sisters and both grandmothers; others became ill. Had it not been for the life-saving instructions of a Jewish doctor encouraging the people to drink and eat less during the injections, Zhenya and the rest of her family would not have survived.

**Ashamed to continue, Zhenya's eyes once again filled with tears as she tells us about the night her mother was raped in front of her. Coming to check on the sick in the stables, two Nazis entered the barn and set their eyes upon Zhenya's beautiful mother. Her sister covered Zhenya's eyes with her handkerchief during the assault, but not before Zhenya saw what the Germans were doing. To this day, when Zhenya sees violence of any kind, her thoughts are taken back to her mother lying helplessly in the grasps of the Nazi officers.**





## Zhenya and her family’s freedom had come, but their fight for survival was far from over.

There are no happy memories of her time in the ghetto. Death was all around, and because there was poor hygiene, people feared that the plague would begin. Now, at eighty-years-old, Zhenya looks back on her time in the ghetto and cannot fathom how people could have survived in such conditions.

The day the ghetto was liberated was one of the happiest days of Zhenya’s life. One evening in 1944, while everyone was asleep in the stables, her mother was awoken by the sound of people speaking in Russian. She exclaimed, “Manya, Rivochka, get up! I hear Russian speech; this is probably our army!” It all happened so quickly. Russian soldiers entered the barn exclaiming, “Go out! You are free! You can go home!” And then the gates were opened, and people took off in all directions heading back to where they had come from. Zhenya and her family knew where to go, for they knew this place and their village was nearby; only a day’s walk away.

Zhenya and her family’s freedom had come, but their fight for survival was far from over.



Starving and scavenging for scraps in the ghetto. Illustrated by Stina Skaren, a volunteer from Finland.

## Freedom Returning to Desolation

It took Zhenya and her remaining family members a day to walk back to their home; however, their return was full of devastation. While they were suffering in the ghetto, war raged through Ol'chadaev and burned their farm to the ground. As they stared into the empty space that was once their family's home, a neighbor saw them return and invited them to take refuge with her. After four years of war, the village where Zhenya had spent half of her life was now impossible to survive in as there were no food, water, work, or provisions. Even the neighbor that took them in was starving, and everyone's bellies were swollen from malnutrition.

It was 1945, and the war was over. She was safe from the Nazis and now lived under the communist Soviet Union (USSR). News arrived that Zhenya's father had perished in the war. No other details were written, just that their beloved father was gone forever. Later that year, Zhenya's older brother, Sasha, miraculously survived the battles and returned home to his family. Shell-shocked and ill, Sasha died in the presence of his family, who held onto him until his last breath.

Hope was nowhere to be found. The family no longer had a father to provide for them, and no jobs in their village for the older children to work. When Zhenya's fourteen-year-old brother heard of rumors of a city on the other side of the country, which had been bombed but had opportunities for work and housing, he went to see what he could find in Chernivtsi, Western Ukraine. Six months later, Zhenya's family received news from her brother: "Mom, come here. I work in a bakery, and they gave me a room."

Boarding a freight train in the winter of 1946, Zhenya and her family made the six hour journey to her brother. The train ride was incredibly cold and 7-year-old Zhenya was wrapped in a blanket; her mother constantly checked whether Zhenya was alive and that she was not frozen to death. At last they arrived, excited for a new chance at life!

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## From Poverty to Hope



**As Zhenya spoke about her brother's ploy to bring her family bread, she told us that she can still recall squeezing the coal-black bread to extract water from the dough to drink.**

Once in Chernivtsi, the five-member family lived together in a one-room apartment without windows, toilet, or water. Conditions were terrible, yet they didn't give up fighting for their lives. Zhenya's mother found a job at the market where she was sometimes given entrails to feed her family, but her wages were still not enough to buy food or clothing. To keep his family alive, Zhenya's brother and his coworker from the bakery made a plan to steal a loaf of bread during each of their shifts and throw it over the fence for the other to catch. During her brother's shift, as he threw the bread through the fence, he was caught by a guard and sentenced to 10 years in the Vorkuta Gulag (labor camp or prison) for this one loaf of bread, leaving Zhenya's family without a man to look after them.





The four remaining Parnus women did everything they could to survive those ten years. As an illiterate and single mother, Zhenya's mother continued her work cleaning the market and other people's homes. One family that she worked for had a daughter Zhenya's age and gave her clothing for Zhenya as they saw that she did not have proper clothes or shoes to wear. Living on cooked husks and baked potato skins, they continued in their struggle to live with unbearable hunger in a one-room apartment.

Meanwhile, one of Zhenya's older sisters got a job at a candy factory and would sometimes bring lollipops home to sweeten up their unpleasant living situation. Zhenya's other sister lay very ill with a heart defect. In the meantime, Zhenya was sent to school, where she completed seven years of education. In 1956, Zhenya's mother tragically passed away. Since she had been injected with the experimental vaccines, Zhenya's mother had remained sick for many years.

When her brother was released after ten years of forestry labor in the gulag, he saw a recruiting advertisement for accountants. He immediately insisted that seventeen-year-old Zhenya should pursue a career in accounting. Knowing that she had no money for the tuition but would have a promising life, he gave her all the money he had earned.

**Zhenya has never forgotten her brother's generosity, and whenever she visits his grave, she always says "Thank you" because his belief in her is what saved her.**

With all her gratitude, Zhenya completed her first courses and worked as a bookkeeper to put herself through secondary financial college. After she graduated, she worked as an accountant in the regional consumer union, where she met her future husband.

A young man named Lev Derevyannaya, six-years older than her and who had just returned from serving in the army, entered Zhenya's life. Sharing a similar background, they immediately fell in love and she was able to see a happy future for herself!

**Telling us her love story, she described Lev by saying, “He was... an interesting man.” While she spoke, we could feel her love for him fill the room, and saw her face illuminate in the memory of her beloved.**

She and Lev married in 1958 and moved into a three-bedroom apartment where their two sons, Alexander and Nathan, would be welcomed into the world. With Lev by her side and a new born son, Zhenya continued to push herself through more education in order to pursue a higher career thus enrolling herself and graduating from the correspondence department at the Lviv Financial Institute.

The future seemed bright in Zhenya's eyes, but when anti-Semitism once again showed its snarling face, Zhenya's family began to be persecuted. At school, children were asked to share their nationality in class, and when Nathan and Alexander revealed their Jewish heritage, a spotlight was put on them. They were taunted by bullies and neighbors and called “zhids” (which is a derogatory anti-Semitic slur for Jews). Zhenya turned to the district police officer for help but was sent away without support or sympathy.

Anti-Semitism only grew in Ukraine, and thousands of Jews began to leave. Colleagues, friends, neighbors, and one of Zhenya's sisters were among those who left. Not knowing how much the anti-Semitism would escalate, they decided to move to Israel. It wasn't until 1973, after a call from a friend who had recently emigrated to Israel, that Lev and Zhenya prepared for their own exodus.





A NEW BEGINNING

## **Journey to the Holy Land**

Their journey to Israel was long. In this time, people could not openly leave the communistic USSR. Departing from Chernivtsi, Zheniya's family travelled to the border of Hungary, to a city called Chop City. By bus, Jews were being evacuated by the masses. The desperation was so extreme that people could be seen climbing through bus windows and hanging onto the bus's steps in efforts to leave.

Arriving in Vienna, the evacuees were taken to a castle where thousands of people waited to be brought to the Holy Land. It was so crowded that there was barely an inch of space on the floor to sleep.

Zhenya was thirty-five years old, her husband forty-one and their sons fifteen and ten, when they arrived in Israel. At the airport, they were met with open arms by an organization that helped in the Aliyah process. Receiving proper documentation and an apartment in Nahariya, their new lives had begun!

Absorption into the Land of Israel was a huge adjustment. They began their new lives with Zhenya learning Hebrew in Ulpan, Lev working as a carpenter, and her boys going to school. After all of her hard studies and years of financial practice in the USSR, in Israel, Zhenya was unable to continue her career in accountancy because of the language barrier and need for Israeli certifications. Thus, like many other women immigrants, she went thirty-two years later to cosmetology school and became a hairdresser and pedicurist.

They moved to Hadera where many other repatriates from Chernivtsi had settled down. It was here in Israel that Zhenya's sons graduated from high school before being enlisted in the IDF, Israeli Defense Force. Her eldest son, Nathan, graduated from college with a degree in electronics and served as an electronics engineer in the Israeli Air Force in a classified missile department. Serving for twenty-six years, Nathan retired at forty-four. Her younger son, Alexander, graduated from the Israeli Naval school. Today, he works in an advertising company as a graphic designer.

2003 was a devastating year for the Derevyannayas. Suffering from diabetes, Lev had a heart operation and was diagnosed with bladder cancer. He and Zhenya had to sell their apartment to cover the costs of Lev's treatments. For the next ten years, Zhenya cared for Lev. He died in 2013, taking a piece of Zhenya's heart with him.

**People wanted her dead,  
but Zhenya survived  
and brought the next  
generation into this world  
despite its hatred.**

PRESENT DAY

## **Humble Through Hardships**

Today, Zhenya is very grateful for the life that she has. She is a proud grandmother of four grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. Memorabilia hang on all the walls, narrating Zhenya's life from being a young girl in Ukraine to having a new beginning in Israel. After working for thirty-two years, Zhenya is retired but does not receive a pension — as part of the agreement made with the Kibbutz where she had lived. She is, however, given social security by the state of Israel, which Zhenya is grateful for. She sighs and calculates, “If it weren't for this compensation, I don't know how we ghetto survivors would live.”





**Yet, even though she is struggling in another fight for her life, Zhenya preferred to emphasize needs of other people rather than her own.**

Several years ago, Zhenya was diagnosed with late-stage ovarian cancer. Undergoing 40 treatments consisting of two courses of chemotherapy, biological pharmacotherapy, and radiation treatments, Zhenya is not yet out of the dark and has recently begun her third round of chemo this last October. The funds for her treatments are covered; however, because Zhenya's sons live far away and are busy with their own families, she must rely on others for transportation to her appointments and treatments. Getting to Tel Hashomer Hospital in Ramat Gan from Hadera is a long journey of at least an hour by car and requires Zhenya to ask her friends and neighbors to take her there.

As the chairman of an organization of ghetto survivors called "Survivors of Nazism," Zhenya is filled with purpose amidst her own battles. Zhenya told us that though her husband has died, she is not alone because members of her organization regularly visit her.

When asked about her personal needs, Zhenya would redirect the questions to focus on the people of her organization. While some are in dire need of basic home appliances and grocery deliveries, many of them also look for joy and encouragement. She thanks Helping Hand Coalition's partners and supporters for looking after her people. The ghetto survivors in her organization regularly attend the Shalom House gatherings at the Helping Hand Coalition Villa in Caesarea and are brought there by bus to hear concert performances, and share meals lovingly prepared by Christian volunteers from all around the world. It is very uplifting for them to participate in these social events with international groups and visitors as they sing and dance together. They also attend various celebratory events and galas throughout the year, including one recent gala in the Galilee with Singaporeans & Christians from Asia Pacific. They look forward to these times spent together, filled with love and joy.





After sharing her story with us, she reflected on the horrors she faced in life. Again, she burst into tears remembering, “I was young, I worked, the children studied at school and I would not often reflect on what I experienced during the war. I didn’t remember much because I was a child. Back then, it was hard for me to perceive it, and now that I have been freed from family worries... how could we have survived in those conditions? It was not possible. Jews, we had large families. How many were shot! Our psyche had been left untouched.” Even today, she cannot watch movies about the war; too many hard memories.





There are countless stories about people's survival during and after the Holocaust. Zhenya is just the first of several survivors who have agreed to share their tales with us for this project. If there is one thing to glean from Zhenya's life story, it is that with survival comes great sacrifice. People tried to shade the light that is inside her, but Zhenya has broken the seams and continues to spread her light and love to everyone she meets.

As we spent the morning with Zhenya, we could see the strength that was within her; but, we also knew that her strength masked her need for assistance and aid. Chemotherapy is one of the toughest medical paths to experience. Through the process, your body becomes so weak that you do not have the strength to lift your arms and complete regular activities, like showering or sweeping the floor. Zhenya cannot afford to pay for someone to help her during the day. The State of Israel provides three hours of evening assistance, but Zhenya has no one to get her to regular appointments or help her during the day.

There are many rough days ahead as Zhenya begins this third round of chemo; yet, she will not let that cause her to despair. Zhenya does not ask for help for herself; she would rather see those around her find the care they need. She is selfless and believes that everything will work out. After hearing Zhenya's incredible story, it's no surprise she is as strong as she is!