

Faces of the Survivors: David

Meet David

As we sat down to hear David's story, his eyes lit up and we could almost hear the sound of violins. He told us of how he had come from a long line of musicians, dating all the way back to his great-grandfather. They would play at Russian, Polish, and Jewish weddings. He even had a very famous Stradivarius violin, which he inherited from his grandfather. He remembers his childhood stories of his father studying to become a professional musician at the music conservatory of Leipzig, Germany.

The Alarm and Evacuation

David Fleitman was born into a family of musicians in 1924, in the city of Slavuta, Khmelnytskyi, a wooded region in modern day Ukraine. His father was a professional musician who studied at the music conservatory in Leipzig, Germany.

When darkness invaded Europe in 1939, Soviet troops stormed into Poland, near their home and occupied the land while the war raged. In June 1941, David and his teenage friends climbed to the top of a hill to play.

From the top, they saw a commotion in the next town over. It was a German army.

"Do you see? How are they so close?" David asked, pointing to a neighboring city of Ostrog.

His friends squinted into the distance. Fear rumbled between them, and they raced down the hill.

"Ostrog! It's under attack!" David and the other teens burst back into the city and their homes, urging people to evacuate. Neighbors began packing and leaving, imploring David's family to hurry.

David's father was not so sure. "We'll stay," he said. "I know the Germans. They are cultured people, intellectuals. They won't let us be killed."

David's mother packed a suitcase and gathered him and his younger brother to leave. David wondered if his older brother, who had been drafted into the Red Army while studying at Bauman Moscow State Technical University, was already on the battlefield.

“These are not your friends from Leipzig coming. David saw them attacking Ostrog. If you won’t go, we’ll go alone,” his mother said, resolute. David’s father looked from the suitcase by the front door to the boys dressed for travel and he relented.

By nightfall, they were headed to the train station to head to Kiev. As they waited, news swirled around the jostling crowds of evacuating people: the Nazis had made it to Slavuta. They’d barely escaped in time. But there was hardly time to appreciate their narrow escape or to mourn his father’s parents who had stayed behind. The train stations were packed. As soon as the train rolled in, people pushed in a panic to board.

David’s parents maneuvered them forward, and David held tightly to his four-year-old brother Miron, praying they would be safe. No one could sit because they were crammed so tightly together on the train. As the whistle blew and the train lurched forward, the roar of planes overhead silenced the chattering passengers as they heard the bombs landing. Cries and stern faces surrounded them as bombs continued to explode in the distance and every second, David willed the train forward to the safety of Kiev.

At the last station before Kiev, the train ground to a halt. The tracks had been bombed. Their family pushed through on foot the last ten kilometres to Kiev where they took refuge in the home of friends. But being reported on by some neighbors, they would not find respite for long and needed to continue onwards for their safety.

A Musician Forced into War

David’s father was able to avoid conscription into the army for some time, including a close call in Kiev after neighbors reported their friends for harboring Jews. But once they left Kiev and eventually arrived in Georgievsk, Russia, his father was quickly drafted for service and sent to a combat engineering battalion 45 kilometres away.

“My father was a trained and talented musician,” David said. “Before the war, he was always so careful with his hands and fingers, so he could play the violin and virtuoso. He’d never even hold a kitchen knife. That day he left for the army, we were devastated.”

David looked to the pictures on his wall. “How could someone who brought so much joy and life to people, now have to participate in the ugly and cruel reality of war?” It broke their hearts.

David was able to visit his father once on horseback. He could hardly believe his eyes as he approached the camp. The father he had known was unrecognizable and worked in a quilted jacket, his hands bloody and calloused from building bridges and detonating landmines. He still remembers his father’s weak smile and the five smoked fish he gave David to take home.

Through letters, they learned he had been able to play in a small army orchestra briefly when the commander decided they needed a band. It wouldn’t last long. Before the year was out, his father’s letters stopped and they learned that his base had been attacked, killing his father.

Lost and Found

As soon as David's father left for the army, David assumed duties as man of the house, taking a job as a driver of a horse cart, delivering spare parts for a tractor brigade. Soon though, they were again displaced and on the run, as the German army approached from Rostov-on-Don. As bombs dropped around them from German planes overhead, his mother carried their suitcase and David carried his brother as they escaped the city, this time by train to Azerbaijan, leaving their family heirloom violin in the hands of some friends.

The 70-kilometer journey was fraught with danger.

It began with whispered questions, but before long, people around them were crying, shouting that the train was headed the wrong direction. It was racing back toward Rostov and certain death from the German army.

Finally, some young men stormed the engine car, stopped the train, and threw the conductor from the train, reversing course.

After a train transfer near the Caspian Sea and a hundred unbearable kilometers standing shoulder to shoulder with other passengers, packed too tightly to even move, the train came to a stop. David looked out the window. A field of yellow and red flowers beckoned him to stretch out and breathe.

He stepped off the train for a quick break to lay down in the flowers and drifted off to sleep, grateful to rest his weary eyes and body.

"Hey!" a man jolted him awake. "Why are you here?" David blinked, panic rising as he realized the train with his mother and brother had left him behind.

"I need to get to Baku to rejoin my mother and brother!" David said, brushing off his clothes.

"That freight train is the one you want," the man motioned. David ran and climbed aboard.

He found himself next to a kind man who offered him pita and cheese. When David explained his plight, the man explained they had one chance.

"Son, when we get to Baku station 2, don't sleep. Immediately run after me. There's only one steam train going to Baku Station 1 and if we miss it, we won't be able to get there."

David struggled to keep his eyes open until the man nudged him as the train stopped, "Here it is. Quickly! Follow me!"

They ran. The station was filled with the smoke from the steam engine, and the train was already pulling from the station as David and the man approached at a full run. The man reached one hand to grasp the train rail and the other back to David who clasped it. They leapt aboard the train and bent to catch their breath.

Now, against all odds, he would just need to find his family again. He spent the trip wondering how far they had traveled without him in the day and a half since he'd last seen them.

As the train pulled into the station, David thanked this traveling companion and pushed onto the platform, scanning the crowd for any sign. He paced the length of the train, his eyes sweeping from left to right for any familiar face. Around him, travelers adjusted their hats and pushed luggage carts.

"Dania! Dania!" The voice was music to his ears. His mother rushed forward to hug him.

Crossing a Continent at War

David would not stay with his family in the refugee camp for long. He was drafted into the Red Army in March 1942 and sent to the front. He and another fifteen men were taken east through the Karakum desert on a sixteen day journey to Chardzhou. From there they were sent to the city of Kattakurgan, Uzbekistan, traveling nearly 3,000 kilometers to reach their destination.

By the end of 1943, the Red Army's official slogan was "Not a step back!" Military officials recruited prisoners and organized penal battalions. They were used as cannon fodder in the deadliest sectors of fighting, sent out first and drawing fire to shield the troops behind them. David served in a detachment directly behind the penal battalions.

The orders were clear: if one of the prisoners or soldiers retreated, he would be shot immediately.

When the war in Europe ended in August 1945, Soviets answered the American army's call for help defeating the Japanese. David's detachment was sent to the Far East, traveling thousands of kilometers across the continent, through the entirety of the Soviet Union, across modern-day Mongolia, and all the way to the sea in Nikolayevsk-on-Amur in eastern Siberia. His detachment remained there awaiting orders until March 1947 when the Minister of Armed Forces of the USSR Bulganin mobilized those born in 1924. David was 22 and called up. It took two months for the Amur River to thaw enough for a boat to transport David and the other sixteen men.

Headed back across the continent, in Khabarovsk, they boarded the Trans-Siberian railway to Birobidzhan, a city in Far East of Russia. It was also the administrative center of the Jewish Autonomous, an official Jewish territory. David stayed there for two weeks, as echelons of soldiers formed in Ukraine, Belarus, and the Caucasus, mobilized from all over the Far East. In the market, he heard Yiddish spoken around him and was comforted by the familiar. It reminded him of home.

Finally, David's detachment boarded a train to Ukraine and rode west through Lake Baikal, near Mongolia. Upon reaching Taiga station, near Lake Baikal, their train stopped for three days. When David's train finally began to move again, it had only traveled a few kilometers when a terrible sight rose before them.

As his train passed, David saw part of a train station that had been sabotaged by escaped war prisoners who were Vlasovites, the Russian liberation movement aimed at overthrowing the Soviet regime and restoring the "national Russian state."

A structure had been overturned, and the support logs stood upright with people hanging on them, climbing them. Bodies and severed parts were scattered beneath, from heads and torsos to children's bodies. It was another disturbing sight of war, but David's train arrived safely to its destination. In the same year, David's war travels would finally come to an end; a journey that took him across 30,000 kilometers (or 18,000 miles). He earned eleven military medals for his service.

A Fight for His Mother

When David was finally released from duty in 1947, he returned to Slavuta where his mother and brother were living.

As he entered the house, the owner motioned him down to the basement. He held his hat in his hands, pushing open the door. He couldn't believe what he saw.

His mother stood in a burlap sackcloth dress. She embraced him as he sputtered with shock. The room was windowless, cramped.

"Why are you living like this?" he asked.

"They won't pay your father's pension," she said.

"What?" he roared, "Why?"

"The note we received only said he wasn't listed among the dead—not that he had actually died. They will not pay."

"What do they need?"

"A funeral document."

David headed back to Moscow to the People's Commissariat of Defense to demand justice for his mother.

It took a month, but the committee finally called his mother back to award her pension and the payments for the years it had been denied.

Life and Hostility After the War: "Jews Go To Israel"

David took on various jobs until one day, he bumped into the director for the House of Culture who recognized him from his father's name.

"Your father worked for me as a musician! Come be an instructor with us," he said.

David agreed and began organizing concerts, events, and dances, including one where he met his future wife, Zhenya.

At the House of Culture, he developed his love for drama and acting, and eventually applied to study at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in Moscow. He made it through the first round of interviews, but in the second, he was cut, discriminated against because he was Jewish.

When he applied to another studio theater in Kyiv, he was questioned about his family ties extensively, until he was convinced they too were prejudiced against Jews.

David received an invitation to study at the Moscow Construction College. He arranged artistic performances in his spare time, and even conducted a choir that performed at over thirty different technical schools.

He graduated with honors, married the love of his life Zhenya, and they were blessed with a son and a daughter. His career progressed from foreman to foreman, and soon to the head of the construction site.

But it didn't matter how hard he worked, he and his family encountered anti-semitism.

"Some of the children at school wouldn't play with our children. The teachers did nothing to help. Alexander was teased and beaten up," David recalls, thinking back to all his son endured. "He even quit violin lessons to take boxing, so he could defend himself."

In 1961, there was a major fire where David worked, a 17.5 million ruble loss. David found himself accused of sabotage, and for three months he barely slept as he faced interrogation from the KGB's USSR State Security Commission.

"They threatened to send me to prison for ten years," David remembers. "They said my family would have to live off of stale bread."

He found a lawyer who helped him clear his name, but the anti-semitism never stopped completely—for him or his family. He had fought alongside these countrymen in the war and earned medals for his time in the Red Army. He sacrificed his father, grandparents, and countless friends, but they would never see him as equal.

By 1991, the baseless anger and hostility toward them had escalated. Messages were left written on their garage and front door that said "Jews go to Israel." It was time to leave.

A Final Journey: Israel

In October 1991, the Fleitmans once more packed up and moved, this time to Israel. While it relieved them of the discrimination and fear of hostility, the move resulted in a financial struggle while they worked to learn Hebrew and adjust to their new home.

David took a job sweeping the streets until he could learn Hebrew. Zhenya began working for one of the government offices. Since she spoke Yiddish and Russian, she worked with the Russian population that had immigrated to Israel. After two years of working there, she had mastered the Hebrew language.

By 1993, the family opened their own Kievsky grocery store in Netanya, which they operated for 24 years.

In 1995, his beloved Zhenya was diagnosed with lung cancer. David did what he could to help his wife beat the disease. Doctors gave up on her case, so David looked for alternative methods. He did whatever he could to help her for ten years. However, in 2005, his wife of 55 years passed away.

He is blessed to have his two children, three grandchildren, and one great-grandson. His daughter Mila often cares for him, as she works relentlessly to help other survivors in their old age like her father.

Today David still lives in Netanya, in an apartment in desperate need of repair. His small pension allows few to no needed repairs, but David does his best to get by each month. One way he tries to save money is by unscrewing light bulbs in the light fixtures to save on the electric bill.

His health needs attention. He is in need of dental care, especially to replace his lower dentures which are more than 15 years old and causes him pain every time he eats.

In the past he underwent surgery on his eyes which helped him see better, but those corrections have deteriorated and his vision has continued to weaken. They are often watery, blurring his vision.

As a result, a year ago, David tripped over a manhole cover on the street, fell and injured his lower back. This back pain is complicated by osteochondrosis (radiculitis), which gives him great discomfort. David explained that his morning routine of 45 minutes of exercise has saved his ability to be mobile.

Despite all of these difficulties, David remains a very kind and optimistic person. He collects cartoons about Israel and the Jews, finding them in various magazines and newspapers. He dreams of being able to publish them one day in a book. He has already typed 1,000 pages with the cartoons and jokes.

His affinity for the arts and music still moves him—the legacy of music passed on from his father and grandfather. It carried him across a continent, through surviving war and finding his beloved wife, all the way to Israel.

Afterward

Our team was blessed to meet David. As we walked into his apartment, we could see that with the dust covered shelves, it needed a warm touch, but as we sat down to hear his story, we found the warmth in his voice. In spite of all of his difficulties, he never complained even once. His eyes were filled with love and pride as he wore his military uniform covered in medals. After we heard about his situation, David was enrolled in Helping Hand Coalition's Dental Care program. With the love and generosity of Christians all over the world, he was able to receive the new dentures that he so badly needed. His daughter Mila carries on his legacy of survival by remembering the Holocaust and caring for the survivors in Netanya. She works with Helping Hand Coalition on joint projects to bring joy into the lives of the survivors, like through the Shalom House project where survivors are cooked warm meals by Christian volunteers at weekly gatherings with international music performances. By holding these fellowship events, the elderly are reminded they are not forgotten or alone. It's been a pleasure hearing David's heartbreaking story and his overpowering optimism through it all. We hope you will be as inspired as we were by his story of courage and strength.