



NEVER AGAIN

HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS FROM THE
FORMER SOVIET UNION

Selfhelp



Introduction

In November 1942, the Nazi territories stretched across Europe from France to Russia, including much of the Soviet Union.

Fifteen months earlier, in June 1941, the Germans launched "Operation Barbarossa," which swept quickly across Eastern Europe. Nazis spoke of Communism (or "Judeo-Bolshevism") as a strategy for Jews to attain world domination. With ideological anti-Semitism as one motivation for military incursion, the invading German troops directly attacked Jews living in their path.

Approximately 1.5 million Jews fled deeper into the Soviet Union. Most of the 2.5 million Jews who remained in Nazi-occupied territories were either murdered in mass shootings by SS *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units), relocated to ghettos and concentration camps, or killed by anti-Semitic collaborators. The intentional extermination of Jews in Eastern Europe began the systematic genocide of 6 million across the Third Reich.



It took the next four years for the Allies to defeat the Germans – years during which many Soviet Jews fought in the Red Army or joined resistance groups, while others remained in hiding or in the ghettos and camps, or joined mass evacuations deeper into the Soviet Union. It is estimated that 55 percent of Soviet Jews were killed during this time.

Following the war, anti-Semitism became part of Soviet policy. Under Stalin, Yiddish newspapers and cultural institutions were closed and Jewish intellectuals were persecuted. Prominent Jewish members of the Communist Party were arrested, including those who had assisted with pro-Soviet propaganda during the war. The situation did not improve greatly after Stalin's death in 1953, with waves of propaganda campaigns against Jews and continued exclusion. Unlike Holocaust survivors from Western Europe, many from the Soviet Union did not have the opportunity to rebuild their lives until they were allowed to leave. In many ways, the nightmare of the Holocaust was replaced by new ones.

Today, an estimated 300,000 Jews from the Former Soviet Union live in New York City. Selfhelp Community Services, a human services organization founded in 1936 primarily by Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, serves 3,600 Holocaust survivors from the Former Soviet Union and more than 5,000 survivors overall.

Profiles of four of them, and one social worker whose family also survived, are in these pages.

Emiliya Khiterer

In September 2022, 90-year-old Emiliya was admitted to the hospital after suffering a major heart attack. Her Selfhelp social worker helped her to come back home by obtaining additional hours of home care and making sure that her benefits, which had been terminated in error, were reinstated in full.

“It is so important to give to others,” says Emiliya Khiterer. Now 91 years old with deteriorating eyesight, she still volunteers when she can, making gift baskets for hospital patients so that they know someone is thinking of them.

At the age of 70, Emiliya and her husband came to the United States to join their daughter, Inna. Born in Odessa in 1931, Emiliya and her mother evacuated to Uzbekistan in July 1941; when they returned to Odessa in 1944, all their relatives had been killed.

Emiliya grew up to become a teacher, a librarian, and finally an engineer. “I traveled to every country in the Soviet Union for my job. But coming here – everything was different.” She had studied English, but had never spoken the language with a non-Soviet person before.

Emiliya’s husband passed away 12 years ago, and she now receives care from a home attendant arranged by Selfhelp. Over the years, Selfhelp has assisted Emiliya with securing a full range of entitlements and benefits, transportation, translating official mail, financial assistance for dental care and hearing aids, and so much more.

“My daughter lives in Pennsylvania now, where she has her job. She comes to see me very often.” Miriam, who is Emiliya’s social worker, provides a great deal of support, and Emiliya thinks of her “like a relative.” Emiliya and Inna are both particularly grateful for Miriam’s frequent phone calls during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Inna could not travel to see her mother.

Emiliya is extremely thankful for the life she has in America, which “gives us people who came here the possibility to have dignity,” and for the support she receives from Selfhelp: home care, assistance with benefits, and the opportunity to socialize with Holocaust survivors like herself.



Emiliya sits in front of a picture that was lovingly painted by her home attendant of 12 years.

Elizaveta Vigonskaia

Social support and connection helped Elizaveta to restore a sense of safety after retiring and moving to New York triggered traumatic memories of fleeing from the Nazis. Today, she no longer feels afraid; she says that “This has become absolutely my happiest time in life.”

Elizaveta was two years old when the Nazis invaded Kyiv in September 1941. She and her family caught the last train out, the day before 33,771 Jews from Kyiv were massacred nearby at Babi Yar. While her father fought in the Russian army, Elizaveta, her mother, and her brother lived in Siberia, returning to Kyiv at the end of the war.

“We were always scared” after the war, Elizaveta recalls. There was very little food – just one loaf of bread for the family, each day – and the KGB made frequent arrests. “They came at night, they took somebody, and no one ever saw this person again.”

Her studies gave her hope. She loved learning literature and chemistry. She studied biology and genetics. Anti-Semitism spurred her to “be smarter, and brighter, and a harder worker” – to be the exact opposite of the people who told her that she was “the worst person ever” because she was Jewish. And finally, she and her family left the Soviet Union behind in 1991.

“We were absolutely happy that we had run away from Ukraine. But the beginning was very hard.” Elizaveta’s son, a doctor in the Soviet Union, enrolled in an American medical school; without money for textbooks, he stayed up all night studying from borrowed copies. “But you know what? This is America. If you know what you have to do, if you see your goal – you will not lose yourself.”

That spirit of hard work saw Elizaveta and her family through their early years. “We worked from 4:00 in the morning to late evening.” Elizaveta worked as a nurse in California for nearly 20 years.

At her son’s urging, she retired at the age of 71 and joined him and his children in New York. “I was so scared to retire. I did not feel safe.” The fear was so strong that it reminded her of her hardest times in Ukraine.

Elizaveta’s Selfhelp social worker provided individual support and invited her to join group events. She loves attending Coffee Houses with other survivors, and taking part in virtual classes and discussions. “People feel at home... they are with us, and they do not feel lonely.”

Elizaveta is most proud of her hard work, her family, and her relationships with younger generations. Four years ago, as a participant in Selfhelp’s Witness Theater, she met weekly with high school students so they could hear her stories and bring them to life on stage. Today, “We are still friends. They come to my home. And they will tell people: Never again.”

Elizaveta often says that she knows that when she needs more comprehensive care and services, Selfhelp will be there for her – and that this knowledge gives her peace and strength.



Leonid Schwartzur

Despite having had a successful career in both Kazakhstan and the United States, Leonid found it difficult to afford the care he needed to address chronic illnesses related to periods of starvation in his childhood. Victoria, his Selfhelp social worker, helped him to obtain financial assistance to meet these and other needs.

Leonid Schwartzur was born in a Ukrainian ghetto. His mother, whom he calls “a hero,” successfully kept him and his two siblings alive throughout the war, subsisting on the potatoes she was paid for slave labor. After surviving childhood hunger and illnesses, he was able to become a successful pathologist in Kazakhstan.

Recognizing political instability as the Soviet Union began to dissolve, he emigrated to Israel in 1990 at the age of 48, and then to the United States at the age of 50. He worked in a private business until he obtained his green card and passed the medical Board exams for his specialty, and then returned to his profession as a hospital-based pathologist.

“I was isolated from the Russian community while I was working,” he explains. “But some of my neighbors are Holocaust survivors.” After he retired, they encouraged him to reach out to Selfhelp.

“That’s how I met Victoria. And for the first time, I feel better because I have more support.” Victoria, his social worker for seven years, helped him to obtain home care and food delivery, as well as restitution payments from Germany for the suffering he had endured.

“Medical care is very expensive,” he says. Victoria has helped him to obtain financial assistance for dental and hearing expenses, and to navigate insurance plans to support chronic illnesses that he traces back to his infancy in the ghetto.

He is very grateful for the community of Russian-speaking survivors that he has met through Selfhelp, and he cares for their well-being. “A lot of my friends also have support from Selfhelp... People know they are not alone.”



*Leonid Schwartzur with his social worker,
Victoria Gorelik*

Anna Leymann

Trained as a science teacher in the Soviet Union, Anna cleaned homes in Brooklyn to support her family after she arrived in the United States. Selfhelp assisted Anna with obtaining restitution payments from Germany, and provided financial assistance to purchase hearing aids and dentures.

Anna Leymann was five years old when the Germans came.

“[As we were evacuating], a German plane came and started to bomb us. My father and I, we ran from the train into a field. My father pushed me down and covered me with his body. He pressed me so strong that I could not breathe. And this picture stays before my eyes now, like it happened yesterday.”

The family fled to Chelyabinsk, Russia, near the Ural Mountains, arriving in 1942. Anna lived there for 23 years. She excelled as a scholar and developed a love of history and Russian literature, but was discouraged from teaching these subjects by a family friend who told her that she could be put in jail if she didn't teach them in accordance with Soviet propaganda. Instead, she became a teacher of physics, mathematics, and astronomy. As a teacher, she followed Kruschev's mandate to supplement her formal education by observing processes at nearby factories, which Stalin had moved to Chelyabinsk out of German-occupied territory.



Anna holds a photo from her wedding day

Anna and her family moved to the city of Simferopol, in the Crimea, in 1965, and from there to the United States in the early 1990s. Her brother arrived first, followed by Anna and her mother in 1995. Her daughter and son remained behind for two years. “They had no salaries, and no water. It was an awful time.” Anna sent them money that she earned cleaning houses, the only job she could find with limited English. She attended night school to learn English, and now she works in polling sites on Election Day.

“I'm very appreciative that Selfhelp connects all the people who live here with [reparations] money from Germany.” She is also grateful for financial assistance to obtain an effective hearing aid, and to replace her dentures so that she can eat comfortably.

Selfhelp also provides Anna with gift cards to purchase Passover food. Unable to celebrate holidays in the Soviet Union, she now proudly does so after learning Jewish traditions from the families she worked for.

Dmitriy Malakh

The stories told by Elizaveta, Emiliya, Anna, and Leonid resonate deeply with Dmitriy Malakh, a social worker in Selfhelp's Brooklyn program. As the grandson of Holocaust survivors, Dmitriy hears echoes of his family history in theirs.

"My mother's father fled from Moldova to Uzbekistan, where they lived with an Uzbek family. They had a lot of difficulty finding basic things to eat. To this day, he cherishes bread because they didn't have it for years." Dmitriy's great-grandfather died fighting for the Russian army, and his grandmother was raised by her mother – "which was very difficult, given that most cities were in ruins."

Four generations of Dmitriy's family came to the United States in 1991, most of them settling in New York. After first enrolling in law school, Dmitriy turned to social work when he realized it was a more direct pathway for him to support others.

As a social worker, "It's easier to see the impact that I'm making." He coordinates a full range of services for the 80 Holocaust survivors he works with.

"Sometimes they treat me like their grandchild," he says. "I try to keep the focus on them so that I can help them with what they need."



Dmitriy Malakh between visits to clients

The Needs of Holocaust Survivors

Selfhelp serves more than 5,000 Holocaust survivors every year, of whom approximately 3,600 were born in the Soviet Union. The four individuals portrayed in these pages are among them.

Like Elizaveta, Emiliya, Leonid, and Anna, Selfhelp's Russian-speaking clients survived tremendous threats as children: bombings, flight, starvation, and the murder of their entire communities, including their own families. Despite these difficult beginnings, many were driven to succeed professionally, while others were so stymied by the anti-Semitism they experienced in the USSR that they were unable to establish solid careers.

Even with extraordinary fortitude and hard work, it was difficult for them to find jobs that utilized their skills when they were finally allowed to leave the disintegrating Soviet Union and emigrate to the United States. They took jobs as nurses and as housekeepers, putting the money they earned into furthering their families' education. And today – despite their best efforts over a lifetime – many are in need of aid.

A 2021 survey by UJA-Federation of New York found that Holocaust survivors in New York, particularly those from the Former Soviet Union, have considerable needs:

- 79 percent live at, or close to, the poverty line
- 72 percent can barely cover their basic expenses
- One in four cannot pay for one or more monthly bills

Selfhelp's own records show a substantial demand for emergency financial assistance, particularly to pay for dental care to correct the poor-quality care provided in the USSR. Many people also come forward seeking help obtaining and maintaining reparations payments from Germany, as well as entitlements and benefits.

Personal connection is also vital. The care of a social worker, the opportunity to connect with other people who survived similar horrors, and the joy of simply existing in a free country – all of these help Selfhelp's clients to put the tragedies of their past behind them.

To quote Elizaveta: "When elderly people sing and dance [at Coffee House events], they are absolutely happy. And life is beautiful."

About Selfhelp's Services

Holocaust survivors from the Former Soviet Union had their lives destroyed by the Nazis. They lost their family, their friends, their property, and their futures. Their story is not widely understood and accepted, yet their suffering continues today because of these experiences and history.

Selfhelp Community Services addresses the needs of Holocaust survivors with a comprehensive array of services, provided by experienced social work staff:

- **Enhanced case management** to design and implement tailored care plans for each client, with sensitivity to their experiences. Clients are assessed in their chosen language for traumatic histories, symptoms, and triggers for re-traumatization.
- **Housekeeping, shopping assistance, laundry, and other chores** to reduce the risk of falls and injury
- **Home Care**, provided by home care aides who are trained in the specific needs of Holocaust survivors
- **Emergency Financial Assistance** to purchase critical items and services that they could not otherwise afford
- **Assistance obtaining reparations payments** from Germany
- **Social programs** to bring survivors together with others who share their past
- **Virtual social programs**, in both English and Russian, to provide real-time interaction for those who are isolated and frail

Because Holocaust survivors from the Former Soviet Union tend to be younger than their Western European counterparts, many remain with us even as the total number of survivors left in the world declines. It is Selfhelp's mission to serve as the "last surviving relative" to all survivors, for as long as they remain.

For more information, please visit our website at www.selfhelp.net.