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THE Heroes

YEFIM VILKIS



KIEV, "Mother of Russian cities," had a population of about one million at the time of the German invasion. When a victorious Red Army marched in on November 6, 1943, less than 100,000 wretched beings—filthy, scarred and starved—crawled out of the ruins to welcome their deliverers. Massacre, hunger, disease and deportation had done away with all the rest. Yefim Vilkis, nursed back to health, told the story of the city's death as seen with his own eyes.

A husky young fellow, still in his early thirties, Yefim went underground when the Germans came, hiding in cellars and attics, woods and fields. Any hope of resistance or sabotage soon vanished, however, for the conquerors swarmed like locusts, searching every inch of the town for fugitives.

From his various places of concealment Yefim saw the Germans kill and burn and loot under the able direction of Reichskomisar Erich Koch. The civic and religious leaders of Kiev were either shot or hanged, the bankers and merchants were tortured for their money, and all the young men and women were packed like cattle in boxcars and shipped off to the labor camps of the Reich.

The Germans stripped the hospitals, churches, libraries and museums of everything of value and then they set fire to the buildings. Homes for the aged and the feeble-minded were burned with their inmates inside, eight hundred being the death toll in one psychiatric hospital.

When Kiev had been stripped of its best, there came a lull in German savagery, but the respite was brief. Soon came an order

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that all Jews and certain classifications of white-collar workers were to be evacuated into territory behind the Russian lines where their food and care would be Stalin's problem. A date was set, and a place, for all to report, bringing with them everything they owned of value. Under cover of darkness, Yefim Vilkis slipped from home to home, insisting that it was a trick, but he pleaded with people crazed by misery.

Eventually some 100,000 men and women reported, loaded down with personal belongings. Grinning German soldiers would pile these possessions into great heaps, and then the doomed groups were herded out of Kiev to the *Babi Yar*, or Women's Ravine, about three miles from the city. It was not, as the name implies, one ravine, but a series, several sixty feet deep, covering a sandy area of four or five acres. Here—over a period of days—one hundred thousand were made to undress, for the thrifty Germans saw no sense in wasting clothes, and when they stood naked, machine guns mowed them down. Such dead bodies as did not fall into the ravines were rolled or thrown, and "labor detachments" covered them with sand and dirt.

Yefim Vilkis is not quite clear as to his movements in the days that followed, for even the little that he had seen from a distance left him "touched in the head." He remembers taking pot shots at German sentries, and thinks he may have killed two or three, but is not sure. He grew less cautious, and was picked up by a German patrol. There was a labor shortage at the time, and Yefim, properly manacled, was put to work lugging crates and boxes in a storehouse.

In the summer of 1943, with Red armies rapidly regaining all the territory that had been lost, Reichskommissar Koch grew panicky and decided that it might be wise to do away with all evidence of the *Babi Yar* massacre. With this in view, Yefim and several hundred other prisoners were sent out to the ravines, along with excavators manned by German mechanics, and the ghoulish business of exhumation began. As fast as the bodies were uncovered, the chained Ukrainians carried them to huge incinerators hastily constructed of oil-soaked timbers.

From August 19th to September 28th, according to information furnished by Moscow, smoke from these horrible pyres darkened the skies over Kiev, heavy and foul. For all the prisoners knew, the rotting corpses that they carried might have been their own wives or children, but such as cracked under the strain, crying out in rage or grief, were shot down, and their bodies burned along with the others.

Yefim Vilkis, however, had in his veins the blood of the Maccabees. Tears blinded him, and leg chains bit through to the bone, but in his heart was the fierce determination to stay alive until he could invoke the old Mosaic law. In mid-September he managed to fashion a key that unlocked manacles, and with stones and clubs the prisoners fell on their sleeping guards. An alarm was sounded and many died as they ran for the woods, but two bullets in the back could not bring young Vilkis down.

Six weeks he skulked and starved, with now and then a deeply satisfying moment as his hands gripped the throat of some German foolish enough to walk alone in the darkness. Six weeks during which he saw the Master Race, acknowledging defeat, put the torch to historic structures and blow up ancient cathedrals and revered monuments. But at the end it was his joy to meet the Red Army, and hand over to its commanders a list of every German responsible for atrocities.

GEORGE CREEL

**Portrait by
William Auerbach-Levy**

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