

Holocaust Survivor Biography: Klara Vinokur

Klara Vinokur was born in Shpola, a small town in the Ukraine, in 1927. Her mother was a dressmaker, her father was a laborer and she had a younger brother, Gregory, and an older sister, who lived near Kiev. She attended the local school with her non-Jewish Ukrainian friends.

On June 22, 1941, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union and her small town became occupied on July 30. On August 19 she was forced to wear an armband with the Star of David and forced to clean the streets and houses. In late September the Shpola ghetto was established and the entire local Jewish population was forced to live in cramped quarters with little food. 10-12 people died per day. Klara continued to clean houses and buildings for the Germans. On August 21 her father was murdered.

In the beginning of May 1942, the Nazis and local policemen announced that those were capable would be sent to labor camps. Klara's mother, afraid that Klara would be taken, sent her to a priest who was a family friend to hide for about one week. On the night that she returned home to Shpola, Klara, her mother and Gregory were taken to the Brodetsk concentration camp where local policemen oversaw their incarceration. Within a few weeks, Klara fell sick with typhoid fever and a temperature of over 100°. She was confined to a room with 20 other sick people. One day they were taken to a pit where they were going to be shot. In one moment, Klara decided to escape. She dropped to the ground and crawled through a cherry orchard for several minutes and it began to rain. The other people were shot. A girl, Riva, in a different camp heard the shooting and found Klara and hid her for three days.

Klara was still sick and decided to return to find her mother. Later in 1942, her mother gave Klara fake identification, renaming her Olga Pushenko who came from a children's home in Donesk. The family then hid with other Ukrainian friends and that was the last time she saw her mother. Gregory was hid in another family and then was taken. Klara then went to hide in another Ukrainian home but the family called the police and she was taken to the police station where she saw partisans hanged and others shot. She was suspected of collaborating with the partisans and on April 7, 1943 she was sent to a state farm. On January 26, 1944, on her birthday, the Russian army liberated her.

The next day she was shot in the left shoulder and after recovering for one month in a hospital, returned to Shpola. Her sister survived so Klara moved to Gorky, near Kiev, Ukraine. She graduated high school, married an officer, and then graduated from the Institute of Foreign Languages. She then immigrated to the United States and worked as the chairwoman of a trade union organization from 1970 to 1985. She has one son and two grandchildren.

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Witness to History Project:

The Witness To History Project is designed to further the message and lessons of the Holocaust by direct interaction between students or interested adults and Holocaust survivors. Participants "adopt" a survivor by learning his or her unique account of via listening to the survivor tell his/her story, asking questions, writing a biography, reviewing a videotape, and memorizing and re-telling the story to others. Ultimately, the participant will have the lifelong job of educating others about the Holocaust by sharing this personal narrative. Contact the Holocaust Awareness Museum to participate.

Holocaust Awareness Museum and Education Center

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