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Mott Community College exhibit tells sagas of child survivors from former Soviet Union living in Genesee County

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Mott Community College professor and program coordinator of graphic design Mara Fulmer stands behind a transparency that is part of the exhibit Recounting Memory: Flint-area Holocaust Survivors & Youth Dialogue with History at the Mott Community College Library.

FLINT, Michigan — Michael Kurkis remembers being 7 years old and floating on barrels across the Dniester River in Ukraine to flee from the Nazis. He remembers the sounds of bombs dropping around him, the sight of the water turning red with blood.

Leonid Litvak remembers the explosions that ripped through a Ukrainian village, leaving children, the elderly and horses "torn to pieces." He didn't speak or eat for days. He was 10.

Those are just glimpses of stories that Holocaust children from the former Soviet Union took with them.

Too young to fully grasp World War II, they survived a horrifying journey as Russian Jews.

Through translators, five Flint-area Holocaust child survivors from Eastern Europe — now in their 70s and 80s — shared their stories with local high school and college students.

Their words and photos are part of a new exhibit at Mott Community College's library that runs until Aug. 25 and ultimately will become part of the permanent archives of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

"Their parents did everything they could just to survive and get their children through war," said MCC graphic design student Ann Curtis, 37, of Grand Blanc Township. "Many children didn't make it. They were the first to be killed or starved. The fact that they're even alive now to be able to recount everything that happened is amazing. The stories are horrific."

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The MCC exhibit focuses on survivors who were children in the former Soviet Union who lived through ethnic persecution after the initial Nazi invasion, Operation Barbarossa, which began in June 1941.

Flint has a long history with immigrants from the former USSR after Flint native and former U.S. Sen. Donald W. Riegle Jr. championed the cause of Russian Jews, helping many resettle in Genesee County starting in the 1970s.

About 450 refugees have relocated to the Flint area through Flint's Russian Resettlement Program at local Jewish Federation and Jewish Community Services, which worked on the project with MCC.

"The main goal (of the exhibit) was to educate everybody on the fact that it wasn't Germany alone that suffered consequences for Jews," Curtis said. "It's a different point of view of what happened during the Holocaust.

"Through everything they'd gone through, they didn't harbor hatred and resentment," she said. "They didn't let it affect who they were. They had families and were kind, generous people."

Interviewed during the past year were Litvak; Kurkis and his wife, Bettya; and Nina and Leonid Yufa. Nina Yufa died in May at age 70, a month before the exhibit opened.

Her interview was especially meaningful to her daughter Irina Yufa, former Flint Russian resettlement coordinator who initiated the MCC project, and granddaughter Sara Yufa (Irena's daughter), who helped translate stories from Russian to English for the students.

"I heard their whole story, how they had to move all over the Soviet Union, how hard it was and how brave they were," said Sara Yufa, 17, a 2011 Carman-Ainsworth graduate. "This is my family's story, the struggles they went through to give me and my brother the opportunities we have now. We can't forget their stories."

Nina and Leonid Yufa immigrated to the Flint area in 1993 through the resettlement program just a couple of years after daughter Irina Yufa came.

Nina Yufa was just a baby when her mother took her, her brother and a suitcase to escape to Siberia because she heard the Nazis were killing Jews.

As a child, Nina Yufa was sick with tropical malaria but had no access to medicine and suffered from health problems for much of her life.

Leonid Yufa also escaped from the invading German army, hiding in Siberia, where his family struggled for work and food.

Litvak, 80, who moved to Flint in 1998, remembers always being on the run, with death always on his tail.

After the 1941 bombing of his town near Moldova, Ukraine, "there were dead children everywhere," he said in his transcribed story featured in the exhibit. For 12 days, the then 10-year-old drank only water, not eating or speaking.

He recalled days of marching with soldiers to another city, being bombed the entire way.

"We left a village, and it was bombed. We came to another, and it was bombed," he said. "Sometimes people are just lucky enough to survive."

There were days of being packed into a cargo train, where people relieved themselves publicly, many dying on the way, their bodies unloaded when the train stopped.

Mostly, the survivors' stories were about survival.




"The bombs fell 30-40 meters all around us. But we were all right," Michael Kurkis was recorded as saying. "And the next day, they came again and started bombing again. We could only sit there and wait for death."



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MCC Holocaust exhibit

- **What:** "Recounting Memory: Flint-Area Holocaust Survivors & Youth Dialogue with History" features first-hand accounts from survivors of the Holocaust
- **Where:** MCC Library lobby
- **When:** June 27-Aug. 25 with a reception to be held 5-7 p.m. July 12.
- **Info:** Free and open to the public

MCC graphic design professor and coordinator Mara Fulmer, whose own great-grandmother and grandmother endured a nightmarish escape from the onslaught of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, spent hours transcribing the videotaped interviews.

Fulmer said the project aimed to link high schools students from Flint, Grand Blanc and Swartz Creek to MCC students and immigrants living in their

community.

"The topic is universal. It's about persecution," Fulmer said. "Whether it's about religion, ethnic-based or about your race, those things are still happening today in some place or another in the world.

"The people we interviewed are an aging population. When they pass away, their stories go with them."

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