A story for my mother

Facts were available.
Only the truth was elusive.

By David Lee Preston
Speaking for the ghosts

Most of the town’s 6,000 Jews were murdered. Who would be their voice?

By David Lee Preston

NE RADIANT SUMMER OF MY CHILDHOOD,
on the sands of a Delaware beach, my mother
extracted a promise:

"Someday you will write my story, won’t you?
Why did she place this obligation on the
shoulders of her 10-year-old son? After all, she
had mastered English, although it was not her native tongue; her
writing was fluid, and she spoke eloquently about her life’s experi-
ences.

And why did we always vacation at the beach? My mother
didn’t care for the beach, but longed for the mountains. We went to
the mountains just once.

My mother died in December 1982 — and only after that did
I begin to look at her life, trying to find her in her letters and
papers, looking for her voice, her laugh, her touch, who she had
been, what had enabled her to survive after she lost her parents.

During the Nazi occupation of Poland, my mother, barely in
her 20s, had hidden in a sewer for 14 months. That, of course, was
the essence of her extraordinary story.

But at my mother’s core — before her parents sent her away
so she might survive; before three Poles killed their lives to hide
her; before she married an engineer whose numbered arm bespoke
his suffering at Auschwitz-Birkenau; before she taught two
generations of Jews in my hometown of Wilmington and became a
noted speaker on the horror that befell the Jews of Europe — in
the far reaches where old memories would stir her awake from
deepest sleep, in Halina Wind Preston’s soul was the Carpathian
Mountains town of Turka.

I wanted to know my mother as Feiga, the “third” her parents named her in
Yiddish, or in Hebrew equivalents, Zipporah. I wished to walk through the Jewish cemetery
where in 1919 they buried Feiga Teichman, my great-grandmother — and where,
three years later, they laid to rest her husband, Benzion, who had taught my grandfather
his trade. I needed to see my grandmother’s shop, where the sign above the entrance
said, in Polish, Ożasz Wind, nachodnyc, and where, from a trap door in the kitchen,
the family had escaped to the basement in 1941 and ’42 during every Nazi killing spree.
I needed to set foot inside the railroad station where, in November 1942 when only her
family and a handful of other Jews were still alive in Turka, my mother at age 21 took
the Catholic name of Halina Nieszkiewicz and bravely bearded a predawn train for
Lwow, never to see any of them again.

I, too, dreamed of those mountains, and of the dusty streets in the town
where Feiga Wind, and her father before her, had been born and raised; where 6,000 Jews
were the largest ethnic group and almost half the prewar population. To keep faith with
my mother, I had to determine what had happened to the Jews of Turka — and to
honour my own imperfect memorial by revealing it. For five decades, the Soviets had pre-
vented Westerners from visiting smaller towns like Turka. But
after Ukraine declared independence, what once seemed impossible
became reality.

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VER THE YEARS, MY SENTIMENTAL
fascination with Turka had become an obsession.
After my mother’s death, my Uncle Leon, her
oldest brother, who had come to the United States
before the war to attend rabbinical school, spent
untold hours answering my questions about his
boyhood home. These sessions spread over more than a decade.
He had no desire to go back, even in memories. Yet early on, Uncle
Leon presented me with an old sheaf of pressed letters writ-
ten to him from Turka, which he painstakingly translated.

I envied Leon his rich understanding of where he’d come
from. In contrast I saw myself as incomplete, a prisoner of a safe
childhood in a split-level home in a faceless American suburb, with
no grandparents and no connection to our family’s past. For me,
every Jewish name, every tiny photograph of a neighbor or class-
mate, every Polish school certificate he unearthed was a link with
my mother’s town.

Eventually I made Turka my town. Between my mother’s
time and mine, the tortured Polish city of Lwow had been
reformed into Lemberg by the Germans, then Lwow by the Soviets
— and now, as part of independent Ukraine, it was Lwów. But tiny
Turka had remained Turka, waiting for me, waiting until it was
time.

When finally I set foot in the town, with my wife, Rondee, on a
rainy afternoon just before Yom Kippur, I did so confidently, holding a pile of prewar
family photographs I’d enlarged — my head swirling with names of people, streets,
buildings, the names that had fed my imagination for so long. My mother’s long-ago
request was now a frightening command — “You will write my story” — and I saw
myself representing not just my mother, but all the dead Jews of Turka.

How do you represent ghosts? I myself might see an appearance to the Ukrainian
we would meet. Rondee was scolded that they might harm us. At the least, we assumed,
the townspeople in far western Ukraine, isolated for 50 years, would be cautious, suspi-
sious, reticent. How could I have a kinship with them? Any one of them might
have killed my grandparents.

We traveled through a picture-postcard landscape of hills and mountains,
then pulled off the main mountain pass and made the sharp turn into Turka. Colorful wood-
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Today, it is hard to find graves intact in Tuchla’s Jewish cemetery. In 1957, my mother was 16 (facing page), and her father’s shop was a gathering place for many people in the town.
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en bungalows gave way to drab concrete walls of Soviet uniformity. We crossed the bridge over the Jeloboda River, soon reaching the regional administrative building on the main street.

We parked along the banks of the Limniers River, which flows into the Jeloboda, in a town now numbering 8,200 residents. I got out and savored the air, the lazy river, the majestic mountain backdrop. Then Rondze and I climbed the steps to the administration building. Inside, regional officials greeted us warmly. Ready for our visit, they had summoned a man who could show us every inch of Turka from the perspective of the past.

Into the room he walked, tall, with bushy, silver eyebrows a dramatically curved nose. He removed his hat, greeted everyone, listened with courtesy as I explained who I was and what I was doing there. Perhaps, I suggested, I remembered my grandfather, the watchmaker?

I took out the faded photograph: a trusting face, a buttoned vest, a high shawl cap, surrounded by timepieces and neatly organized tools, an adoring girl beside him. She always told me he was steady.

"Wind," said Victor Lesyk with a mischievous smile, and a shiver went down my spine.

Victor Lesyk's big, wrinkled hands, wide fingers and dirty nails betray a life of toil. He is the son of Josyf Lesyk, the Ukrainian blacksmith of my mother's time, a blacksmith himself since 1935 when he finished the seventh grade. Like my mother, he was born in 1921. Walking to and from school, he had passed my grandfather's shop each day.

"It was pleasurable for us to look through the window and see the clocks," he says, escorting us to his own house. "When my watch stopped, my father said, 'Bring it to Wind,'" says Lesyk. But no, he says, he no longer has anything from my grandfather's shop.

Rondze is amazed that history can feel so close. And I find that, despite my nervousness, despite my duty to uphold justice, I am drawn to Lesyk. To him I may represent forgeful ghosts who should remain in the past, and for me he represents all the painful ambivalence of his generation. Yet he is as close to my grandfather as I can come. Despite my wariness, I smile along with him, happy to have this connection.

In this house in recent years, Victor and his wife, Darja, conducted clandestine meetings of the Ukrainian independence movement Rukh, hosting leaders from the larger cities Szambir and Drohobycz, mapping strategy for the glorious moment they'd dreamed of all their lives. Only twice before has independence come to Ukraine — a short-lived republic proclaimed in 1918, and a few weeks in 1941 as the Nazis were arriving in Lvow. Now that statehood is real, Victor can foresee a better life for the 8-year-old grandson who bears his name. When Lesyk was a boy, he had to go out every day to buy meal for his father. He mingled with Jews, even absorbing a good bit of their language — Hutsul, he calls it. To impress me, he uses Yiddish expressions recalled after all these years, and we share a laugh each time: A gorn Shabes! (Good Sabbath!) Goyishe, thank you.) I do say nice. (I don't know.) It feels to Rondze as if he's saying: See! I'm OK, I'm not one of the bad guys, I was close enough with these Jews to understand their language. Yet for all I know, Lesyk is a villain ingratiating himself with these expressions.

It's so unsettling, tempting invitation to let down my guard.

"We were four boys, in 1935, '36 and '37. There were Jewish — Seeman, Halperin and Binner — and I was the fourth," recalls Lesyk. "Every night after work, we would go to the industrial school." From an ash can off the kitchen comes the steady ticking of an old, rusted metal clock. Ah, Lesyk tells me with a grin, it was purchased from Joshua Wind. "Yes, I went to your grandfather's shop and bought it from him for 10 shillings, around 1935. I wind it once a week. It's been more than 50 years that it works!"

But, I thought, he didn't have anything from my grandfather's shop... I walked to the above and stood alone, touching the clock. Is Lesyk telling the truth? — or did he plunder the clock during the German occupation?

Lesyk sighs. Life was better before the war. "It was no problem to live with other nations. All the foreigners were Jews: Hirsch, Rand, Rosler, Gazer... If you wanted to buy some shoes, you went to Neusnitz or to Brenner. I bought shoes from Brenner in 1937. If you had no money, you could buy, even for 10 rubles. Because he believed me, and he let me bring 10 rubles each month. It was better. How can I tell you? They were my friends. We even had a saying: 'If you have trouble paying, go to the Jews.'"

Rondze is uncomfortable. Lesyk refers to the Jews as fritzes, but it doesn't seem to bother him that they're gone. I think, Were the Jews considered neighbors or commodities, necessary for business?

Lesyk doesn't know we doubt him. He reads off more names: "Wolf, Erdman... Weingarten had a sawmill. Reich... Weins was a dentist; his son went to school with me. Sefirt had three leather shops. There were two Jewish blacksmiths: Heger and Kottenmacher. Two seamstresses, the Fleischman sisters, both were killed in a 1942 action." During an atrocity, "they would just drag every Jew who wore an armband from the streets."

Lesyk tells us that a "plundering commission" was set up in Turka, directed by a German named Piltz. "He would go from house to house, and where there were no longer any people living, he would take all the valuables away.

Only one man did all that?"

Lesyk says some Ukrainians served as guards, but, he hectically adds, they wouldn't shoot Jews. In any case, he reminds us, anyone caught trying to hide a Jew would have been slain.

What is he really saying? Is Lesyk protecting someone?

He pulls out a photograph taken in Turka on Oct. 26, 1943. Lesyk and his two brothers in fancy clothes. One wears a double-breasted jacket that is much too small. Now I am second-guessing everything he does. I can't help but think, Whose jacket was that? How was it obtained?

An old barometer hangs in the dining room, hidden behind drapes. "Once I saw it," says Lesyk with enthusiasm, "and I asked my father where he'd gotten it, and he said, I bought it from Wind. It will always show you tomorrow's weather."

"With every "discovered" item from my grandfather's shop, Lesyk just makes us more suspicious. After all, the preser Turka postman, Drobiok, a Pole whom the Winds treated as family, had stood outside the watchmaker's shop before a winter season in 1944, waiting to help himself to the contents. "I'm waiting for after they take you," Drobiok told my grandfather without apology.

Lesyk doesn't think he has anything else — but wait: Now he puts a gold-plated pocket watch on the dining-room table. Yes, it came from Wind's shop. And now he goes to the parlor overlooking the Limniers and returns with a German-made statuette of a woman holding a clock above her head; it looks vaguely like an Emmy Award. He says his father bought it from my grandfather around 1937 as a birthday gift for his wife.

Can this story, Rondze wonders, be true? Or did Lesyk's father give a stolen object as a gift of love?

My emotions are at war: A stranger is parading my family's possessions, yet I'm happy to see them. Am I betraying my mother?

Turka, a commercial outpost at the junction of two narrow rivers in the Carpathian Mountains, was under Polish rule for hundreds of years, part of the old Austrian province of Galicia — in the Austro-Hungarian Empire until World War I — and of independent Poland by the time my mother was born. The map of Eastern Europe kept changing, but Turka was always a frontier, always near a border.

Turka was a muddy, rocky place where Poles, Ukrainians and Jews struggled together for two centuries; yet for decades almost everyone arrived, kicked and screaming, in the hands of Chava Brandeinshteyn, the Jewish midwife. Tailors and lumbermen, bookkeepers and cobblers, druggists and ink makers mingled daily with bare-foot peasants and hardly mountain men who rode in to have their horses shod on Legionov Street by Josef Lesyk, Victor's father. Thems played no frolics, and a single hospital headed by the Polish physician, Jan Oms, took all patients in a steep hillock of yellow soil accepted their bodies when they died. The statue of the Virgin Mary in the market square was tagged by Jewish shoemakers — but no Jew ventured outdoors on Easter, nor did Christians dare disturb the sanctity of yom Kippur. Every week, commerce

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LONG WHAT USED TO BE KOSCISCUZ STREET, MY GRAND-
father's shop once stood. The shop—the house in which my mother grew up—was destroyed after the war, says Loeys, and replaced by
this two-story concrete apartment house, an unfailing, institutional
building. We approach the side entrance and a gray-haired woman.
The old place was torn down about 1956, she says, but the basement
is the same. She invites us inside. I will never stand inside the watchmaker's shop, but at least I can go down into the basement that kept the family alive.
"It had a hole in the floor above," the woman says. "You can see a concrete slab here in the ceiling. That's how they closed it." She is showing us the trap-door beneath my grandfather's kitchen. When I touch the ceiling, I am touching my grandfather's iniquity.

We return outside. Two rear steps are original, the woman says, and she gives me a hammer. "Go ahead and chip away," she says. "For souvenir stones." Somewhat shrewdly, I comply, so that I can leave with a few relics from my mother's house.
The woman remembers my grandfather's family, "but it was so long ago. I've forgotten the names." We thank her, and as we walk away she calls out: "It would be nice if you came here to live once again. We would live as friends."

IN A REMOTE SPOT IN THE HILLS TWO MILES SOUTH OF TURKA, a rugged farmer stands beneath overcast skies in a field of brown grass overlooking a pine forest. This place is called Hrynow, and Jaroclaw Klimentowski Dolynsawka knows it well. He was born in Turkus in 1925, and today he lives not far from this field, on the site of a brick factory once owned by Moosie Hirth, a prominent Jew.

Dolynsawka remembers what happened here at Hrynow on Jan. 8, 1942—the day after the Ukrainian Orthodox Christmas—when the Gestapo, along with Ger-
man and Ukrainian police, began a mass murder of Turka's Jews.

"It was in the winter of 1942, the Christmas holiday," he says. "My father and I, we went to church. When we were returning home, we saw them gathering some Ukrainians and Poles who had worked at the brick factory, to dig pits for them."

Dolynsawka, his crumpled right hand in a brown glove to hide a war injury, gestures over a wide area to show the locations of the pits.

"When the pits were ready, they brought the Jews from Turka to the brick factory," he says. Dolynsawka watched the Jews file past his house: The line stretched to the center of town, a mile at least.

"The head of the line was at my house, the tail in Turka," he says. "I remember, it was a cold day, and they were barefoot. There was a whole column of them, and they were conveyed with submachine guns and with dogs.

OLD people and young people. Men and women and children. Rain began to fall. Dolynsawka's expression is grim, emphatic.

"They wouldn't let other people come close to the column, so we watched from a distance. Nobody was crying. They knew what awaited them. They seemed as if they were frozen over. It was like when I was at the front. Nobody would betray any emotions. Because they knew they were going to die."

A brisk wind blows the rain against his gray sideburns.

"It took them maybe three hours to shoot them into the pits," he recalls. "But some were not quite dead. And then people would come here to the place where they were buried—and for two or three days afterward we would see the earth still heaving."

UNDER DENSE PINES, UPON LEAVES AND POWDERY SOIL, we walk past tombsbones bowed and broken as if heartless. They reflect our feelings. Jozef Ivanovich Yurichoko trudges with us up the undulating hill of Turka's Jewish cemetery, where our great-grand-
parents were buried long before the war. The deputy chairman of the Turkas regional administration, Yurichoko is a farmer's son, born in 1935 in Turkus. He has an otherworldly story to tell.

In the spring of 1942, he was a schoolboy walking near this hilltop when he arrived upon a scene that remains vivid 50 years later.

"I saw about 100 Jews stripped to their underwear, standing in single file near a
deep trench," Yarichko recalls. "I couldn't see their faces, only that there were some women among them. There were uniformed Germans all around. I wanted to turn and go back, or to hide behind a tree or a corner. But at that moment a German officer called to me, so I came up, trembling with fear. I guess they thought I was a Jewish boy. He started asking me some questions in German, and I didn't understand anything. I was frightened, so I started crying. Then one of the officers took my bag. It took him some time, maybe a couple of minutes, to look through my books and notebooks. He saw books in Ukrainian, and my school notebooks, so then they understood that I was Ukrainian, and he just told me to go away. I started running, and I heard shots being fired. So I understood that those people were shot to death. They were single shots, like from rifles or revolvers. I started running even faster, without ever looking back.

"I don't know if anyone else witnessed this massacre, but the place could be seen quite well from the town... I went home and told my father what I had seen, and he told me to stop taking that path past the Jewish cemetery, because another time they could shoot me, too. So I stopped taking that route.

Nearby, within the well-maintained Ukrainian cemetery, sits a Catholic chapel. St. Mykhailiv. Yarichko says the Ukrainians would take people from there to the Jewish cemetery, give them shoes and order them to cover the bodies.

Even among the prewar Jewish graves around us, are we lucky to find any names. All through the wooded hill, stones have sunk into the earth, most of them destroyed. Some it is clear we won't find the graves of Feiga and Bezalel Trachman. Were my great-grandparents' stones used to pave Logoskow Street, as some old-timers have told us occurred during the German occupation? Or did it happen under the Soviets, when the street was renamed for Lenin?

To Rondze, the cemetery is the only spot in Turkia that feels Jewish. Yet here we find the taint of the murderers once again, fresh and horrible: bones and a skull, strewn beside a recently opened grave, the concrete casket lid lying on its side. I can'tudge the heavy lid; surely it took several murdered to lift it off. Yarichko looks away. "Someone should cover it with earth again," he mumbles. Nearby we find a small, opened grave — perhaps a child's — graffitied into the stone. At least we see no bones. Beyond the graves, the ground is greener, yet we find a third opened grave. No gravestone, no bones, but evidence of a recent campfire. The graveyard is a shortcut through town.

We reach the top, the wind rustling through the pines like the victims' applauding our visit. The view is breathtaking: a 360-degree vista for miles, mountains in the distance, rolling farmland, the railroad, and Turkia below.

Why is there a forest growing in this graveyard? One man had told us he'd planted the trees after the war to dress up the cemetery, out of respect for the bodies. Others said the trees were meant to hide the Jewish cemetery from view; they could not, after all, move the hill.

I need to do something, something for the dead and also something for myself. For Yom Kippur, I've brought along a tape recording of my sister chanting the liturgy, "Kol nidrei..."

Shari had studied at the same synagogue as our mother and our Uncle Leon, and is a cantor. With my wife at my side, I whimper on the tape. Just as Joshua Wind once traveled into the countryside to chant these prayers, so now his granddaughter's voice fills the hilltop, descends into Turkia below, defies the chilly wind blowing through the cemetery and rises to the heavens.

El malakh nakhisah... El malakh nakhisah... "Exalted, compassionate God, grant perfect peace in your sheltering presence among the holy and the pure, to the end of all our beloved who have gone to their eternal home..."

Yarichko knows his head. He has never heard these mournful melodies, nor can he understand the age-old Hebrew and Aramaic words. "May their memory endure as an inspiration for deeds of charity and goodness in our lives..."

But the moment is not lost on him.

"May their souls be bound up in the bond of life..."

I can speculate about the nameless innocents murdered here — but he can still see them, perhaps hear their soft cries, their final prayers, the last sounds made by Turkia Jews.

... May they rest in peace. And let us say: Amen.

N O ONE EVER STOOD TRUE FOR KILLING THE JEWS OF Turkia.

But the bloodshed did not go undocumented. Fifty years ago, on April 27, 1945, a five-member Soviet commission issued a report on the "crimes inflicted upon the population of the entire Turkia region by the German fascist temporary occupants" — including the murders of 6,386 people.

I found the report in a dusty archive in Lviv, now accessible to researchers. In the Hryniv massacre of January 1942, called the "Second Faschi" in Turkia, Germans and Ukrainian nationalists shot 800 people from Jan. 8 to Jan. 11. During five major atakias in Turkia between October 1941 and September 1942, 7,410 people were killed. In the "Big Ataka", 6,000 people from all over the region were rounded up in five days in August 1942 and taken to the Belzec killing center.

And in a sixth ataka — marked Judenschi, meaning "free of Jews" — the remaining Jews were ordered to the ghetto in Sambir. "Otherwise, according to the announcement quoted in the report, "every Ukrainian and Pole has the right to shoot Jews." This final ataka evidently occurred after November 1942, when my mother left her family in Turkia and boarded the train for Lvov.

Others involved in the six listed Turkia atakias included: Li. Strzatkow; SS soldiers, gendarmes from Turkia and Lvov; police tonsendahn, an ethnic German formation; Nazi storm troopers from Lvov; Turkia city policemen; Turkia regional policemen; Ukrainian nationalists; customs police; and forest police.

According to the report, the Ukrainian mayor of Turkia, Klimenty Pennychyn, helped shoot 50 people point-blank in an ataka on Oct. 12, 1941. Both Penschny and Stefan Ralno, a Turkia city policeman named in the report, were among the thousands of Ukrainians who retreated with the Germans toward the end of the war, according to several people in Turkia — and both men emigrated to North America.

As for Li. Eduard Strzatkow, a postwar tribunal in West Germany accused him of involvement in the deaths of 6,000 Jews. The court found insufficient evidence to prosecute him, and the case was dismissed in 1977.

THERE ARE NO JEWS in Turkia anymore. The 1989 census counted only one Jew among more than 57,000 people in the region — and none remained by the time we arrived. But one woman in a ramshackle Cabin in Liovine, a rural village outside town, is the only person in the region known to have been born Jew. On a dim, rainy morning, we pay her a visit.

Petruha Repichch sits on her bed beneath framed Christian icons and timeworn family photographs. The former Peila Kastera is 85, with cataracts and deeply wrinkled skin. She survived, she says, only because she married a Ukrainian.

Our visit triggers a torrent of memory, in almost emotionless staccato, from Repichch. In 1937, at age 28, she married Kasii Repichch, a deacon at the local church. In deference to him, she was baptized. A daughter was born in 1939, a son in 1941, another son in 1942. After the atakias began, her parents, siblings and other family members hid in the forest, and they would come to eat at night for food. Also, she says, a Ukrainian priest named Hrushovsky hid three Jews in his home in Liovine; the Germans killed the priest and his wife during an ataka.

"My mother and father were taken away and killed in 1942, during an ataka," she says, weeping slowly on the edge of the bed. "The Germans came here and took people away, to Hryniv I think, and they killed them there. During the atakias, people would drive them like cattle. Sometimes local people would drive them, too. Oy, yes, Ukrainians."

She grabs her heart and her head, pouring out details as if they had just happened.

"The Germans came to our house on two cars. My husband was asleep in bed. They asked who else was in the house. They asked me who I was. I said I was his sister. A German told me, 'Speak German to us!' I told him I couldn't speak German."

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Gernan, or well take you away? OK, so I started speaking German to them. And he told me: 'There are 100 Jews in Losiemiec. Betray them to us, and we will leave you alive.' I told them, 'No, I don't know any Jews.' I was pregnant at the time. I didn't tell them anything.

That week, while her husband was in Turka, two Ukrainian policemen entered the house. 'They were worse than Germans,' she recalls. 'I didn't know them, they were not from here. They said, OK, we're going to take you away.' I was cooking potatoes, and they told me to stop. My husband's brother was here. He told them, 'Look, she's one of us, and she showed them some documents. But they drove him out of the house and they stayed here. They told me, stop cooking! Stop cooking! Or we will kill you right here.'

I heard a shot on the porch. I was trembling all over. My daughter was standing next to me saying, Mama, mama, are they going to kill you? Are they going to kill you? O God.'

Her sister and brothers were killed in an ambush. 'It was in the spring, during the days of the great fast before Easter,' she says. 'I remember them coming to my house from the woods one night, and I gave them something to eat, and I told them to find a different hiding place because I'd heard the Germans were coming for them. And they said, No, it's all right, spring is coming, it's getting warmer. They killed all of them, and my father's brother, too.'

She pauses. 'I never thought I would be telling this to anyone,' says Pernina Repitsch.

'The Germans did not kill me because they thought I was Ukrainian. Once, I heard them speaking among themselves, and one of them said, Yes, she understands the Jewish language, but she is not Jewish. Nobody from the village told them that I was Jewish.'

In 1945, my mother wrote from Poland to her brother Leon in New York, telling him the fate of their family.

...During the 14 months in the sewer, and earlier when death looked me in the eyes, and I personally was broken, and life for me had no value, the only thing that kept me alive and strengthened my spirit was that I knew I had someone to live for.

The author at Turka's Jewish cemetery

Under cover of early-morning darkness, before the final Shabbat that wiped out every Jew remaining in Turka, young Friga Wind entered the restroom of the railway station, fished her yellow Star of David armband down the toilet, went back out to the concrete platform and boarded a train for Lvov, a Virgin Mary medallion around her neck.

Fifty years later, our own visit completed, Rondie and I stepped from the same platform onto the 6 a.m. local that carried us to the same city. We rode away from the Carpathians, away from the pristine hills of my mother's town, on tracks that had taken thousands of Jews from Turka to their deaths, and through the window I watched dawn slowly break through the mountains, rain soaking the ragged hills.

After the war, my mother returned to Turka as Halina Wind, having adopted the name under which she'd survived — and learning that her family had been murdered. Townpeople — among them her father's friend, the Polish Catholic prelate Kulakowski — greeted her kindly, wondering why she was still alive. From the basement of the ramshackle house on Kosciustko Street, she scooped up a few of her grandfather's work receipts as keepsakes. She lit candles at his workbench, then she removed the mezuzah from the front doorstep and departed, never to see Turka again.

"I went through cannot be described," my mother wrote from Poland to her brother in New York in September 1945. "Human imagination cannot embrace it... I went through a lot, but the words of our beloved father during our farewell kept me together: Don't think about us, Go, save yourself. I foresee that it will be your destiny to survive."

"How much terror she must have experienced in the crisp mountain air of tiny Turka! How comforting the filthy sewers in Lvov must have felt after she had known the dark side of Turka's nature."

Halina Wind Preston passed the task of remembering onto me. I saw it as my sacred duty to bear witness — for my mother, for my grandfather, and for all the murdered. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how Victor Lesyk obtained my grandfather's timesheets, or why my great-grandparents' graves no longer can be found, so whecler I will ever know precisely who killed my grandparents and Heiso.

What matters is that I was there. Only God can bring atonement to Ukraine for the monstrous crimes committed in its soil. God, I trust, will separate the guilty from the innocent: But my presence demonstrates that time will not erase the memory of the Jews of Turka, nor purge their blood from the haunting, haunted mountains of Ukraine.