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## 'Through Soviet Jewish Eyes'

Exhibit photographs tell stories of bravery and tragedy

BY JENNIFER BRODY ON APRIL 27, 2015

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*Curator David Shneer speaks with Soviet veterans and Holocaust survivors in February at the Midwest premiere of this traveling exhibition. The Illinois Holocaust Museum exhibition is the first to include explanatory texts in both Russian and English.*

Their position behind the camera placed them close to Russian society's elite without actually being in power.

In Russia of the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish "grandpa photographers" like Moisei Napplebaum, built their careers on portraits of Lenin and other leaders. During the brutal Nazi-Soviet war, the second generation -- that includes Evgenii Khaldei, Georgii Zelma, and Dmitrii Baltermants -- became acclaimed war photographers. Their images of soldiers marching and fighting bolstered Stalinism; others documented the grief and emptiness of genocide.

More than 60 black and white photographs -- spanning June 1941 to May 1945 -- from 12 Soviet Jewish photojournalists are featured in the exhibit, titled *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*, at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in Skokie. The exhibit runs through Sept. 7.

"This exhibit is a fantastic way to tell the Soviet Jewish story within the larger story of the 70th anniversary of liberation and end of World War II," noted Arielle Weininger, the Museum's Chief Curator of Collections and Exhibitions.

With explanatory texts in both Russian and English, this traveling exhibition offers Russian-speaking Jews a chance to explore their identity, said Michael Polsky, presenting sponsor of the exhibition and Invenergy CEO. The exhibit which includes a section on Partisans gives museum visitors with opportunity to appreciate the bravery of those who fought.

Victory Day, May 9, 1945, the anniversary of the official Soviet victory over Germany is the biggest holiday of the year for the Russian-speaking Jewish community. In Chicago, that community of 40,000 strong includes veterans like Vladimir Evelenko, 89, who witnessed the signing of the surrender in Berlin. "He was 18 then, but remembers he cried after it was signed," said Maya Gumirov, translator of the exhibit's texts and Holocaust Community Services case manager at CJE SeniorLife.

Recognition of this history is especially important while these veterans are still around, said Genia Kovelman, Director of JUF's Russian Jewish Division, a co-community sponsor of the exhibit. "We don't separate the Holocaust from World War II. This history was in our towns and cities. We had both victims and heroes," she said.

The Soviet Jewish photographers are among the war's unsung heroes; they were documenting Nazi atrocity sites three years before better known Western photographers like Lee Miller landed in Germany, according to Curator David Shneer whose award-winning book is the basis for exhibit.

They changed lenses under fire, slept in trenches, and faced obstacles getting their film back to Moscow, but managed to take "arresting photographs of the heat of the battle and war's terrible aftermath," he said.

Baltermants masterfully captures that aftermath with his grieving widow in the newly liberated city of Kerch in 1942. A smoke-filled sky tops one photograph while it is absent from the original image to the left. "The final sky was darkened to give it a more ominous feel," Shneer said. "Baltermants was quoted saying, 'The camera did not capture what I saw that day.' This is a brilliant way of responding to what a photograph is supposed to do."

By altering images or photographing staged scenes, they blurred the line between art and photojournalism. "That's the tension of the show," said Shneer.

### Shift in focus

Some photographers returned from assignments documenting Nazi war crimes in one liberated city after another only to discover their own families had not escaped death squads. "When they learn that their entire families were murdered, it becomes more personal. It's their Jewishness that shapes what they photograph," Shneer said.

This is especially true of Khaldei, whose father and all but one sister were killed by Nazis. Profoundly changed by this tragedy, "His camera is as much a tool of revenge as documentation," writes Shneer in his book. In January 1945, after crossing into Germany with the Red Army, Khaldei exacts revenge by setting fire to a German house and photographing it while Soviet soldiers destroyed a Nazi flag.

When the Red Army liberates a Budapest ghetto, Khaldei captures images of destruction and survival. Hanging on the exhibit's victory wall is his beautiful, haunting image of two survivors -- still wearing yellow stars -- standing on a ruined street. Ghetto photographs like this one were published in Yiddish, but not in any Russian -- language publication.

"In a country that today most think of as anti-Semitic, how does Stalin -- if he is all powerful -- let Jews document atrocities of war?" Shneer questioned. "I am fascinated that these photographers were Jewish and built the profession of Soviet photography. Their story could not have been told in the Soviet Union."

After the war, many Jewish photographers suffered anti-Semitism. Some were pressured to Russianize their names; others were fired. In one Soviet publication, Khaldei's photographs were among those published to commemorate Stalin's 70th birthday -- but without his name.

Now, the legacy of these photographers lives on -- in Shneer's book and on the museum's walls.

*Jennifer Brody is a freelance writer living in Chicago.*

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