

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE HOLOCAUST

# DEATH IN PIDHAITSI

by Peter Handberg

After a pogrom in Berlin in 1923, Alfred Döblin, an assimilated Jew, decided to travel to more originally Jewish settings, spending time amongst the people and environments that barely two decades later were as good as completely wiped out. Döblin's book *Reise in Polen [Journey to Poland]* will be published in Swedish translation in autumn 2019. The Swedish translator of Döblin's book, Peter Handberg travelled to Poland and Ukraine himself in 2018, or to put it more accurately, followed in the footsteps of the Holocaust.

Below is an extract from Peter Handberg's forthcoming book. In the company of Andrey, who comes from the Jewish community in Lviv, he visits Andrey's grandmother Dana in what is now western Ukraine.

### A child looks on...

For breakfast Dana made coffee on the gas hob and served bread with eggs from the hens that were pecking in the garden, having spent the night up on their perches in the henhouse. The yolks were golden yellow and tasted and smelled exactly the way I remembered from my childhood. Just as we were about to get into the car, she brought me a healing elixir for my foot. When we arrived yesterday it was pitch dark. Now I could see the incredible views across the valley and the shining cupolas of the church in Berezhany, the ruined synagogue, the steep hills and slopes, and the town where more than 30 percent of the population were murdered in the space of a few years.

Like all the towns in this area, Pidhaitsi, 30 kilometres away, has frequently changed name over the course of its history and seems to be spelled differently every time. When I spoke on the phone to a woman from Skåne, in southern Sweden, whose father came from there, at first she didn't understand what I meant: "Ah! You mean Podhajce!"

The town had frequently been invaded and was destroyed by Cossacks and Tatars. The entire population was forced to flee on several occasions. But the greatest disaster took place in

1942–1943 when virtually the entire Jewish population, who had lived there since the Middle Ages, was exterminated. The railway station from which thousands of people were deported to the death camp in Belzec on two occasions in September and October 1942, no longer exists. It was bombed to destruction during the war. Today the town is reached by bus.

We drove up to the square, and naturally we got into conversation with an old woman with a headscarf who, with her hands on her back and a bunch of keys dangling from one hand, rushed off to show us where she thought we ought to go.

"We can't keep up," said Andrey, smiling, "even though I'm a dancer."

**AFTER UKRAINIAN INDEPENDENCE** in 1991, Stefan Kolodnytsky was appointed the first mayor of Pidhaitsi. He is now retired but he has had a keen interest in the history of Pidhaitsi, not least the Jewish part of it. He lives next to the Jewish graveyard in a big house surrounded by a brick wall. A chained dog guards the entrance. He comes out onto the steps. "Of course, just a moment." We wait outside while he fetches the key to the synagogue.

"For long periods, the Jews were the majority in the town", Stefan explains, as we walk along, "but since the death of Artyk Hirsh in 1992, there hasn't been a single Jew here." When Stefan took up his post, he managed to get two streets renamed as a reminder of the town's Jewish past; he also had the synagogue repaired so that it didn't collapse. Dating from the 1630s, the synagogue is the oldest building in the town, and, despite the repairs, is extremely dilapidated. Above the entrance a text in Hebrew is



Some of the gravestones in the Jewish graveyard in the town have been vandalized.

PHOTO: PETER HANDBERG

carved into the sandstone: "This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter." Most of the interior was destroyed, but the walls bear a few faint traces of frescoes with patterns of flowers and animal motifs and the space carved out in stone for the *Aron Hakodesh*, the cabinet or holy ark in which the Torah scrolls were kept. During the Soviet era, grain was stored in the synagogue; vandals scribbled graffiti all over the walls, full of swearing and sexual insults. "But that has been cleaned off."

Before that we had walked round the Jewish graveyard, which is one of the oldest and best preserved in the whole of Ukraine, with more than 1,350 gravestones, *mazevot*. The oldest gravestone goes back to 1599. Here, too, I saw graffiti and sexual insults on some of the gravestones. Stefan points out a grave from 1648 – a Jewish man murdered in the violent Cossack uprising under the Hetman Bogdan Khmelnytsky against Polish-Lithuanian rule, which also had an agenda of pogroms, with tens of thousands of Jewish victims as a consequence, many of them also from Pidhaitsi. The renowned Messiah figure Sabbatai Zevi became a legend in Poland and Ukraine after that, and here was no exception.

Mass executions took place at the graveyard during the German occupation. Stefan's own mother, Julia Kravchuk, had witnessed a massacre by climbing a tree. He showed where

the tree had stood; now just a stump. At the time, she was living in the house that he has since inherited. One day she saw lots of Jewish women sitting against the wall of the graveyard, under guard. She recognised one of them as Rivka, a friend of her mother's, and asked: "Why are you sitting there, Rivka?" – "I am waiting for death," Rivka answered. Stefan pointed out the place where she had sat, but the wall was no longer there either. From the garden, his mother heard the shots and saw the bodies fall into the grave. But not all of them. When the Germans left (they had come from Tarnopol, now Ternopil) Rivka was still lying on the ground and was alive, although in severe pain. It was clear that she did not have long to live. Then Julia saw a man, a Ukrainian man who she did not know, come out of a garden, make his way to the site of the massacre and start to take the gold rings off the women's fingers. He couldn't get Rivka's ring off so he

chopped off the finger. "He went mad in the 50s," said Stefan laconically. "He had done that a lot."

Stefan had agreed to give us a guided tour of the town in return for a small fee. "You understand, almost every house has a story, was home to a victim, a witness, or a child of one." We had stopped at a *beth midrash* from 1874, a house where the *Torah* was studied and interpreted. Almost all of the plaster had flaked off. An old lady was raking the ground. Hens

**"DURING THE SOVIET ERA, GRAIN WAS STORED IN THE SYNAGOGUE; VANDALS SCRIBBLED GRAFFITI ALL OVER THE WALLS, FULL OF SWEARING AND SEXUAL INSULTS."**

were pecking. “That was where Pidhaisi’s *mitgnadim* went,” opponents of Hassidic Judaism. There was a library and a reading room.

A building slightly farther away was where the owner had uncovered the skeletons of two adults and a child when he was renovating the house a few years ago. They were the bones of the Jewish family who used to live there. They had undoubtedly been robbed and then murdered and their bodies hidden. So they lay there until 2007. “An unsolved crime.”

Stefan’s mother Julia had told him about a Ukrainian family in Holendra outside Pidhaisi who promised to hide Jewish families, whereupon they killed them or handed them over to the Germans after stealing their valuables.

Stefan says that nothing is clear-cut: “Some Ukrainians hid Jews, many were killed for that if they were discovered. And then there were collaborators who also took part in the mass shootings. And informants of course. And others who lined their own pockets at the Jews’ expense. But my Jewish friend Bernhard in the US was helped by Ukrainian partisans.”

**WE HAD NOW REACHED** a simple building on Sikorska Street, which was renamed after the war. This was where mother of three Kateryna Sikorska hid photographer Moishe Klyar and her neighbor’s boys Adolf and Leon Kressel for over a year. Someone informed on her and all of them were shot. Her daughter Iryna managed to survive and was later given the designation *Righteous Among the Nations*.

This was a town where ghosts emerged on every street. A town where the past was only just beneath the surface, where the houses had been replastered but the past peered through again when the plaster flaked off, as with Anton Herbrych’s kosher restaurant *Jadla*, whose adverts reappeared on the walls just a few years ago.

A Jewish house of prayer, now a home. On the corner of every street there was a story of death and brutal violence, fear, and atrocities, but also unlikely heroism. This was where the baker Max Gross lived. He was murdered with all his family, six people. We were inside the ghetto. Over there was where the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police were; the latter were forced to perform duties imposed on them by the Germans, such as rounding up everyone who was to be deported and guarding the lines of people on the way to the trains or the mass graves. One of the leaders was a man called Dornfeld, a lawyer. Another was Doctor Ridke. He returned to Pidhaisi after the war but then vanished without trace. Clearly he was troubled by his conscience. Artyk Hirsh, Pidhaisi’s last Jew, had told Stefan the story. Some of the men in the Jewish police force gave advance warning of what was going to happen before the raids began. Many people took poison, including the son and daughter-in-law of the head of the *Judenrat*, Rabbi Liljenfeld.

This is where the boundary of the ghetto was, with its fence,

barbed wire, and watchtower. “Sometimes”, Stefan continued, pointing to a recently renovated house, “people find the Jewish hiding places when buildings are renovated – mostly double ceilings. In this house, the Pikh family found a hiding place containing Jewish books and other items.”

That grey house over there was where the Pistreich brothers, Leon and Yossel, lived, born in 1921 and 1924. A Jewish police officer told them that the ghetto was to be liquidated on June 6, 1943. Together with 23 others they managed to escape into the forest. With Eliezer Haber, they found a hiding place with a Ukrainian farmer, Michail Gunchak, and stayed for 14 months in a covered hole in the ground without seeing daylight. But they survived.

**A WHITE HOUSE: LEON KLAR.** He managed to get hold of false papers and survived. In another white, two-storey house with an old Lada in front of it, a Ukrainian woman had lived with a Ukrainian policeman who assisted the Germans, giving them everything they requested. For two years she hid two Jews, Henisch and Rozmarin, on the top floor. They survived. Over there was where one of the town’s dentists had his house and practice. He was shot while the rest of the family survived.

“This is the house of one of the town’s oldest citizens, Yury Cherevko; he is quite sick now, but there is one thing he will never forget. With a friend, he sneaked through a field of corn and came quite close to the mass grave that had been dug a few days earlier and where the executions then took place. A German forced the victims out on a plank that lay over the hole. Then he shot them one by one. The German had a crate of beer next to him. He shot and drank, shot again and took some deep gulps.”

We stopped outside a shop, “*Produkti*”, a grocer’s. “Here,” said Stefan shaking his head when Andrey asked if they had coffee, “was where the victims’ clothes and shoes were brought on barrows after the mass shootings. Young women and girls were forcibly recruited to sort clothes and wash, patch and mend all kinds of garments. Rags were burnt or given away. The rest was transported away by train.”

“Where to?”

“No idea. Some central camp? I was mayor for 25 years but I don’t know everything. But,” he said, pointing where we were going, “I had access to housing information and population registration data going a long way back. Although I never met them I know the names of many people, almost none of whom survived. In 1940 alone, many Jewish children were born here: *Shlioma Kupfer, Bronia Mates, Marek Borel, Bruno Nas, Enta Vegveiser, Blima Tsvok, Minka Shtetner, Kolia Shtorkman, Renia Buhvald, Henia Beizen, Zhydana Tsitron, Ryva Verfel, Frima Vaisbrod* ... born in 1940, yes I can go on and on. What happened to them? All of them killed or died of starvation or

## “THE OWNER HAD UNCOVERED THE SKELETONS OF TWO ADULTS AND A CHILD WHEN HE WAS RENOVATING THE HOUSE A FEW YEARS AGO.”



In this shop, “Produkti”, now a grocery store, young women and girls were forcibly recruited to sort clothes and shoes that were brought there after the mass shootings.

PHOTO: PETER HANDBERG

disease. Jews lived in every house or every second house.” He pointed along the street we were walking down: “*Isaak Kreshner, hairdresser and family. | Driver Vaismilkh Volf and his wife Hudel. | What happened to the Gang and Akkerman families, 13 people all together? | Friling, owner of a shop selling fancy goods? | Leon and Salia Fuks who lived here on the town square? | Herman Keslier, casual worker? | Bar owner Davyd Friedmann? | Hatmaker Khaim Kupfer and his wife and four daughters? | Aizyk Pistrek, who traded in eggs? | Businessman Bernard Hakin who had a lovely flat here on the square and a family of five? | The Gliazar family? | Yoakhim Boitel, factory worker and his wife Amalia Laiter, the head librarian? | Fireman Israel Fisher and Erna? | Doctors Rotersman, Fridman, Falber and their families? | Lawyers Nutyk, Pomerants and Rotenberg and their families? | Miller Oskar Haber?* | There are no signs that any of these or thousands of others survived. There are also people whose full names are not given, such as *Beila the mad, Avre the hunchback* and another mad person, *Princess Sara*, who wandered around singing in the streets at night. Some didn’t even want to survive. Taras Hunchak, who was ten years old then, remembers his father offering a Jewish woman who he used to help with food a hiding place in the house. But she answered resignedly: ‘What happens to other Jews will also happen to me’. Others had a stronger will to live. Artyk Hirsh, the town’s last Jew who I spoke of earlier, told me how Goldenberg, half deaf, crept up out of the mass grave and found a place to hide. He was my schoolfriend Lusia’s grandfather.”

Slowly but surely the number of Jews living in the ghetto be-

gan to fall. Sometimes there were new arrivals from other places, but the number of inhabitants continued to shrink until the last death march on 6 June 1943. Ukrainian priest Josef Ancharsky came to Pidhaisi the same day and wrote in his diary:

**There has been an action against the Jews. In the night the poor people were fetched out of their hiding places. Everything is very sad and terrible. When I left Pidhaisi I saw a large group of Jews being taken out of the town to their death. This might be the last action in the town. [...] A small group of Germans with machine guns is escorting them. The victims walk slowly [...] They have long known that the end would be like this ... I look at their faces, see no expressions. They are as grey as the dusty road that leads to their death. ... If there are any human emotions left in any of them, they are probably relieved that it will all soon be over. That there will be an end to their suffering and the anxiety that burned their souls to pieces.**

Over and over again, the priest is struck by the impassive faces of the people condemned to death: “They are like dead robots. It deeply affects me!” At first he had thought that this meandering line only contained older people but then he realizes:

**There were young faces too. Children, boys and girls. A long chain trails along in complete silence. No words, no crying, no screams. All the movement of life had**



Ljubomyra Michailova Shelvakh tells how she in this graveyard witnessed children thrown alive into mass graves.

PHOTO: PETER HANDBERG

already ceased within them; death, that they soon will meet, is one long SILENCE.

After Stefan's shocking and detailed guided tour, we made our way across the square in silence. Andrey's interpreting skills had started to slip alarmingly: "I need some coffee!" My jottings in my notebook were virtually illegible. As the town didn't have an open café, Stefan invited us back to his house. He put the coffee pot on and brought out a plate of biscuits and a bottle of *Wyborowa*. Andrey was driving and I had no desire to drink during the day. In the evening I had promised to give a short talk to the Jewish community in Ternopil and I didn't want to turn up smelling of vodka. But it would have been impolite to decline. So I raised a glass with Stefan.

Where did his interest come from?

"From my mother's stories; they colored my childhood. And in this house," said Stefan, topping up his glass, "and in the butcher's that I pointed out earlier, my uncle, my mother's brother, hid his Jewish girlfriend Ryva Lief through the entire war. He had built double walls. They got married when the war was over. He was declared *Righteous Among the Nations* too."

HE BROUGHT OUT some papers and documents. The address of a Polish family from Pidhaitsi who lived in Skåne in southern Sweden. And the address and phone number of Bernhard Scheer. "Yes, the son of the dentist whose house we passed earlier." The father, Benjamin, was shot when he tried to escape a German raid. His wife Pepi and sons Zbyszek (later Bernhard) and Max were taken to a labor camp in Tarnopol. They managed to escape and were hidden by Ivan Kiefor, a faithful patient of their father, in the village of Szeredno outside Pidhaitsi until the Red Army invaded in March 1944. After the war, the family moved to the USA. In September 1989 Bernhard visited his hometown again, 50 years since his father had sent his daughter to America with the last boat from Gdansk, a day before the outbreak of the Second World War. "I am extremely grateful to Ivan, his wife and his daughter Olympia", Bernhard told the local newspaper, "it is thanks to them that I am still alive ... my children have gained a life."

"Bernhard and I talk on the phone from time to time even today," said Stefan smiling: "Is Minka still alive? Yes. And what about her? How sad. What's the weather like in Pidhaitsi?" – "It's sunny but cool." Bernhard, who is now 96 and lives in Arizona, usually burst out laughing: "Here in Scottsdale it's always warm! You must come over here one day, Stefan! It's good for your health."

STEFAN SHOWED US A PHOTOGRAPH of a local football team from the past. "There were three football teams in Pidhaitsi in the

1930s," he explained, "the Jewish team *Maccabi*, the Ukrainian team *Kristla*, and the Polish team *Streletz*."

"Which was best", I asked.

"*Kristla*," he answered. I didn't want to disappoint him by telling him what I had been told in Rohatyn the day before: "Considering the antisemitism, in the late 1930s it was a great delight to the Jews that *Ż.K.S. (Żydowski Klub Sportowy, the Jewish sports club in Rohatyn)* beat a Ukrainian team in the town of Pidhaitsi 8-1!"

"During the war, in the middle of the Holocaust," Stefan said, "a match was once played between Berezhany and Pidhaitsi, at the same time as a massacre was being carried out on one of the hills outside the town. Taras Hunchak, the ten year-old, had seen a massacre before – 'I'll never forget how the Germans shot the old people and the little ones. I was an eye-witness to that crime'. Now, in the stands, watching a football match, he once more saw the scenes in front of him when he heard the shots:"

Everyone was appalled by this terrible fact – here, in the square, people were playing football and up

there, up on the hill, Jews were being shot. Everyone immediately turned in the direction from which the shots had come. I saw the tragedy in people's faces, people standing next to me [and out on the pitch]. I am sure that all hearts were bleeding in that terrible moment, but we could not help the poor victims ...

WE DROVE TO SEE Ljubomyra Michailova Shelvakh, born in 1936. She was standing in the kitchen cutting onions. There were tears in her eyes and she had just cut her thumb. "Say Ljuba, I know," she said, meaning that telling her story made her sad. Could I give her anything? I wanted to give her 300 hryvnia, but Stefan thought 200 was enough. In the car she said that a rabbi from Israel had been there a few years ago and she had gone with him just as she was going with us now.

In the Jewish graveyard she walked between the gravestones to some slightly raised ground towards one side of the fence. I wanted to take a photograph first. "Why photograph an ugly old woman?" she wondered, "you should have seen me when I was a young girl." This is where I started the recording:

Ljuba: "Who shall I tell? Him? Or you?"

Andrey: "Him, him, him."

L: "And what about you?"

A: "I listen. The important thing is to record it."

L: "There used to be a path there [points], do you understand, that was where they [the Jews, under guard] went, to a hole that was dug in the ground. Do you understand?"

A: "Yes, yes."

L: "Yes. My mother and I were going to travel away. It was like this ... the Jews took their clothes off, they were only wearing underclothes. The women did the same thing – they walked there

**"HE SHOT THEM ONE AT A TIME, ONE AFTER THE OTHER. AND THEY ALL LAY IN A BIG PILE. WHILE MY MOTHER AND I WERE THERE THEY FILLED THE HOLE ROUGHLY HALFWAY UP."**

in their brassieres. And everything they had, gold and clothes, they had to put in piles. The clothes in one pile, gold and valuables in another. Yes. And then other people came and took it and sorted it and took it away on barrows. And they were forced to come nearer and stand right next to the hole [points], in a line, and there [points] stood a *falksdaitscher*. Do you understand?”

A: “Who stood there?”

Peter: “A *Volksdeutscher*”.

L: “*Falksdaitscher*, *falks* ... a man, not a Ukrainian, everyone says they were Ukrainians ... those, well they said *falksdaitscher*. And he took them to the hole where they had to go. And it was him who shot them. Yes. He shot them one at a time, one after the other. And they all lay in a big pile. While my mother and I were there they filled the hole roughly halfway up. The ladders were very long so it was probably four metres deep, what I can remember – very deep. That was what my mother said to my step-father too. And they killed everyone. Here [points behind her] there was a wall. And my mother came here from Kramartjusjka, she climbed up onto the wall and watched while they killed [the Jews]. And I watched too. I wasn’t very big so my mother lifted me up and supported my back so I could see. I remember it all very clearly. And I feel very bad when I think about all that, you understand. But it is how it is. So, there [points backwards] ... they killed, killed, killed. They came with four people – father, mother and two children. The children were small, a year old or something like that – a boy and a girl. This was what happened: first they killed her, the young woman, then her husband, then the older woman, then the older man, they killed all of them. But they left the children. And he picked up one of the children and threw her down into the hole alive. Then he took the other, threw the boy down alive. The girl and the boy were thrown down there living. I can still hear their screams in my head: ‘Mamma! Mamma!’ Then they took another Jew, killed him and threw him on top of the children. It was terrible. And so it went on. I cried so much, I was afraid that a child ... I said to mother: ‘Look, he threw a child into the hole!’ And he [the murderer] just said: ‘Hanka, go away from there. You can’t be there with your child when she is crying!’ I had become very frightened from seeing all this! ... That young woman, she had such long hair, it covered several of the others ... she wore it like young women have it now, loose, she was very young, her hair covered ... And he sent us away. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

A: “I don’t understand. Sent away?”

L: “Yes, sent us away, told us to get away from there.”

A: “Aha, to go away from there.”

**THE HORRIFIC STORIES** of children thrown alive into mass graves are told by many witnesses across Eastern Europe. Other witness testimony told of babies kicked down into graves alive or kicked with boots or shovelled in with a spade. There are numerous accounts of children whose heads were crushed often at the start

of the raids to set a tone of relentless brutality and quash any resistance.

Was it only sick brutality, excesses of violence by perverted and desensitized mass murderers who were already wading in blood? Or had there also been an order issued to save on ammunition?

**WHEN WE WERE** in Ljuba’s house, she had told us some things before we decided to go to one of the mass graves. I wrote down some points in my notebook. She had seen several mass executions from a distance. She had seen lines of Jews trailing out of the town to their deaths. At one point she said the shots were “*Kubantjik*”, which was never translated or perhaps misunderstood by Andrey. These were thus men from Kuban in Russia, possibly meaning “*Volksdeutsche*”. In any case, at that point she found herself near enough to see who the men firing were, how the execution was carried out, and how the bodies fell into the mass graves. According to Stefan and other sources, SS-Scharführer Willi Herrmann, who also led the massacres in Berezhany, was one of the most active. Before the war he had been a locksmith. After the war he returned to his occupation before being sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment in 1966.

Stefan: “Yes, that was some of what she saw.”

L: “Yes, that’s what I saw. First ... listen. Then, another time, they killed every tenth person. So my mother said: ‘We’ll go now so you aren’t scared. Because they’re going to shoot them now’. You will understand who ‘they’ were. And they killed every tenth person. First they killed everyone in one house and then everyone in another – took them, brought them here in carts. There are several graves. Here, two in Vukach and in the old town.”

A: “Here, here?”

L: “Yes, I told you.”

A: “And the people fell straight down into the hole?”

L: “They fell down into the hole. They walked and walked and walked and then down into the hole. That’s why they said to them: ‘Walk!’ There was a plank over the hole, a plank, do you understand?”

A: “Yes, yes.”

L: “A plank. And they walked out on the plank.”

Stefan: “And where did they shoot?”

L: “Where? At the people!”

S: “Did they shoot them in the back or in the neck?”

L: “No, no, they ...”

S: “Did they shoot them in the chest?”

L: “They shot them from behind. Shot from behind, yes, here [shows where on her body with her hand] in the heart.”

S: “You also talked about the woman who was pregnant.”

L: “No, no, I’ll tell you about her later. So ... they killed them, they did it like this. They killed some, fetched more, killed them, fetched more. When I was out with my mother we came past one of the graves. I hadn’t seen the shootings there. But when I came

with my mother, a woman said the grave was moving. Blood, that liquid, it ran all the way down to the walls of the houses. The dogs ... they hadn’t even covered the graves properly, some dogs came with a head, others with a leg. I lived in all this but it was terrible. Living in that fear. Yes. And about the pregnant woman, I was coming along with my mother ... when a hay cart came past. Mother and daughter. She was pregnant, about to give birth, the same day or the next maybe ... And he [the Ukrainian policeman] hit the pregnant woman with ... that, weapon, the wooden bit ... how do I explain it?”

A: “Do you mean the butt?”

L: “Yes, hit her with the butt. And he ... the German killed him and left him there.

A: “Who killed who?”

S: “The boy who was brutal to the woman.”

L: “Yes, he killed the boy.”

A: “The German? And the policeman hit her?”

S: “The German killed the policeman.”

L: “The Germans. Yes the Germans.

He said: ‘Why did you do that? Can’t you see her condition?’ And then he killed him.”

A: “Did he shoot him?”

L: “He beat him to death. I don’t remember. I watched – and his feet were already on his head. And he was thrown in with the others. So. Is there anything else you want to ask me? There were two graves I saw.”

A: “Have you told this to anyone else?”

L: “I told you, I told that rabbi. He said he was a rabbi. As young as you are.”

A: “And the Germans? Have Germans come here asking questions?”

L: “No Germans ... that was what I saw. My mother might have seen more.”

A: “Do you have children yourself?”

L: “Why wouldn’t I? I have six grandchildren ... and six great-grandchildren. And four children.”

A: “Are they all healthy?”

L: “All of them. One died. One died.”

A: “Who? A grandchild?”

L: “No, my son. He was 37. The other three are living. One is at the power station in Zaporizhia. Yes, I was asked about the Ukrainians ... with the Jews or ... how they lived together. The rabbi asked me that. And I answered very well. Ukrainians and Jews. Definitely.”

A: “Why do you think the Germans did this? How could they do that? Why?”

L: “How should I know? I don’t know. Don’t know so I say nothing. It happened very suddenly. We were forced to break stones [Jewish gravestones used for building roads], my mother told me about it.”

A: “The Ukrainians?”

L: “Yes. We crushed rocks and pushed them on barrows, and

the Germans took them. We were forced to work. Is there anything else?”

A: “We haven’t upset you?”

L: “No, no.”

A: “Peter says to give you his heartfelt thanks. He is very grateful.”

L: “Thank you to you too. God bless you.”

Although I only understood parts of the conversation, I could clearly see the mental energy she possessed. The old fear surged up once more and was expressed in her gestures, in the shadows of her face. Her eyes filled with fear again. She carried with her the terror, fear, the horror, the screams, the shots, the blood, the smell of decaying flesh, everything that happened 75 years ago; she had carried it with her for most of her life. And although I had only understood fragments, still I understood. Terror is faster than words. It is there, in concentrated form, and it takes a while for it to find a spoken form – first come incomplete words, concepts. It was like it is with a drug where it tends to work before you have even taken it (in my own case in the past

*Ljunglöfs Ettan* tobacco snus). Back in Sweden, I would read the transcription and the translation and her face would once more appear, full of the fear and tears of the 7 year old she once had been.

**DID GERMANS COME** to Pidhaisi these days? I asked her finally. No, Stefan answered for her, never, though actually yes there was a coachload once. They were visiting the graves of some German soldiers and demanded all manner of answers from the local council.

Ljubomyra said she could walk back. We said our farewells one more time. The last I saw of her was her briskly cutting across the Jewish graveyard to her little house on Spasivska Street where she would carry on making soup for dinner that evening with some of her grandchildren. ❌

Peter Handberg is a Swedish author and translator. Among a long lists of books and novels he is the author of two works of literary nonfiction about the Baltic States, and two collection of essays of which the latest, *The Disconnected Heaven* was published in 2011 to critical acclaim. Handberg has also been widely praised for his translations to Swedish, particularly his interpretation of Thoreau’s *Walden*, published in 2010. The coming book of Handberg *Världens yttersta platser – Judiska spår* [The World’s Outermost Places – Jewish Traces] will be published simultaneously with his Döblin translation in the fall of 2019 on the publishing house Faethon förlag.

**“THE OLD FEAR SURGED UP ONCE MORE AND WAS EXPRESSED IN HER GESTURES, IN THE SHADOWS OF HER FACE. HER EYES FILLED WITH FEAR AGAIN.”**