

Books

“Rose’s Odyssey” is an absolutely riveting story of surviving the Holocaust that tells a story quite different from almost any other Holocaust story you might have read.

By **BERNIE BELLAN**

In the spring of 1984, Dr. Meir Kryger (whose name is no doubt well known to many readers as the “sleep doctor” who spent many years in Winnipeg), his wife, Barbara, and daughter, Shelley, along with Meir’s mother, Rose, went to Rome where they were to spend Passover with Meir’s cousin, Henry Welch.

It was during a Passover seder in Henry’s apartment that Rose Kryger opened up - for the very first time, about what had happened to her during the Second World War. As a child of Holocaust survivors - and like so many other children of Holocaust survivors, Meir didn’t have a clue about his parents’ past, but as a child, he didn’t consider that unusual.

As Meir notes in his mother’s recently published memoir, “Rose’s Odyssey,” “I eventually learned that what is considered normal is quite different for children of Holocaust survivors. I never touched a single artifact from my family that predated the second World War. I thought that was normal. I never knew grandparents. I thought that was normal. As I was growing up every family that I knew had survived the horror of losing everything. I thought that was normal. Our family had no place it considered home, even when we were living in Montreal. I thought that was normal. Most of the adults I knew while growing up had horrible unspeakable memories locked up that were never discussed.”

Now, there have been countless memoirs and accounts of Holocaust survivors published over the years, but in many ways “Rose’s Odyssey” is unlike any other that I have ever read. In the first place, Rose, her husband Sam, sister Ghenia, and nephew Zvi (who later adopted the Anglicized name Henry), ended up traveling east from Poland to escape the Nazis, in contrast to so many other accounts of survivors who either remained trapped in Poland or managed to escape by going west.

Reading about the travails that beset those four individuals beginning in 1939 and through to 1945 is horrifying, but in a totally different way than it was for the millions of victims who didn’t manage to escape Poland.

A second aspect of “Rose’s Odyssey” that was so totally gripping is the matter of fact language that Rose uses in describing what happened to her. As it turned out, Rose had compiled a very detailed set of journals in which she described her experiences - both during and immediately after the war, along with those of her husband, sister, and young nephew.

As Meir Kryger notes in the prologue to this book, however, it was only after Rose’s death in 1993, in Montreal, that his sister and he actually discovered those notebooks, all written in Yiddish. As well, there were two audiocassettes in which Rose had also told what had happened.

Henry Welch actually translated Rose’s words and published a book in 2004 titled “Passover in Rome.” That book went out of print, but during Covid Meir reread the book and “felt the book needed to be made available again.”

Thus, after revising the original “Passover in Rome” and updating it with new maps, photos, and a glossary of Yiddish expressions, “Rose’s Odyssey” was published in 2022. It is available on Amazon as both a paperback and in Kindle format.

While the mere fact that the four individuals whose story is told in the book travelled over 18,000 kilometers from 1939-1947, which is when the story ends with Rose and Sam going to Palestine, is astonishing enough, it is reading about all the horrendous experiences they endured - yet somehow managed to survive, that makes this book so compelling to read.

In conversations with Holocaust survivors myself I’ve often asked them what it was that they think kept them going when so many others around



Rose’s Odyssey

Rose Kryger Henry Welch Meir Kryger

Book cover - the three young women seen here are (l-r): Rose and her two sisters, Ghenia and Sally. The picture was taken in Lodz in 1926. All three survived the Holocaust.



Rose’s son, Meir Kryger, who spent many years in Winnipeg where he became famous as the “sleep doctor”

turned out.

But it was Rose and Ghenia whose abilities to endure anything thrown at them which made me write to Meir Kryger at one point when I was about halfway through reading the book, saying that I just “couldn’t put it down.” Of course, knowing that all four survived the war - even before I began to read the actual story of how they survived, told me that there wouldn’t be a

shocking surprise - which might have made me hesitant to want to continue reading what is, in no uncertain terms, a true horror story.

Yet, some elements of the story related such abject descriptions of suffering that once I had finished reading certain chapters I just has to take a break from finding out yet another story about the absolute degradation that was forced upon those four individuals.

At the same time though, the book is a remarkable adventure. Traveling 18,000 kilometers - on trains, boats - leaky rafts at one point, camels at another point, and very often, simply on foot, would make anyone wonder where Rose and Ghenia, in particular, drew the strength to carry on?

From managing to survive a slave labour camp in Siberia their first winter after escaping to Poland to constantly seeking a warmer place where they might live, Rose and the others reached what must have been the nadir of their journey when they found themselves in Kazakhstan in 1941.

In a chapter titled “Worst Winter of Our Lives,” Rose describes having to deal with a typhoid epidemic that swept through the hellhole in which they found themselves, known as “Zhyd Ken Chek”:

“We were in the middle of the Kazakhstan Steppes, where the wind runs wild without any obstacles. Outside there were no trees and very scarce vegetation. The highest tree was a small bush not higher than 8 to 10 inches. That little bush dried by the wind became the only fuel we had to cook, bake and heat our kibitka. We collected these bushes and stored them in our hallway.”

In the course of the chapter, Henry Welch who, from time to time in the book, adds his own commentary to Rose’s words - sometimes to clarify certain aspects of the story, at other

times to give his own perspective on something she has written, describes what happened to him in Zhyd Ken Chek:

“The minute we got into this settlement, I got sick.

Continued on page 8. See “Rose’s Story.”



Maps showing the route taken by Rose, her husband, Sam, sister, Ghenia, and nephew, Zvi, from 1939 - when they escaped from Poland, to 1945, when they returned home.

Rose's Story

(Continued from page 7.)

I got pneumonia, then a horrible case of diarrhea and finally typhoid fever like everybody else. It was very unusual because I was never sick since we left our home in Lodz. I sure made up for it all at once in Zhyd Ken Chek.”

As typhoid fever swept through the settlement, however, everyone there became infected at one point or another that horrible winter.

Even as I'm writing this, I have to pause to consider what Rose wrote about that typhoid epidemic, in her typical unsentimental “just the facts” style of writing: “That winter Zhyd Ken Chek turned out to be a death trap. Of the 128 people who had arrived at the end of December 1941, only about 25 survived by the time spring of 1942 made its slow appearance. The four of us were among the survivors.”

But, as if that weren't enough, Rose adds this note about one of the huts that had housed 45 men: “That ill-fated single men's hut; out of 45 strong, young men, only two or three survived. The rest of them died during the typhoid epidemic. There was no medication, no medical assistance and not enough food. I would visit them from time to time and bring whatever food we had to spare.”

Returning to the question which I had posed previously: Was there something special that allowed Rose, Sam, Ghenia, and Ziv to survive when so many others didn't? Rose herself gives no clue as to what it was that enabled those four to survive, but there is a hint that Ghenia had an exceptional ability to improvise to the point that she became a skilled black marketer in many of the outposts where they found themselves, and that proved crucial to the wellbeing of all four.

Whether it was trading various food items or other different commodities in their possession, reading about Ghenia's resourcefulness is not only fascinating, it's highly entertaining in many respects.

And, in the end, as gut wrenching as so many parts of “Rose's Odyssey” are - and how could any story of surviving the Holocaust not be - it's also a story of triumph - of taking all those blows leveled at the four individuals who faced unremitting challenges together, and persevered.

The book doesn't end with the end of World War II, however. Rose and Sam end up returning to Poland, where they found out that Rose's other sis-

As my mother used to say, may she rest in peace; when it comes — it comes in bunches. I got measles. After the measles,

ter, Sally, has also survived the war. even though she had been taken to Auschwitz, as had several other of their relatives. But the Poles were decidedly unwilling to welcome Jews back into their midst, so Rose and Sam ended up making their way to Germany where, in one of the great ironies of the aftermath of the war, many Jews did find a welcome mat laid out for them.

Eventually though, Rose and Sam could simply not accept the notion that they would live their lives amidst the very people who had brought about the Holocaust in the first place. As noted, Rose's journey ends with her and Sam emigrating to Palestine, along with their two children, Marylka, who was born during the war, and Meir, who was born in 1947. I should also mention that Rose did have another child - a girl named Gucia - in Siberia, but because there was so little food, Rose could not properly nurse the child, and she died after three months. Rose never got over the loss of that child and, while she didn't attempt to put it out of her mind at any point, her iron will to survive led her to find the inner strength to carry on.

Again, reading out about Holocaust survivors who went from Poland to Siberia - and then to even more distant lands, never knowing when they would have to move again, and then returning to where it all began - is an engrossing story in itself. The fact that this book is so well written is a credit not only to Rose Kryger's vivid account of horrific events, but also to Henry Welch and Meir Kryger, both of whom contributed to the editing of this absolutely compelling story.

Even though the book was self-published somehow it made its way on to the reading list of none other than Arianna Huffington, author, entrepreneur, and founder of the Huffington Post, who was effusive in her praise of the book, writing “I love this book: it is compelling, enlightening and at times, heartbreaking.”

One final note: Meir Kryger had contacted me about this book back in August when it was first published. I told him back then that I simply didn't have time to read it because I was quite busy putting out the paper - although I did say that I would try to find time to read it at some point. If only I had known then how good a book “Rose's Odyssey” was; I can only hope that this review leads others to making that same discovery - sooner rather than later, as was unfortunately the case with me.