
NATION

Her family tried to poison her during the Holocaust. Today, she tells her story

Alexis Shanes [NorthJersey.com](https://www.northjersey.com)

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GLEN ROCK, N.J. – Frances Malkin was 4 years old when her family tried to poison her while they took refuge among hay bales in a pig barn in occupied Poland.

Malkin wouldn't stop crying as her family hid from a grisly fate, and they worried she would reveal their location to Nazis trying to kill Jews.

As a last resort, they shoved a poison pill in her mouth.

After decades of silence, Malkin shares her survival story with listeners in her adopted country, America.

She tells her story using a traveling exhibition. Audiences can gaze at letters, maps and black-and-white photos depicting the horrors of the previous century. A series of 10 posters showcases a Russian perspective on the Holocaust.

The exhibition was developed by the Moscow-based Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center.

“We’re trying to find historical truth and common ground,” says Igor Kotler, CEO of the New Jersey-based Museum of Human Rights, Freedom and Tolerance, which has a partnership with the Russian Holocaust Center. “While presidents fight each other, people have to find common ground.”

For Malkin, the unthinkable described in the exhibit is more than a weeknight history lesson. The photos on the posters pale in comparison with her words, which paint a picture of an extraordinary childhood marked by dire threats.

The invasion

Malkin was born in 1938 in the eastern part of Poland that is now Ukraine. Her family owned a confectionery store. Life was normal.

Then, in 1939, Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin signed a nonaggression pact, the two countries invaded Poland and World War II began.

“Communists came in, and everything was taken away,” Malkin says. “You were not allowed to own property.”

Malkin was a small child, so she doesn't remember much from when the Jewish community in Sokal was forced into a ghetto, “a few square miles surrounded by barbed wire.”

To help tell her story, she relies on her uncle's diary – written in Yiddish and translated into English and called “Years of Horror, Glimpse of Hope: The Diary of a Family in Hiding.”

Many of Sokal's Jews were rounded up and put on trains just beyond the ghetto. If they survived the train ride, they were gassed at Bełżec, a Nazi camp.

Roughly half a million Jews died at Bełżec, which was among the deadliest camps and a major part of the “Final Solution.” Bełżec was an extermination camp, and few who were deported there survived to give testimony.

Though they avoided the trains, tragedy struck Malkin's family when all Jewish men ages 14 to 60, including her father, were ordered to report to the town square for labor assignments.

“He came in, he picked me up, he kissed me. We didn't find out until two years later,” she said. “When the Jews arrived, a crowd of Ukrainians was waiting for them. They selected 400.

“They were shot.”

In hiding

Malkin's uncles, longtime residents of the area who knew all their neighbors, often sneaked out of the ghetto at night in search of a family willing to hide them, she said. Otherwise, they would face death at Bełżec.

Hiding Jews was punishable by death.

"Everybody said no," Malkin says. "Everybody said no, except for one woman."

Francisca Halamajowa had thrown out her husband, a Nazi. In 1942, she and her daughter agreed to shelter two families.

Inside Halamajowa's pig barn, a ladder led to a trap door, which led to a hayloft. That hayloft became home to Malkin and a dozen others for the next 20 months.

Malkin, the youngest, promised she wouldn't cry. Crying would lead to discovery – and certain death for her family and Halamajowa.

"And this I remember: When we left the ghetto, people were being rounded up," she said. "There was mayhem. I started crying."

Halamajowa beat the pigs, so they cried, too, masking the toddler's wails.

When Malkin wouldn't stop crying, her family came to a terrible decision.

The only way to defeat the Germans was to survive, they reasoned. They would have to sacrifice Malkin to save themselves.

Her relatives brought poison with them. They gave Malkin a lethal dose.

"I kept pushing it out," she says. "They pushed it in. I fell asleep."

They planned to place Malkin's body in a burlap sack and put it in the nearby Bug River. Unknown to the rest of the family, Malkin's mother planned to jump into the river after her daughter and drown herself.

They never had to use the sack.

"She went to pick me up and felt the pulse," Malkin says. "At that point, they decided I was the miracle child."

Halamajowa continued to care for her hidden charges, bringing them buckets of food and taking away their waste.

Halamajowa threw parties for Germans, so neither they nor her neighbors would suspect the truth.

When the Soviet army liberated Sokal in July 1944, Malkin's family realized they weren't the only people Halamajowa hid. The matriarch had saved a family of three who lived downstairs. One refugee, Malkin's aunt, died in hiding.

"Six thousand Jews lived in the town," Malkin says. "Thirty survived. She saved 15 of them."

Liberated

Malkin's mother knew there was no life for them in Poland. Mother and daughter headed west to Austria, where they waited in camps for displaced people.

Her mother found an uncle in the USA willing to sponsor them. In 1949, at age 10 and with no English skills, Malkin moved to Newark, New Jersey. She graduated from high school, married and had a daughter.

Her mother never remarried. For the next 60 years, they never talked about what happened.

"Until 10 years ago, I was totally blocked of it," Malkin says. "I never spoke to my mother. It wasn't mentioned."

For that, Malkin says, she's sorry.

"Talk to your parents, grandparents," she advises. "Learn their stories. Everyone has a story."

The United Nations-designated International Holocaust Remembrance Day is Jan. 27, coinciding with the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. This year marks the 75th anniversary.

Yom Hashoah, which marks the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, is April 21. It corresponds to the 27th day of the month of Nisan on the Hebrew calendar.

*Contact Alexis Shanes via email (shanesa@northjersey.com)
or Twitter ([@alexisjshanes](https://twitter.com/alexisjshanes)).*