

Ed Kaye

In August 1939, Ed Kaye was preparing to travel from his home in Pruzhany, Poland, to Palestine for university studies. He abandoned his plans when Hitler's army invaded Poland on September 1.

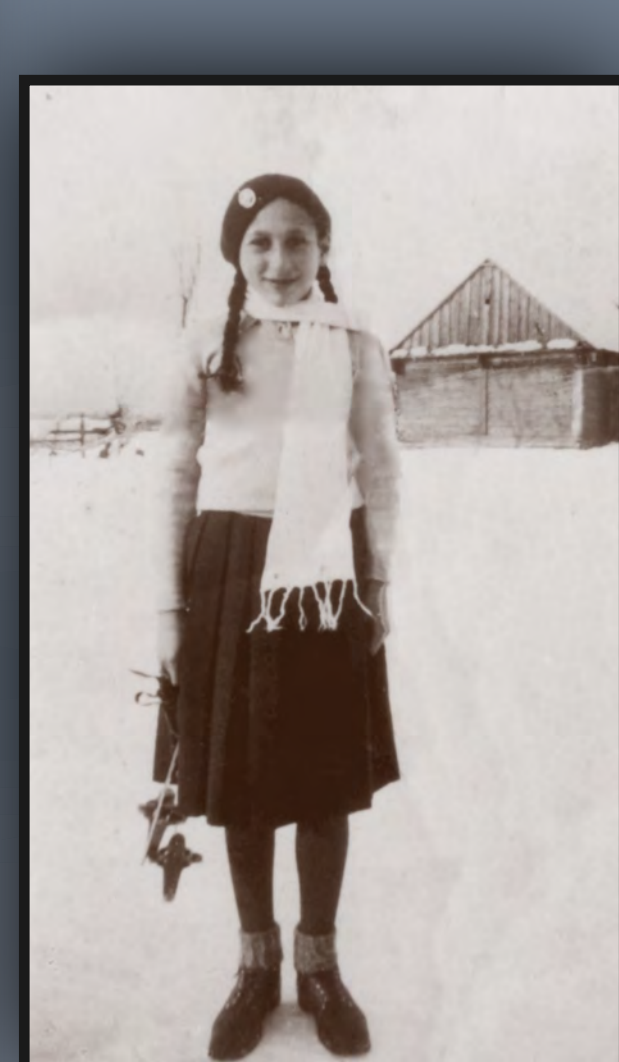
In the years that followed, Ed and his family endured occupation by Communist Russians and persecution by Nazi Germans. Ed escaped to the forests and joined a group of organized guerrilla fighters, known as partisans, to fight the Nazis. During World War II, 20,000 to 30,000 Jews escaped from Nazi ghettos and camps to form or join partisan groups that resisted the Germans.



Ed at 14 years old, 1935.
Ed Kaye Collection, Holocaust Center



Ed Kaye, left, and Jacob Epstein, c. 1935.
Ed Kaye Collection, Holocaust Center



Ed's sister, Sarah Kaganowicz.
Ed Kaye Collection, Holocaust Center

Childhood in Pruzhany



Pruzhany Marketplace, c. 1919.
Holocaust Center Collection

Ed Kaye was born Mendel Kaganowicz on February 18, 1921. His parents, Meyer and Laya (née Goldberg) Kaganowicz, had three children. They lived in Pruzhany, Poland (Belarus today), a small town with a large Jewish population. Ed's family had lived in the area since the 1400s. His father owned a lumber yard and his mother stayed at home to raise the children.

Ed returned to Pruzhany. In September 1941, the Nazis established a ghetto. Ed and his family were among approximately 10,000 Jews from Pruzhany and nearby communities forced into an area less than one square mile. Ed joined a Jewish resistance group in the ghetto. On work assignments outside the ghetto, they stole weapons and ammunition left by the retreating Soviet Army and stockpiled them for future use.

Ed escaped the ghetto with a group of 18 men and women. They crawled into a drainage ditch and slid under the barbed wire of the ghetto fence. After waiting for the guard above the ditch to leave, they carefully made their way across a frozen lake and through the town to the forest beyond. On January 28, 1943, shortly after his escape, deportations from the Pruzhany ghetto to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp began.

Soviet Occupation

German invasion of Poland, September 1939.

On September 1, 1939, the Nazi army invaded Poland and started World War II. Poland was divided between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, signed in August 1939. The Soviet army occupied Eastern Poland, including Pruzhany.

The Communists were hostile toward capitalists and merchants like Ed's father. The political antagonism affected Ed, who was asked to leave one school, and after graduating from another, was unable to find employment as a teacher. Finally, Ed was trained as a building inspector and went to work in Domachevo, Poland.



Holocaust Center Collection, based on information courtesy United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Nazis in Pruzhany

On June 22, 1941, Germany broke the pact with the USSR and invaded the Soviet-occupied Polish territories. Nazi soldiers beat Ed's brother Reuben to death near Pruzhany. In Domachevo, Ed witnessed numerous Nazi abuses. In one incident, Nazi officers shot two older Jewish men. Then they ordered two other Jewish men to recite the Kaddish (Jewish mourner's prayer) while they urinated on the bodies. This degrading offense convinced Ed to defy and fight against the Nazis.

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An open grave in Pruzhany, found after the war, containing the first victims of the Nazi invasion.
Ed Kaye Collection, Holocaust Center



Partisan

Ed Kaye, left, and fellow partisans Shaye Pomeranic and Avreml Ribnik, 1944.
Ed Kaye Collection, Holocaust Center

The partisans had to scavenge for food and supplies from nearby towns and farms. Once, Ed's group found a mound of potatoes. They divided them up—one potato per person per day.

Ed and his group were inexperienced. One night as Ed and a few others returned from a foraging expedition on the outskirts of town, German soldiers followed them back to camp. When the Nazis attacked, the partisans who were awake escaped, but those who slept were killed by grenade explosions. Partisans also had to evade local residents who might trade them to the Polish police for a kilo of sugar or bottle of vodka.

Ed's Jewish *otriad* (squad, in Russian) met the Kirov Otriad, a Soviet partisan group. Encounters with other partisans could be dangerous, since many non-Jewish groups fighting for their own political and nationalistic reasons were antisemitic. Ed decided to enter the Kirov Otriad because it was larger, well-armed, and better at finding food. During one mission, after a non-Jewish partisan helped Ed up the muddy bank of a river and realized he had helped a Jew, he said, "Why did I have to stretch my hand out to a Jew—and save another one?"



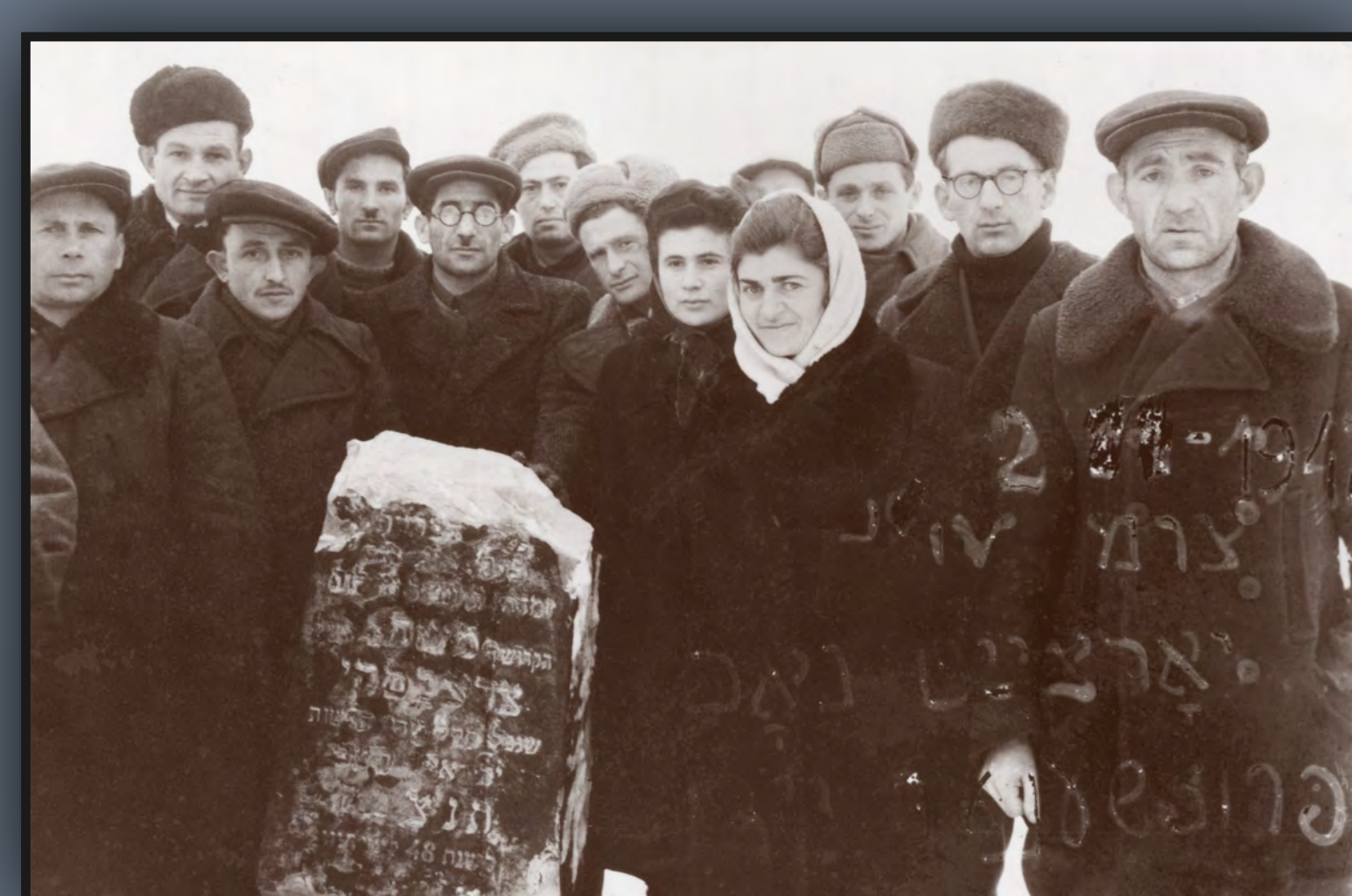
A Jewish partisan, Boris Yochai, plants dynamite on a railroad track near Vilna, c. 1943.
Courtesy United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, from YIVO Institute for Jewish Studies

The partisan groups sabotaged the Nazis. They destroyed telephone lines and railroad tracks whenever possible. Loaded down with ammunition and weapons, Ed's *otriad* could cover about 21 miles a night.

On the rainy and windy afternoon of June 5, 1944, Ed's *otriad* marched along with many other partisan groups for miles and stopped close to the Moscow-Berlin railroad tracks. Small groups were each given four sticks of dynamite, which they placed at the tracks, lit the fuses with their cigarettes, and blew up the railroad for miles. Later they learned their operation coincided with D-Day, the allied invasion of Europe.

By the end of the war, Ed had completed about 25 missions. The Soviet government honored Ed with two military decorations for his valiant fight against the Nazis.

After the War

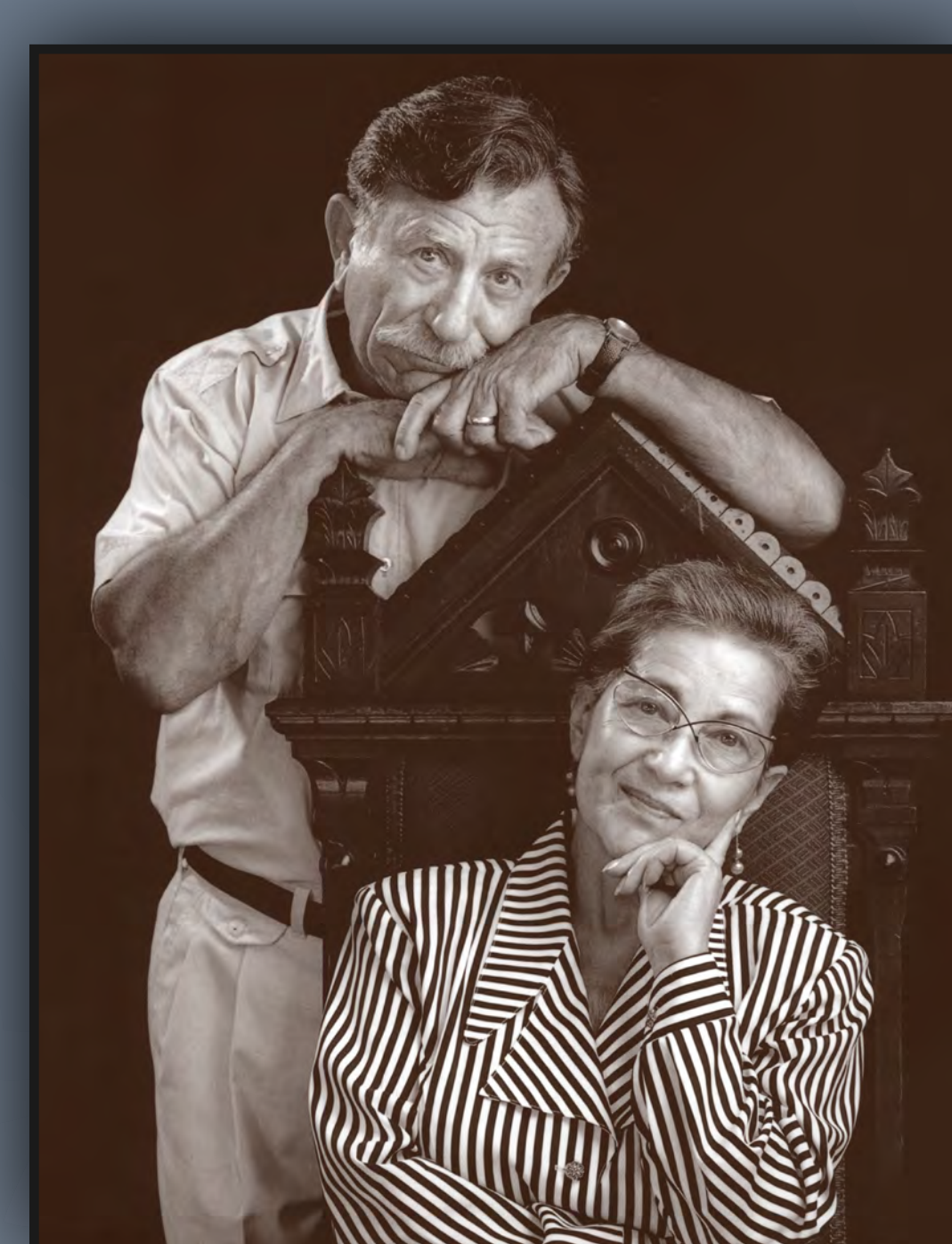


A group of survivors at the Pruzhany cemetery after liberation, 1945. Two of Ed Kaye's fellow partisans are pictured: Avreml Ribnik, second from left, and Shaye Pomeranic, seventh from left. Ann Pomeranic, later Ed's wife, is in the center wearing a scarf.
Ed Kaye Collection, Holocaust Center

When the Soviets routed the German army from Pruzhany, Ed returned home and found the town burned and nearly destroyed. Ed reunited with Ann Pomeranic, who had survived Auschwitz, and they married in 1946.

There were few other Jewish survivors in Pruzhany. The non-Jewish residents were extremely hostile to returning Jews, and one said to Ed, "Why did you live and come back?" Ed and Ann left for Stettin (Szczecin), near the newly reconfigured border with Germany. Ed helped smuggle Jews out of Poland.

Jewish agencies in Seattle sponsored Ed and Ann. They came to the United States in 1949. Ed and Ann raised their two daughters in Seattle.



Ed and Ann Kaye, 1997.
Courtesy Nick DeGala. From DeGala, Nick, *Triumph and Spirit*. Triumph Spirit Publishing, Denver, CO, 1997.

"Jews weren't sitting on their hands. We spilled our blood and laid our lives down to destroy the Nazis."

RESISTANCE

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