Interview

Inna Kalenska*

"My Mother was Identified as Jewish by Our Neighbors." Interview with Viktor Zinkevych

https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2025-0002
Received February 13, 2025; accepted February 25, 2025; published online March 26, 2025

1 Introduction

The voices of Holocaust survivors, especially those who endured the tragedy as children, remain an essential yet often underrepresented part of historical discourse. In the decades following World War II, their testimonies were frequently overshadowed. While there were early efforts to document their experiences, such as *The Black Book*, many testimonies were lost to time, suppressed by political circumstances or personal trauma. Recent scholarship highlights the crucial role of oral history in reconstructing these silenced narratives and understanding how survival, memory, and identity were shaped in the postwar years.[1]

This interview is part of the "Names" research project, initiated by the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, which seeks to restore the identities of those lost in the Babyn Yar massacre. The project has assembled the most comprehensive database of Babyn Yar victims, currently documenting over 29,000 names, and continues to expand through archival research, personal testimonies, and visual documentation. By preserving individual voices, the project challenges historical erasure and provides a deeper understanding of the Holocaust's human dimension.

This interview was conducted with Viktor Zinkevych, a Holocaust survivor, who was born on July 22, 1940, in Kyiv. His life was shaped by the trauma of early loss and the horrors of Nazi occupation. His mother, Yevheniia Pechenyk, worked as a nurse in Kyiv's Pavlov Psychiatric Hospital and was executed at Babyn Yar after being

1 Oral history plays a crucial role in Holocaust research, particularly in preserving the testimonies of survivors whose voices were often overlooked in the postwar period. Tureby, Malin Thor and Kaparulin, Yurii. "Oral History and the Holocaust – An Introduction" *Eastern European Holocaust Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2024, pp. 15–23. https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2024-0011.

***Corresponding author: Inna Kalenska**, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, 01601, Ukraine, E-mail: inna.kalenskaya99@gmail.com. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3809-9988

reported to the Nazis by neighbors for her Jewish origins. Viktor survived due to the protection of his grandmother and later faced years of concealment regarding his family history. This interview provides a profound personal account of survival, identity, and loss during and after the Holocaust, alongside insights into postwar life in Ukraine and the lasting emotional scars of these events.

The interview was conducted by Anton Domnich, Researcher, Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center and Inna Kalenska, Research project curator, Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center on January 16, 2025, in Trostianetska Street, 6B, Apartment 100, Kyiv and first published here. Edited by Yurii Kaparulin.

2 Transcript

Anton Domnich (A.D.): Good day. My name is Anton Domnich, a researcher with the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. Today is January 16, 2025. We are here at Trostianetska Street, 6B, apartment 100. Which language would you prefer to conduct the interview in – Ukrainian or Russian?

Viktor Zinkevych (V.Z.): Russian would be easier for me.

A.D.: Of course, that's no problem. Let's begin with the first introductory question. Please state your full name and date of birth.

V.Z.: Viktor Volodymyrovych Zinkevych, born on July 22, 1940.

A.D.: Thank you. Now, let's move to the first section. Could you tell us about your parents? What were their full names, where were they born, and what kind of work did they do?

V.Z.: My father, Volodymyr Norbertovych Zinkevych, was born in Kyiv. He was a Kyiv native, as was I. My paternal grandmother, Olimpiada Petrivna Zinkevych, lived to be 105 years old. She passed away in 1989, here in Kyiv. My family roots are deeply tied to this city. My maternal grandfather, whom I never met, was reportedly the chief physician at Pavlov Psychiatric Hospital. He was a psychiatrist, and my birth mother, Yevheniia Leibovna Pechenyk, also worked there as a nurse. My aunt and grandmother were also employed at the hospital. I often joke that our entire family was in psychiatry.

I was born in 1940. When the war started and the Germans invaded Kyiv in 1941, I was still a baby.

A.D.: Do you know how your parents met? Was it at Pavlov Hospital as well?

V.Z.: Yes, though I don't know the details of how they met. They married, and my mother was Yevheniia Leibovna Pechenyk.

A.D.: Where were you living at that time, when your mother was still alive?

V.Z.: From what my relatives told me, we lived in the grounds of the hospital. My grandfather was given a small house there, and our entire family lived in that house.

However, when the Germans came, they drove us out. My mother was identified as Jewish by our neighbors, who reported her to the Nazis. The Germans came and took her away. She was later executed at Babyn Yar, either at the end of 1941 or early 1942. I was too young to remember exactly.[2]

They also wanted to hand me over to the authorities, but my grandmother hid me. That's how I survived.

A.D.: Could you explain what happened after your mother was taken?

V.Z.: Yes, my father worked at the Seventh Tank Factory in Darnytsia, here in Kyiv. When the war broke out, the factory was quickly evacuated to Saratov, Russia. My father didn't have time to take the family with him, so we remained in Kyiv – me, my grandmother, and my brothers.[3] One of my brothers was an adopted brother; the others were cousins. My eldest brother, Heorhiy, recently passed away. My younger brother Pavlyk still lives in Kyiv.

A.D.: Were these brothers from your mother's side of the family?

V.Z.: Not all of them. One of them, whom we called my adopted brother, was actually the son of another woman who lived with us after divorcing her husband. Although he wasn't related to us by blood, we grew up together like family.

I remember some things from when I was about three years old, in the summer of 1943. By that time, the Germans were occupying Kyiv. I have vivid memories of how the German soldiers would sit in the courtyard, laughing and eating. My elder brother and I were hungry, and we walked near their table. My brother said to one of the soldiers, "Pan, give me a "gur."" He meant a cucumber, though he mispronounced it. The soldier gave us a large, overripe yellow cucumber, and we shared it. Small moments like that stuck with me.[4]

Later that year, in October 1943, the Soviet army began retaking Kyiv. I remember the bombings at night. My grandmother and I, along with my brothers, had to run and hide in the nearby ravines.

A.D.: Was it near Babyn Yar?

---

2 Such memories actualize the topic of current academic research. Here is one of the latest studies on the process of organization and murder in Babyn Yar. Dean, Martin. 2024. *Investigating Babyn Yar: Shadows from the Valley of Death*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

3 This is a remarkable explanation of why some Jews remained in their places until the arrival of the German army. That is, it does not refer to the commonly held view in memoirs that the Germans were a "civilized nation" and could not have committed such violence. In this case, we see that this was the way life worked out, which could have been different in other cases.

4 This is an important insight into children's experience of survival during the Holocaust, when Jewish children were forced to hide their identity and look for various means of survival, including food. For example, the experience of Jewish children's survival is covered in detail in one of the most recent works by Joanna Sliwa. See Sliwa, Joanna. 2021. *Jewish Childhood in Kraków:* A Microhistory of the Holocaust. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

V.Z.: No, it was closer to the hospital where we had been living. When the Germans arrived, they forced us out of that small house in the hospital grounds. We relocated to a wooden apartment building on Bahhovutivska Street in Lukianivka. We were given a place on the second floor, and that's where we lived. By the way, my grandmother wrote to my father in Saratov that it had happened and my mother had died.

A.D.: What happened after the war? Did your father return?

V.Z.: Yes, my father eventually returned from Saratov. By then, he had remarried. I was too young to know that my biological mother had died. When my father came back with his new wife, he introduced her as my mother. I didn't question it at the time because I didn't remember my real mother.[5]

I only found out the truth years later, when I was about 12 years old. I was being teased at school, called a "Jew," and didn't understand why. When I asked my father, he finally told me that my mother had been Jewish and had been executed during the war.[6]

A.D.: How did they find out about your background there if it was kept secret?

V.Z.: When you go to school, you give your birth certificate to the school principal, that's it. They saw that my mother was Jewish and started teasing me.

A.D.: How did you feel when you learned about your Jewish heritage and what had happened to your mother?

V.Z.: At first, it didn't affect me much. I didn't see nationality as something significant. Sure, the other kids teased me, but I didn't dwell on it. I was more focused on surviving day to day. It wasn't something I gave much thought to even later in life. To me, all people are the same.

A.D.: Did this perception change as you grew older? Did you start to reflect more on your Jewish identity?

V.Z.: Not really. I think it might have been different if I had been raised in a Jewish family or had a closer connection to those traditions. But since I grew up in a Ukrainian household, it wasn't something I deeply identified with. I was aware of it, but it didn't define me.

A.D.: How did your stepmother treat you?

---

5 Despite their tragic experience, many Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in different countries managed to return to a seemingly peaceful life, create/restore businesses, and become professionals. However, the trauma of the war and the loss of loved ones remained with them for life. Today, researchers are separately studying the transmission of this trauma to the following generations born after the Holocaust.

6 The last years of Stalinism were marked not only by state anti-Semitism but also by the intensification of domestic antisemitism, cases of which were documented at the end of or during the first years after the end of World War II. Khanin, Ze'ev. 2003. *Documents on Ukrainian Jewish Identity and Emigration 1944–1990*. London: Frank Cass.

V.Z.: Well, she didn't abuse me or anything like that, but she wasn't exactly a loving, nurturing figure either. She would take care of the basics – cooking and household chores – but there was always tension in the household. She wasn't working. Somebody told me why she didn't work. She said, like grandma didn't allow her to work, like she was watching me, keeping an eye on me.

She and my father often argued. She was extremely jealous, even though there was no reason to be. Eventually, their constant conflicts took a toll on my father's health. He passed away when he was only 59 years old. After that, she became even more unstable. She believed she was being harassed or "burned" by invisible forces and kept changing apartments because she thought people were out to harm her.

I remember it was a difficult time as I was a child. I remember when my father returned to us on Bahhovutivska Street in 1944. He brought a large sack of apples. I was so excited. His new wife, my stepmother, threw me an apple and asked me, "Who do you love the most?" I said, "Mom and dad." Then she asked, "Anyone else?" I answered, "Uncle Yosif."

A.D.: Who was Uncle Yosif?

V.Z.: He was my aunt's husband and a very charismatic man – always cheerful and full of interesting stories. He had a fascinating life. He was a soldier during the war and ended up in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp near Kyiv. A Russian prisoner saved him by giving him his identity papers. Uncle Yosif didn't look stereotypically Jewish, so he managed to escape and survive.[7] After the war, he worked as a skilled machinist and loved playing dominoes.[8]

A.D.: When did you learn about his experiences in the camp?

V.Z.: I didn't hear the full story until much later. My cousin Natasha, uncle Yosif's daughter, shared these details with me.

A.D.: Did you try to learn more about your mother after you found out she had been killed at Babyn Yar? Did you search for any of her relatives?

V.Z.: It wasn't me who searched; her relatives found me. My uncle, Yefym Pechenyk, was the first to contact me. He worked in a shop on Podil. I don't know exactly how he found me, but I was still a teenager, probably around 14 or 15 years old, and still in school. He gave me the address of my mother's parents, who lived in Zhashkiv, Cherkasy region. I visited them at some point.

A.D.: How did that visit go? Did you get to know your grandparents well?

---

7 According to the recollections of some Jewish Soviet prisoners of war, such as Arkady Vaispapir, Jews were singled out by checking for circumcision. See: Юрій Капарулін, Михайло Домаскін. Між радянським терором та Голокостом; досвід Аркадія Вайспапіра (1921-2018)//Проблеми історії Голокосту: український вимір, 13, 2021. С. 18.

8 One of the largest in Kyiv, and in German-occupied Ukraine as a whole, was the Darnytsia camp for prisoners of war and the Syrets concentration camp, which also held prisoners of war.

V.Z.: It was brief. I met my maternal grandfather and grandmother, but I didn't ask too many questions. I was young and didn't fully grasp the importance of documenting those stories. I only stayed with them for a short time. After that, we gradually lost contact.

A.D.: What about your uncle Yefym? Did you maintain contact with him?

V.Z.: For a while, yes. He would visit us here in Kyiv, but he eventually passed away. He had children from two marriages. His sons from the first marriage – Yevhen and Sasha – ended up in Kamyshyn, Russia. Another son, Leonid, was born from his second marriage to Dora Matviivna. Lionia also moved to Kamyshyn. I used to visit them occasionally, but over time, we stopped communicating.

A.D.: Could you share more about your connection with your cousin Yevhen?

V.Z.: It's an interesting story. I was serving in Engels at the time, working at the military academy. One of my former cadets was stationed in Kamyshyn and happened to meet Yevhen. During their conversation, the cadet mentioned me, and Yevhen realized I was his cousin. The cadet gave him my address, and soon after, Yevhen came to visit me. He stayed for a while, and later I visited him in Kamyshyn.

A.D.: Did you develop a relationship with him?

V.Z.: Not particularly. We visited each other a couple of times, but we didn't stay in close contact. He had his own life and career. He was a military doctor and had studied medicine in Kyshyniv, where he married a Moldovan woman. Over time, our communication faded.

A.D.: What about your other relatives on your mother's side?

V.Z.: No. Lionia moved to Kamyshyn to live with his brothers. I remember visiting their apartment in Cherkasy once, but by the time I went back years later, they had sold the place and left for Russia.

A.D.: Do you have any photographs or memorabilia related to your mother's family?

V.Z.: Yes, I have a few photographs. Uncle Yefym gave them to me. There's one of my mother's from when she was young and another from the time after I was born. She had light-colored hair and didn't fit the stereotypical image of a Jewish woman. But the neighbors knew her background and betrayed her to the Nazis. That's how they came for her.

A.D.: Let's talk about the next stages of your life. You learned the truth about your mother, finished school, and then joined the military. Could you tell us more about that period?

V.Z.: I finished school at 17. We had practical training in our final year, and by the time I graduated, I had a third-class qualification as a lathe operator on a revolver-type machine. After school, I worked for about two years at the Arsenal Factory in Kyiv, where I was also active as the secretary of the Komsomol organization.

When I turned 19, my father suggested that I join the military academy. He believed that a military career would provide stability and opportunities for me. So, I applied to a military academy in Zhytomyr. However, I didn't score well on my entrance exams – I barely passed with threes,[9] – and I wasn't admitted. They put me on a reserve list.

A.D.: How did you eventually get into a military academy?

V.Z.: A recruiting officer from the Odesa Air Defense Academy came to Zhytomyr. They were struggling to fill their quota for new cadets and admitted those of us on the reserve list. We didn't even have to retake the exams. That's how I ended up in Odesa. I studied there for three years, specializing in air defense systems. I surprised myself by graduating with honors. Even though I wasn't a top student in school – my Ukrainian language grade was a three – I managed to excel at the academy. After graduation, I was assigned to Kapustin Yar, a well-known missile testing range.[10]

I was a military representative responsible for inspecting and accepting new air defense equipment. Civilian engineers would bring the equipment to the testing site, and we would oversee its setup, testing, and transfer to military units. After about a year and a half, there was a reorganization, and I was offered a position in the political department. But I declined – I've always been more interested in technology than politics. Then, I was reassigned to a remote air defense division in the Urals.

Before I had met my wife, Tamara, there in Kapustin Yar. We met at a dance in the officers' club. I had noticed her before – she was beautiful, lively, and a great dancer. One evening, I went to the movies with some friends and saw her sitting behind us. After the movie, I offered to walk her home, and that's how we started seeing each other. She lived in Znamensk, a closed military town near Kapustin Yar. Her sister worked as a clerk in one of the military units, and Tamara worked in a dining facility. We eventually got married and moved to the base where I was stationed in the Urals. Our daughter Oksana was born there.

A.D.: What were living conditions like at the base?

V.Z.: We lived there for about four years. It wasn't easy – remote, isolated, and surrounded by forest. Our division was part of a larger air defense network, with units spread out across a wide area. The nearest thermal power plant was about 25 km away. It wasn't the kind of place where you'd want to stay forever. We lived in a two-room apartment on the second floor of a wooden building. There was no gas supply – just electricity and a wood stove for heating. The only brick building on the

9 This is a low, passing grade.

10 In memoirs about the postwar life of Holocaust survivors, one can find facts when Jewishness became a pretext for various kinds of discrimination, such as the inability to enter a prestigious university or obtain a certain specialty, or to hold a certain position, such as a managerial position, etc. However, this case demonstrates a relatively successful path in education and further career.

base had its own central heating system, but most of us had to make do with more primitive conditions.

Eventually, I was promoted from senior lieutenant to captain. That promotion came with an opportunity to transfer to the military academy in Engels. I accepted it without hesitation. I knew I didn't want to spend my entire career in that forested outpost. I spent the next 18 years serving at the academy in Engels. After those years, I retired from active service and returned to Kyiv. I was 45 years old at the time.

A.D.: Once you returned to Kyiv, how did your life change? What did you do after leaving the military?

V.Z.: When I first came back to Kyiv, I didn't have any immediate work lined up. I focused on getting a place to live. Eventually, I found a job at the Hryshko Botanical Garden. I worked there for 16 years as an engineer. Although my duties were mostly manual – digging, planting, pruning trees, mowing the grass – I enjoyed being outdoors. It was peaceful work. I stayed there until 2006, when I was 66 years old. After that, I found a job as a gardener for a banker. The pay was better than at the botanical garden, but I didn't work there for as long.

A.D.: Could you tell me more about your family life after you moved to the Urals? You mentioned your daughter Oksana earlier.

V.Z.: Oksana was born in 1965 while we were stationed on a remote base in the Urals. In the Urals there were and still are a lot of closed cities. For example, there is the city of Cheliabinsk, which is open, where trains run, etc. And there is also Cheliabinsk-40, Cheliabinsk-20. These cities are located in the forests, they have air defense systems and are heavily guarded. There prisoners work with radioactive substances, they get irradiated. They had an accident there some year before I arrived. And Oksana was born in those lands.

She was a lively, talented child. From a young age, she loved dancing. She would watch television and start copying all the moves she saw. As she grew older, we noticed her potential and enrolled her in a dance program at the Palace of Pioneers in Engels. Later, when she was 11, we placed her in a School of Arts where she focused on choreography.

Everything was going well until January 1979. It was the school holidays, and Oksana went on a trip to Saratov with her class. While there, something went wrong. Her teacher called me and said, "Viktor Volodymyrovych, Oksana is in the hospital." I rushed to Saratov with my wife. When we arrived, Oksana was already unconscious. The doctors did a spinal tap and diagnosed her with a brain hemorrhage caused by a congenital aneurysm.

I've been thinking for years that maybe it was because she was born in that zone. And there, when you go to the headquarters in Kyshtyn, there are these lakes, and the trees are all dry and bare. That is this radiation. But at the same time there were other children there. She wasn't the only one there. I don't know if they were born there or

somewhere else. My wife had a friend. They had a baby on the same day. He wouldn't take his mother's milk and my wife would give her milk. Her husband drove her and there they fed him. Like a "milk" brother. Where he is now, I don't know. Because we left and moved away. Yes, there is Ihor Makhmudov.

Oksana spent three months at the Institute of Neurosurgery. She had right-sided hemiparesis (her arm and leg do not move well). Then we were advised to go to the Burdenko Institute in Moscow for further treatment. The doctors examined her and suggested inserting a balloon into the aneurysm to prevent further ruptures. However, after more tests, they found that this method wouldn't work because of the aneurysm's location. Instead, they decided to thrombose the aneurysm using a catheter. They performed the operation with Oksana fully conscious. After the procedure, she remained paralyzed on her right side – her arm and leg. We returned home, and life changed completely.

We arranged for her to have home schooling. Teachers came to the house to help her with her studies. Despite her condition, she tried to carry on as best she could. We explored rehabilitation options in different clinics, but it didn't lead to any improvements. The damage was already too severe, and we were told that rehabilitation should have been started much earlier. By the time we found clinics, it was too late.

She lived with paralysis for 14 years. Then, on January 3, 1993, I found her unconscious on the floor in her room. It happened almost exactly 14 years after the first hemorrhage. We took her to the emergency hospital, but she didn't regain consciousness. She was 27 years old. [After] Oksana's death, my wife, Tamara, was never the same. She survived another 23 years, but the grief stayed with her. In 2016, she was diagnosed with cancer. They operated on her, but it didn't help – she passed away on November 6, 2016.

A.D.: Are your relatives still around? Have you stayed in contact with them?

V.Z.: Most of my relatives are either gone or we've lost touch. On my mother's side, I don't have any active connections anymore. The relatives who lived in Zhashkiv either passed away or moved elsewhere. On my father's side, I had cousins, but they're also passing away one by one. My older cousin Heorhii died last year at the age of 87. My younger, foster brother passed away in the summer of 2024. As for my cousin Natasha, she's still alive but not in good health. She has dementia and other problems.

A.D.: You said that in school you found out you were Jewish and asked your father. He said that mom died, but he didn't tell you how. And when did you find out about all these details, what happened and that it was such a tragedy that the Germans executed so many people?

V.Z.: I can't pinpoint exactly when I found out. I knew that my mother had died there, but the full scale of the tragedy became clearer to me over time. My cousin, who was born in 1943, knows many things from the stories of his mother (Aunt Tania,

my uncle's wife). My parental grandmother had three kids – the eldest daughter, aunt Valia, the middle son, Uncle Leonid (father of my cousin Pavlyk), and the youngest son, my father (he was born in 1914). From the stories of Aunt Tanya (Uncle Leonid's wife and Pavlyk's mother) my cousin learned all this, and he told me later how it all was. Now it's hard for me to say when I found out. But I knew that there were such events.

A.D.: Did you visit Babyn Yar as an adult, after all the events?

V.Z.: I visit the memorial every year in September. I bring flowers and pay my respects. The last time I went was in 2024. I went with my niece, Varya, who is Natasha's daughter. We took many photos. I even have a photo of myself standing by the memorial with a portrait of my mother.[11]

A.D.: Did you see any of the new installations at the site?

V.Z.: Yes, I did. There were new additions. I found them moving and important. It's crucial to preserve the memory of what happened there.

A.D.: How do you feel knowing that your mother was killed simply because of her heritage? Have you ever tried to connect with others who lost relatives at Babyn Yar?

V.Z.: I think growing up in a Ukrainian family shielded me from fully understanding my Jewish identity for many years. It wasn't until later in life that I started to process the significance of what had happened. Of course, it hurts to know that my mother was betrayed and executed because of her background. I often wonder how different my life would have been if she had survived. My stepmother wasn't a warm or caring person. Maybe if my real mother had been there, I would have had more love and support growing up. Instead, I lived in a household filled with tension and conflicts.

A.D.: Did your relatives ever talk about what happened at Pavlov Hospital, where many people were also killed during the war?

V.Z.: No, no one ever told me about that. By the time the Nazis started executing patients and staff there, we had already been forced to leave our home in the hospital grounds and move to Bahhovutivska Street. I only learned about those events much later through historical accounts.[12]

---

11 Despite the dangerous conditions of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, many people try to participate in events to commemorate the Holocaust, including in Babyn Yar. In particular, the participation of Roman Schwartzman, a Holocaust survivor from Odesa, in a Bundestag meeting on January 29, 2025, which honored the victims of National Socialism, was symbolic. In his speech, he drew attention to the problems faced by Holocaust survivors in Ukraine in the context of Russian aggression. See more https://www.bundestag.de/en/media_centre/1041538-1041538.

12 The murder of patients in psychiatric hospitals and homes for people with disabilities during the Holocaust remains one of the most under-researched topics in Ukraine, although several landmark works on the subject have been published in recent years. See the special issue of *Ukraina Moderna* Vol.28. on this https://utppublishing.com/toc/ukrainamoderna/28.

A.D.: One last question – do you have any photographs, documents, or family memorabilia that we could photograph or scan for preservation?

V.Z.: I only have a few photographs of my mother, which you've already seen. Aside from that, there's nothing else left.

A.D.: Would you allow us to document those photographs?

V.Z.: Yes, of course.

A.D.: Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your story. Can we use this information to further our research and in future publications?

V.Z.: Yes, of course. There are no secrets here.

A.D.: Thank you so much.