

We Proudly Recognize

Dana Cohen



Dana Cohen lives in Norfolk with her cats. She loves her quiet life. It was not always that way, however.

When Dana was just 7 years old, her dad was mobilized into the Polish army in Lwow, Poland and she was never to see him again. Many years later, Dana would learn her dad was murdered in the Katyn forest. The Katyn forest massacre was a mass execution of Polish nationals carried out by the Soviet secret police in April and May of 1940. The massacre was prompted by Joseph Stalin. The number of victims was estimated at about 22,000. It was 1940 and the Russians were gathering up the Jews. In the very early morning of April 13, 1940, Dana's perfect childhood ended as she and her mom were thrown into a lorry for a trip to Siberia to live in a forced labor camp. They would never see their home, father or family again. After a month's journey in cattle cars and the most unhygienic conditions, mostly women and children numbering 40-50 a car, landed in Kazakhstan, the famous hunger steppes. There they survived for two years building stables, digging foundations for railroad ties and dealing with amazing cold and snow. All of this work was done for no payment and little food. She saw so many bodies of people that did not survive the work and cold that were devoured by hungry dogs in the snow. Dana was forced at a young age to steal potatoes in order to survive. She knows what it felt like to be so hungry that she could not feel her insides. She spent a winter sleeping with her mom in the corner of a small kitchen of a kind Russian villager sharing space with a newly born calf so that she didn't have to sleep outside and surely perish.

That summer brought good news that the Russians broke their alliance with Hitler and all the prisoners would be released from the labor camp. However, they had no transportation and were invisible to others. They had to reach Uzbekistan before winter. They made a train and another lorry, which her mom traded in her wedding ring to afford, and after three full days on the street they jumped another train to get to their destination. During this time, Dana contracted typhoid fever and nearly died. Another time she had a terrible kidney infection and no doctor would treat a Jewish girl. By what her mother called a "long chain of miracles", which included changing their identity and enrolling Dana in a Catholic orphanage, they made it alive to Uganda via the USS California. They lived peacefully in a hut on Lake Victoria, and Dana was safe to be Jewish again and attend school. She had pets including a monkey and a crocodile. When she was 16, she left for Nairobi and attended an English secretarial school.

Dana moved to DC in 1958, where she met her husband, William, of blessed memory, and married. She has lived in Norfolk since 1965. Her mother passed in 1994 at the age of 90. For many years Dana managed the family business with her husband and son, Michael. Today, she is a successful, active member of the Holocaust Commission of the United Jewish Federation in Tidewater. When asked what it takes to be a survivor, Dana says, "You use your wits and your guts, and you still are always a decent human being".

Her love of animals continues, and at her request, BO&H will make a charitable contribution to the Norfolk SPCA in her honor.

To learn more about Dana Cohen and The Holocaust Commission, visit <http://jewishva.org>.

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