



Private Tolkatchev

AT THE GATES OF HELL



*Majdanek and Auschwitz Liberated:
Testimony of an Artist*

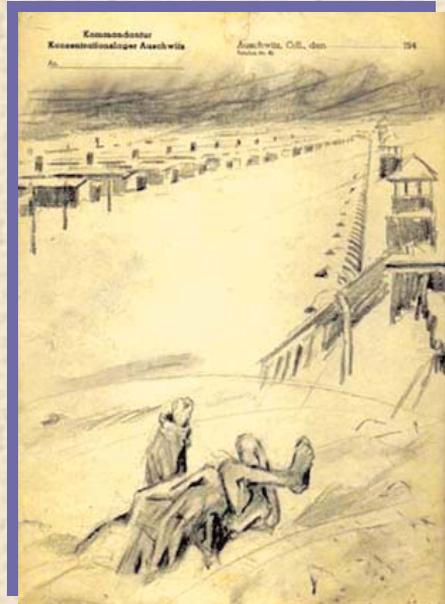
American Society for Yad Vashem

BIOGRAPHY

1903 Born in the town of Shchedrin in Belorussia. His father was a metal worker.

1909-1919 Tolkatchev studied at a vocational school, as well as at a school for the arts. Due to his family's poor financial situation, he was forced to leave school and work as an apprentice to a sign painter. Afterwards, he joined an artists' cooperative.

1919-1920 Tolkatchev became one of the first members of the Komsomol (the Young Communist League). As a member of the revolutionary underground, he participated in the Civil War. Tolkatchev went to Moscow to study with the artists Osmarkin and Kontsalovsky.



Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1945

1920 Tolkatchev returned to Kiev and became responsible for the political education department of the Komsomol in the regions of Podolsk and Shulov. During this period, he painted several murals in the youth clubs of this region.

1922 Tolkatchev joined the Communist Party.

1924 Tolkatchev was sent to study at the Communist Institute in Kharkov.

1925-1927 Tolkatchev served in the Red Army in an artillery division.

1928-1930 Taught at the Institute of fine Arts in Kiev.

1929 Tolkatchev's exhibit about the death of Lenin, "The Great Sorrow," was exhibited in Kiev and Moscow.

1930's Tolkachev worked on book illustration, including the works of Gorki and Sholem Aleichem. He exhibited the series "The Shtetl" in 1939.

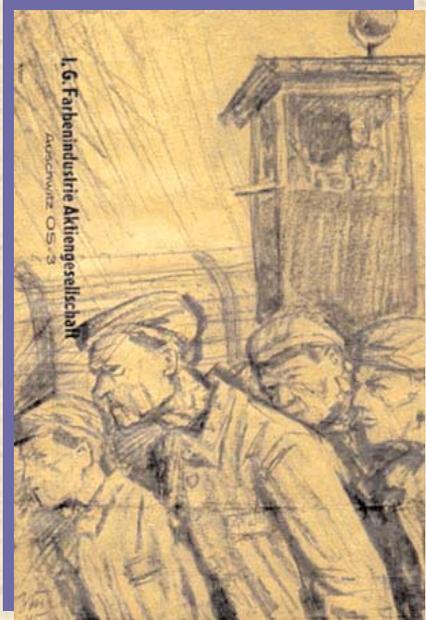
1940 Tolkachev was appointed professor at the Institute of Fine Arts in Kiev.

1941-1945 Tolkachev enlisted in the Red Army, despite his age. He continued to create official art for the Soviet regime.

1944-1945 As an official artist of the Red Army he joined up with Soviet forces in Majdanek, shortly after its liberation (1944) and immediately after that, with the forces that liberated Auschwitz (1945). During this period he drew the series: "Majdanek," "Auschwitz" and the Flowers of Auschwitz."

1945-1946 The series "Majdanek" and "the Flowers of Auschwitz" were Published as albums. They were also exhibited in various locals in Poland in the cities of Lublin, Rzeszow, Krakow, Katowice, Lodz and Warsaw. The Polish Government sent these albums to heads of state of the Allies, government ministers and military officers.

1950-1960 The relation of the authorities toward Tolkachev changed. Tolkachev's works were declared defective – he was denounced as "the personification of detached cosmopolitanism and bourgeois nationalism" because of the "Zionist-religious works." Daybreak, 1945



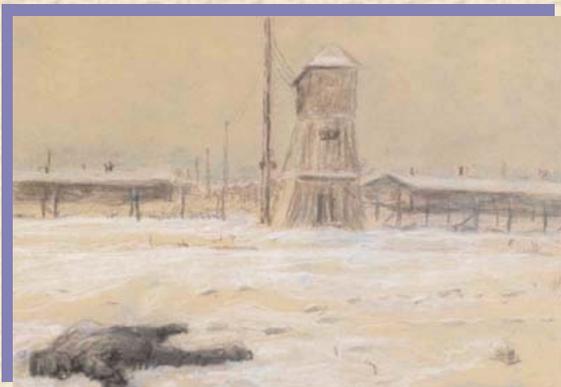
1960-1970 Tolkachev worked on book illustration and on the portraits of Ukrainian writers. He also returned to the theme of the death camps. The album "Auschwitz" was published in Kiev in 1965.

1977 Tolkachev passed away in Kiev.

PRIVATE TOLKATCHEV AT THE GATES OF HELL

“ did what I had to do; I couldn’t refrain from doing it. My heart commanded, my conscience demanded, the hatred for fascism reigned.”

In these words, artist Private Zinovii Tolkatchev embodies the creative essence of one who arrived at the gates of hell in a Red Army uniform. Tolkatchev’s art was charted on the wings of the Bolshevik Revolution, created in conviction of its justness. Simultaneously with enlisting his art for the revolution, Tolkatchev the artist began to search for an



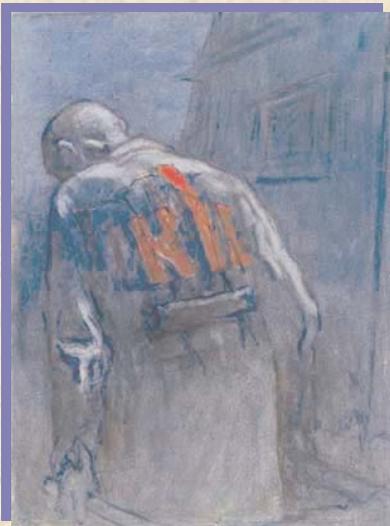
Winter, 1944

additional expressive mode to manifest personal layers in his works. Tolkatchev was drawn to printing techniques, and created several series of illustrations, of the works of many authors and poets. These works embody an epic breadth and monumentalism of a different kind. In 1941, shortly before the outbreak of “Operation Barbarossa,” Tolkatchev completed a large-scale series titled “The Shtetl” based on the stories of Sholem Aleichem. In this series, he depicts – with great power – the suffering of the Jewish people under Czarist rule. These works reveal another important side of Tolkatchev’s creative impetus – his bond with the Jewish people.

With the USSR entering the war in June 1941, Tolkatchev volunteered to join the front. However, only towards the end of the war, in Autumn 1944, did Army officials respond to Tolkatchev’s request, and he was sent to serve in the Political Department in the First Ukrainian Front, which at the time was stationed in Lublin, adjacent to the Majdanek extermination camp. “Hatred guided my brush, urged me on, the brutal reality inflamed my imagination.” Horrified by the scenes he witnessed, Tolkatchev, in a spiritual whirlwind, immersed himself for thirty-five days, with hardly any food or sleep in painting the Majdanek series. Tolkatchev showed his initial works to a member of the Polish-Soviet Nazi Crimes Investigation Commission, who urged him to finish the series before November 27, 1944, the opening day of the Majdanek camp commanders’ trial. The exhibition opened the day before the trial, at the Lublin Art Museum, and was reviewed extensively in the Polish press. In Lublin alone, 128,000 tickets were sold, and from there, it traveled to other cities. In the Majdanek series, Tolkatchev was able to create, as if from nowhere, a set of symbols that express the horrors of the Majdanek extermination camp. The fact of the matter is that Tolkatchev enlisted those same capacities already encountered in his earlier works, that is, his ability to synopsise and

focus. However now Tolkatchev, was painting neither in the service of the Revolution nor of the author-poet; rather, he bluntly presented his viewers with the hard and brutal reality that he experienced, and which had stricken his people, Soviet and Jewish alike.

"A cold winter wind howls over Auschwitz, surrounded by three rows of barbed-wire fence. It seems that it is not the barbed-wire that trembles and howls, but the tortured earth itself which moans with the voices of the victims." The barbed-wire fences of Majdanek did not prepare Tolkatchev for his next mission. At the end of January 1945 he accompanied the Nazi Crimes Investigation Commission to Auschwitz, literally hours after the entrance of the Red Army into the camp. Again, Tolkatchev is seized by the urge to capture the scenes, the voices. In the absence of drawing paper, he enters the camp's former headquarters and takes stationery with bold black letters: *Kommandantur Konzentrationslager Auschwitz; I.G. Farbenindustrie Aktiengesellschaft; Der Oberprasident der Provinz Oberschlesien*. The typography becomes an integral part of the composition and the image of the Nazi oppressor, who Tolkatchev refrains from perpetuating, stands before us. As if possessed by madness, he sketches what he sees. Abutting the sketches he adds densely written lines with the testimony of the few survivors able to utter words. Adjacent, he jots repeatedly – "to remember, not to forget." By using meager materials of pencil and paper, intimate in scale, Tolkatchev succeeds in creating art of monumental scope. The understanding that on these very same pieces of paper, just a few days prior, were written orders of extermination endow them with a tragic power that causes one to shudder.



As one who began his artistic oeuvre as an enlisted artist and a monumentalist, much like Kathe Kollwitz in Germany of the 1920s and 1930s, or the Mexicans Diego Rivera and Jose Orozco of the same period, he depicts ultimate horror in the minor chord of pencil drawings. The spare materials on the one hand and forcefulness of expression that awakens emotions on the other is reminiscent of the early 19th-Century series of prints, "Disasters of War" by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya.

"...I couldn't tear myself away from that same piece of cursed land that was left behind, and from the terrible human abyss. My whole body was wracked with dumb sobbing. I had left Auschwitz behind." Auschwitz was not left behind; it emerges with all of its horrors from the scenes rising before us, drawn by a Red Army soldier, and artist, and a Jew.

In order to comprehend the great contribution of Jews in the fight against Nazi Germany and to bring their defeat, we present a short review by Dr. Yitzhak Arad, the highly renowned historian, on the subject of Jewish history during the Holocaust in the former Soviet Union territory.

Dr. Yitzhak Arad, General Major, was Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate from 1970-1993.

*Eli Zborowski, Chairman
American Society for Yad Vashem*

OPERATION BARBAROSSA, OR THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

Nazi Germany was defeated by the joint efforts of the Allied forces led by Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States. However, the decisive frontline and battles where Nazi Germany was defeated were fought by the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War. The fate of the war was decided in the battle at the gates of Moscow, the battle of Stalingrad and in the battles in Kursk Salient, making the defeat of Germany only a matter of time. The Allied landing in Normandy in June 1944, and the strategic bombings of German cities hastened the defeat and the fall of the Third Reich and contributed a great deal to the final victory. However, the die was cast before then in the battlefields of the Great Patriotic War, through the superhuman efforts made by the people of the Soviet Union and the enormous price they paid: millions of soldiers who fell on the front or were killed in captivity and millions of civilian victims sacrificed on the Soviet home front, many times more than those of Britain or the United States, or of any other Allied country.

The Jews of the Soviet Union fought on every front of the war, from Murmansk in the far north to the Caucasus Mountains in the south, from Brest-Litovsk and the Soviet-German border to the gates of Moscow and the streets of Stalingrad, and to the battles within the heart of Berlin. Most of them were ordinary soldiers, but among them were officers in every branch of the army. There were 305 Jewish generals on the various fronts of the Great Patriotic War, and dozens more who were half-Jewish. They were rewarded with combat medals and decorations, and 150 of them were awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. In no other Allied army were there so many high-



Dr. Yitzhak Arad was born in Poland and is a veteran of the Nazi-era Jewish resistance movement in the ghetto, and partisan combat. He has researched, lectured, and published extensively on the Holocaust.

Dr. Arad served as the director (Chairman of the Directorate) of Yad Vashem for twenty-one years (1972-1993). He remains associated with Yad Vashem in an advisor's capacity. He continues in his research and writing; with his work being translated into several languages.

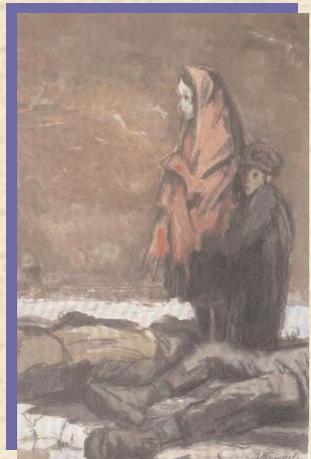
ranking Jewish officers, and that despite the policy set down by the senior Soviet leadership in Moscow of restricting the advance of Jews through the command ranks, and of limiting the number of high decorations they could receive.

There were between 490,000 and 520,000 Jews serving in the Soviet army. There were about 20,000 partisans, and the total number of Jewish soldiers who fell on the battlefield was over 120,000. To that number should be added 75,000-80,000 who died in the forests. Thus the number of Jewish soldiers who died in the Great Patriotic War was over 200,000, about 40% of all the Jewish soldiers who served in the Red Army and with the partisans. It is the highest percentage of all the nations of the Soviet Union and among all the other nations which fought in the Second World War. The Jews had their share in the victory and the defeat of Nazi Germany.

At dawn on June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, a surprise attack on the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was surprised by the attack, despite the fact that during the weeks and months before the war, a great deal of information had reached it about German preparations for an invasion. Stalin was convinced that Germany would not invade the Soviet Union before 1942, and then only after Britain had capitulated. He refused to accede to the entreaties of his army commanders to put the army on alert and call up reserves, lest Hitler view such actions as provocation and an excuse for attack. Only at midnight on June 21 did he agree to put the army on alert in areas bordering on Germany, but the order reached the forces after the Germans had already invaded.

The invasion was launched along four main axes: Army Group North headed toward the Baltic states and Leningrad; Army Group South toward the Ukraine, south Russia and the Caucasus. The 11th Army, along with the Romanian army, attacked **November 3, 1943** through Bessarabia and along the northern shore of the Black Sea, toward Odessa and the Crimean Peninsula. In the north, Finnish forces attacked Leningrad. The Italians and Hungarians also joined the Germans in the attack against the Soviet Union. The Red Army's resistance increased as it overcame its initial shock and surprise. Nevertheless, the German army continued its advance, and on July 4 reached Smolensk, approximately 300 kilometers from Moscow.

In August 1941, Hitler, in opposition to the opinion of his land-force commanders, decided to pause in the attack on Moscow, and turn his main armored divisions south to the Ukraine and north to Leningrad. Encircled by enormous German Panzer forces on September 19th, Kiev was conquered, along with vast stretches of the Ukraine. In the north, the German attempt to take Leningrad failed, but they besieged the city with the help of the Finns.



Hitler's decision to turn his tanks to Kiev and Leningrad saved Moscow, and enabled the Red Army to bring in fresh forces from Siberia and the Far East to strengthen the army in the Moscow sector. At the beginning of October, the German army renewed its attack and advanced toward Moscow, and was stopped only 40 kilometers from the capital itself. The rains began at the end of October and the roads, which were vital to Germany's mechanized army, turned into rivers of mud. The terrible cold of the early Russian winter severely hampered the Germans, who were not prepared for a winter war. The stubborn resistance of the Red Army, German losses, the rains and the winter all forced the German army to halt in its tracks. German plans to conquer Moscow and Leningrad by winter, and bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union, fell apart.

The German army was faced with the need to fight a prolonged war, with all the logistic complications and implications that entailed. The Soviet Army suffered extraordinarily great losses, but nevertheless, was strong enough to begin a counteroffensive early in December, which lasted until March 1942. The offensive's main battleground was



Singing Girls, 1945

around Moscow. The Red Army advanced west hundreds of kilometers, until it reached the region north of Vitebsk. It was the German army's first great defeat since the beginning of the Second World War. Hundreds of thousands of German soldiers were killed, wounded and captured, and the Germans lost hundreds of tanks and great quantities of equipment. In the spring of 1942, the Soviet counteroffensive stalled.

At that point, a far-reaching development occurred on the German-Soviet front. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor and the following day President Roosevelt declared war on Japan. Germany and Italy then declared war on the United States, and the war, which had previously been waged in Europe and at sea, turned into a world war.

The German plan to renew the attack was formulated shortly before spring 1942. The fronts were to be the Ukraine and southern Russia. The choice of place and objectives were primarily dictated by the economic considerations. The main objectives were Stalingrad (on the Volga River) and the Caucasian oil fields. Hitler knew oil was vital, and that he could not continue the war without it. On the other hand, if the Red Army was deprived of its source of oil, it would not be able to wage a prolonged war. The plan had a deeper strategic goal: after the conquest of Stalingrad the German army would move north along the Volga and reach Moscow from the east and southeast, behind Russian lines.

The German attack began on June 28, 1942. At the beginning of September, the German army reached the outskirts of Stalingrad and began

its attack, then advanced south and reached the northern slopes of the Caucasus mountains. On July 9, after a nine-month siege, the Germans conquered the Crimean port city of Sevastopol.

The battle of Stalingrad lasted until November. The Soviet 62nd Army, commanded by General Chuikov, resolutely defended the city, most of which was conquered by the Germans. The Red Army controlled only three small bridgeheads on the western bank of the Volga. While the battles raged, the Red Army made preparations for the counteroffensive, which became the turning point in the war. It began on November 19, 1942, when the Red Army attacked in two directions: northwest of Stalingrad toward the south and southwest, to defeat the 3rd Romanian Army, and to the southeast



of Stalingrad. A week later, both forces met west of Stalingrad and the 6th German Army was encircled. The plan for the counteroffensive and coordination between the various forces were the work of General Zhukov. Attempts of the German armored forces to rescue the 6th Army failed. The 6th German army, with its 22 divisions, surrendered on January 31, 1943. More than 90,000 German soldiers were taken prisoner, and the number of German prisoners reached 150,000. The German failure at Stalingrad and the advance of the Red Army to Rostov put Army Group A in danger of separation from the main force. As a result, it rapidly retreated from the north Caucasus. In January 1943, the Soviets won an additional important victory: an almost 30 months siege of Leningrad was ended. In a month, a decisive turning point was reached in the war on Soviet territory: the German victories and occupations ended, and their defeats forced them to retreat from the occupied territories of the Soviet Union.

At the beginning of the spring of 1943, the southern front stabilized east and west of Kharkov and west of Rostov. The Red Army's advance created an arc within the German defensive lines west of Kursk. Hitler decided that after the defeat at Stalingrad he needed a political and military victory on the eastern front, and despite the objections of some of the army commanders, the decision was made to attack the Soviet arc in the Kursk sector. To that end the German army brought together 17 of its best Panzer divisions. On July 5, 1943, the German army began its attack called "Operation Citadel," from north and south of the Soviet arc. The Soviets were ready for them. On July 12th, the largest tank battle of the Second World War was fought, involving 1,200 tanks on both sides. It was the Germans' last attempt to take the initiative on the eastern front, and ended in their total defeat.

In August 1943, after the victory at the Kursk Salient, the Red Army renewed its advance along the entire western front, reaching the Belorussian border in September. Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, was liberated on November 6. Between March and July 1944, the Red Army liberated all of the Ukraine and Crimea.

One of the greatest German defeats of the war was in Belorussia. On June 22, 1944, three years after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Red Army attacked through a wide front and broke through the German defense lines in several places. Tens of thou-

sands of Soviet partisans had been operating behind German lines, and on the eve of the Soviet attack, they coordinated their activities along the front, disabled almost the entire rail system in Belorussia, and paralyzed the German supply system. The Red Army advanced westward rapidly, and by the end of July, all of Belorussia was liberated. The losses of the German army were greater than those at Stalingrad. In July and August 1944, following the attack, the Red Army liberated Lithuania, Latvia (with the exception of the Kurland region) and Estonia, entered Poland and reached the outskirts of Warsaw. In January 1945, the Red Army attacked Poland and conquered Warsaw, and in February, reached Berlin. The Battle of Berlin lasted for two months. On May 1, 1945 with the Red Army merely a few hundred meters from his underground bunker, Hitler committed suicide and the city fell. On May 8, 1945, Nazi Germany surrendered.



The Last Farewell, 1945

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ABOUT THE AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR YAD VASHEM

Founded in 1981 by a group of Holocaust survivors, and spearheaded by Eli Zborowski, the American Society for Yad Vashem works in partnership with Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem to support their efforts in the areas of commemoration, education, research, capital improvements and special projects.

The Society draws support from more than 150,000 individuals nationwide. Their contributions range from a few crumpled dollar bills, to donations from major philanthropists, to a whole cadre of volunteers who give us the gift of time.

Yad Vashem was established in 1953 by the Israeli Parliament (*Knesset*), and was entrusted with the task of commemorating the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. It mandates Holocaust remembrance, commemoration, and education, to ensure the lessons of the Holocaust are secured for posterity.

Elizabeth Zborowski
Cultural Director American Society for Yad Vashem

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