Dear Diary...Diaries of the Second World War

Most people have heard of Anne Frank and her 'frank' and personal account of living in hiding during the Second World War, but have you heard of Rutka Laskier, Yoko Moriwaki, Tanya Savicheva or Petr Ginz? Probably not, but all of these young people also wrote personal accounts of their experiences in the war. Read on to find out more.

Ghetto Life

Life for Polish Jews was particularly hard during the war. They were the first nation invaded by the Nazis and the Jewish citizens of the country soon found themselves rounded up and sent to live in enclosed communities known as ghettos.



Miriam Cheszczewascki was 15 years old in 1939, when she began to write about being interred in the Radomsko ghetto. Her father ran a Jewish school where Hebrew was taught. This school later became an active part of the ghetto community. Both Miriam's father and brother were murdered by the Nazis while the family lived in the ghetto. Her father, David, was killed for refusing to board a deportation train and her brother, Nahum, had been actively involved in the Zionist cause. Miriam's early diary focuses on the events between the summer of 1939 and the occupation of her town, Radomsko, in September 1939. The later entries come from 1941 and describe the events of the war and ghetto life.

On 24th October 1942, Miriam and her mother surrendered to a Polish police officer. They had been hiding for a week in a lavatory while the ghetto was being cleared by the Nazis. They were starving and exhausted and agreed to be transported along with the other Jews of Radomsko. Miriam probably died at Treblinka concentration camp in 1942.

A month before her deportation, Miriam had written: "It may seem silly, but only a step away from death I still worry about my diary. I would not want for it to meet a miserable end in an oven or on a rubbish heap. I wish somebody could find it - even if it be only a German - and would read it. I wish that these scribblings, though they record barely a fraction of the cruelties, would one day serve as a true and faithful document of our times."



After the war, the notebooks containing her diary were given to her old teacher, Stefania Heilbrunn, who took them to Israel. Miriam had wanted her diary to be saved and to be read and now that dream has come true. Parts

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of the diary have been published in Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish and English and the original notebook was donated to Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the Holocaust.



Rut 'Rutka' Laskier

Rut 'Rutka' Laskier – (1929 – 1943), also wrote about her teenage years spent in a ghetto in Poland. She was brought up in Gdansk in Northern Poland. When the Nazi party came to power in Germany in 1933, her family, along with many others, fled to the south of Poland, away from the German border.



They settled in Bedzin, where her grandparents came from and were eventually forced into the Bedzin ghetto when it was created in 1939. In 1943, at the age of 14, Rutka started a sixty-page diary, reporting on her own daily life as well as the horrors of the ghetto. During the period in which she wrote the diary, Rutka began to fear that she would not survive the war. She asked a Catholic friend to help her hide the diary beneath the floor boards of the house she was living in. When the ghettos were cleared, the friend, Stanislawa Sapinska, returned to the house to retrieve it. The diary remained with her for 64 years until finally being published in 2006. Rutka died in the camp at Auschwitz in 1943. Rutka's mother and brother also died in the Holocaust. Like Anne Frank, only Rutka's father survived the war and remarried.

A Czech Childhood Cut Short:

Petr Ginz (1928 – 1944) was a Czechoslovakian boy of partial Jewish heritage. Ginz was somewhat of a child prodigy: he was a keen speaker of Esperanto, a language derived from a number of other European languages; and he had written five novels by the time he was 14.

The law in Czechoslovakia declared that children of mixed Jewish and Christian marriages should be transported to work camps at the age of 14. Ginz was transported to a concentration camp at Theresienstadt and wrote and studied extensively while there. At the camp, he started and ran the Vedem newspaper, chronicling life for the other inmates. He died at the age of sixteen in 1944 when he was transported to Auschwitz and sent to the gas chambers there. His diary for 1941 – 1942, written in a matter of fact manner about the time before his transportation, has been published in a

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number of languages, including Esperanto.

Diaries from Elsewhere

While teenage diaries of the Holocaust are the most prevalent, there were some diaries produced in other war-torn parts of the world as well. Both Japan and Russia suffered huge civilian and humanitarian crises during the Second World War.

'Japan's Anne Frank'

Yoko Moriwaki was a young Japanese girl who grew up in the city of Hiroshima. As a school project, she began to record her daily life and activities in April 1945. She recorded her pride in her school and her country, the planes she saw flying overhead and lists of the classes she was taking. The diary is a snapshot of an ordinary life lived during extraordinary times. Her diary comes to an abrupt end on 6th August 1945, when, on a school trip to complete community work, Yoko was caught up in the nuclear bombing of her city. Years later, her father added one last, sad entry in her diary. A section of the text reads: "At 8:15 in the morning, you bore the full brunt of that terrible atomic blast ... Finally, you drew your last lonely breath at 11:24 that evening, uttering the words, 'Isn't Mother here yet?'" Her brother survived the blast and made publication of the volume possible.



Hiroshima after the atomic blast.

Caught up in the Siege

Some of the most poignant texts written during the war years are very short. Tatyana 'Tanya' Nikolayevna Savicheva (1930 – 1944) was a young Russian who wrote her diaries during the Siege of Leningrad in 1944. The siege was conducted by the Germans, who prevented Russian supplies from reaching the city of Leningrad, now known as St. Petersburg. Beginning in 1941, the blockade lasted until the Russians were able to break through and create a supply corridor in 1944. The siege had lasted 872 days by the time it came to a halt; over 1.5 million Russian civilians and soldiers had died of starvation and hypothermia in the cold Russian winters.

Tanya kept two diaries at first, but the larger of these was burned when no more wood was available to keep her family warm. The surviving notebook is a small book that simply records the dates of her family members' deaths. The last



Tanya Savicheva's Diary

entry reads: "The Savichevs are dead/ Everyone is dead/ Only Tanya is left." Tanya Savicheva was one of 140 children rescued from Leningrad in August 1942. She was taken to a hospital in Shatki as an evacuee in 1944, but later died of intestinal tuberculosis. Stone versions of eight pages from her diary detailing the loss of her family, one by one, make up part of the 'Flower of Life' Memorial in St. Petersburg.

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