

Jewish group recognizes Ukrainian "Righteous"

by Roman Woronowycz

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NEW YORK — It was a night filled with thank-yous and remembrances and plenty of tears as the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers honored those who saved Jews during the Holocaust of World War II at its annual dinner sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League. Jewish community activists also were honored at the May 24 affair, but the "Righteous" were the center of attention.

J. Morton Davis, the dinner chairman, explained, "We gather here to focus attention on those we call 'Righteous,' ordinary people who did extraordinary deeds, simply because it was the right thing to do."

Deputy Consul of the Embassy of Israel Tzuriel Raphael quoted a line from the Talmud, which was "also the theme of the gathering: "Whoever saves a single life is as if one saves the entire world."

One of the survivors, Roman Kent said. "We must not only remember the tragedy of the Holocaust, but the heroic deeds of the Gentiles."

It was an emotional evening during which an elderly Ukrainian and her daughter, who had been flown from Western Ukraine, were honored for saving the lives of a Jewish family, chosen to represent the "righteous among the nations of the world." There they were reunited after 37 years with a woman they had saved.

Lutsia Balyk Vertepna and her daughter, Vira, were certified as "righteous" by the Yad Vashem Martyrs and Heroes Central Authority on April 2, and have been memorialized at the Yad Vashem Garden in Jerusalem. The JFCR, which works in coordination with Yad Vashem to ensure the financial stability of the people recognized, many of whom are poor, has offered financial support for the Vertepnas, who still live in the house where they sheltered the Jewish family from the Nazis.

Mrs. Vertepna and her family saved the life of Bronia Felberbaum-Kagan, her father and mother by hiding them at their farm in Romanivka, Ukraine, from early 1942, until the Soviets occupied the area in spring 1944. The Felberbaums had escaped a ghetto that had been established in Velyki Birky just before it was burned to the ground by the Nazis, after a German officer had told Bronia's mother, who worked as a maid for him, that the ghetto was to be "liquidated."

Mrs. Vertepna's sister, Helen Balyk, promised the Jewish family refuge in the household, where her father Josef built a hiding place to which Mrs. Vertepna and her young child brought food each day for the Felberbaums.

The two families stayed together even after the war. until 1958. when the elder Felberbaum died and Bronia and her mother emigrated to the United States.

Mrs. Vertepna and her daughter were introduced by the younger Felberbaum at the ceremony. Her voice cracking and fighting back tears, Mrs. Kagan said, "I just want to tell Lutsia and Vira that without them we, my husband, my children, would not be here. And I would like to thank them on behalf of my parents for helping us live."

All the while the 81-year-old Mrs. Vertepna, head covered with a kerchief, cried, perhaps from a terrible case of nerves or more probably from sheer happiness at

grown very close to during the years they spent together. When asked to say a few words after she had been introduced, Mrs. Vertepna backed away from the mike, shaking her head, a fresh stream of tears flowing down her face.

More than 350 gathered at the Pierre Hotel in Manhattan for the \$5,000-a-plate, black-tie affair, which helps support 1,200 "Righteous" people in 26 countries with monthly grants. Among them were community activists from the Ukrainian American Coordinating Council and the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America.

More Ukrainians are being honored as information unattainable during the Soviet era becomes available. Robert Goldman, JFCR executive vice-president, said, "During the Soviet times we had no access to the stories and could not verify many of them. Now we are receiving more and more. Unfortunately, a lot of the people have already died."

In addition to honoring the Vertepnas from Ukraine, the JFCR also honored two JFCR activists. Author Fanya Gottesfeld Heller and Mr. Kent, producer of the documentary film, *Children of the Holocaust*, were presented the Recognition of Goodness Award for their longtime work within and on behalf of the Jewish community.