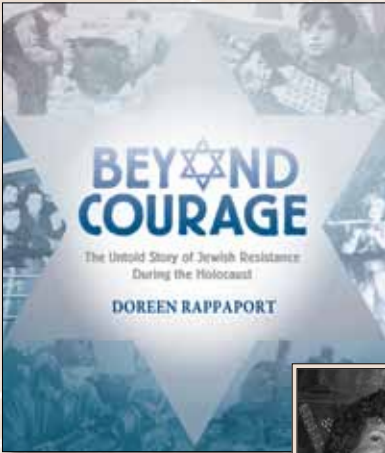


# A Conversation Between Author Doreen Rappaport and Holocaust Survivor Jack Kagan



Doreen Rappaport  
with Jack Kagan.  
(Courtesy of  
Bob Rosegarten.)



One of the stories in *Beyond Courage* centers around Idel (Jack) Kagan, a Polish Jew who helped dig a tunnel to freedom out of the Novogrudok labor camp. It wasn't just the tunnel escape that astounded me. It was Jack's courage and persistence at such a young age. He was fourteen years old and had already tried to escape once before. The outcome of that first attempt was frostbite and the amputation of his toes — without the benefit of anesthesia or surgical instruments. In spite of this disability, Jack went on to help dig the Novogrudok tunnel and crawled out of it with 230 other Jews.

I was determined to find Jack, though I had no idea where he was, or even if he was still alive. I found him on the two-hundredth Google hit: Jack Kagan was living in London. I contacted him, and he agreed to tell me his story. We corresponded for six months, until I felt I had gotten Jack's story just right. — Doreen Rappaport

**DR:** When you escaped the first time and realized you had to go back, how did you feel?

**JK:** When I learned that we had missed the partisan rendezvous and would have to wait three nights in the forest, I frankly did not give a lot of thought to my situation. I knew I wanted to survive. If I had fallen asleep then in the forest, I would have frozen to death.

**DR:** When you escaped the second time, what crossed your mind when you crawled out of the tunnel?



Idel Kagan (left) and Tevele  
Niankovski, 1944. (Courtesy  
of Jack Kagan.)

**JK:** To run as quickly as possible and hope that my legs would carry me for the next five miles.

**DR:** When we work together or when you tell your story to others, how do you feel revisiting that difficult time?

**JK:** About four years after I

came to England, I moved into a flat with eleven other survivors from different parts of Europe. We were all lonely, without families, and we formed strong friendships. We stayed together for about two years, until I got



Jack Kagan (third from right) with cousins, including Berl (far right),  
Novogrudok, 1936. (Courtesy of Jack Kagan.)

married. During this period, we never talked about survival or about the pre-war years. We never asked each other any questions about who we were. We did not want to know.

Later, I can't remember the year, the book *Exodus* came out (Leon Uris's father was from Novogrudok). We started to relax, and for the first time I told my story. Only then did I realize that all survivors must tell their stories and that they should be recorded for posterity. Otherwise our suffering would not be known by the new generations. But I must tell you, it is not easy. Many times





Ladder into the tunnel, Novogrudok labor camp. (Courtesy of Jack Kagan.)

I keep the tears away. Some of my friends have even felt guilty that they survived.

The same was true with the work you and I did: you put on a brave face, and you tell it as a story. It is not easy. You see the faces of your loved ones.

Telling my story always reminds me of another loss. My last day in school was in 1941, when I was twelve. I lost my education then. I always regretted that I have not picked up my schooling.

**DR:** How did your grandchildren react when they heard your story?

**JK:** They heard it mostly from my children and from videos made by the BBC and others. After telling them how hungry I was, I showed them what 125 grams of bread looked like. One slice and soup for twenty-four hours — a starvation diet. “How did you manage to survive?” they asked. It was and still is difficult for them to understand that their grandfather was a survivor.

**DR:** To what do you attribute your strength in surviving the camp and your many losses?

**JK:** I came from a loving family, an unusually loving family. Two brothers married two sisters. I never heard an argument in either home. It was a home full of love. Then came the Holocaust. You start losing one after the other. Killed for doing nothing, just for being Jewish.

After every killing, you get stronger. I wanted to survive. I wanted to take revenge. I somehow knew that I would survive.

After the operation, I lay on a hard bunk for about seven months. Not doing anything but thinking. Everybody was at work. From February 4, 1943, with the victory of the Battle of Stalingrad by the Russians, I somehow wanted to believe that the free world would win the war, and I wanted to survive to see it.

I also had *mazel* (luck). You needed luck to survive.



Partisan dugout, Naliboki forest, Poland (now Belarus). (Copyright © United States Holocaust Museum, used by permission.)

**DR:** What helped you to reconstruct your life in London?

**JK:** My life changed after I met my wife, Barbara, and we created a family.



Idel (Jack) Kagan (second from left) with three cousins who survived the war: Rachel Konigsberg (Gurevitz), Dov (Berl) Kagan, and Leizer Sadan, 1990. (Courtesy of Jack Kagan.)