

# Tribute To A Hero: Benjamin Balanzoff

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45th Anniversary Program Book  
for the Boyerker Benevolent Society, 1968  
Pages 12 – 13

Destroyed because it was isolated, the town survives because it was remembered.

If a newspaper ever found its way to Boyerka, the news it contained would have been read and re-read, interpreted and discussed as we would try to understand just how great the danger really was. But no newspapers arrived. We could only try to guess.

“There are pogroms.” Someone said.

“There are always pogroms”, said another

“Have you seen?”

“No.... but....”

“Then don’t talk.”

When does a man know that his life is in danger?

“Why should anyone want to kill me,” he asks. “No. I can’t believe it.” For to believe means that he must run. To hide is not enough. He must leave . . . leave everything he has ever known, everyone he has ever known, leave quietly, at night taking the back roads, without tickets, passport, or other papers . . . to seek safety among strangers.

And because it is so difficult to leave, men refuse to believe.

But almost half a century ago, the warning came to Boyerka, and we did believe it. It’s hard to remember just exactly what the warning said, but it must have been eloquent, it must have spoken directly to us in a language we could trust for we listened, or rather our parents listened and sent us forth. Ten days later, Boyerka no longer existed: not even a monument to mark the spot. If only our parents had listened to the warning for themselves also.

But this warning, this life-saving, town saving warning that fifty years later we vaguely recall . . . from where did it come? Who could even know that there was a Boyerka? Who could care that it was in danger? And if someone did know, and if someone did care, what could he do?

Not very many years before the town was destroyed, a few of its inhabitants had emigrated and, for the most part had established themselves in the United States. Now, I’ve never measured the miles between say, New York and Boyerka (one reason is that I’ve never been able to locate Boyerka on any map I’ve seen), and I’m sure that one of today’s jets could make the trip in half-a-day. But all this was long before the jet, when miles were much longer.

In any case, those who had emigrated were further from Boyerka than we, in 1968 , are from the moon.

Except for an occasional letter, no news came out of Boyerka; and except for an occasional letter, no news came to Boyerka.

For a young immigrant in a new country, I suppose it would have been easy to forget. There was a new language to learn, new customs to learn. There was a completely new life to make. To have forgotten would have been understandable. But Benjamin Balanzoff did not forget.

Aware that the town was threatened, aware that those he had left behind were in danger, having learned that the danger was increasing, and realizing that in its isolation, the town could not know just how critical its situation was he undertook to sound the alarm.

With great energy, he organized what today we might call an Emergency Committee, composed of all the Boyerker he could contact in this country. He urged each of them to write letters to their families, advising them to leave, immediately upon receipt. There was no time to be lost.

But writing letters is one thing; getting the delivered is something else.

The postal service was archaic, but even worse, it was not to be trusted. Benjamin Balanzoff decided to carry the letters himself and deliver them personally. But upon arriving in Romania, he was advised not to cross the border into Russia. The country was still undergoing the after-effects of the revolution, there were armed hands roaming the countryside and pogroms were widespread.

Restrained from completing his journey, what could he do? He searched about, inquired here and there and finally found a young man, a Russian Jew, whose papers were in order and who would make the trip. Benjamin Balanzoff entrusted him with the letters which he himself had carried so far.

The letters reached Boyerka. We listened to the warning and we left. By the time we reached Jassy, Boyerka had been destroyed and all who remained, murdered.

And now , celebrating the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of our society, we can also celebrate the survival of Boyerka noting that in spite of its isolation., it was remembered. So it is for us to continue to remember and to sound the alarm whenever and wherever new threats arise.

Benjamin Balanzoff, acting alone, enabled a town to survive for fifty years after it was burned to the ground. From his heroic act, new generations have arisen. (This was written 1968... Boyerka now survives for over 90 years since its demise)

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