In the ghettos I saw many deaths. It was a common occurrence in my life there and it came to the point that I didn’t think it unusual. I soon forgot my happy pre-war life, and thought there could be no other life than this. I knew no other life. It wasn’t until many years later that I could truly realize the horror of my existence.

Tobijas Jafetases

Immediately after invading Lithuania in the summer of 1941, the Nazis and their local Lithuanian collaborators savagely attacked Jewish families throughout the country, beat and murdered them and forced nearly 200,000 of them into ghettos. Tobijas and his family were among those forced into the Kaunas ghetto. At 10, Tobijas was forced to work as a messenger and lived in fear as he watched men, women and children randomly executed. In 1944, his mother arranged for him to be sent out of the ghetto, where friends from Vilnius were waiting to hide him. He never saw his mother again.

Tobijas is now 85 and lives with his wife, Yelena, in Vilnius. In advanced age, he strives to lead an active life and heads the Lithuanian Council of Ghetto Prisoners. But he faces genuine challenges, like climbing to his fourth-floor flat in a walk-up building. Tobijas and Yelena are grateful for Claims Conference-supported food deliveries and social events with other Nazi victims.