



# Echoes of Memory Volume 7

The writers whose work is collected in this seventh volume of *Echoes of Memory* write about personal experiences during the Holocaust, but many of these pieces also do the work of interpreting the individuals' survival and describing that experience over the nearly seven decades that have elapsed since the Allied victory in Europe. Compiled here are stories that chronicle the work of remembering and memorializing the victims of the Holocaust, of guiding visitors through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Permanent Exhibition, of mourning a brother killed so many years ago. Included also are accounts parsing what it means, for the writer, to do the writing of memory.

Never before has the title of this collection, *Echoes of Memory*, seemed so apt, as these stories describe fully and powerfully the ways in which memory echoes and reverberates through time. The work presented here describes the world where the Holocaust happened as fully as it describes the world that has existed, for these survivors, after. Through their voices, through their individual and personal interpretations, we have a potent opportunity to sound a whole history. And readers may learn more about the Holocaust through the shared personal experiences of each writer, as we learn more fully what it means for us all to live in a post-Holocaust world.

The work within this volume tells also the story of our writing group, the distinct voices chronicling disparate life experiences. These writers have created community over the nearly 13 years during which this group has met. Still each writer tells, in an individual means and from a unique perspective, the history of the Holocaust and personal experience of survival.

Compiled as they are here, these writers' work helps to underscore the importance of understanding the Holocaust as an atrocity perpetrated against millions of individuals. Within this volume, the Holocaust is told through the varying and particular life story of each writer adding to what we may know of the Holocaust, word by word.

—Maggie Peterson  
Writing Instructor, The Memory Project

# Echoes of Memory

## CONTENTS

<b>JACQUELINE MENDELS BIRN</b>			
How I Came to Write My Memories	1		
My Father's Pocket Watch	2		
<b>RUTH COHEN</b>			
The Jewish Hospital in Bratislava	4		
My Dream of America	4		
The Town I Used to Call My Home	5		
<b>MARCEL DRIMER</b>			
Escape from the Ghetto	6		
Hiding	7		
To Give Up or Not	8		
Winter Coats	10		
<b>GIDEON FRIEDER</b>			
Snippets from My Life, Unit 2: Coincidence to the Skeptics, Miracle to the Believers	11		
To Save the World Entire	13		
<b>MANYA FRIEDMAN</b>			
The Award	16		
The Encounter	17		
My Friend Lola	18		
<b>LOUISE LAWRENCE-ISRAËLS</b>			
Purple Oleander	21		
<b>HARRY MARKOWICZ</b>			
A Bedtime Story		22	
Dunkirk: May 1940		24	
Gitele		26	
The Midland Hotel		27	
Remembrances of a Hidden Child		29	
<b>HALINA YASHAROFF PEABODY</b>			
Going Back		32	
<b>ESTHER STAROBIN</b>			
Closing the Circle		33	
Writing as a Pathway		34	
<b>ALFRED TRAUM</b>			
The Gas Mask		36	
Ruth		37	
<b>SUSAN WARSINGER</b>			
One of Many Tours		40	
The Pineapple Voyage		43	
<b>MARTIN WEISS</b>			
Democracy without Equality		45	
A Letter to My Brother, Moshe		47	
Remembering the Forgotten		48	



## How I Came to Write My Memories

JACQUELINE MENDELS BIRN

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*Born in Paris, France, in 1935, Jacqueline fled with her family to the Vichy-controlled southern region of France, where they lived together under surveillance for the remainder of the war.*

When I grew up in Paris, after we survived World War II, there was not much talk at home about what we had endured. I knew that all of our close relatives were dead, I no longer had grandparents or cousins or aunts and uncles. I envied my school friends who went for lunch and holidays at their relatives' homes.

After I met my husband, Richard, in 1957 in Paris and he proposed to me, we were married and I began a fantastic journey with him in my life. When I arrived in New York, my parents-in-law invited relatives of their family for a meal and to introduce me to all of them. Everyone wanted to know how I, a Jewish girl, had survived the war. Although we had gone back with my parents to the village where we were hidden for 29 months, I knew very little then of the events we had lived through because my parents did not want to talk about the horrors they had gone through.

So I told Richard's relatives what I knew, and what I remembered. I told them my mother's phrase that she repeated often when I asked her questions: "It was horrible, it was horrible." As for my father's family in the Netherlands, all I knew was that everyone was dead. I did not elaborate at the time. Many years later, and after living in many countries, Richard was assigned to be a foreign service officer in Washington, DC. I started to teach at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the US Department of State. There they teach diplomats not only the language of the country where they are assigned, but also the politics, history, economics, and culture of that country. There was always a professor or other specialist who came once a week to lecture on topics, including World War II in Europe. Little by little, and because I went with my students to the lectures, I started to raise my hand and add information that I knew. This was during the time when historians had just begun to do research and write books on World War II and the fate of the Jews.

I read more and more about the Jews in France and began to understand what had happened to us and to my extended family in the Netherlands. I read in French and in English. I read from my library and from my husband's library. We both went to listen to many lectures in a variety of venues in Washington, DC. I filled many folders on the history of the Second World War. I also added many books in French and in English, mostly biographies of people who had survived. My husband, who wanted to know about World War II as much as I did, bought history books on Hitler, on Poland, on the events before the war, on collaboration and more. Because he is a specialist in foreign affairs, he was always able to answer my questions.

After a while, the lecturers at FSI were asking me to speak about my survival in France. I prepared my presentations with great care and I spent many hours reading and learning about events that I had not been aware of before. Little by little, I started to remember details that I had forgotten. I talked to my sister every day on the telephone, which triggered our memories and we reminded each other of small events that we had lived together and had forgotten over the years.

Six years ago now, I became very ill with a deadly and rare disease of the blood, amyloidosis, which necessitated a bone marrow transplant and chemotherapy. I survived. I did not go back to work and the recovery was slow. I became very depressed, having nothing to do but try to regain a normal life. I was away from the job I loved and in isolation during the long months of recovery.

We went on vacation to our home in Cape Cod that summer and my son-in-law, who was spending the month of August there with our daughter and granddaughter, saw how distressed I was and suggested

that I start writing my memoirs. He knew that during the war years, I was the age of his daughter, between four and nine years old. I could see what a different life she was having compared to my life at the same age. I told my son-in-law that I did not know where and how to start writing and he said, "Why don't you write one sentence at a time," which I did. I had my laptop with me and I started.

I worked many days and nights until midnight or one in the morning and I finished writing ten chapters. I have gone to many sources of information thanks to the many books that I have acquired on the topic of World War II in France. I also went to the numerous folders where I added clippings from newspapers, excerpts from events, obituaries and biographies of individuals.

I was able to get detailed information from the archives of the Département of Dordogne where we were arrested and interrogated. My daughter, Anne-Emanuelle, my niece, Jessica, my sister, Manuela, and I had returned in 1997 to the village where my family was hidden. At that time, Jessica wanted to know more about her father, Franklin, who was born in 1943 in the village under terrible circumstances. Jessica wanted to do a documentary film on her father and the circumstances of his birth. She also wanted to know why he tragically died at age 44 in 1988. We found many of the village people or their children still remembered us. Most of them still live in the same area and we were able to locate them. Jessica took photographs and she filmed interviews, which were very helpful to me when I was writing.

At first, Jessica wanted to complete the documentary film she planned to do. But she ran out of money and the material that she had accumulated remained dormant. When I started writing, she gave me all the interviews she had transferred to DVDs. She also gave me her notes. They were very helpful to me and added to the knowledge that I had from my papers, my books, and my memory.

I wrote ten chapters with many footnotes, a large appendix, and numerous photos and documents from archives in Périgueux, the capital of the Département of Dordogne. My daughter Anne-Emanuelle reread my writing several times and advised me all along.

My niece Jessica became my chief editor, and we were on the phone and computer with each other many nights over the past year. She reviewed my errors and gave me suggestions.

My book was published in June 2013 under the title *A Dimanche Prochain: A Memoir of Survival in World War II France*.

This has been a labor of love and memory. The result is a book for our children, grandchildren, and the little family that we have. To my surprise, many people have bought and read my book and have given me much praise. They also say how much they learned from my experience as a child during those terrible years in France.

I wrote those pages because I feel that the present must not forget the past, however painful it still is for me, a hidden child and a survivor. My book is dedicated to the memory of my beloved brother and of my two grandmothers, one of whom committed suicide in 1941 at the age of 64 and the other who was murdered in Sobibór in 1943 at the age of 69.

## My Father's Pocket Watch

My Dutch grandparents, Emanuel and Thekla Mendels, were from Almelo, the Netherlands. They moved to Amsterdam and then to Hamburg, Germany, in the early 1920s, because their import-export business in wheat from the United States was not doing well. Their clients in Germany could not pay their debts because of huge inflation in Germany. Therefore the Mendels brothers, Emanuel and Maurits, and their families settled down in Hamburg in the hope that they could recuperate the money that was owed them.

Their children, including young Frits, moved to Hamburg as well. At first, Frits worked in a bank. Then he started working in an import-export business in leather. The owner, Mr. Ben Elzas, told him that there

was no future for him in his business because he had three sons who would inherit his business. Frits had been corresponding with a former schoolmate of his from the Netherlands who told him that there was an opening in his import-export business in food products in Paris. Frits, who was 21, said to himself, “Why not?” He had planned to go to England where there was a possibility for a job through an acquaintance of his father, but could not go there because of a dockworker general strike. Frits accepted the offer to go to Paris instead. As a young Dutch man, 21 years old, he settled down in Paris, moved into a top-floor maid’s room because the rent was cheap, and went to work.

Before he went to Paris, Frits had gotten acquainted with a young woman, Ellen Hess, the accountant in the office where he was working. Frits and Ellen became good friends and shared their lunch every day; Frits ate a kosher sandwich, but Ellen had ham on hers. That was strange to Frits at first because his mother kept a kosher home. After Frits moved to Paris in 1926, he corresponded with Ellen. Their friendship grew into love and Frits proposed to Ellen four years later. Whether or not to accept was a difficult decision for Ellen. She was an only child and very close to her mother, who had lost her first husband and divorced her second husband.

Ellen accepted the offer. Upon their engagement, Ellen offered Frits a beautiful gold pocket watch with a Swiss mechanism, made in Germany. She had it engraved on the back with Frits Mendels’ initials. Frits and Ellen were married in Hamburg on August 28, 1930. They took the train to Paris and settled down in that beautiful city.

Frits and Ellen were my parents. My sister Manuela was born in 1933 and I was born two years later. The events that followed changed the life of our little family forever. After Hitler took power, he quickly imposed laws against Jews, at first in Germany and later on, in all the countries that he conquered.

After France was invaded, an armistice was signed between Hitler and Marshal Henri Pétain, which divided France into a northern occupied zone and a southern so-called free zone. At first, my parents stayed in Paris, obeyed the laws against Jews, and hoped for the best. I remember wearing the yellow Jewish star on my chest and remarking to my mother how pretty it was, yellow on my green outfit.

After my father’s business was “Aryanized” in May 1941, he didn’t have an income. His business associate was very kind and shared some of the income from the business with him. Of course, that was illegal. Then came the infamous roundup at the Vélodrome d’Hiver on July 16–17, 1942. We were still in Paris and the police forgot to ring our bell. We were able to flee Paris on July 30. My father had secured the help of two young smugglers who helped us to cross the demarcation line on August 1, 1942. A wonderful neighbor upstairs from us kept some of my parents’ valuables—silver objects and family heirlooms. My father was wearing the pocket watch my mother had given him when we crossed the line in the middle of the night.

My parents were arrested in the hotel where we stayed. They were interrogated at the police station, in Ribérac, Dordogne. We were under temporary watch, but not imprisoned. My parents had to report daily to the police station. They were declared illegal refugees of the “Jewish race.” They were fined a large sum of money. After one month, we were allowed to go to a minuscule village, less than 100 kilometers from the main town, and under constant surveillance. My father had his watch with him, and my mother was able to keep some rings. My parents found a tin box and put their precious objects in it. They asked a farmer who owned the land where my father became a farm hand to bury the tin box in the ground. My father told the farmer that if we were caught by the Gestapo or the militia, and sent to a concentration camp, the contents of the tin box would be his forever.

When France was liberated, my father retrieved the tin box and along with all the other miracles that saved our lives, the watch was not mildewed or rotten. It still worked.

Today, and every day since my father’s death, his watch hangs from a hook on the wall in my bedroom. I wind it once in a while and it works perfectly. The watch is now 80 years old.



## The Jewish Hospital in Bratislava

RUTH COHEN

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*Ruth Cohen, from Mukachevo, Czechoslovakia, was first imprisoned with her sister in Auschwitz in April 1944, then several other concentration and work camps beginning in October of the same year.*

The hospital in Bratislava, where I spent a full year, from March 1946 to March 1947, recovering from tuberculosis (TB) on the spine, was a truly remarkably unique place. The doctors as well as the nurses were completely involved and interested in our cases. There were several other Holocaust survivors there, suffering from various types of TB and other ailments that had resulted from being in concentration camps.

They all worked hard to diagnose our ailments. It took almost three months to decide on what was really ailing me and how to go about treating it. Most other survivors of TB on the spine had a different version of the same and many of them died. I was lucky.

Young volunteers, also survivors who were living in Bratislava, came around on a regular basis, supplying us with books, newspapers, local gossip, and just plain love and hope. They helped us feel better about humanity and more hopeful about our future. As the final day of my stay there arrived, I had beaten all odds, made friends for life, and was happily looking forward to the first day of the rest of my life.

## My Dream of America

My grandmother lived with us after my grandfather died in 1937. My parents did not want her to live by herself in my grandparents' house. Among many other things she taught us as young children was the song "Old Man River" from *Showboat*, the song made famous by Paul Robeson. She also told us that in America each person, rich or poor, whatever race or religion, was equal. As a young child I certainly believed her.

When Hitler's Germany made the pact with the British to break up Czechoslovakia, Mukachevo became Munkács and my family had a big dilemma. We had a choice to go to Palestine or the United States. My family from America sent us papers first, so our plan was to prepare ourselves for that probability. My father could not think of leaving his 80-year-old mother behind, so even that plan was nixed and we stayed in Munkacs. Soon schools, attitudes, business, food, and just about everything else changed.

We were taken to a concentration camp, including my grandmother. Most of my family was murdered. I was hospitalized for a whole year and finally got better. My father, sister, and I got ready to sail for America. We boarded the SS *Washington* in Le Havre, France, in April 1948. The voyage was awful, the Atlantic was very stormy, everyone was sick. Fortunately I was not.

When we arrived at the New York harbor at 5 a.m. on April 26, 1948, my birthday, the weather was glorious. As we slowly passed the Statue of Liberty, my feelings as well as those of all other passengers—all of whom were survivors—were very strong. We all cried and hoped that our new lives would be as beautiful as we saw Lady Liberty to be. We were met by cousins, and because it was the first day of Pesach and we were very religious, we walked to Williamsburg crossing the Williamsburg bridge. The view of Manhattan was unbelievably amazingly beautiful. Each time I pass by the Statue of Liberty, by car or ship, the very same feelings arise—tears, hope, and disappointments all over again.

## The Town I Used to Call My Home

The town I was born and raised in, Mukachevo, Czechoslovakia, was modern as well as quite old fashioned. There were horses and buggies bringing in wares from the neighboring farms to sell in the very large open market, which was filled with stalls and pushcarts. Cars and trucks also drove around the town. We also had telephones, although not in every house, but as I remember in all businesses. The town also had a theater.

In our backyard, we had a vegetable garden with chickens and geese running around. There were three buildings in the backyard as well. One was a place used for bottling beer, which was delivered to customers directly from there. Next to it was a very large structure, which was the icehouse. Early in the spring trucks full of large blocks of ice were brought there from the Latorca river. The ice was used for refrigeration in our house. As the icehouse emptied out, we children and our friends used the building as our playground for hide-and-go-seek. Someone I met a few years ago reminded me of those great times.

There was also a garage for the car and a stable for a horse and a cow. The cow was milked every day and we had butter and delicious buttermilk and, naturally, milk, which I hated because it was fresh and awful. We also had a septic tank in the very back, which was emptied periodically by people who specialized in that work.

My parents were quite modern and forward-looking for that time. Amazing, how old and new coexisted.

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## Escape from the Ghetto

MARCEL DRIMER

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*Born in Drobobycz, Poland, in 1934, Marcel Drimer survived the war first by hiding in secret bunkers in the town's ghetto, then in the home of a Polish-Ukrainian family.*

Conditions in the Drohobycz ghetto in the summer of 1943 were unbearable. They included hunger, frequent *Aktions*<sup>s</sup>, and indiscriminate beatings and killings. The Germans were forcing the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) to deliver 100 women and old people every week for executions or deportation to Bełżec. Constant fear was the order of the day. There were other signs that the ghetto would be liquidated soon, so my father decided to smuggle out my mother, my sister, Irena, and me by bribing the guard who was taking the workers to and from the ghetto. It was still dark when my mother, dressed in men's clothing, hid my sister under her coat; my father took me the same way and we marched out of the ghetto.

We could not enter the factory through the guarded gate so we hid in the bushes across the street from the fence. Father loosened several planks in the fence so he could smuggle us in. First he took my mother and sister, and told me that I was a man and I must sit quietly and wait for his return. In the ghetto I had heard stories about people running away and abandoning their children and I was petrified that Father would not come back for me. Crying, I ran after him. A guard heard me cry and came up to us. Father made up some story and gave him the jacket off his back to keep quiet. For the first time in my memory, my father spanked me. He was angry that I would think he could abandon me. I was not a man though; I was only nine years old.

Father worked in a lumber factory, where men whose families had been killed lived in a dormitory. He could stay there, but he needed a hiding place for us. He prepared such a place in a timber drying shed with a loft where we hid. At night, after making sure nobody could see him, my father delivered food to us and took away the waste.

After a few weeks, a young woman named Teresa, who worked in the factory, confided in a friend her suspicions that my father was hiding somebody. She suspected this because she saw him carrying containers at night. She said that she needed to confirm her suspicions, and then do "the right thing" and collect her reward in the form of sugar or flour the Germans offered for turning in Jews. The friend told my father about the plot. He was devastated and shared his worry with a Jewish friend who happened to be a physician. Together they came up with an idea.

The doctor, who had been educated in Austria, knew German well. He wrote an anonymous letter to the SS pretending to be an SS officer saying that Teresa had infected him with syphilis. The next day she was taken by the SS and brought to the clinic where the doctor worked. She was not seen or heard from again until after the Red Army liberated us.

Feeling the pressure and knowing that time was of the essence, Father started looking for a more secure place for us to hide. He took off the armband with the Star of David and went out at night to meet with some farmers that he knew. After several dangerous trips, he found a Polish-Ukrainian family named Sawinski. They were willing to take in my mother and Irena, but not my father or me for the obvious reason that in Poland only Jewish men were circumcised. My father was determined to save at least my mother and sister since saving the whole family at that time seemed impossible.

Mrs. Sawinski came to the dormitory to take Mother and Irena to the farm. Mother started to say goodbye to me. I was fully aware of the situation and scared to be separated from my mother and sister. I wanted to sleep when I was in danger, hoping to wake up in a different time. We all began to cry and Mrs. Sawinski

cried along with us. Finally she said, “Whatever will be, will be. Take the boy with you.” I had a few things packed just in case. We said goodbye to Father and left for the farm. It was night, and we had to go through forests, rivers, and fields to avoid being detected.

It took a lot of promises and begging to convince the Sawinskis to allow my father to join us in hiding. Later my uncle, Abraham Gruber, his wife, Tusia, her daughter, Fela, and six other Jews joined us.

The Red Army entered Drohobycz on August 7, 1944. And today the names of Jan and Zofia Sawinski and their four children are listed in Yad Vashem and in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as the Righteous among the Nations for saving the lives of 13 Jews.

## NOTES

I. Operations involving mass assembly, deportation, and murder (German)

## Hiding

The Germans entered Drohobycz June 30, 1941. Some of their first published orders deprived the Jews of their civil and legal rights. They confiscated items of value, such as fur coats and jewelry, as well as radios and guns that would help the Jews to be informed or resist the Germans. The Nazis used this loot to support the war effort. As a result there were no taxes imposed on German people during the war.

In their systematic efforts to exterminate the Jews and take most of their possessions they organized extermination and *Raub Aktionen* (looting actions). In one such *Aktion*, the Germans with their local helpers entered our home, filled up a wardrobe with crystals, dishes, candlesticks, etc., and left with them. Mother watched helplessly holding my crying sister, Irena, in her arms. On his way out one of the German soldiers looked at Irena and complimented her on the pretty “Aryan” looks and said, “Don’t cry, little girl; this time we came for your things only, not for you.”

After that *Aktion* my parents dug a hole under the mattress to hide our belongings in case of another *Aktion*. There were no beds—they had been looted earlier.

The other kind of *Aktions* involved murder and deportation to extermination camps. To survive these *Aktions* we would hide in the lumber factory where my father was working, or in the woods and farms. During the three years of German occupation we hid in 19 different places. One such hiding place was an unfinished basement on a farm in Modrycz, a small village near Drohobycz. The basement was dark, cold, and full of water. Mother lay down in the water placing my sister and me on her body. We hid this way for a few days.

Usually, before an *Aktion* we had a day or two warning. Often it was a false alarm; we would hide for a couple of days and then return home. One day my uncle Bumek became sick with a high fever and did not go to work.

The *Aktion* came without any warning. As its noise came closer, Bumek lifted the mattress and several planks off the floor, and we all scrambled into the hole. At that moment, a neighbor with a small child came and asked us to take them in. She must have seen my parents removing the dirt from digging the hole. When told that there was no room in the hole, she threatened to tell the Germans about our hiding place and we would all perish. They joined us. The hole was not meant to hide people; there was no air to breathe, the dust was choking us, and there was no room to move. Bumek, who had a high fever and also suffered from claustrophobia, lifted the mattress every hour to provide some relief.

We heard the door broken in, heavy boots, and loud voices in German and Polish. They fired several shots into the walls and floor and listened for children's cries. We were terrified but did not make any noises. After a few minutes we heard the door shut and it was quiet. We thought that they had left. Bumek had an anxiety attack; he lifted the mattress and faced a German soldier with a gun pointed at him. The soldier ordered Bumek to get outside. We expected the worst and thought that this was our end.

One of the local helpers was a Polish or Jewish policeman, my uncle's former classmate. Bumek begged him for help. After talking with the soldier and the others the policemen asked for money and jewelry. Bumek lifted the mattress and asked Mother and the other woman for their rings and jewelry. After getting the loot, they left. How did they know that we were hiding in the house? Someone had inadvertently locked the door from the inside and that was a sure sign that we were there.

Some incidents of hiding did not end as well. Before that *Aktion* a woman with a pretty little girl walked every day by our house. Mother befriended them and sometimes shared food with them. A few days after the *Aktion* the woman was walking alone. Sobbing, she recounted that during the *Aktion* her little girl started crying, endangering the lives of all in their hiding place. She had to smother her own child so others could live.

Once again we had survived, but we never knew for how long.

## To Give Up or Not

In April 2012 President Barack Obama came to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to talk about the government's efforts to fight genocide wherever it exists. He also announced awarding posthumously the Medal of Freedom to Jan Karski, a Polish hero whom we, Polish Jews, admire. The president addressed Holocaust survivors, sitting in the front rows, as those who "never gave up."

During one of the many *Aktions* in the Drohobycz ghetto in 1943, I hid with my mother, my sister, Irena, and other Jews in an underground bunker, one of the 19 hiding places we used during the Holocaust. Father was at that time in a work camp, temporarily safe from deportation.

We were all constantly hungry and scared. Irena was anemic and bleeding from her nose. I was small for my age, did not talk much, and looked like a hunted little animal. A woman with a child was hiding with us. She exuded an aura of superiority and self assurance, being fairly well dressed and fed. She said to my mother, "Mrs. Drimer, why are you trying so hard to prolong your misery? Don't you see that your little girl will not live much longer and your son is physically and mentally impaired? Why don't you just give up?" The woman's opinion of me did not help my already low self-esteem.

My mother thanked the woman for the advice and said that we would try our best to keep on living. There were many times in our miserable existence that my parents considered another option. They would have liked to get cyanide pills for all of us, but could not afford it.

I have no idea what happened to the woman, but we did survive.

After the liberation, I restarted my life trying to prove that woman and Hitler wrong. It took a few months to learn to speak normally, not in a whisper, and to strengthen my atrophied leg muscles, so I could walk and run.

The years after the Holocaust were not about life and death survival. But living in a Communist, antisemitic Poland was a struggle. Because of the Holocaust, I had lost three years of schooling

and had to catch up. My parents hired a tutor and I made up two grades, but in the fourth grade I was still a year older than my Polish classmates. The teacher assigned me to be the president of the class. As I was distributing books, a boy tried to trip me and complained, "Why do we have to listen to this kike (*parszywy Zyd*)?" I put down the books and punched him in the mouth. From that time, no one called me a kike. After we parted ways, whenever he saw me on the street, he very politely took his hat off to me.

In high school I seriously tried to improve my physical condition. I exercised every day at home doing countless push-ups, sit-ups, and other calisthenics, but I needed some weight training to build up my muscles. The only places that were available for that purpose were sports clubs associated with the coal mines. I signed up for boxing and trained two or three times a week lifting weights, shadow boxing, and skipping rope, and I shortly started seeing results. The only problem with boxing was that eventually I had to get into the ring with another boxer. In the first or second round, my opponent hit my nose with a left hook. He broke a bone in my nose, so that to this day I have problem breathing. This was the end of my boxing career. I have learned a lesson that with my nose I will never be a boxer. *I did* give up boxing! But since that time I have been exercising regularly, lifting weights and walking.

I graduated from high school in 1953 with straight As. My sister, Irena, by that time a pretty and healthy young lady, graduated a year later also with all As. In my freshman year at the Wroclaw Polytechnic Institute I could not adjust to the hard routine of engineering studies. For the first time in my life I was away from my family, living in a rented room, eating lousy food in the institute's cafeteria. I was failing two courses. While visiting my family one weekend, I suggested that I would quit and try some easier studies. My wise father said, "We did not quit in much more dire situations. You should study hard and in the worst case wait until they let you go."

I barely passed the two courses but gradually improved my grades and in my sophomore year I was on the Dean's List. Those on the list would get a little more scholarship money. Standing in a special line to receive it was like a badge of honor.

I graduated in 1957 with a BS in Mechanical Engineering. Irena graduated with an MS in Civil Engineering. Later there were many PhDs, professors, and one ambassador among my cousins who survived or were born after the war, but I was the first in my family to graduate from a university.

I retired in 1994 from the Army Corps of Engineers as Supervisory General Engineer (GS 15). After that I worked for 16 years as a consultant for the same organization. During my professional career I sponsored some highly qualified emigrants from Poland and helped others to find jobs and settle in the United States.

Irena worked for many years in a high position as a civil engineer in the Construction Ministry in Israel and recently retired. She now lives in Israel with her husband, a retired professor of entomology, two children, and six grandchildren. My wife and I have one son, Adam, and two grandchildren. They are our pride and joy.

So much for those two children, one branded "physically and mentally impaired" and another predicted to "die soon."

Just before my 40th birthday on May 1, 1974, I got a letter from my parents in which Father wrote, "This is a special letter for your birthday. It is the 40th birthday and a special one. We should be happy that we all miraculously survived the Nazi beast and are living normal lives, because many survivors are not capable of that. My dearest son, I wish that together with your beloved mother we will be able to wish you, Ania, and your sweet little Adam all the happiness in the world for many years to come and a lot of 'nachat' ('pride and joy' in Hebrew) from him."

## Winter Coats

Winter of 1942 was severe. In the Drohobycz ghetto the Germans had decided to exterminate the Jews. The ways to achieve this were by starving or freezing them to death. The food rations were extremely small and there was no coal to heat the homes. People tried to avoid starvation in any way they could. Many of those who before the war worked in professions or trades had to resort to begging—after selling or bartering all their possessions for food, they had no other choice. Cold and hunger combined made people's lives miserable. As a result, many starved to death. In the spring and summer the misery was intensified by an outbreak of typhus caused by outrageously unsanitary conditions. There were frequent *Aktions* during which we hid in a hole dug under the floor of our apartment, or in the lumber factory where my father worked. There were often rumors about forthcoming *Aktions*, which made life so very tense.

Based on such a rumor, my parents decided to escape from the ghetto. We hid in an attic of a timber-drying shed that my father had prepared for us earlier. This was only a temporary solution, so Father tried to find a Gentile family that would hide us. He visited several peasant neighbors of my maternal grandparents and offered to reward them for hiding us. Since he did not have any money he offered a fur coat. Possessing such a coat was punishable by death, as they had been confiscated by the Germans right after they occupied Drohobycz in June 1941. One of the farmers denounced Father to the authorities. A Polish policeman came to take him by train to a prison in nearby Boryslaw. Aware that in the case of an *Aktion*, the prisoners were the first to be killed or deported to the Belzec extermination camp, Father decided to let the policeman shoot and kill him instead. He got away from the policeman and ran to the middle of the street, to allow the policeman a good aim and to protect the pedestrians on the sidewalk. He was hoping and expecting to be killed any second. Instead, the policeman caught up with Father and hit his head with the handle of the revolver. He said, "I was given an order to bring you to prison, not to kill you. Others will do the killing." Father was covered with blood and in pain.

In the Boryslaw prison there were several other Jews who committed similar "crimes." One of them was Mr. Hoffman, whom father befriended. Together they started planning how to escape the prison. Mr. Hoffman knew one of the jailers. He asked Father if he had anything of value with him that could be used to bribe the jailer. Father had a diamond from Mother's engagement ring hidden in the heel of his shoe. Mr. Hoffman took the diamond, added money that he had hidden in his clothing, and gave it to the jailer. The jailer released both of them.

Usually, from our hiding place in the lumberyard, we could see Father working in the yard through the cracks in the wall. He made an effort to walk often where we could see him. When we did not see him, we realized that something was very wrong. For the next two to three days during the time he was imprisoned, we did not have anything to eat or drink. Mother was desperate—she could not contact anybody outside and she knew that without Father we did not have the slightest chance of survival. My sister and I instinctively felt how helpless the situation was and were upset, worried, and so very hungry.

On the third day, my uncle Bumek, who worked in an oil refinery nearby, came after sunset and took us back to our apartment. A Jewish man in the lumberyard had notified Bumek about what had happened.

Mother cried all the time; she tried to keep us calm and fed us with the meager food that Bumek brought with him. At one point my sister, Irena, screamed, "Mommy, mommy, I see Daddy coming." Mother replied that she must be imagining, that Daddy would never come back. But it was, indeed, my father. He was covered with blood, unshaven, and dirty, and he even brought a peasant woman with him who had some provisions for bartering. My parents offered what little we had for her food. It was not enough for the woman. At one point she noticed my sister's coat and offered to give us some food for it. Mother was hesitant to barter away my sister's only coat, but the woman insisted, arguing that "by the winter the girl will most likely be dead." Luckily, this prediction did not come true.



## Snippets from My Life, Unit 2: Coincidence to the Skeptics, Miracle to the Believers

GIDEON FRIEDER

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*Gideon Frieder moved with his family to Nove Mesto, Slovakia, at the beginning of the war. In 1944, the family members were forced to flee. With the help of a Jewish partisan, Gideon survived the rest of the war in hiding with a Catholic family.*

Oh, the hierarchy of fear. There are many dangerous people outside the house, and one has to recognize who they are. The least dangerous are the Wehrmacht<sup>1</sup>—these old men with their grey uniforms. They come only occasionally on patrol, as our hamlet is too small and too insignificant, so there is no standing garrison in it. We are warned that they can be quite dangerous, but once they come into the house and sit down, they are really nice. I am just seven years old, yet they teach me how to use the Mauser<sup>2</sup> and the Schmeisser<sup>3</sup>, how to load them and how to take care of them. On another occasion they also showed me how to use a hand grenade. They sit inside because it is warm and they are tired and they usually bring some coffee, which Aunt Paulina brews for them. We can also drink some. Looking back, it was possibly ersatz—but at the time, I felt very important to be able to take a sip.

You never do this with the soldiers with the black uniform, with the skull and bones insignia. Uncle Jozef calls them SS<sup>4</sup>. Sometime they come with some others who Uncle Jan calls Gardisty<sup>5</sup>, and they speak Slovak. Uncle Jozef is very strict, telling me *never* to talk to them or be around when they are here—I should play in my corner where I sleep and be quiet.

When the SS are coming down the hill in their armored cars, we go inside, but we do look through the window. I am careful just to peek, as I listen to what Uncle Jozef says. He is very nice and very wise, speaks many languages as he is really a Polish man who came through the village once and stayed to marry Paulina. He also speaks German, as he is from the part of Poland where there were many Germans, so he learned to speak when he was a child. I know because he talks in German when the Wehrmacht soldiers come to drink coffee in our home.

It is, however, the really dangerous soldiers that we all fear—they have a white uniform over their clothing and they speak very bad Slovak. I cannot understand a word they say. Does not matter, we *never* stay in sight when they come, we just hear them shouting. They are *very* visible and easily recognized when coming in their cars down the hill—and everybody who sees them shouts “Vlasovci”<sup>6</sup> and runs into the house and hides, no peeking, no talking, just waiting. They do not speak to anybody, just kill and burn the houses. The house next to us was burned with all the people inside and it is still there today, burned down, with a plaque on it.

The partisans are the last group that comes into our hamlet, but I am not afraid of them. They come usually at night and warm themselves around the stove. I am not allowed to be around them. Only Uncle Jan and Uncle Jozef talk to them. Aunt Paulina goes to her side of the house. I stay in my corner, and after the partisans go up to the attic to sleep, Uncle Jozef joins Aunt Paulina. Uncle Jan and I always stay at our side of the house and go to sleep.

One day, still in the winter, only about three months after my arrival here, the Wehrmacht came into the village shouting and running, so we all immediately went into our houses. There seemed to be a lot of them. Some came to our hut and started to search. Suddenly one of them shouted something and came into the room holding a clip with five rifle rounds. After some discussion that I did not understand, really I did not hear a lot because I was crouching in my corner, the Germans put a sentry in front of the house and took Uncle Jozef away. Aunt Paulina and Uncle Jan were distraught and Paulina went immediately

to her side of the house. There was a window there where she could have seen where they were taking her husband. I do not know how long it was. Only the sobbing that occasionally came from the other side of the hut marked the time.

I do not know how long it all lasted, but suddenly I heard a shout of joy, and Uncle Jozef came into the hut. The sentry was not at the door and the Germans were gone. Everybody came to the table and Jozef told us as follows: The soldiers took him up the hill to the neighboring village of Polianka and brought him to a room where their commander was sitting. The commander shouted at him, accusing him of being a supporter of the partisans, and demanded to know where they were. Jozef did not wait for the translation and immediately answered in German, surprising the officer. He said that he is not a supporter of the partisans, that he was pressured by the partisans who killed one of his wife's family members in another village, and he has no choice but to let them sleep in the attic, where one of them left the clip. If the Germans would protect the village from the partisans who come and steal all the food, there would be no problem, but the Germans are not there at night, and what can he do? If he does not let them in, they will kill everybody the same way that they killed others.

Many years have passed since that winter—it was sometime in January 1945—and now, with the benefit of hindsight, I speculate that the commander may have been a veteran of too many killings, sensing the end and the defeat, reluctant to kill any more, especially a German speaker with a plausible story and a family. The commander may have been in an especially jovial mood or may have had reasons unknown to me. The commander may have been in a special frame of mind, having the power of life and death in his hands, but enjoying the ability to be benevolent. Or, as one of my religious friends firmly believes, divine intervention guided the commander's decision and saved my life, so that two decades later I could meet with David Ben Gurion, in recognition of my work helping to secure the only real shelter of She-erit HaPleta (the survivors), the Jewish state of Israel. Let the believer believe and the skeptic call it sheer luck; the fact is that I was saved.

But the story does not end there. The real miracle had not happened yet. Precisely a week later, the Vlasovci came. They surrounded the village and conducted a thorough house-to-house search. They found *nothing* in our home—it had been sanitized previously, so to speak, by the Wehrmacht. Had the searches occurred in a reverse order, there would have been no discussion between Jozef and any commander. Simply, the Vlasovci would have found the ammunition, barricaded Uncle Jozef, Aunt Paulina, Uncle Jan, and me in the house, and burned us all, house and people, until we all were turned into ashes. Miracle, divine intervention, or just coincidence? Let the believers believe and the skeptics—well, the skeptics will say it was all a coincidence.

## NOTES

1. The "Wehrmacht" was the regular German army. At the end of World War II, the garrisons were mainly old men, as most of the young were either dead or on the front lines.
2. The "Mauser" was the Mauser 98K, the standard issue bolt-action rifle of the Wehrmacht. It was later (in Israel) called "The Czech Rifle," as it was produced, among other places, in the Moravian town of Brno, then part of the German "Protectorate." In the 1947–48 Israeli wars it played a major role, being the rifle that stopped the Arabs before the May 1948 invasion by the neighboring states. It remained the standard issue rifle in the Israeli Defense Forces until the late 1950s.
3. The "Schmeisser" was the popular name of the MP40, at the time of this story the standard submachine gun of both the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS.
4. The "SS" were really a mix of mechanized and armored units of Waffen SS.
5. The "Gardisty" were Slovak collaborators that belonged to the "Hlinkova Garda," a paramilitary unit of the Slovak Fascist Hlinka Party, originally modeled after the *Sturmabteilung* (the Nazi SA).

6. The “Vlasovci” were Ukrainians who collaborated with the Germans. They derived their name from their association with General Andrey Andreyevich Vlasov, an ex-Red Army general whose Russian Liberation Army (ROA, the Russian acronym) fought on the side of the Germans. I did not do enough research to ascertain if the “Vlasovci” that I encountered were actually part of ROA or just collaborators fighting as part of the Waffen SS. They were quite renowned for their brutality. They spoke either Russian or Ukrainian—I do not know which—but both are Slavic languages, and when they are heard shouted from a distance, the children thought that it was just bad Slovak.

## To Save the World Entire

Why was man created alone? Is it not true that the creator could have created the whole of humanity? But man was created alone to teach you that whoever kills one life kills the world entire, and whoever saves one life saves the world entire.

—*paraphrased from the Talmud*

Imagine you are a devout Catholic and live in a small, mountain village. It is snowing, it is cold. Your home—just a bedroom, a main room, and a kitchen—is heated by a wood stove. You share your home with two other adults, both family. War is raging around you. Day and night you are likely to hear shelling. Food is scarce. More than one home in your town has been torched, the inhabitants inside burned alive, for hiding Jews or partisans.

Imagine there is a knock at your door at nightfall. It is dark when you open the door. Ushered into your home is a scared, young child. There is blood on his clothing. You know he is Jewish. What would you do? And after you decide to keep him, what then? Here I concentrate only on one aspect of my somewhat paradoxical and miraculous survival, and this has to do with the people and with the location.

The day after I arrived, Jozef and Paulina sat me down to teach me my new identity. I had a new name, I had a new family, and they also taught me to memorize a set of sentences. They started with “*Ocbenasknonabi...*” We practiced the sentences until I could recite them by heart as though I had known them throughout all my young life. They instructed me to recite them if asked to do so by the Ukrainians (who fought on the side of the Germans), the Germans, the Guardists (members of the Slovak Fascist Hlinka Guards), or anybody else for that matter. They gave the blurb a name—a name that made no sense to me—but I did memorize the sentences, which were just an unintelligible garble to me.

I do not remember if I had to recite them ever alone or only as a part of a group of children, but I knew them well. What were these sentences? And why were they so important of all things, that teaching them to me was the first course of action upon welcoming me into my new home and my new reality?

The Holocaust ended. Years passed. I went to school. I studied: math, languages, science, world religion. I was in the army. I married and created a new family. From time to time I would come face to face with an echo from my past. I repressed them. Conversely, from time to time I would come across a passage or person that I knew that I had seen before. I knew that it was familiar. I searched my memory, my knowledge, and my past—all in vain. I did not find it. The failure to identify what I sought to remember tormented me for a while. Slowly, it faded—other interests, other worries filled my mind. I can’t honestly say that I dwelled upon the lines taught to me so long ago in the small, snowy village by people who loved and cared for me.

More years passed and I moved my family to the United States. Slovakia became independent and appointed an ambassador to the United States. He tried to rally support for Slovakia and got a list of all the residents of the Washington, DC, metropolitan area and its environs who he considered to be Slovak. Suddenly, for the ambassador at least, Dean Prof. Dr. Frieder was transformed: He was no longer the stinking Jew he had been considered while actually living in Slovakia; he was now a respected Slovak.

I was invited to a reception in the embassy. I hesitated, as I had never identified as a Slovak, and the new Slovak flag is almost identical to the old Fascist flag. Eventually I went there—my curiosity got the better of me and compensated for my aversion to anything Slovak.

Slovakia is 85 percent Catholic, so it was not surprising that the reception opened with a short prayer of thanks recited by a Slovak Catholic priest, in Slovak:

*Otče náš, ktorý si na nebesiach,  
posväť sa meno tvoje.  
Príd' kráľ'ovstvo tvoje.  
Bud' vôľ'a tvoja  
ako v nebi tak i na zemi.  
Cblieb náš každodenný daj nám dnes.  
A odpust' nám naše viny,  
ako aj my odpúšť'ame svojim vinníkom.  
A neuved' nás do pokušenia,  
ale zbav nás zlého.  
Lebo tvoje je kráľ'ovstvo, moc i sláva teraz i vždycky i na veky vekov. Amen.*

The first words caught my attention. The closing words seemed familiar and disturbing. I mulled. I contemplated until suddenly, like a blinding lightning strike, the words hit me. This was the blurb that Jozef and Paulina had taught me, the meaningless set of slurred words. Except now, they were clearly enunciated. I approached the priest and casually inquired after the prayer he had recited. It was the Lord's Prayer, he told me.

I went home and opened the New Testament—in my case, in Hebrew. Here it was. What I was reading was the Lord's Prayer, its words clear, its sentences well phrased: "Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name" (*Yitkadal V Yitkadash Shmei Raba*<sup>2</sup>).

Our Father, clearly stated, not slurred as in, possibly, "ourather." Our Father, in the language of the country, even back then when the Mass was recited in Latin. Our Father, probably one of the only two prayers known by Jozef and Paulina, these wonderful, ignorant, intelligent, primitive, yet full with the knowledge of life angels. Our Father... Thy kingdom come (*Avinu Malkenu*)—arguably the most Jewish part of the Christian liturgy. They taught me the prayer the way they knew it, instinctively, slurred, without parsing it. It was a mantra that identified children who should live, and the lack of it would kill. It was a mantra demanded by the murderers from the children they met—and those who did not know it did not survive. It was the shield by which Jozef and Paulina protected me from the evil—not only because they knew that I needed it, but also because they were professing what they believed in. That faith, personified for them by the Lord's Prayer and by the Hail Mary, was a necessary shield in those dark times. It sustained them as they prayed every night before the picture of the heart of Jesus that they'd hung on every wall in their hut, and it was the reason that they and their fellow inhabitants of that hamlet saved numerous lives. In a country where the president, who was a Catholic priest, paid the Germans to kill the Jews, these true humanitarians taught the Lord's Prayer to save a Jewish child.

"Whoever saves one life"—in this case, by faith and prayer.

"Our Father who art in Heaven" (*El Maleh Rachamim, Shochen ba Mromim*<sup>3</sup>), gather under your wings these righteous souls.

## NOTES

1. I use here the English version of the Lord's Prayer used in the Catholic tradition. The King James version starts with "Our Father which art in Heaven."
2. "Glorify and sanctify the name of the Lord" is, in Aramaic, the opening phrase of the Sanctification (Kaddish) in Jewish liturgy (translation for meaning rather than verbatim).
3. "Our Father, our King" in Hebrew is the most frequently used phrase in the liturgy of Yom Kippur—the most holy holiday in the Jewish calendar (verbatim translation).
4. "God Full of Mercy who dwelleth in Heaven" is, in Hebrew, the opening phrase of the prayer for the dead in the Jewish liturgy (verbatim translation).

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## The Award

MANYA FRIEDMAN

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*Manya Friedman (Moszkowicz), from Chmielnik, Poland, survived the Gogolin transit camp; Gleiwitz, Ravensbrück, and Reclin concentration camps; and a death march.*

I was recently quoted by a young columnist from a local newspaper, saying that I will speak to anyone who wants to listen and even to those who don't want to listen. But when I was asked to speak to a Rotary Club in Virginia I was curious to find out first about their organization, what they represent and what their purpose is, before I accepted their invitation. I had no previous knowledge about them, and since this was not arranged by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, I had to do my own research.

One day while sitting next to my bookshelf that holds my *World Book Encyclopedia* (once a very reliable source of information) I reached for the book marked with the letter "R" and located the information I was looking for. I read mainly about the meaning and purpose of the Rotary Club. Among other things I read that this was a men's club, and I was impressed with their aim and purpose. However, I was not impressed with the time scheduled for my speaking engagement. It was to be in the morning for breakfast, before office hours.

Since my children have restricted my driving long distances on the Beltway, I had to take the train the evening before and spend the night with my son, who lives near where I was to speak. He drove me in the morning to the meeting place. When I arrived I was surprised to see an almost equal number of ladies and men. I assumed that they must be spouses of the members, because in the *World Book* I had read that this was a men's club. But during the conversation, the ladies introduced themselves as members of the club. With embarrassment I recalled my old-fashioned reliance on my edition of the *World Book*, published during the 1970s. Things had changed since then.

It was a very attentive and appreciative audience, listening while I shared with them my experience during the Holocaust. I received from them several mementoes with their organization's logo.

Sometime later, I received a call from one of the club's members asking if I would be available on June 22. The club was having their annual dinner to welcome new members and distribute awards to old members, and they wanted me to participate. Since I had no assignment from the Museum for that date, I accepted the invitation. At the time all that was mentioned to me was the date. The date was several months in the future, so I just marked it on my calendar, and there was not much communication between us during the interim.

Only shortly before the event was to take place was I informed that I would get an award. I did not think much of it; I assumed it would probably be another plaque. I inquired what I was expected to do. Was I expected to speak? I was told to just say thank you.

Finally, the name of the award was mentioned to me: The Paul Harris Fellowship Award. It did not make a big impression on me, but my son was curious and looked it up on the Internet. He e-mailed me at once with the information he learned. This was the most prestigious award the organization bestows on only selected, deserving individuals. The recipient must be of high moral character and principles among other things. I was amazed. How can one accept such an award, and by just saying "thank you"?

So when the member who was in touch with me (after reading my short bio) presented me with the award at the annual dinner, I was moved. I started by saying that such an award is a great honor for any recipient, but in my case it has even a more significant meaning. I told them how for several years I existed just as

a number—79357. I said how my hard labor was rewarded with starvation. I recalled how dehumanized I had been, that I often wished for it all to end, no matter how. So now each acknowledgment or award, no matter how important or insignificant, has a special meaning to me. Each of those occasions makes me realize how fortunate I am to live in this free and wonderful democratic country. At last, I told them that with deepest appreciation I accepted their award.

On the way back to my table, I noticed that some tears had been shed by several ladies. It was quite a long ceremony; eventually all the acknowledgments were distributed, new members were welcomed, speeches by old members given, and a new president sworn in.

After the ceremony, one of the members who had greeted me before came over to my seat, bent down almost to a kneeling position, and took both my hands in his. He said, “You probably noticed my accent.” I made a joke of it. I thought that he maybe came over to congratulate me or praise my speech. He went on saying, “I am a German. I was five years old when the Holocaust took place. My father was in the Luftwaffe and was seldom home. Now I am asking for your forgiveness. I want to apologize for what my family did.” I was speechless for a moment. Such an unexpected confession. Then I told him what I usually tell others. “What happened cannot be undone. Try to be a good person, and do your best to prevent such atrocities from happening again.” Before he left he gave me his business card in case I would like to contact him.

After he left, I kept contemplating what had just taken place. I thought, regardless of how painful it is for us to keep repeating the horrors of the Holocaust, there is some hope of reaching some of the people.

## The Encounter

Some time ago I was approached by one of the Museum’s personnel and asked if I would meet the then-minister-president from Brandenburg State in Germany. He was coming to observe the Days of Remembrance, to read some names in the Hall of Remembrance, and to light a candle. I agreed. But from that time on, hardly a day passed by without my wondering about meeting (with trepidation) the German official. How would I react meeting someone from the German government?

While volunteering at the Museum with Visitor Services, I have met many Germans, including student groups, exchange students, and visitors. Some have even apologized for what their ancestors did, but I have never met anyone in a position of authority. Scenes from the past flashed through my mind, as did questions: Do I stand at attention while speaking to him? Can I look directly into his eyes?

When I learned that in the Brandenburg district, his district, there had been two well-known camps, Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück, I began to relive the time I spent in Ravensbrück. I was held there after being evacuated from our camp in Gleiwitz and after a death march. The conditions and the treatment there were indescribable. Though the camp was built in 1939 as a labor camp to accommodate about 5,000 women, by January 1945, when we arrived, the camp housed about 30,000. The sanitary conditions were deplorable. We slept on three tiered bunks, on straw sacks, four women on each bunk. Some even slept on the floor. Every morning, before roll call, while running to the latrine we stepped on corpses, women who had died during the night. The few “toilets” were without doors, and hundreds of women waited in line. And as the number of inmates increased, the food rations decreased. Some of the Kapos (our German overseers), in addition to walking around with clubs in their hands, were also escorted by dogs. Every morning, while standing in the lines to be counted, we saw the carts loaded high with emaciated naked bodies being wheeled to the crematoria.

Almost daily, I relived those memories, until the day arrived (more than 60 years later) when I was to meet Herr Platzeck, minister-president of the Brandenburg State. I got up that morning feeling extremely

nervous. I checked several times to see if I had my Metro ticket, my Museum badge, my keys. Halfway to the elevator I turned back to make sure I had locked the door. Through the years I have spoken to thousands of people about my experience during the Holocaust—from junior high school students to White House correspondents—but I had never been so anxious before.

When I arrived at the Museum, I could not even remember where we were supposed to meet. I met Miriam, our photographer, and seeing the state I was in, she was kind enough to stay with me until the party arrived.

Finally Mr. Platzeck and his entourage, including a translator, arrived, accompanied by several staff members from the Museum and a security guard. I was introduced to him, and after a short handshake, he put his arm around my shoulder, a gesture which he repeated often. He had requested a private meeting with me (and his translator). We proceeded to the Hall of Remembrance where he read names of inmates from Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück who were murdered during the Holocaust, and we lit candles in their memory.

Led by the security guard we went through the exit from the Permanent Exhibition and through a security door to the fifth floor. There we separated from the rest of the party.

By then I was more relaxed. He was human. I even joked with him that he has a Polish name but misspelled. He inquired about my personal life, about the time I was in Ravensbrück. I told him I was there only a short time. Most of that time I spent in the Gleiwitz camp. He was very familiar with the camp, the Gas-Russ-Werk, and with the company that started it. Besides running our camp, that company was instrumental in melting the gold confiscated from the Jews and from the gold teeth extracted at the extermination camps. They also contributed to the production of Zyklon B, the gas used in the extermination camps.

Mr. Platzeck seemed very proud while telling me about the memorial built in Ravensbrück and about the German youngsters being taught there about the Holocaust, who in turn take visitors on tours and tell them about the memorial. He mentioned that every year—with that one being the exception—he travels to Israel to observe Yom Hashoah. He also told me about his family. They had belonged to the Socialist party and were put in camps during the war. Then he told me about a former inmate of Ravensbrück who came to visit the memorial; he said an “elder dame” came. I got so emotional, I interrupted him. I did not wait for the translator. I asked him, “Please repeat it.” I don’t know why. Maybe the conversation about the camps brought me momentarily back to that time, and his expression “elderly lady” was such a shock to me. That elderly lady was from France; she had been a prisoner in Ravensbrück. After seeing the memorial, she said she had lived long enough to finally see the Germans apologize for what they had done; now she could go home and die.

Finally our time was up. The knock on the door brought me back to reality. But before leaving Mr. Platzeck handed me a gift, a shawl with a design from a wall hanging in a palace ordered by Fredrick the Great around 1765. I didn’t have any gift to reciprocate. I remembered I had my ID card from the Museum in my handbag, so I handed it to him. Someone from the Museum remarked that it was a very proper exchange.

## My Friend Lola

A new year of uncertainty had just begun, 1945. It would be another year of hunger, pain, and misery. As I contemplated our future with my best friend, Lola, I wondered how much longer we could endure the brutalities. I could sense from the expression on her face that she was more concerned about the immediate, the present moment. She had not been feeling well for several days but did not dare complain, nor go to our camp doctor. In a labor camp there is no room for the sick or those unable to work.

She seemed to drag every morning; her body was unwilling to work. I helped her climb down from the bunk bed, supported her every morning at dawn while standing in line to be counted, and assisted her with her chores at work. I was her supervisor.

Then one day she just refused to get up. She was burning with fever. I felt the heat during the night, since we slept next to each other. I took her to the infirmary. Dr. Berkovitz, a French Jew, was very sympathetic. He was the second doctor at the camp. The first doctor was deported together with the Jewish camp overseer and the woman who gave birth at camp, for not reporting her pregnancy. The newborn was thrown against the wall by the enraged SS *Lagerführer* from the neighboring men's camp. Dr. Berkovitz, though very sympathetic and fatherly, lacked the proper medications to cure any illness. I visited my friend every day despite restrictions.

Early in the morning on January 19, as our group was returning to camp after working the night shift, we could sense that something was out of the ordinary as we were approaching the camp. Girls were running in and out of the barrack. There was a big commotion. No one knew anything for certain and all kinds of rumors were circulating. Everyone was talking about evacuation. It seemed the Soviet army was approaching and the German camp authorities had decided to evacuate us to central Germany.

I was faced with a dilemma. Not only was I uncertain about my own future, but what should I do about my friend Lola in the infirmary? Should I leave her? Maybe she would be liberated by the Soviet army, but at the same time a rumor circulated that the camp would be burned down, to ensure that no evidence was left behind. I could not support my friend by myself, but after convincing another friend to help me, we took Lola from the infirmary. With support from both of us we managed together with the others to march to the railroad station. There were no railcars available and we could not return to our camp; the road was blocked. When we were leaving our camp, a group that marched from Auschwitz was waiting at the gate to enter for a rest. So we spent the night in a neighboring barn. The next morning we were loaded onto open rail wagons, the type used to transport coal. To overcome the January cold, each one of us had been given a blanket as we left the camp.

Each car was packed, with no room to sit down. I took my friend to a corner of the railcar, held on to the rails with my hands, and with my back pushed away the crowd so she would not be squashed. After almost ten days in the excruciating cold with only the snow to quench our thirst, we reached Ravensbrück. My friend, for some astonishing reason, felt much better. We spent some time in the Ravensbrück camp, then were transferred to a smaller camp, a subcamp of Ravensbrück. By then it was April—spring. We sat on the step leading to the barrack, trying to catch some rays of sun which seemed, for the most part, to be absent from the camps. We checked each other's heads and removed our garments to try to eradicate the lice, but were mostly unsuccessful.

One night, again sharing a bunk bed with my friend on the upper-third tier, I felt like I was sleeping next to a hot oven. She again had a high temperature and was uttering incoherent sentences. I was faced with the same dreadful decision of what should be done. Should I take her to the infirmary? I did not even know if there was one in this camp, or if there was a doctor or nurse. And what if they would report her to the authorities, or they might send her away. How could I leave her like this? She would be missed at the roll call's counting, and she could die from the fever. I decided I had to take her to the nurse. As before, I visited her daily, although this time I could only wave to her through the window.

A few days later, at dawn, while standing at roll call to be counted, I and a few other girls were selected from the line. Since a selection in camp never meant a better lot, I was concerned that it would be very distressing for my friend when she found out. I instructed the others not to mention anything about me. I decided I would rather have my friend think that I deserted her when I did not show up, rather than have her worry that I had been deported from camp.

This selection happened to be my liberation. It was the end of April 1945. The chairman of the Swedish Red Cross, Count Folke Bernadotte, was in Germany negotiating with Himmler, head of the Gestapo, for the release of some Scandinavian prisoners of war. He also insisted that Himmler release some prisoners from Ravensbrück camp.

After the war was over, after inquiring of different authorities, reading the lists published by many Jewish and other organizations, and corresponding with the police from my hometown, I came to the sad realization that I had lost my entire family—my parents and my two younger brothers. I also grieved the loss of my best friend, Lola, from camp. Sometime later, I received a letter from Germany, from Lola. She had been liberated by the Soviet army, after suffering a recurring illness. I read that letter over and over to assure myself that she really had survived. She also wrote to me that she found out that Dr. Berkovitz had survived as well. She made a special trip to visit him and thank him for his fatherly care. Dr. Berkovitz greeted her with disbelief. He could not believe that she had survived and attributed her survival to a miracle rather than to his medical expertise. He told her all he had had in camp was aspirin and Band-Aids.

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## Purple Oleander

LOUISE LAWRENCE-ISRAËLS

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*Louise Lawrence-Israëls was born in Haarlem, Netherlands, and survived the war by hiding on the fourth floor of a rowhouse in Amsterdam.*

Selma was my best friend. She spent three years with my family and me in hiding in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, during the Holocaust, from 1942 to 1945. The last time I saw Selma was five and a half years ago.

My husband and I planned to go to Israel, where Selma had moved at the age of 80. We were going to help her celebrate her 90th birthday. However just before the big day, Selma had a massive stroke. We did not know, at the time, how severe the stroke was, and we decided to travel to Israel to see her anyway.

Selma had lived in Israel for ten years in a beautiful home for senior citizens. She had her own apartment, filled with all her old furniture, books, photographs, and objects that were so dear to her. She had brought all of it with her from the Netherlands, when she made Aliyah to Israel. She had a small balcony full of plants; she always had a green thumb.

When we arrived, Selma was sitting in a wheelchair outside the home's hospital area; pillows kept her from falling forward. It was sunny and she sat surrounded by sweet smelling flowers in all colors. Closest to her were purple oleander bushes. When I think of her now, that is how I remember her. She could not speak anymore. The stroke had done its job. She took our hands in her hand—she still had the use of one hand—and held on tight. We spoke to her and that brought a smile to her face.

I felt so fortunate that she recognized us. When she got tired we said goodbye, and this time she took my husband's hand and held on for a long time, as though she was telling him to take good care of me. We knew we would not see her again.

Selma lived for another year. She never spoke again, and she died in her sleep. Selma's wish was to be buried in Israel.

In November 2007 we again traveled to Israel. It was important for us to see where Selma was buried and to say kaddish graveside. After some difficulties in finding the right cemetery, we finally found her grave. The day was sunny and so peaceful. I brought a bag full of little stones from home, and we put them all on her gravestone, as is the Jewish tradition. We put down a stone for each of our children and grandchildren.

Selma is home now, with all her loved ones. She lost most of them when she was so young.

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## A Bedtime Story

HARRY MARKOWICZ

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*Born in Berlin in 1937, Harry Markowicz survived the majority of the war in hiding with a Belgian family until the liberation of Brussels in September 1944.*

During World War I, Germany invaded neutral Belgium with the intention of eventually conquering Paris. Major battles took place on Belgian soil and the country was left in ruins at the end of the “Great War.” Remembering the atrocities committed by the Germans during that war, most Belgians hated the “Boches” even before their country was invaded once again by Germany on May 10, 1940. Partly because of that, many Belgians were willing to help Jews, although the penalty was death or deportation to a concentration camp.

After Germany invaded Belgium, the restrictions and persecutions imposed by the Germans on the Jewish population were gradually and systematically increased so that each new one was a relatively small step up from the previous ones. The “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” was decided at the Wannsee Conference held in Berlin on January 20, 1942. In June of that year, the order was given to the German officer in charge of Jewish affairs in Belgium to deport 10,000 Jews to Auschwitz. An appeal was made through the Association of Jews in Belgium (AJB) for Jews to volunteer to be deported to work for Germany. Of an estimated 60,000 Jews residing in Belgium at the beginning of the war, only about 6,000 were Belgian citizens. The rest were immigrants, including from Poland, Austria, and Germany (where my family and I lived before we left Berlin in 1938, the year after I was born). Only 4,000 Jews accepted deportation, not knowing that their real destination was a concentration camp in Poland. To meet the quota for the first transports of Jews to Auschwitz the Germans resorted to different strategies.

In August 1942, the Germans started raiding Jewish neighborhoods. The first three raids took place in Antwerp. The news spread rapidly from Antwerp to Brussels, where my family and I lived. The Germans surrounded whole neighborhoods during the night and took away entire Jewish families regardless of age and state of health. Until then, the Germans worked through the Association of Jews in Belgium, which they had established to facilitate their control of the Jewish population. Previously, only able-bodied Jewish men were selected to work for the Germans. This was now a new situation— all Jews, including elderly people, babies, young children, and the sick, were being taken away. Obviously, all these individuals were not suitable for factory or farm work.

My parents decided that it was not safe for us to stay in our apartment since many Jewish families lived in our neighborhood. My mother’s brother Abraham, his wife, Gutsha, and their son, Manfred, and daughter, Lotti, lived not far away—but in an area that was not particularly Jewish. We stayed with them at night, going back to our apartment only during the daytime. A few days later, in early September, the Germans surrounded our neighborhood at night and loaded all the Jews they could find into their trucks.

After this raid, my whole family went into hiding. My parents moved into a third floor apartment in a quiet side street. The windows overlooking the street were covered with newspapers, as was the custom in Belgium when an apartment was unoccupied. The landlord, as well as several neighbors on the street, knew that a Jewish family lived in the “vacant” apartment. Indeed, some of these neighbors regularly did the food shopping for my parents.

With the assistance of an underground organization, my sister, Rosi, my brother, Mani, and I were hidden in several locations, each in turn having been determined to be unsafe. At first, the three of us stayed with an elderly Gentile couple who lived near us. In exchange for a large sum of money, my parents arranged for them to move into another neighborhood where they were not known and we could pass for their relatives. Unfortunately for us, shortly afterward they returned to their

old neighborhood into an apartment previously occupied by a Jewish family. To complicate matters, their 18-year-old grandson who lived with them decided to join the Rexistes, a paramilitary movement that supported and collaborated with the Nazis. After that, Rosi and I stayed in a children's home in the countryside, where other Jewish children were hiding as well. When my mother visited us, she found out that Jewish adults were also hiding there and she decided it was not a safe situation.

By 1943, we each ended up living with a different Belgian family, where we felt relatively safe and were treated very well considering the wartime conditions, such as the general lack of food and heating fuel.

To keep in touch with our parents and to reassure them that we were all right, Rosi wrote them long letters. During our last year in hiding, from September 1943 to September 1944, she wrote 53 letters, which my parents kept. The last letter was dated "Wednesday, September 15, [19]44, eight days after the liberation." In her neat handwriting, she describes in great detail the retreat of the defeated army, which took place in front of the house where she was living next to the banks of the Meuse river. From the house she had a front-row view of the highway across the river. She writes:

From time to time we went into the shelter when Allied planes strafed the convoys of German vehicles which have been streaming by continuously for eight days. On the dirt road on our side of the river, we saw the pitiful remnants of an army in retreat dragging itself by us. The first ones we saw were Mongolians and Russians [former POWs who switched sides to fight with the Germans] dragging themselves rather than walking. They were dirty and miserable, their knees almost touching the ground. Then we saw German specimens—white-haired old men pulling carts to which they were attached by straps....

Because the mail was subject to censorship, these letters were addressed to a neighbor, who then brought them to our parents. The same neighbor mailed my parents' letters to us using his own return address so that any correspondence could not be traced to my parents. After almost seven decades, it's interesting to try to decipher the pseudonyms and codes Rosi used to foil the censors who might read her mail. Naturally, as a teenager she did not have any expertise in the cloak-and-dagger world. On occasion, she erred by writing a real name or an actual address. Realizing her dangerous mistakes, she blacked them out completely with her pen. Paper being hard to come by, that was her solution to any revelations she made inadvertently. Today, it's amusing to see that by holding up her letters to a light it's possible to read the crossed-out information. Of course, such "errors" could have led to our arrest and deportation.

Infrequently, when I was between hiding places, I stayed with my parents in their apartment. It was small, unheated, and very sparsely furnished: a double bed, a small table with a couple of chairs, and for me a crib that I had already outgrown. The makeshift kitchen had one electric burner with a heating coil that often broke, forcing my father to use all his resources to repair it. After nightfall, my parents spent all their time in the back room, since any light in the room overlooking the street would have been visible from the outside.

With her blond hair and blue eyes, my mother did not look stereotypically Jewish. She could pass for a Gentile as long as she didn't have to speak, since her knowledge of French and Flemish was limited and would easily identify her as a foreigner and therefore subject to further investigation. She sometimes left the apartment to visit me, my sister, and my brother before my two siblings moved to the Ardennes, which required travelling on a train. One day, my mother was walking on the street around the corner from their hiding place when she saw German soldiers walking toward her and became frightened. She happened to be in front of a *salon de coiffure*, a beauty parlor, so she stepped inside. Grasping the situation, the hairdresser invited my mother to go quickly into the living quarters in back of the shop. When my mother hesitated trusting this stranger, the hairdresser said, "My husband is Jewish; he has been hiding here since the beginning of the German roundups of Jews in Brussels." This courageous Belgian woman

may very well have saved my mother's life while taking the chance that she, and for sure her husband, would have been deported to a concentration camp.

The backyard of the house where my parents lived was at a right angle to the backyard of the house with the beauty parlor. Nine- or ten-foot-high brick walls separated all the backyards. By chance, the two backyards were partially contiguous. My parents arranged with the hairdresser and her husband that in case of imminent danger to either couple, they would climb over the common wall with a ladder and would find refuge in the others' apartment. The front door of the house was reinforced with a horizontal steel beam, part of a bed frame, to slow down access to the house. My parents went over the wall on six occasions when the Gestapo came at different times of day and night looking for a Russian engineer who lived next door. Another time, they fled over the wall when German vehicles pulled up in front of their house. It turned out to be a false alarm: The Gestapo had come to arrest the Jewish family living in hiding in the house next door.

I don't have a clear memory of the family that was arrested except that they had several older children. The mother and the youngest daughter had been arrested earlier on their way to a grocery store located up the street. The mother almost never went out, leaving the food shopping to the younger daughter, who could more easily pass for a Gentile, but on this occasion the mother accompanied her daughter. Later, the Gestapo found out where they lived and arrested the rest of the family.

One time before that family was arrested, I was staying with my parents when they came up for a very rare visit despite the curfew. Everyone was in the back room chatting and probably exchanging news. It was exciting for me to have these visitors, but soon after they arrived, my mother told me to say goodnight to everyone because it was my bedtime. I had to go to sleep in the front room. Like any six-year-old, I protested; I wanted to hear the adult conversations. One of the neighbors' daughters offered to tell me a story. This may have been the first time anyone had told me a fairy tale. I don't have any memory of it, but I can still recall the sense of wonderment that overcame me. When she finished telling the story, I promptly fell asleep. I never saw her or any other member of her family again.

Several nights later, I was awakened by loud noises coming from the street. It happened again and this time I heard it distinctly: several bursts of machine-gun fire. I didn't dare move and stayed under the blankets trying to imagine what was happening. The next morning I asked my parents, who slept in the back room, if they had heard anything. They hadn't and my father added, "It was probably just a dream."

## Dunkirk: May 1940

Following the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany. The British Expeditionary Force was posted at the French-Belgian border to prevent Germany from invading France. Between the two world wars, France had built the Maginot Line—formidable fortifications along its border with Germany. On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded the neutral countries of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in order to bypass the Maginot Line and to invade France where its defenses were weakest. British troops then moved into Belgium to try to stop the German advance toward France.

On May 14—my sister's and my brother's birthday—four days after Germany started invading Belgium, my parents, my sister, Rosi, my brother, Mani, and I left Antwerp and joined the mass exodus of Belgian civilians who were trying to get into France to escape the rapidly advancing German army. My parents, together with four other families, engaged the owner of a truck to take us to the French border. When we reached Ostend, on the Belgian coast, the truck driver declared that was as far as he was going. He left us

on the side of the main road crowded with refugees heading south toward France by various means of transportation: cars, trucks, motorcycles, horse carts, and bicycles, but mostly on foot.

From there, we continued by walking toward the French border along the Belgian coastline with one of the other families that had been on the truck with us. Years earlier in Berlin, Mr. Lefkowitz had been my father's business partner, while Mrs. Lefkowitz was a distant relative on my mother's side. My parents had met at their wedding, which took place in Danzig in the 1920s. The Lefkowicz family had two children—Felix was 12 years old, my sister's age, and Liza was three years old, like me. Along the way, my father and Mr. Lefkowitz bought a three-wheel, pedal-powered surrey normally used by vacationers to ride on the boardwalks of coastal resort towns. All of the belongings that we had taken along, such as clothing, bedding, as well as the silverware, were loaded on the surrey. While Liza and I perched on top, the others pushed and pulled us along the road toward the Belgian-French border.

At the border, Belgian citizens were allowed into France but stateless people like us were turned back. Later, I learned from my sister, Rosi, that our mother had tried to convince a Polish-speaking French border guard to let us into France, but to no avail. We had no recourse but to turn back in the direction of the oncoming German army on its way to invade France. We moved back to La Panne, a seaside resort near the border, where my parents rented a villa near the beach. My parents were running out of money, so they rented out rooms to other refugees who also had been turned back at the French border.

By this time, the German army had encircled several hundred thousand British, French, and Belgian troops with their backs to the North Sea along the beaches between La Panne and the harbor town of Dunkirk located a few miles south on the other side of the Belgian-French border. The only way to prevent the Allied soldiers from being captured by the German forces was to evacuate them by boat. The German Luftwaffe had bombed the port of Dunkirk, preventing the British naval ships from picking up the Allied troops in the harbor and forcing the soldiers to wade into the sea. The loading process was progressing slowly until thousands of small crafts, boats with shallow drafts, came from England to help evacuate 385,000 soldiers, mostly British, but including 100,000 French and smaller numbers of Belgian and Dutch soldiers.

The German ground forces were ordered to stop their advance some distance from the beaches, possibly because they had outrun their supplies. However, the Luftwaffe continued to attack the Allied soldiers on the beaches and strafed civilians on the roads. In the sky above, the British Royal Air Force engaged the German fighter planes in air duels.

Many years later, I learned of the miraculous evacuation to Britain of Allied soldiers from the beaches from Dunkirk to La Panne during a period of eight to nine days. When I asked my brother, Mani, what he remembered about those events, he told me that all night British and Belgian soldiers were walking around the sides of the villa toward the sea. The next morning he walked down to the beach and discovered a makeshift pier consisting of a column of military trucks driven into the ocean. The stragglers were picked up by small boats, which ferried them to the naval ships out at sea.

Mani also told me that at some point, my father and Mr. Lefkowitz went to search for food, which was extremely scarce since we were in the middle of a war zone. When approaching German planes started strafing the roadway, my father and Mr. Lefkowitz, along with other civilians, ran into an empty factory for shelter. They didn't realize that the roof was made of glass until they were inside. After the planes had passed my father got up and realized that a bullet had gone through his pants without harming him. Mr. Lefkowitz was not so lucky—a piece of shrapnel went into his buttock. An ambulance came along and loaded all the injured civilians, including Mr. Lefkowitz. Shortly before the ambulance was going to leave for the hospital, Mr. Lefkowitz jumped out of the ambulance telling my father that in all this chaos he would never be able to find his family. Fortunately for him, they found a doctor who removed the piece of shrapnel and tended to his wound.

My very first memory dates back to that period. I remember lying in a ditch beside my mother and other civilians. Standing tall next to me on the roadway, a British officer is calmly scanning the sky through binoculars. In my memory of the event I don't see what the British officer is observing in the sky. His presence and his bearing are comforting. I continue to watch him but soon I fall asleep. When I wake up we are still in the ditch but the towering figure is no longer standing there. I ask my mother, "Where did he go?" She replies, "The soldiers are gone." That's all she says, but I sense fear, maybe in her voice, or in her body language. That was the last British soldier I saw until the liberation of Brussels by British troops four years later.

## Gitele

In September 1938, when I was one year old, my family left our home in Berlin and crossed the border into Belgium. Although we had entered Belgium illegally, we were given residency permits; however, my father was not allowed to work legally. So he traded in foreign currencies, such as US dollars and British pounds, on the black market.

Starting with the Nazi occupation in 1940, Jews in Belgium were required to register with their local Jewish council set up by the Germans to help them carry out their anti-Jewish decrees. Sometime in late 1941, my father was summoned by the Jewish Council in Antwerp, where we were living. My father was ordered to report for work with one bag on a specified date. The selected Jews were told they would be working in German factories or farms to replace the German men who were serving in their armies. This explanation seemed plausible since the Germans were also recruiting Gentile Belgians to work in Germany.

Suspecting that the Jews who were going to work in Germany would not be coming back, my father decided to ignore the letter from the Jewish Council. Jews who didn't report for work were threatened with severe punishment, for themselves and their families. My parents decided to move surreptitiously to Brussels, where they would not register us with the Jewish council. Although my mother didn't know either French or Flemish—the two languages spoken in Belgium's capital—she took the train to Brussels to look for an apartment. I remember her saying later that she was walking in the neighborhood near the Gare du Midi (the central train station) when she heard Yiddish spoken. Soon she had rented an apartment on the first floor of 44 rue de Suède. We resumed our lives: My father continued his business dealings. My brother and sister went to school, while I stayed at home with my mother, being too young to go to school.

An Orthodox Jewish family with 12 children lived across the street. Their youngest child, Gitele, was a girl my age, and the two of us always played together. She spoke Yiddish but we had no problem communicating since I spoke German with my parents. We played on the street and in our apartment. One time while my mother was taking a nap, Gitele led me to a hiding place where she initiated me in the game of "doctor."

We lived near a brewery, and every day a wagon loaded with cases of bottled beer came down our street pulled by four huge horses. For some reason, whenever the wagon drove down our street, all the children would run away shrieking that the driver was a boogeyman out to get us.

The front wall of our apartment had a large window, which was opened by cranking it up with a handle. The strap holding the counterweight was broken, so my parents used to prop the window open with the handle. One day while Gitele and I were playing at the window, she accidentally knocked over the handle causing the heavy window to crash down on her hand. Fortunately, part of the handle had prevented the window from closing entirely. She was taken to the hospital. When she came back several days later her hand was bandaged and in a sling. She reported that the brewery driver had been at the hospital and was very nice to her. After that we were no longer afraid of the *dybuk*/boogey man and even waved to him as he careened down our street in his majestic wagon.

In September 1942, the Germans raided our neighborhood and took away all the Jews they could find, including children, the old, and the sick. Informed that the Germans carried out nighttime raids in Jewish neighborhoods in Antwerp, my whole family was staying with my mother's brother and his family in their apartment outside of the Jewish area where we lived. We avoided being caught and subsequently deported. Following this raid we went into hiding until the liberation of Brussels in September 1944.

Several years after the war was over, my mother and I were walking on a busy downtown street in Brussels. Suddenly, my mother said, "Look, there is Mr. [ ] with his daughter." My mother and the man spoke for several minutes; meanwhile his daughter and I ignored each other. I didn't have anything to say to her; I was waiting impatiently for my mother's conversation with her father to end. After we parted and went in our separate directions, my mother said, "Don't you remember them? They lived across the street from us on rue de Suède. Gitele and you played together all the time." Of course I remembered Gitele, but to my great chagrin I had not realized it was her. After a moment my mother added, "Only Gitele and her father survived from their family."

## The Midland Hotel

It was August 1945, the month I celebrated my eighth birthday. My parents, my sister, Rosi, my brother, Mani, and I were on vacation at the seashore in Belgium. We were staying at the Midland Hotel, a small, three-story building separated from the dunes and the sea by the main coastal highway. Very few other guests were staying at the hotel. With the exception of one or maybe two houses, there were no other buildings on either side of the road for as far as the eye could see in either direction. Cars only rarely drove by on the highway. Occasionally, a streetcar ran on the tracks that followed the coastline on the opposite side of the road. The whole landscape seemed deserted. Eleven months had passed since the liberation of Belgium by Allied forces in September 1944 and my parents had come out of their hiding place. The war in Europe had ended barely three months earlier and I was readjusting to living with my own family after a two-year separation during which I lived with strangers. I had lost most of my ability to speak German and had to relearn it in order to speak with my parents. Rosi, Mani, and I spoke French with each other but we switched to German to speak with our parents, who were not fluent in French.

Following the German invasion of Belgium in May 1940, my family and I had walked this very same road, having joined the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Belgian civilians and other refugees fleeing the advancing German troops in the hope of finding safety by crossing the border into France. While France admitted Belgian and Dutch citizens, anyone who was stateless was turned back at the border. That is how we ended up walking back from the French-Belgian border on the same coastal road toward our apartment in Antwerp. By this time Belgium had surrendered and the country was entirely occupied by German troops. Meanwhile, the fighting was continuing in France. Along the way, my family and other refugees were picked up by German trucks coming back empty from the front. The Germans were not motivated by altruism; their goal was to clear the road of refugees so that they could proceed unimpeded with the delivery of supplies to their forces fighting in France. The German soldiers didn't show any hostility towards us; my brother recalls that they even gave us bread since there was no possibility of buying food along the way.

The Midland Hotel was owned by Monsieur François, the owner of La Marée, a café in Brussels frequented by my father and his business partners. Monsieur François informed his regular customers that after five years he was finally reopening his seashore hotel and invited them to spend their vacations there. That's how we joined a small number of guests also staying at the Midland Hotel. The war was over but many aspects of prewar life had yet to return to their normal rhythm.

When we first arrived, Monsieur François told us that we could go down to the beach but he warned us that the minefields planted by the Germans in the dunes were still being cleared. Almost across the coastal highway from the Midland Hotel, a narrow pathway about six to eight meters across led from the road to the beach, which had already been de-mined by volunteers. Ropes marked off both sides of the passageway while signs posted behind the ropes warned the passersby not to venture into the dunes because they were still mined.

During our first afternoon there, we were relaxing on the terrace of the hotel. A waiter took our orders for drinks. Soon thereafter, we noticed several men walking out on the pathway leading to the beach. When they arrived at the highway we realized they were carrying a man. A car came along and stopped, and the man who had been carried was placed in the car after which it drove away. We didn't know what we had witnessed. Later, we found out from Monsieur François that these men were volunteers who were de-mining the dunes. They had maps made by the Germans showing where they had buried their mines. However, over the years the sand that made up the dunes had shifted, making it difficult to correlate the maps with the exact location of the mines. One of the volunteers had stepped on a mine and was killed. Because the mines were linked to one another, a second mine exploded and another man, the one we saw being loaded into the car, had his leg blown off. I had an uncomfortable feeling; men were risking their lives and limbs to de-mine the beaches and dunes so that others like us, less than 100 meters away, could enjoy our seaside vacation.

While we were at the Midland Hotel, we were joined at various times by friends and relatives. My parents invited Florence, the teenage daughter of the family that had hidden me during the war, to stay with us. My cousin Matty, a captain in the US army who was stationed in an American army field hospital in Liège, Belgium, frequently joined us on the weekends. Besides going to the beach, my brother and sister rented a tandem bicycle with a small seat in the back for me. We rode along the coastal highway for many miles. In a small resort town, one of many along the coast, we saw a group of German prisoners of war rebuilding a road. They wore parts of their uniforms but no one seemed to be guarding them. We watched them for a while from a distance, enjoying the spectacle. At the same time, we felt the punishment was insufficiently harsh in view of what we, and millions of others, had endured during the war.

Later, I asked Mani and Rosi whether the volunteers who were de-mining the dunes were also German prisoners of war. They didn't know, but the fact that no one seemed to be very upset by the incident that had occurred our first day at the Midland Hotel led me to believe that my gut feeling was correct.

Among my other memories of our stay at the Midland Hotel, there is one that on occasion still bothers me. At that time, life was gradually returning to normal in Belgium but there was still some food rationing. As hotel guests we were able to order anything on the menu without restrictions. One morning, I ordered *un oeuf à la coque*—a soft-boiled egg—for breakfast. The egg was served in an egg cup. With one blow of a bread knife, my brother “decapitated” it for me. I proceeded to eat my egg and when I was finished I turned it upside down. When the waitress returned to our table she looked at me and exclaimed, “Ooh! You didn't eat your egg!” Without thinking about it, I replied, “No, I didn't.” Turning toward my parents, she then asked, “Could I buy it for my little boy?” Following an awkward moment I turned the egg around to show her that I had indeed eaten it. She looked surprised and we all burst out laughing, causing her to be embarrassed.

I remember the disappointment expressed on her face. Without intending to do it, I had played a cruel joke on this woman. For the briefest moment she thought she would be bringing an egg home to her little boy.

## Remembrances of a Hidden Child

I was six years old and playing with several boys my age on the sidewalk across the street from the *droguerie* run by Mrs. Vanderlinden. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of a man in a cassock entering the store. For the briefest moment I wondered what a priest might want to buy in a *droguerie*, a store in which only household cleaning products could be purchased. Before the Vanderlindens, who were hiding me, moved into the center of Brussels, they lived in an area called Bon Air on the outskirts of the city where I attended a nearby Catholic school. Although they had been nice to me, priests and nuns still made me feel uneasy.

A short time later, the priest left the *droguerie*. Apparently he had not bought anything since he left empty handed. I continued to play with my friends until it was time to go home.

Mrs. Vanderlinden, Mami as I called her, was alone when I entered the store. “Did you see the priest who was here?” she asked me. She leaned over to be closer to my height and took my hands in hers. She seemed troubled, “The priest said he knew that you are not my son and that you are Jewish. He added that if something happened to your parents he would come back for you.” She continued, “I don’t know how he knew but I told him that if anything happens to your parents you will stay here with us. I will not give you up!” Clearly, Mami was distressed by the implications of the priest’s visit. I felt comforted as she reached out and held me tightly in her arms.

\* \* \*

I woke up to the sound of voices coming from the adjoining room. I sat up to see who was there and through the partially opened door I saw a man I did not know. He was wearing a trench coat and a hat—typically worn by the Gestapo in civilian clothes. Suddenly he looked directly at me and our eyes met. Still looking in my direction and speaking in French he asked, “Who is that?” I heard Mami’s voice but I could not make out her reply. This was followed by more talk but soon the voices became muffled. I heard footsteps going downstairs and then it was completely quiet again.

Mami appeared a little later and told me that the two men were gone. They were Belgian policemen in civilian clothes. She did not know why they came or what they were looking for. She added, “One of them noticed you when you sat up and asked me who you were. I told him you were my son. I also asked him whether he would like to see identification papers.” He replied, “That will not be necessary.”

That was fortunate since Mami did not have any documents identifying me as her son.

\* \* \*

It was a sunny day and I was playing outside with Jean-Paul, whose parents owned the butcher shop across the street. We were throwing his small rubber ball back and forth on the sidewalk. The *droguerie* was on the same sidewalk behind me. While waiting for Jean-Paul to throw the ball back to me, in the distance behind him, I noticed a woman walking in our direction. She was not a stranger. In fact, it was my mother. I realized she was going to the *droguerie* and she would have to walk right by us to get there.

When I first moved in with Mami and Papi, I had been given some instructions: My name was Henry Vanderlinden, the Vanderlindens were my parents, and their teenage daughter, Florence, was my sister. Also, I would always have to speak in French and never let anyone know that I could speak or understand German. However, I had not been given instructions on what to do in the unlikely event that I saw my mother on the street.

As my mother approached we continued to throw the ball. She walked past Jean-Paul and she was getting closer to me. I returned the ball every time Jean-Paul sent it to me. Now she was next to me; I could have touched her if I had put out my arm. She ignored me completely as she passed by me and I did not even glance in her direction. Some time went by before I told Jean-Paul that I needed to go home. We threw the ball back and forth a few more times before I turned around and walked toward the *droguerie*. Once inside I ran toward the heavy curtain that separated the store from the living area in the back. I parted the curtain and I saw my mother talking with Mami. They both turned toward me smiling and I jumped into my mother's open arms.

\* \* \*

In Bon Air, where I first lived with the Vanderlindens, the whole neighborhood consisted of two-story row houses built by the municipality for working class families. Each front yard was enclosed by a low brick wall. A little boy my age lived next door and we often played together. He spoke Flemish, which I did not understand, so we communicated nonverbally. One day the two of us were sitting on the brick wall in front of the Vanderlindens' house hidden from the street by vines. Looking toward me he started to unbutton the front of his short pants. Almost at the same time, I was startled by loud shouts coming from the house. I turned around and saw Mami leaning out of an upstairs window. She must have run down the stairs two steps at a time because almost the next moment she was standing in front of me and yelling, "Don't do that!" Although I had not done anything her tone scared me; I did not know why she was so angry; she had never yelled at me before.

A short time after this incident, my mother asked the Vanderlindens to move into Brussels itself so that their new neighbors wouldn't know that I was not their son. They agreed and until they moved I stayed with my parents in their secret hiding place. Most likely it was at this time that my parents told me not to let anyone see my penis, except for the Vanderlindens. When I asked why, they explained that my penis was different from the other boys'; that is one way the German soldiers were able to identify Jewish men and boys. "What is a Jew?" I asked. I can't remember their response; anyway I probably didn't understand what they told me. However, I always remembered the incident that had made Mami so angry but it did not make any sense to me; I never connected it with my parents' warning.

During the rest of the time that I lived with the Vanderlindens—a year and a half, but at that age it seemed much longer—Mami never again expressed any anger toward me. Indeed, she was always extremely kind and affectionate. The two of us frequently played games together, such as hide-and-seek; I loved all the attention she gave me. One could not have asked for a warmer relationship. Indeed, she was everything one could want in a mother, and more.

After the war, my sister Rosi's friend, Fela, told us about her little brother who was hidden in an orphanage. The Germans found out that Jewish children were living among the orphans and they raided the orphanage. All the boys were told to assemble in one place but just before that Fela's little brother asked permission to go to the restroom. He had no idea what was going to happen next. The Germans made all the boys drop their pants. By the time he came back from the restroom, the other Jewish boys had been ordered outside and the Germans were loading them in their waiting trucks. Fela's brother owed his life to chance, as was often the case of those who survived the war.

It is hard for me to understand why in my mind I compartmentalized this knowledge from the incident that took place in the Vanderlindens' front yard almost seven decades earlier. It was while I was engaged in the process of writing down my memories that the connection suddenly jumped out at me. Mami had not been angry with me; she was probably panicked by the possibly grave consequences of an innocent childish action.

\* \* \*

From time to time, the Vanderlindens gave me presents that were expensive and extremely hard to obtain during the occupation. One Easter, they gave me a basket full of hard-boiled colored eggs. Like all food items, eggs were rationed, so they must have purchased them on the black market. The Vanderlindens were working class so I assume that my parents provided them money that my father had saved from before the war. Another time, they gave me half a dozen very large oranges that had been smuggled in from Spain. I had never seen an orange before. Oranges and bananas were simply not available in any store, even with ration coupons. Although they were not religious, for Christmas the Vanderlindens gave me fancy toys, among them an erector set that came in its own wooden box. The gift that perhaps meant the most to me was a small silver identification bracelet engraved with the name Henry Vanderlinden.

Several years after the war ended, my family immigrated to the United States. After graduating from college I worked for a year during which I saved all the money I earned so that I could go to Paris. I was motivated to go there after reading W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. (Before my sister passed away, she relayed to me that our mother had told her that I had a personality change after reading that book.) While living in Paris I visited the Vanderlindens a few times in Brussels. It had been a decade since I had seen them. During that time we corresponded, if not regularly, at least around the New Year holidays to exchange wishes. They had aged, Papi was in ill health, and Florence was married and lived abroad. When I visited they tried to make me feel at home but I felt somewhat alienated from them. It seems we didn't have much to talk about. We didn't reminisce about the war or the time I lived with them; those topics never came up.

On one occasion when I visited the Vanderlindens, Mami handed me an identification bracelet. Unlike the small one she had given me when I was six years old, this new golden one was made to fit my adult wrist. Harry, the name my parents gave me when I was born in Berlin 22 years earlier, was engraved on the front. My family's last name—Markowicz—was engraved on the back. In the act of giving me this new bracelet, I felt her giving me back my own identity.

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## Going Back

HALINA YASHAROFF PEABODY

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*Halina (Litman) Yasbaroff Peabody, born in Krakow, Poland, survived the war with her mother and sister by posing as Catholics using false papers bought from a priest.*

My long-term memory is full of blanks. I had hoped that revisiting the places of my childhood would help bring back some of the memories, but this has not happened. Until age seven, I lived in Zaleszczyki, Poland (present-day Ukraine), a small historic vacation town on the frontier with Romania. The town was very picturesque and almost completely surrounded by the Dniestr river, which served as the natural border between Poland and Romania.

My family lived through the Russian occupation, which began in September 1939, and the German occupation until the end of World War II. We were thrown out of our home under both occupiers but managed to survive in another part of Poland called Jarosław, where we lived as Catholics under assumed names. I cannot remember any people from the early years, but I have been dogged by one horrific memory. It was first “action” carried out by the Germans. Over 800 Jews were ostensibly taken on a work detail. They never came back. I was only about eight years old at the time, so my mother tried to soften what happened, but she couldn’t avoid telling me that they were all shot.

Years after the war, I found myself volunteering at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which is a repository of so many memories and the history of what happened during those terrible years. By sheer coincidence, I found a photo of two sisters from Zaleszczyki and, through the good offices of the Museum, was able to connect with them. They, in turn, connected me with a few other survivors from my town. We had the strangest reunion because I did not remember any of them but they all remembered my family very well. It was a very moving occasion, and I found out that they, too, remembered the unmarked grave of Jewish friends and neighbors who had been murdered. In fact, they were working on putting a monument at the murder site.

In April 2011, along with my son, my sister, and my sister’s four children, I joined a small group of families who went to Zaleszczyki to place a monument on the unmarked grave. We had a ceremony, which the whole town attended. A cantor said kaddish as we commemorated the loss of all of those buried there. It was a very important event for my sister and me for many reasons. We brought our children with us to show them where our families came from. We also educated the town by teaching them what had happened to the Jewish community that no longer existed. Like in many other parts of Europe, the schools in Zaleszczyki were not teaching students about the Holocaust. Now, they will.

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## Closing the Circle

ESTHER STAROBIN

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*Esther Starobin (Rosenfeld) was born in Adelsheim, Germany. She was sent to England by her parents on the Kindertransport in June 1939.*

For most of my life I was not very interested in learning more about our family in Germany. It was my past and it didn't seem to matter to me. However, as I grew older, I would sometimes be at an event that brought to my mind something connected to my family or to the Holocaust—something as simple as people talking about their mother's favorite recipe made me feel a need to return to Adelsheim to see where I was born, to know it was a real place. Fred and I visited there in the late 1980s, but I still felt no connection to the place. When we had extended family gatherings there were a few basic stories of life in Germany, before the Holocaust, that were repeated each time. But they seemed like legends.

After I retired from teaching, I began volunteering at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. At first I knew nothing about the survivor group. Eventually I was invited to attend the meetings, where I met other survivor volunteers and heard their stories. I think this experience, more than anything else, made me more curious about my family's history. I joined the memoir group and began my journey of learning about my own family's life prior to the Holocaust. I have come to depend on Reinhart Lochmann, a local historian from Adelsheim who was a teacher at the one of the high schools there. When the previous man became too old to carry on, he became the historian of the Jewish community that had once existed in Adelsheim. Over the years Reinhart and his wife have been so hospitable to the various Jews and their descendants who have either returned to Adelsheim or contacted them by mail or e-mail to learn about their families. Reinhart is very interested in the history of the Jews of this area, but he goes beyond that interest to make those of us who visit there feel welcome. He makes sure to answer questions about our families and to show us all the places that were important to our parents and to us. Nothing we ask appears to be too demanding of Reinhart, even though he often has to do extensive research to find the answers. He also has learned much about the Jewish religion. He even visits the Jewish cemetery and places stones on the graves of our family members. In many ways it seems as though it is more important for him to keep these memories alive than it is for me.

So when Reinhart and his wife visited the United States, my family was delighted to reciprocate their hospitality. The first time the Lochmanns came to the Washington, DC, area, we did all the usual sightseeing. However, when they returned in the summer of 2009, Reinhart and Heide did not particularly want to visit the city proper. They were more interested in the places that were part of our everyday life or were fairly local. Consequently, we went to Brookside Gardens in Wheaton, to a service at my temple in Kensington, and further afield to the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

However, their main interest was in the life of their son and daughter-in-law who had moved to the area in order for Timm, their son, to take a postdoctoral position at the University of Maryland. One day the Lochmanns and Fred and I met Timm, our daughter Deborah, and our niece Renee at Ledo, a longstanding pizza place near the university. After our meal, we toured the campus. On the way home we stopped to drop Heide and Reinhart off at the apartment their son was renting. I couldn't help thinking I was helping the Lochmanns understand their son's life in the way Reinhart had helped me know my parents' life in Adelsheim. I wondered if they sometimes resented the fact that I knew more about that in the same way I sometimes resented Reinhart knowing more about my family than I did.

The next day was a major shopping event. Heide and Reinhart noticed several necessary items missing from Timm and Christine's apartment. Of course, like any parents, they sought to rectify this, so we went shopping. In this way Timm and Christine became part of our lives. Over the two years they have lived

in the area we have invited them to dinner and to various family events. Christine and I have been to several museums and ethnic grocery stores together, although these trips are less frequent now that she has a job. When Timm needed someone to take him for his driving test, he asked Fred to accompany him. We enjoy their company and like to hear how life here compares to their lives in Europe.

One weekend we all went to see the holiday light display at Brookside Gardens. Afterward we came home and had dinner together. It struck me when we walked into our home how at ease Timm and Christine are in our house. They took off their boots and shoes and helped us take the food out before we sat down to chat. I never expected to be friends with Germans. In fact, I had always avoided people who I knew were German or non-Jews from Germany. In the course of that evening's conversation, we learned that Christine was going on the same flight to England as Rosemary, a longtime friend of my foster brother, Alan.

Over the years I had always imagined each part of my life as a separate chapter. I thought of the people as existing in separate groups, never mixing them in my mind. I wonder how I was able to think about my life as such separate parts for so long. It now is clear to me that all these parts converge in a continually changing way.

## Writing as a Pathway

I arrived in the United States on November 11, 1947. I was an unhappy child torn from my second home to come to a new land with family I hardly knew. My sister and I were met in New York by two uncles—one my sister knew from Germany and one an unknown American uncle. I knew neither. So I began my journey to becoming an American and eventually a Holocaust survivor.

I had lived a sheltered life in Thorpe, England, with my foster family. I knew they weren't my real parents but knew little about my history. My sisters came to visit occasionally but it all seemed pretty normal to me. Life in the United States was very different—living in a city, living in a large house with many people, living as a Jew. I knew my parents were dead though in my mind I kept hoping they would unexpectedly show up. It wasn't a subject anyone talked about. I knew I was different than most of my classmates but thought it was because I was Jewish. It never entered my mind that it had anything to do with being originally from Germany.

As more and more about the Holocaust was discussed and written about, I felt sorry for those who had suffered and survived but did not feel that included me. I continued my life as a wife, mother, and teacher. A large part of my teaching career was spent in a middle school that had many children who lived in difficult situations. Eventually I would tell them about my life as a foster child and if Alan, my foster brother, was visiting he would come and visit my classes. My talks, however, always focused on the foster child aspect and having lived in many different homes.

When the first Holocaust Survivor Gathering was held, my sisters and I were not considered survivors. We didn't think of ourselves as survivors either.

After I retired, I began volunteering at the Museum. I had been doing that for several months before I was invited to a survivor meeting. From that I learned about the memoir writing group. I joined and have since learned so much about my family and life in Germany.

In my early writing I would cover a large span of time without adding much feeling to what I was writing. Gradually through the years this has changed. As our workshop leader, Maggie, introduced us to the writings of others and to thinking about a specific idea or object, I was forced to reconsider how

I examine my experiences during World War II and after. Writings and questions from other workshop participants opened up further questions in my mind. What a gift!

Often I had no idea about the subject that was suggested to us. This led me to discussions with my sisters. In particular, an avenue of communication was opened with my oldest sister, Bertl. Sometimes, she could and would share information about our life in Germany or of our parents that otherwise I would never have learned about. Other times, Bertl knew as little as I did. Then I would write to Reinhart Lochmann, who has studied the history of the Jews in Adelsheim, our former home, to see if he could locate the information. Before this I resented the fact that Reinhart knew more about my family than I did, but I have come to appreciate his willingness to research and to share. So I learned about my father's early life this way. I learned about the items in our home this way. I learned about the court case that took my parents' business away. I learned about my parents' and brother's deportation to France in 1940 this way.

This research has led me to think about my mother and father and to write about them. As I reread the few letters that came from the camps in France, I found such love, strength, deep faith, and hope that I was not really aware of from my previous somewhat quick reading of these translated letters. Reading the few letters exchanged between my mother and my foster mother helped me appreciate the connections between them and the love emanating from them both. It showed me how lucky I was to have had them both in my life.

Perhaps the greatest gift from the writing workshop has been the ability to look at past events and to realize how much they affect the way I live my life today, as well as my family, my activities, my religious life, and my friends.

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## The Gas Mask

ALFRED TRAUM

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*Alfred (Freddie) Traum was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1929. In June 1939, he and his older sister were sent to England on the Kindertransport. Their parents were murdered in the Holocaust.*

Herr Tamer lived at the end of the hall. He was a tall gaunt man, a very private man, or so it seemed to me as a nine year old—a lonely figure who responded pleasantly to my greeting when our paths crossed. One day he knocked at our door and asked if he could come in to listen to Hitler’s speech. He didn’t own a radio and knew we had one that, even though it was old, was better than nothing.

So, Herr Tamer and my parents gathered around the radio when Hitler began his speech. It went on and on for ages—mostly ranting and raving and frequent interruptions of “Sieg Heil.” I couldn’t concentrate on what he was saying, but noticed the expressions on my parents’ faces. My mother’s eyes were moist near to tears; my father sat stone faced. Herr Tamer’s gave no indication or sign of emotion to the “Führer’s” uttering. But deep down I knew that whatever Hitler was saying was not good for us Jews.

I was more interested in Herr Tamer’s gas mask case. He noticed my gaze, removed it from his shoulder, opened the lid, and handed it to me for a closer inspection. It was a dark green round metal canister with fluted sides. Herr Tamer had been enlisted in one of the many organizations that sprang up under the Nazi regime. He wore an armband that identified him as a member of the NSKK. As far as I knew, that was the extent of his uniform. I have no idea what the initials stood for, but I know they rated a gas mask. Many people, by that time, were walking around with gas mask canisters slung over their shoulders. Of course gas masks were not issued to Jews. They did not matter.

That wasn’t the first time that my parents and Herr Tamer had gathered around the radio to listen to similar speeches, and always with the same emotional impact. The worsening situation for Jews living under Nazi rule was already very much in evidence through restrictions, persecutions, fathers abruptly disappearing without warning. In some cases they reappeared, after several months, and were given just days to leave the country. We learned later that they had been incarcerated at Dachau or Buchenwald.

The signs were all there. There was no future for Jews under Nazi rule. The only question remaining was where to go? Who would let them in? My parents had received affidavits for the United States, but it all happened too late for them. In 1942, they were shipped east to Minsk and there was no word from them or about them after that date.

In June 1939, my sister and I left for England on the *Kindertransport*. We were fostered by an English Gentile family that lived in London. The following Monday morning, after our arrival in London, I was enrolled in the local school and placed in a class appropriate for my age. I spoke only several words of English, which was just enough to get me into trouble. When one of the boys asked me, “Do you want a fight?” I used the one English word in my lexicon and answered, “Yes.” I wasn’t sure what he wanted of me, but was certainly shocked and surprised when he punched me. I quickly learned that I had to improve my language skills.

But when it came to arithmetic, and problems written on the blackboard for us to solve, they seemed pretty straightforward to me. However, the teacher was puzzled that my answers were correct—I finished before anyone else in the class, but she couldn’t figure out how I got there. Apparently, we learned math very differently in Vienna and did much of the calculations in our head. The English method seemed very long-winded to me. I thought, at least here was one subject in which I excelled. But she wasn’t happy with

that. She wanted me to do it the English way and spent a considerable amount of time on the blackboard teaching me the English method. She needed to see how I arrived at the answer.

When it came to composition time the teacher indicated that it would be fine if I wrote my essay in German. It provided me an automatic “A” since she couldn’t read it and judged me mainly on quantity and neatness. I knew this wouldn’t last for long.

A school staff member interrupted the class, asked for me to be excused, and indicated that I should follow her. She took me to a storeroom and pulled a square carton from the shelf. On opening it, I discovered a gas mask. Smilingly I accepted. Like all the other boys I was being issued my own gas mask. She showed me how to put it on and then proceeded to adjust the rubber straps. When she felt confident that all the adjustments had been correctly carried out, for a final test she held a piece of paper over the bottom of the mask and indicated for me to take a deep breath. She did this by inflating her own chest and motioned for me to follow suit. As I inhaled the paper held firmly to the mask, there were no leaks. She then wrote my name on the box and with a friendly pat on the back handed the box to me and told me to return to my class. For her, it seemed just the normal and right thing to do. However, to me, that gesture had a much deeper meaning.

During playtime, many of the boys were swinging the gas mask cases around and throwing them, playfully, at each other. I held mine proudly into my side. To me, it was an affirmation that here in England I, too, mattered. I really mattered.

## Ruth

This would be our first return to Israel since my sister’s death. My visits before had always felt like a homecoming. Now there was an emptiness that could not easily be replaced by family or friends. Josie and I embarked on our short vacation with mixed emotions.

Our purpose was twofold. We would spend time with family and friends, but in addition we would attend a reunion at a kibbutz, Kfar Hanassi. The kibbutz, an agricultural community, was formed in 1948, shortly after the state of Israel was established. Most of its members had emigrated from England, where they had belonged to Habonim, a Zionist Youth Movement.

Kfar Hanassi is a thriving kibbutz resting in the upper Galilee region. It is perched on a hilltop overlooking the rolling hills of the Galilee to the south, and to its north lies the border with Syria. Even though I had been a member of the Habonim Youth Movement in Manchester, I had never planned to live on the kibbutz. However, I knew many of the Manchester group that formed the nucleus of Kfar Hanassi. I suspected that I would probably be able to recognize a few of the “old timers.”

We traveled there with our good friends Frank and Elaine. Frank, who had been a member of that original group, had maintained strong ties with the community. I was quite excited about visiting the kibbutz again. It had been a long time since I was last there. A great deal of effort had been made to beautify the area. The kibbutz now contained guest quarters and a very up-to-date dining hall where the food was good and plentiful. I managed to pick out about half a dozen fellows—even though the aging process had taken its toll, they were still unmistakably recognizable. Their features and expressions remained the same.

I tugged at Frank’s sleeve and pointed in the direction of an older man sitting on a couch a long way from where we were standing. A shock of white hair covered his head. His strong burly figure and his countenance were unmistakable to me.

“Is that Zammi over there?” I asked.

“Why, yes it is. He isn’t known as Zammi anymore; he changed his name many years ago. Now he is known as Adam. Would you like to meet him? Come, I’ll take you over to him.”

I hesitated. “Better not. From what I remember of our last meeting, it did not go over so well.”

“When was that?” Frank asked in amazement.

“Well, over 50 years ago,” I replied.

“And you think he would hold a grudge all that time? That’s crazy! Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

My mind slipped back to that last encounter. It was in the fall of 1948. The state of Israel had just been declared and was immediately attacked by the surrounding Arab nations. I faced a dilemma: I just recently had been accepted for my national service with the British army and told to go home and wait for my instructions as to where to report for active service. I decided that under the current circumstances I should really volunteer for the Israeli army.

I was aware that some of the Zionist movement leaders were involved in clandestine recruiting arrangements for those wishing to serve in the Israeli army. Zammi was the youth leader in Manchester, but when I approached him about volunteering he dismissed the idea out of hand, saying they didn’t need someone like me without former military experience. I tried to rationalize with him, told him that if the British army was willing to accept me, why wouldn’t the Israeli army? No matter what I said, he would not change his mind. I therefore contacted another organization where I was not known. They very readily accepted me, and shortly thereafter I was on my way to Israel. I wondered whether Zammi would remember that incident?

Frank dragged me over to where Adam was seated. I could see signs of recognition as he looked me over. He stood up and gave me a bear hug. Still the powerful man he had been 50 years earlier.

“Is it really you, Freddie?” he asked. Then his face took on a more serious expression.

“I was sorry to hear about your sister Ruth.”

“Thank you. Yes, she died several years ago.”

There were a few awkward moments, neither of us knowing what to say next. To break the ice, I gave Adam a light rabbit punch and said, “You know, even though you wouldn’t accept me, I did join the Israeli army.”

He had a faraway look in his eyes as his face took on a more serious expression.

“I suppose there is no reason why I shouldn’t tell you now,” he said.

I was puzzled by his comment. Adam continued, “About a week before you contacted me, your sister Ruth came to see me. She knew that you wanted to volunteer for the Israeli army and begged me not to accept you. She told me that she had already lost all her family and that you were the only family she had. She didn’t want to lose you too. I honored her request, and as you know, I didn’t accept you. She also made me promise not to tell you of her visit to me. Well, until now, I had kept that promise, too, but somehow, I don’t think she would mind my telling it to you now.”

Adam's remarks stunned me into silence. A divulgence like this after so many years took my breath away. Ruth had always been there watching out for me, while I always went right ahead and did whatever I wanted, with little regard or thought for anyone else. Reflecting on my actions in my younger years made me feel quite guilty. Even though Ruth never mentioned it, I suppose she would have preferred some discussion instead of my pronouncements of what I was about to do. When I look back on it, Ruth felt a responsibility over me like a parent, but had none of the authority that a parent would normally exercise over a child. It could not have been easy for her.

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## One of Many Tours

SUSAN WARSINGER

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*Susan Warsinger (Hilsenrath) was born in Bad Kreuznach, Germany. She escaped with her brother and was smuggled into France before leaving for the United States in 1941.*

I did not want to get up that morning because I knew it was very cold outside. I would have a long walk from the Metro to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The hike would entail walking briskly down Independence Avenue, where the wind would surely blow in my face and I would be frozen by the time I got to the Raoul Wallenberg Place entrance of the Museum. I got up anyway because I had committed myself to being one of the tour guides for the 93 members of the Frederick Presbyterian Church who were arriving at the Museum at 9 a.m. that day. Luke, from Visitor Services, had e-mailed me and asked that I participate because he knew me. He had introduced me when I gave presentations to visitors in the Wexner Center, and we had become friends. It was his mother's church and he was excited to have a survivor tour guide.

When I got there, the congregation was already viewing the film on antisemitism in the Helena Rubinstein auditorium. When it ended, we walked up the staircase to the Hall of Witness. Luke randomly divided the group so that each tour guide had ten to 12 people. My group consisted of adults and some teenagers. During the past two years, I had become accustomed to touring only law enforcement officers visiting as part of the Museum's leadership training programs, so I knew that I had to adjust my tour to meet the needs of all my participants. We talked about the architecture of this monumental four-story atrium. The visitors told me it was different from any other museum they had ever seen. They realized that they were surrounded by red brick walls and dark gray steel structures, and they told me that it reminded them of a railroad station, a factory, or a prison of some kind. I asked them what they thought about the wide staircase that leads up to the second floor, ending at a brick gate whose arch resonates the gate to the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. As most visitors usually do, someone in my group whispered, "It looks like a railroad track." They commented on the hall's glass roof, which on that day revealed a bleak winter sky. I asked them to look at the lamps protruding from the brick walls and told them that we would encounter similar ones later in the Permanent Exhibition. We talked about the lit line that cuts through the hall's marble floor and the askew steel forms hovering over the platform on the east side and considered the symbolism of these features. I wanted to talk more about the steel desk where our Visitor Services staff help thousands of people from all over the world, and the steel donor desk where Holocaust survivors talk about their experiences. However, I knew that we only had about two and a half hours for our tour. Therefore, with great reluctance, we left this grand hall that speaks for itself so emotionally. I hoped that our 12-year narrative journey through the Holocaust would be a good learning experience for everybody.

While we were waiting for the elevator to take us to the Permanent Exhibition, they individually reviewed the identity cards that Luke had distributed to them earlier. I wanted to make sure that they were familiar with their companion's name and the city and country from which he or she came. I also wanted to make sure that they knew that the exhibition starts with 1945, the end of the story, and then we would gradually step around the corner and begin in 1933.

When we arrived on the fourth floor, there was a hush as we entered the exhibition because on the right there is a gray steel wall in which the words "THE HOLOCAUST" are gouged deep. Next to it is a disturbing panorama of the American soldiers looking at burnt bodies on a railroad track. The expressions on the faces of my group were not much different than those of the soldiers.

The fourth floor deals with the rise of the Nazis, which includes the period from 1933 to 1939. I like to spend the most time on this floor because people need to understand how Hitler and his party rose

to power, how the Nazis gradually accomplished their hold on the society, and how antisemitism led to the systematic murder of millions of people. I think it is important that our visitors learn that we cannot be blind when we see injustice occurring in the world and that we learn what prejudice and hatred can do to people.

Through questions and answers we found out how Hitler became appointed the chancellor of Germany in 1933 and how terror began as soon as the Nazis came into power. We talked about people losing their rights and privileges, about the boycotting of businesses, and the burning of books by Jewish authors and other political opponents. We talked about the propaganda used on teenagers and even young children when they were read picture books like *Der Giftpilz*, part of the elementary school curriculum that taught that Jews were poisoned mushrooms. I told them about the free radios that every household got from the government that played only one station. My group understood that the Hollerith machine was a forerunner of the computer and that IBM sold this machine to the Nazis. Perhaps IBM did not know that it was going to be used to sort information about the Jews that were living in Germany. We talked about how the Nazis used race as a “science” and how they conducted tests to show who was a true “Aryan” and which “race” was the purest on a hierarchy of people. We had a group discussion near the display that shows how Jews went from citizens to outcasts. My visitors were shocked at all the signs that were in front of theaters, hospitals, parks, concert halls, sports events, and most public places stating that Jews were not allowed. I asked them what they thought the response of the Jewish community was to all this antisemitism. Most everybody thought that the Jews would want to leave. However, some members of the group said that they believed some Jews wanted to stay and wait until the Nazis were not in power anymore. Other ideas that came up were fighting back, hiding, or changing from being Jewish to another religion. Some said that they did not know what the Jews would do. I thought they summed up the situation for the Jews in Germany at that time pretty well.

I taught them about the Evian conference that was held in Evian, France, and how all the countries that attended, except for the Dominican Republic, would not raise their immigration quotas so that the Jews could emigrate from Germany. We went over the *New York Times* editorial cartoon that explained the result of the Evian conference.

It was not until we got to the Torahs that are strewn on the blue carpet and covered in glass that I revealed to my group that I was born in Germany and was a young girl when the Nazis desecrated these scrolls during *Kristallnacht* on November 10, 1938. As we were standing at this “Night of Broken Glass” display and I informed them about my experience on that night, many other visitors to the Museum moved over to us to listen. This usually happens when I give my tour and it was no different on that day. I felt honored to have them join us.

After discussing the voyage of the *St. Louis*, we made our way to the “Murder of the Handicapped” display, which describes the first systematic killing, which occurred between 1939 and 1941. The Nazis killed 70,000 people because they believed they were a drain to their society.

I asked the group to take out their ID cards as we crossed the narrow bridge that holds the names of lost communities on its glass walls. Their task was to find the town where their companion was born. Usually visitors become excited when they find it and it was no different on that day. This activity usually helps me get to know some of the people in my group, and I found out that the man with the windbreaker and blue jeans was the pastor of their church. There were two teenagers, a boy and a girl, whose attention to each other prevented them from participating in the group. At one point I found the boy standing on the bridge, with his hands holding the banister, looking down into the Hall of Witness. I went over to him and asked him what he was thinking. He replied that he felt like he was a guard looking down into a prison. I then proceeded to tell him that Chief Charles Ramsey, who was then the head of the Metropolitan Police, sent his lieutenants to the Museum on the same tour that we were taking. I told him about observing one of the officers standing there in her uniform with her gun in her pocket, holding the railing in her hand just like he was. He was surprised and, I think, pleased when I told him that she had

said the same thing as he did. I knew then that I finally had his attention and that he would, if not verbally, mentally involve himself in the tour. I thought that I could get responsiveness from the girl a little later.

We proceeded and talked about the American responses to what was happening in Europe. I recognized that I was taking too long on the fourth floor, so we continued down to the third floor white lounge and sat among Ellsworth Kelly's abstract art, and I prepared them for the "Final Solution." I found out what they knew about the ghettos and the concentration camps and filled in what they needed to know. When they were ready, we began, again, on our journey.

It is always very quiet on the third floor. People are so moved and emotionally drained that they do not want to speak. I chose one of the ladies in my group to read the caption above the shoes that were not burned in the crematorium and there was utter silence. We studied the mural of the electrical wire fence around the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, and they recognized the lamps on the high posts that held the wire together. They were similar to the lamps that we had seen when we first started our tour in the Hall of Witness. I was pleased that they remembered. I had found out the name of the teenage girl, and I called her by her name and asked her to look at the photograph of the women who had just arrived at the camp. She was surprised and delighted that I had singled her out. She looked at the photo carefully and explained that all the women's hair had been shorn. She felt very important when I asked her to read the caption in the next display, which made clear how the Nazis used the hair. I realized that I had met my challenge when I got the two teenagers involved and they finally allowed the Museum to speak to them.

As we moved on to the wall where there are two very moving paragraphs from Elie Wiesel's book *Night*, bordered by two posts from the fence of Auschwitz-Birkenau, I invited the pastor to read them to us. He started out with a strong melodious voice. However, as he read, "Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever," his voice started to quiver and he was crying by the time he got to the part "Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams into dust. Never shall I forget these things even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never." I knew that I had to console the leader of his church somehow. I approached him and gently put my arm around him and told him that I understood how he felt and that neither one of us could change the past. It seemed to comfort him and he said, "Thank you." It was a most memorable moment for all of us.

We only had 20 minutes left before I had to take them back to the Rubinstein auditorium. This always happens, and then we have to hurry through the second floor, where we talk about rescue and resistance. So we did the best we could conversing about the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and some of the other rescuers who are listed on the white metal wall. We also looked at the Danish ship that took Jews across the channel to neutral Sweden.

I also wanted to take them to the Hall of Remembrance so that they could light a candle for their companion on their ID card or any other victim who was murdered. I wanted them to experience this awe-inspiring, monumental, cathedral-like, six-sided space that was so full of symbolism.

We were a little late getting back to the auditorium. Luke and some of the other people in the group were waiting for us. I bid goodbye to my group and when they clapped I was embarrassed but secretly enjoyed their appreciation. I did feel that the group had learned that one cannot be a bystander to injustice. I hoped that they understood their role and responsibility in society and embraced the value that all people are equal. I also hoped that they realized that never again can we allow the world to stand by and do nothing, like during the Holocaust.

People ask me how I can do this over and over again. I do not know whether teaching people that we must not let injustice happen when we see it and that we must do something about it is enough. I do not know if it is a vaccine against future horrors. I do know that I feel morally responsible and that it is my obligation to be involved even though I might make only a small contribution. I began my association with

the Museum because I thought I had something to contribute. I soon came to realize how much I was gaining and continue to gain through my involvement. I also know that working for the Museum in the Education Department has helped me feel connected to my past, helped me define who I am, helped me confront my own experiences, and helped me move forward.

## The Pineapple Voyage

The ship, the *Serpa Pinto*, was Portuguese. It looked a lot like the *St. Louis*, which is prominently exhibited on the fourth floor of the Museum. It was painted black with red lettering on its side and loomed above us. My brother Joe and I were among the 56 children who ascended the gangplank on September 10, 1941. We had arrived in Lisbon after traveling by train from Brout Vernet to Marseilles, over the Pyrenees, through Spain, and then to Portugal. The Quakers and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society helped all of us, from France and Germany, obtain passports and tickets to come to America. Only six of these children had parents who were already in the United States. My brother and I were two of those six.

As all the children boarded the largest ship we had ever seen, bigger than a football field, we were instructed that only the bow was to be our area. At no time were we ever to disturb or mingle with the passengers on the pleasure cruise. I still do not know whether the other passengers were aware that we were on board or pretended that we did not exist.

Our accommodations were in a rather large hold below the lower deck in which cargo had been carried. All the children, sometimes called “refugees” and sometimes called “students” on the ship’s manifest, were housed in this hold. There were no portholes and the only furniture available to us were double and triple bunk beds. Joe and I chose a double one. He slept on the top and I slept on the bottom. However, we had to reverse this position very soon because he wet the bed. His nightly problem was understandable because he was very young and anxious as a result of being separated from our parents for two years. We had been yearning to see our mother and father again ever since they had sent us to safety in France, when it became clear after *Kristallnacht* that it would be dangerous to remain in Germany. This two-year separation had been extremely difficult for both of us because we were so young. But now as passengers on this ship we were exhilarated because we were on our way to be reunited with our parents in the United States.

Our ship stopped in Casablanca to take on passengers. It was whispered among the children that stowaways, who were hiding in the lifeboats, needed to be put ashore. We could see the mosques and their turrets from the ship. Somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, U-boats were identified and caused us to be afraid that they would sink our ship. One of the more pleasant experiences was docking at a beautiful island. It was lush with splendid trees, carpeted with green lawns, and dotted with dazzling white houses. We learned that this place was Bermuda.

The *Serpa Pinto* was loaded with fresh pineapples that were being transported from Portugal to the United States. Because of the overabundance of this fruit on board, our breakfasts, lunches, and dinners were served every day with pineapple. Joe discovered a hidden treasure. It was in a small area near the galley where mountains of fresh pineapples were stored. He gorged himself because he had never eaten such luscious delicacies. As a result of his overeating, my brother contracted a flaming rash over the lower part of his torso because of the acidity of the pineapple. His condition got worse because he urinated in bed. To add to his many problems, the ship tipped and swayed causing him to lose his balance.

When we were in the Bermuda Triangle, the deck seemed to be breathing, heaving and moaning as the violent winds swept over everything. All the children, including my brother and me, became wretchedly seasick. In particular, my brother’s raging digestive system needed to spill its contents over the railing.

Of course, he was tasting pineapples over and over again. I watched him helplessly as the ocean, one hundred feet below, swallowed the contents of his stomach.

On the 13th day of our journey we were told that very early the next morning our ship would pass by the Statue of Liberty. Since my brother was sleeping up on deck in the fresh air, he was already in place to see the statue. Unfortunately, a heavy mist obscured the entire area, disappointing everybody. When we were about ready to give up, the mist lifted, and to our great delight, we saw the statue illuminated by the dawn's early light. We were so happy that we cried with joy upon seeing this magnificent and historical monument. At that moment my brother and I knew that we were finally going to be reunited with our parents in America, the land of the free that welcomed Jewish people.

As our ship pulled into the harbor and began to dock, reporters from New York newspapers took pictures of the children hanging over the railing. One of these photographs, plus a caption about my brother and me, was prominently displayed in the exhibit of "Jewish Responses" on the fourth floor of the Museum. It is dated September 24, 1941. Joe and I were thrilled to see our father waving from the dock. We were hoping that we would soon be in his arms. However, we were not allowed to disembark until medical personnel examined us and other children to determine if we had communicable diseases. When Joe was examined, they discovered his rash and would not permit him to disembark. I tried to explain why my brother had the rash but no one listened to me because I was a little girl.

In 1941, immigrants with health issues were not allowed to enter the United States and were temporarily housed in Ellis Island. On our way to the island we saw the beautiful skyline of New York and the revered Statue of Liberty. At Ellis Island, the people treated us royally and we feasted daily on what we considered delicate gourmet foods. We ate at long tables where waiters served the most delicious white bread, bread that we had never seen before, and bread that was so soft that we could compress it in our hands and make a little ball. It tasted wonderful. It was called "Wonder Bread." At the table, an American sailor introduced us to a beverage that was brown, fizzy, and delightful. It tickled our noses. We learned that the beverage was called "Coca Cola." We also discovered what to us was a form of candy that could be kept in our mouths all day. It was called "chewing gum."

The inflammation on Joe's skin cleared up and in a few days we were reunited with our parents. The voyage on the *Serpa Pinto* left an indelible mark on my brother—he has never eaten pineapple again.

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## Democracy without Equality

MARTIN WEISS

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*Martin Weiss was born in Polana, Czechoslovakia, and survived Auschwitz-Birkenau and Mauthausen. He was liberated by US troops at the Gunskirchen camp in Austria in 1945.*

Since I moved from New Jersey to the Washington, DC, area and was given the opportunity to visit the United States Capitol Rotunda in observance of Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day), I can't help getting in touch with my memories and emotions on many levels.

To start with, I hope to pay tribute to all the fallen individuals who perished during the Holocaust and to remind us that we cannot afford to forget, lest we the people make the same mistake and allow such a catastrophic event to happen again.

Seeing the troops march in with the colors is a most touching experience. Everyone in the rotunda had a feeling of pride and patriotism. Also the singing of "El Maley Rachamim" by a cantor in magnificent voice and hearing the kaddish (a prayer for the dead) said in Hebrew touched your soul. As a Jew, it made me feel very proud that the United States finally reached a level of freedom and democracy that we can celebrate with pride and experience the observance in the Capitol Rotunda. Seeing in attendance senators, congressmen, justices, and many other high government officials symbolizes efforts to be more inclusive than in the country's checkered past.

Meeting 120 liberators of the concentration camps added extra meaning to the occasion. Listening to their individual experiences of prejudice at that time in the service made me appreciate them even more. These veterans wrapped themselves in the American flag of democracy while many of them were deprived of their civil rights back home on a daily basis.

A Japanese-American mentioned that while he was in the army fighting in Europe against Nazism, his family was interned in camps in the United States. An African-American gentleman told us that while he was in the service, black troops were segregated and worked in menial jobs only. And when he got home he wasn't even allowed a drink of water at a public fountain and couldn't get a cup of coffee in a restaurant. German prisoners of war were treated with more respect than many citizens who fought the Nazis.

As I listened to them, it made me think of the time I came to the United States as a 16-year-old in 1946. Needless to say I felt lucky to be here considering what I went through under the Nazis.

Going to night school trying to learn English and hearing about the greatness of American democracy and the "four freedoms," I was excited and wanted to learn how American democracy worked. It meant a lot to me, after experiencing Nazism and communism.

My teacher was Mrs. Durst, a very nice elderly lady. She encouraged me to read the *New York Times* so I could improve my vocabulary. Time and time again I read articles about "Jim Crow" and the lynching of blacks in the southern states and also noticed that black Americans were not treated fairly elsewhere. So I asked her to explain how this could happen in a country that advocates freedom to the world. She tried very hard to explain that states had their own rights and the federal government was helpless and couldn't do anything about it. I retorted that that doesn't make sense. So I gave her this analogy: If a southern black man asked for a visa to go overseas he would apply to the federal government, not the state; therefore, the government had jurisdiction of this citizen. So, how can you call that freedom or a country of laws, when you practice such selective justice and injustice as well?

One has to draw a conclusion that Congress can pass a law to suit the moment in time and that makes it legal, no matter how unjust the law is (in a sense the Nazis did the same thing).

To prove my point, eventually that was corrected.

In 1952, during the Korean War, I was drafted into the army and was not anxious to go—after all, my Holocaust experience was still fresh on my mind. However, once I was in uniform I resolved to be a good soldier and carry out my duty to the best of my ability. In a way I was proud, thinking, “Just a few short years ago I was at death’s door in Austria and was liberated by people in the same uniform I was now wearing.”

I reported to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, the induction center for processing. Then I was transferred to Fort Lee, Virginia, where I took my basic training and stayed for two years.

After finishing basic training I was assigned to food service and went through a cooking class. I discovered that I had some knowledge and understanding about how to prepare food—that is, compared to others in my class. For part of the training, my group of six or eight was assigned to a “WAC” mess hall, which was very nice because we had a chance to meet many women. The sergeant saw that I had an instinct about the preparation of food so he put me in charge of the group most of the time, while he was absent almost every day.

So instead of just putting out food as they did in other companies on the post, I saw to it that we made the food taste good and made a nice presentation. Simply put, we treated the troops with respect. In fact, the major (the highest rank a woman could achieve at the time) came over and asked who was responsible for the best biscuits she ever had. The irony was that I had never eaten biscuits before my time in Virginia.

After we finished basic training most men were shipped off to Korea. I was lucky I stayed stateside. With a stroke of luck I found out from friends in personnel that there was an opening at the officers’ club. I took advantage of that and applied for the position. After a brief interview with a major, I got the job and started at once.

One day when I returned to the barracks I saw this big black fellow from Alabama crying, and I inquired what the problem was. He told me that he got orders to go to Korea.

So, I retorted, “What’s the problem? Almost everybody is bound for Korea.” He replied that he didn’t mind going but that all black troops were destined for Korea because of their skin color.

I thought that was impossible. So I asked some friends who worked in personnel and they said it was so, and explained that most of the officers there hailed from the south. Then, I understood.

There was another incident: A group of us befriended Willie, a black soldier from Passaic, New Jersey. After basic training we were excited to get a pass and go to town to blow off some steam, but Willie said, “No, I’m not going.” Therefore, each one of us tried to convince him to come with us, but he refused no matter how we pressed him to come.

When we got on the bus we noticed that all black soldiers went to the back of the bus—only then did we realize why Willie didn’t want to go with us. I felt badly for not realizing that—it’s how it was in the south at that time. I remember feeling very ashamed and, moreover, somewhat disenchanted with American democracy.

As for me, my assignment as a buyer at the officers’ club was very satisfactory. I even received a bonus every month from the club because they liked my performance. The best thing was that I ate good food, for example lobster and nice pastry. Overall, it was a good experience.

## A Letter to My Brother, Moshe

Dear Moshe,

I'm writing this letter to you even though I know you will never read it. The spring of 1944 was the last time we saw each other. When we arrived in Auschwitz, within minutes we were separated never to see each other again. I remember the chaos that enveloped us as soon as we stepped down from the train. It was around midnight and we found ourselves under bright floodlights. Everyone was trying to hold on to their loved ones. Immediately, soldiers with rifles surrounded us, their fingers on the triggers as though we were the most dangerous criminals on the planet. Immediately, men were separated from women and formed a line. As the line advanced forward we encountered a tall, sharp-looking, terrifying SS officer, who pointed his thumb to the left or right, determining if you were chosen for labor or the gas chamber. The same process was replicated for the women in line. After the selection, we stood in a group and saw our mother with our younger sisters, Esther and Miriam, in a group near us. I suggested that I run across the empty space and join them, so I could be of help to them. As I was making a dash towards them, a man in a striped prison uniform grabbed me and angrily shouted, "You can't go there." He threw me back toward the men's group. The next morning, when we found out where we were and what occurred during the night, I realized that what he did saved my life. That night is seared in my mind as it was bedlam in hell. As we went through the showers and came out the other side, our father, Uncle Zalman, Elje, Ernie, and I were taken to a barrack. It was dawn and it was the first time we saw the tall chimneys spewing out black smoke from the crematoria. Then a few hundred yards from where we stood, we saw a huge fire under tall pine trees. Inmates that had been there before our arrival explained that our families had been killed during the night, and that now they were being cremated in the crematoria and the overflow were burned in the pits under the pine trees.

Before this, we had heard of the terrible atrocities in Poland and in the Ukraine and we believed it, yet we could not imagine that modern Germans could be that brutal. Now we were just numb as reality stared us in the face. While there, I recall the weather was very bleak, cold, wet, and dreary while we had to stand outside shivering from the cold, fright, and fear of what was to come next. After a week or so we were sent on a transport to Mauthausen, Austria. I recall it was around *Sbavuos* and our father and many older men huddled together and said the prayers, but I just ignored it all the time I was in camp and after; I have not been religious since. Our father, his brothers Zalman and Elje, his cousin Ernie, Meir, and I were sent to Mauthausen, where our father and Meir died in the Melk concentration camp. The rest of us survived.

One thing I will always remember is what a great brother you were. Even though you were seven years older, we were very close and had many hearty laughs as we horsed around doing our chores around the house and farm. I remember when I was about six years old, you put me on this tall skinny horse to teach me how to ride, and as the horse went into a trot I fell off and you and Azik laughed while I cried. After that, I learned to ride rather well, almost as well as you. I always recall you not showing fear under any circumstances and me trying to emulate you. During the war when we had to slaughter the animals during the night because the Hungarians had made our business illegal since we were Jews, I was your helper and held the candles or the kerosene lantern. I also recall when the Hungarian police (whom we despised) would hire our horses and wagon to take them on patrol in the outlying villages, you would go to buy a calf from a farmer while they were busy and then squeeze the calf into the wooden box that served as a wagon seat. They would sit on the box, providing you a safe escort home.

In closing, one thing that always bothered me is that you did not return after the war, but I did. You were always strong, healthy, and fearless, and there isn't a day that I don't think of you. About 30 years after the war, Mania, your girlfriend from back home, told me a story of what she thought might have happened to you, after liberation. After you were liberated you were with some people from our area, one of them was Wolf, the *shwartzzer*, as he was referred to back home because he was not a nice fellow. He had been a "Kapo" and you threatened to expose him for what he'd done, and how he behaved. The story goes that

you and he went to town looking for food, and a couple of days later he returned without you. When asked where you were, he said he did not know. They surmised that you got into a fight and he killed you. After the war, Wolf lived in New York City and was invited to a wedding in Baltimore. While at the wedding some people recognized him as the mean “Kapo” and wanted to take some action, but it seems he got wind of it. He sneaked away early and caught a train home. Then a short time later, he died of cancer. That’s all I know about what happened to you, and it has been bothering me ever since I heard it.

My memory of you lives on,

Your Brother M.

## Remembering the Forgotten

For the longest time I have remembered incidents that occurred during the Holocaust, about which very few have heard. This is a story I heard about after I returned from the concentration camp in 1945. Benzion and his family were from Plosk, a small village near Polana. Until 1939, it was known as Karpatska Russ in Czechoslovakia. From 1939 to 1945 it was under Hungarian occupation. Now it’s Ukraine. There were only a few Jewish families living in Plosk. Benzion’s family consisted of his wife, Chava, his son, David, and his daughters, Helen and Olga. As I remember, they were an extremely good-looking family. Benzion was a tall, well-built, and very confident man. He wore a long, brown leather coat and rode a big “Java” motorcycle. He was the only Jew in the area to do that. The memories I have of him were that he was a fearless individual.

I remember there were rumors that he would occasionally slip over the border to Russian-occupied Poland. If true, he was never caught. In April 1944, around Passover, we heard that the Hungarians were going to round up the Jews. All the communities found themselves helpless. We couldn’t trust our neighbors though we lived side by side and got along pretty well. What was ironic is that our neighbors were Russian and hated the Hungarians as much as the Jews did. Hearing of the inevitable roundup of the Jews, my father debated if we should go into hiding in the mountains. For a moment he thought that he, my older brother, Moshe, and I should go. The drawback was that it was still very cold in the mountains and we were afraid we wouldn’t survive. We felt that the peasants would inform on us to the police; we could not trust them. It also meant we would be leaving my mother, two older sisters, and two younger sisters on their own. We soon decided that we would have to stick together no matter what. After a couple of days we were arrested and taken to the “ghetto.”

However, Benzion did take his wife and children and some of his extended family into hiding, and they survived in the forest for a while. The Russians were advancing at a good pace and they expected the Russians to reach them soon. One day, one of them sneaked out to locate some food and a peasant saw him and reported his finding to the Hungarian gendarmes. They arrested all of them, took away their clothes, and put dog collars on them. They marched them naked, in cold weather, for about 10 or 15 kilometers. They tied them up in a stable like animals and shot all of them.

The brutality of man has no equal. You can see many atrocities, but you only have to see one victim and he becomes your brother.

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