The Hidden Child

The Second and Third Generations Secure the Legacy

Vol. XXVI 2018

Published by Hidden Child Foundation/ADL

Claims Conference

The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany
In her book, Catherine Edmunds sets out to find her hidden mother by focusing “into the personal, the small, the everyday,” to see “what happens when an ordinary life is thrown into disarray by extraordinary, vast, and terrible events.” Tammy Bottner, a physician, writes about her father’s and grandparents’ experiences; here, we publish her chapter on the transmission of trauma through DNA. At a family Shabbos dinner, Daniel Fachler, a third-generation in Costa Rica, is shown a copy of our 2017 issue and is inspired to send us his translation of his grandfather Shloime’s story of survival. In Canada, Hy Braiter finds his late father Samuel Braiter’s Yiddish memoirs and has them translated into English. Krystyna Plochocki, a hidden child herself, translates her mother’s memories of Ravensbrück, where, in an odd but life-saving twist, she had been incarcerated for “helping a Jew” during the Holocaust. Putting all these family dynamics into perspective, noted psychologist Eva Fogelman speaks about how the second and third generations confront the problems of elderly Holocaust survivors.

It took many decades and much courage for Pinchas Zajonc to write about the murder of his family in a Polish forest in February 1944. First-time writer Sylvia Hanna finally opens up about hiding in an underground bunker for two years. Leo Vogel, born in 1940, tries to summon memories of parents he barely knew. Robert Reitter, raised as a Christian, spends a lifetime dealing with the question of identity. Susan Kalev, born in 1944, writes about having lived most of her life in “the shadow of the unspoken.” And Irene Eber discusses how the surviving remnants managed to “survive survival” in the first year or two after the war.

Refugee Willi Steen was my mother’s first cousin. His mother, Bertha Sternschuss, was my grandfather’s sister. I have a vivid memory of Willi, in his American Army uniform, visiting us in Brussels in October 1944 when he found his parents. I had just returned home from the convent, and my mother and I went to see Tante Bertha often in that one-room apartment on Rue Berckmans. Willi died young, and it is only now, thanks to the Internet and to his son Franklin’s genealogical skills, that I have connected with this branch of my family. I am very grateful to Franklin and Paula Steen for allowing us to publish Willi’s story and letters.

This issue prodded me to acquaint my 17-year-old grandson, Max, creator of the cover, with our family history. Upper left: my uncle Zygmunt Strahl and his bride, Hela. Both were killed by the Nazis. Upper right: former hidden children, including my husband and his twin brother, in summer camp, Olloy, Belgium, 1946. The group photo includes my father and uncle, Tarnow, Poland, 1920s. My aunt Julia (Clara) holds my cousin Pepi, born in the D.P. Camp of Linz, Austria, 1947. Bottom right: My uncle Dr. Maurice Strahl, survivor of Mauthausen, and his wife, Julia, lone survivor of her family, in Linz. The yellow star belonged to my parents.

Rachelle Goldstein, editor
How many people have looked back on the former generation and cried, “I wish I had asked about...?”

The answer to that, is probably “all of us,” but asking is one thing; knowing how to record the answers, quite another. I had already written a number of novels when I decided to write this biography, so I had a good idea of how to organize a narrative and set it out in such a way that it would be readable. I knew there was some interest in the idea of the “hidden child” because my mother had been sought out by historians and students for her first-hand testimony—but for them, she was a soundbite, an extra snippet of information to help build a bigger picture. I wanted to go the other way, to start at the bigger picture, and focus down into the personal, the small, the everyday, and see what happens when an ordinary life is thrown into disarray by extraordinary, vast, and terrible events. The novelist in me wanted to write this book. The daughter in me wondered what I would discover, because this was always going to be a journey into the unknown, a teasing out of what had been hidden. My mother was keen, so we went ahead, by means of letters and phone calls. We pored over old photos and what documents had been saved—mostly school reports, which showed the start of a lifelong love of education. This is what I mean about the small, the everyday. We all love to look back over our old school reports, but they’re rarely mentioned in history books even though this kind of ephemera gives us a flavor of the times that lists of dates and battles can never replicate.

My mother was born into a Czech Jewish family in Bratislava, Slovakia, in 1930. Her very early childhood was idyllic, and I describe this in some detail in the book, but by the time she reached her teens, concealment had become essential for there to be any hope of her survival. It is self-evident that this would have huge repercussions on her development as a person. The effects on her children, years later, would be more subtle. The latest scientific research shows DNA may be affected by the experiences of your parents, and this has led me to wonder about how much my mother’s past has affected my own life, quite aside from the obvious point that I would not even exist had she not been hidden.

This biography covers my mother’s first twenty-five years, from the comfort and culture of pre-war Bratislava, through the inexorable rise of anti-Semitism, to the decision of her desperate parents to hide her in an orphanage. She knows she isn’t an orphan, but doesn’t know that by the time she leaves, she will be, and the agonizing worry hangs over her the whole time. In the outside world, members of her family are deported to death camps while she remains isolated, hidden in evermore fearful conditions. When at last the war comes to an end, she comes out of hiding, only to be faced with the aching sadness of loss. She leaves Slovakia for good, flying to England in an RAF bomber with other orphaned children, none of whom speaks any English. And then, bit by bit, she rebuilds her shattered life; she comes out of hiding and learns to live again. Eventually she realizes how important it is that future generations learn what really happened—and so she tells people, though the quote at the start of chapter one shows how little idea they have of what people like her have gone through.

But this is not just her story. Her best friend is also hidden in the orphanage, and has an even more traumatic time, even though this girl’s own parents survive. One of her brothers lives through the horrors of Buchenwald, and his story is included, in his own words. Her half sister has an extraordinary escape from Slovakia through France, and via Casablanca and Lisbon to London, where she finds work with the BBC and through various connections eventually manages to piece together what has happened to her family, and reunite the survivors. And through it all there is music and dance, a love of opera, of culture, of mathematics, country walks, and stamp collecting.

My mother thinks she’s ordinary. She’s not. She’s extraordinary.

I find that people in this country haven’t a clue really what happened, in spite of all that has been said. They still haven’t a clue what was going on. And it seems strange to me. And for instance, a woman in the rambling club, when I said I wouldn’t be out today, because of being interviewed about my wartime experiences, said: “What wartime experiences? You were a child!” That to me is very odd. I didn’t bother to explain. But after all, even an English child had wartime experiences, whether they were evacuated, or whatever, but this absolute lack of knowledge of what went on...

Jana Tanner, née Grálová

SAILING OUT OF THE PARK

Three small children, Jana, Pavel and Jirka, cross the border from their home in Bratislava to visit Aunt Hermia in Vienna. They are taken for a treat to the famous Prater fair, where they paddle a small boat around a make-believe Viennese Venice. The adults have decided the newly-opened ghost train will be too frightening for the little ones, but the boat should...
be fine. The adults can’t foresee what is about to happen. The children reach a blocked gate and are stuck. The youngest, Jana, is terrified.

Their teenage half-sister Máňa isn’t with them to sort them out and offer advice or rescue. She has accompanied the family on this trip to Vienna in the hope that Aunt Hermá’s sons, Gusty and Dolfi, will take her shopping. Boys being boys, they have no interest in shopping and have taken her instead to a political meeting. This is Austria in the mid nineteen-thirties, so naturally, given the situation in neighboring Germany, there are a lot of political meetings.

Back in the Prater, the eldest brother, Jirka, takes control in his big sister’s absence. He shouts at the gate and bangs it with the boat, then with a paddle. He is strong-willed, and insists on being let through. Jirka tends to get his way, so the gate opens at last and they manage to continue. Jana is relieved, but perhaps this is a bad time to be sailing forth so decisively.

And here the memory stops, because this is not my memory; it belongs to my mother, Jana, and she’s trying to think back nearly eighty years to dredge up the past. I want to help, but I know I’ll muddle things up with the benefit of hindsight; the knowledge—which is still somewhat sketchy at this point—of what is going to happen to the children, to their parents, to Hermá and her sons, over the next few years. I’ve been to Vienna, but the Vienna I knew in the nineteen-seventies will be very different to the city my mother visited in the thirties. I suspect our only common ground is a mutual fondness for Wiener Schnitzel and a memory of grand buildings and trams. There’s another problem. I’ve received an email from my Uncle Paul—Jana’s brother Pavel, the middle one of the three children—and his memories of this trip to Vienna are very different to my mother’s. He has no recollection of a boat on a lake, but has told me about the ghost train, so it turns out they went on the ride after all. According to Paul, the children sat in a small rail car that went along a mostly indoor track, up and down, and even through water, with frightening figures looming up all around them. I love fairground ghost trains, and can picture this perfectly.

So which memory is the true one? Both? Neither? I can imagine Jana not being allowed on the ghost train as she was a little girl and the adults would have assumed it was too scary for her; but I can equally imagine the two older boys begging to go on it and jumping up and down with glee when told they could. Paul’s memory of the train may have displaced that of the gentler boat ride which made such an impression on Jana, but perhaps her fear is picking up on the terror her brothers may have described when talking about the ghost train. I don’t know how to begin disentangling the memories at this distance, but I’m going to have to make the effort if I’m to find out who my mother really is and what happened in her childhood to make her the person she is now.

I try another tack. Mother and I are chatting on the phone when I mention the dog; a German Shepherd.

‘German Shepherd?’ she says. ‘It was a chihuahua!’

No, not that one. I know about the chihuahua. I’m talking about the German Shepherd that lived in the apartment block in Bratislava, the dog her two brothers and their friends played with, the one that took their orders—sit! Stay! That sort of thing. No, she says, there wasn’t a German Shepherd. She thinks I’m confusing it with her half-sister Máňa’s chihuahua, given to her by a boyfriend but not made welcome at home because their father, Gustav, wasn’t a dog person. Why do I think there was a German Shepherd? Because her brother Paul has told me in reply to an email of mine where I was asking him about his early life. He was very clear about this particular dog.

As Paul is nearly two and a half years older than Jana, she concedes that his memories of the very early days may be clearer than hers; there may have been this animal, but she has her doubts. I don’t get any further with the dog. I wonder why Gustav, the children’s father, didn’t like dogs. I’m not keen myself. Maybe I’ve inherited his dislike of all things canine. I know he liked collecting stamps and paintings and Dresden figurines. I’ve collected stamps and I’m an artist, so I hold onto this, trying to find connections with the grandfather I never knew and who I can only picture from the few old photos that have survived, showing a small dapper man with a neat goatee beard. I’ve drawn a portrait of him which I’ve given to my mother as a gift, and she says she is astonished by the likeness. This gives me hope that I’m managing to immerse myself in my mother’s past, that I really am going to be able to find out about her early life. I’m going to have to pick up clues as best I can, and where different memories collide, perhaps I’ll be able to use the sort of genetic sixth sense that enabled me to draw an accurate portrait from a few tiny photos.

I need to go back to the beginning, to sort out the facts as far as I can. I thought I already knew my mother’s background, but it’s becoming clear that that’s not the case. When my brother and I were very young, Mother would sometimes talk to us about her childhood experiences but much of it seemed so nightmarish I was nervous of asking questions and the conversations were never taken very far. I enjoyed the story of the teacher and the grass snake, and the wicked nuns, but didn’t like to ask about the genuinely scary stuff.

Continued on next page
My cousin Charles, Máňa’s son, knows even less than I do. When I phoned him to pick his brains about our shared background, he told me he never talked to his parents about what had happened to them when he was in his teens because teenagers don’t—I know what he means—and then when he was much older, and wanted to know, it was too late.

This non-asking is typical of children in our position. A Jewish friend has said I’m a classic Second Generation Holocaust survivor, wanting to protect my mother by not asking too much; not dragging up memories I assume she would sooner keep hidden, but I’m not convinced. Some say that if I start asking questions now, it could prove emotionally draining for all concerned and that therefore it might not be a wise thing to do. That might well be the case if Mother had never talked about her life before, but she has—not especially to me and my brother, but certainly to anyone wanting to research the holocaust, as well as to her U3A* class on aural history. She’s even provided material for the historian Sir Martin Gilbert, who mentions her in his book *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust.*

It’s clear that I’m going to have to turn detective to find out as much as I can while there are still memories to be found. I’m going to pick my mother’s brains, and when her memories dry up, I’m going to kick start them with anything I can find out from her brother Paul, from the memoirs of her childhood friend Gerda, her cousin Marian, or anyone else I can discover with a connection to her story. It will be slow going. Mother sends me notes in a spidery longhand that I can’t always read. ‘Am I writing this whole book for you?’ she asks, having sent a couple of thousand words of notes and thinking this comprises an entire book. No, Mother. You’re not. ‘Will people outside the immediate family even be interested?’ Yes, they will. Come on Mum. Don’t get cold feet.

Uncle Paul sends emails from New Jersey which are easier to read, but his health is poor and it is sometimes difficult for him to continue the correspondence. My mother can’t email. She’s internet-wary, despite being no technophobe in other respects. She could always program the latest video-recorder with ease, so I don’t know why she’s never embraced the internet age, but that’s how it is, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

Back to the narrative. Three small children sail out of a gate in Vienna’s *Prater,* out of the thirties, out of a fairy-tale childhood full of parks and kite-flying, puppet theaters, books and music—and into chaos. To say their world will be changed forever is facile. Of course, it will, but more importantly, the children will be changed. Their paths will diverge dramatically. I can’t follow them all because not all can be followed, so I’m going to concentrate on just one; Jana. I’m going to search for my hidden mother. I’ll need to find background information that has been destroyed, tease out memories that have been suppressed—and I have no idea how the process is going to affect either my mother or myself.

Catherine Edmunds was educated as a classical musician at Dartington College of Arts, and the National Centre for Orchestral Studies, Goldsmith’s College, London. After twenty years as a professional musician, she re-invented herself as an artist and writer. Her artwork includes book illustrations and TV appearances, and her published written works comprise a poetry collection and four novels, as well as dozens of short stories.

Jana Tanner, now a great-grandmother, has pursued her love of music with regular attendance at English National Opera’s dress rehearsals. She is a prize-winning costume designer for a local amateur dramatic group and has spent many years attending local adult education classes in various literary fields. Jana enjoys walking holidays, and is an active member of several rambling clubs.

*Catherine Edmunds was educated as a classical musician at Dartington College of Arts, and the National Centre for Orchestral Studies, Goldsmith’s College, London. After twenty years as a professional musician, she re-invented herself as an artist and writer. Her artwork includes book illustrations and TV appearances, and her published written works comprise a poetry collection and four novels, as well as dozens of short stories.*

*Jirka, 1932*
IT’S IN THE DNA: EPIGENETICS AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

By Tammy Bottner, MD

It was the spring of 1997, and I had a newborn baby. He had arrived ten days after his due date, pronounced healthy, and after four days at Newton Wellesley Hospital his father and I drove him home, me sitting beside him in the backseat because, like every new mother, I was worried he would stop breathing back there and who would know? But I only did that the one time, then I sat up front like a normal person, confident Ari would survive the car ride. I really was not an overly anxious new mother. As a pediatrician, I had more experience than most new moms. I could see Ari was a strong and robust baby.

We had just moved into a little carriage house in Newburyport, and had fixed up the smallest bedroom as a nursery. Ari’s room held a light-colored wooden crib and changing table and a pretty lamp his aunt had painted for him, and sported a good-sized window which looked out onto a leafy street. Danny was working as a psychiatrist in a local practice, and I had four months’ leave before I would be starting work in a pediatric practice. We were newly settled in a lovely community. Everything was good.

Yet I was terrified. And I don’t mean just the regular “oh my God I have a newborn what do I do” type of terrified. I had already taken care of hundreds of newborn babies, many of them premature or sick. Feeding and caring for my sturdy little son was not difficult for me. My husband, Danny, was a bit scared in that way, but for me even the waking up at night to feed baby Ari was a cakewalk compared to the stress-filled, sleep-deprived years of my residency.

No, I was terrified because I was caught in a waking dream, that of a parallel universe, one in which I had given birth in a different time and place, in which an unspeakable horror was in store for me and for my child.

My grandparents were Holocaust survivors. My father, too, was a survivor. He had lived through World War Two as a young child in Europe. Despite the thousands of miles and more than fifty years of time separating my family’s traumatic wartime experiences from that of Ari’s birth, I found myself reliving the trauma. It was deeply troubling and very strange.

When I was a young girl, we would sometimes drive up to Montreal to visit my father’s parents, Melly and Genek, whom I called Boma and Saba. The adults would put my sister and me to bed and then stay up talking about “the war.” But of course, I was still awake, and listening, and could hear all kinds of scary things. Since I wasn’t supposed to be listening, I never spoke about these late-night reminiscences. But the fear they elicited stayed deep inside me. I can’t even remember any specifics of what I heard now, but I can very clearly recall lying in bed with my heart pounding, experiencing equal parts guilt for not having had to suffer as they had, and horror at what they went through.

Decades later, while I was pregnant with Ari, Danny and I watched the Holocaust movie Schindler’s List. It was awful. Of course, I knew about the horrors of the Holocaust. I had read plenty of books, heard lots of stories, some even firsthand. But this movie somehow clarified the degradation, the humiliation, the slavery, and the pointless sadism that the Jews endured under the Nazis. The movie struck a deep chord in me. For days afterward I couldn’t sleep, images of the movie haunting my imagination, a feeling of fear permeating my being so completely that I didn’t know what to do. But slowly I returned to normal, and I thought I had moved past the reaction the movie had caused me.

When Ari was born, however, those feelings came back. Even as I looked around my little house in beautiful Newburyport, part of me was living in Nazi-occupied Europe during World War Two. Profound terror shook me as I gazed at my baby boy lying in his bassinet beside me, and obsessive thoughts went through my mind—what if we were being hunted? What if boots were pounding up the stairs to our room? Where would I hide? What would I do if he cried? What if I had to give him up in order to save his life?

Was it just because of what I had heard as a child that I experienced this terrible distress? Maybe. But perhaps—and I mean this literally—the horror of the Holocaust was actually in my DNA.

Epigenetics is a relatively new scientific field, but a fascinating one. We used to believe that our genes, which we inherit from our parents at conception, formed a permanent and unchanging blueprint of our makeup for our entire lives. In other words, you got what you got, and that was it forever. We now know that it’s a lot more complicated. It seems to be true that genes themselves don’t change, but what is incredible is that there are countless ways that the expression of these genes is changeable. And almost everything we do, eat, or experience in life can change the way our genes are expressed.

So, it is possible that the trauma that my grandparents lived through, and that my father experienced as a child, actually changed their genes, and that these altered genes were passed on to me. If I inherited some of the trauma of the Holocaust in my very genes, maybe that explains my visceral reaction to seeing Schindler’s List and other Holocaust movies, and my overwhelming anxiety when Ari was born.

Think of your genes as a very, very long row of light bulbs. Each bulb represents one gene, and we have millions. Interspersed among these light bulbs are switches. The switches represent points where changes can occur; they can be turned off or on, dimmed or brightened. Those switches are where epigenetics comes in.

Let’s pretend we have two identical twins. And let’s say one of them smokes two packs of cigarettes per day for thirty years and the other twin doesn’t smoke. After thirty years, we look at the two and compare them. Remember, identical twins have the same exact genetic makeup. The smoker appears older than his twin, his skin tone is different, and he is ten pounds thinner than the nonsmoker. Why? Because the effects of the cigarettes caused some of his genes to be turned off, others to be turned on, and these changes resulted in

Continued on next page
different proteins being made in his body. Proteins are little messengers, and so the smoker’s body received different genetic messages than that of the nonsmoker twin. What is truly fascinating is that, as a result, the smoker’s children will inherit different genetic material than will the nonsmoker’s, even though the twins had identical genetic makeup when they were conceived.

So, as we go through life, our experiences—stress, happiness, trauma, diet, medications, illnesses, sun exposure, radiation, toxins, exercise patterns, almost everything—affect our genetic expression. On a cellular level, this happens because methyl groups bind to certain areas of the gene (the switches), turning it off or on. And the genes can be further affected by histones, the spools around which the DNA is wound. Histones may wind the DNA either tighter or looser, which changes the way the gene is expressed. We can think of histones as the dimmer switches, which can change how brightly a particular light bulb is glowing.

In other words, our environment changes the way our genes are expressed. The old nature versus nurture, or genetics versus environment question, is too simplistic. What we do, how we live, what happens to us, changes how our genes affect us.

And it gets even more interesting now that we know that the differently expressed genes can be passed on to the next generation. The fact that certain lightbulbs have been dimmed or turned on or turned off, results in those modified genes being passed on to the offspring in their slightly altered state.

This is really mind-blowing. What my grandparents experienced in their lives changed their genes. These altered genes were passed on to their child, my father. He, in turn, went through further trauma, food deprivation, and social isolation, further affecting the on/off switches and dimmers, further altering the expression of his genes. And these methylated or altered genes were then passed on to me. So, even though I was born in a time of peace and plenty, nonetheless, some of that baggage was inherited altered genes that affect my cortisone levels, and predispose me to anxiety. Could this predisposition have affected me when my son was born? The time after giving birth is a particularly vulnerable one for most women, so it makes sense that I was affected then. What we don’t know is whether there is some kind of collective unconscious memory that is embedded in my DNA, leading me to “remember” the trauma my grandmother Melly was experiencing when her son, my father, was born.

There is still much that science has to figure out. Why do some survivors and their children do well, while others suffer from PTSD or other psychological or physical ill effects? There is no easy answer at this point. Studies show that whether one’s mother or father underwent trauma, as well as what age they were, affects the progeny’s outcomes. And if one looks at grandparents’ experiences, it matters whether it is a paternal or maternal grandparent. Strangely, for example, if one’s maternal grandmother was severely underfed as a child, one is more likely to develop diabetes but, conversely, if one’s paternal grandfather was underfed, the opposite is true. And if one’s father was underfed as a child, one is relatively protected from heart disease, but if one’s mother was underfed, one is more likely to develop heart disease. The science behind epigenetics and its effect on resilience and health is still in its infancy. But the mere fact that we now understand that life experiences can have an effect on future generations’ health is a major step forward in our understanding of how genetics and environment interact in determining our health outcomes.

Excerpted by permission from Among the Reeds: The True Story of How a Family Survived the Holocaust, © 2017, by Tammy Bottner, MD.

Tammy Bottner, MD, is a physician who treats children and adolescents in a small city north of Boston. She completed medical school at the University of Massachusetts and trained for her pediatric residency at Maine Medical Center in Portland, Maine. She has been practicing pediatrics since 1992, and is a graduate of the Fellowship in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona School of Medicine. The proud mother of two children, Tammy is the author of “Among the Reeds: The True Story of How a Family Survived the Holocaust.”
On a hot evening in July, 1941, William Sternschus, formerly Wilhelm Sternschuss of Cologne, Germany, sat in a small stuffy room in Brooklyn, writing to the wife he had been forced to leave in England 18 months earlier, a few weeks after their wedding.

July 4th was Willi’s 34th birthday. As he wrote to Lily, he thought of what might have been if his family were with him. They had all sent birthday greetings: Lily; his parents, Joseph and Bertha; his sister, Rosa; his brothers, Erich and Leo, and Leo’s wife, Else. But they were all so far away. The loneliness, the longing for his family, were oppressive. In letters to them, he summoned comfort with shared memories of good times. But the sense of isolation echoed through.

On July 7th, he wrote:

July 4th is a national holiday here and it fell out on a Friday, so I had 3 days free. I had planned to drive out into the country. But it rained continually all three days. And how it rained! So I went to lots of movies, one after another. What else can you do in such weather. I didn’t celebrate. Just slept a lot and long. I didn’t get a single personal birthday wish, since no one here knows anything about my birthday.*

It had been a long and painful odyssey that had transplanted Willi from Cologne, by way of England, to Brooklyn. He wondered daily when he would see his family again and where they were. It would be more than three years before he would learn the answers to those questions, and before he would see his parents again, who had survived in hiding in Brussels.

Back in 1939 in Cologne, Willi had thought a great opportunity had opened. His first cousin, Mary Laufer, had offered him an affidavit of support in the United States. Her husband was a partner in the firm Laufer & Bloom, a distributor of Manischewitz products in Brooklyn, Long Island and the Catskills. The Laufers had also proposed a job for him on one of their delivery trucks. With the affidavit in hand, Willi was able to leave Germany after Kristallnacht and make his way to England. There he applied for a visa to the United States.

After 1933, Britain became a refuge for Jews from Europe. British immigration authorities demanded financial guarantees for refugees and other immigrants, and allowed them into the country with the understanding that they would only be staying temporarily. Leaders of the Jewish community met with the British Home Secretary and pledged to support Jewish refugees until they left Britain or integrated into British society. After the Anschluss in March 1938, when Germany annexed Austria, the number of refugees increased. Though British public opinion about these refugees was initially supportive, there was some antagonism, especially from some of the trade unions and newspapers.

Willi hoped his stay in England would be brief and the American Consulate would recognize his affidavit and quickly process a visa for his voyage to the U.S.

In February, 1939, as the wave of refugees grew, the Jewish community took over Kitchener Camp, a former military camp, near Ramsgate. The site became an emergency refugee camp for German and Austrian refugees waiting for visas to other countries. The refugees themselves carried out much of the reconstruction of the camp in.

Continued on next page
exchange for their food, lodging and a modest allowance. By early summer 1939, Willi was building and working at Kitchener Camp. He eventually became a camp medical orderly and chief of the ambulance service, based on his previous experience working with the Red Cross in Cologne.

Camp life was hard. Living with thousands of others was frustrating, and the constant rain and dreary weather was depressing. Everyone was waiting for something, anything, to happen next in their lives.

In England, Willi also encountered friends from Cologne, including his pal, Otto Eisler, and Otto’s sister, Lily, his future wife. Willi’s brother, Erich, arrived in England as well. Willi was able to get occasional “furloughs” from the camp so he could meet his friends, and corresponding with them while back at camp helped him keep up his spirits.

June 9, 1939
My Dear Lily,
You can’t imagine how I felt when I got your package. It tasted wonderful, and it was packed with so much love and care! It made me realize how much I’ve missed all that. If I weren’t too embarrassed to do so, I would even tell you that I was close to tears for the first time since I’ve been here. But such sentiments aren’t right for us now.

Can you imagine what it means to live together daily and hourly with 2,000 people—and only men! Our barrack comprises two rooms that are separated by a thin wall. Seventy-two men sleep there. And our hut is considered a model!

For the past several days everyone has been so irritated that hardly a single calm word gets exchanged. And we are forced to live together with each other and are never, even for a short time, alone. With all these people, you can’t do what you would like. That would cause terrible confusion. And almost every day there are unpleasant incidents … But I’m not writing this all to complain. And the truth is, I’m really just too happy to have gotten out of Germany.

But this is just all a waystation. By the beginning of next year, I will be in the U.S.A., Gd willing. And then the new life really begins. Of course, I would love to travel. But that’s just dreams that we can’t spend too much time on. That’s for the few lucky ones. And what you write about having your own home! Lily, could we even hope for such a thing?

I’ve heard that older people can be put up in homes here. But is that certain? It would be wonderful if we could all get our parents over here. I wish that day would come soon.

Later Willi had moments of real depression. On August 3rd he wrote to Lily,
I have always struggled not to become like the others, that is, not interested in anything, lazy, indifferent, almost apathetic. But now I almost believe that for here, that is right. I really am almost at that point … I really force myself to (work) so that I don’t sleep away the entire day the way I already sleep away all my free time. I almost believe that I won’t regain my energy at all. Is that all, just like the frequent headaches, a result of my being sick, or do I really have the camp psychosis already?

After the war broke out, in September 1939, Britain offered many of the refugees the opportunity to join the British military. Willi wondered what he should do. In the meantime, his affidavit for the United States needed to be renewed and he hadn’t heard from his sponsors. He decided not to join the military, pinning his hopes on getting to the States. Still, he wondered if it was the right decision, especially because it was taking so long to obtain his visa to the States.

In late December 1939 he wrote:
You can believe me that it was very difficult for me not to participate. I made a rational decision. I hope it was right … Everyone whom I asked here told me that I did the right thing. I also acted according to my parents and brothers and sisters as well … You hardly believe how terrible I felt and still feel about making the decision as I did.

I had had bad luck with America and still have to wait again. … It seems to me that I will never get to the USA.

In early January 1940, Willi’s applications were finally processed further. In the meantime, he and Otto had many conversations about the future. Willi was going to an unfamiliar world where he knew no one, leaving everyone and everything he loved behind. Otto “made a shidduch” for his sister, Lily, and his friend, Willi, suggesting that if they married, they would at least have a piece of the past with them in their future.

In February 1940 Willi and Lily were married in London. In April Willi finally left for the United States, but there was no visa yet for his wife, and Lily remained behind.

In the United States, Willi’s letters to Lily describe his difficulty in adjusting to his new life. Although he found friends from Cologne, he yearned for his family. He wasn’t even sure how they were coping. Desperate letters from his sister Rosa begged him to help her get out of Germany. He finally was able to gather $200 to send her, but never heard further.

He thought his older brother, Leo, and his wife, Else, were hiding in France. He thought his parents had left Cologne. Despite his outgoing personality and constant efforts to be positive, the sense of loneliness, isolation and worry echo from his letters.

At the beginning of 1941 Willi received a card saying that his parents were in Belgium with Leo and Else. It had taken the card two months to reach the U.S. from Europe.

In the meantime, the months dragged on, with little hope that his wife would be able to join him. Perhaps one of the lowest moments was that July 4th, when, alone and despondent in his room in Brooklyn, no one nearby had known enough or cared enough to wish him a happy birthday.

Mobilization and War

January 1942: The U.S. Selective Service System sent William Sternschuss an “Order to Report for Physical Examination by the Armed Forces Prior to Induction.” On July 21, 1942 he received the “Order to Report for Induction.” Sometime later, his official name became William Steen. Lily told the story that he had wanted to cut his name to Stern, but the officers couldn’t read his handwriting, and so he became Steen. In the Army he got a new nickname, too: Bill.

At first, Bill was sent to surveyor’s school. Later the army assigned him to Camp Ritchie in Maryland. Along with other refugees, and many Jews who had fled the Nazis, Bill became one of the “Ritchie Boys,” trained in military intelligence, prisoner interrogation, document retrieval, counter-intelligence,

Contined on next page
During that whole time, he thought constantly about his family. His personal goal was to find them. Once the German lines had been pushed back sufficiently, Bill asked his captain for leave to travel to Brussels. His excitement and pain spilled through his letters to Lily. By this time, he was writing in English and these letters are in his own words.

October 11, 1944

Our parents are well and healthy. I just returned from a visit at their home. That’s the most exciting news we had in a long time. But let me tell you how everything happened.

Last night, I arrived after 7 o’clock in Brussels. It was a very dark night and raining. For a few hours, I searched in town with the help of people I had never met before. Everybody was very kind and helpful. I won’t tell you too much of the details. At about 9:30 I had finally located our parents. One of the Belgian people who lives in the house, went upstairs to prepare them. The parents were in bed already. It’s hard to describe what happened then. I may tell you everything later on. But the facts: We were all happy and spent hours talking. I had to tell them all about you and your family, about Erich and his wedding and Lotte and about everybody. You can imagine our conversation. It was good I had your pictures and the snaps of Erich’s wedding, which I left them.

They live at their new address two years already. The address is J Street [sic], 141 Rue Berckmans, BrusselsSt. Gilles. Leo and Else left about 2 years ago. Leo used to come and visit the parents every few weeks or months. Lately he was not able to come, because of the changes. I can’t tell you all about it. Leo changes his address very frequently and used to write every few days and I am certain that the parents will get mail again as soon as the mail service is continued. We have not his present address. The parents had a very hard time during these years and could survive only with the help of good people, who really saved their lives. The parents are full of praise for Leo and also Else, who have done a lot for them. They often risked their own lives in order to help them.

I spent the night and the following morning with the parents. Then I had to leave again, but hope to be able to come back soon. Your chocolates, candies, etc. came very handy. I gave them everything and all the food, sweets and other things I could get hold of. They really need things, as the food situation is still serious there, but I hope soon there will be more food available for the civil population.

A few days later he wrote Lily more details about how he found his parents.

13 October 1944

Lil Darling,

It was already dark, when I approached Brussels, and raining cats and dogs. After driving almost 200 miles without a rest, I was getting tired. It was quite a job to keep my jeep from slipping on the wet pavement.

I was really glad, when two English soldiers asked me for a lift. Driving all afternoon at an average speed of over 30 miles all alone and constantly working the window wiper by hand in a weather like that, had me all but worn out. Fortunately, one of the Englishmen knew the way in town well and directed me. Before he left the car, he directed me to the street where I knew my parents had lived. “So many streets left and so many turnings right, etc., etc.” But I hadn’t been driving again more than a minute or so, and I was lost and had no idea any more where I was. So I asked two passing Belgian people in my best French for help. They offered right away to bring me to the place and I was more than glad to take them into my jeep. In less than two minutes, I was in front of 7 Rue Courbe.

Before he left the car, he directed me to the street where I knew my parents had lived. “So many streets left and so many turns right, etc., etc.” But I hadn’t been driving again more than a minute or so, and I was lost and had no idea any more where I was. So I asked two passing Belgian people in my best French for help. They offered right away to bring me to the place and I was more than glad to take them into my jeep. In less than two minutes, I was in front of 7 Rue Courbe.

When I started thanking my guides, they said: “That’s nothing, we have to thank you for the lovely ride.”

Now, I was standing in front of my parents’ house. I was quite excited when I pressed the bell, after making sure it was the right house.

Continued on next page
I kept thinking, "Are my parents still alive?" Will I see them now? What has happened to them during all the years, I haven’t heard from them. And if the Germans have deported them.” And many more thoughts passed through my head. The few moments I had to wait for the opening of the door seemed endless.

Suddenly some light fell through the opening of the door, and the cool voice of a stranger asked: “Who is there?”

I said, “Can I see Mr. or Mrs. Sternschus? Whom do you mean? I have never heard the name?”

At that moment all my hope was gone. I started explaining. I was looking for my parents and telling him everything I knew about them.

He told me, he had lived two years already in the house and had never heard of them. How was that possible? Didn’t I have a letter written only half a year ago from that address, sent through the Red Cross? It didn’t make sense.

The stranger, a man in his 50’s, invited me into the house. He offered me a cup of coffee and promised me to make inquiries at the police in the morning. He invited me to sleep in his house that night.

I intended to search some more during the night, but had to find a garage for my jeep first. He offered right away to help me look for one.

When we stepped outside, he met some neighbors and asked them, whether they knew anything about my parents. After hearing my story, they took charge of me right away. They guided me to several garages, but none would take my jeep for the night. Finally, we passed an English Army garage, which agreed to keep the jeep for the night, after I had talked to half a dozen NCOs.

Then people, husband, wife and sister-in-law, invited me in their house. They were very much concerned about me. They offered me food and a bed, right away, and they hung up my wet things to dry. It was hard to conceive that all these strange people were so much concerned about me.

I had another two addresses in Brussels. But very old addresses and I didn’t think they could be any good. But I did not intend to let anything untried, and told my hosts I was going to look up the two other places.

"It’s not very far from here," they said, "and we will come with you and show you the way."

I accepted their offer very gladly, and we went to the first address. It was still pouring and pitch dark. Without help, I would never have found my way. It did not take very long, before we rang the bell at a dark house. We waited a long time, before an elderly woman opened the door.

Yes, she remembered my parents. At least, I had found someone who knew my parents. Can you imagine, how my hope rose? She remembered, that my father had moved to Rue Berckmans, a few years ago. She didn’t know an exact address, but was sure I could find out more about my parents, over there.

As it happened, 141 Rue Berckmans was the last address I had. My guides went with me there immediately. The way was short. It was cold and dark, still raining heavily. The mentioned house was a café. We went in and sat at a table. The owner came over and asked what we wanted. My hosts talked with him in French. He didn’t understand what they meant and was a little worried about my uniform and carbine.

I told him I was looking for my parents and gave him the name.

He looked surprised. “Mr. Sternschus? Of course, he lives in this house!”

I hardly could speak. “And how is he?”

“Oh, he is very well.”

“And my mother?”

It seemed an eternity till he answered. “Your mother is with him and is O.K. too.”

It is hard to describe what I felt the moment. Was it really true? My parents alive and under the same roof with me. Was it possible? Was I dreaming?

I heard myself say, “Where are my parents? Let me go to them."

“Easy, easy,” the man said. “Let me go upstairs, first and tell the old people, lest they may get a shock.”

Was I glad, he had thought of that! I was too excited to be careful.

After a few minutes the café-owners came back, and said casually, “Your parents wait for you upstairs. Go ahead. They were in bed already.”

Carefully I took the magazine out of my carbine, check that the chamber was empty, as well, placed the carbine on the table and put the loaded magazine in my pocket and said, “You’ll excuse me, won’t you? I leave my weapon downstairs, not to scare my parents.” Then I went upstairs.

The café-owner showed me the room. My father opened the door. He was in his pajamas, apparently just jumped out of bed. He looked so much older than he did when I had seen him last.

"It is our Willi," he exclaimed, "It is really Willi," and he was in my arms and kissed me. "I knew you would come, Willi. I knew it all the time. You see, Berta, God has helped us all the time, and now Willi is back." Mother was sitting up in the bed. "It is Willi," was all she could say, and she said it over and over again, while she kissed me under tears. I only could look at her. All I said, "Oh, dear Mama, and dear Papa. I am so happy you are all right and I am with you again." It cut my heart to notice, how old and thin both of them looked. But both smiled under tears and I was at that moment as happy as I had not been in a long time.

Lil Darling, I’ll write you more about my meeting with the parents some other time. All my love,

Your Willi
October 15, 1944

Thanks for your letters of September 25 and Oct 1st. Meanwhile, I wrote you a long letter, telling how I found the parents. When I'll have time again, I'll continue telling you what happened afterwards in detail. You can imagine how happy I am, to have found our parents, at last. I expect to get there again soon, even if it is only for a few hours. It's amazing how the old people could survive all these terrible years. Did I tell you, that they stayed in their room for two years and did not dare to show themselves on the streets. The Germans drove in cars through the streets and caught all Jews they met and pulled them inside the cars. (Every Jew was forced to wear a yellow star on his clothing and it was therefore easy for the Germans to recognize them.) Then the Germans asked for a ransom. When they received the ransom money, they let their prisoners go, sometimes. But mostly, no matter whether they got the money or not, they put their prisoners into freight trains and shipped them to Poland. And nobody ever heard of them again. Everybody who survived the journey in the freight train without any food, water facilities, was killed in Poland by poison gas.

It's terrible to think of all that and to know how many close escapes our parents had. Take care of yourself, Darling. I am fine.

October 17, 1944

I just came back from another visit to our parents. This time I had only 1 1/2 hours time to stay but it was well worth it, and I hope I'll be able to get there more often from now on. I stepped in their room quite unexpectedly and they were very happy to see me and only sorry I had to leave so soon again. I brought them your package with candies, sausage, and all the good things. Besides I had a big bag full of other food etc., so they will have plenty to eat for many weeks. Besides, I brought mother some Eau de Cologne and wine. So even if I should not be able to get there again during the next few weeks, they will be o.k.

Leo and Else may show up during the next few days or weeks, as well. I hope so, at least, as we expect that the mail and railroad service will be resumed soon.

Bill was discharged from the U.S. Army at the end of 1945. He and Lily started a small business in Chicago, where her sister and parents had settled. Slowly life resumed for them. Not as before. It couldn't be. Too much was lost forever. Bill's sister Rosa had been deported to the East and later died. Other family and friends were gone or scattered around the world. The survivors struggled to form new lives from the remnants of the old lives. Bertha and Joseph managed to get to England, but the rigors of the war experience were too much and they passed on within a couple of years.

Far away in Chicago, Bill and Lily tried to be in touch with other friends and family in Europe, but it was hard to discover what had happened to many of them. Then one day, Bill noticed an opportunity for officers and civilians to serve as interrogators, translators and interpreters in Europe at the Nuremberg Trials. He re-enlisted and Lily applied for a civilian position.

But that's the beginning of another story.

Willi’s parents, Josef and Bertha, moved from Rzeszow to Hamburg in 1896, where they set up an egg import business, and where their first two children, Rosa and Zygmunt, who died in infancy, were born. In 1900 they moved to Cologne where Leo, Willi and Erich were born. All but Rosa escaped from Germany and survived the Holocaust.

Paula R. Steen grew up speaking Yiddish at home in Los Angeles and ended up getting a Master’s Degree in German from UCLA. She taught in the Hamburg, Germany school system for nine years. Since returning to the United States she has taught and served as an administrator in public and private schools. Although she never had the honor of meeting Bill Steen, her father-in-law, in person, Paula feels it has been a privilege to be part of the Steen family, to hear the memories of Bill’s wife, Lily, and his children Frank and Barbara, and to have had the opportunity of learning about Bill’s thoughts and experiences through his letters. Paula and Frank raised three children and have 13 grandchildren.

* Until the end of November 1941, Willi’s letters were written in German. The translations are by Paula Steen.
A JEW SENT TO A CONCENTRATION CAMP FOR HELPING A JEW

By Krystyna Plochocki

The Jew who was severely punished for helping another Jew was my mother, Bajla Ruda Ejchner (Maria Trzcinska).

In the autumn of 1942, my mother and I, with my mother’s sister and her little son, escaped from Piotrzkow Trybunalski ghetto. We obtained forged “Aryan” documents and settled into a tiny apartment in a quiet residential neighborhood in Warsaw. Only my mother held an authentic birth certificate from Maria Trzcinska, a child who had died many years earlier at the age of about 2. (As far as I know, this child’s death certificate was destroyed.)

Our place felt safe—as safe as it could be for people like us. We were hiding in the open, going out as needed, and leading a seemingly ordinary life. My aunt worked as a secretary and supported all of us, while my mother took care of our household. My little cousin, then two years old, and I, aged seven, attended kindergarten. As far as I know, there were no encounters with black-mailers. We shared the apartment with another Jewish woman, who also had forged documents. Since I don’t remember her name, I will call her “Hannah” here.

It all changed on February 2, 1944. That morning, the Germans launched a huge roundup in our apartment building. When I looked out the window I could see a dense line of armed men in uniform, many with police dogs on a leash.

Immediately, groups of these Germans set out to check all the apartments, inspecting the documents of those present. The search was thorough: our meager belongings were thrown on the floor, and each piece of paper was scrutinized. They left our room when they did not find anything suspicious. But only a few minutes later, they were back, holding two sets of documents with two different names that they had discovered in Hannah’s room. Is she Jewish? Are you Jewish? Loud voices, menacing screams, threats, my mother knocked down on the floor, her face bloodied as she is kicked by an SS-man, then taken for interrogation. I am sure everyone in Warsaw at the time, including little kids, knew that “interrogation” meant brutal beatings and torture. To me it also meant what I had heard grownups whispering about: the end of us all.

My mother and Hannah were dragged to the police car, and, warning they would be back, the Germans left my cousin and me with our next-door neighbors.

Mother and Hannah were taken to the notorious Pawiak prison, and from there driven every day for interrogation to Gestapo headquarters, “Szucha Street,” whose very name made people tremble.

Despite brutal torture, Hannah did not tell the Germans who we were. And by holding out, Hannah saved our lives. She was executed as a Jew a few days later.

My mother’s interrogation continued, but no amount of beating made her admit she was Jewish or that she knew Hannah was. Nevertheless, the Germans gave her a death sentence, the only punishment on the books for helping a Jew.

This was the beginning of the unique story of a Jewish woman punished, as a Pole, by Germans for helping a Jew.

A female warden, who worked in the Pawiak prison on a mission from the Polish underground, was passing along news about prisoners, including my mother and Hannah. Someone from Żegota (an underground organization helping Jews in hiding) bribed a German official to transfer my mother’s name from the list of persons to be executed to the list to be sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Thus, she was saved from immediate death.

After the war she wrote a few pages about her life in the camp; the rest of this story is from her handwritten notes.

Ravensbrück was an almost exclusively women’s camp about 50 miles north of Berlin. The inmates came from all the Nazi-occupied countries of Europe, with the majority of them consisting of Poles and Jews. Located in a pine forest, it was clean and well maintained, with beautiful flower beds, as described to the inmates by a German guard on the way to the camp. However, this idyllic appearance was just an illusion.

In reality, Nazis executed inmates brought in with death sentences; and starvation, exposure, disease and hard work killed thousands more. Ravensbrück was also notorious for the medical experiments performed on female prisoners, the so called ‘little rabbits.’

She arrived as a Polish political prisoner at Ravensbrück Camp on April 23, 1944. Along with other women, my mother was sent to the showers. All clothes and belongings were taken away, and they were given only thin camp uniforms and wooden clogs—no underwear or stockings. They were handed shovels and promptly marched to dig trenches in the frozen soil. Feeling chilled, being emaciated after weeks of imprisonment, and never having done any hard, physical labor before—moreover, holding a shovel taller than she, and wearing clogs far too big and heavy—my mother believed she had no chance to survive.

But her life was saved once again, this time by a German kapo. Some German anti-Nazis, sent by Hitler to concentration camps in the 1930s, had by the end of the war taken over certain functions in the camps. In Ravensbrück, their covert, voluntary mission was to save the intelligentsia found among the inmates. Thus, my mother, who spoke fluent German and had an advanced degree in history, was

Continued on next page
given a job in a sewing shop and a bed in a quiet corner of the barrack.

Sewing Shop I: A huge space with huge windows, central heating, lots of light. Six hundred women working on sewing machines arranged in rows, sitting or standing along tables and work stations with steam irons. A dream job for an inmate in Ravensbrück.

The first sewing machine gets the cut-out material and starts with the pants, and the last one finishes the SS uniform. Faster! Faster! A quota for the sewing shop is 180 to 190 uniforms or coats in 11 hours, day or night. Buttons have to be sewn on by hand, 600 buttons per worker, the cloth is thick and rough, and you have to make sure the button is strongly attached. The quota needs to be met, even if the machine breaks, even if new, untrained workers are brought in; it doesn’t matter what. The quota is the torment of our lives.

We are famished: our food for a day consists of a bowl of soup cooked from rotten potatoes and turnips, and two slices of camp quality bread. As the working shift goes on, our hands are getting weak and numb, black circles are moving in front of our burning eyes, sweat drips from our faces. It is hot and stuffy, especially at night, when the windows have to be closed and covered with dark blinds. Unbearable back pain from working for hours in the same position. Not a moment to stretch or use the bathroom, because a mountain of unfinished work would pile up.

No break for eating our meager rations either; we had to eat without taking time away from work.

And, if you did not meet your quota, if the seam was not perfectly straight or the button did not hold, your sadistic overseer would teach you a lesson: beating you up with whatever weapon was handy, and hitting your head, face, back, hands. Large scissors were frequently the favored weapon. The beatings were applied with vulgar swearing and insults, yelling, threats of more of the same, but the worst threat was losing your job and being sent to digging ditches—or worse.

After the shift was over, the bone-tired inmates still had to clean the workshop, as well as their barrack and its surrounding area. They were barely able to shuffle over to the freezing showers and, at last, could crawl into their bunk beds for a few hours of sleep. The barracks were freezing in winter and hot in summer, noisy, overcrowded, suffused with fear, sickness, longing, suffering. Waking up meant going to endless roll-calls, standing in the open field for hours in all kinds of weather, where, almost every day, someone fainted or dropped dead of hunger and exhaustion. Then, to work again.

A year later, in April 1944, at last, we heard the approaching front and air raids. British and American bombers were flying over our heads and we were delighted seeing our terrified guards running to bomb shelters. We were praying for a bomb to fall on the camp, so that we’d be freed.

Finally, by the end of April, the Nazis ordered the inmates to leave the camp, forcing women barely able to stand on their feet to join the march to somewhere further West. Many prisoners feared that this "Transports" of this kind were organized by Nazis all over Germany and the occupied territories to cover up their deeds from the approaching Allied armies, and were universally given the name “death march.”

As the Ravensbrück “death march” went on and on, there was no hope left. Then, suddenly, a huge explosion sent the guards scurrying to hide in the ditch and my mother and her friends bolted, running to the nearest forest. The Germans were shooting at them, but no one was hit.

They stayed in the forest with no food or shelter for a few days, until hunger forced them to move. They walked East for days, miles and miles through deserted German villages and towns. They found food and a place to spend the night in empty homes, whose owners had fled in panic before the approaching Soviets. On the way a Soviet officer saved them from being raped by his soldiers. Eventually, they reached Breslau (now Wroclaw in Poland), which was almost totally bombed out, but had a functioning railway station. From there my mother made it to Warsaw and found us.

Note: My mother, Bajla Ruda Ejchner (Maria Trzcinska), was born on January 20, 1908, in Belchatów (Poland), a daughter of Israel and Rózia Pytowski. In the early 1930s she obtained a master’s degree in history and education from Warsaw University. Because of the high unemployment rate of the times and the anti-Semitic rules applying to government employees, she could not find a position as a public-school teacher, but she taught as a volunteer at a Free University in Łódz. She married Abraham (Broniek) Ejchner, my father. After WWII began, my mother and I, and other family members, spent almost three years in the Piotrków Trybunalski Ghetto. In October 1942, we escaped to Warsaw, where we lived under forged Aryan documents (my mother used the name of Maria Trzcinska). In February 1944, she was arrested by the Gestapo for helping a Jew, and she was sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp as a Polish political prisoner. Her parents, brother, sister, nephew and I survived on “the Aryan side” too, but my father was murdered by the Germans. After the war my mother worked in the libraries of Łódz and Warsaw University, where she also taught history and librarian science, and she also taught at Teachers’ College. She passed away on January 21, 1986, in Warsaw, Poland.
I was born on February 25, 1932 in Ostrowiec Kielce, Poland, to Miriam Belle and Mayer Fachler, who owned a kosher butcher shop. My mother suffered from postpartum pneumonia and died three months after my birth. I had six older siblings: Shmuel, Yankel, Szulim, Shimshon, Rachmiel and Rivka, a baby who died before I was born. After my mother’s death, her sister Elke helped raise my brothers and me. My aunt’s husband Ber Glatt left for America in pursuit of a more prosperous and stable life, but my aunt had refused to leave with him, because she did not want to leave me alone.

By the end of 1939, the German army invaded my hometown. After they gained control of our city, the first item on the Nazis’ agenda was to establish a ghetto. One day, in April 1941, they marched through our town, announcing from loudspeakers that all Jews were to gather in the main plaza. I remember throngs of people assembled in that place, including my family. The Nazis immediately determined our lot: some were sent to ghettos, others to the concentration camp, and many were shot on the spot.

I was able to hide, along with my cousin Chanke Gutwil, who was around my age. We succeeded in reaching the limits of town when Chanke cried and caught the attention of some Nazi soldiers. They brought us back to the plaza, where we were allowed to use the restrooms located in houses that had outdoor toilets facing the plaza. I entered one of these, but could not find a place to hide. So, I went to another, and realized this one had a gap between the ceiling and the roof. I crawled into this space, and fell asleep until the next morning. When I woke up and looked through the window, I no longer saw soldiers patrolling the plaza, but I saw many corpses.

During the night, my father, my brothers Shimshon and Rachmiel, and my aunt Elke had disappeared without a trace. I escaped to the forest and hid there for about four to six weeks, surviving on berries. When I understood that my feet had become swollen because of the lack of food, I returned to Ostrowiec. There, I saw some Nazi soldiers directing a group of Jews to one of the town’s most important metal foundries, a shop known for its production of metal-cast train rails. Among them I spotted my brother Szulim, who was 11 years older than I was. I followed the group to the foundry and asked a Polish policeman to get my brother Szulim. As soon as my brother arrived, he bribed the guard with his watch to protect us. Szulim told me that the Nazis had constructed a ghetto next to the cemetery and that my two oldest brothers, Shmuel and Yankel, were there.

I went looking for them, and found them sharing a second-floor apartment with other people. It struck me that they were constantly talking about fleeing and joining the resistance. A few days later, Shmuel and Yankel told me that they were leaving and that they would come back to visit me. But they never returned, and I never saw them again.

Two days later, Szulim told me he was leaving, and he would come back to get me. Szulim did come back shortly thereafter. Escaping together was risky, but there seemed to be an opportunity: we had to go quietly to a wall behind a hilly part of the cemetery. At dawn we went to that wall, and my brother helped me jump off first before he hurdled over it. A resistance fighter carrying a revolver awaited us on the other side. The three of us set out for the forest, walking several hours. Once there, my brother told me he was going to take me to a family that supported the
resistance.

Szulim had established contact with a Catholic couple that collaborated with the resistance. Joseph Kotwyza and his wife Maria had no children and had agreed to adopt me under the guise of being Maria’s nephew. Joseph was of Polish origins, but he had previously lived in Germany and was a German resident. Szulim brought me to a house where the Kotwyzas lived. Their home was set on a large piece of land, close to the forest, on the edge of Ostrowiec. From then on, I became Stefan Tadeus Kotwyza. I helped Maria plant potatoes, tomatoes and many vegetables. During my time with them, my brother Szulim was able to visit me a couple of times. He always arrived at night, along with his resistance companions.

After a year of living with the Kotwyzas, the Nazis discovered that Joseph was helping the resistance, and he was shot. From that moment on Maria felt our best option was to leave Ostrowiec. We travelled to a town near Mintz, because Maria had a close relationship with a cousin who lived there. Maria’s cousin was married and lived in her own house; but she owned another house that was vacant and in good condition. This property was smaller than that of our previous home in Ostrowiec, but it was sufficient to cultivate some vegetables to survive on. However, I lost contact with Szulim.

One day, Maria decided to tell my story to the town priest. The following day, I went with Maria to meet the priest, who decided to make me an altar boy to help hide my Jewish identity. Maria also wanted me to be baptized, but the priest told her he would only perform this rite if no one came to claim me after the war. I lived with Maria in Mintz for about three years until the war was over.

By the end of 1944, a great part of Poland had already been liberated by the Russian army. From then on, the resistance, as well as my brother, joined the Red army. During a military drill, Szulim was riding a motorcycle and had an accident. He fractured several ribs and was transferred to a hospital near Mintz Masowiecki.

After his release from the hospital, he was introduced to Regina Grunspan through a shidduch. She came from a wealthy family that owned several wheat mills. A Polish family had hidden Regina during the war. During this time Szulim began his search for me, and he returned to the town where he had originally left me with the Kotwyzas. When he inquired about Joseph and Maria, he was told that Maria had family in Grodzisk, a small town outside of Mintz. He thought it a strange coincidence that I was living near Mintz, so close to them.

It was easy for Szulim to find me, and my life changed completely. When my brother found the house, and opened the front gate, Maria and I recognized him immediately. I was extremely happy to see my brother. Maria and I hopped on his jeep to go meet Regina and see her house in Mintz. I remember a big house filled with weapons, and a soldier keeping guard. Szulim was given a high-ranking position during the administration of Mintz.

My brother visited me at Maria’s place several times within a period of about two months. One day, when Szulim felt that I had earned his trust, he told Maria that he wanted to take me on a vacation. But we never returned to Maria’s house. Regina was able to sell some belongings she had saved during the war in exchange for about $20 of gold. We travelled to Prague where we traded the gold for Zlotes.

After the war, the Hagana was searching for Jewish survivors to convince them to go to the British Mandate of Palestine. With help from the Hagana, we hoped to get to Italy because American and British forces occupied the area. We travelled from Mintz to Warsaw by train. From there we could not continue because the rails were damaged. The soldiers helped Szulim get rid of his military uniform. From then on, we took many paths, sometimes we travelled by truck, and other times we had to walk. We were always supervised and guided by the Hagana. We went through Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and finally reached Austria, where we stayed for about one week in a refugee camp. Then, we went to the mountains with a large group of Holocaust survivors.

We had to descend a mountain to reach Italy. We belonged to a group of about 100 refugees. For all of us to cross the border illegally, we needed to divide into small groups of 20 people. Szulim was sent with one group, and Regina and I went with another. On our way down my group was stopped by Russian soldiers. My brother noticed that something went wrong and came back for us. And for the second time, he had to bribe a Russian soldier with his wristwatch. At the bottom of the mountain, Hagana soldiers, belonging to the British army, were waiting with trucks to take us to refugee camps.

While we were in Italy, we met Samuel Lustig and his wife Sofia. Soon after, Regina suffered from appendicitis. Sofia looked after me while Szulim and Regina travelled to Modena’s Military Academy for treatment. Afterwards, I was sent to a special camp in Cervino for children that had survived the Holocaust.

For me, Cervino was significant because I was able to return to a normal childhood.

Contined on next page
There, we were free, and we had everything — a swimming pool, a theater, and joyous activities such as singing, exercising, parading and running through obstacle courses. Because it was located at a high altitude, it was always cold in Cervino, and even during the summer the mountain tops were covered with snow.

Meanwhile, Szulim was trying to contact family members who had left for the Americas prior to WWII. In New York, there was my uncle Nathan and Regina’s family. But he had no street addresses, and he searched for them through the U.S. consulate. Szulim did remember Uncle Moses’ postal code. Uncle Moses had immigrated to Costa Rica, and Szulim sent a letter to San Jose P.O. Box 1203.

I had been in Cervino about two months when Szulim and Regina called me back to Modena’s refugee camp. They had received a correspondence from Uncle Moses, who told them he was making arrangements for us to travel to Costa Rica.

Documents arrived that allowed us to transit through the United States. We boarded a ship in Taranto, south of Naples. This ship had been used to transport supplies and ammunition to U.S. soldiers during the war. The ship had about 20 passengers, many of them were Catholic priests travelling to New York. For some reason, at some point, the ship was redirected to Florida. About three weeks after our departure, we arrived in Pensacola. The captain of the ship asked Szulim how much money he was carrying. Szulim replied he did not have much with him. Upon hearing this, the captain said that he would not allow us to disembark, and that we would be returning to Naples.

The next day, a well-dressed gentleman boarded our ship from a smaller one. The man asked for the Fachler family, and Regina recognized him as her uncle Monroe Macys because of his similar appearance to her own father. We were immediately allowed to go ashore.

We stayed at the most luxurious hotel in Pensacola. While getting dinner at the hotel we were recognized by some of the priests who had travelled with us. They were happy to see we had finally gotten off the ship. From Pensacola we travelled to New York by train to meet my uncle Nathan. While in New York, we were welcomed by Monroe into his home in Long Island and by my uncle Nathan in Brooklyn. Eventually Szulim decided that we should go to Costa Rica to live with Uncle Moses and his sister Dvoire whom he knew from Poland.

I arrived in Costa Rica at the age of 11, and have lived in this peaceful country ever since. I became a medical doctor and participated in the first kidney transplant ever performed in Costa Rica. I married Angela Steinberg, and we have four children, eight grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Note: After the war, Szulim discovered that our brothers Shmuel and Yankel were killed by pro-Nazi Partisans six months before the Germans surrendered.

Salomon Fachler (Shloime in Yiddish) lives in Costa Rica and is a member of our organization. During a recent Shabbos dinner, he showed his grandson, Daniel, the 2017 issue of The Hidden Child. Daniel was inspired to send us his translation of his grandfather’s story of survival. Under the organization “Embajada Mundial de Activistas por la Paz,” Salomon Fachler has shared his story across his country, including to the Costa Rican Senate.

Salomon’s story appears on YouTube under the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0tsK-pldeY
THE SECOND AND THIRD GENERATIONS SECURE THE LEGACY

My mother was brushing her hair, looking into the mirror. I still have that silver-edged mirror in my crowded attic. It was set on her dresser like a large picture frame. As a young boy, I took comfort in watching my mother and in being with her. We lived in Hungary, and I remember a day when one of our two maids entered the room. I watched her reflection in the mirror as she spoke: “Madame, they say Jews must now wear a yellow star every time they go outside.”

My mother glanced at me and pretended a laugh, so tense and shrill, I found myself cringing. Looking back on that six-year-old and his mother, I can find words now for what were then only mute feelings. We were Christianized, my parents and I, but keenly aware of our family’s Jewishness. What the maid had heard was true, so all that fall and winter, none of us left the apartment without a coat that had a yellow star sewn on its lapel. They were hand-made, these yellow stars, cut out freehand from yellow fabric by a seamstress in the neighborhood, each a little different from the others. For us, though, they all implied the same thing — they meant shame.

Before we had to wear them, our stance outside the home had been forceful and proud. My father, particularly, carried himself like a man of the ruling class. He was an executive, and successful at what he did. Anyone addressing him with less deference than he thought his due was in for a dressing-down. My mother had a gentler manner, but she too was not humble. Her father lived nearby in the same neighborhood. He was a dignified man, short in stature, but with a strong, erect posture. Grandfather Ernest dressed carefully in custom-made clothes of expensive fabric. He had a deliberate way about him, and I knew even then that he and I were rather alike, and that I wanted to grow up to be like him, reputable and self-respecting.

My father was harder to emulate, though there was much about him I admired, including his proud honesty. When he was sixteen or seventeen, in the early days of the First World War, he had volunteered for the army. During training, he had neglected to lock up the rifles. The officer in charge assembled the men and asked who was responsible, and my father was proud that he had stepped forward and shouted, “I am responsible.” And I too was proud of him for that.

But for so talkative a man, it was surprising to me that my father never said much about his religious beliefs. As a teenager I once pressed him to declare whether he believed in God, but he would only answer, “Each person must decide on that score for himself.” My father would not say that he was Jewish. He had been baptized as a child, and I think he may never have entered a synagogue, although he once told me of having been in a place as a small child where men wore a tallit — a dim recollection that sent a cloud of embarrassment over his face.

When I speak of my Christianized Jewish-Hungarian family, Americans usually ask, “Were they forced to convert? Did they convert to escape persecution?” I must answer, “No,” and have never found an easy way to explain. My mother was converted as a child, while my father’s maternal grandfather converted in the mid-19th century. In those days, where my family lived, Jews were not persecuted or forced to convert. On the contrary, many Jewish families prospered mightily under the protection of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. If they were baptized, there was no secret about having once been Jewish. My family cast off its Jewish heritage as some newcomers to America forget their mother tongue.

Our neighborhood, Rószadomb (Hill of Roses) was a quiet suburb, a half-hour’s walk from the Danube and Parliament. Coming home from school one day, wearing my yellow star, I realized I was being watched from the open window of a ground floor apartment by a dour-looking man. “You filthy Jew,” he shouted at me, and spat on the ground. From my upbringing, I wanted to say, “I am not a Jew,” but my yellow star held me back from uttering these words.

A few months after the emergence of the yellow stars, it was decreed that Jews could only live in Jewish neighborhoods, in houses specially designated as Jewish. We moved to a large building downtown. It was noisy and crowded in comparison to where we had lived before. On the sidewalk stood a kiosk that in peacetime had displayed advertising placards, but that during these times announced official notices from the government, headlined in huge dark, black letters, “ZSIDÓK!” “JEWS!”

The restrictions they spelled out became more stringent from day to day, limiting when we could leave our buildings and for what reasons.

My father became determined to find another place for us to live, even though we would then effectively be in hiding. He had friends who were not Jewish and one of them, Joseph Visontai, wanted to help us. One day, during the hours we were still permitted to leave the building, my mother and I took a streetcar to meet Mrs. Visontai at her apartment.

Their boys, one aged 10 and the other 7, the same as I, were not home yet. So, while the two women were chatting and getting better acquainted, I found myself a door to play with. It had a handle large enough for me to hang on, and I made it swing freely on its hinges, carrying me back and forth. I heard my mother say, “Oh, he is a very easy child, he will play with a door such as that for hours.” And so, the arrangements were made. Peter and Bucko, the Visontai boys, were simply told that we were staying with them for a

Contined on next page
while. The days passed and one morning the brothers and I were laughing together, still in our pajamas and bathrobes, when I blurted out the truth about our being in hiding with them.

Abruptly, they fell silent. I went to my mother, who paled visibly when I told her what I had done. She said, “Go back now and say you were only joking.” So, hitching the belt of my bathrobe tighter, I returned to the brothers, and told them with a fake smile that what I had said about hiding was only a joke. In remembering those days now, it is not fear that I remember, but shame: the shame of being different from others, and the shame of having had to lie.

After we had been there three months, it became too dangerous for the Visontai family to hide us. Those sheltering Jews were themselves sent to concentration camps. My father went out to find another place to hide. He wore no yellow star that day, for by that time, a Jew would risk deportation to the camps, or worse, if he happened to encounter roving Arrow Cross, the Hungarian Nazis. He was at risk too without it, because in those days any official could ask to see a person’s papers, and anyone identified as a Jew, as my father was, could be shot on the spot for not wearing the star. He was asking himself, as he later told me, “Who can help me here, whom can I turn to?”

Once, on an impulse to visit a friend, he ascended into a trolley car that seemed to be without passengers. But when in the car, he saw one person sitting there — an officer of the German army! Instinct told him that flight or even the slightest show of fear would prove fatal. My father spoke German well, and he did not have a Jewish appearance. So, he strode up to the man and asked, “Wie viel Uhr ist es?” “What time is it?” The officer looked at his watch and civilly provided the answer. So, this moment of danger passed, as did some of the others yet to come.

But Grandfather Ernest did not escape his moment of danger. Towards the end of the time that the Arrow Cross were hastening to eliminate the Jewish population of Budapest, he had hidden in a closet with my grandmother. They had nothing to eat except a small can of tomato paste that he doled out, a spoonful a day for each, making it last for two weeks.

Grandfather Ernest was born in 1877 at Göntér, a family vineyard in the south of Hungary. Though he had left as a young man to make his fortune in the cities of Austria-Hungary, he would return to Göntér for yearly visits to his mother who lived out her life there. Even after she died, he would return from time to time to join others in the family for whom the vineyard remained a treasured place, until it was taken from us in 1944.

It had been a cherished place for me too when I visited there as a small child during the summers. The villa had cool white rooms, which seemed large to me at the time. I was given a room of my own to sleep in, with a large grandfather clock that I would look at upon waking. The room would already be alive with the bright morning sunshine of another summer day, and it seemed to me as if there would be an endless supply of such days, each one joyous to wake to, offering freedom and fresh surprises.

Our hosts at Göntér were Grandfather’s nephew Miklós, 40 years old, and his wife Léni, hoping to have their first child. On payday the vineyard workers — called peasants then — would line up for Uncle Miklós to pay them. A table would be set up outside on the unpaved road that was used by all of us, as well as by the horse-drawn wagons, the dogs, and even the enormous pigs on the one occasion they escaped from their pen. Uncle Miklós would sit at the table with a detached, amused look (how much that ironic detachment would cost him later), and the peasants would wait to take their pay, their bare feet shuffling in the warm dust. I recall one, looking around toward me with a complicit smile, as if he were saying, “the master and your entire family bind their feet up in leather shoes, but don’t you and I like it better going barefoot.”

Grandfather Ernest seemed anxious in the summer of 1943. He knew full well his family’s past in that backwards rural world, where until his parents’ time, Jews were looked down upon, living in their own humble sections of villages, practicing modest trades. Then, with the encouragement of the long-reigning Franz Joseph, the last Austro-Hungarian Emperor, they were allowed to own property, and many, including his father and mother, greatly prospered. But the roots of that prosperity were not deep, and he knew that the respect his family presently held was provisional and transient.

The rounding up of Jews began in Hungary’s countryside six months after we, visitors in the summer of 1943, had returned to Budapest. The young couple who made Göntér their permanent home had left for a vacation, visiting Léni’s family in Switzerland. But when they heard what was happening, they perversely came back home! We later learned that upon arrival they were taken to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Presumably, Aunt Léni being pregnant was gassed at once. According to a survivor’s report, Uncle Miki was killed some weeks later, in an attempted breakout, while wielding a pistol in his hand.

What had led them to return from Switzerland? Just as Uncle Miki was amused by the role he had taken on in life, to substitute for my grandfather, to whom it might have fallen to manage the vineyard, so perhaps he viewed with detachment, or disbelief, the idea that peasants dressed as militia in cockaded hats could come along and remove them from the vineyard and take them to some unheard of, and quite unimaginable, place.

Budapest was heavily fought over during the last three months of the war. The Russian Army encircled the city, while Hungarian and German soldiers held on to it at all costs.

My mother and I passed those three months, still referred to as the months of the Siege, in the basement shelter of an apartment house where my father found us another place to live, after the Visontai family decided they could not keep us hidden with them any longer. The apartment was empty, vacated by friends who

Contine on next page
had managed to flee the city in time. We lived there for a month or so, descending to a basement shelter, together with the building’s other residents during air raids. Finally, as the bombings became very frequent, everyone in the building simply moved into the basement.

From then on, there was little or no movement between the basement and the outside world. Only a few residents, my father among them, took the risk of coming and going, living a more daring life, and escaping the safer confinement of the crowded basement. His boldness was native to him, perhaps enhanced by his life as a soldier when he was only seventeen years old, but evident in him even earlier. The stories about his childhood, told to me by his sister and mother, attested to that.

Each family had moved a bed or two into the musty subterranean space surrounded by storage bins in which the residents kept suitcases and sacks of beans and potatoes. It was lucky that the custom of the time called for this kind of winter storage among apartment dwellers in Budapest, since the beans and potatoes soon became our only food. It was lucky too that we all had cooking oil that could be used in improvised lamps. On one of the first days of the Siege, after the electricity failed, one of the men went around to pull a piece of cloth through a slit in a bit of wood, floating it in a glass filled with oil so that it created a lamp emitting light.

Though each family occupied not much more space than the bed or two they had moved downstairs, we all got along with one another well enough. The time for rounding up Jews had past, and no one asked why we had moved into the building so recently.

Only once was that old threat briefly rekindled, when two soldiers wearing the strangest uniforms passed into our basement, using a brick passage from the next building, exiting through a similar access to the building on our other side. Around his neck each of them wore a large tablet with writing on it, and as they moved past the families huddled in their spaces, they gazed at us balefully, looking, as I was later told, for Jews.

Thinking back to that time now, it’s hard to imagine how we could have managed with so little space, so little food, so little light, no bathtubs or showers, and nothing that could be called entertainment. I made one friend, a little girl, the daughter of the building’s superintendent, a year or two younger than I. One day she said to me, “You know, you could come and live with us, if anything were ever to happen to your mother.” “That would be very nice,” I replied, and I meant it too, thinking only of what an adventure it would be, having the superintendent and his wife as parents, and my friend as a sister.

The days from then until the end of the Siege passed slowly. I recall the privation and the hunger of that winter and reading my book by the light of one of those improvised oil lamps. It was called “What Happened After They Lived Happily Ever After.”

My mother and I spent a lot of time together, and to cheer us up, we would sometimes look through her small leather book filled with dessert recipes. We would read how to make strudel and friends’ ears and other such staples of the Austro-Hungarian dessert menu. I don’t know if that was such a good idea, even if it seemed agreeable at the time. We had so little to eat, some days a potato, other days only beans, that the imagined desserts may have only intensified our need. “I’m hungry, so hungry,” I recall repeating to my mother, until she finally told me, “if you say that once more I’m going to hit you.” She herself was emaciated then. A picture of her survives from that time on a fake passport I still have, showing her face, slender, gaunt, eyes staring from their sockets.

The Russian Army encircled Budapest, and our basement home would often rumble with the impact of artillery shells. Some of these would whine before landing, and we would learn to expect the explosion just as the whine became really loud. Airplanes could be heard overhead on days that the door to the basement was open. We could tell from the sound whether to expect bombs to fall or not, as the planes of the attacking forces sounded different from the peculiar, almost intermittent, sound of the defenders.

The basement door was made of thick metal, and closed with a lever that made for a tight seal against the building’s wall. On a February day that the shelling seemed to have come to a halt and there were no planes in the sky to be seen or heard, my mother told me to go outside into the courtyard, which was enclosed within the building’s walls. “The fresh air will do you good,” she said, “and while you play, I will get some more clothes down from the apartment.” I took my little friend, and we went to play outside.

After playing with the snow for a short time, I heard the sound of a plane in the sky. It was not that intermittent sound we had come to ignore because it meant “friendly” German Stukka aircraft, nor did it quite seem like the drone of Russian planes releasing bombs we had seen in the distance. A moment of uncertainty, then a
strong, compelling voice spoke in my ear, “Take her and go inside!” It was the voice of a man, and yet there was no man to be seen anywhere. I stood at once, and found that stretching my hand to my little friend was a clear enough message that she stood too, and we lost no time in reaching the door and closing it from within with the big lever.

My hand was still on the lever when the bomb exploded in the courtyard, filling the air with a gigantic sound, and knocking me on my back on the floor. When the noise died down, there was a silence, and those of us in the basement looked at one another, stunned and hollow-eyed. My mother was not the only one who had profited from the lull to go upstairs, and soon we opened the door, looking for them to return. Some did, making their way through the rubble that had been the building’s courtyard. One man came staggering in, holding a blood-red handkerchief to where his nose had been. Others came back, not wounded, yet shell-shocked. But person after person was not my mother. I began to sob, unable to hold back. My little friend’s earlier offer of consolation was of no use to me now. How could the prospect of living with her and her parents stand up to my mother’s absence? All I could feel then was wrenching despair.

Then my mother did return, unhurt. When I saw her face, I understood how much I loved her, and was amazed at my absence? All I could feel then was wrenching despair.

The gratitude we all felt was stronger than I had ever experienced before. When the building’s harvest was shown me until then. The priests continued to identify as non-Jews, at least publicly. He then attended the Bronx High School of Science and Yale University, where he received both undergraduate and graduate degrees. He then pursued a career in market research which he found to be fulfilling for more than fifty years. In his mid-fifties he began to study Hebrew and is now a devoted member of a Reconstructionist Synagogue in Westchester County.
I was very little when the Germans invaded Poland and our town, Jedrzejow. As the bombs fell, we fled to nearby fields, where my father covered my sister Jean and me with his body to protect us from the planes’ strafing. The bullets did not harm us, and I came to believe my father was the bravest man ever.

Educated as a professor of mathematics, my father spoke five languages, and played the violin. But as a Jew, he had not been allowed to teach at the university even before the war. He worked alongside my grandfather, who owned a large clothing store and tailoring shop in town.

After the invasion, all Jews were forced into a ghetto, where we were no longer allowed to own businesses or to participate in any form of livelihood. All valuables were taken from us. People with money or jewelry hid their assets as best they could—cash and coins in the hems of clothing, diamonds in teeth cavities, and so on. My parents had money and jewelry, so they did the same. This saved our lives.

My father and grandfather were required to give away their merchandise to the Poles, but the Germans kept the very good furs and suits for themselves. How devastated my father and grandfather must have been to see all their possessions taken from them. Yet they were allowed to keep two workers to accommodate the German soldiers with uniforms, furs and coats. Because of this, we had more food, and we did not starve as others did in the ghetto.

After some time, the Germans rounded up all the women and children, including my mother, my sister Jean and me. We were not yet aware of the peril we were in. I wore my favorite little coat and hat, and carried a small knapsack on my back. As we stood in the town’s big square, people were lugging their bedding, pots, pans, food. They believed they would live!

My father ran from one S.S. man to another, trying to bribe them, promising them everything. After several beatings, leaving him bloodied on his head and body, he finally found someone who took the bribe, and my mother, Jean and I were allowed to return to the ghetto with him.

But this was short-lived. Before long, we were seized again. This time, my parents knew our intended fate. A few people had escaped the first transport, and had come back to speak of the atrocities of the gas chambers.

I remember sitting in a horse-drawn wagon with other women and children, when suddenly, a man pedaling by on a bicycle asked my mother to quickly hand him either Jean or me. My father had not given up! Again, he had given a man a lot of money to save at least one of us. My
mother was afraid Jean would carry on, so she handed me, her younger and more placid child, to him.

Covering me, the man put me in the front of his bicycle, and took me to his friends, or perhaps his family. I only remember crying bitterly. I was so lost and so afraid. The people were very nice, and there was a little girl who wanted to play dolls with me. Although they all tried to comfort me, I just cried for my mother and father.

When evening came, the man took me on his bicycle again, telling me he would take me to my father. He left me in a cemetery, saying my father would come to get me. It was dark and cold; my teeth were chattering and I was so terribly frightened. It seemed like forever, but my father came. He hid me under his coat, and took me back to the ghetto. When he put me to bed, I stayed there until they left. Two days later, my mother and sister returned in the middle of the night. My father had hired a car and bribed a man to get them out from where they were. My mother, my sister and I were no longer legal in the ghetto. By then, all women and children had been sent away, and we all knew the consequences of being found: we would have been shot on the spot. So, we stayed below ground in a horrible cell, while my father arranged for forged papers for us.

At that time, my father was still allowed to stay in the ghetto. He found a former business acquaintance who owned a big farm, and he begged the man to hide my mother, Jean and me until our papers arrived. We were taken to the farm at night in a wagon filled with hay.

But before we could get our papers, the Germans liquidated the ghetto and my father was taken to Buchenwald. My mother pleaded with the farmers to let us stay with them, and she gave them all our money and jewelry. The farmer built a bunker under the house that could be accessed through their pantry. As the smallest, I was the only one able to stand erect in this cold, damp hole. We were fed when our rescuers remembered, or perhaps just when they felt it was safe.

Only the two spinster sisters, their brother and his wife knew we were there. We hardly washed. Sometimes the brother’s wife would bring us some sudsy water left over from their wash. Mom kept some bread, often moldy, hanging in a bag. We could only eat it at special times. I kept asking if it was time to eat my little piece of bread.

Under these trying conditions, Jean and I quarreled a lot. Once, my sister had hated beans, and she would cry bitter tears when told to eat them. But with the little food we were given, and our constant hunger, she would forget any such dislikes and insist, screaming, on eating all that was brought to us. Mom was so fearful of her screams that she would say to me, “You are the good one; you’ll see, when she’ll have enough, she will share with us.” And that’s what happened.

I often dreamed about my father. I remembered him as tall and handsome in his tweed coat. How I wished he would come and save us from our filthy hole. Jean and I also fantasized about what we would do to Hitler if we ever found him. Somehow, it made us feel better.

We would whisper to one another, and if we had to cry, we did so, quietly, into a pillow. Our main distraction was to listen to Mom’s stories about how it was when she was little, and about her family. Sometimes, she told fairy tales, and we would beg her endlessly for more. It was her storytelling that kept us alive during our two years underground. This was our only reality and our sole sense of feeling human.

Our bunker was directly under the living room, and at Christmas, when we looked through the cracks of their floorboards, we could see the tree. The colors on the tree, the smell of the food, and the fun they seemed to have made me so envious that I would cry in my pillow and ask, “What is wrong with us that we have to be cold, hungry and miserable like this?” To this day, Christmas makes me feel very sad.

Only twice over the course of two years did we get some relief by going outside. With no one around, we climbed a ladder and went on the roof, where we could breathe some fresh air and stretch our limbs. On our second outing, we enjoyed our venture immensely. We found some rotten apples and ate them. Mom didn’t let us eat too many. Then we found a little baby bird and wanted to nurse it back to health.

Suddenly, one of the owners rushed upstairs and told us to hide. Partisans had seen something on the roof and thought that Germans might be hiding there. We had no time to reach the bunker, so we were told to hide inside some old straw mattresses. While we laid still, in terror, the partisans stuck their bayonets into the mattresses. It was only by sheer luck that they did not poke those we were in.

After this experience, the owners of the farm didn’t want us there anymore. They felt that their lives were too much in danger and that Mom had given them all the money she’d had. Mom said we would most likely get killed by the Germans in the woods. She tried to persuade them not to throw us out, telling them she still had a diamond in one of her teeth cavity, but they no longer wanted us at any price.

The next morning, they took us into their wheat fields. The wheat was high, and the sun was brutally hot. We had to wait for nightfall. With no water to drink, we felt scorched and parched. My sister and I cried a lot, but we had to stay. At nightfall, Mom was completely despondent and we didn’t move. I am sure she was paralyzed with fear, because she knew that going into the woods meant imminent death for us all.

Even as I write this, I can feel the fear, and above all, the question, “Why me?” Are we so bad that they hate us so?

Somehow, the owners of the farm had a change of heart. Perhaps they pitied us, or maybe the diamond had enticed them, but they came back for us. The next day, one of the sisters came down with a pair of pliers and pulled out Mom’s tooth with the diamond. We learned then how cruel life can be.

After two years, the war finally ended. Our rescuers told Mom, and we were overjoyed. Still, we couldn’t come out because they didn’t want anyone to know they had hidden Jews. So, Mom went to town to look for other survivors, and to find a place for us to live.

We stayed in the bunker by ourselves, and it was terrifying to be without Mom even for a moment. We were so scared, but there was no choice. It seemed like an eternity until Mom came back. Then at night, we left in the hay-filled wagon, so no one could see us leave.

We went to a house in Jedrezewo where many people were packed into one or two rooms with only makeshift, double beds. Everyone was worn out, dirty, hungry, and covered with lice. Those days seem like a blur now. I don’t remember how long we

Continued on next page
stayed there. Then we moved to another place, not as crowded, where Mom found an old friend, who delighted us with song and dance.

We were free, but we were still Jews! The Polish children made terrible fun of us, calling us stupid, dirty Jews. I was given a doll, and the Polish children took it away from me. We still lived in fear, this time of the Russians. It was during this time that Mom got sick and had to go to the hospital.

Jean and I were left with a lady, but we were mostly alone. We would go to the hospital to visit Mom. Our clothes were terrible, our shoes had holes and no backs. Jean would tell me to be careful, because there were land mines on the roads. So, even after the war, I remained fearful.

When Mom came out of the hospital, she sent us to school. At that time all schools were run by the Church. Prejudice against the Jews had not diminished because the war had ended. The Poles still hated the Jews. The children still called me those same terrible epithets, and pulled my hair. I truly felt like an outcast. The nuns spoke in a semi-whisper.

Then one day, a miracle happened! A man stood at the door, tall and thin, and crying. It was my father! After six months, he had come back to Poland to look for us, not knowing whether we were alive. And we had no idea that he was alive. He had survived Buchenwald, one of the worst concentration camps in Germany. It had taken him six months just to gain enough strength to travel back to Poland.

When I first saw him, I hid behind a door. He didn’t look like my robust, tall, strong father in his tweed coat and hat. He looked like a thin, tortured being—like no one I knew. It took me a while to get close to him. We must have looked just as scary to him.

Shortly after my father returned, we were confronted with a new dilemma. The Russians arrested him, claiming he must have collaborated with the Germans since all of us had been saved. My father had some friends, prominent Polish people from his college days, who testified on his behalf, and he was released. Then we had to run away from Poland. I was only too happy to leave the school and the misery behind me. Still, I was confused as to why we were running again.

We arrived in Kassel, Germany, at a displaced persons’ camp. There, on a site of old army barracks outside of town, men, women and children awaited entry into a country that would have them. Conditions were difficult and uncomfortable, but we were among our people, and that felt wonderful. We were free, and, for now, no one was killing us. A curtain separated us from another family in the same room. There were public showers, and smelly, ugly outhouses. We had plenty of food and clothes brought from the U.S.A.

I explored the woods with other children. We did acrobatics on frames of old army trucks. We created all sorts of games. I learned how to dance, and wore a beautiful costume in a school play. I was told I was the best dancer they had.

I went to school and loved it. No one made fun of me, and I discovered that I really could learn. Hebrew was fun. The teachers were very nice, full of hope and promise for a better world, primarily in Israel. I worshiped Israel. Although it was still a very dangerous place, most of the Jews wanted to go to Palestine.

Upon our arrival at the D.P. camp, my sister and I could only speak Polish. But any language other than Yiddish or Hebrew was frowned upon, so I started to speak Yiddish, and learned Hebrew in school. No one wanted to be reminded of the hate and prejudice they had experienced throughout the years. Although conditions were not fantastic, I had a sense of freedom and belonging I had never felt before. I was not ashamed of who I was. I was Jewish, and it was grand! We sang Hebrew songs; I learned how to read and write. I was not stupid, as the Polish children had said, so this was paradise!

I recently had a dream that I lived in a place where all people were Jewish, the butcher, the baker—everyone. It seemed like Heaven. I was looking for safety, and this is how I resolved it in my dream. I still battle with who I am. Yet somewhere deep inside, I am Jewish. It shows up constantly in my life, like an automatic reflex. I know my utopia doesn’t exist anywhere. But even now, when I get frightened or unsure about something, I still think of my Jewish utopia.

While we were in the D.P. camp Mom found out that one of her brothers, Uncle Henry, had survived the war. Everyone else had died—her mother, father, two brothers, their wives and their children. So many aunts, so many cousins, and of course, so many friends were also killed.

Life in the D.P. camp was the best I had ever known. After my horrible experiences from early childhood on, this was paradise. I didn’t realize how poor we were, or how awful our living conditions were. We were free!

Nothing seemed harsh. I was outdoors almost all the time. The second-hand clothes and shoes were a joy to me. Mom cooked on a makeshift stove, and everything she prepared was delicious. She made her own noodles, and baked her own breads and cakes. She worked so hard!

Compared to their wartime experiences, this should have been a paradise for my parents too. Yet, it was very sad for them. Before the war, they had large families; they were rich and proud. The loss of their families and their means was a terrible realization. The sadness remained with my mother, and the anger with my father. It showed up relentlessly throughout their lives. The terrible fears and anxieties caused my mother to have two nervous breakdowns. In her old age, she became withdrawn and depressed. But how I admire the courage and strength she showed Jean and me during the war!

Sylvia Hanna, née Strumpf, came to the U.S. in 1949. Now retired from a successful career as a fashion designer, she enjoys life with her husband, Jim. She dedicates her story of survival to her children and grandchildren, so that they may remember and help to create a truly better world.
MY FIRST RETURN TO POLAND, 1963

By Pinchas Zajonc
(Written for the first time in July 2017)
Translated from Hebrew to English by Rena Bay

When I left Poland in 1946, I had no intention of ever returning to the land drenched with the blood of my family. For many years I felt angry at, and fearful of the Poles. Although I did have some stifled longings to see my former home, the village, the shining green fields, the forests, and even the nests of the storks, these longings did not overpower the pain of the loss and murder of my family.

In 1963, I received a formal, typewritten letter from the Polish government, with my name handwritten at the top, and the signatures of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Religion at the bottom. The content of the letter was most surprising. In brief, it stated: “We respectfully invite you to come to Poland. Our intention is to enable you to look for the remains of your family members who were murdered during the Nazi occupation. Whether they were murdered in the ghetto, or in a hiding place, or in a barn, or in a bunker in the forest, or any other place, we will help you in your search and in burying their remains in the Jewish cemetery in Lublin.” There was one condition, “... if 20 years have passed since the murders.” This stipulation didn’t exactly make the proposal valid for me, since the murders of my family had occurred on February 2, 1944, and in 1963, only 19 years had elapsed.

I assumed my Aunt Dina had given my address to the Polish officials. In 1959 I had discovered that my mother’s sister, Dina, had survived the Holocaust, had married, and was living in Warsaw with her two sons. I had a hard time deciding whether to accept the invitation and sought advice from Aunt Dina and from my other aunt, Miriam, who had escaped unharmed from the bunker and was living in New York. Although Aunt Miriam really would have wanted to find all the remains in the forest and erect a gravestone, she was very anxious for my wellbeing during such a search, and she advised me not to go. Though Aunt Dina considered the improbability of finding any remains, she suggested I come to Poland. At least a visit to see her in Warsaw would be worthwhile.

I wrote Aunt Dina about my enduring fears of the Poles. The forest is near the village of Pogonow. Maybe the head of the village, Kowalczyk, the one who shot me after I lay wounded on that horrible day, was still living there ...

Aunt Dina tried to calm me, saying that Poland was now “a lawful country,” where every tourist, especially one invited by the government, can feel absolutely safe. But I remained far from tranquil. To ease my anxieties, Aunt Dina spoke to a friend, named Weisskop, who had once been the Governor of Lublin. He promised to personally accompany me, from the beginning to the end of my stay. Deciding whether to return to Poland was now completely up to me.

Two important factors stood out: one, the help the Poles offered in this search for my murdered family was an opportunity that would not repeat itself; and two, I held a memory of the forest that was so precise that I believed I would have no problem finding the bunker. Moreover, it seemed plausible that the villagers of Pogonow, who likely would have found my murdered family, would have disposed of their bodies by tossing them into the bunker.

Finally, I decided to make the journey and wrote to both my aunts. In Warsaw, Aunt Dina was very happy with my decision. But Aunt Miriam in New York could not yet support me, although I began to sense a more positive tone in her letters. In the end, she wished me good luck.

Still, the biggest difficulty in turning this special journey into reality was its expenditures. The lowest cost was by ship to Italy, then by trains to Warsaw. At that time, travelling abroad was not acceptable and nearly impossible for a member of a kibbutz. However, I applied to the secretariat, asking for the most modest budget possible. Of course, I was asked to relate my family’s story in the forest, to speak about the murders and about the fact that I too had been wounded that day by the Germans’ gunshots. This was the first time I was listened to concerning the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Surprisingly, the next morning our social secretary informed me of their approval. However, the final decision still needed to be reached after a general discussion in the dining room (Sichat Kibbutz). The secretary advised me to hold an open meeting of the kibbutz members on Friday evening to tell them my family’s story during the Holocaust, and to show them the invitation from the Polish government.

The dining-room was completely full. The meeting, held in absolute silence, lasted about four hours. No one left. Some cried. And I, too, could barely contain my emotions and excitement. I could feel the currents of warmth and the audience’s identification with my terrible fate. The
I asked my aunt whether I should identify czyk, the village leader, of Lublin, where we stayed with my Aunt Dina’s friend, Mr. Weisskop. As agreed, my aunt introduced me as a tourist from London. Zosia didn’t react, for her the key to our house and to all our belongings.

We entered the house with Zosia, Aunt Dina and her friend Weisskop before me. As agreed, my aunt introduced me as a tourist from London. Zosia didn’t react, didn’t say a word, but she couldn’t stop staring at me. Suddenly, she pushed the others aside and, sobbing, she clasped me with hugs and kisses.

“Pawel, I know who you are! I’m so happy that you remained alive!” I too hugged her and burst out crying. But then I felt a terrible anxiety. If she recognized me so easily, then soon the whole street would know who I am, including Kowalczyk.

Meanwhile, I gazed at the living-room furniture that I knew so well. On the right was the kitchen, with the stove, the pots … and the little pan with the long handle that my mother used every morning to prepare scrambled eggs for me and my little brother. Sometimes, he and I would argue over who would get the crusty part from the side of the pan.

Zosia suggested I take with me whatever I wanted. She gave me the little pan. Then she took me to my parents’ bedroom. Here was the wide bed and above it the two big pictures of Adam and Eve. We went out to the yard.

There was the doghouse and the swing that my father had made for us. I was overwhelmed with sadness. I shivered and cried. We returned to the house. Zosia asked me what else I would like to take. I pointed to the chest of drawers and said that in the last drawer on the left side there was a little bag with some blond hair from my haircut at the age of three. Zosia apologized, saying she had thrown out that bag many years ago.

But she opened the middle drawer, took out a colorful tablecloth and gave it to me. I immediately recognized it as my family’s Passover tablecloth. I took that too with me, saying goodbye to Zosia with more hugs and kisses and much pleasure on both sides. Zosia added she hoped I would come again to visit for as many days as I wanted.

Accompanied by Aunt Dina, Mr. Weisskop, and the two men sent by the Polish authorities to help in our search, we walked toward Pogonow, about 6 kilometers away. The men had brought with them a metal casket and digging tools. On the road, we met a young Pole, and I asked my aunt and Mr. Weisskop to inquire about Kowalczyk. The young man answered, “Yes, he’s alive, he’s fine; in fact, I’m his daughter’s husband. I can take you to his house.” My anxiety level reached the sky!

The contrast could not have been clearer. After visiting the house of my birth and happy childhood, we were now on our way to the forest where I survived the rest of my young years in oppression and deprivation—in hunger, in snow, in frost—and where I became a wounded, bleeding orphan.

My main hope in finding the remains of my family was based on my strong and sure visual memory of the forest. I remembered all the paths, every tree, each clearing. Utmost in my mind was finding the sites of the destroyed bunker, and of the alternate bunker. But when we got to the village of Pogonow and I went up the first hill to view the forest, I was greeted by a terribly disappointing surprise: the forest had been cleared! In every direction there were only bare, open fields, with occasional pine saplings and a few low growing fir shrubs.

A light drizzle began, and I stood there, drenched and sobbing, thinking that my whole venture had been in vain. Aunt Dina embraced me, trying to console me for my good intentions and worthy pursuits. “It really is a pity, but that’s life,” she said. Mr. Weisskop also whispered some comforting words in my ear. Still, I felt...
We walked back to the village, and, soaking wet, we returned by bus to Lublin. Aunt Dina managed to buy tickets for the following day’s train to Warsaw. I didn’t sleep all night. In the morning, I asked to go back to the area. But there was no change in the result.

We went yet again the following day with a new idea. I scanned the horizon and found three young fir shrubs. The one on the far left looked very much like the fir under which I had hidden from the Germans on that terrible day my family was murdered. But the other two firs also looked very similar. Making an unsure assumption that maybe the Poles buried my mother in a pit near the tree, I asked the two men to dig around each one of the shrubs. My mother had been murdered in front of my eyes. If I managed to find her remains, I would be able to find the bunker. I started with the one on the left. I climbed into it and hid as I had then. From there I gave the men the angle and the distance for their digging, about 5-6 meters to the left of the fir. They dug, but there was nothing. Even when I changed the angle and the distance, there were no results.

Again, we returned to Lublin, and again I couldn’t sleep. I asked my aunt to go back once more, reasoning that I wanted to dig near the other two shrubs. She tried to persuade me that there was nothing to be done, but I stubbornly insisted, and the next day we returned once more. I hid in each of the other two shrubs, but the digging of the two men came to naught.

We returned to Lublin. Again, it was dazzling. I cried all night in frustration, disappointment and hopelessness. The whole journey seemed to be a colossal failure.

In the morning, as we were going to take the bus back to Warsaw, my aunt saw my terrible emotional state and suggested we stay for another day to rest in Lublin in Weisskop’s house.

It’s difficult to describe my physical and emotional state during those terrible and hurling four days. They were four of the most difficult days of my life. I begged my aunt to get to those three fir shrubs once more, promising her that it would be the last time. Comforting and praising me, with hugs and kisses, she claimed that I already did everything possible. Weisskop interrupted, and supporting me, sug-}


gested that we go back that day.

So, there we were again in what had once been a forest. This time there was no rain and I continued to surround the three low firs, trying—from the depths of my memory—to fix a location. I examined the three fir bushes anew.

Suddenly, an unbelievable, wondrous miracle occurred, all as a result of a tiny flash of memory, hidden deep within me. I recalled something dim and stifled I had not remembered until that moment. When the Germans shot me, I had fallen on my stomach, and from that position, I had seen the cross atop the church in the village of Pogonow. So, I went to the furthest shrub and fell on the muddy earth, and did so again at the middle shrub. Only near the third shrub, the one that during my first visit to the bare forest had resembled “my” fir the most, I dropped down, and saw the cross of the church!

Again, I hid under the shrub, and asked the two men to dig. At first, the results were discouraging. There was nothing. I began to doubt my assumption that the Poles had buried my mother under the fir, at the spot where she was murdered. However, this was the only point of reference I had. I was at the height of my tension. I continued to instruct the two men: a meter here, and a meter there, closer to the tree or further, a little to the right, a little to the left … when suddenly, they found my mother!

This was a seminal moment. They gathered her remains and put them in the metal casket. I went into the pit and found parts of her shattered skull, and laid them in the metal casket. I also found parts of her dress, which turned to dust at my touch.

This was the moment when my emotional tension unraveled. I went from the darkness of sorrow and despair to a sense of achievement and great satisfaction, akin to a personal victory. Yes, this difficult, shocking and appalling story, laced with deep grief, concluded with a final answer. The journey had not been in vain!

I found my mother in the pit, and from there finding the bunker was simple and quick. There, I found the remains of my brother Meir, my aunt Rachel, and my father Shlomo. And, amazingly, I found my father’s pen knife … I transported all the remains to the Jewish cemetery in Lublin. Today, there is a family grave and a tombstone in Hebrew and Polish.

I returned home in early October. In our kibbutz high school “Mevuot Eiron,” where I was a teacher and educator, I told my students the reason I came back late. My journey to Poland sprouted wings. My students told their parents, and as a result, I was invited to tell the story of my journey to the neighboring kibbutzim, and, of course, to my kibbutz, Ma’anit. Until then my personal tragedies from the time of the Holocaust had been hidden deep in my heart. But from then on, it all flooded out, and continues to this day.

And something else happened, somewhat surprising and strange, yet also positive. From the end of the war until my return to Poland I had been haunted almost every night by horrible nightmares. One particular dream, both difficult and shocking, repeated itself often in several versions. I’m in the forest near a large pit filled with blood; my father stands in the pit, raising his hands toward me. I run to him, shouting “Father, I’m coming to save you.” But my voice is not heard, and my legs can’t move. And then I wake up. In one of the other versions, my mother is also in the pit. After my return to Poland, twenty years later, these nightmares stopped.

Was this connected to the journey? Probably. Could there be another interpretation? Maybe.

I believe children of the Holocaust will always be afflicted; there are no cures for their wounds. A “normal” child grows, matures, becomes a parent himself. His parents age, leave this world, and are laid to rest in a nearby family grave. Children of the Holocaust don’t have a grave to visit, to mourn their loss.

Despite its being in a foreign country, I now have a grave in the Jewish cemetery in Lublin. And, in a sense, by virtue of this, I became a normal man.
My mother used to recall, with a sense of pride, people telling her how foolish it was to be pregnant in 1944. Yet she held on to some irrational sense of faith. She was able to survive—pregnant, and with a 3-year-old, in a Budapest ghetto for six months because a relative chose to include her on a special family Zionist list. Instead of being shipped off from Pápa to Auschwitz, she was transported first to a Budapest internment camp and then to a ghetto. My Uncle was the Rosh Hakal of the Pápa synagogue and was permitted to save his own family.

In the summer of 1944, I was born in the Budapest internment camp. Now my mother had two little girls to care for. While she worked inside I slept in a basket on the ground of the inner courtyard. When I was one-week old, a German officer, standing above on the balcony, flipped his cigarette butt below into the yard, and ignited my bedding. The flames quickly engulfed me and the screams brought my mother running into the courtyard. The shock of seeing me on fire immediately stopped the flow of her milk. I was rushed back to the hospital where I had been born with third degree burns. There was nothing they could do for me; they smeared me with Vaseline and my mother was told to wait out the critical first 24 hours. She gave me transfusions of blood and spent her nights waking up every few hours to rotate my head from side to side so that the damaged skin on my neck would not harden into scar tissue. I survived the burn, and because she could no longer nurse me, she would chew on beans and peas and put the softly chewed food into my mouth. That first year I developed a huge pot belly, stick-thin arms and legs, and a scar running down my neck and shoulder. But I was strong. My older sister Mari succumbed to a childhood disease and died.

So, my mother and I remained alone, and in January 1945, when the Russians entered Budapest, she was left to fend for herself and her infant. At age 27, she walked the streets of Budapest, hungry and cold, not knowing if any of her family would be coming home. She made her way back to Pápa, my father’s hometown, and resettled in the house where she had spent her marriage. She would soon learn that no one would be coming back—not my father, not her sister, and not her parents.

Later that year my mother was sitting on the balcony of her Pápa house when a man from nearby Kapuvár walked by—an older man whom she and her family had known since her childhood. He was on his way to a Jewish wedding. They had not met in many years. It turned out that he too had lost his wife and children to the war, and was alone. He and my mother got to talking and he never made it to the wedding. They married the following year, and thus, my earliest memories are from our big house in Kapuvár. Two years later, my younger sister Marika was born. In the small town of Kapuvár, I was the sole surviving Jewish child of school age. I recall one day, rushing home from the one-room schoolhouse, asking our nanny what the word “Jew” meant.

Until I was 10 years old I believed that my stepfather was my biological parent. My parents almost never spoke of the war years or of the families they had lost. Once I found out, I insisted on reciting the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, at the
synagogue services.

Slowly, I began to understand that my mother was a Holocaust survivor. From glimpses and tales over the years, I started to grasp the enormity of the losses in her life. My mother had been raised in a traditional Orthodox Jewish family, with sheltering, loving parents, and a talented sister. From a family life rooted in stability, order and comfort, she was suddenly thrust alone into an insane and terrifying world. She, who had been taught to speak French and German, to cook and bake, to sew and keep a kosher home, had lost all the comfort and predictability of her very existence.

Now she had to give blood and chew peas to heal and nourish her infant.

She once told me that she had returned to Sopron, her home town, to search for silverware that had been left for safekeeping with Gentile neighbors. There, she heard the rumblings of former neighbors, “Those Jews, you can’t get rid of them, more come back after Hitler than lived here before Hitler.”

My father had been sent to a German labor camp and in uncharacteristic fashion my mother confided to me that he returned home only once to see her. During that one night, she became pregnant with me. I have often imagined that one night of love when I began, as I have often visualized what my father would be like, how he would look down on me from heaven and be proud of me.

In my regular return trips to Hungary, I visit the homes of my parents and the grandparents I never knew, and envision my life there with them. I walk the streets my mother grew up in—I touch the orderly red brick stones of her school building and breathe the same air into my lungs. I gaze at the women in town, my own age now, and think that could be me. This is what my life would have been.

I sometimes want the life that was taken away from me. I want not only to survive my history, but to live my history. I want to return to Mother.

My mother never wanted to return to Hungary after we escaped during the 1956 Revolution. Finally, after years of my talking, something in her opened, and she thought she could take on the memories. In 1992, after 36 years I took her back with me. In her parents’ home in Sopron, she stood in the garden her father had built with silent tears streaming down her face. The woman who now lived there, a simple peasant who remembered my parents, and me as an infant, stood nearby and understood.

I have always been the repository of my mother’s past, the live reminder and remainder of her first life. Since her death 10 years ago I carry on the legacy of her life. I feel somehow more connected to the past than to my present life. My real self is still anchored back in Budapest.

And it keeps my mother alive within me.

Susan Kalev and her mother were the only survivors in her family. Susan never knew an older sister or her father. Although her mother never spoke about her war experiences, Susan grew up in the shadow of the unspoken, the inner narrative that shaped her mother’s life. In 1956, Susan, her mother, a new father and a younger sister escaped Communist Hungary after fleeing to Vienna through a forest. Today, Susan lives in New York City. She is a psychotherapist who often works with trauma, loss and separation. She writes often on Holocaust issues and is a member of the Hungarian Group of Hidden Children that addresses how to survive, and how to create lives of meaning and purpose.

### Annual Conference of Child Survivors of the Holocaust

The annual conference for 2018 will be in West Palm Beach, Florida. Registration will open soon.

Check www.holocaustchild.org for details.

---

**THE BEST TEACHER**

Suffering, loneliness
Are the best guides,
To seek out beauty and joy
Wherever you can find.

One kind word
Creates a symphony-like sound
Can bring tears of gratitude abound,
That is what one kind word can do.

Some of us who have been deprived
Of gentleness in our early lives
Are aware of the power
That compassion can bring forth
And practice it often times.

**FEAR?!**

We had been together
Much too long.
Good bye! And good luck.

As you are leaving
Release your grip on me.

Change your Weapons of threat,
Become a useful object.

Maybe a simple bench
On which People can rest.

---

By Greta Elbogen
From her book, God Plays Hide and Seek, Theodor Kramer Gesellschaft, Wien, 2015
MEMORIES OF LIBERATED LUBLIN, 1945
By Samuel Braiter
Translated from the original Yiddish by Gloria Brumer

Written decades after 1945, this short story by Samuel Braiter, now deceased, was discovered among the late writer’s effects. Readers of The Hidden Child may recognize the boy in this tale, Jankl Kuperblum, now Jack Kuper, whose story appeared in the 2015 issue, Volume XXIII, page 9, as A Jewish Child in Christian Disguise. We are grateful to the author’s son, Hy Braiter, for permission to publish his father’s account of postwar Poland.

One sunny Friday morning, I was working in my military barber shop located at no. 5 Lubartovska Street. Before the war, there had been a laundry in the courtyard and there hadn’t been enough room in front for a barber shop.

Previously, I had to remove rocks that had accumulated there during the war years. Believing there should be at least one Jewish barber in Lublin, several Lubliners—Hershek Bilbarfer, Shie Azek and Kalmen Maister, of blessed memory, from Tschechvey—as well as other Jews living in Peretz House, helped me with this endeavor.

The Jewish Committee lent me a bit of money, which two Lubliner Jews guaranteed. I had a few złotys in my pocket, and Shie Azek and Kalmen Maister went with me to the non-Jewish barber establishments that had lots of extra barber tools: mirrors, armchairs with footrests, as well as stools for the waiting clients.

We alone established the prices for all these items, and if the guy tried to bargain with us, we threatened not to pay him anything. When we mentioned the names of the Jewish barbers to whom the mirrors and the other equipment had once belonged, they shut up right away.

We carried everything away on our backs through the street to the former laundry. We piled everything in a heap, waiting for a barber shop.

Several days after opening the barber shop, inspectors from the barber’s guild came to see my craftsman’s card and to ask, “Don’t you know that you can’t work without a craftsman’s card?” I replied that before the war I had had a card as a Lubliner barber’s assistant. They recorded my name and asked if I knew the names of the representatives of the barber’s guild before the war. I replied that of the Jewish representatives, I knew Chil Gauss of Gradzter Street and Ezra Gertsman from Krakovsky Street. And of the Poles, I remembered Pianianzec and Piaksi. They said that they would check, but in the meantime, I was not allowed to hang up my sign on the gate. That sign said “Lubliner Barber” and had my name in Russian and in Polish.

I asked them, “What should I do to get a craftsman’s card?” They answered, “You have to pass a trade exam.”

“There’s no need for that,” I said. “Before the war, in 1935, I passed such an exam, and am entitled to a craftsman’s card. It’s not that I am afraid to take the exam again; I just have no time to run here and there and bother with it.”

Again, they said that they would check, but in the meantime, I had to paint over the sign on the gate, because they didn’t want to see that. They left, and we continued to work.

Now going back to the sunny Friday morning as I stood and worked … in comes Gedalia Migdal, holding by the hand a small barefoot boy with dirty shriveled feet, torn pants and a ripped shirt. At first, I thought he was from Pulaw, and he knew my whole family. When he saw the boy looking for a house for the winter. He then whitewashed two rooms of the laundry for me as well as the first-floor apartment and balcony over the barber shop, which I was given.

On opening day, and on subsequent days, I had so much work that I had to take on a partner, Leon Budman from Minsk. But he was a ladies’ hairdresser, so I had to take on a second partner, who was a barber for men, Shame Sharf from PIask. He survived the occupation in Lublin. I moved from Peretz House into my own flat and began to live decently.

Several days after opening the barber shop, I remembered Pianianzec and Piaksi. They disregarded his raggedy appearance, grabbed his hand and quickly took him upstairs. She washed him up and then took him to the marketplace to buy him something to wear. I went back to work, and Gedalia went away happy because he himself was from Pulaw, and he knew my whole family. When he saw the boy looking for a house in the street, he recognized him right away and brought him to me.

My wife brought him back from the marketplace. I cut his hair. At lunch, he couldn’t tell us much because he was tired. In the evening, I came up, washed up and Sarah lit the Shabbos candles. When the boy woke up, he began to cry. All during dinner, tears ran down his face. My wife and I pretended we didn’t notice. When I asked him his name, he said he had several. While in hiding he had once spoken out in Yiddish during his sleep, and so the next morning he had been forced to drop his pants. From then on, he hid from village to village and changed his name. His real name was Yankl.

Continued on next page
For two consecutive hours he told us about what he had lived through as a Polish boy, horrors that made my hair stand on end. And all during the telling, he couldn’t stop eating the sweets that my wife had bought for him. Halvah, chocolate, pickles, things he hadn’t eaten for years. He ate so much that he had diarrhea all night, to such an extent that he soiled the straw mattress and made the house dirty. He gave back everything that he had eaten.

He got sick and we cared for him like he was our own child. When he got well, he couldn’t thank us enough. He wouldn’t let my wife do anything and he helped her with everything. Before we got up in the morning, he would go down and clean up the barber shop.

Then the Jewish Committee took the boy from us. They had gathered a group of such orphan Jewish children together, and established an orphanage. There they were fed and clothed, taught to read and write and do arithmetic. But twice the boy ran away and came back to us. He called me Cousin Chaim and my wife Cousin Fela. After the third time that he ran away, the Committee sent all the children in the orphanage to Reichenbach and from there they were to go to Israel. Yankl cried the whole time, and swore that he would run away again and come back to us.

In the meantime, I got my craftsman’s card, and we worked seven days a week. On Sundays, most of our business was from the Jewish Russian and Polish invalids, because on Sundays, they were released from the hospitals. They were drawn by my sign: Lubliner Barber and Talented Hairdresser. I know I was wrong to keep my shop open on Sundays, but that was my most profitable day, so I ignored the prohibition.

One Sunday, a committee of three, representing the barber’s guild, arrived. Among them I recognized the elderly chairman Pianiaszek. He asked for me and he reproached me. How could I dare to work on Sundays after they had given me the craftsman’s card so speedily, without my taking the exam and without my paying. And they had done so because I was now the first Jewish barber in Lublin. And did I work on Sundays before the war when I worked for Zilbersher or Getsman? I told Pianiaszek that the shop had certainly closed in the front on Sundays, but we took in clients by the back door. “But if you were caught,” said Pianiaszek, “you paid a hefty fine.”

“I’m not paying a fine”, I screamed angrily. “Now the police is a combined Russian/Polish force, and there is justice.”

The Russian invalid whom I had left sitting mid-barbering, now asked, “What do they want?” “They don’t let me work,” I called out to him in a loud voice in Russian. The other Russian invalids (clients) now rose up and began to beat the heads and backs of the three Poles with their crutches. They ran from the barber shop, barely escaping with their lives. We continued to work but I thought to myself: I’ll work another two months and then I’ll have enough money to leave Poland as a Greek Jew.

But things worked out differently. Shortly thereafter, I received the following death threat: “Braith, we are giving you 48-hours-notice to leave Lublin and the Polish soil.” It was signed A.K.

I went to the U.B. on Probastve Street. There I got a gun permit and a small revolver. But, I thought, “Go play war now after the liberation?” Several days later, after we had eaten our supper, my wife and I went out as usual for a walk. At the gate stood the watchman and we stopped and talked to him. As soon as we took a few steps, my wife noticed that there was a tarpaulin-covered truck across the street, and from under the tarpaulin was the barrel of a machine gun. She grabbed me and dragged me with her to the ground just as the machine gun released a volley of bullets which flew over our heads. The truck sped off, and the watchman lay in a pool of blood, wounded in his hand and in his foot. We quickly got up and went back into the house. We couldn’t sleep all that night and decided not to wait any longer and to immediately leave Lublin and Poland.

My two partners put together several thousand zlotys for me. I went to Sheindl, the butcher Itzik’s wife, who was involved with transporting Greek Jews via the Red Cross. She didn’t take a lot of money from me and helped us leave Lublin the following week and thus we were saved from death. We went through seven kinds of hell before we got to Italy, and from there to Canada.

While we were in Italy, I got a letter from my mother’s cousin, asking us about Yankl, who had been with us, because the boy was his brother’s son. How he learned about him we have no idea, even to the present day. I had written to my uncle Israel Cohen (who now lives in Los Angeles) and who had family in Pulaw. And so, from mouth to mouth, the cousin in Belgium got my address.

I responded that the Jewish Committee had taken Yankl from us, and that he should look for him in Israel among the immigrants. He would have gone there in 1945-46. With that the story ended, and no one wrote to me after that.

Nevertheless, when I was in Israel in 1968, I tried to find Yankl but with no success. When I visited Israel two other times, we couldn’t find him.

In 1980, my aunt Gitele wrote me about a book by a certain Jack Kuper from Pulaw, and she thought that the story was similar to my story from Lublin, and that the author was likely the lost little boy. I immediately wrote a letter asking whether he might in fact be Yankl Kuperblum, and whether he was the little boy we helped in Lublin.

One evening, when I was home alone in Florida, the phone rang and it was Yankl Kuperblum calling me from Toronto. I almost dropped the receiver. He asked me my name and my wife’s name because he couldn’t remember the names any more. But he remembered what we had done for him. He’s been in Toronto since 1948 just as long as my wife and I. We had been to Toronto 20 times and did not know that we should look for him there. Who could have imagined that he would have changed his name, and that from that little shepherd boy would come such a mensch.

Now he assured me we will never lose track of each other again. Now he is very busy getting his movie out.
I was born in Amsterdam, Holland, in 1940, a few months after the country capitulated to the German invasion.

I am now nearly 77 and I’ve already lived some 50 years longer than both my parents would have. They missed out on experiencing fully the adventures, loves, adversities and all other aspects of a normal life, which we, present here, have experienced in so many different ways.

For me it all started in the spring of 1943. I have a vague memory of my mother and me sitting at the table eating our breakfast when the door burst open, and my father, surrounded by a swirl of panic and fear, rushed into the room. My father was a house painter, and as usual, he was wearing his overalls, which had paint blotches smeared in a mosaic of colors.

Sometimes he would come home in the middle of the day, sit me on his knee, and we would invent stories about those shapes and colors.

Not this time! This time he just shouted, “We have to leave immediately, the Germans are blocking off the street.”

The dark clouds of doom, which had been gathering for some time over Amsterdam’s Jewish community, finally settled over my family as well. Suddenly, we were no longer able to escape the terror of what had already happened to so many others in communities all over Holland.

I was just a toddler when the evil of the world descended upon me. It came in grey faces, and with a goose-step gait. It came in words and a language I could not understand, spoken by violent, ugly people. It came in shouts, and in silences, and screams of fear. It came from seeing the terror in the faces of my protectors, my mama and papa.

At that morning’s breakfast table my mother was no longer trying to coax me into eating the little bit of food in front of me. In that instant, the peace and love I had known until then was gone forever.

The thoughts that must have been racing through my head would have been of confusion, apprehension, and a lack of understanding of what was happening.

Why couldn’t I finish the little bit of food. Didn’t mama always say to eat up everything, because there was so little for anybody?

Why was mama putting all those clothes on me? I was so warm. Why did she yell at me to stop crying! ... She was crying!

Where are they rushing me off to? How come they keep whispering in my ear that they love me. I know they do. Their tears are streaming down my face. Why is mama squeezing me so hard? She is hurting me. What is happening? How come my Oma and Opa haven’t come to see me?

Maybe my mama and papa were bad, because I heard them talking once about being Jews. Papa said the Germans say it is bad to be a Jew, that’s why they have to wear that yellow star, so that the soldiers can see who are the good and who are the bad people. I don’t understand, because when I have done something bad, I try to be good again. So why can’t papa and mama stop being Jews, then they won’t be bad anymore.

With a deep unselfish love, while experiencing unspeakable heartbreak, my parents—mustering what must have been superhuman courage—decided that, to save their little baby’s life, they had to give me away into the care of the Dutch resistance movement, so I could be hidden from the Germans’ murderous intent.

They must have been fully aware

---

**THE LAST TO SPEAK OUT**

By Leo Vogel

(Excerpted from Mr. Vogel’s keynote speech delivered at the Jewish Cemetery on Victoria Island, B.C., Canada, on Yom Hashoah, April 23, 2017.)

---

We are the last! The cabooses of the cattle trains, left behind to roll on an empty track of fugitive memories.

Our cries of pain, were once ignored, by those who survived the camps, saying they’d suffered more. But, suffering cannot be quantified.

Many thought we were too young to understand but, we will be the last who saw and can testify.

Silently we endured, hiding, as we were taught. We are the last who can shout out the witnessed horrors.

---

I was just a toddler when the evil of the world descended upon me. It came in grey faces, and with a goose-step gait. It came in words and a language I could not understand, spoken by violent, ugly people. It came in shouts, and in silences, and screams of fear. It came from seeing the terror in the faces of my protectors, my mama and papa.

At that morning’s breakfast table my mother was no longer trying to coax me into eating the little bit of food in front of me. In that instant, the peace and love I had known until then was gone forever.

The thoughts that must have been racing through my head would have been of confusion, apprehension, and a lack of understanding of what was happening.

Why couldn’t I finish the little bit of food. Didn’t mama always say to eat up everything, because there was so little for anybody?

Why was mama putting all those clothes on me? I was so warm. Why did she yell at me to stop crying! ... She was crying!

Where are they rushing me off to? How come they keep whispering in my ear that they love me. I know they do. Their tears are streaming down my face. Why is mama squeezing me so hard? She is hurting me. What is happening? How come my Oma and Opa haven’t come to see me?

Maybe my mama and papa were bad, because I heard them talking once about being Jews. Papa said the Germans say it is bad to be a Jew, that’s why they have to wear that yellow star, so that the soldiers can see who are the good and who are the bad people. I don’t understand, because when I have done something bad, I try to be good again. So why can’t papa and mama stop being Jews, then they won’t be bad anymore.

With a deep unselfish love, while experiencing unspeakable heartbreak, my parents—mustering what must have been superhuman courage—decided that, to save their little baby’s life, they had to give me away into the care of the Dutch resistance movement, so I could be hidden from the Germans’ murderous intent.

They must have been fully aware

Continued on next page
that they, themselves, were on the brink of being deported to the “camps” from which no one had ever returned.

As a 76-year-old man, with my own children and grandchildren, I cannot ever come close to imagining the depth of their despair.

From that moment on my parents had no knowledge of my whereabouts, nor would they ever know whether I lived or died.

How they must have cried! How desperate they must have felt, worrying about me and about each other … while they endured, daily, the horrible suffering at Auschwitz.

**DID THEY SCREAM FOR EACH OTHER AND FOR THEIR SON, WHILE THEY STOOD NAKED IN THE GAS CHAMBERS?**

These haunting thoughts, which I’ve carried with me my whole life, are deeply ingrained in my mind, and at times they resurface during unguarded moments … a legacy from which there is no escape.

My parents would never know that through their own extreme sacrifice and the incredible heroism of the Dutch underground workers, I would eventually be hidden in a “safe” house with a Christian family in the south of Holland, far away from Amsterdam.

I have fragmented memories of that moment when I was being taken from my parents by a Dutch resistance worker who, as prearranged, was dressed as a Nazi officer.

_Who is that man dressed like a soldier? Why is mama saying that I must be good and go with him? I am so scared! Is mama coming with me? Is papa? Papa, stop pulling mama away! Don’t turn from me! Come back! Don’t leave me with this bad man! I promise I’ll be good! I promise I won’t be a Jew!_

I didn’t know then, that I would never see them again.

I was not yet three when I watched my parents stumble away, crumbling in their grief and misery, while I was held back in the powerful arms of a resistance worker dressed in a Nazi uniform.

This brave man, who helped to find a hiding place for me, was later also murdered. He and his organization helped to save 300 Jewish children. The equally brave Christian family, with whom I was eventually hidden, protected and loved me.

I was able to stay with them until I was nearly 10 years old.

In the year 2000 I had the honor to have their names inscribed on the wall of the Righteous at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem.

When the war had already been over for five years, and I was by then 10 years old, it was decided by various bureaucrats and governmental organizations that I, like so many other orphaned children, had to be returned to my Jewish roots and that I could no longer continue to live with my rescue family: the people I loved, who had cared for me for 8 years and who had endangered their own and their children’s lives to save a little Jewish boy from death. This family fought hard against losing me, but in 1950 it was sanctioned by the Dutch courts that I be moved to a Jewish orphanage in Amsterdam, hundreds of kilometers away from the Christian family that had loved and protected me.

For three years I lived in the orphanage, then at age 13, I was finally placed with another foster family with whom I moved to Canada. Not long after settling in this country it became obvious that this was not a good placement for me. Both foster parents were survivors of the camps. They too struggled with their own psychological and emotional demons and were not able to deal with the sadness of a displaced and abandoned orphan boy.

All my life, the only tangible contact I’ve had to connect me with my parents was one small passport picture of each. Then, six months ago, in a box of memorabilia that had belonged to my cousin’s deceased mother, and that had been locked away since the end of the war, a letter was discovered, written by my father in May of 1943 on what’s now old and yellowed paper. All at once, I received a small glimpse of him as a person. Suddenly, it was as if he’d come alive … he was no longer just an image on a photo. Now I feel even more intensely the agony they must have felt during those dark days in 1943, when we were still a little family.

He addressed the letter to “Dear Everybody.” The content appears to be written in a code known only to the family, outlining events happening to various family members. It is not clear to me where this letter was written, who the recipient would have been, or what all the coded messages meant.

There is a short reference about me, stating that as a two-year-old I was good with words and that I had recovered from scarlet fever, and soon I would be playing with my new friends. This statement was probably meant to alert the family that I would be placed into hiding within a short time.
Three old Holocaust survivors are sitting around playing cards, chatting about various things. Dave says, “You know, I’m getting really forgetful. This morning, I was standing at the top of the stairs, and I couldn’t remember whether I had just come up or was about to go down.” Sarah says, “You think that’s bad? The other day I was sitting on the edge of my bed, and I couldn’t remember whether I was going to bed or had just woken up!” And Goldie smiles smugly. “Well, my memory’s just as good as it’s always been, knock wood.” She raps the table. With a startled look on her face, she asks, “Who’s there?”

Aging Holocaust survivors may forget whether they’re going up or down the stairs or whether they’re going to sleep or waking up, but what is most striking to their family members is that their traumatic experiences in the Holocaust are even more memorable in their old age than they were seventy-two years ago. Sons and daughters of survivors are often caught off-guard when a parent becomes clinically depressed after retiring or losing a spouse, other relatives, or friends. Their families do not understand that when an aging survivor experiences a current loss, their grief encompasses not only the immediate death, but also the murder of family members they were unable to mourn at the time. A present loss in a survivor’s life acts as a trigger to vivid death imagery they witnessed of prolonged, or abrupt, killings of loved ones and strangers, and their own near-death encounter.

In older Holocaust survivors, the elements of natural aging are unconsciously or consciously perceived through a different lens. Survivors relive the loss of control over their own destiny more intensely. Erik Erickson’s adult ego development of integration versus despair is another trigger to mourn aspirations never reached and survivor guilt. Survivor guilt at times can be mediated with seriously focusing on Erickson’s concept of generativity, imparting values to future generations. The aging Holocaust survivor is often not conscious of the connection between the horrific past and his or her current emotional state, especially if he or she is surrounded by beauty, love, and financial security.

Despite these commonalities among aging Holocaust survivors, their descendants do not experience a monolithic group. This presentation will delineate four types of families, which are not mutually exclusive, and which have implications for different experiences by the children and grandchildren of survivors. The types are the “independent aging Holocaust survivor family,” the “bearing witness family,” the “dependent aging Holocaust survivor family,” and the “aging isolated Holocaust survivor.”

Let us begin with the “independent aging Holocaust survivor family.” Here, the survivors are working, semi-retired, or retired and still living an active lifestyle. Very often, this is a family that has sufficient financial resources to live comfortably. Members of the family may or may not be active community members, they are generally involved with their extended families, and their lives are not necessarily focused on Holocaust remembrance or commemoration. Their identity encompasses their profession, their hobbies, their role in the family, or their Jewish or ideological identity. The life they lived during the years of the Third Reich or the German occupation

Contined on next page
does not necessarily constitute a major part of their identity. It might be the family that says, “What does the Holocaust have to do with me?”—almost like the wicked son at the Passover Seder. Or it might be a family whose primary identity is that of being immersed in a religious community, for example: very active Orthodox or Chasidic Jews, or Bundists, or Yiddishists. In rare cases, these might even be families that denied their Jewish identity and their persecution as Jews during the Holocaust. In these families, the burden of maintaining the family secret continues.

The independent aging Holocaust survivor requires minimal care from their children or outside social service agencies. Because they are not financially needy, they do not seek out Holocaust survivor support organizations. Often, their only link to Holocaust related institutions is their monthly reparations check. However, this independent aging Holocaust survivor is not immune from becoming another of the types listed below, should he or she incur a death of a loved one, or lose the capacity to be an active professional or community member. At that point a family member witnessing a vibrant parent become clinically depressed feels helpless, and will seek out psychological help for a magical cure to get back the old parent.

The most commonly used clinical intervention is psychopharmacological medication. In severe cases, psychiatrists have all too often resorted to ECT (Electric Convulsive Therapy). While these alternatives may have an immediate effect to jolt an individual out of severe depressive symptoms, such as unwillingness to get up or engage in activities of daily living (bathing, eating, etc.), these treatments are not permanent solutions because they do not satisfy the patient’s unconscious need to mourn. Survivors need a listening ear. Paraphrastically, when Prozac was in vogue, doctors were giving it out like candy. Some survivors had suicidal ideations, which of course panicked the children. Others became enraged at loved ones for not meeting their needs.

One example is of Joseph whose father was a successful scientist, a devoted husband and father. After he retired he became very depressed. He had been a very busy professional, which did not leave much time for hobbies or hanging around. The Prozac he was given made him very angry at his wife, who he felt did not want him to talk about his Holocaust years. She had been a loving wife who got him and the family to be Yankees. His son tried to keep his father busy by giving him some tasks in his business. He bought him a computer and gave him tutorials. All this did not bring back his productive, successful father who soon started to deteriorate physically as well.

The role of the offspring to make the survivor parent happy is intensified during this period. However, it is important to know the limitations. Yes, children of survivors must make themselves available, but at the same time, others need to be to engaged so as to create a social support system: A few volunteers in the community who visit once a week, other family members who can be in touch regularly, a survivor social gathering, other community events, and maybe a mental-health professional.

This rude awakening of the vulnerability of the survivor, may motivate the second-and third-generation family member to want to do a long-postponed oral history, or to fill in the gaps. It is best not to be too eager to ask about the survivor’s experiences during the Holocaust, and to begin with the present, and then early childhood before delving into the traumatic events. If there are any photos, begin by identifying family members, or taking out a map and starting with locations. These are a few non-threatening devices to initiate a long-awaited conversation.

While the second-generation family member is often engaged in the physical care of the survivor, the third-generation child is there to bring levity and joy.

The second type of Holocaust survivor family is the one I call the “bearing witness” type. In these families, the Holocaust survivor, or possibly one or more of their children or grandchildren, are involved in Holocaust education and commemoration. This can take all kinds of forms, including public speaking, writing memoirs, engaging in political, Holocaust and Jewish causes, and other types of activism, such as human rights, advocacy for other oppressed groups, volunteerism, and participation in the helping professions.

The dynamics in the “bearing witness family” vary. At times, one person takes the lead, while other family members are supportive. In more instances, family members have mixed reactions to the active witness. The active witness can be a mem-

Contined on next page
proud of a son or daughter who has written a play, is working for a human rights organization, is teaching a Holocaust course, is speaking at a Holocaust commemoration, or has otherwise embraced their family history. Often, survivors will write and publish stories based on their experiences with the help of one of their children, who are sometimes professional writers. A project such as this could not have been done by most survivors without the help of their children because of educational or language barriers. This experience of writing together has often brought the survivor and their child closer together.

One problem that emerges with the “bearing witness” survivor is when he or she becomes too weak, or ill, to continue such work. To give up the role of “bearing witness” at this point would not only cause a loss of identity, but the loss of a supportive environment in which bearing witness is conducted. Isolation and despair can follow such a transition. It is a double-edged sword for children, a spouse, or other relatives to tell a survivor to quit their “bearing witness” work. On the one hand, they do not want to take away what is most meaningful to them; on the other hand, family members have a responsibility to become protectors of their aging survivors and prevent them from losing face.

Anger often intensifies with aging survivors as they confront their own imminent end. Out of control public displays of this anger in public speeches or in the media embarrasses and shames their offspring. Again, an awkward position of a child of survivors to tell a survivor not to be so angry, when in reality, they have so much to be angry about.

Child survivors and second and third generations are taking over the telling of the family history for their parents and grandparents. Some survivors are using their last energies to continue to tell their stories in public, or to try to write them down. This group requires support for the emotional strain their activities cause, and validation for making a difference. At times these families need assistance with intergenerational communication and understanding. There is a difference between being supported by the external world for participating in Holocaust education, commemoration and life-affirming activities, and a resistance and negative reaction from family members for wanting to make a difference through these positive projects.

The third type of family is the “dependent aging Holocaust survivor family,” in which survivors have experienced a loss of motivation or ability to care for themselves caused by the death of a spouse or physical illness. If the deteriorating physical condition of a spouse becomes too overwhelming for the elderly partner to cope with, it is one of the children or grandchildren who is called upon to help. Often, in such cases, one child sacrifices himself or herself for the care of the surviving or ill parent, thus establishing a dysfunctional family structure.

If siblings have to coordinate their efforts to care for an ill parent, or one who is suffering a complicated reaction of grief, the prior dynamics among them come to the fore. If relations were healthy, the elder becomes the primary focus. But if the relations were replete with conflicts, the interaction between the siblings takes center stage, rather than the best interests of the aging parent. This dynamic, of course, can also happen in families that do not have a Holocaust family history.

What makes a Holocaust survivor family differently in this stage is its increased distrust for institutions or individuals outside the immediate family. Aging survivors who are feeling vulnerable may become even more suspicious of outsiders when they are ill, or have lost a spouse, or most of their friends. The role of the next generation as protector from the outside world, or as interpreter of the external surroundings, is even more pronounced in a “dependent aging Holocaust survivor family.” Social services providers become part of the outside world that is not to be trusted. Under these circumstances, the job of mental-health providers is challenging. Often the second and third generation members of these families are caught between the survivor and the social service providers.

A survivor who only wants a family member to care for them ignores the suggestions of social workers who may propose getting outside help at home, or moving to an assisted-living or nursing home environment. No matter what outsiders say, a spouse, child or grandchild may feel disloyal to the survivor who is emotionally or physically incapacitated if he or she does not personally care for the elder who has suffered so much in the past. Disloyalty brings out feelings of survivor guilt in second and third generations. To avoid such feelings, second or third generation members may attempt to sacrifice themselves by doing the impossible in caring for the elderly parent, such as moving the survivor into an already-crammed apartment, or leaving one’s spouse and children to live at the survivor’s home for a long period.

The “dependent Holocaust survivor family” can get into this state overnight or over an extended period of time. In families where the Holocaust survivor was perceived as the strong one, the “fighter” as opposed to the “victim,” the transition to becoming caretakers rather than being taken care of comes as a shock, and causes what Robert Jay Lifton calls a “disequilibrium.” At other times, family members enter a state of denial in the face of the worsening physical or psychological condition of the survivor.

Second-generation family members, or American spouses, who at times feel their own survivor guilt, can have these emotions surface when the survivor becomes physically and psychologically needy. Such feelings may influence family members to sacrifice themselves more than is appropriate or realistic under the circumstances. When second generation members make unrealistic choices, friction with other family members, spouses, or children may result. In a “dependent survivor family,” one of the most difficult choices a child of survivors may have to make is to put a parent in a nursing home. When placed in a hospital or nursing home, the uniforms, the loss of control, the regiment-

Contined on next page
ed schedules may trigger memories of an earlier incarceration, and post-traumatic stress symptoms may erupt. When it becomes impossible to avoid such institutions, the offspring of survivors have to sensitise the staff to the emotional needs of their parents, and maintain a constant advocacy for them. PTSD symptoms can too easily be interpreted as psychotic, and a survivor may be given the wrong medication.

The fourth type of family is the “aging isolated Holocaust survivor,” lone individuals who have no immediate family, are alienated from family, or have abusive descendants. This isolated survivor is dependent on social services organizations, volunteers, friends, and strangers for coping and daily needs. In the mind of the isolated Holocaust survivor, Hitler’s plan to annihilate the Jews succeeded. This survivor constantly obsesses about what he or she did to deserve such a fate, and can be beleaguered with survivor guilt. The question often asked is, “Why did I survive to suffer like this?”

I mention this type of Holocaust survivor family because often the volunteers are children or grandchildren of survivors who lost their parents or grandparents, or descendants of survivors who work in social service or medical agencies.

The despair experienced by some Holocaust survivors is exacerbated by the fact that they did not have children, or had problematic children. Not having children can happen to anyone, but for survivors, and particularly for women incarcerated in concentration camps, this circumstance has special significance, and a different level of responsibility is therefore felt by the survivor. There are survivor mothers who fear that their incarceration or persecution was responsible for their child’s infirmities. A few blame their lack of conception on experiments performed on them during their years in concentration camps. There are those who chose not to have children because the trauma of witnessing what happened to youngsters during the years of German-occupation. Thus, the despair is compounded by survivor guilt, which is relentless in some aging Holocaust survivors.

Survivors in their final developmental stage, which Erik Erikson characterizes as “integrity versus despair,” must assume responsibility for their own lives and accept significant others—including family members—into their lives. When a survivor does not have “significant others,” despair sets in because there is no one for the survivor to guide, and their need to bear witness is not validated by people who matter to them.

Volunteers who befriend isolated aging Holocaust survivors, listen to their stories, show them that they have something worthwhile to impart to the next generation, give isolated survivors the will to live. Despite the fact that the legacy is a mixed blessing, it does have integrity, and that integrity is imparted to others.

The role of a social service agency and mental-health or medical provider is, with these families, emotionally intense. As outsiders, their first task is to gain the trust of these survivors, who distrust them or suspect they have ulterior motives. These survivors are sometimes forced to rely principally on social service agencies or strangers for their needs because their children or grandchildren have given up trying to care for them. The second or third generation in this scenario may resent the survivor because they are demanding or entitled, paranoid about outsiders, or irrational about giving up control over some aspect of their lives, typically finances.

In any of these family types, family secrets are often revealed during this late stage of life. Children or grandchildren may be shocked to learn that a survivor was married before the war or had a previous family, or that a spouse survived the war and the survivor knowingly or unknowingly committed bigamy. Of course, learning that one’s parent is Jewish, though rare, is another secret that subsequent generations have had to face.

As the memory of the past is sharpened for aging Holocaust survivors, a certain kind of earworm attacks them. These are not jingles they cannot get out of their head, but rather, the last words they heard from a parent, or child, or sibling. Or, their own voice saying, “I should have gone to the left with my daughter and not given her to my mother.” Family members have to assuage their irrational survivor guilt so that they can go to their resting place in peace.

Finally, let’s return to Dave, the survivor, I introduced you to at the beginning. Dave was at death’s door, and the family was gathered all around him.

“Sarah, my wife, are you here at the bedside?”

“Yes, Dave, of course I’m here.”

“And Bernie, my oldest son, are you here?”

“Yes, dad.”

“And Rachel, my daughter, are you here?”

“Yes, Father, at the foot of the bed.”

“And Sam, my youngest, are you here too?”

“Right here, Pop.”

“Well, then,” said Dave, “if all of you are here, who’s minding the store?”

Holocaust survivors across the board wish for their descendants to mind the store after they are gone. And by that, I mean that it is their wish that their descendants as well as all Jews be in charge of their legacy, of their memories, of who they were and what they accomplished during their time on earth. While wishing one’s legacy to continue is inherently human, with Holocaust survivors, it is profoundly urgent, that future generations bear witness when the survivors no longer can.

Psychologist Dr. Eva Fogelman is a founder of the Hidden Child Foundation/ADL, a filmmaker and author of many books and articles. She is co-director of Child Development Research, founding director of Psychotherapy with Generations of the Holocaust and Related Traumas, TIMH and Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers/ADL (originally Jewish Foundation for the Righteous). She wrote the Pulitzer Prize nominee, “Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust,” and is a co-editor of the newly published Children in the Holocaust and its Aftermath. Dr. Fogelman is the writer and co-producer of Breaking the Silence: The Generation After the Holocaust and an advisor to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and to this publication.
Abstract

A bulk of focus regarding Holocaust education is laid on concentration camps while information about displaced persons (DP) camps is scarce. For reasons that are not clear, Holocaust education generally neglects the crucial question of how the surviving remnants managed in the first year or two after 1945, and materials about how people coped with surviving survival are not plentiful. It is important because in the initial years after liberation, the DPs needed help in returning to life, in relearning to make choices, in confronting the empty reality of their new existence, in trusting other human beings, and in becoming trustworthy themselves. Holocaust education must address the loss of human values by the perpetrators and the incongruous position of the victims who were then forced to live among them. The incongruity was compounded by the fact that victor, victim, and perpetrator did not have a common language.

In 1945, there were seven million DPs in the three zones of occupation—British, American, and Russian—into which Germany was divided. The DPs included forced laborers from various countries, prisoners of war, people who had fled before the arrival of the Soviet armies, and Jewish concentration camp prisoners (ibid., p. 3). The last group, at first a minority, grew rapidly in 1946 when they were joined by increasingly large numbers from Poland. According to a November 1946 estimate, more than 11,000 Jewish DPs alone lived in the American zone (ibid., p. 43). Thus, what took place during the initial years after the War was a rapid increase of the Jewish population in Germany. At the same time, non-Jewish foreigners were gradually decreasing as foreign laborers and prisoners-of-war were slowly returning to their homes. In contrast, Jews in the DP camps were a largely homeless population without hope of ever returning to a home or a family. Needless to say, in post-war years, there were hardly any Jewish families in Europe that had remained intact.

In the American zone, there were well over 100 smaller or larger DP camps. The larger ones might contain several thousand
persons, whereas the smaller ones consisted of only several hundred people. Until United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) took over management of the camps, the American occupation army was in charge, especially of the larger camps. These sometimes consisted of primitive army barracks or furnished apartment blocks that seemed luxurious in comparison.

One cannot but feel sorry for the young American soldiers in their clean uniforms and polished boots when they were confronted with the starved, unkempt, and unwashed Jewish DP’s who appeared to them uncivilized and barely human. Not only was the sight of such humanity shocking, soldiers did not know what to say to them also. In October 1945, an American soldier who worked with the Jewish DPs wrote home:

_They have been demanding, arrogant, have played upon their concentration camp experience to obtain ends. I saw rooms in camp after they left—filthy, dirty, furniture broken, such a mess no other group left. They refuse to do any work, have had to be forced by gun to go out and cut wood to heat their own camp. American soldiers have developed bitter attitudes in many cases._ (Shephard, 2011, p. 10)

Irving Heymont similarly described, in his letters home, the DPs as apathetic and unwilling to cooperate when a number of them were to be moved to another camp. Should the American soldiers resort to force in moving the DPs, they could be accused of organizing transports as the Germans had done (Heymont, 1982, pp. 56–57).

The Jewish DPs were often thought to indulge in exaggerations. Some American officers exclaimed, “Crematoria and poison gas! Come, come … don’t tell me you fell for all that malarkey too. Do you seriously believe that the Germans actually pulled that stuff?” (cited in Bauer, 1970, p. 135). Nor could the American soldiers understand one another and consequently, the army resorted to the thing they knew best: maintenance of law and order and rigid discipline in the camps. The army’s actions were, however, resisted by the Jews who regarded such treatment as proper for the vanquished Germans, but not the liberated inmates of the concentration camps (Königsweder & Wetzl, 2001, p. 22). It is significant, moreover, that the attitudes of those American soldiers who had liberated the concentration camps and those who came later differed markedly. Frontline soldiers had actually seen what Nazis were capable of inflicting on other human beings, whereas those who came later, no longer beheld the terrible sights of the dead and dying (ibid., pp. 24–25).

A non-German in Germany after liberation confronted major difficulties. To be sure, Germany was defeated and the signs of its defeat were visible everywhere. There were the demolished urban neighborhoods and victims of the relentless allied bombings only a short time earlier. Public buildings, factories, bridges, and industrial installations were in ruin and there were shortages of every kind, especially daily necessities. Yet many of these defeated Germans still had homes and unlike the DPs they also had families. They had friends to whom they could turn in times of need; they apparently took baths and wore clean clothing. And it was obvious that they did not like those Jewish DPs, whom many saw as assertive, noisy, and to blame for the disasters that had befallen them. As for the Jewish DPs, even if they no longer had to fear for their lives, loving their erstwhile enemy was not exactly a goal to which these Jews aspired.

For me, reading and writing about the DP camps in Germany after the end of the Second World War is unlike dealing with any other topic. It involves a time and place where I was a participant, experiencing similar or same attitudes and events. When the War ended, I was a 15-year-old Jewish teenager, having survived as a “hidden child” in Poland (Eber, 2004). By some miraculous process, which to this day I do not quite understand, my mother and sister remained alive due to the famous Schindler list. My sister found me after the War and the three of us decided to leave Poland. Our destination was the American zone in Germany where we hoped to find our family members. We, in fact, succeeded as it turned out. My mother’s youngest sister and her husband, a well-known journalist, had managed to survive. Whereas my mother and sister found a welcome shelter with my aunt, I was restless and soon began exploring various DP camps for congenial surroundings.

While researching and writing this article, I have learned that I belonged to a small minority of Holocaust survivors. Among a sample of 900 Jewish DPs, only 3 percent were between the age of 6 and 17 (Königsweder & Wetzl, 2001, p. 52). Probably this accounts for the fact that, having no one to communicate with, I began to write a diary in a school notebook, which I had kept from the brief time I had attended a Polish school. This is, no doubt, the major reason that the diary in the summer of 1945 repeatedly refers to loneliness and my longing for Poland.

Resorting to a diary is reassuring because the diary provides evidence of how matters were perceived at that time. Resorting to memory, on the other hand, may raise the question of whether matters actually occurred as they are remembered. Still, I cannot resist telling the following two vividly remembered episodes. They are as clear today as if they had happened only recently. How to live in a society had to be relearned and in Holocaust education, this is an important point to be emphasized.

_Contd on next page_
It was the spring of 1946, shortly before Passover. It was a holiday imbued with special meaning for the DP's, by signifying liberation from the Nazi slavery and was our first Passover of freedom. In the small Bavarian DP camp of Cham (Königsweder & Wetzel, 2001, pp. 220–221), we anxiously awaited the arrival of American matza, the unleavened flatbread Jews must eat during the Passover week. When the holiday was close and matza had still not arrived for some 200 people in Cham, the camp administration decided that we must bake our own matza. Abie, an energetic and resourceful camp member, was charged with buying supplies of flour in the surrounding villages; the baker, a member in our camp, was charged with leasing the local bakery and making it ritually fit; and an organizational expert in camp was charged with organizing teams of women to roll out the dough. All went exactly as planned and soon the bakery resounded with loud cries of “faster, faster” from the baker and his helpers.

Speed was an important part of matza baking. In Jewish history, it is well known that the exodus from Egypt, which Passover commemorates, was above all hurried with no time for bread to rise and hence the importance of eating unleavened (or unrisen) bread in remembrance. Until the present day, therefore, the five of us were hauled before the American commander of the camp. He shouted furiously at us and accused us of sabotage and of destroying American property. Our punishment? Confinement to the camp until our ocean liner was due and we would be shipped off to the Bremen port, he announced to us. Until then, no more passes to leave the camp would be issued to us.

To this day, I remember how ridiculous the threat seemed to me. A fence had never stopped me in the past and would not now. All I need is one loose slate, loosen it a little more, mark it, and find it again for the next excursion. The five of us left the furious commander secure in the knowledge that we could very well manage without his passes.

No matter whether the camp experience was positive or negative, it was part of reliving how to live in a society. The DP camp, of larger or shorter duration, was a crucial point of transition. The participants in a Holocaust Education or the listener to a lecture must not leave thinking that the labor or concentration camp inmates “Lived Happily Ever After.” To be sure, the War had ended and the daily threat to survival no longer existed, but learning how to live again as a human being among other human beings, all of them strangers, was a different matter.

Without a doubt, there are reasons that the episodes recounted above are so well remembered. Running through them is the question of trustworthiness. Can one rely on others to do what they promise they will do? Are authorities reliable? Or can we, in the final analysis, only rely on ourselves to do what must be done? Need we dumbly obey when authorities are unreasonable? At which point should we think for ourselves? At which point is obedience harmful? Although not all of these questions may have arisen consciously at that time, but these and others played a role in the DP’s reentry into life. Whereas Holocaust education must, on the one hand, deal with the issue of how the Nazis tried to put an end to the Jewish existence, it also ought, on the other, to raise the question of how a remnant prepared to live again in the human society.

Irene Eber, Ph.D, is Louis Frieberg Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Humanities, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Acknowledgments

My gratitude to Professor Barbara Johnson and Mary Fuld for their painstaking reading of this essay and suggestions for improvement.

Notes

1. This figure may be far too low. A larger figure is listed in Brenner and Harshav (1997).
2. This is a review of the memoir by Göran Rosenberg, A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz.
3. The list contained the names of over 1,000 Jews (most of them men) who were to be transferred in the fall of 1944 from Poland’s Plaszów concentration camp to Schindler’s Brünnlitz factory.
4. Further details about the Polish past and departure are in Eber (2004).
5. Diary entries for July 28, 1945; August 29, 1945; October 8, 1945, and April 4, 1946.
6. The authors list 204 DP camps for October 1947.
7. The authors describe it as a camp with “extremely poor living conditions.”

References


THE HATE OF CHARLOTTESVILLE STRIKES A HAUNTING CHORD

By Ruth Rovner

Like many Americans, I watched in shock the scenes in Charlottesville of young white men, looking grim and determined, chanting “Jews will not replace us! Jews will not replace us!” as they carried flags emblazoned with swastikas.

I had never seen such a naked and public display of anti-Semitism. But my shock was combined with another more unusual reaction.

“It’s good that George is not here to see this,” I thought to myself. My own shock would have seemed mild compared to what George would have felt.

George Klin was my longtime companion who died last year. Unlike my privileged life as an American Jew who never personally experienced anti-Semitism, George’s life was starkly different.

In his native Brussels, he was a hidden child during the Holocaust. These were children living in Nazi-occupied countries who were spared the death camps because brave Christians hid them.

George’s happy childhood was suddenly interrupted when the Nazis occupied Belgium. From then on, Jews lived in constant fear. He was just 11 when he heard a fateful knock on the door of the family apartment in Brussels one day. Along with the urgent knock came voices shouting, “Polizei! Polizei!”

It signified a dreaded Nazi roundup. Although terrified, young George still had the presence of mind to use the chain lock on the door. He huddled in fear with his mother and sister as the police knocked repeatedly – but then moved on to knock on other doors.

All was silence after about an hour. Later, when George ventured outdoors, the street was completely empty. His neighbors had been rounded up and would be sent to the death camps.

After that, it was too dangerous to stay in his neighborhood. A Christian neighbor knew about a courageous Catholic woman who ran a boarding school in a town near Brussels. At risk of her life, she hid Jewish children who then pretended to be Catholic. She agreed to take in George and his younger sister Louise.

Along with other hidden children, they were now safe, but still lived in fear of discovery.

Once a month, George and Louise looked forward to their mother’s visits. She brought cookies, other treats – and love.

Then, one day, the visits ended and never resumed. Sister and brother knew that something terrible had happened.

But their father was safe in Brooklyn, where he had come to visit a cousin right before the war started. When war broke out, the cousin urged him not to return. So, at war’s end, brother and sister boarded a boat and were reunited with their father in Brooklyn.

Life resumed some normalcy. George was an honor student in high school, earned a college degree and then a PhD. With a talent for language, he became a professor of Romance Languages. He married and raised two children (the marriage later ended in divorce).

But the shadow of the Holocaust was always with him. At age 65, he finally learned the actual fate of his mother. The Nazis had left Belgium in haste, with no time to take their records. Years later, when I visited a Holocaust museum outside of Brussels, the curator showed me a computer with the Nazis’ meticulous documentation of Belgium’s Holocaust victims.

He typed in the name of George’s mother, and soon the facts appeared on the computer screen. First, the mundane details: her name, address, occupation. Then came the dark facts – the date she was deported to Auschwitz – even the train number, and the date she was gassed.

George tried to take the news stoically. He had always known something terrible had happened; now he knew the specifics. It haunted him with new intensity.

Unlike his mother, who died in her early 30s, George lived to age 85 – and during that long life, he never really recovered from the childhood trauma. He occasionally had nightmares about the past, and he felt lifelong and intense hatred for the Nazis.

“They killed my mother!” he would shout tearfully in moments of anger and grief.

He would surely have suffered more nightmares if he saw the young neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, marching in lockstep and shouting, “Jews will not replace us! Jews will not replace us!”

I wonder if these young men ever think about how their actions probably affected Holocaust survivors here. I wonder if, as future fathers, they will ever understand the lifelong trauma of children victimized by the Nazis whom they want to glorify.

George was one of those children. While I grieve for him, I am relieved that at the very end of his life, he was spared one more stab to a wound that never healed.

Ruth Rovner is a freelance writer.
BOOKS

“What! Still Alive?!”
Jewish Survivors in Poland and Israel Remember Homecoming
By Monika Rice
Syracuse University Press, October 2017
288 pages, 2 tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index

“What! Still Alive?!” offers a powerful and deeply affecting examination of the complex memories of Jewish survivors returning to their homes in Poland after the Holocaust. These survivors left unparalleled testimonies of their first impressions with the Jewish historical commissions from 1944 to 1950.

As many survivors found they were no longer welcome by their Polish neighbors, they chose to settle in the new state of Israel. Again, these surviving Jews left testimonies describing their postwar returns. In “What! Still Alive?!” Rice investigates the transformation of survivors’ memories from the first account after their initial return to Poland and later accounts, recorded at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem between 1955 and 1970. Through close readings of these firsthand narratives, Rice traces the ways in which the passage of time and a changing geopolitical context influenced the survivors’ memories.

Monika Rice teaches courses on the Holocaust, Jewish-Christian relations, and women’s spirituality at Seton Hall University, as well as Gratz College.

Histoires secrètes
Les enfants juifs et l’Assistance publique
Marion Feldman and Katy Hazan
Preface by Bernard Golse
Editions In Press, Paris, 2017; 186 pages+ bibliography

L’Assistance Publique originated in 1793 as a result of a French Revolutionary law that imposed upon the French nation the obligation of caring for children of families in need, not as a matter of charity, but of right, and justice. It wasn’t until the end of the Twentieth Century that this institution was decentralized and its name changed to l’Aide Sociale à l’Enfance.

Children came under the care of L’Assistance Publique when tragedies, such as grave illness, penury, or loss of a parent occurred in a family, or “abandonment” to a child. The situation could be either temporary or long-term, until the child reached majority (21). Children were placed in an institution supervised by L’Assistance Publique or with a family judged to have good Catholic values.

What was the role of l’Assistance Publique concerning Jewish children before, during and after the occupation? Even with Jewish traditions of solidarity and tzedakah, some Jewish children in France were entrusted to this agency during these periods. Indeed, such was the background of one of the two authors of this book, clinical psychologist Marion Feldman. Marion’s grandparents immigrated to France from Poland in 1928. Knowing no one in Paris and living through dire poverty, ill-health and the early death of her grandmother, the family frequently relied on l’Assistance Publique for the care of Marion’s father, aunt, and three uncles. The siblings were repeatedly separated and rendered ever more vulnerable by living alternatively between two milieus: their Yiddish-speaking home and the French speaking institutions. With the onset of the war and the occupation, the siblings were, yet again, separated from one another. All were hidden, including their father. Miraculously, all five dodged the repeated “rafles” (round-ups) of Jews and survived.

Historian Katy Hazan’s involvement resulted from her doctoral research into the postwar fate of Jewish orphans of the Shoah in France. She authored several books dealing with French Jewish organizations, notably the OSE and the UJRE, and the ideologies and policies which guided their management of fifty children’s homes. She also raises a problem of a particularly grievous nature: the post-war search for thousands of hidden children, many of them orphaned and scattered around France. Orphans who had no surviving relatives were not likely to be found if they were not reported to Jewish organizations by the gentle family or institution that sheltered them.

The search for the hidden children left without parents became a vexing chase. Some of the children entrusted to the AP were retrieved by surviving relatives or Jewish organizations, but an unknown number were not. Success or failure depended on the whim of local agents of the AP, some of whom could not comprehend why anyone would want to raise these children as Jewish, or decided that it was in the best interest of children to remain in the boarding schools that had sheltered them, or with Catholic families that had adopted them and to whom they had become attached. The latter was not the reality in all cases: there were many occurrences of abuse, such as children being mistreated or

Continued on next page

UPDATE:

English edition of Maman Grète, Une éducatrice venue d’Allemagne pour des orphelins de la déportation en France et autres portraits de famille. (French edition, published in 2016, was reviewed in the 2017 issue of The Hidden Child.)

My Maman Grete
by Michel Stermann
Pages: 252, paperback
Self-published, TwentySix Platform (www.twentysix.de)
ISBN: 978-3740744007

Can be ordered as “printed on demand” at book stores, or online at: TwentySix shop (enables free reading of the first pages: use link over the cover picture)
Amazon USA, UK, Canada, Japan, Australia, France, Germany
Google Books
Ex-Libriss Switzerland
“farmed out” as cheap labor.

Combining the psychoanalytical method and the historical record, Feldman and Hazan, piece together the fate of Jewish children who, after the war, were not retrieved by relatives or Jewish organizations. From their distinct professional perspectives, Feldman and Hazan delve into more than 300 files from which they select 14 accounts of individual children or groups of siblings entrusted to the AP. Still, they point out that their research may not be exhaustive, since some files have disappeared. This leads them to question the causes of their disappearance: were they destroyed or misplaced, or possibly hidden to protect children from being found by the Gestapo?

Clearly, the AP also resorted to endless obfuscation in its refusal to return children to parents, who in some cases applied year after year for their return. The many pretexts invoked include: inadequate conditions to sustain the family, poor moral quality of parents, and other such “problems.” Some children were removed from France. Feldman and Hazan charge the AP with the crime of “disaffiliation.” Some of the 14 cases they have selected end tragically. One, a young man, born in 1931, with no surviving parents, commits suicide at age 33 in a fit of depression. Another, a young widowed mother, herself a former orphan of the Shoah in Belgium and France.

This book presents one more tragic page in the history of children of the Shoah. Marion Feldman is a senior lecturer in psychology (Paris-Descartes University), clinical psychologist, researcher at PCPP EA 4056 Sorbonne Paris Cité, Institute of Psychology. She has published books on the study of affiliations and the impact of traumas on the development of the child. Author Katy Hazan is an associate and doctor of history, head of the Archives and History Department of the Children’s Relief Society (OSE). She has published numerous books on the rescue of Jewish children and on their recuperation.

Reviewed by René Goldman, a graduate of Columbia University and a retired professor of Chinese history at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, is a native of Luxembourg and a child-survivor of the Shoah in Belgium and France.

Mouth of Truth
By Lillian Boraks-Nemetz
Ekstasis Editions, 2017, 240 pages

Based on the author’s personal experience as a child in the Warsaw Ghetto, Mouth of Truth is a gripping tale of impossible choices, divided loyalties, and unimaginable horrors. Batya, now a grown woman, has been trying to live a normal Canadian life in oblivion of her terrible past. One day, a friend confronts her with a secret revelation about her father, which makes her question her family history and its legacy of guilt. Shocked and betrayed, she forges her current life and embarks on a journey of discovery to look for the truth in hope of finding what lies behind the terrible secret. Batya, as a wife and mother, unaware that she is suffering from a childhood trauma (post-traumatic stress disorder), approaches a crisis brought on by series of events that trigger memories of her family’s dark past with which she must cope before she can feel love, find healing and peace.

Lillian Boraks-Nemetz was born in Warsaw, Poland, and is a child survivor of the Holocaust. She escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto and spent the remainder of the war in hiding under a false identity. Boraks-Nemetz graduated from the University of British Columbia with a Masters Degree in Comparative Literature. She is an author of the award-winning novel The Old Brown Suitcase as well as The Sunflower Diary and The Lenski File, and two volumes of poetry Ghost Children and Garden of Steel. She has been working at the University of British Columbia’s Writing Center for many years and often speaks to students about the consequences of racism as a member of the Holocaust Center’s Outreach Program. She is a board member of the Janusz Korczak Association of Canada. She lives and works in Vancouver, B.C.

Avrumele: Recollections of a Hidden Child
By Albert Hepner
Self-published in 2018, paperback, 106 pages Available at Amazon.com

Our readers may recall Albert Hepner’s abridged account of his childhood experiences in German-occupied Brussels that appeared in our 2015 issue (page 18). This book is Albert’s complete Holocaust memoir. With near total recall, the author expresses in exquisite visual and sensory details his wartime struggle to understand his bewildering surroundings. The voice is that of a child, the perspective is of an adult.

Shortly after Belgium is invaded, Albert’s father dies of natural causes, leaving him and his widowed mother to fend for themselves as the situation for Jews becomes increasingly perilous. Ultimately, to increase their chances of survival, mother and son must separate. They are helped by two heroic Jews—his mother’s physician cousin Maurice (Motl) Globerson, and his father’s longtime friend, Abraham Winnik—plus a long list of courageous Belgians who provide one sanctuary after another.

Throughout the book, Albert deals with fears of discovery and with the question of identity, a familiar quandary for many former hidden children. The following quotation articulates the past and present manifestations of his dilemma: “Pierre asked ‘Are you Jewish? ... ‘NO,’ I nearly screamed. My lifesaver asked, ‘Really?’ as though he knew more and that I was lying. I’m sure that what happened to me at that moment is what I now know is an epiphany. I was seven, in unfamiliar territory, mostly with strangers, and I had to lie about who and what I was to the one ‘adult’ besides my mother who seemed to be a true friend. That episode with Pierre has always gnawed at me. It probably explains why I am always driven to reveal—explains why I am always driven to reveal—explains why I am always driven to reveal—explains why I am always driven to reveal—explains why I am always driven to reveal—explains why I am always driven to reveal—explains why I am always driven to reveal—explains why I am always driven to reveal—explains why I am always driven to reveal.”
During the war, my cousin Joseph Kleinhandler was known as Joseph Petit to protect his identity as a Jewish child. After his resettlement near family in the United States, Joey never talked much to anyone about his experiences during that awful time in his life.

At age 10, he was put on a train by his parents to go live as a sick child—even though he was not ill—at an institution for pre-tubercular children, about 100 kilometers from his home in Lens, in the north of France. When liberated by the Canadians, he returned to his hometown, and discovered that thirty members of his family, including his parents, had been killed. He had nowhere to turn but to American family members, whose names and addresses he had carefully guarded in a little notebook hidden in his school desk at the Abbey of Valloires in Argoules. He was united with them in 1947 through an army chaplain-rabbi from New York who was in contact with the family.

Joey’s parents had moved from Poland to Lens, a town near Lille, a few years before his birth. When the possibility that Joey could escape the impending doom of a Nazi invasion was opened to his parents, Joey was placed on a train with a bunch of school children who were headed to the countryside for a summer vacation camp. Since age 10, and for most of his life, Joey could never reconcile himself to his mother not crying when she said goodbye to him. Only later in life did he come to realize that she had been protecting him by her behavior.

Joey went with a Red Cross representative to a farm in the Jura Mountains in the east of France, and at the end of that summer, he was sent to the Abbaye de Valloires, an old abbey that was being used as a hospital, where, of the 350 children there, only four that we know of were Jewish. The institution was run by nuns and nurses, and Joey was required to attend Mass every day, and Vespers every Sunday night. Although he was from an orthodox Jewish family, he was so good in catechism class that he was asked to teach the other students. He did not take first Communion, however, and in order to avert suspicion, Joey was given the task of pumping air into the organ during Mass. There were only three nurses who knew Joey’s true identity.

When he arrived in the U.S., Joey lived with various members of his family, graduated from the University of Connecticut, and spent an entire career as an executive at Warner Communications in California. He was married and had 4 children.

In a speech that Joey gave to his daughter Shannon’s high school class in 1999, he said that the three years he spent at Valloires were very difficult, lonely and confusing, and he added, “I have never been able to overcome the pain of that experience; I probably never will.”

Joey was a true survivor in every sense of the word. He didn’t dwell on his sorrowful childhood; he became a special, loving human being, who never felt a sense of joy, or gratitude, or elation at having survived. The feelings, the emotions, the enormity of the whole experience never changed for him over the years. He always asked himself, “Why did it have to happen?”

When Shannon introduced him that day at her school, it was the first time she learned about her father’s life during the war. She said on that occasion: “Instead of emerging from the war full of hatred and anger, he has emerged as a man of love and understanding … To me, and to those around him, he is an example of forgiveness. He always inspires me to look for the good in other people. He teaches me, not in his words of advice, but in his gentle actions.”

Joey’s gratitude to the nuns and nurses was a huge part of his life. They were the righteous people who stepped forward at the risk of their own lives to save Jewish children and adults from certain death perpetrated by the moral corruption of the time. His surviving family is forever grateful to the nuns and nurses at the Abbaye de Valloires for having saved Joe, who was a big, loving part of our lives until his death in 2001.