

MY STORY

Marlena (Malka) Singer Sutin

Background: *On August 23, 1939, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a non-aggression pact. Hitler's troops invaded Poland on September 1, 1939; Stalin's army overran eastern Poland on September 17, 1939. On September 13, 1939, German troops and Panzer tanks entered Dombrowa (also known as Dabrowa) Tarnowska, a town in southern Poland. The Germans destroyed and occupied a large part of the town. At the time, Marlena (Malka) Singer was almost two years old.*

Before the Nazis overwhelmed Dombrova Tarnowska, Marlena's father, Zvi Singer, was a wholesale wheat merchant. In preparation for the looming invasion, he gathered his family and a few belongings into a horse-drawn wagon, and headed east. The Orthodox Jewish family of four — Zvi, his wife Yanina (Yentl in Yiddish), Marlena (Malka), and her older brother Yossi — proceeded in a column of many Polish people, Christians and Jews, from nearby areas as well as from Dombrova-Tarnowska. Adding to the general havoc was the retreat of parts of the Polish army. As the panicked masses fled, Nazi twin-engine Junker dive bombers followed them eastward, strafing them with bombs and bullets.

After a near hit, Zvi could not find Marlena and called for her in vain amid flying shrapnel and dirt. With no response to his shouts, he thought she had died. In despair, he said he would not go on without saying Kaddish for his infant daughter. But at last Marlena's cries were heard. She was covered with dirt, but alive! Many of the fleeing souls attempting to escape these brutal attacks perished under this blitzkrieg.

The family continued its eastward journey for several weeks until they reached Grzymalow, a town in the Suchostaw region of Ukraine, where they remained for some time. One night in 1940, the Soviet Union's secret police rounded up masses of refugees and packed them in tens upon tens of train cars with a single sliding door and two small windows. The trains crossed the Ural Mountains into Asia.

At one point the passengers were moved into cattle cars and transported on the Trans-Siberian Line to the Amur area of Siberia, not far from the Sea of Okhotsk. The family had traveled through Kiev, Kharkov, Swerdlovsk, Omsk, Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Lake Baikal, ending up in Aldan. Here, they and hordes of others were placed onto trucks and driven to an area that had but two extremes of climate: It was either very hot or very cold, and had vicious winds. Men worked mostly at logging, although in the spring the Poles planted potatoes and vegetables. There was no schooling for the children.

In June 1941, Germany broke its non-aggression pact and invaded the Soviet Union. Based on an alliance reached between the West and the Soviet Union in August 1941, those in Aldan were allowed to leave the area and find residence elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Marlena's father was able to get the family back on the Trans-Siberian Line, and the family ultimately ended up in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where they stayed until the end of WWII.



Malka in Samarkand

Life was difficult in Samarkand. The summers were sweltering, requiring the family to sleep outside. Earthquakes occurred often, sometimes producing large crevasses. Marlena was placed in a school where only Russian was spoken, and she did not know Russian. The family had little to eat. Marlena contracted malaria and suffered from other illnesses. Many people died there.

May 9, 1945, the Soviet Union “V-Day,” presented the opportunity to return to Poland. After the misery of Samarkand, they traveled via an open cattle car train and arrived in Poland in May 1946. The family went to Krakow and then on to Dombrova Tarnowska. But Poland was no paradise: On July 4, 1946, a pogrom occurred in Kielce, a nearby village. There, a mob of state militia, police officers, and civilians murdered 42 Jews. The violence was not new to Kielce where Jews were accused of blood libel or using the blood of Christian children for ritual purposes.

The Singer family learned about their extended family and others. A few survived in hiding; most were killed during the Nazi invasion or they perished in concentration camps, including Auschwitz.

Back home in Dombrova Tarnowska, the family resided in Marlena’s grandmother’s home, which had survived the Nazi destruction because it had been occupied by Nazi leadership. For a period of time Marlena’s parents placed Marlena and Yossi in what Marlena considered to be an orphanage in Krakow. Marlena felt abandoned.

She said she was “... sent away to a school in Krakow with my brother. I started to wet my bed again and the other girls would make fun of me. This unfortunate circumstance stayed with me through my teens. I did not have the emotional power to defend myself against the girls’ cruelty, as I felt alone and without will. The school was really an orphanage supported by American money so that my parents did not have to pay. I hated being away, and I hated that place.”



Malka in orphanage, seated in front row, 3rd from right. Sign states “Religious School of Krakow.”

The family stayed in Poland into 1949. Despite Israel’s statehood in 1948, Poland did not allow Jews to leave Poland for Israel until 1949. Marlena’s family was among the first families to leave Poland for Israel. They traveled by train from Krakow to Warsaw, then to Prague, and then to Bari, Italy, where they boarded a ship for Israel. The ship had no water with which to wash, and “everyone had lice.” Upon arrival at Haifa, Israel, they were sprayed with DDT.



Jewish Scouts: Malka standing top row on right after the war, Poland.

After living in tents in Haifa for a time, the family moved to a small apartment in Jaffa, an ancient city a few kilometers south of Tel-Aviv. In Israel, Marlina soon became “Malka” to people outside the family. “Malka” is the Hebrew word for “Queen” and is a common name for girls in Israel. In 1953, Malka and her parents moved to Tel-Aviv into a very small, scantily furnished one-bedroom flat, with a tiny kitchen, bathroom, living room with a couch on which Malka slept, and a small balcony facing the street.

Malka’s Holocaust history and experiences took their toll on her in Israel. Malka’s father was sad and depressed, and continually ill with tuberculosis and other ailments. Malka’s mother was needy herself and lived in a reality all her own that prevented her from communicating responsibly and sensibly with her own daughter.

Also, Malka felt incompetent because of her lack of education in early childhood and her troubles at the Israeli Orthodox girls’ school she attended. The school only taught Hebrew and Jewish Scriptures. She was thrown into a big, ill-equipped classroom with 40 to 50 girls and just one teacher. The school provided no mentoring, guidance books or tutoring; and there were no math or social studies courses. Malka did what she could to escape the pain she was suffering at home, and to withstand the cruelty of the other girls at school.

Malka recalled that her mother “had a ruthless streak when it came to money,” that she treated others uncaringly and in that regard was “incorrigible.” Her mother lived in a fantasy world that coveted money and anything that smacked of luxury. But her parents’ life was anything but luxurious. Malka’s parents owned and eked out a living with a very small, mini-neighborhood, twenty-foot-wide grocery store near their home. To save money, they essentially abandoned Malka to her father’s sister, Sophie Stendig. This was a life-damaging trade for Malka.

Sophie had survived Auschwitz. Sophie’s daughter, of the same age as Malka, also named Marlina/Malka, did not survive Auschwitz. Sophie lived with guilt that she did not suffer the same fate as her daughter. Sophie took out her guilt, despair, anger and sorrow on Malka, going so far as telling Malka on many occasions that it should have been Malka instead of her daughter who was killed in the Auschwitz gas chamber. All in all, between her parents and her Aunt Sophie, Malka was burdened with parents and an aunt who were unable to provide unconditional love for Malka and who, for reasons only psychologists can explain, were able to survive in Israel much at Malka’s cost.

Malka was but a child, aged 2 through 8, from the time of the German invasion in September 1939 until her return to Poland in 1946. Her recollections are minimal. Her physical and emotional suffering from those years and later from her seriously damaged parents and Aunt

Sophie, have constantly plagued Malka to this day — in dream, nightmare, and memory. Further, carrying over from her days at the orphanage in Krakow, her emotionally lost mother, and then her oppressive life with Sophie, Malka has been unable over the years to defend herself against domineering, cruel, and abusive women.

In a book about Malka's life, *Malka's Journey*, Malka explains her early life in Israel:

“The real sadness and melancholy set in when my parents gave me to Sophie. They thought that Sophie had a beautiful apartment, a husband, and plenty of money, and that she would take good care of me and give me things that they could not afford. Yossi stayed with my parents. But the truth was that I was miserable, for a number of reasons. The war made monsters out of some people. Sophie had seen her daughter go to the gas chambers. It paralyzed her and made her inordinately bitter all her life, but interestingly enough, not with acquaintances, or her husband, mainly with me, my parents, and other cousins.”

With the onset of her teenage years, Malka had terrible acne, got her period, had to wear glasses she did not need, was skinny due to lack of appetite, was frightened to look in the mirror, and generally felt “pushed out of everyone's life.” She never belonged to any organizations or youth movements that many Israeli girls participated in. Her parents did not know about such things, and Sophie did not want to share Malka with anybody. But the worst blow was having to live with Sophie. Malka recalled:

“I was a punching bag for Sophie; her needs obsessed her. She did not help me through these awkward times. And I wanted so much to please her; there was nothing that my parents did to protect me, no love, no “how are you doing?” No sense that they were involved in my life. They threw me out. They gave me up for dead. So, Sophie must have felt that she was imperial, that she owned me, and that my parents had to bow to her wishes.”

Since Malka was raised in Orthodox Jewish tradition, attending only Orthodox schools, her father and Yossi did not allow her to do military service. As a young woman at that time in Tel-Aviv, Malka felt somewhat under-rated because she was not part of the young fighters in the 1948 war of independence. Malka describes this:

“When I turned eighteen, it was time to go into the army, but my father and brother both refused to let me go. It was devastating for me. My father took me to the army office where I had to swear I was Orthodox and therefore exempt from participation. It was extremely embarrassing and painful. I wanted to open a door and escape my life with Sophie and my parents but the door was locked shut. I signed up to go to the religious university Bar-Ilan.”

Bar-Ilan was totally out of reach for Malka, however. She had a poor base of education. And she had serious thoughts of suicide. Malka was “*unequipped to be with young people,*” was depressed and emotionally exhausted, and it was obvious that Bar Ilan was not going to work. Yet, as she moved on at eighteen years of age, Malka transcended her awkwardness and she blossomed.

After her unsatisfactory Bar Ilan experience, Malka was employed by the Israel Tourist Office, working primarily at Lod Airport to assist tourists. Her English verbal skills were quite sufficient. She had studied English from the fifth grade on, and she went to movies, concerts, and the theater. Her English writing skills were somewhat limited. She was a beautiful woman, and

she had developed the social skills needed for the work. She dated various eligible young men, but the relationships floundered from one to another. Malka rejected Orthodoxy and while she has maintained the traditional religious aspects of Judaism, she has not regretted leaving Orthodox Jewish life.



Portraits of Malka in Israel

The years of 1961, 1962, and 1963 were life changing. In 1961, Malka visited a favorite and wonderful relative who was a well-known and successful caterer in New York City. Malka met Jonathan Sutin, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, who was visiting New York City. They met one evening at the home of a friend of her mother, Mrs. Malik. Malka and Jonathan saw each other a few times. In 1962, Jonathan traveled to Israel to see Malka, but this adventure failed because Malka's parents had heard, incorrectly, from Mrs. Malik that Jonathan was not Jewish, and Jonathan's visit to see Malka was making Zvi ill. In 1963, after graduating from law school, Jonathan returned to Israel, proved that he was Jewish, and he and Malka were married in September. Malka's "boss" at the Israel Tourist Office was a rabbi from England, and he performed the marriage ceremony. A Cinderella story!

The rest of the story is quite bright. Jonathan and Malka lived in the District of Columbia for two years, while Jonathan worked for the United States Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, spending a good deal of time in Alabama on voting rights and school desegregation matters. They then moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Jonathan joined his father's law firm. Malka taught at their synagogue and kept their home and saw to it that their three beautiful children, Elyana, Jessica, and Joshua, were properly fed, educated, and full of good character and values. At the writing of this article, Malka and Jonathan will have reached the 57th anniversary of their marriage.



Jonathan and Malka Sutin at their wedding



Malka and Jonathan with their children at the family home in New Mexico

This article was written by Jonathan Sutin, Malka's husband. Malka's entire story can be found in ***Malka's Journey: From the Holocaust to a Life Beyond***, as told to and written by Judith Chazin Bennahum, a close friend, and published on Amazon. Jonathan wrote a 1,350-page biography of his father, Judge Lewis R. Sutin, also found on Amazon. And Jonathan is presently working on his own memoir.