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Out from the Ashes



My Life Story

Joan Feuerman Mermelstein

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FORWARD

We, Jews, are a small people in a wide world. We have faced dispersion, hate, pogroms and massacres, while continuing to struggle for survival. But we are also a people rich in traditions, with a heritage of spiritual, national and universal values which we contributed in full measure to mankind.

Remembrance serves many purposes. It is important to look back not only to the endless path of Jewish martyrdom, full of persecutions and death, but also to the rich lives that our relatives and ancestors lived. The Holocaust not only wiped out six million lives, but it destroyed a whole way of life, and changed, forever, the lives of those who survived.

Remembrance helps us look back and wonder how different the fate of Holocaust victims and survivors would have been if the western leaders of those days would have had the stamina to stand up to Adolf Hitler's appetite for territorial expansion and wild dreams of enslaving all nations he could conquer to create the Third Reich. This insanity could have been stopped in time, but it was not. The leaders of Britain and France wanted to believe that they could reason with Hitler until they finally came to realize that they were dealing with a monster. By this time, Hitler had managed to build a powerful War Machine. It took six years of bloody battles with millions of casualties and billions of dollars to put an end to the Nazi nightmare.

Before the madness, I was a young girl, burning with hope of becoming a teacher and in love with a young man, a dental student. He was murdered as was my beloved family and all my dreams. Somehow, I survived... but, oh, how different my life would have been...

Now we can see with admiration and pride the miracle of the eternity of the Jewish people — of our lives rebuilt and of the rebirth of the State of Israel. While carrying the inner burning and suffering of the past, the Jewish people, including survivors of the Holocaust like me, stand tall today with Israel in the center of the Jewish present and future. We know that our martyrs did not perish without a dream, because above the smoke of the crematoria, they saw the coming of rebirth. Out of the ashes, the dream of Jerusalem became a reality in our generation.



MY FAMILY

My father was raised on a farm in the Carpathian mountains, while my mother lived in the city of Davidova near Munkacs. Her family lived in a big, beautiful, elegantly furnished home with servants. My grandfather, David, was a very prosperous businessman. My mother went to private schools and had a Hebrew tutor at home.

While my father was single, he taught *cheder* during two winters in the city where my mother lived with her family. When my father went to synagogue on Friday evening, my grandfather David invited him after the services to come to his house for a Shabbat dinner. That evening my mother and father fell in love at first sight. They had very different backgrounds and lifestyles. But that did not matter because they were very much in love. Before my father had to return home, they decided to get married.

My grandfather offered to take my father into his business after they were married. But, my father explained that he promised his father before he died that he would take responsibility and be in charge of the whole farmland. Since he was the oldest son, he had to take care of his widowed mother.

My father's mother, Grandmother Sandra, opposed the marriage. She wanted a daughter-in-law who knew how to perform farm chores. She said, "Rosy is a princess with silk hands and will not fit into the community."

After they were married, they arrived in a coach to our town in Turja-Bystra. When mother stepped out from the coach, wearing a beautiful silk dress and a hat to match, all the women came out to welcome her. The women whispered between

themselves and felt that they were on a much lower pedestal and my mother would not communicate with them.

But shortly, they found out that they were wrong. Mother reached out to her Jewish neighbors and was eager to get to know everybody. She soon found out that many Jewish families in the community were very poor. Mother got in touch with the rabbi from the city she grew up in. That rabbi, as well as many other rabbis, collected donations from the rich and distributed the money to the poor families.

This simple and harsh mountain setting provided only the basic necessities in those isolated villages. Because it was such a poor community, teachers of the *cheder* did not want to settle there and went on to cities where they were well paid. With the rabbi's help, mother persuaded a few teachers to stay in town so that the boys could get a Hebrew education. She assured them that they would be well paid. Mother brought the Jewish community to life with hope and faith. The Jews became spiritually strong and vibrant.

The women in the villages were very primitive and isolated from the outside world. Mother was a city girl, from privileged parents, intelligent and well educated. She encouraged the women to dress up on Sabbath and go to *Shul*, which they did only on *High Holidays*. My father got some help and made a partition and reserved a cubicle with a dozen extra seats for the women and their children. Mother was leading the services.

The whole Jewish community was very pleased and grateful when mother helped to enrich the congregation. They all respected and followed her leadership and caring and compassion for the needy.

On Saturday afternoons, she organized for the Jewish families from the scattered villages to get together and celebrate the Shabbat together. Everybody brought food, snacks, fruit, pastry and drinks. They exchanged jokes, riddles, Yiddish folk songs and dances. While everyone had a good time, mother spoke to them: “We need to be connected in order to be strong. We can learn a lot from each other about the need to help to decrease the isolation and loneliness that many of us feel. We all have to make an effort in helping to improve our Jewish community.” My mother gained a lot of respect and admiration. Everyone was eager to volunteer a few hours a week to improve their neighborhood.

Then years later our community flourished. They succeeded in invoking faith, hope, prayer and joy collectively. Mother’s passionate concern for needy humans and her compassionate lifestyle was a joy to serve God. Soon even her mother-in-law Sandra learned to respect and admire my mother.

Grandma Sandra was also very instrumental in the welfare of the community. My father's mother, my grandmother Sandra, lived on the farm all her life. My grandmother was interested in mother nature since she had been a little girl. She enjoyed walking and observing our farm land and the forest nearby. She picked and smelled wild flowers, dandelions and different shaped types of leaves. She would spend more time outdoors than inside. Grandma would take along a basket and fill it with mushrooms that she had found under birch trees. She also picked raspberries, blueberries and cranberries. She observed, connected and experimented with different kinds of herbs, leaves, teas and barks. She had a natural ability to discover and develop the power of how to heal ourselves. Her lifestyle and habits revealed new discoveries. She discovered many home remedies which were very effective in healing

common diseases, such as colds, flu virus, occasional headaches, indigestion, back aches, stomach troubles, constipation, diarrhea, infections, swelling, insect bites, burns, bruises, rheumatism, stiff joints, high blood pressure, home remedies to relieve pain, and more.

Since there were no doctors in small villages, our neighbors and the community turned for help to my grandmother. My grandmother, Sandra, took care of the poor people using her potions and herbal mixtures. She planted in her garden plants and herbs. In her basement was one room fixed with shelving on the walls, filled with all kinds of spices and herbs. She cured the sick from many common illnesses. Patients trusted her.

At first she practiced preventative medicine in our family. She would say: "You can do more for your health than any doctor can." She believed then that we are what we eat. It was more true at that time than it is now, since then we didn't have any pollution or pesticides. The air was clean and fresh, the water pure and crystal clear. My grandma, Sandy, took every grandbaby and put it on the table after its bath and gently massaged it with Cod liver oil from the shoulders down all parts of the body, to the toes. She learned that cod liver oil is rich in bone building properties. After the massage, the baby had a good night's sleep.

Later, she showed and recommended to all mothers with babies in our community to give them a gentle massage after their baths. The mothers were very grateful to find out that their babies didn't wake up and cry in the middle of the night after being massaged.

Grandma knew which teas were good for a cold. She also recommended chicken soup and garlic. For a stomach disorder she used mushroom-barley soup and a herb tea. One of the teas flushed

out the flu bacteria. Goat milk, garlic, onions, oats, barley, mushrooms and many other home remedies healed and in many instances stopped the pain. The preserves mixed with cognac cured viruses and other stomach disorders.

She knew every source in medicinal healing and which herb maintains the health of the body or aids in curing the sickness. She also knew when she couldn't help and recommended seeing a doctor. The patients asked grandma to call the doctor for an appointment. She would tell the doctor about the symptoms of the illness and what she had done to try to help. When the doctor couldn't help to lower blood pressure with drugs, the patients turned to Sandra for help. She used leeches for high blood pressure.

She would place the leech on the vein behind the ear. The leech sucked out the sick blood, she said, and then fell to the floor. The blood was squeezed out from the leech to be able to use the leech again. After this act the patient's blood pressure improved. The patient was then monitored to find out if he had to be treated often.

The neighbors and the community believed and trusted in her. She was successful most of the time in helping them to relieve the pain, heal and cure some of the common sicknesses. My grandmother helped heal the sick for over 50 years. I was about 12 years old when she died at the age of 87 years. She went to sleep at night and didn't wake up in the morning. My grandmother left a rich source of herbal knowledge to the community. She helped many sick people to feel better. She would not accept any money for her services. The Ukrainian people had a loom in every house. They wove linen table clothes and towels, and they would give

some to Grandma in payment. They also worked on our farmland in return for the services Grandma did for them.

Our grandma instilled in her grandchildren the idea of healthy eating and taught us to practice preventive medicine. When the grandchildren were old enough they helped grandma pick, collect and deliver many of the herbs and plants with healing properties. They would pick and bring home from the forest mushrooms, chamomile tea, valerian tea, raspberries, blueberries and cranberries. My siblings also learned to know some of the organic herbs and barks, such as Magnolia bark, birch bark, willow bark and more. They all had healing properties. The grandchildren also helped to dry the mushrooms, some teas, herbs, fix bark extract, and store them for the winter. The berries were cooked into preserves, mixed with cognac and other ingredients, and stored for the winter as well.

Time has not changed the availability of the herbs, nor their usefulness. I am not surprised that after a century so many doctors are turning to alternative medicines first, before it is necessary to use drugs.

EARLY CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Before World War I, my family lived under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In our house we spoke Yiddish and Hungarian and were called by our Jewish names. With our gentile neighbors we spoke Ukrainian, but were called by our Hungarian names. (See Appendix for a list of family names.)

After World War I ended, a major political change came with the creation of the Republic of Czechoslovakia out of three districts: Bohemia with the capital of Praha, Moravia with the capital of Brno, and Slovakia, with the capital of Bratislava. A year later, in 1919, our district Carpathia with the capital Ushorod, was incorporated into the new democratic country. Professor Thomas G. Masaryk, a patriot and admirer of democracy, became the first president.

Both of my parents were Orthodox — strictly kosher, and well educated in Hebrew. In the winter my father taught in *cheder*, teaching the boys to pray, to read Hebrew, and Jewish history. He prepared the boys for their Bar Mitzvahs. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons, my father and a few of his friends studied Talmud Torah.

I was born on January 20, 1917, the last of 12 children, to Rose and Israel Feuerman, on a 100 acre farm in the town of Turja—Bystra. We lived with 115 other Jewish families among about 1,000 Ukrainian, some Hungarians and some German people.

One of my earliest memories is of playing with other children in our orchard as a two and a half year old. When my friends fathers' arrived from work, they ran into their fathers arms calling, " Papa, Papa." I ran into the house to ask my mother where

my papa was. She took me in her arms and told me that my papa was taken to heaven by the Messiah on a white horse.

From that day on, I had many questions to ask about my papa. I often tried to imagine what he was like and how he looked. When I got older, it was explained to me that he became over—heated while feverishly raking hay one summer day to beat a thunderstorm. He contracted pneumonia and died after a short illness, three months before I was born. I was told that my daddy was a hard-working, very earnest and religious man. He was firm and strict with his children, but he was a caring and loving father.

We were a very close and loving family. We helped and respected each other. The older siblings took care of the younger ones. My sister Ida was the kindest sister. She gave me special attention and loving care. She named me “Yolan” which means “good girl” in Hungarian. When I began school, I became known as Yolanda.

After my father died, Ida wrote a letter to our Uncle Maurice in Westchester, New York saying that she wanted to emigrate to America. This was in 1917, during World War I. Because of the war, she did not get an answer until 1920. In the meantime my sister Sara got married and moved to the nearby city. Ida was also dating a young man and was ready to get married. Four weeks before the wedding she received an invitation from Uncle Maurice. She packed her wedding dress and said good-bye to her fiancé. She told him that she would try to send him the papers necessary to come to the States as soon as possible.

She left home in June 1921, and I was three years old. I remember when Ida picked me up and hugged and kissed me good-bye. She told me, “I am going to America and I will send you pretty clothes and toys.”

There were four families, our Jewish neighbors, who arrived together on the same ship at Ellis Island. Uncle Maurice was there waiting for Ida. He was happy to meet Ida. She was a beautiful, healthy twenty-three year old girl. He took her to Macy's Department store to buy her new clothes. He packed up the clothes she had brought with her, including her wedding dress, and sent them back home.

He was proud to introduce his niece to his wife, Mina, and, when they came to his restaurant, to his customers,. Uncle Maurice told Ida, "You are young and beautiful, why would you want to marry a greenhorn? You will be working with us here in the restaurant, learn to speak English and you will meet here many young men and marry a rich man." Ida was a big help in the restaurant and tried her best to please Aunt Mina, but Ida felt that Aunt Mina didn't like her and was very jealous of her. Ida also couldn't get used to the climate in New York. She would get sick when she smelled the fumes from the cars. She explained all this to our Uncle. He was very disappointed but could not persuade Ida to stay.

The Agency found her a job in the Catskill Mountains as a waitress in a hotel. After a few months, the manager of the hotel asked her to go out with him and shortly after this they married and moved to a resort town where Ida's husband, Sam, worked in a hotel in the winter. The town was Lakewood, New Jersey. They raised two daughters and lived there for a long time. Ida's husband Sam died when she was 75 years old. She lived alone for ten years. When she had a hard time doing daily chores, her older daughter, Harriet, invited her to live with her family in Connecticut. After a few years, she was transferred to a nursing home in Torrington, Connecticut, where she died at the age of 98.

Our family was prosperous while my father was alive. He worked hard and managed the family land very effectively. The Ukrainian neighbors were happy to work on our farm. In return, they received farm produce among other things. My older siblings also helped out.

Each year, after harvesting, there was a surplus of grain, fruits and vegetables. Our father, with some help, loaded all our wagons and the horses hauled the produce to sell in the marketplace. From time to time, he also sold cattle and horses.

In the early 20th century small towns and villages in Europe didn't have electricity and plumbing. Therefore people had to work much harder and it took longer to do even the simple everyday chores.

In order to cook a meal, wood had to be delivered from the forest, chopped and a fire had to be made in the stove. Then you had to bring a pail of water from the well, in order to start to cook a meal. You had to start from scratch. You couldn't buy in the grocery noodles, spaghetti, sauces, or cans of foods.

We had our own chickens and geese and when we wanted to cook poultry, the *shochet* had to kill the chicken or goose, the housewife plucked the feathers and cleaned it. After this, to make it kosher, the housewife used salt and soaked the poultry in water according to our traditions.

A housewife spent much time in the kitchen cooking and baking. The good part was that the people ate healthy, fresh food. It also tasted much better.

The soil was naturally rich in beneficial resources. We didn't have pollution, chemicals, additives or pesticides. The environment was pure and clean. The air and water were pure and fresh. Our mountains were filled with tourists every summer. Many

sick people from other countries came to cure tuberculosis and asthma. The baths of mineral water cured rheumatism and arthritis.

Besides farmland, our family had two horses, two cows, two or three young calves and two goats and in the barn. We also had 20-40 geese and many chickens.

Autumn was the busiest and most productive season in the year. All the farm produce was harvested and delivered home — the grains, corn, potatoes, beans, cabbage and more. The produce was sorted, most of it was stored for the wintertime, some of it was shared with needy neighbors and the surplus was sold in the marketplace. In our orchard we had four different types of apple trees, pears, a few different types of plums, cherries and walnuts.

In order to attend to all the chores, we needed outside help. While our neighbors worked on our farm land, their younger children were in our care. Mother prepared meals for all the children. We played in our orchard filled with fruit trees and we picked flowers. We were happy and always kept busy. When we were older and went to school, we came to our house after school. I helped the other kids with their homework. We lived and worked with our gentle neighbors together in friendship until the big political change came in 1939.

I remember when I was a little girl, my sisters would invite our Jewish friends who helped evenings to clean the cabbage. The men shredded the cabbage, and put it in barrels. After they added salt and other spices, the cabbage was pressed until it felt moist. The barrels then were covered and stored in a cool, dry place. A few weeks later, we had sauerkraut.

When the fruit was ripe, our family cooked jam from a mixture of plums, pears and cherries. Some of the fruit was dried

in the oven and stored for the winter. It took a lot of labor, time and knowledge to attend to all the produce properly.

My older sister Ida told me that my oldest brother David was drafted in the military in 1915 during World War I. My mother went with him to visit the Rabbi before he left. There was a large waiting room at the Rabbi's house filled with Jewish people. Rabbinical students made notes of everybody's story and presented them to the Rabbi. The Rabbi knew my mother well. His wife was a close friend of my mother. Our family would often deliver fresh farm produce to the Rabbi. The Rabbi blessed my brother, giving David a Mezuzah, to wear at all times during the war. He reassured my mother not to worry, "David will return home in good health." In 1917 many soldiers came home; most of them had suffered severe injuries. My sisters then told my mother, "See, you believe so much in the Rabbi, our David did not come home like everybody else in this town." Mother did not give up hope. David was in captivity in Russia. He was helping one family with farm work and was treated well.

One day a tragedy struck our family, three months before I was born, when my father contracted pneumonia and died after a short illness. After my father died everything began to unravel. Our family was in a state of transition.

My mother had never worked on the farm. My mother could not keep up with the harsh demands of farming and had to attend to her new infant (me). Two of my siblings were married, my brother Samuel was a mechanic and worked in the city, and my brother David was still in captivity. My sisters Ida and Sarah tried to manage the land, but soon gave up as they had heated disputes with the Ukrainian neighbors. They claimed that the land belonged to them. By then my sister Sarah married and lived in the nearby

city. My mother had no other choice, but to give all the work and responsibility of the farm to our neighbors. They were supposed to split all of the farm produce and the livestock in half for their work. However, since Mother was unable to oversee what was happening, they cheated her and gave her less than her share.

In the meantime, my brother David returned from war captivity in Russia in 1918. He found a new sister but lost a father.

Shortly after he returned, David got married and built a house for himself next to ours. He told mother that he would oversee the farmland, and he made a more formal arrangement with the neighbors that they should plant and harvest the land and in return they would get half of all the farm produce. With this arrangement at least we got the portion of the produce to which we were entitled.

Even when we were struggling ourselves, Mother managed to share what we had with those in need. She said, “When you help those in need, you get much more in return. We are put on this earth to do good deeds. Never do to others what you would not want them to do to you. Learn to appreciate what you have, and don't feel bad for what you don't have. Always have strong faith in God, 100%, and he will fulfill your needs. Never lose hope, for life without hope is empty and meaningless.” She instilled in us to say the morning prayer after we got washed, and we always said a proper blessing before every food we ate.

Another childhood episode that I recall was that involving my widowed mother and her suitor, Isidor. They were childhood friends and crossed paths 30 years later — after my father had passed away.

Isidor was divorced, a handsome, witty, intelligent man, but mother did not like his character and values. He was a self-centered

and greedy person who was an established businessman in the lumber trade. Isidor wanted to date mother when they were teenagers. Mother refused and Isidor was very hurt.

When he learned that my mother was widowed, he persisted in trying to tell her that he had never stopped loving her. Isidor told mother that the older children could take care of themselves and the two youngest children, that was my sister Pearl and me. He explained that he would be a good father to my sister and me once they were married. He promised to provide a good education for us in the city.

He told mother that he changed and would take good care of the family. However, my oldest sister Ida didn't trust him and discouraged mother from getting involved with him. When Ida immigrated to America in 1921, Isidor was able to persuade mother to marry him.

We all moved to the city where mother grew up and where Isidor lived. He bought us toys and asked us to call him Daddy. Perl agreed to call him Daddy, however I refused. I told him that my Daddy was in heaven and he was not my Daddy. At that point Isidor got angry at me and took away the toys from me.

Mother then realized that Isidor did not really love us, but pretended to buy our affection through toys and gifts. After 10 months experiencing a few unpleasant episodes, we packed up our belongings and returned home.

I felt very guilty that I was to blame for the breakup, but mother reassured me that she was at fault since she wanted to trust him so that we would have a better life.

As I grow older I remember and recognize the values by which my beloved mother lived. I am very sorry that I did not appreciate it then as I do now. She would say: "People deal too

much with the negative, with what is wrong, why not try to see positive things. God made the world this way, so that we would have the possibility of being nice to each other. We are put on this earth to be honest, helpful and friendly to each other. When we go out of our way to do a favor for someone, we feel right. Being kind to others is a way of being good to yourself. When we see only ourselves, we walk alone with our burdens. When we recognize that we are all in this together, we feel much better. By treating ourselves with kindness of acceptance, we make it possible to reach out first to those closest to us, and then to others. In order to bring more love into our lives we need to practice forgiveness. We need one another. We live in a wonderful world of beauty and mystery. The more we observe, connect to all that surrounds us, the greater and deeper the experience of peace, joy and beauty is available to us. We need each other to share the mysteries of life and death, to remind us that we are all one.

I do not get much sleep at night so my mind lingers on the past. I see my mother on Friday evening. She put on a special dress for lighting 12 Shabbat candles and saying the blessing. The warm, *challah*, *gefilte* fish and chicken soup were always shared at the dinner table with a few needy invited friends. Mother's deep faith and belief in God helped to overcome many difficulties in her life. She also respected and believed in one Rabbi in our district. This particular Rabbi was famous for helping to solve problems. The Rabbi would go every morning to the *mikveh* with his flock, pray most of the day, and study Talmud. In the afternoon he would spend a few hours helping people who came to him with different problems.

Mother would explain to us "The Rabbi is holy. He is closer to God than we are. God grants the Rabbi's wishes. For

instance, when we have a legal problem we need a lawyer to represent us in front of the judge. The lawyer is closer to the judge than we are.”



STORIES FROM MY CHILDHOOD

Story #1

When I was a little girl my mother told me many interesting stories. I remember a few, but not with all the details. When my grandfather, David Berkowitz, was a young man, Franz Joseph was the Emperor and leader of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My grandfather served in the military and became a colonel. On one occasion, when attending military exercises, he saw in the near distance a young girl swimming in the river. He saw a big wave run over her and the girl went down and was drowning. My grandfather ran and jumped into the river in his uniform, pulled the girl out and carried her to the shore. She was unconscious. Her driver rushed from his carriage with a blanket while my grandfather tried to revive the girl. When she was breathing, my grandfather asked the driver, "You know this young lady?" The driver said. "This is the princess, the daughter of Emperor Franz Joseph, and I am her driver." Colonel David was shocked to hear that. He carried the princess into the carriage and made her comfortable. He signaled the driver to have the horses speed up. My grandfather sat in the front seat with the driver.

When they reached the palace, the princess told her father, Emperor Franz Joseph that colonel David Berkowitz just saved her life. The Emperor expressed his gratitude to the colonel and asked my grandfather if he wanted money, gold or a promotion. My grandfather said, "I am just glad that I was in the right place at the right time." After a pause, my grandfather said, "On second thought, I do have a request, your majesty. I would be grateful, your majesty, if you would implement a law to give Jews equal rights." The Emperor shook hands with the young, handsome

colonel and told him, "Your request will be granted." Then he put a heavy golden ring with the Emperor's name engraved on it on David's finger, telling my grandfather, "You are a hero. You have earned this ring." The news spread all over Europe. The Jews soon felt that they were treated better, and felt that they were going to be treated better for many years to come. The Jewish people were saying, "Emperor Franz Joseph is our friend.

Emperor Franz Joseph was a powerful leader over two countries at the same time, Austria and Hungary, which was called the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Story #2

Another story I remember that my mother told me was that her father, David Berkowitz used to invite four to eight poor people on Friday evenings after services to his house for a Shabbat dinner. There was a table set in a room for those invited people. Once a compassionate Rabbi, always helping the poor, having meetings and collecting money for the poor who were too ashamed to go begging, wanted to find out if the well-to-do-Jews in the city were helping these poor people. He disguised himself and dressed as a beggar and went on Friday evening to *Shul*. After the services, as usual, my grandfather, David, invited a number of them to come back to his house for a Shabbat dinner. Included among the beggars was the disguised Rabbi. The servants served a delicious meal for them, just as they always did.

Next Friday the Rabbi came again to the same synagogue, but this time he was dressed in his Rabbinical robes. David invited the Rabbi and four poor people for Shabbat dinner. The Rabbi accepted the invitation. This time the Rabbi was seated in the

bright diningroom, the candles were lit, the table was set elegantly with a fine damask tablecloth, crystal glasses, and fine china. The rabbi was offered to make the *kiddush* over the wine and the blessing over the *challah*. After the fine meal, the Rabbi and the rest of the family prayed and sang *zmiros*.

After the celebration the Rabbi stood up and said to David, “Do you know Mr. Berkowitz that I was here last Friday too, eating a Shabbat meal in the next room with the beggars. I wanted to find out how it felt to be excluded from the festivities. Just to see a glare from the candle lights, but not to participate in saying the blessings over the wine and made me lose respect and made me feel like I was different from the rest of you.

Mr. Berkowitz, if you would bring the table from the other room into this diningroom and have the poor people join you in sharing the joy of Shabbat, your mitzvah would be much bigger.”

David Berkowitz was never so embarrassed in all of his life. He begged the Rabbi to accept his apologies, and promised to have the poor invited guests share in the Shabbat traditional observances.

Story #3

I remember one more story my mother told me about her father, David Berkowitz. He was in the import/export business. So he traveled a lot, often long distances by train. Most of his trips were around 50-80 kilometers. He had a coach, horses, and a coachman — a driver who drove him to many different towns and cities where grandpa did business.

On one occasion his driver was sick, so he had to hire another driver for an important trip. Grandma Molly helped him pack a few things for an overnight trip.

All over Eastern Europe, as you traveled on the road, when you entered the next town or city, there was a monument — a wooden cross about 10 feet high with Jesus on it. Whoever approached such a monument, except a Jew, stopped the horses, stepped down, and kneeled before the cross and said a prayer. Some of them just removed their hats and crossed themselves to pay respect to Jesus. Grandpa David noticed that when his new driver passed by such a statue, he did not stop and did not pay any attention to the cross.

Grandpa did not like that and did not trust the man to drive him. He told him: “Petro, we have to turn back home. I forgot to bring with me a very important document.” Grandma Molly was surprised to see them returning, so grandpa explained what happened and said: “A man who doesn't believe in anything can not be trusted.”

A few weeks later the same driver killed a wealthy businessman while sleeping over in a motel with him. He took all his money and disappeared. There was his picture on the front page of the newspaper. Grandpa David recognized him and showed it to the family.

Story #4

After my father died, my oldest sisters, Ida and Sarah, took responsibility in managing the family farm land. Both of them used to help father with working on the farm, so they knew well the

people with whom they shared the same borders and the place where the borders connected.

When my sisters came with a few helpers to harvest the corn, Ivan was already waiting for them. He told my sisters they should leave, that the land belonged to him. When my sisters protested, Ivan pushed Sarah to the ground. Both of my sisters came home crying, telling mother that they would not go to the farm land any more to be pushed around and humiliated by Ivan.

Mother tried to reassure and calm down my sisters and at the same time get dressed so she would not miss the bus. She went to visit the Rabbi. The Rabbi knew all the difficult times my mother endured — losing her loving husband and expecting a baby. He shook his head, took a deep breath and said: “I consider this to be one of the biggest sins that Ivan has committed. I assure you that Ivan will be punished accordingly.”

In the meantime the Rabbi's wife insisted that mother stay with her a few days to relax before she went back home.

When my mother got off the bus and walked home, she passed a funeral procession. Ida and Sarah approached her with the news that Ivan had died of a heart attack. The rumors spread quickly. God had punished Ivan for behaving unjustly and cruel to my sisters. From then on our Ukrainian neighbors lived and worked in friendship with their Jewish neighbors. After all, they knew that they needed each other.

GROWING UP

When I was growing up, only well-to-do Jewish families from villages sent their children to cities to get a higher education. Jewish boys and girls in villages didn't want to remain in small towns working on farms. They went to the cities to learn a trade. They would learn and work for the employer for two to three years, receiving room and board and earning some money. They became tailors, shoemakers, seamstresses, mechanics, etc.

My brother Samuel was a mechanic. He had to work much harder back then, since there were no machines. He was a single, handsome young man working in a city near the Polish border. He ate out in a restaurant and got sick from food poisoning. The doctor put him on a special diet and the nurse, Irene, offered to take care of him, under the doctor's supervision. She would bring homemade meals for him. In return Samuel would buy her nice gifts. When my brother was well he thanked the nurse for everything she had done for him to help him to get well again. He asked her then to stop caring for him. The nurse told him that she would continue to care for him because she was in love with him. My brother was surprised to hear that. First of all she was not Jewish and second he did not love her. Samuel knew then that he had to quit his job and return home. He told us the whole story when he came home and packed his backpack and left in a hurry on a bicycle to the nearest city where our married sister, Sarah, lived. He knew that Irene would follow him home.

The next day the nurse came to town and asked where the Feuerman family lived. When she walked into our house, she asked where Samuel was. Mother asked her to sit down first and

calm down. Then mother expressed her gratitude for her helping my brother to get well. Over dinner mother explained to her that we were a strict Orthodox Jewish religious family and it was against our laws to marry outside of our Jewish faith. Mother told her that she was a very nice, intelligent and kind person, so she would have no difficulty in meeting a young man of her religious faith. Irene told mother that her life had no meaning without Samuel. She saw his photo on the dresser, pressed it to her heart. Before she left, she said, that she would be back when Samuel came home.

After she left mother went again to tell her story to the Rabbi. About ten days after mother visited the Rabbi, Samuel got a letter from a mechanic. He needed an experienced man to manage his shop because he was sick and had to stop working. The mechanic lived in the same city that the Rabbi lived in. Samuel accepted the offer after a long discussion. He signed the contract and took charge of the business. The mechanic had two daughters and after a few weeks he asked my brother to marry his oldest daughter, Bella, saying it would have to be soon, while he was still alive. Samuel told him that he liked and loved Lea, the younger daughter, and so he married her. It was a religious wedding, where the men and women danced separately and the bride and groom held a handkerchief during the dancing. The same Rabbi officiated at the wedding. The nurse found out that Samuel was married and we never heard of her again.

My brother was happily married and had two children. In 1940 he was taken to a slave labor camp. His wife Lea and the two boys went into the gas chambers in Auschwitz in 1944. After the liberation Max, my husband, met my brother in 1945 in

Yugoslavia. My brother returned home and after some rehabilitation, he remarried and had two children with his second wife. He had been afflicted with many illnesses in the labor camp and died in 1973. His second wife and both of his children came to the United States and settled in Brooklyn, NY. His children are married now with children of their own and they, along with his second wife, continue to live in Brooklyn. A grandson who was named after my brother Samuel attended the University of Pennsylvania.

On Sabbath mornings, I carried the prayer books for my mother to *Shul*. In the afternoons on Sabbath, the Jewish boys and girls from the nearby villages would get together in a park or in a house. We would sing Yiddishe songs, exchange jokes and riddles, eat fruit and pastry, and drink fruit juices. We had fun. Married Jewish men would also get together and sing *zmoros* and study Talmud.

Passover was a very memorable tradition in our house. We had a large house with a large oven built in the hallway, and because of Kashrut, our house was selected for baking Passover matzos. The whole procedure was under Rabbinical supervision. The wheat was harvested in dry sunny weather, and milled in the specially cleaned mill. The flour was stored away in a dry, clean place. The work began a day after Purim. All furniture was cleaned, all the “Chametz” was removed, and all necessary equipment was installed.

Jewish young men and women and children 10 years of age and older were chosen to participate in baking the matzos. We all wore white aprons after scrubbing our hands. I was 10 years old and I started the process. I filled a measuring dish with matzah

flour and poured it into a large copper dish and another girl poured in a dish of water. A lady quickly kneaded the dough and the next person divided the dough into ten equal pieces. Five women on both sides of the table were further kneading the piece of dough and with rolling pins rolled out the dough into a round matzah. The 10 matzahs were then put into the oven. Everything was timed and done in haste. As soon as the first ten matzahs were out of the oven, the next ten matzahs were baked. This process went on for four weeks. The matzos were then put in one, two, five, and ten kilogram boxes. All the Jews from the area came to pick up their orders. I have to say that those home-baked matzahs tasted much better than those baked by machines.

In Eastern Europe, Jewish people took their time to fully celebrate and observe each holiday according to all the traditions. We looked forward to Passover, for the whole family got together for the celebration of the two Seders, with traditional Passover meals. We also had to chew our bitter herbs to remind us of our ancestors when they were enslaved in Egypt thousands of years ago.

Shavuot, which celebrates the Jews receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai, was a major festival for us. I would call all my Jewish friends into our orchard where we picked flowers, made wreathes, and put them on candlesticks. We would decorate the house with green branches. After the services we enjoyed dairy meals – blintzes, cheese cake and kreplech.

On Tisha b'Av, we fasted all day, and Mother told us the sad story and the meaning of this holiday. On Rosh Hashanah, a major holiday, we prayed both days in the synagogue for a good year. We always had some people join us for special holiday meals

and wishing everyone a happy New Year. We fasted and prayed all day in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur, when we asked God for forgiveness for our sins.

We had a large *succah* for *Sukkot*, and we decorated it with all kinds of ornaments and flowers. After the services we enjoyed eating in the *succah*. I remember the gentile neighbors saying: "Let's finish the harvesting, because the Jews are praying for rain." It always seemed to rain on *Sukkot*.

Chanukah was also a historical, meaningful holiday. We baked *latkes*, exchanged gifts and lit Chanukah candles. Purim was another happy holiday celebration. Boys and girls would dress up in costumes like children do on Halloween in the United States. Mothers baked delicious pastries, and we would give and take *shalichmunas*.

The Jewish people in our town and in the nearby villages lived in close friendship. We cared for each other and communicated like one family. Now few, if any, Jewish families live in the district of the Carpathian Mountains.

SCHOOL DAYS

In my home town Turja-Bystra, in Carpathia, the peasants were very poor. In fact many of them could not afford to buy shoes and warm clothes for their children, so they were unable to go to school in the wintertime. The teachers had a meeting because something had to be done so that the children would be able to attend classes. One teacher came up with an idea. He was a talented young man who wrote poetry and he was also a playwright. He invited a few other professional young people to this meeting, including me. He told us that he was going to write a play and he would need us to volunteer to accept given parts by him. After practicing at home, we would travel to nearby cities and perform. My sisters sewed the costumes for us. The school principal came along to introduce us and explain to the audience that we were volunteering to perform to help to send the poor children to attend school in the winter.

We were so successful that we kept on performing twice a year on Easter and Christmas vacations. It was in all the papers and on radio news that we were buying shoes and clothes for the needy children, so that they could go to school in the winter. We were 18 volunteers and we became close friends. We were performing from 1930 till 1939, and we enjoyed doing it.

When I started school, the Czech language was installed in the educational system, so I learned a language not spoken at home. German, the principle language in Central Europe was also taught.

Throughout my school years I was a good student and a favorite of my teachers. Besides school, I was also helping out on

the farm, and would look forward to receiving parcels from my sister in America. In her letters she would call me her child, since she raised me for my first three years. My mother wasn't feeling well, had a difficult time, after she lost her loving husband.

Because I was special to Ida, most of the presents were for me. I had many friends in school. I liked to help out my classmates with their homework and shared my lunches with those in need.

When I completed eight years of grade school, I was fluent in five languages —Yiddish, Ukrainian, Czech, German, and Hungarian. In our region most children completed their studies at the elementary school level. Only the privileged families could afford to send their children on to high schools in the cities.

However my teachers, who were fond of me, spoke to my mother about a high school education for me. After some persuasion, she allowed one of my teachers to introduce me to a high school principal. Impressed with my scholastic record, the principal made arrangements for me to tutor three students between classes, in order to earn some pocket money. I moved in with my married sister Sara, who lived three kilometers from the school. I walked this distance each morning to make my first class at 9 AM, and walked home after classes were over at 5 PM.

My elementary school background helped to make me advanced beyond my fellow classmates who entered high school from the 6th grade. The faculty recognized this, and counseled me to take a test which allowed me to skip my sophomore year.

The crowning honor in my high school years was receiving a golden medal in my senior year (1935) as the most deserving student in the school. The medals, which were engraved with the bust of President Masaryk, had been issued to commemorate his

80th birthday. Only one student in each Czech high school would earn this award. The medal was presented to me by the principal on graduation day in a moving ceremony. Amid all the congratulations from friends and parents, I felt sad that my family was not there to share this event. I vowed that if I ever had children, I would give high priority to participation in functions with them so they wouldn't feel neglected.

During the summer following graduation I admitted that I wanted very much to become a teacher, since I loved children. The complication was that a college degree was required, and it was very difficult for Jews to gain acceptance into colleges at that time in Czechoslovakia. Also, the area college was located in the District capital, Ushorod, which would mean more separation from my family.

One day that summer, when my mother and I were shopping in a grocery, the owner, Mr. Handelsman, invited us into his house. He was an old family friend, and a Godfather to one of my brothers. His son Emil, a well-to-do newspaper editor, happened to be visiting at the time. Emil took an interest in me and asked to see my high school report card. Impressed, he proceeded to make an appointment to have dinner with the Bishop of the district. Emil and the Bishop had been best friends in college and had helped one another get through school. The Bishop tutored Emil in exchange for pocket money. The Bishop was presently a chancellor of a Catholic Teachers' College. The two got together and Emil discussed my situation, the closeness of our families, and did not forget to mention that my mother was a widow. In the end, the Bishop kept his old promise to grant any favor to Emil by persuading the Board of Trustees to accept my application,

provided that I passed two entrance examinations administered in Ukrainian. In order to do that, I would also first have to complete a one-year Ukrainian language course. I decided to accept the challenge.

Over dinner at Emil's beautiful villa, we laid out the arrangements for my food and lodging in Ushorod (capital city) while I studied. He and his family traveled extensively, but he still offered me board for one day a week. Five friends of Emil each would serve me dinner one day a week. A Rabbi and his wife, very good friends of my mother, were very happy to have me live with them and have the Sabbath meal with them. In exchange they would receive fresh dairy products and flour from our farm.

My personal life went well in the capital city of Ushorod for the first couple of years. All families were kind to me and made me feel at home. Emil and his friends had fine cooks in their employ, who prepared extraordinary food. The rabbi's house was a contrast, humble and strictly kosher. I observed the Sabbath with them in a very orthodox style.

After finishing the Ukrainian course, I passed my entrance tests to the Catholic Teachers' College. Emil's newspaper carried a long front-page article, blessing the Bishop for making an exception to admit an orphan Jewish girl with excellent grades into his school. His article gave me a lot of recognition in the city, and I met many people on account of it.

RISE OF FASCISM IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The political climate in this border region was visibly changing as early as 1937. At the direction of the Nazis, fascist terrorists crossed the Polish border to loot and destroy Jewish businesses, synagogues and factories. They claimed that they were the original Ukrainians, who had been displaced by the Jews. Rumors started to spread that Czech families in the Carpathian region would be required to move westward into the interior of Czechoslovakia. As a result, wives and children of professionals living in Ushorod began to leave. This caused confusion for the students, who were torn between getting their education and their personal safety.

At the college, I was the only Jewish student in a class of 42. It was awkward for me to attend classes in a devout Catholic surrounding, while living in a religious Jewish atmosphere. It seemed that I had to work much harder than the rest of the students in order to make it. I tried to ignore any episodes of discrimination for the sake of my goal.

Towards the close of my sophomore year in college (1938-39) events turned for the worse, as had been rumored. Nazis appointed Hungarians to replace Czechs at all professional jobs in the Carpathian district. The larger cities on the Hungarian border, including Ushorod, quickly felt this takeover by the Hungarian regime. Jewish doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professionals lost their licenses and their right to practice. Jewish soldiers were no longer trusted to serve the country. They received shovels for their rifles and striped prisoners' uniforms with yellow armbands

marked YUDE. Jewish students were likewise expelled from high schools and colleges.

After all my hard work and all the help I had received from many kind people so that I could become a teacher, Hitler's madness shattered my life. I became depressed and confused. At the time I thought this was absolutely the worst thing that could happen to me because it destroyed my hope for a better future.

Hitler's madness was spreading rapidly for all of Eastern European Jews to see. It began with humiliation, inconvenience, and fear and led to increasing horror.

In this turmoil, a Ukrainian attorney, who had an office a block from the college, approached me and introduced himself. Rudy seemed to know all about me. He explained a new law requiring all non-native residents of Ushorod to leave the area. As a Ukrainian, Rudy was still free to practice law among his people. He offered me a job in translating documents and other paperwork from Czech to Ukrainian. This job in Berezna lasted for about 8 months. One morning, I learned from his landlord Mr. Handler, that Rudy and his wife had escaped during the night, when he learned that Hungary would be invading the whole Carpathian region. This came to pass a few days later, when Hungarian officers impounded everything in the office for their military use.

I locked up the office and returned home. Rudy dispatched a letter which was forwarded to me at home, instructing me to remain in the office to serve his clients. In lieu of my last two months' salary, he requested that I collect food products in 20 kilogram sacks from his apartment.

My family was against my going back to Berezna since law and order had broken down there, and people were being killed in

the streets. I took the chance though and made a near-fatal mistake. Hungarian officers were occupying Rudy's apartment and caught me as I entered. They interrogated me and did not believe my story, even when I produced Rudy's letter. They wanted to know how it was possible for a Jewish girl to be working for a Ukrainian lawyer when Ukrainians hated Jews. A private was handed a note and told to escort me to the general because the lieutenant believed that I was a spy. The general believed my answers and released me, but I was lucky to come home alive that day. My family had been right in not wishing me to go back to Rudy's apartment.

In 1940, after my sister Pearl gave birth to twins, my mother asked me to go to Mukachevo and help my sister with the babies. She knew that this way I would be thinking less of my troubles. Mukachevo was the largest city in the region, and had a large Jewish population, including Polish Jews who couldn't find work in Poland. I saw many of them dragged away at gun point. They were herded into trucks and driven across the Polish border where they had to dig their own mass graves. They had to undress and then all their jewelry was taken from them. They then were lined up on the edges of the graves and brutally slaughtered with machine guns. Many of them were still alive when they were buried.

Massacres and further restrictions became a way of life. A new law was then added to the confusion in 1940, ordering Jews to submit proof that their parents and grandparents were taxpayers in the towns and cities they lived in. Everyone busily traveled to search for documents, believing that the proof would grant them immunity from persecution. Meanwhile, local police and authorities in the region rounded up all young men and sent them

to slave labor camps. Four of my brothers-in-law, including Pearl's husband, were drafted. Gradually, all men between the ages of 16-45 who were in good health, including my two brothers, were taken off to labor camps. They were not permitted to write home and their families didn't know where they were or even if they were alive. Before they left, many hid their valuables in walls, soles of their shoes, or in the ground. Women also hid jewelry in their shoulder pads, hems, and in their long hair braids. This jewelry was for the most part family heirlooms, which were considered precious.

I met a young man in the park while taking care of the twins. He had been expelled from dental school, with just two years of study remaining. We found that we had a lot in common, and started to date. He, too, was given notice to leave for labor camp. He left promising me that we would get married if and when he returned. I later learned that he died of starvation and barbaric treatment.

In 1943, my mother became very ill, and she wanted me to come home. Parting with my sister, Pearl, and my two adorable nephews was very difficult and emotional for me. The boys were very attached to me, and I loved them dearly. I remember them putting their little hands around my neck, crying and pleading: "Please, Aunt Yolanda, don't leave us. We will be good, and we will behave. First Papa left us and never returned, and now you are leaving us, too."

With a broken heart, I kissed them and said goodbye to my sister and her two darling little boys with a feeling that I would never see them again.

On the train back, the conductor asked me for identification and had me thrown off at the next station. In the middle of the night, I walked for hours. When I came to a town, the name was known to me. A Jewish girl by the name of Lily Friedman went to high school with me, and she was from that town. I located the family's house and I spent the night there. We were not sleeping, just talking and hoping that the world, especially the US, would come to rescue us from persecution. The world knew about the gas chambers and the destruction of European Jews and the world did nothing. I then walked about 25 kilometers to my home.

In my town, I found my family and the rest of our Jewish neighbors living like captives. We could not leave and had no mail delivery or newspapers; our radios were taken from us. Gentiles looked down at us with disgrace. We lived in the shadows full of fear and humiliation, awaiting the worst. Our gentile neighbors often spoke to us about news which they had heard from markets in the large cities. They related many atrocities done to Jews in other areas by the Nazis. It was as if they delighted in watching us react to their news. These were the same neighbors who helped us with planting, harvesting, and other farm chores, particularly on the Sabbath. They knew ahead of time exactly when our families would be taken away because they attended evening meetings with the authorities. It was therefore not coincidental when Mary, a neighbor girl who milked our cows and cleaned our stables, asked to borrow my nicest clothes and jewelry to wear to a wedding. Two teachers in the village asked me to knit sweaters for them and their husbands on a rush basis. They promised to pay me later but never did. When my brother David repaired the orchard's fence, a neighbor asked him why he bothered (they knew he would never

voluntarily relinquish his property, the possessions of his father and grandfather before him).

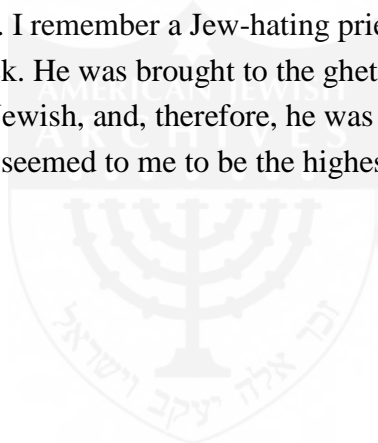
On the last day of Passover in April, 1944, a sheriff and two assistants of his knocked on our door at 4:00 AM. The barking dog awakened my sister Helena and me. I got up, lit a candle, and went to the door. The sheriff ordered us to get dressed and follow him. We were not to bring anything other than a change of underwear. I told him that my mother could hardly walk, as she was recuperating from a long illness. The sheriff said he had orders not to miss a soul. Outside, the neighbors surrounded our house and anxiously awaited our departure. They shouted and asked the sheriff for our house. Others wanted the livestock and many asked for our land. No sooner had we stepped out, they rushed inside the house to grab clothing, linen, china, bedding, etc. The sheriff made no move to stop them. We were escorted to the town hall, where we joined other Jewish families. All of us were frisked. A former classmate, whom I used to share lunch with frisked my family.

My niece had a jar of ointment with her which the doctor had prescribed for her infected knee. That girl took a pencil to stir the ointment to check for hidden jewelry. Then she asked my niece: "Golda, for what do you take this ointment?" When my niece told her that she used it for her infected knee, the girl told her with a big smile, "Golda, you will not need the ointment where you are going." She took the jar and threw it in the garbage. The guard praised her for doing a good job.

We were loaded onto trucks and driven out of town. A group of urchins came out with musical instruments and played a march. In the next town, we were transferred to a bus, which was already loaded with Jewish men, women and children. Rich and

poor, including sick and crippled, were jammed together for the journey to Ushorod, the capital. A large ghetto with high fences had been erected and was patrolled by guards. Here we would stay for the next six to seven weeks.

Ghetto life was characterized by suffering, poor sanitary conditions, and starvation. It got worse by the day as more and more Jewish families were added. Babies screamed day and night as they suckled on their mothers' breasts, and no milk came out. Rather than this deplorable existence, many doctors, pharmacists and others issued drugs to their families and themselves, and committed suicide. I remember a Jew-hating priest being brought in wearing his frock. He was brought to the ghetto because his grandmother was Jewish, and, therefore, he was considered Jewish by the Nazis. This seemed to me to be the highest form of irony.



DEPORTATION TO CONCENTRATION CAMP

Finally, it was the turn of the Jews of Ushorod to be taken inside the ghetto. This came as a total surprise to many wealthier Jews who had given large sums of money and gold for a promise from the authorities that they would remain secure in their own homes. That promise was broken.

One foggy night, without warning, Hungarian troops acting under Nazi orders, opened the gates of the ghetto. Everyone was ordered to assemble. The Jews were given no time to make any arrangements. They had to leave their factories, department stores, and beautiful homes. They had no chance to hide or save any of their possessions.

The dead and weak were buried in a mass grave. We marched to the train station under heavy guard. My sister Helena and I supported our mother, and by some miracle, she managed to get to the train with us. Through the fog, we spotted a long, rusty cattle train, and armed Hungarian troops waiting at the station. The train doors screeched open, and we were herded into the train, pushed by rifle butts. As we fell on top of each other, the doors were shut and the noisy, windowless train rushed off into the pitch darkness. There were no seats or toilet facilities on the train. Within a few hours, it became unbearably difficult to breathe. Some people were fainting, others were vomiting, and babies and the sick were dying. The train sometimes stopped to discard those who died during the journey. At the stop in Slovakia, we saw, for the first time, a German SS Commandant who took over the command from the Hungarians at this point.

After a long journey, the train stopped for a final time. It was again nighttime, and we were ordered out. A regiment of SS men and SS women with rifles, whips, whistles and dogs approached us and began to separate us. The aged were separated in one group, mothers with young children into another group. I told one of the Gestapos that I would go with my mother, but he hit me on the arm which held her. He told me that I would go to work and my mother would be taken care of. There was a lot of screaming, resistance, and praying as we were separated. The SS men used rubber whips on us and the commandant yelled very loudly, “Ferfluchtetes Folk. Wo habt Ihr Ihren Gott? Warum helfft Er Euch nicht?” This means, “Dammed people. Where is your God, why doesn't he help you?”

Everything went so fast, that my sister and I had no chance to say good-bye to our mother. My sister and I found ourselves lined up with single women 16-40 years old. We marched under heavy guard and dogs. On both sides of the street were high barbed-wired electrical fences. We stopped near a large metal door and a sign on the door said “Auschwitz-Vernichtungslager” (Extermination Camp). We were warned that to touch the fences would result in electrocution. The metal door was shut behind us, and we were led by armed SS men and women to a huge bathhouse. We were ordered to strip in front of the guards. Polish political prisoners next shaved our hair off. Jewelry fell from hair and clothing, which was efficiently sorted out and collected. After this process, I hardly recognized my sister when we faced each other. The successive shocks were too much for our minds to handle.

We went through a disinfection process, and we each received a gray linen dress uniform with several digits printed on it. That plus a pair of sandals were all the clothing we got.

The large group of girls were herded to the courtyard, counted, and divided among the cellblocks. My sister and I were led into block C. We found ourselves in long barracks with a passage in the middle. Flat wooden planks about six feet square were arranged on both sides. Twelve persons were pushed into each plank that night. In order to fit, we all lay on our sides packed so tightly that if one person wanted to turn over, then everyone had to turn as well. There were no mattresses or pillows, and it seemed impossible to sleep under those conditions.

In the front of the barracks, a cubicle was walled off by wooden boards. The “Block Elteste, Capo” stayed here. Her duty was to implement the orders given by the SS personnel. Our Elteste was a Jewish woman from Slovakia who had been in Auschwitz since 1941 and had become hardened and mean. She was given a whip and was allowed to strike us ruthlessly. It was hard to believe that she was also Jewish.

That first night was the most horrible in my whole captivity. In the middle of the night we heard lots of activity in the near distance. Peeking through the wall panels, we saw a startling scene. The elderly were lined up. Polish prisoners with large scissors cut and ripped off their clothes. Others removed valuables from their bodies. If they couldn’t remove their wedding bands, they just chopped off their fingers. They also removed the golden crowns from their teeth. Then they were loaded horizontally onto trucks like logs of wood. Horrible thoughts entered my mind.

In the morning, I went over to the Elteste and asked her to let me visit my mother. She answered, “Who the hell do you think your mother was, that she was spared from going up in smoke just as mine did three years ago.”

“Dear God,” I thought, “how much worse can this get?” We all had deep, painful thoughts about our parents and that pain never left our hearts.

Soon we learned what the daily routine was to be like. We were awakened at dawn, lined up outside, and counted. This activity seemed very important to the SS women. The warning was that all would be punished if any were missing. While we stood silently for two to three hours, SS women counted us. After our cellblock was counted and the numbers corresponded, we were sent back to the barracks. The procedure was called “Zeil Appel.” At 9 A.M., gentile Polish captives, who performed chores outside the camp, brought us large aluminum cans filled with soup made of water, grits, and squash greens. Each of us was served one large spoonful without utensils. This we received twice a day.

Although we could not visit someone in another cellblock, we often met in a huge bathroom. All kinds of rumors were exchanged. Each day a few German civilians came to the Camp. While we lined up outside, they selected captives who were pulled out of line and never seen again. Later we learned that Germany had a great labor demand since their manpower was being used in the military. The Nazis turned to the concentration camp population for their labor supply. There were noticeably fewer captives all around the camp every month. The unwanted were herded away and taken to the gas chambers under the pretense of

going to the bathhouse. (They were given soap and a towel.) Soon more trains with captives arrived and filled up the cells.

Once a note tied to a stone landed a few feet from me as I was going to the bathroom. It was thrown over the fence from another cellblock. The note was from a doctor to his wife. It revealed that his duty was to cremate the dead bodies. He knew that the Nazis would not allow him to live because he was a witness to their secrets. He encouraged his wife to eat everything and try to survive for their two boys who had been left with their maid, who had helped to raise them. I remember finding another note describing Dr. Mengele's barbaric experiments on twins, in which they were tortured before they died. My heart was deeply wounded, remembering my precious little nephews that I helped to raise for three years. It was difficult for me to part with them. I loved them deeply and felt that I would never see them again.

There was a constant turnover of captives at Auschwitz, a temporary holding place for those who were not exterminated. I witnessed the arrival of a transport from the Lodz ghetto. The women, after spending three years in the ghetto, did not look fit for any work. They said that at least in the ghetto, families could stay together.

One morning in July of 1944, we were all given towels and soap as we lined up. By this time, we understood what would happen as we were led to the bathhouse. We knew that the bathhouse meant the gas chambers. As we approached we could smell the terrible stench, which made us all cough. Suddenly a whistle blew and a command to halt was given. A car approached. Four civilian men stepped out and began selecting women. I was among those chosen, but not my sister Helena. We overheard them

say that they badly needed laborers, but most of us were “Dreck,” Helena sneaked into the transport while the men spoke with the Gestapos.

We were hurriedly taken to the train. There wasn't enough time to tattoo our groups' arms with numbers as was regularly done with others who departed Auschwitz for work camps. As we boarded the freight train, we assumed wherever we were going would be better than Auschwitz.

Our destination this time turned out to be a camp in the city of Gross Rosen in Germany. The camp's appearance was clean, both inside and out. Our barracks contained bunk beds with mattresses, pillows, and blankets. A group of Polish captives (girls) were very sad when they saw we had arrived because this meant to them that the German war effort was not winding down. The Capo was a former actress from Warsaw. We were informed by her of the camp regulations, which were strict. Rations consisted of one kilogram sawdust bread per week, imitation black coffee for breakfast, and soup for lunch and dinner. It was good fortune to find a piece of potato in the soup.

We set out to work at 5 A.M. It was a thirty minute walk from the camp to the textile factory. German women and children stared at us as we marched down the streets under armed guard. Boys in the Hitler youth, dressed in black uniforms, with swastikas on their arms, clapped hands while singing: “Eins, zwei, drei, führ, schmutzige Juden mashieren hier.” (One, two three, four, filthy Jews march here.) They sang this every morning as we marched to work.

Our foreman, Herr Kleinberg, was strict but also fair. He soon learned that a language barrier existed in this latest group.

Hardly any of the girls spoke German. The foreman asked whether any one of us could translate orders from him — German to Hungarian, Czech, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. I raised my hand. Herr Kleinberg called me into his office and asked me for my name. I had to think for a minute because we hadn't used names throughout our captivity. We had been reduced to numbers. Herr Kleinberg told me that my duties would be to translate his procedures and regulations to the captives. Also, the other women would report any machine repair needs to me, and I would be sent to the machine shop where French and Italian prisoners would do the repair work. Another responsibility I had was to vacuum the floors around the machines. The noise from the vacuum cleaner and the machines penetrated to my head from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. six days a week.

There were also German women who worked at the factory to supervise the more complicated equipment. I acted as an interpreter for them as well. These women were generally nice to us. They didn't care for the Reich but had to go along with it. One woman was very friendly with me and would sometimes in secrecy share her meager lunch of black coffee, a slice of bread, an apple and an onion. She told me that she was receiving ration tickets for milk, butter, and sugar to feed her three children (not herself). She believed her husband was fighting somewhere at the Russian front but really wasn't sure if he was still alive.

A few weeks later, the foreman called me into his office to praise me for my work. As a reward, he gave me a pair of vinyl overalls and a matching blouse, which is what the German workers were wearing doing this type of work. I was grateful for the extra clothing; it was a hardship to keep my only uniform clean at all

times. We would huddle in blankets on Sunday, our day off, to wash our dresses. Our SS supervisor raised a strong objection with the foreman over the clothes he gave me. Only German women could wear this, she said. He, however, stood his ground, saying she had no right to interfere with his decisions at work, just as he had no right to interfere with her regulations in the barracks. His policy was to treat his workers based on their productivity, regardless of their race.

An incident where I was put in personal danger began when I brought a wheel to the machine shop for repair. As I handed the wheel to the mechanic, he pressed into my hand a newspaper clipping. The article described how Germany was losing the war and about their setbacks in Russia. I read the clipping and crumbled the paper between my fingers. At the same time, I spotted the shadow of a SS man guard patrolling just outside the door. He might have seen the mechanic giving me the paper. As I waited for the wheel, I shredded the article with my fingernails and slowly dropped it on the floor. With my shoes, I further minced the paper so it was not noticeable. The mechanic was also scared of being caught, so I indicated to him that I destroyed the evidence. Sure enough, the guard stopped me as I left the shop and asked me to show him the paper. I pretended that I didn't know what he was talking about. He had an SS woman frisk me in another room. She, of course, found nothing.

As captives, we were not at all aware of events taking place in the outside world. Indeed, we did not know the day of the year, aside from knowing that if we weren't going to work, it was Sunday. On Sundays our chores went on inside the barracks — scrubbing floors, cleaning windows, and doing laundry. The

machine shop personnel had a relative amount of freedom, so they could listen to the radio or read newspapers and become informed. The Block Elteste was informed through her contacts among the French prisoners. On the day before Yom Kipper, she addressed all of us in front of the SS women. She wanted us to be optimistic about gaining our freedom and pray for punishment to those responsible for the tyranny. The Nazis could only whisper among themselves. They couldn't comprehend how starving women had the self-control to refuse food! For me, starvation was the ultimate form of pain.

In the winter of 1944-45, we heard rumors that Russian soldiers were advancing toward the camps. One night, there was a bombing raid nearby and we saw rockets glaring and felt the barracks shake. The next morning our camp was evacuated.

We later found out that if we had not left then, we would have been liberated by the Russians in February 1945. All of us, 550 women, would have been saved. Instead we went through a "Death March." Only a very few of us survived the starvation, freezing winter, unsanitary conditions, and typhus. Our only possessions were two blankets and some rags to cover our bodies. There were no trains available to transport us this time, so we had to march long distances in the snow to the next concentration camp.

We typically took shortcuts over farm land and slept in barns or deserted houses. The farmers in the countryside felt sorry for us, and despite warnings not to help us, they still tried to get food to us. They cooked soup or potatoes, or threw fruits and vegetables near us as we marched. One time I bent down to pick up an apple, when a Gestapo hit me with his rifle over my head. I fell

down and my sister pressed snow over the bleeding gash. I still retain a scar on my forehead.

The marches produced a very high death toll, from a combination of the cold, hunger and disease. The lice we were infested with carried typhus. Only about sixty of five hundred and fifty girls in our group would survive the march. The survivors were extremely ill. Parts of my body were frostbitten and my lower body was swollen and purple.

Eventually, we were unable to get up and continue the march, no matter what the Gestapos did or threatened. Our bodies had given up and we just could not move. At this point, the Gestapos loaded the live bodies onto trucks, and then we were put on a freight train filled with captives, bound for Bergen-Belsen. This was a major camp where captives from other camps were pooled together. It had warmed up — the winter had ended.

The prisoners' state of health was pitiful. An epidemic of dysentery broke out and our systems could not hold food. My sister took outside our two blankets, so I was laying on the damp grass. We were surrounded by many large piles of dead bodies. It is hard to describe our appearances — we looked like skeletons and were beyond recognition. I recall an incident where a girl approached a newly arrived group of men captives from another camp. She asked if any of them were from Lodz. One of them told her his name. “O my God, I am your sister Hanka,” she hysterically cried out. They stood only eight to ten feet away from each other, but couldn't recognize each other.

Each morning the SS women came to count us. This made no sense at all — most of us couldn't stand up to be counted. When the SS men and women failed to show up one morning, the

atmosphere suddenly changed. Voices shouted that the Nazis had left the camp. Those who were able, headed for the kitchen for some food. I was totally helpless, lying on the damp grass with a high fever. My sister went to get some cold water to cool off my body, but she found that the running water was shut off. She then joined others, who were able to walk, in the kitchen and brought some food back for both of us. I wasn't able to eat the food, so she ate it all. Within one hour, she as well as all others who ate from the kitchen that morning were dead. The Gestapos poisoned the food before running away.

In the afternoon, an open military car drove through the camp. A British officer was shouting to us in German that they had brought us freedom. There was unbelievable crying, yelling, and hysteria.

During the Holocaust, it was not the objective of any major power to save the Jewish people from annihilation. It was only indirectly, in the process of defeating the German Nazi war machine, that Allied Forces stumbled across the camps and encountered what was left of European Jewry. Nonetheless, there is much for which we Survivors are profoundly grateful. We know that if the British Forces had not come across the death camps when they did, far fewer of us would have survived.

When the British troops took over the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on April 15, 1945, they found piles of over 10,000 dead bodies, and about 40,000 sick. More than 35,000 died shortly after being liberated.

LIBERATION

It was difficult for us survivors to rejoice then or now. The end of the war was no cause for survivors to celebrate. The end of World War II was not the end of the Holocaust survivors nightmare. We felt lost, very sick, with deep wounds of pain, misery and despair. We had no families, no homes to return to. We were forced to live with the memory of experiences that cannot be fully described or comprehended. It would have been easy to despair. But instead of succumbing to bitterness and hatred, we survivors in this nation created a record of determination and accomplishment.

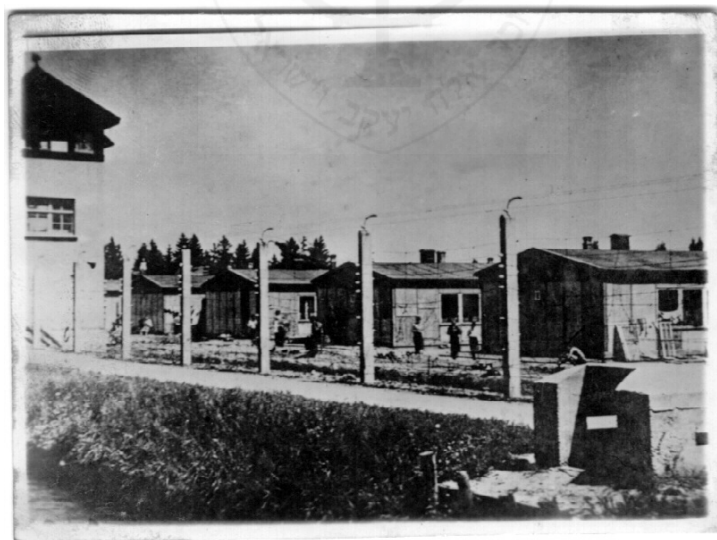
The British troops were not prepared for the hopeless physical condition of the survivors that they had found. Our stomachs could not handle the food, and many more were dying. The British called for more military help, Red Cross, doctors and nurses.

The soldiers converted the military quarters of the camp into hospital wards, where we were cleaned, deloused and given lengthy rehabilitation. The British managed to catch up with many of the Gestapos as they were running from the camp. They were brought back to the camp and made to cremate and bury in mass graves the dead bodies.

I was placed in a clean bed and given an alcohol sponge bath to reduce my fever. For about two weeks, I was fed only tea; gradually adding crackers with honey and later some soup to my diet. The doctors helped us with some medication, and during the spring of 1945, at this makeshift infirmary, gradually cured my stomach problems and typhus infection. My legs remained swollen

and partially frozen with sharp pain. My fever could not be suppressed, and my mind was affected. I was in a daze for much of the time and couldn't concentrate.

Count Bernadotte, the head of Swedish Red Cross visited Bergen-Belsen in May of 1945. A kind, soft-spoken gentleman, he came to tell us that Sweden, unlike any other nation in the world, was opening its doors to admit several thousand Jewish survivors. He believed that the healthy climate, good food and medical treatment in Sweden would aid in our recuperation. Within two months, three transports of patients were shipped to Sweden across the North Sea from the port of Løbeck. I was in the last transport to leave and was carried on a stretcher by two British soldiers into the ship. One of the soldiers put five photographs that he had taken into my robe pocket. He told me that the photos would give me “proof” that the atrocities had really happened, so nobody could deny it.



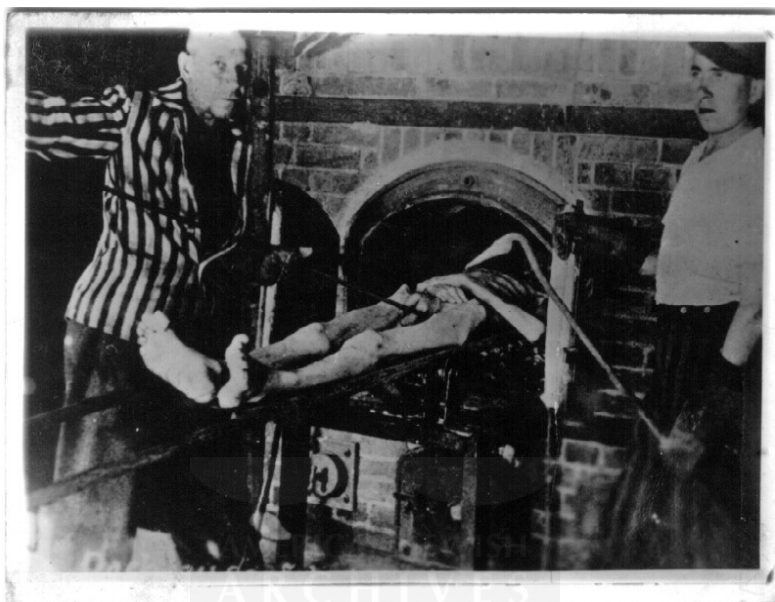
The barracks in Bergen-Belsen. The odor inside was so horrible that we took our blankets and laid outside in the damp grass.



Dead bodies are piled up on top of one another at Bergen-Belsen.



The liberated prisoners lead British soldiers to the thousands of corpses.



To prevent the further spread of disease, liberated prisoners put the corpses into the ovens to be cremated.



The British help liberated prisoners load the bodies into wagons.

Around this period, I developed amnesia, and I remembered nothing of my journey to Sweden. I found myself in a hospital bed, in pain, and burning up with fever. Strange doctors and nurses were tending to me. I didn't know who I was or where I was. My legs were elevated high above the bed. My mind had retreated into itself and was a complete blank.

One nurse in particular touched me with her warmth and kindness towards me. She was actually a language teacher who was volunteering at the hospital. Speaking in German, she explained that I was one of many thousands of critically ill victims brought to Sweden from Nazi concentration camps, thanks to the work of the Red Cross. She told me I was now free and that I would recover with the help of the team of doctors and nurses who were caring for me.

In six months time, I was able to sit up in bed by my own power. Lying in adjacent beds were two girls whom I recognized. They were aware of my amnesia, and tried to jog my memory by going over the details of our confinement, the work in the factory, and the long winter death march. This horrible discussion brought me out of my amnesia. The facts I began to remember gradually were nightmarish. I had horrible nightmares and would wake up abruptly, soaked and wet from perspiration. However, I still had no memories of my family.

I lived in Sweden from July 1945, until October, 1947. I spent about 10 months in the hospital in Landskrona. In May of 1946, I was transferred from the hospital to a countryside convalescent home in Ryd. There I joined other Czech girls who were recovering their health.

The Swedish doctors encountered physical abnormalities among our group which occasionally baffled them until they could make further studies. In my case, after spending about a year in the convalescent home, and while on the way to recovery, I developed severe stomach cramps. Both my thighs became numb, and I was frightened of paralysis. A team of doctors conducted all sorts of tests, such as sticking needles in my legs after blindfolding me. These doctors were unable to account for my ailments. It wasn't until four weeks later, when I had my first menstrual period in two years, that I was relieved of these terrible stomach pains and the numbness that I had been experiencing.

I owe my life to the extraordinary nature of the Swedish people, who were so sympathetic and generous. The populace near the hospitals had prepared presents for us, but had to wait until we came out of quarantine before they could deliver them. When that time came, we were showered with gifts from our visitors. I received a robe, slippers, homemade cookies, and a beautiful sweater knitted by a young woman. Moreover, each of us were “adopted” by a family whom we spent our Sundays with. This included a family dinner and outings to amusement parks, museums, concerts, etc. I'll forever be grateful for the love they displayed toward us.

A cultural difference between the Swedes and the survivors caused a problem for a short time. Wasting food is a cardinal sin in Sweden. Restaurants and institutions alike had self-service systems, where one could go back for second and third helpings as long as one finished everything. We tended to load our trays with more food than we could eat, probably because we feared starvation above anything else. The food we could not finish was

either thrown out or hidden away in our rooms. Eventually our hospital attendants discovered our practices and reported them to the Czech lawyer, our representative. He apologized for us and explained to the Swedes that it would take time following the period of barbaric treatment and starvation for us to adjust to a normal life style. The lawyer called us together also, and conveyed the Swedish feelings on the matter, which matched their desire to help us. From that time on, we did our best to follow the customs of our hosts.

I will always be grateful to the Swedish people. They reached out to us with compassion, caring and kindness. They went out of their way to help us.

In 1943, Count Folke Bernadotte, the grandson of Oscar II, King of Sweden and Norway, became vice-chairman, and Head of the Swedish Red Cross. In this capacity, during the final months of WWII, he led a Swedish relief expedition to Germany with the “white buses”.

Bernadotte’s expeditions succeeded in saving thousands of concentration camp victims and brought them to freedom in Sweden. I was one of those victims [in Bergen-Belsen 1945]. Very few people in the world did what Count Bernadotte did. He was one of the few people who got up and recognized what Hitler wanted to do.

On June 3, 1998 at the Isaac Wise Temple in Cincinnati, I had the honor to meet the two sons of Count Bernadotte. At the HUC Commencement Exercises in Cincinnati, the Heller Foundation chose Bernadotte as that year’s recipient of the award because he was very instrumental in saving Jews from German

concentration camps and because he devoted his life to the effort of peace.

During the award ceremony, Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, HUC President, asked the audience if anyone had been touched by Bernadotte. I stood up and Rabbi Zimmerman asked me to come up and present the prize award certificate to the two sons of Count Bernadotte.

I was deeply moved. I told the two brothers: “I can still hear your fathers words over the loud speaker at Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945. The world shut the doors on European Jews. But we, the Swedish people will open the door and help make you well again.”

The two brothers told me, “It was touching and memorable to meet me. It was an incredible experience to hear my memories.” I was the only survivor they met, whom their father saved.



Joan Mermelstein goes to the podium at the ceremony honoring her liberator Count Bernadotte.



Joan Mermelstein presents the certificate to Count Bernadotte's sons.



Joan holds the certificate flanked by Count Bernadotte's sons.

During the last half a century I always wished to have the opportunity to visit those extra-wonderful people and their beautiful country. Sweden is a kingdom, part of the Scandinavian peninsula. After WWII the Social Democrats took over the government. The labor market was well organized into a strong union. A laborer earned as much as a professional. There weren't any millionaires, but there weren't any homeless people. The population in Sweden is very low in comparison with the area of the country. The northern part of Sweden is filled with mountains. The summers there are very short, and there is a lot of snow in the winter. Central Sweden has beautiful scenery of large lakes and rivers. They are filled with fresh fish: salmon, trout, pike and herring. The Swedish people eat fish and potatoes four-five days a week.

The Swedish people preserved the old traditions. Christmas (Yul) was the main festival of the year. Since they have very little daylight during the winter, they decorate their homes, the outside, and the streets with bright colorful lights and greenery. They celebrate four-six weeks with dancing, music, and good food. They select a beautiful and talented young girl, dressed in white, wearing a crown on her head. She is called "Santa Lucia". She leads a parade on a large sleigh, decorated with flowers and bright lights. A marching band and a large group of people follow her singing Christmas songs.

Sweden succeeded in staying away of all German attempts to participate in the German policy therefore it was saved from oppression during WWII.

As time went by, relatives and former neighbors of the women in my convalescent group began to send letters of

invitations to immigrate to the US, Canada or Palestine, once they located us through the HIAS agency. Some of us joined the male survivors and illegally fled to Palestine. The Swedish people were hurt, as they seemed to want us to make a permanent home there. Even native Swedish Jews, who were assimilated in Stockholm, would visit and encourage us to stay. During one session, it was brought up that two of the girls were engaged to Swedish gentiles. The representatives met with the girls and advised them to imagine their parents' reactions to their plans. These words brought tears to one girls' eyes, and she pulled off her ring and returned it to her beau. The other girl, who was brought up in less religious surroundings, replied that her parents wouldn't have objected to her intermarriage, and so went ahead with her plans.

My total loss of knowledge about my family reached an emotional climax during a visit from a Czech government representative. He announced over the loudspeaker that President Benes welcomed all Czech citizens back home and would help get us readjusted to a normal life. When the officer entered my ward, I cried out that I wanted to go home. He asked me questions about my hometown and made me realize that the Carpathian region was now under Russian occupation. He also told me that he had visited a group of women who had been from my district. After he made a phone call, he arranged for a Swedish social worker to accompany me to Varnamo. It took two hours by train. We entered a hotel lobby and there I saw many women speaking Hungarian and Yiddish. As I looked around, one girl came over calling out my name and embraced me, "My God, am I glad to see that you survived," she said. I was also very happy to meet her. She happened to be a close friend of my family. Miriam provided me

with the first substantive clues to my identity. She told me the names of all my family and then she said: “You are lucky. Do you know that you have a sister in America? Her name is Ida.”

She then introduced me to two sisters, who would shortly immigrate to the United States because their father had sent them an invitation. The girls asked me to write my sister's name for them and anything else I knew about her. They promised to do everything possible to locate her. I doubted whether they would really bother to make a search, but having nothing to lose, I did as they requested.

In about six weeks I received a letter from them. Enclosed were copies of ads that they had placed in leading English, Czech and Yiddish newspapers in the New York area. There was no response yet, so they were about to try radio announcements. The radio message would read: “A Nazi victim, Yolanda Feuerman, born in Turja-Bystra, Czechoslovakia, now living in Sweden, is seeking her sister Ida Fourman in this country. Anyone having information which might bring these two sisters together should please come forward. This is very important.”

The radio announcement brought some quick progress. Some old neighbors of my family had called to reply to the radio ad. They could confirm that Ida was still living somewhere in the area. These neighbors had last seen Ida in New York City in the 1920's, when they had all immigrated together. They also wrote to me because they remembered me as a baby, and told me that they had started their own investigation by contacting other friends who knew Ida. An important fact was now known — Ida was married and living in the resort town of Lakewood, New Jersey. They promised to drive to Lakewood shortly and locate my oldest and

only living sister. I read that letter many times to make sure I understood what was happening.

Several weeks later, I was called to the office of the factory where I worked part-time. The secretary smiled and said that a cablegram had arrived for me from America. I began trembling uncontrollably, so much so that the secretary asked me for permission to open and read the cablegram to me. I nodded affirmatively. It read: “Dear Sister, Yolanda. I will soon send a letter and money — your loving sister Ida”. When I heard those words, I burst out in tears explosively. This was something I could not do for a long time. The office staff and my friends soon learned that after two years, I had found my sister. They surrounded me and were very happy for me.

Before long, the first letter from Ida arrived with a ten dollar bill enclosed (quite valuable in Europe at the time). She described her happy family life in Jew Jersey — a fine husband and two lovely teenage daughters. We wrote to each other very often and got to know more about one another. Ida had tried to write our family during the war years, but the mail did not go through. It didn't occur to her that small town folks would be affected. Immediately, Ida started working toward my immigration to the US. When I had my visa and was ready to depart, Ida informed me that the ships running between America and the Scandinavian countries were in the midst of a long strike. Therefore, she had bought me an airline ticket. Stockholm offices would notify me of my reservation.

When I read this letter, I was reminded of my dream of over a year ago, where my sister dressed in a pilot uniform asked me to fly with her to the United States. Stockholm informed me

that my reservation was booked for Yom Kipper 1947. I did not accept that flight. I had marked on a calendar that a Rabbi from Stockholm would come to Varnamo where our girls lived in a hotel to have holiday services with us. My flight was then changed to Simchas Torah.



Joan Mermelstein with her friends in Varnamo as she prepares to leave for the United States in 1947.



Joan poses with her friends as she prepares to board the train for the airport.

During the twenty-six hour flight from Bromma Field in Stockholm to New York on October 6, 1947, the uppermost thing in my mind was the anticipation of seeing my sister. What sort of feelings could we have towards each other? Would we relate well? I was the last to leave the plane when it landed at LaGuardia Airport.

I spotted my sister and her family waiting for me. She took me in her arms and we made a spectacle crying together. I felt I knew her all my life. Her husband, Sam, was also a very kind man. He drove us to New York City to his parents' house. His father had a fish market on the lower East Side. We had dinner there, and then we drove to Lakewood, New Jersey. My sister and her family tried

their best to make me feel at home. I was deeply depressed. My wounds were deep and fresh. My nights were disrupted with nightmares. Unfortunately, some of her friends were not as understanding and compassionate as my sister and her family. They would say to her, “Oh, Ida, why are you so worried about Joan, she looks just fine.”

It was also very frustrating because I could not speak the language. When my nieces brought over their friends to meet me, I couldn't say more than “hello.” My nieces insisted that my sister should speak only English with me, not Yiddish. They enrolled me in night school and brought me books from the library. In a few months I was speaking English. My sister was constantly buying me clothes and other things. She paid so much attention to me that my younger niece, who was 12 years old at the time, became jealous. She asked Ida, “Mama, who is closer, a sister or a daughter?”

Sometimes during this period I secluded myself and concentrated on remembering the details of my past. Gradually, I was able to recall the faces of my mother, sisters, brothers, and their families. These, I now connected with the information I received about their fates:

My mother was asphyxiated in the gas chambers of Auschwitz on the first night of our arrival there.

David, my oldest brother, also perished in Auschwitz, together with his wife and two of their children. A third son survived and is living now in Israel.

Ida, my oldest sister, of course immigrated to the US in 1921.

Sarah, her husband, and their three youngest children went to the gas chambers in Auschwitz. Two older children are living in Israel.

Molly and husband perished in Auschwitz. Their son died in a labor camp.

Gershon managed to hide himself for most of the war. The Hungarian soldiers found and shot him shortly before the war ended.

Joseph, his wife, and two children died in Auschwitz.

Margaret and her child perished in Auschwitz. Her husband survived his incarceration in a labor camp.

Samuel, my brother, survived in a labor camp, but never recovered from his illnesses which afflicted him during this period. He died in the Carpathian district in 1973, leaving a wife and two children. His first wife and two children died in Auschwitz.

Golda and her child died in Auschwitz. Her husband survived.

Pearl and her set of twins died in Auschwitz while her husband survived the labor camp.

Helena, my sister who had been with me through everything, died in Bergen-Belsen on the day of liberation, as I had described.

These mental exercises brought on endless nightmares. I would wake up abruptly almost every night, soaked with perspiration, after dreaming that my family were being chased and herded at rifle point by Nazi terrorists. My numbness was transformed into a deep depression, with tremendous feelings of dehumanization.



Ida and Sam Fourman (center) with Shirley (left) and Harriet (right).



Ida Fourman with her family in the nursing home.

A NEW LIFE

In 1948, after living with my sister and her family for 10 months, I wanted to look for a job and start a new life for myself. In Lakewood, NJ there was nothing suitable for me. This was a resort town and most of the jobs were in the hotels. I was still weak and needed work that was not strenuous; I could not be a waitress. My sister said that I was not ready to go to work yet. I was still very weak and depressed. She wanted me to stay longer to gain more energy.

When my brother-in-law, Sam, had his vacation between the seasons, I went with him to New York City. His parents lived in a big house; with all the children married, they invited me to live with them. Sam and I took the subway to Manhattan in the garment district. We went to an agency and there were jobs posted. I had no idea what kind of work I would be able to do. One sign said: "Operator wanted on ladies fine lingerie — no experience necessary." I told Sam that I would like to try to get that job. I knew how to sew on a sewing machine. I had learned in high school.

The agent gave us the address and we located the shop on Broadway. Sam was a very compassionate man. He talked to the manager, explaining my situation and asking the manager to be patient with me.

The foreman showed me from the very start how to thread the needle and the whole process. There were about 40 women operators working very fast. The foreman told me not to pay attention to them, but to work at my own speed. Those women had been working at piece work for many years.

With the foreman's encouragement, I started working; slow at first and concentrating to do a good job. I made progress and improved every day. It took me a long time to get used to the noises from all the sewing machines and the subway rides during rush hours. I was determined to overcome the hardship and not to sink into despair. After all, I survived the darkest days of mankind. I would go through the dark tunnel and eventually would come to see the light. I worked in that shop until the middle of 1951.

In the late '40s and early '50s there was a big shortage of housing in New York city. The survivors of the Holocaust, who had emigrated to America, had mostly made their homes in New York City. It had convenient transportation, and it was easy to find employment.

In New York City I met Max, my husband. He had received an invitation to come to America from his older brother Irving who lived with his wife and two sons in Brooklyn. He had spent three years in a slave labor camp and then spent two years in Paris after the war.

At the time (in 1950) I lived in New York City. I often visited with close friends of Ida's. One of them was Tanya Ackerman. She called me one day, telling me that her cousin immigrated from Paris. His name was Menashe Mermelstein. I told Tanya that I knew his family but I never met him, since we both lived in different cities away from home.

Tanya told me that cousin Menashe was coming to visit her and asked me if I would like to meet him. I said: "Sure, why not."

When we met for the first time, Max told me that he had met my brother Samuel after the liberation in Yugoslavia. My brother told Max that his brother Josef worked with him in the

same camp and that he had died of brutal treatment and starvation. This discussion made us very close to each other. Max found a job in a delicatessen store and moved out from his brothers' house where he felt very uncomfortable.

In 1950 he arrived in the USA, and stayed with his brother and his family for two weeks. Max was very disappointed that his brother and family did not ask him what had happened to him or to the rest of the family. They were busy with their first new television they had just purchased. His sister-in-law Jennie said, "Sit down and watch Milton Berle. Who wants to talk about the war?" Max' eyes filled with tears, and he thought to himself that he had made a big mistake coming to America.

We seemed to have a lot in common and understood each other well. Both of us were lonely, so we decided to get married. Just before Max and I were to be married, we had our first disagreement. Times were hard and it was tough to get an apartment. The daughter of the people where I lived was moving to a larger apartment, so she told me that if we would like, she would help us to get her one room apartment in the nicest neighborhood in Brooklyn. In the meantime, Max's brother had found a four-room apartment on the East side in a run down neighborhood, for the same price.

Max said four rooms were better than one for the same price. But, the one room was very spacious and modern, with a kitchenette and a large bathroom with a walk-in closet. The apartment building was across the street from the beautiful Botanical Gardens. Prospect Park, The Brooklyn Museum, the library, a zoo, and the best schools were all within walking distance. I convinced Max that this was the ideal neighborhood to

raise children. We both came from large families, so both of us wanted a family.

Mostly Jewish families lived in that apartment building. At that time my self-esteem was very low, my wounds still fresh, and my nights were still disturbed with nightmares. I didn't feel like communicating with our neighbors. I felt that we had nothing in common and that we came from two different worlds. My style has always been very low key. Later I realized that I was wrong. I was underestimating my neighbors. They were very friendly people with small children; some were expecting babies.



Joan and Max are married on February 25, 1951.

MAX'S STORY



Max Mermelstein in the Czech army in 1926.

My husband, Max, told me his true story. Max was drafted when he was 18 years old and served in the Czech army for three years. He was just finishing learning the wholesale winery business and was expecting to be promoted on his job, when he got drafted.

After three years of service he came home. He rested for a while and then went on his bicycle to the city where he had previously been working in the winery and asked for his old job back. Max was told that his job had been filled by someone else, and he returned home very disappointed. His mother sent him to the same Rabbi my mother went to. He was a very famous Rabbi. The younger generation did not believe in miracles and Rabbis, and, at first Max refused to go to see the Rabbi.. He had no other choice, so he made the 25 kilometer trip on his bicycle to visit the

Rabbi. When Max walked into the Rabbi's office, the Rabbi sent him back home. He told him to come back to see him with his tzitzis on. After this trip his mother had a much harder time convincing Max to go again. When he finally did, the Rabbi shook his hand, asked him to sit down, and asked him a few questions. He promised Max that he would get a good position in the near future. After he blessed him, he sent Max home.

Shortly after that, Max received a letter from his former employer telling him that he had gone into partnership with a Mr. Klein and that they had opened a new business in another city. They offered him a managerial position and gave him a bookkeeper and some other help. Max enjoyed working there and did very well for himself and for the business. He supported his widowed mother, built a new house, and had a nice sum of money saved up in the bank. He dated a girl and was planning to marry her after the war.

In 1939, the Nazis took over our district — Carpathian. All Jewish factories and businesses were taken away by the Nazis. Max had to leave everything and return home. He spent three and one half years in slave labor camps. He also lost most of his family including his girlfriend. They perished in Auschwitz and in labor camps.

Max came out of it in good physical health and went back home to find a gentile neighbor living in his house. He did not find any other Jewish survivors there when he went back, so he went west to Czechoslovakia. The “Joint” Jewish organization provided the survivors with transportation, food, and lodging. In Prague he met many survivors. They found out that it was easier to immigrate to the USA from France than from Czechoslovakia. So Max joined

a few other survivors, who were planning to immigrate to the USA, and they took a train to Paris. He lived in Paris for two years until he got an invitation from his older brother Irving, then living in Brooklyn, NY. A foreigner couldn't get employment during the day, so Max worked at night as a presser.

In America, Max worked long hours and overtime and earned much less than the other workers. He did not like to take orders. Max worked there for about 10 years, learned the business, but was very unhappy working there.



Max Mermelstein's 1939 passport photo.

CHILDREN

In 1951, I had to quit my job because I was pregnant and I did not feel well through the whole nine months. I spent much of the time in the park walking or reading a book. Two of my neighbors also came out to the gardens with their babies. We said hello to each other and exchanged a few words. I struggled to turn from inside out, to open up and to make an effective connection. I had become suspicious of people because of my experiences during the war. Making friends did not (and still doesn't) come easy to me.

When we met the next day again, I felt more comfortable in making conversation with my neighbor Miriam. I told her that I was expecting a baby. Miriam congratulated me and said that it was wonderful and that we would be spending much time together with our babies. Miriam then said that she had to leave early because she had to go shopping. I told her that she could leave her baby with me, and I would bring her home in time for feeding. Miriam was very pleased and accepted my offer. I also felt good inside to be able to help. Soon I got to know the rest of the families and their children. We all became friends, and offered our help to each other when it was needed.

When my Bobby was born we received many gifts for our baby. Our landlord told me that he would keep me on the list. As soon as there would be a larger apartment empty, we would get it. He kept his promise. That meant that I did not have to ask the super for an apartment; so I saved one month's rent.

My sister Ida came from New Jersey to help me with the baby. She stayed with us four weeks, giving me a chance to recover and regain some strength.

I had an easier time with my David who was born three years later. Max earned more money because he was working overtime. We were fortunate to have two healthy children. That was a miracle to me. I gave myself to my children so my nightmares began to diminish. Our children were our priority.

By that time all of us with small children had become so close that we were like one big family. Our children were happy playing together. On weekends the fathers would participate and take the children to museums, the library, to a merry-go-round and many other points of interest. We would celebrate each child's birthday together, and we would take them on trips together.

When our boys were eight and five years old and had started school, we bought a delicatessen/restaurant. We gave a small down payment, and the rest we paid on a monthly basis. After the boys went to school, I did my shopping, and joined Max in the store. The boys and some of their friends came from school to the restaurant for lunch. They went back to school and stayed there till 3 PM. After school they walked six blocks to the store. They did their homework in the store and then we went home. Max remained in the store with our help, a kitchen man and a waitress, until 11 PM. That was our daily routine. We both worked hard, but Max didn't mind it. He liked it better than working for others.

About at that time, our friends Rita and Frances got part-time jobs. Their children stayed with us after school, until their mothers came home. We were always there for each other.

Now a half a century later, we all still keep in touch. Two families live in Florida, one in New Jersey, a few on Long Island, and in Brooklyn. We exchange birthday and New Year cards. When we were in Florida four years ago, we visited our friends. Last year one family came to Dayton for a wedding, so we had a chance to spend some time together. All our children are professionals; most of them have their own families. The one I cared for after school is a doctor-radiologist. He gave me a warm hug when we met last time. He told me that growing up with all his friends together in Brooklyn was his most memorable and happiest time in his life.

We are very proud of our two sons Robert and David. When they were only four years old, they were reaching out to help others. They ran to open doors for our neighbors, when they were coming with their shopping carts. Across the hall lived a 92 year old lady, Mrs. Lerner. She would call our boys whenever she needed help. One of the neighbors fell and broke her hip. After hospitalization, she was convalescing in her apartment alone and her roommate was at work. When I couldn't be with her, my boys took turns helping her out. Miss Cohen bought them a Websters Dictionary; we are still using it. That was in 1959.

When the boys were older, they helped in the Delicatessen after school and on weekends. Both of them had jobs during summer vacations. They put the money they earned in saving accounts.



Joan, Max, Robert, and David visit the Statue of Liberty.



*Max, Robert, and Joan on Robert's
Bar Mitzvah, January 1965*



*David's Bar Mitzvah, November
1968*



Robert's graduation from Columbia University, 1972

Both boys finished Stuyvesant high school, specializing in sciences. Robert attended Columbia University engineering college on a scholarship. David went to Brooklyn college. He did not want to follow in his brother's foot steps.

When Robert was in his senior year in engineering school, a recruiter from Procter and Gamble selected a few students to come to P&G in Cincinnati for an interview. Robert finished college at the age of 20 in May of 1972. He was accepted as a chemical engineer at Procter and Gamble. He began working there in June of 1972 and continued until his resignation in January 1999.

The first Saturday in Cincinnati Robert went to synagogue, at Ohav Shalom. He heard that the Rabbi at Ohav Shalom, Rabbi Greenfield, came from Brooklyn. Bobby asked the Rabbi where he could find volunteer work. The Rabbi sent him to the old age Orthodox home. This only one of many community service projects for Bobby. After a few years the P&G employees organized a junior achievement project at the P&G plant. They provided a work shop and all needed materials for arts and crafts. Robert asked a few other single engineers to volunteer and join him. They contacted many high school dropouts and encouraged them to come learn to make many different things. Then Bobby and his friends drove the boys with their finished products to the Convention Center to sell. They were very successful.

After Robert moved from Brooklyn to Cincinnati in 1972, our neighborhood in Brooklyn changed for the worse. We didn't feel safe in our apartment, not in the restaurant, nor in the street. We also missed Robert and he missed us. When he came home on vacation, he asked us to move to Cincinnati and we agreed. We closed our business; we couldn't sell it. We moved to Cincinnati in 1973. David transferred from Brooklyn College to The University of Cincinnati, and later to their school of Pharmacy. After graduation, he worked at the Middletown Hospital for 20 years.

In the last 24 years here in Cincinnati we traveled with our son, David, on his vacations. We visited 38 states and their points of interest. We saw many former presidents' homes and their libraries, up to the Reagans. David would say that we have to make up for all the time we lived in Brooklyn when we never could afford to go on vacation.



*David, Joan and Max on a cruise to the
Bahamas, 1978*

I am proud of the work that my son Bob has done helping others in the community and in the world. He paid for schooling for a boy in Thailand. He trained as an adult literacy tutor using the Laubach method and worked with three people in the neighborhood during the mid-80's. Throughout the 80's, Bob was on the Board of the Cincinnati Council for Soviet Jewry and was in charge of the twinning program as well as purchasing of foods, electronics and medicines to be flown in by tourists for refusenik contacts. When he was planning to be married, he and his bride Gail agreed that all the wedding gifts were to be given to the Soviet

Jewry. Now he is working for Habitat for Humanity, building houses for low income families.

After Robert was married, he bought a house only six blocks from us — within walking distance. We are now blessed with a granddaughter whose name is Paula. I call her my “sunshine”. She lights up my heart.



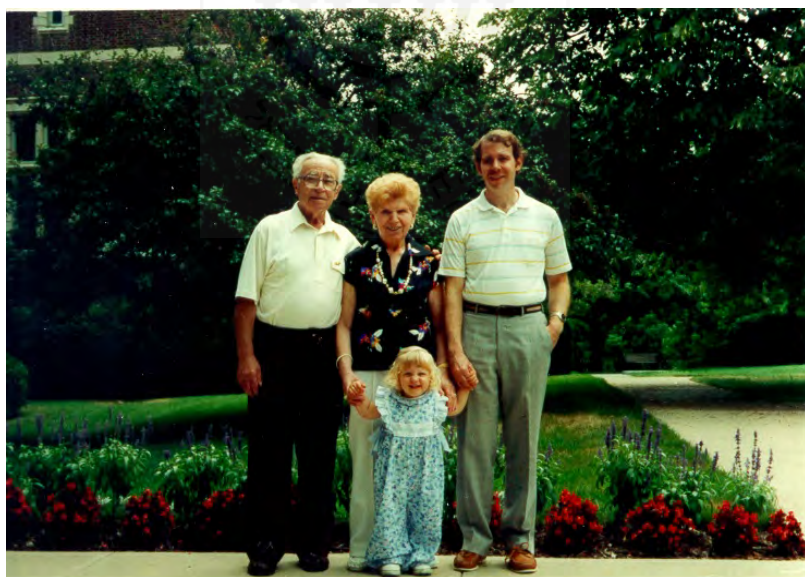
Joan with granddaughter, Paula, 1990



Uncle David and Paula



Joan with granddaughter, Paula, on her 10th birthday



Max, Robert, Joan, and Paula, 1991



Gail, Robert, and Paula Mermelstein

ISRAEL

One of the most memorable and meaningful events in my life is the trip I took to Israel with my son Robert in the autumn of 1977. We joined a charter tour of about thirty Jewish persons, most of whom lived in NYC and Boston.

Before the plane landed, they played *Shalom Aleichem*. I was deeply moved, and felt that I had come home. My whole family had given their lives in the Holocaust. From their ashes, we built Israel in our lifetime, and somehow I felt that my whole family was connected to it. My mother had always said, “Marchem (hope), Next year in Jerusalem.” She wanted so fervently to be in Jerusalem, and now I was there. I felt as if I had fulfilled her lifelong dream.

I particularly was looking forward to seeing my nephew, Barry, and niece, Bella, whom I hadn’t seen since 1940, before the war. They had survived concentration camps and were in a British Displaced Persons Camp in Cypress for about eight months before eventually getting to Israel.

We stayed in Jerusalem for the first week, and my nephew Barry and niece Bella visited with us a number of times. When we got together, our memories went back to home. We cried as we shared our stories, overjoyed that we got this chance to meet. Our memories lingered on loved ones we lost from both sides. They cried, “Thank God, we have one aunt left with whome we can connect and communicate.”

According to them, when they came to Israel shortly after Statehood, there was no green grass or trees. The survivors joined the Kibbutz youth and worked hard to prepare the ground for

planting. They lived in primitive barracks until they were able to get apartments.

We toured every day seeing many historic places and sacred shrines. Evenings and weekends we spent with our relatives. One evening they took us to a night club. The Yemenites were very good performers. Barry showed us Hadassah Hospital, where he worked as a switchboard operator. His wife, Shoshana, from Bulgaria, was a caterer for weddings and *Bar Mitzvahs*. It was hard for Shoshana and I to communicate at first, since I didn't speak Hebrew and she didn't speak Yiddish or English. Finally, when she spoke Bulgarian and I talked Czech, we understood each other. We visited with their son and family in Tel Aviv. We also met my husband's niece Reiza and her family in Haifa.

Our tour guide majored in archeology at Brooklyn College, which gave a wonderful perspective. She explained with details the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians and its rebuilding. She also provided background about a typical “dig” in Israel.

When we went through the Golan Heights she emphasized the importance of controlling the area for security reasons. When we passed Hebron, we were advised not to stop or buy anything from the Arabs. They recently killed two tourists. They were violent and were patrolled by Israeli soldiers from the roof tops.

We enjoyed the sights in Tel Aviv. On the border with Lebanon, we saw Israeli Red Cross jeeps, Israeli doctors healing Lebanese patients wounded in terrorist attacks. We saw Masada and took a dip in the Dead Sea. We also made a stop in Bethlehem and took a tour in a large Temple, where Jews, Muslims and Christians worship under the same roof. Friday we visited the market place in Jerusalem, packed with *Hasidic* Jews shopping for

Shabbat. We stopped touring before sundown. Vehicles were off most streets in Jerusalem on Shabbat. In Tel Aviv it was a different life style. We saw people swimming in the Mediterranean Sea. The outdoor cafes were filled with tourists and residents.

We saw a Japanese delegation of youth praying fervently at the Wailing Wall — dressed in blue robes with large Stars of David. They were doing penance for Japanese terrorists who had attacked El-Al passengers in Rome earlier in the 70's.

As we were leaving Israel, the Israelis were expecting Anwar Sadat to arrive in Jerusalem for peace talks. This was his first trip to Israel — a historic moment.

But the most moving sight for me was Yad Vashem. There I felt as if I was close to my whole family who perished. The impact of my trip remains engraved in my mind forever. By fulfilling the lifelong desire of my mother to go to Jerusalem, I felt I had filled the empty spot in my heart.

OUR NEIGHBORHOOD IN CINCINNATI

When we first moved to Cincinnati, we lived in an apartment in College Hill. I wanted to learn to drive, but my instructor told me after a few lessons, I should give up trying to learn because he told me that I had a poor sense of direction. It happened in Bergen-Belsen when my high fever was not treated for a long time. This has been a handicap for me. I feel if I would have been able to drive, I would have been more active in the community and could have attended more social functions. After two years, since both our sons lived with us at that time, we needed more room. So we purchased our house on Kirkland Drive.

Max and I were pleased to have our own home again like in the old country. Max liked to work around the house. He planted vegetables and tomatoes in his garden. One day, Max was eating a golden delicious apple. It tasted so good, he took out the seeds and told me his brother, Irving, had taken seeds like that and planted a tree. I was laughing at him. But, he put the seeds in a flower pot and said, "You wait and see. I'm not going to live to eat the apples (he was 70 at the time), but you will have golden delicious apples." A year later, he replanted the seedling in the ground. Within five years, we had apples. And now, over twenty years later, we are still eating them as well as the apple sauce I make every year. Max always liked to be active; but now, in his nineties, he is slowing down.

Max and I were the first people walking in our neighborhood 24 years ago. The neighbors would say, "Look there are the walking people." Now 24 years later we see many people

walk and jog. We meet many friendly, interesting people while walking.

Once an elderly lady approached me as I was walking, telling me that her doctor wanted her to walk, but she kept putting it off. She never walked by herself. I asked her if she would like to try to walk with me. She answered with a smile; “Oh, I would like that very much, but I couldn't keep up with you.” I told her that we would begin at first to walk 10 minutes a day, and then we would take it from there. We met every morning and walked, increasing to half an hour, four to five times a week.

After about 10 months her doctor told her that her heartbeat had improved and her high blood pressure was lower. She said that she couldn't do that without my help. A few weeks later a girl of 14 or 15 was waiting in her driveway and when I approached she handed me a basket of beautiful flowers. I told her that she must have made a mistake, because I didn't know her. She told me that she knew me and said: “You are the lady who encouraged my grandma to walk and made her feel better.” I was deeply moved.

Another incident happened one winter afternoon around 3 PM. The children walked home from school. One girl was left behind and was walking alone. A car stopped near a mailbox and a man opened the door, stretching out his hand and holding a letter and asking the girl to take the letter from him and put it into the mailbox. He did not see me coming a few feet behind. When the girl took the letter, the man grabbed her hand. I yelled out: “Stop, help, police.” The man shut the door and sped off. The girl was shaking and was frightened. I walked her home and told her mother what had happened.

Only a few weeks ago I was returning from my walk about 7:30 A.M. On the corner of our street I met an elderly lady in her nightgown and a pair of slippers, carrying a pair of shoes in her hands. I stopped and asked her if I could help her. She told me that the people where she lives are monsters. They lock her up in the room so, so she left them. She didn't know where those people lived or from where she came. I helped her to walk to our house, asked David to bring a chair for her to sit down. David called 911. The police arrived about the same time a car stopped. A young woman stepped out from the car, she was very mad. She told us that they were sleeping when she got out from the house. She grabbed the old woman without asking or talking to her and dragged her into the car. The poor lady looked at me and pleaded: "Please don't let those monsters take me. I don't want to go with them, they will lock me up again." She meant her daughter and the son-in-law who was also in the car.

We asked the police to follow their car and try to find out from the neighbors if the lady was being mistreated or abused by her daughter and son-in-law.

In our neighborhood live mostly elderly people. We communicate and reach out to each other. One of my neighbors is on crutches, limps and has a hard time walking. When I take my walk in the morning, I pick up her newspaper from her driveway, and take it to her door. It is a little thing, but to Sue, my neighbor, it means a lot, and it makes me feel good to be able to help.

Our next door neighbor was a mechanic. He fixed things around the house, plumbing, electricity and much more. He died a few months ago. We all are now looking out for and helping his widow. When she came home from the hospital, after surgery, I

cooked for her chicken soup and chicken breast. She told me that the other women also brought her a lot of food, but she was able to eat and enjoy best my soup.

When some of us go on vacation, others take care of the mail, and take care all around the house. All our neighbors are gentile, but we all get along just fine.



REMEMBRANCE



*Cincinnati Hillel Student Center, Memorial for
Children murdered in the Holocaust, 1993*

On the 50th anniversary of my liberation from Bergen-Belsen in 1995, I had two articles printed in the *American Israelite*, about my experiences during the Holocaust. I mailed out some

copies to my friends in Brooklyn. They were very surprised that I never told them in all 25 years we had lived together in the building like one family, that I am a survivor of the Holocaust. I explained that at the time, during the 50s and 60s nobody wanted to hear about the Holocaust. I had to suppress the pain and keep inside my indescribable memories of that horrible nightmare. Then in the 70s, one day, I heard on a radio talk show, a revisionist denying that the Holocaust ever occurred. They were denying that six million innocent Jewish men, women and children were brutally murdered by the Nazi regime.

When I heard these outrageous lies, my blood was boiling over. I felt that it is urgent for me to speak up in public and to tell the truth about my experiences to teachers and their students. My son David helped me to tape a few powerful episodes, including my testimony, about my experiences. I distributed some of these tapes to a few organizations to some special people, hoping that they will communicate my experiences to future generations.

After a half a century Professor and Author William Helmreich interviewed hundreds of Holocaust survivors to find out how we rebuilt our lives after such an inhumane, brutal experience, both physical and emotional. His conclusion was that most of us are rehabilitated physically, but the psychological damage is very deep seated. I explained to him my feelings.

I may appear quiet, but I am screaming within. I will go to a party and feel alone. We made *Bar Mitzvah's* and weddings with many guests, but the ones we wanted most, never arrived. I will go to a funeral and cry — not for the deceased — but for the ones that were never buried. We survivors will reach out to you, but not let

you close, for you remind me of what I could have been, but will never be. The survivor is at ease only with other survivors.

We remember the crowded transports, the cattle trains, the barbed wire, the poison gas and most of all the ovens.

We remember the dread names: Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Theresienstadt and more.

We remember men, women, and children tortured, starved, shot, gassed, or burned.

We remember the dead and struggle to keep up with the living. May our memory turn into resolve, that we may live as Jews, faithful to God and his Torah, in good times and in bad, that through us, the Jewish people will live on, that we uphold and defend freedom and human decency at all times.

During World War II, the Nazis plundered hundreds of kilograms of gold and diamonds, confiscated from the Jews throughout occupied Europe. They took Jewish cultural treasures. Trainloads of Jewish precious properties were brought to Germany. Religious objects taken from synagogues. Torah scrolls, ceremonial items, silver ornaments, and rare volumes of Judaica were collected by the Nazis in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Over 3,000 paintings, sculptures and art objects were confiscated from the Jews by the Nazis.

We survivors of the Holocaust are not “Greenhorns” any more. The hour for survivors is now very late. We must do what is necessary in the time we have left. In the years immediately following the Holocaust, a small group of activists among us demanded that the world remember the catastrophe that befell mankind, especially the Jewish people. Most of the time our stories of pain, grief and unimaginable evil were met with silence.

Abandoned during the war, we were ignored after the war. And we survivors again felt alone and forsaken.

Perhaps people did not know how to respond. Maybe they felt ashamed that nothing had been done to help the victims. Maybe in spite of the horrible photographs and chilling stories, they still could not believe man could be so barbaric, so ugly. Or, maybe because it happened to Jewish people, it just didn't matter to others. The world had shut its eyes when we were being murdered, and after the war it did not want to be reminded of the appalling consequences of its failure to act against the Nazi murderers and their collaborators.

But we persisted. We were driven to tell our stories and to motivate others to learn, to be vigilant, to remember. This ever-burning drive in us to communicate our message, and to have others remember what had happened, eventually became the catalyst and motivating force behind many projects of remembrance.

Most of this country's population born after the war is far removed from and uneducated about the Holocaust. Because of this level of ignorance, on talk shows, in college newspapers, and other types of media, the deniers may be able to plant seeds of doubt about what happened during the Holocaust. This is a war between the truth and a chronic disease, called anti-Semitism. And the real danger posed by the deniers is not today, next week, or even next year, but ten to twenty years from now, when there are no more eyewitnesses. For the survivors, the process of telling, retelling, and remembering is never over. Our mission to communicate and guard the truth of what happened to us must continue.

Day after night after day, the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz burned with bodies of our loved ones, but no words of condemnation came from the Allies. No Allied bombers were sent against the railroad tracks or the death camps. Even world Jewry did little. There was mostly indifference, silence, and murder. All the while, the killing in Auschwitz continued unabated.

Together, we must challenge those who deny the Holocaust. Together, we must stand against the poisonous talks, vandalism and violence of the neo-Nazis and other Jew haters. And together we must speak out against those who, in speeches and hate rallies, attack individuals or groups only because of their ethnic and racial heritage. We must not remain silent.

The hour for survivors is now very late. We must do what is necessary, in the time we have left. Now for over a half century we survivors have attempted to rebuild our lives. This was not an easy thing to do. It is true, that we looked to the future in hope, but the shadows of the past remained. And we dedicated our lives to Remembrance, of all those for whom the future had been destroyed by the Shoah.

The Allied leaders also realize that to build a sound future, there had to be an accounting for the greatest crimes against humanity in recorded history — mass murder and extermination, enslavement and deportation based on racial, religious or political affiliation. The world learned how the crimes were committed. Let us recommit ourselves to the principles of justice and liberty for all, and to Remembrance now and forever. When millions of innocent Jews were jammed into boxcars on the way to the railroad sidings at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau, to be selected for

extermination, they were not granted the right of due process. We didn't have the right to defend ourselves. For us, there was no justice, only a "Final Solution," in the crematoriums and gas chambers of the Nazis.

Remembrance serves many purposes. It helps us look back and wonder how different the fate of the Holocaust victims would have been if the Western leaders of those days would have had the stamina to stand up to Adolph Hitler. This insanity could have been stopped in time but it was not. The sad facts are, the world has not learned its lesson. The world must never forget the crimes of Hitler's Germany.

The millions who perished must be honored not only with words, speeches and with ceremonies, but mostly with a determination to expose evil, to stand up to terror, to denounce abuses of human rights whenever they occur. The legacy of that terrible time must and should be our shared commitment to building a better world for ourselves, our children, and all generations yet to come.

We have come a long way, but there is much more to be done. It took many years of hard work and determination not to let the world forget. Years later we were to be heard. Our pleas to remember acknowledging our concerns answered by a generous American government and an American people that tries to understand.

We have always faced oppressions from others, we must not turn against ourselves. Jews must take care of Jews. Let us celebrate what brings us together as Jews and teach the lessons of the past to ensure the future of our children and their families to

come. We have survived despite great odds and have built new lives for ourselves and our families.

We must persist in our various efforts to communicate and to guard the truth of what happened to us. I play an active role by distributing recordings of my experiences during the Holocaust. I also speak in schools to teachers and their students. After my testimony I tell the students that we live in the best country in the world. Freedom is very precious, so we should not take it for granted. We must learn from the past about what happens when hatred and prejudice are allowed to run wild. You learn in history, that is how wars are started. American brave soldiers were fighting in those wars and many thousands of them lost their lives to defend freedom.

You are the future, and it is up to you to keep freedom alive. Treat your parents, teachers, friends and neighbors with respect. You have to be vigilant and speak up when you see injustice, prejudice or discrimination. You can make the world a better place.

The teachers are very receptive with tears in their eyes. My testimony is well- received. I am deeply moved when I receive large baskets of beautiful flowers from these teachers the next day and letters from students telling how deeply my story affected them.

That horrible decade (1937-1947) will remain deeply engraved in my memory for the rest of my life. It began with confusion, humiliation, oppression, fear, then led to enslavement, starvation, demoralization, suffering in pain and despair. I witnessed brutality, torture, killings, exterminations, and saw and smelled the heavy, dark stench of smoke from the gas chambers. It

left me helplessly sick with amnesia, horrible nightmares and deep depression. In spite of the odds, I never lost hope and my faith in God, which my beloved mother instilled in me in my childhood.

We survivors of the Holocaust have the sacred duty to ensure that the truth of our experiences is communicated to future generations. Having survived the most hideous period in mankind, I have never taken for granted our precious lives and liberties afforded to us in this great country. Each day is a bonus gift to me and I try to fill it with meaningful deeds.

I bear witness to the power of love and hope in the face of hatred and despair. My thoughts linger on the loss of those who never got to see the future — never to hold a child — never to walk in freedom.

My blessed granddaughter, Paula, lights up my life and brings joy to my heart as a continuation of my parents, sisters, brothers and their families, who perished a half a century ago. Each of the terrible things that happened to me also brought me some unexpected surprises — moments of connection with others, opportunities to become a better person. I guess I do wish it could have been easier, but really I feel that my life has been blessed nonetheless.

When times are tough, it is easy to shut out the rest of the world. Sometimes it's necessary to turn inward, feeling the depth and breadth of our sorrow so that our wounds can heal. But, ultimately, we need to come back out into the light, scars and pain, and allow our suffering to make us more compassionate toward others. Precisely because we have known pain, we can empathize more truthfully with the pain of those around us. We can offer the example of our own journey to healing as encouragement for those

still taking the first steps. In so doing, we not only inspire fellow sufferers, we make sense of our own pain.

Rather than close off our hearts and sink into despair, we can let hardship hone us into a vessel overflowing with wisdom and compassion. And there is no doubt that the world could use more of that.

The memories of our past are constantly with us. They are seared into our minds and into our hearts. The magnitude of the catastrophe is still difficult to grasp. I am still dominated by sadness. The suffering and bloodshed against our people are inscribed in my consciousness forever. I still struggle to recapture my identity, long suppressed. I was alone, bereft of my loved ones. My past and my recollections are unspeakable. Faces of my loved ones, relatives and Jews of my hometown come surging up with forceful power. They spoil my days and disturb my nights.

I am forced to live with the memory of experiences that cannot be fully described or comprehended. It would have been easy to despair, but instead of bitterness and hatred, over the past half a century, I was determined, with hardship and courage, to lead a normal life.

With the passage of each year we realize that time is against us and we must make sure to utilize all means for future remembrance. What does it mean to remember? It is to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading. Writing, in turn is a way of turning memory into words, and connecting the present to the past.

To die is sad, but natural. In no way does it convey the brutal reality of death in Auschwitz. They died of starvation, from lack of hygiene, from exhaustion, from emotional and

psychological collapse. They perished because they were denied an even minimum allotment of food, clothing, shelter, medication and human dignity. They died abnormally.

How could the civilized world watch in silence and indifference the annihilation of six million innocent human beings? How could they witness, and on many occasions, enthusiastically collaborate with the Nazis, in committing these horrible crimes? Now we survivors ask: Why?

Nobody who has ever been in one of these cattle cars on those railroad tracks running in front of Auschwitz and looked through the cracks towards the camps can imagine the horrible sensation. If you were not there yourself, you cannot grasp what it was. I will not try to describe here my feelings or thoughts of that moment for the simple reason that I cannot. I do not know how to describe pure fear, horror, and worst of all, the feeling of complete helplessness.

My tragic past has taught me that the unthinkable is possible. For me it is impossible to ignore the fear that history can repeat itself. We must join with each other. For no Jew can survive if all Jews do not care for one another. We are here to remember, and not let others forget. We carry on our Jewish heritage and our culture and traditions to remain our brothers' keepers.

Through the proceedings of the Nuremberg Trials, we came to know the perpetrators. Documents that the killers had so carefully created were gathered and studied. In the defense testimony of accused doctors, judges and industrial leaders, as well as military generals and concentration camps commandants, the world learned how these crimes were committed. We also learned that tens of thousands of ordinary Germans from all walks of life

had willingly participated in the annihilation process. Let us recommit ourselves to the principles of justice and liberty for all — and to remembrance now and forever.

Holocaust is not simply to learn from it, but also to tell it and to retell it to ourselves, to our children and to future generations. Those who were lost said “Remember us!!” That is why we are here today.

Remembering the Holocaust is now part of the Jewish calendar. Yom Hoshuah, the days of Remembrance, has become an established time annually to bear witness as a community. It is our commitment to those who perished and to each other, a commitment taken up by our children and hopefully by the generations which follow. What we remember is gruesome and very painful But remember we must. After 50 years we are finding fresh Holocaust related disclosures and the behavior of those who could have helped us, or at least, not hurt us, but instead helped those, who were determined to wipe us out.

Even Switzerland, which claimed neutrality, we now learn, was involved with the Nazis. The world has recently learned that the Holocaust was not just mass murder and criminal behavior against humanity, but also the greatest robbery in history of mankind.

We were driven from our homes and stripped of our family heirlooms. The Nazis took anything of value. They stole from us when we were alive and even defiled Jewish corpses — tearing their gold fillings out of their mouths and cutting off fingers to recover gold wedding bands, from our loved ones, after murdering them. The Holocaust survivors wish to see justice done, before it is too late.

In spite of having to use all of our strength to live through the Holocaust, to survive those death marches, and to face the ice-cold reality that you would never see family members again, despite all of this, we somehow remarkably mustered up even more strength and more courage to move on with our lives.

Arriving in strange countries with little more than what we had on our backs, and scars in our hearts, we defiantly created new families and employment. We strove to give our children the best of everything, not least of which was the same set of values which our parents gave to us.

Our children never had the privilege of being touched by a grandparent. They never felt the warm hugs and sweet kisses that can only come from a grandparent. They never heard them sing sweet lullabies. The sad fact is that all “bubbes” and zeydes” were brutally murdered by the Nazis.

I remember when my Bobby came home from his friend's birthday party and asked me: “Mommy, how come Arthur has two grandmas and two grandpas, and I have none.” How do you explain to a 3 year old what happened to his grandparents? I realized then, that our children too are very much affected by the Holocaust.

I appeal to the young to reach deep into their inner resources and generate the courage to oppose discrimination by striving for greater self-esteem and pride in personal achievement. It should be definitely made required reading in all schools, teaching the history of the Holocaust and its implications.

All that we have seen, all that we have done, all that we have created is for a purpose. The purpose is to bear witness. We

hope that future generations of Americans will remember and use the power of this vision to protect people everywhere.

Rooted in a past that was shattered, we have become a cry of conscience to the world and a voice determined to create a future that is worthy of our journey to hell and back — from darkness to light, from tyranny to freedom, from Holocaust to life.

We have rebuilt our lives not because our losses can be replaced, but that our call will be heeded by future generations, whose losses can be prevented. We say to you more urgently now, for each day we are fewer — remember with us!!!

I would like to say to my dear children and precious granddaughter:

Know your Jewish heritage, its values, traditions and religion. Follow the path of Yiddishkeit as it will provide you with the special warmth and security so lacking in most peoples' lives today. Be proud of who you are. Carry the torch of remembrance high and pass it on to your children so that they, too, shall never forget!!

I am deeply concerned that since most of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe perished in the Holocaust, all of these traditions will fade away. We had a rich Yiddish culture, with many highly respected Rabbis. They studied “Gemura” Talmud every day. We must communicate to the next generation. Never again; we shall not forget.



Joan visiting the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.



Joan in the Holocaust Museum's Hall of Martyrs

APPENDIX 1:

JEWISH LIFE IN THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS

In the 19th century our ancestors in Russia were tortured, demoralized and disenchanted by fear and despair. When Czar Nicholas ordered the Jews to convert to Christianity, the Jews had no other choice but to flee. They took their belongings, including the Torah Scrolls and wooden carved “Mezuzahs”, and escaped during the night. They crossed the Russian border and walked many kilometers in the wilderness until they reached a mountain. On top of the mountain was a large empty field. The Jews made a home for themselves there. Among these Jews were my ancestors.

The farmers furrowed the earth. With great exertion and heavy pressure on the plows, they prepared the land for planting potatoes, corn, cabbage and other grains and vegetables. They also raised cattle, sheep and geese. Some of them were peddlers, tailors, shoe makers, and saloon keepers.

They named their village Apsha. The Jews soon discovered that nearby were many other villages settled by Ukrainian people, and some Hungarian, mainly professional people. The Jews learned to live and work together with the gentile people. The gentile people helped the Jews plant and harvest. In exchange, Jewish seamstresses made clothes for the women and Jewish tailors sewed clothes for the men. Jewish shoemakers made shoes to order. Most of the older Ukrainian people were illiterate, so that in many instances they depended on the help of the Jews. The Jews knew

how to read and write in Hebrew and they studied the Bible. Many of them studied Talmud Torah.

Jewish communities were not large in numbers but had important personalities and were rich in accomplishments. The Carpathian Jews were also engaged in the moving of lumber, the biggest natural treasure of these mountains. The Carpathian Mountains were also known for its healthy climate and for pure crystal, clean waters. There were many wells with mineral water, which was bottled and distributed to Eastern European countries. Many people traveled from far away to spend a few weeks in the Carpathian Mountains.

Many famous *Hasidic* rabbis in the Carpathian region were instrumental in Jewish lives. They appealed to all Jews to follow their direction and imbue their daily activities with holiness. The Jews had little education but tried to find a way to serve God. Togetherness and a new spirit was evident in their daily prayer, a practice that has always been part of the observant Jewish man's life style. The rabbis advised the *Hasidim* to pray with deep concentration and dedication. The rabbis established *yeshivahs* with many students, who in turn, provided leadership to many communities. The Jewish communities were alive, creative, imaginative with hope - all that was to end in smoke and destruction.

At the turn of the last century, the whole area grew into a large district and the Carpathian Mountains were incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The leader of that large empire was Emperor Franz Joseph. The outbreak of WWI in 1914 brought an end to peaceful development in the region. The miseries of the war increased even further when the Austro-Hungarian Empire

collapsed in 1918 and the Carpathian Mountains became a part of Czechoslovakia.

Until then, the close relations between Ukrainians and Jews was based on mutual needs. Gentiles were glad to perform chores for Jews on Sabbath, especially in return for a piece of Jewish *challah* and *gefilte* fish. The fine relations between Jews and Ukrainians began to deteriorate when the Czechs opened their schools and universities to *all*, providing Ukrainians with educational opportunities that had never been available to them under Hungarian rule. The economic and social struggle between the groups began. The Jews were accused of exploiting the peasants by supplying them with alcohol and loans at high rates. The Jews were made the scapegoats for the deteriorating economic situation. Conditions were ripe for Hitler and the Germans to take over the region. While all these communities perished in the Holocaust, many *Hasidic* rabbis survived and continue their activities to this day in Israel.

APPENDIX 2: FAMILY NAMES

In our house my family spoke both Yiddish and Hungarian, but we called each other by our Jewish (Yiddish) names. With our gentile neighbors we spoke Ukrainian, and we were known by our Hungarian names. The following is a list of my family whose names I can recall. Unless otherwise noted, all of these family members perished in the Holocaust.

Relationship	Hungarian Name	Yiddish Name
Mother	Rose	Rachel
Father	(died of pneumonia when I was a child)	Israel Schmuel Hersch
Oldest brother	David	Dovid
David's wife	Miriam	Mariam
Oldest nephew	Maurice	Moishe
Niece	Giselle	Golde
Nephew	Joseph	Jossel
Oldest sister	Sarah	Hyah Surah
Sarah's husband	Herman Stein	Hersch
Niece	Helena	Heintsch
Nephew	Bernard (survived; living in Israel)	Barish (now called Dov)
Nephew	David	Dovid

Niece	Bella	Beila
Niece	Sarah	Saruel
Sister	Ida (came to the USA before the war)	
Ida's husband	Sam Fourman (married Ida in the USA)	Shalom
Niece	Harriet	Yenta
Niece	Shirley	Shaindel
Brother	Gazor	Gershom
Gazor's wife	Doris	Devorah
Sister	Molly	Malka

GLOSSARY*

Bar/Bat Mitzvah – literally “son/daughter of the commandment”; term denoting attainment of religious and legal maturity as well as the occasion at which this status is formally assumed for boys at the age of 13 plus one day, for girls at 12 plus one day.

Challah – braided egg bread baked specially for the Shabbath and holidays

Cheder – Common name for an elementary school dedicated to the teaching of Judaism

Gefilte fish – (literally, stuffed fish) boiled fish balls

Hasidism – a popular religious movement giving rise to a particular style of communal life, leadership, and a social outlook emerging in the second half of the 18th century.

High Holidays – the holiest days of the Jewish calendar: Rosh Hashanna (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Repentance)

Kiddush – blessing over wine

Latkes – fried potato pancakes traditionally made on Chanukah

Mezuzah – parchment scroll affixed to the doorpost of rooms in the Jewish home inscribed with verses from Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21.

Mikveh – ritual bath used for ceremonial immersion

Shochet – individual who slaughters animals according to the Jewish laws of keeping Kosher

Shul – synagogue

Sukkot – fall harvest festival

Sukkah – temporary shelter open to the sky which is built for
Sukkot

Shalichmunas – gifts of food for Purim

Yeshivah – school where boys study Jewish law

Zmiros – festive songs

* Portions of the glossary are based on information taken from the
Encyclopaedia Judaica (1971).

