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# FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

Essays by Children of Holocaust Survivors

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Edited by Dr. Robert Ready and Dr. Ann L. Saltzman  
Drew University Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study



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Published by Drew University Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study

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ISBN 978-0-578-36897-9

LCCN 2022910591

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DREW UNIVERSITY  
CENTER FOR HOLOCAUST/GENOCIDE STUDY  
EMBURY HALL  
MADISON, NJ 07940

*Special thanks to the following donors whose generous contributions supported the making of this book:*

Jacqueline Berke Memorial Fund

Hedy Brasch, in memory of Alexander, Elizabeth, and Eva Ellenbogen

Judy and Steven Elbaum, in memory of their parents Fela and David Urman,  
Sala and Izak Elbaum, and all Holocaust survivors.

Sylvia Holder Fund

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to the following people,  
without whom this book would not have been produced:

## **Professor Joshua Kavaloski**

*Director, Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study*

For enthusiastic support of the writing workshops from their  
inception to the subsequent production of the book

## **Members of the Center's Board of Associates**

For encouragement and support of the book

## **Professor Edwina Lawler**

For comprehensive proofing and editing

## **Angela West**

*Center Coordinator*

For meticulous attention to all aspects of arranging the workshops  
to compiling and assisting in the production of the book

## **Vaughn Swanson**

For expert design of the cover, dedication page,  
and assistance in compiling the book



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[\*] This essay was not written in the Drew Center Writing Workshops.

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## Introduction

Robert Ready & Ann L. Saltzman

The personal essays in this volume were written during a six-week series of Writing Workshops for Children of Holocaust Survivors offered by the Drew University Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study in fall 2019. This was the second series of writing workshops offered in memory of Jacqueline Berke, founding director of the Center, and co-instructor, with Bob Ready, of writing workshops for Holocaust survivors in 1998. In the more recent series, the writers were asked to concentrate on their stories as children of survivors. As you will read, this was not an easy task. As Vera writes, “I was surprised at how difficult it was to focus my mind on me, as a 2G survivor, rather than on my parents.”

Sonia begins her essay by writing, “To write about my life is difficult, especially when I have grown up in the shadow of my parents’ experiences surviving the Holocaust. It seems like the past, present and future are intermingled. Their stories are interwoven with mine in such a way that there is no definitive separation. My life has been shaped by theirs.” As workshop leaders, we recognized this difficulty, yet gently pushed them to write about what it was like growing up in a family of survivors. When did they learn about their parents’ experiences? How did it affect their growing-up years? And as adults, what truths about both survival and life had they gleaned from their parents?

The image of a “shadow” was one that often appeared in the essays. Vera writes how, “at a young age I became aware of the heavy shadow [the Holocaust] cast on all their lives.” Elaine describes it as a “fog of heaviness,” and wonders whether “the gray of the sky [was] transferred to New Jersey from the sky over the concentration camp where my relatives were killed?” Others picture a cloud hanging over their families. Occasionally there are cloud strikes, sudden bursts of “sound and fury [that] brought the Holocaust right into our tiny dining room,” as Elaine writes.

At other times, depression hid in the greyness. Monica describes how her mother suffered from back pain, the result of an accident earlier in her life, which caused her to take to

her bed. However, decades later, she “realizes that Mom’s terrible back pains were compounded by depression, her loss and longing for her family.” Vera’s mother also “succumbed to feelings of dark anxiety and agitation that always lurked beneath her composed exterior.” Judy E.’s mother “suffered from bouts of depression. And yet, when it came to [Judy], she managed to surface from those dark places.”

For some, their parents’ inability to tell the full truth of what they had experienced led to protracted silences about family history. For Hedi, “the silence is unbreakable. Unbearable.” She feels “incomplete, unmoored.” For Sister Eleanor, it leads to a lifelong quest to discover the truth of her origins, that her mother was a Jewish Holocaust survivor. And for Sonia, finding a sister she did know existed returns a small piece of the world lost to the Holocaust. As she writes, “silence did not win.”

As adults, the writers recognize that their parents’ silence was not only self-protective but also a way to protect their children. While reading letters her parents wrote to each other during the war, Rozsa came to understand that, “They struggled and suffered a lot more than I understood as a child.” Sister Eleanor realized “years later ...that our parents were trying to protect us by denying any possible Jewish heritage. They thought if people knew...we would be the targets of anti-Semitism.”

In return, some writers felt the need to protect their parents. In college, Judi S. begins to date non-Jewish boys but realizes that “my parents would never forgive me if I became serious with someone not Jewish and I couldn’t do that to them.” Vera describes, how in adolescence, she made sure she was always home on time. “I had no right to cause my parents any further grief in life. While they needed to protect me from any and all harm, I needed to shield them from their painful memories and the sadness those memories brought on.” Monica notes that as a child she felt guilty because she was not able to protect her parents. Ora writes plaintively, “I don’t have the words to say that I am sorry for all the unfathomable things [Dad] had to live through and endure. I don’t have the words to say that I am heartbroken by what he had to go through in order for me to exist.” Her lack of words leads to her own silence.

The writers show great respect for their parents and gratitude for what they learned from them. Despite all that Judy E's parents "had endured, my mom and dad forged ahead with faith, love, optimism and gratitude." Monica's parents' "finest legacy is to look for the positive side where hope dwells." Rozsa writes that her parents portrayed their Holocaust experiences as a great adventure. "It is not that we children did not know about the part of the family that perished in the Holocaust. However, the overwhelming message was a positive one, survival against all odds." Sonia learned "striving for strength and resilience." Elaine learned risk-taking.

Finally, by writing these essays, the authors pledge that their parents' lives and experiences will not be forgotten. The volume is filled with photos of their mothers and fathers as well as pictures of those who did not survive. Judi S. ends her essay discussing the ambivalence she felt about applying for Lithuanian citizenship. "After spending several months reflecting on my motivation to do this...I decided that it is my birthright and I should take back the citizenship my grandmother's family had for generations. I am determined and proud to show the Lithuanian government that neither the Russians nor the Germans killed off the Laucknicki family!"

Hedi describes herself as a "memorial candle. A Jewish light destined to carry the shreds of our family to the next generation." Her adult *Bat Mitzvah* is "a chance to honor family I lost and to link my daughters and husband to my heritage." Rozsa translates letters written by her parents long ago. As she reads them, "the past becomes the present. It is like sitting in a time machine and living their lives, their feelings, their thoughts. ... As long as I am reading, they are alive." And Judy E., who describes herself as a "memory keeper" writes that "when I am no longer here, [my children] will assume my role ... and pass it on to their children. The lives of those we have lost will never be forgotten. We will honor our sacred calling from generation to generation."

In her introduction to *Moments in Time: A Collage of Holocaust Memories* (2005), the first of our volumes by survivors, Jacqueline Berke writes: "We are awed by the richness of the resources we are helping to mine. ...they constitute a unique legacy, a dimension of history that is our duty to focus on, to familiarize ourselves with, indeed to embrace as authentic expressions

of experiential truth gleaned in the inferno.” Legacy, two generations, and truth converge in this collection of 2G writings

## Nicknames

Elaine Citron

I was quite young when I figured out that adults lie. I lived in the middle apartment along with my mom and dad and two younger sisters in a three-family brown clapboard house on Bell Street in Orange. The top floor apartment was rented by tenants. The maternal side of my family --grandmother, grandfather, two unmarried aunts and an uncle—lived in the largest apartment on the ground floor. They were the only immediate family I was ever to know, since everyone on my dad’s side was annihilated by the Nazis in the War. Dad was the sole survivor.

The families mingled freely. I loved to be with my Russian born grandmother, Tillie. She was large-boned and kind of crude. She loved life and could burst into song in the middle of a sentence. If Tillie was happy with you, she would offer a piece of her homemade apple pie with a finger to her lips. It would be our secret.



*Me at age 3*

I often felt invisible. My mother was overwhelmed caring for three young daughters. My father was bitterly disappointed that his third child was another girl. He would never have the son he longed for to carry on the family name. I sought my hiding place, the stairs between my family’s apartment and the tenants place above us. The stairs were covered with green linoleum and very steep, but I would wedge my body on the stair where I fit best, no extra room at all. Sometimes I would roll out of the space, fall down to the bottom. I don’t know why I was proud of my black and blue marks from the bangs and bumps. I felt brave to strike out on my own to be away from the noise and chaos of my family and to accept that being hurt was part of the price for living.

I don’t think anyone ever knew about my secret place and what I was doing. No one ever mentioned it. What they did say was, “Why are you always so sad? You have food, family and a home, everything is great.”

What I could not say to them or even put into words at that tender age was that I knew that they lied. I could tell. The sky always felt gray. I heard hushed voices, whispers about sad things that happened that I was not to know about. “Not in front of the *Kinder*.”

The weight of my father’s experience—the sorrow, loss, suffering—was like a fog of heaviness that I felt. Was the gray of the sky transferred to New Jersey from the sky over the crematorium where my relatives died? Of course not, and I hardly knew those details then. Of one thing I was sure—they lied; everything was not great!

I was also confused. My mother loved being Jewish and delighted in the rituals, such as lighting the Sabbath candles. My dad ate ham and bacon and stated that he never had to do another thing to prove he was Jewish. I went to a Hebrew school with two boys. The teacher called me by my Hebrew name Esther, or sometimes Esther Malik for Queen Esther, the Jewish heroine. I was unhappy with my name, Elaine. I wished for a nickname. A nickname was an American thing and would take me far from my father’s nightmare in Europe. My dad did call me “Elaine the Pain,” but that wasn’t the kind of nickname I had in mind.

My father worked as a carpenter/construction worker. My family had little money, but unimaginably one summer when I was six my family planned to rent a bungalow with another family down at the Jersey Shore. I loved everything about the seaside, and then there was also the penny arcade for excitement. I felt very grown up at the vacation bungalow, waking before anyone else, making my own breakfast and enjoying my cereal while watching the day unfold. I observed the other family, our best friends, with whom we shared the vacation house and how they did things. My mother’s siblings were unmarried and there was no family on my dad’s side so I never saw another family at close range. Also, the family that resided in the next house had twenty-two children from one father and one mother. I was fascinated by a family of that size then and even today I’m still a bit curious about them.

I eagerly awaited going to the arcade and deciding what I would pick as a prize once I won enough tickets to redeem something. I was fascinated by a set of six different colored metal

cups that looked like the colors of the rainbow. I planned to give them to my parents so they would know that I was unselfish and that I loved them.

At week's end, after numerous games of bowling and Skee-ball, I had enough tickets. I picked up the prize and presented it to my parents. "Get that out of here!" my dad screamed and stormed out of the house. Later my mother explained that Dad was made to drink from similar cups in the camps. How could I know? I felt hopeless. How could giving my loving gift have such a horrible result? Could I ever get anything right? I wished I could disappear. Years later I would learn never to serve turnips to dad—same reason.

My mother tried to give us a good life. She was beautiful, smart and personable, but dad's needs came before everything. My sisters and I called each other by first initials so we were "E", "J" and "K". Somehow, no one ever could remember the reason why, a G was added to the E and I became "E.G." A friend saw a piece of mail addressed to Elaine Hav-a-bug, which was a humorous distortion of my last name "Haberberg," and I became "Bug" for life.

I studied Fine Art in college and married a man from New York. I commuted to my teaching job in New Jersey. My colleagues called me "Brooklyn." My students called me "the Fruit" for my married name, Citron, or worse, "The Zit." My marriage was brief and I was back with parents along with my infant daughter. I had wanted to leave the nest, to be independent of my parents but had not made a wise choice. My father respected my mother deeply. I had not been around many other families and naively expected my husband to treat me the same way. I stayed with my parents for a time to plan what to do next. One day, Dad found me watching a great PBS show about ancient Romans, "I Claudius." Dad called me Claudius from then on.

I began my corporate sales career and moved to Northern Jersey. Some of my friends now were calling me "Hackensack." At 3:30, one Friday afternoon, I was leaving the work week behind with Hoboken, thankfully in my rear-view mirror. My mind was going in different directions, a mile a minute, thinking of my sales job, parenting challenges, a date for the evening or lack thereof. I had learned from my father to analyze every situation to death, to figure out

what to do to get the best possible outcome. In my case, that entailed meeting the sales challenges I faced, which could lead to a raise or further career opportunities.

As I approached the merge onto NJ Route 3 West, I was hopelessly lost in thought, maybe even blacked out for a second from concentration on how to solve my life. There were many challenges in raising a child in a divorce situation. Should I move to the west coast, which had always been my dream? I entered the roadway without thinking. Miraculously, my green Honda was not hit. Somehow, I managed to land safely in the swirl of frantic cars heading away from the city. I heard a voice, loud as it could be, “Stop this worrying, you were meant to live life, love life every minute, live it for us.”

It was the voice of my Grandmother Esther, my father’s mother who disappeared from the Warsaw Ghetto, never seen again by my father. I was named for her. I seldom thought of her, knew little about her. There was only a single picture of her—stern faced yet beautiful, wearing pearls and a strange bird-like thing on her shoulder. I acknowledged her gift, accepted it. Somehow, I did not doubt that she had reached out to me from who knows where to set me straight. I still worry some but mostly I remember to love life and live it joyously for those that didn’t get the chance to live.



*My grandmother, Esther.*

My grandmother reached out to me one more time. She was with Justina, my father’s sister who died at fifteen. This time she had a stern rebuke for me: “We were never buried, we need a place of rest where we can be honored and acknowledged, mourned.” I couldn’t believe I was being reprimanded, given a guilt trip from the beyond, by people I never even met. O.K. This, I could do. I mentally buried them in the rose garden in the front of my house. A beautiful place right near-by. I told them that I could see them every day and would remember them. They



were in the most beautiful place I could find and close to me. I could do something for them I was grateful that they asked.

When I was a child, one of my greatest fears was my dad's eruptions. He was short and solidly built. His expression was often serious, thoughtful or glowering. He cultivated a stern somewhat scary face. I think he never wanted to be mistaken for prey again, so he was a ticking time bomb. You were never quite sure what might set him off.

When we were little, dinner time at our house was a pretty good bet. My younger sisters and I were close in age (8, 5, and 3). With three little girls and wayward elbows it was quite likely that someone might spill her milk. Wet, white and loud! While people were jumping out of their seats to avoid the flow of the milk, the sound and fury from Dad brought the Holocaust right into our tiny dining room. It seemed almost inevitable. After the out-of-control yelling there was then the silent glare and the bit lip. Not wanting to be like my father, I learned to control what I wanted to say—to think before I spoke.

My father never spoke to us about the Holocaust. I heard many humorous stories about before the war as well as some of his adventures after the war. After the war he covered his Auschwitz number with a decorative tattoo. I don't know if it was meant to be anything in particular but when I was older, I thought it looked like a rather messy nuclear symbol for the atom.



*My father tried to obscure his Holocaust tattoo.*

When he was in his sixties and after a number of strokes, I boldly sought a moment of sharing with him. I asked if he had any regrets in life. He said he was sorry that after the war, he had hidden the fact that he was a Jew. His co-workers never knew. I wasn't sure that he was sincere with me because he was capable of saying something just to put me on. He sometimes told us that when he was a child, he was a girl not a boy. Despite the stroke's limitations on his speech, Dad still could be a tease, a tormentor or a con. And proud of it.

I reveal things about myself in drips as if they were precious. Maybe I feel safer that way too, that people can hurt you if they know too much about you. I didn't go as far as one sister who chose to wear a gold cross around her neck so she wouldn't be seen as Jewish. Of the many messages we were taught as kids two stand out: First, don't upset your father. He has been through enough. Second, don't draw attention to yourself. The first was unambiguous but the second was a problem. I stumbled and struggled with the concept for a long time. I knew that I was smart and had the drive to go somewhere, but I played it safe in the earlier years and followed his advice as best that I could.

At some point, I felt that I wouldn't survive as a human being unless I was true to myself. I left my safe career as an art teacher and went into corporate sales even though Dad told me "Sales is for whores." I have never regretted my decision. Later, I married a man from India. My father was against it, not because of who my husband was as a person but because we would draw attention as a mixed-race couple. I defied him on a number of occasions. I told Dad, "You made your mistakes, let me make mine." He actually had nothing to say to that. I think he respected me for it. Strong like my dad, I am a risk taker even though he told me not to be. Dad in his own way was a risk taker too. How else did he survive? It's a miracle that I am even here.

I feel as if I have lived as two different people. My early life was filled with frequent episodes of unexplained sadness, confusion and guilt. It seemed to go on and on in this way until I hit my thirties. Then I sought help. I studied meditation, visualization, Shamanism and sought out therapy. I discovered options. I didn't have to just accept what came my way.

One day, I was sitting in a meeting of seventy or so sales people. We were part of South Western Bell's Yellow Page Directory Expansion Campaign into the Northeast. The manager, Ralph, a tiny, loud-mouthed Texan was brow beating us about how worthless we were and how he would like to punch us all in the mouth. I glanced around the room. Not one person moved a single muscle. We were a mixed group—twenty somethings to older men and women in their sixties. At some point, I thought, "Well, I will/could lose my job for this"; I was a single parent

struggling to get by. I stood up and with voice trembling said, “I am thirty-five years old, and I am somebody’s mother, you can’t talk to me this way.”

In a flurry of movement, two other managers removed Ralph from the room. I was kind of the hero for that day. People were amazed at what I had done. No one more than I. I had faced up to a powerful bully, the only person in a throng of professionals to take a risk in front of everyone. I had certainly traveled far from Dad’s early, and repeated message, “Don’t draw attention to yourself.” My strike for integrity was a huge step forward.

Since that sales meeting I have started an Art Licensing business which allows me to combine my love of art and business. My Indian husband of thirty years understands me, calls me “Babe” or sometimes with a Sanskrit flair, “Baballum.” We recently traveled to India for a niece’s wedding where I was the only non-Indian among one thousand guests. I really stood out that time.

I have great joy from my daughter and her family. My grandson and I do massive art projects together and have adventures. The other day I heard him ask his mom if he could sleep at “The G’s house.” There was the missing g from my childhood nickname, “E.G.” I’ve had some great nicknames but this is the best. I am living life joyfully—for them and for me!

## Memory Keeper

Judy Elbaum

It is the day after 9/11—a beautiful autumn day. The air is crystal clear and the sky is flawless azure. I am sitting in the courtyard in back of my house. I spot a blue jay as it flits from the red brick courtyard wall to a nearby yew bush. I see a chipmunk scurry along the ground searching for a burrow. I hear the distinct chirping of a cardinal.

This moment in my courtyard on the day after 9/11 is etched in my mind. I am despondent. We kept saying never again, never again, but how many wars and genocides have occurred since the Holocaust? Bangladesh, Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda—tip of the iceberg.

I am repulsed by the never-ending manifestations of evil in this world. For the first time since I gave birth to my children, I question having brought them into this world. Why was I even born?

I am Judy Urman Elbaum, the only child of Holocaust survivors. The name I was given at birth—the one that appears officially on my birth certificate is Marion Judy Urman. Marion is in memory of my maternal grandmother, Miriam, who perished in the Holocaust. Judy is in memory of my paternal grandmother, Yittel, who also perished in the Holocaust. Several weeks after my birth, my father persuaded my mother to call me Judy. He was concerned that there might not be another opportunity for a namesake for his mother. He was the sole survivor of his family and had been an only child. My mother was considered one of the more “fortunate” survivors. Out of her family of nine, five had survived.

My name says it all. I am the heir of a tragic legacy. I am my family’s memory keeper. I must ensure that they are not forgotten and that their stories are told and retold. It’s a heavy burden to bear and it weighs heavily on me. I sometimes find it hard to breathe.

My experience of growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust has been one of extremes, from the depths of despair to the pinnacles of joy. I have many questions. Though I have found

some answers, I have come to understand that some questions defy responses, because there are no words to express the incomprehensible.

As a child, I watched my parents grapple with immeasurable loss, all the while progressing with their lives. Every morning at 4:30 a.m., before the crack of dawn, I heard the faint rumble of the garage door rolling open. This was a constant in my years living at home with my parents—from my childhood through my departure for college.

My dad was leaving for work. He never missed a day in all my coming-of-age years. He was steadfast, reliable, determined. He was never really ill. If he did catch a cold, his remedy was a glass of hot tea with a squirt of lemon and a shot of vodka. He was better the next day. I didn't know it then, but he was my hero.

In the throes of my pre-teen and teen years—I'm ashamed to admit—my parents embarrassed me. Their English bore a heavy Eastern European Jewish accent—so unlike the perfect English spoken by my friends' parents. We certainly were not like the families on the TV sitcoms of the time—"Leave it to Beaver" and "Father Knows Best." My parents, especially my mom, were overprotective. If I was late getting home, my mom, much to my mortification, would call all my close friends to try to track me down.

Yet, at the same time I was experiencing these feelings of annoyance and embarrassment, I couldn't help but admire my father's ethic of hard work, endurance, and never giving up. After his brutal incarceration at Auschwitz and the catastrophic loss of his family in the Holocaust, he immigrated to the United States with barely a penny in his pocket and only an eighth-grade education. In spite of what seemed like insurmountable odds, he founded a successful wholesale meat business.

I internalized his work ethic and applied it to my studies. That served the dual purpose of learning good values from my dad, and ensuring that I brought some happiness and pride to my parents. I was their only child, their only hope, and they lived vicariously through me. My hard work paid off. I graduated salutatorian of my high school class. It was a milestone day for me,

but what I remember most about my high school graduation was the look of pride in my father's eyes.

I observed my mom as well. She struggled more with the evil that befell her and her family; she suffered from bouts of depression. Yet, when it came to me, she managed to surface from those dark places. She was the quintessential Jewish mother. When I was little, she sang Yiddish lullabies to me when I was sick or frightened. She nursed me through my childhood illnesses. She fed me endless bowls of chicken soup, placed cold compresses on my fevered brow and hovered over me like a guardian angel, nursing me back to health. She was always there for me, whether it was to place a band-aid on a skinned knee or to listen to me vent about a problem. I was the most fortunate of children to be so loved and cared for by my parents in spite of all that had happened to them, and I knew it.

Unlike my dad, who was unable to salvage any family mementos prior to the war, my mom's surviving family had managed to rescue some photos. I was intrigued with these photos of my mom with her family before the war. At least I knew what my maternal grandparents and aunts looked like. There is one photo in particular that gave me pause. It's a photo of my aunt in a very old brown and beige frayed leather photo album. She is my mom's older sister, Pesl. The photo is faded black and white. She is in what looks like a field of thick foliage. She looks serious, and there is an otherworldly beauty about her.

Pesl was in her early twenties at the time this photo was taken—about a year before the war broke out in Poland in 1939. She could have gone to a forced labor camp, but chose to remain with her parents and eight-year old baby sister, Zlatka. I am haunted by this photo.

My mother tells me that Pesl was a poet who loved literature and writing. She had a kind heart and was devoted to her family. I often look at her photo in silence and lament not knowing her. I was deprived of a relationship with this special woman. In its place are silent imaginary exchanges. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to converse with Aunt Pesl. What was her life like before the war? What books did she read? Could she recommend one to me? Could

she share one of her poems? Pesl's short life of beauty and devotion lives on in my memory as a blessing to me.



*Pesl, Circa 1938*

My grandparents also abide in me. I may not know what my paternal grandparents looked like, but I've kept them alive in my mind's eye along with my maternal grandparents and my aunts. That whole grandparent/grandchild thing or lack thereof loomed large in my life. Whenever there were gatherings of my parents' fellow Holocaust survivors, there were never any senior citizens around. The Holocaust created a whole demographic of baby boomers without grandparents. I was one of many of the second generation who never knew what it was to have a grandparent



*The Rosmarins, circa 1942: Top Row left to right: Uncle Chunek, Aunt Pesl, Uncle Heindel, Fela (my mom); bottom row left to right: Grandmother Miriam, Aunt Zlatka, Grandfather Yaakov. My mom and her four brothers survived (two not shown here). My grandparents and two aunts perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.*

One thing was for sure: The universe had to fill this void in our lives. My parents would be grandparents. My children would belong to and benefit from that grandparent/grandchild mutual admiration society. *Ich vill einiklech*, my dad would say (Yiddish for “I want grandchildren”). To me, that meant work hard in college, but not too hard. Find work after graduation that won’t be too demanding, and make sure your office is not too far from home. You need to focus on finding the right nice Jewish boy to help you start a family.

My parents were not going to leave my love life to chance. They intervened and set me up on a blind date with the son of family friends. I was not a fan of blind dates, but I was pleasantly surprised. My future husband, Steve, and I bonded over our mutual appreciation of French cuisine and that “aha” moment when the second generation meet and have an instant connection and understanding about what life was like growing up as the children of Holocaust survivors.





*My husband Steve, with his parents, Sala Bierman Elbaum and Izak Elbaum in a Displaced Persons Settlement, Nabburg.*

As I revisit this part of my young adult life, I realize that my parents' wishes influenced my college course choices, the work I chose upon graduation, and my choice of spouse and decision to start a family soon after marrying. Surprisingly, I was not really resentful of my parents for getting so involved in my life. It's hard for me to separate what they wanted from what I wanted. My marriage was and is a happy one, and having children has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.



*My Dad, David Urman, of blessed memory, with his first grandchild, Lawrence, 1982.*

It has not been pain-free, however. In December of 1984, my husband and I were expecting our second child. He was born very prematurely at only twenty-five weeks gestation and weighed a little over one pound. We named him Saul after Steve's mother, Sala, a Holocaust survivor who passed away a year before our wedding. My sweet little boy only lived three days. It was not meant to be.

How do you make sense of such a loss? I had watched how my parents did it. I saw my mother's commitment to anchor our family in a humble, warm and comforting place to call home. I saw my dad's constancy, fortitude and perseverance as he built a new life in his beloved America. In spite of all they had endured, my mom and dad forged ahead with faith, love, optimism and gratitude. I observed, I learned and I absorbed their ways of being. When baby Saul died, I knew what I would do.

There were times when it was hard to get out of bed in the morning. But I learned from my parents how to grieve. Somehow, I got through it—I survived. And then I carried on and tried to distill some goodness from the sadness. I became a volunteer for the ARC at Stepping Stones in Livingston, New Jersey—a program of early intervention and a preschool for special

needs children, many of whom have Down syndrome. I volunteered there for over fifteen years, and I edited a book for them entitled *The ARC Family Diaries*. It was a heartwarming compilation of essays, poems, photos and artwork submitted by parents, grandparents, siblings, staff, volunteers and the special needs children. It was my way of being with baby Saul and keeping his memory alive. I was a memory keeper after all.

Which leads me back to some of the questions I posed early on in this essay. Why was I born? There could be as many answers to this question as there are days in my life, or no answers at all. If I approach this question from my parents' perspective, I was born because they believed there was enough good in this world to bring me here and rebuild their lives after all they had gone through. And they wanted to ensure that those we lost would not be forgotten.

Why did I have children? How could I not? If my two parents could take that leap of faith, how could I not? The *einiklech* (grandchildren) that my parents so desperately wanted would bring them happiness and pride and affirm the continuity of their descendants, their culture and their traditions.

Why is it that I sometimes find it hard to breathe? Perhaps another question I'd like to ask Aunt Pesl, but dare not, is how did they die? When I have trouble breathing, am I reliving the final moments of my loved ones? Perhaps, I can breathe a little easier now that I have it down on paper.

As for the questions that defy answers, there are images. When I think about my G2 experience, an image prevails. It is an image reported to me by a dear friend who attended my wedding. She was struck by the sea of tattooed forearms pumping up and down in jubilation as they lifted my husband and me up on chairs and danced around us to the *hora*. So much joy and so much sorrow embedded in one image. The heartache is there. It is tattooed on the forearms of the victims as a constant reminder of the horror. That makes the wedding celebration that much more joyful and celebratory. The happiness, the thankfulness, the exuberance are all there, and they are palpable. How miraculous for the survivors to have made it to this wedding in spite of it all!

The Auschwitz number on my dad's forearm is tattooed across my heart and seared into my soul as a permanent marker of the atrocities my family suffered in the Holocaust. But that hasn't stopped me from living my best life. I am the matriarch of a thriving family—a son, a daughter, their spouses and four precious grandchildren. They are contributing members of society and have made this world a better place in which to live. When I'm no longer here, they will assume my role as family memory keeper and pass it on to their children. The lives of those we lost will never be forgotten. We will honor our sacred calling from generation to generation. If only they could see us now. How proud they would be!



*Steve and I (center) with our son, daughter, their spouses and three of our grandchildren, left to right: Abby, Isaac and Remy, December 2018.*



*Here I am with our newest G4: Freddy, February 2021.*

## The Search for My Jewish Identity

Sr. Eleanor Francis

In the fall of 2019, I took part in a workshop at Drew University. The workshop was for second-generation Holocaust survivors or “2G’s” as we are sometimes called. There were eleven of us and each of us had a parent—or in some cases two parents—who were Holocaust survivors.

I grew up with my mother and grandmother, but I didn’t know anything about the Holocaust or that they had been part of it. When I learned anything at all, it came in hint form. I had a Jewish friend named Ruth Zitron. Once, when we were both about eight, Ruth said to me, “Your grandmother is Jewish.” “No, she isn’t,” I replied insistently. Just to be sure, I asked my mother, “Is Grandma Jewish?” “No,” she replied shortly. I didn’t try to pursue it, but I haven’t forgotten it either. Although I had no sophisticated idea of what “Jewish” might be, I at least knew it involved religion. We used to pass a synagogue in Santa Barbara, where my sisters and I



*My grandmother on the ship from Sweden*

grew up. Another rare hint came when my mother let slip, “I was in a work camp where we had only one bowl of soup a day to eat.” Being unfamiliar with the Holocaust or even with World War II, I had no context within which to put the work camp but knew it must have been awful because the campers were so underfed. My mother’s voice was too guarded for me to ask many questions. I think her body language was also closed. Only years later did I learn that our parents were trying to protect us by denying any possible Jewish heritage. They thought if people knew our heritage, we would be the targets of anti-Semitism. This never happened during the twenty-two years I lived in Santa Barbara.

There was a mostly unspoken idea in my home that Germans are bad people. My sisters and I just knew not to take German in school. No one in my family would ever consider going to Germany. My father referred to Germans as “Krauts.” As I got to be a teenager, I understood that we fought against Germany in World War II. I still had not heard of the Holocaust, or *Shoah* or “the final solution.” (I understand the word “Holocaust” to have come into use in the 1960’s, but I don’t think we studied it in high school.)



*From left to right, Me, Bonnie, Mom, Dad, Marie*

When my sisters and I grew to be young adults, we had different approaches toward our mother and her background. We knew more about the Holocaust because we had read some related books. My youngest sister Marie and I chose to honor Mom’s reluctance to talk about the Holocaust. Our middle sister Bonnie had a different approach. She was a student of psychology and believed both Mom and the rest of us could be harmed by Mom’s silence. She pressed Mom to give her some information. Mom was reluctant but tried to do her best. That information got passed on to Marie and me. When Bonnie first showed me a genogram that she had drawn for a college class, it hit me in the pit of my stomach: not only were my mother and maternal grandmother survivors, but on my mother’s side, the whole family either died in or survived the

Holocaust. Were they Jews? Were they practicing Jews? I knew by this time that Hitler didn't care whether a Jew was a practicing Jew or not. They were all a scourge. But what makes a Jew a Jew?

In my young and middle adult years, I don't remember any specific incidents relating to my mother and the Holocaust. However, there was one: The year was 1993. "Schindler's List" was playing in movie theaters all over the country. I went to see the movie with a friend. For me, it was a powerful and horrifying experience. One line has stuck with me forever. "There are the Hungarians." A line of naked Hungarians was running by to be looked over by the "Selection." With a startling realization I gasped, "That was Mom." I was aghast and started to cry right there in the theater.

A few weeks later, I was on a walk with Mom and Dad on a San Francisco street. We passed a theater where "Schindler's List" was playing. On the marquis in large letters was written SCHINDLER'S LIST. Dad looked up and said, "Did you see that movie?" "Yes, it was very good," I replied. "Did *you* see it?" "Yes." My mother's hurt and angry remark was "I didn't have to see it. I *lived* it." After that there was silence.

My sister Marie is eight years younger than I, so she had a somewhat different family experience, but that experience also included hints and shocking facts from people outside the family. Like me, she was ignorant of even some family basics. For instance, she didn't know Mom had a brother.

Growing up, Marie had many Jewish friends. Her best friend was a Jewish musician named Marianne O'Siel; Marianne's family hosted an exchange student from Israel named Judy. One day when Marie was thirteen, Judy said, "Your mother is a Holocaust survivor. She has every sign." Somehow Marie understood the truth of it right away.

Once when Marie was a teenager, she was griping about something. Mom's retort was "Oh, really, what's the worst thing that could happen to you? Gang rape?" The implication was that even that was not as bad as what Mom had experienced.

I began to read books and articles and to talk with friends about the Holocaust. I learned that Judaism passes through the mother's line and that there were recognizably "Jewish" names like "Goldman" on my mother's side of the family. It was said that some people "look Jewish." That would be a strong indication that Jewishness is not just about religion. Some of my friends even told me I was Jewish, although with my blond hair and tall stature I looked more like my Swedish father. As I recall, I didn't mind the possibility that I might be Jewish. However, by my late twenties, I was a Vedanta nun.

Vedantins believe that all the major religions lead to the same goal. In fact, I knew some Vedantins who were Jewish. I learned that there are different kinds of religions. Some, like Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are called "universal." By genetic testing, you cannot determine the religion or ethnicity of people of those religions. Other religions, like Shinto and Judaism, although they are not races, are related to certain cultures. My old question, "Who is a Jew?" can now be detected by genetic testing using services such as Ancestry DNA and 23&Me. So, in a very twisted sort of way, Hitler was correct when he picked out Jews, whether observant or not.

In November of 2015, Mom passed away. My two sisters, two nieces, and I were all at her bedside. It was the day before Thanksgiving and it looked like it would be a very sad holiday. However, we decided to devote the day to giving thanks for Mom's life.

After my sisters and I had overseen and performed a memorial service for her, we studied her files, especially her Holocaust file. I knew she was getting money from the German government, but had no idea of the paperwork behind it. We learned that in 1999, she had applied for restitution from the Generali Fund which administers Holocaust reparations payments. It was through the German government that Mom received \$400 per month in later years. In addition, through Jewish Family Services she received free housekeeping services and twenty-four hours care while on hospice. JFS receives funds from the German government (via the Claims Conference) to assist Holocaust survivors.





*My mom in Hungary.*



*My mom at age 80.*

In July of 2017, I gained great understanding of my identity when my sister and I visited the Jewish Cultural Center in San Francisco. We spent an hour and a half with a man named Brian Brown. (He is a Jewish man who admits to having a non-Jewish name, but did not explain the history behind that). Brian is the Care Manager and Coordinator of the Holocaust Survivor Restitution Fund in San Francisco. He used to meet with Mom once a year when she was alive. I believe it was my first real affirmation of Mom's Jewish identity from an expert. My sister and I had a chance to ask some of the questions that were bothering us. We were really puzzled by a letter to a government official in Budapest that Mom had in her Holocaust-related file. This particular letter was written in an obviously angry tone and complained about the Hungarians' lack of response to her pleas for restitution. She said that the Germans did unspeakable things, but at least now they acknowledge their guilt and try to make amends. "But," she went on, "you kicked me out of the country that I loved with all my heart. Except for my mother, I lost my entire family and everything I had. Now you want to wiggle out of the pittance you agreed on?"

We learned from Brian that the Hungarians were very anti-Semitic and have given very little restitution money to anyone. "They were the worst," he said. Well, my sister and I were so

naïve that we had no idea of how countries other than Germany had cooperated with the Nazis. For me Hungary meant sometimes hearing Hungarian being spoken; it meant my grandmother's friends; it meant Hungarian food (Oh for a poppy seed cake!) It meant Hungarian and Gypsy music. It meant hearing Mom talk about Budapest, one of the great beautiful cities of the world. Now, I tried with shock to take in that Hungary had such a serious flaw. Other things we learned were that most of the Jews and others that the Nazis rounded up in Hungary were sent to Auschwitz. We learned that Neuwirth (our mother's maiden name) was Jewish, although not always. We learned that the papers from Israel that were in Mom's folder were there because as a Jewish state, it wants to help out Holocaust survivors by taking care of insurance claims. By the time Brian Brown finished with us, I was finally sure that I indeed did come from a Jewish family, at least on my mother's side. The mystery was ended. But the clincher came when my sister and I were going out the door. "This is the first time I have met a Jewish nun," Brian remarked. (Actually, I know at least two others.)

I now realize that I have been searching for my Jewish identity for perhaps the last twenty years, unconscious though the search might have been. One thing I have enjoyed is putting myself in situations where there are Jewish people. Perhaps twenty years ago, I joined Shirley Sugarman's interfaith group at Drew. It went into abeyance soon afterward, but I made a friend there who hosted informal Shabbat services which I attended. This man was neither a rabbi nor Orthodox. However, he was a very observant Jew. One of the most impressive things about him was that he refused either to drive or to be driven on the Sabbath. He lived in Madison but walked to a synagogue in Morristown each week. I invited him to the convent twice to talk about Judaism. He was ever proud to be "a Jewish man who had visited a convent."

Another really significant Jewish friend I made was Rabbi Shefa Gold. She is one of the leaders of the Jewish Renewal movement. I was fortunate to meet her because she has brought a number of Jewish groups to our retreat house for instruction in the Jewish Renewal form of worship. Jewish Renewal worship is expressive, holistic, heart-centered and includes much Hebrew chant and even dance. There is dancing with the Torah, which I find especially joyful to see, and dancing without the Torah. I have had plenty of chances to talk with Shefa about being 2G and I think the talks have contributed to my 2G understanding of myself.

Currently, I have a friend and colleague named Rabbi Debra Smith who is the founder of a Jewish Renewal congregation named *Or Ha Lev*. It is small and does not have a synagogue. It meets in a Lutheran Church (or currently on Zoom). Nevertheless, I enjoy it more than most formal synagogues. Rabbi Deb has invited me to a number of special feast day services, for which I feel most grateful. She has also taken me to the Conservative synagogue in Morris Plains, *Adath Shalom*. I still feel shy about calling myself Jewish. I am usually in a Christian habit since I am a Sister in a convent called The Community of St. John Baptist. People know me as an Episcopal priest. I don't want to make the time to explain myself to people unless they know me well.

I have chosen to devote my life to religion and spirituality. With regard to religion, all my life I have taken a path different from that of my parents. My father was not a Holocaust survivor but was disgusted by the hypocrisy of those who claim to be religious but who belie the tenets of their religion through participation in prejudicial and discriminatory actions. My mother was interested in groups like the Unitarian Universalists, who don't practice much ritual but are concerned about issues of justice.

In my twenties, after considerable search, I joined a Vedanta Convent in San Francisco. Vedantins like to consider themselves the world's first religious pluralists. They focus on having a mystical encounter with God. After fifteen years, I realized that although the philosophy of Vedanta suited me well, Vedanta does not come from my culture. The language and the music are particularly foreign. I switched to an Episcopal convent in New Jersey. After some years, I also became an Episcopal priest. By the time of my ordination, my father had passed away, but my mother was alive and attended the ordination along with four other family members. She was given the best seat in the chapel. I think she had come to accept my religious peregrinations. Besides my mother was a good friend. Although we didn't share the same religion (at least not overtly!) we shared a love for the arts. It was largely because of my mother that I heard many fine concerts and saw many spectacular art exhibits in San Francisco.

One of my main ministries today is interfaith work. Back in the days when I was trying to decide which religion I should pick in order to continue convent life, the local Episcopal

bishop was so kind as to invite me to see him. We became friends. His advice to me was, “It doesn’t really matter which religion you make your home, because in any event, you must be a bridge person and in this word of strife we need all the bridge people we can get.” I think the first formal interfaith work I did was to join the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission for the Diocese of Newark. I was invited by the then bishop and stayed on for ten years. I also began to give programs on religious pluralism, at which the attendees self-described themselves as Christian, Jewish, or Unitarian. The idea of religious pluralism programs was to ask, “Whatever religion I am, how do I look upon people of other religions?” Next, I became part of an organization called “United Religions,” which was founded by the very bishop who encouraged me to do interfaith work. It has become a worldwide organization, but I joined a group which meets at the U.N. One of the U.N. programs is to meet every year on the International Day of Peace (September 21). Each year, a different religious group leads a program. Always included is a procession in which all the flags of U.N. member countries are honored. One of my jobs at the U.N. is to serve as a kind of chaperone for youth of different religions. One of my current ministries is giving Interfaith programs along with my rabbi friend Debra Smith and my Muslim friend Shabiha Sheikh.



So where does my 2G identify fit in? The most honest answer is that I don’t know, but there are some bits I think I grasp. My mother and grandmother had to live on next to nothing during the war. I never forget that “one bowl of soup a day” my mother once mentioned. I have never seen a photo of them at the time, but based on other photos I have seen, I can imagine what they looked like. I know the tremendous wastefulness of our present lifestyle, even for those of us who take vows of poverty. I know that there is actually enough food to feed the world, but our

style of agriculture assures that some, like myself, will be overfed and others will be underfed. We throw vast amounts of food away. I am still aghast when I see this!

I think my love of education is also entwined with the fact that my mother was deprived of educational opportunities as a young person. My mother was very bright and did well in school. When she should have been going to college, she went to Auschwitz, Bremen, and Bergen-Belsen instead. After the war, she and her mother were liberated to Sweden. In Sweden, Mom met and married our father. They moved to the U.S. and had three children while her mother stayed in Sweden until 1950. Mom worked sometimes as a housewife and sometimes at jobs that were not challenging enough for her abilities. At times she was bored and frustrated. I think I felt sad and a little guilty that my opportunities were so much greater than hers. I tried to make up for her loss. In high school and college, I thought I had to earn A's in every class, even though both parents said it was unnecessary. In midlife, Mom finally had the opportunity to go back to school. She did very well as an art history student and graduated at age fifty. I was so proud!

In the past year, the search for my Jewish identity and study of Judaism have continued. In February 2020, I took a trip to Israel as part of an interfaith group. Both leaders and participants were Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. The holy places we visited in Jerusalem and the environs were also holy to the three different religions. The Jews of Jerusalem are mostly Orthodox and I was fascinated to get a close-up view of the details of how they live and worship. We visited the famous Holocaust Museum, *Yad Vashem*. There I could have done family research but knew there was little time and better opportunities awaited.

I was fortunate to spend the month of March 2020 near Washington, D.C, where I spent one fascinating day at the U.S. Holocaust Museum. On the second floor of that museum is a research center where families of Holocaust survivors and victims can get help accessing the amazingly voluminous records in the museum archives. A young man worked with me the entire day. He told me we could only research one relative at a time, so I chose my mother. Later, I received a sizeable amount of additional information via email links, which were only available for a limited period of time. I had had no idea the museum had any information on my mother,

let alone so much. She is listed in a number of places, including SHARIT HA PLATAH, which translates to “The Surviving Remnant.” It is an “extensive list of survivors of Nazi tyranny published so the lost may be found and the dead brought back to life.” It was published by The Central Committee of Liberated Jews in Bavaria in 1946. She is also listed on the Bergen-Belsen Survivor List. There are copies of legal documents giving information such as this:

Name: Neuwirth, Marta

Date of birth: May 20, 1926

Birthplace: Komarno, Czechoslovakia

May 12, 1944: moved to a ghetto called Nove Zamky

June 14, 1944- taken to Auschwitz

August 1944- taken to Bremen work camp, followed by Bergen-Belsen

April 15, 1945—liberated to Sweden

Two pieces of information gathered at the Holocaust Museum were brand new to me: my mother had lived in a Jewish ghetto before being sent to Auschwitz; my mother’s religion was listed as “Jewish” on official documents.

We 2G’s are encouraged to write and speak about our stories. Why? Because the first generation of survivors is gradually dying, so it is up to the second and third generations to keep our stories alive. If we don’t keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, there could be another one. I have been fortunate to speak and write for a number of groups so far—some Christian, some Jewish, some live, most on Zoom. As of today, I have just received some important information. One of the organizations for which I spoke gave me a wonderful gift of a DNA testing kit. I have received the results: I am 50% European Jewish, 45% Swedish, and 5% “other.” A great deal of research has gone behind “my Jewish identity.” It is a real thrill to have Jewish identity shown through scientific means. Where will this end up? I don’t know, but already I have learned more about myself and my background than I would have thought possible. I can only look forward to learning still more.

## What Comes of Love

Ora Gordon

I've kept a lot of myself from my mother. Sometimes it feels as if I've kept my whole life from her. She was and continues to be a private, quiet person. And the fact that her heart was as bad as it was, came as a shock to me and my brother, but also, not a surprise. That she wouldn't want to worry us and didn't share those kinds of things with us was my mother's way. Her health was hers, a possession she closely guarded.

But now, after falling into a coma from pneumonia and needing vascular and cardiac arteries replaced, she is dependent on us until she is well enough to leave the hospital, until she rehabilitates, until she finds a place to live.

A year-and-a-half pass. She moves into an independent adult-community. She and I return to the state of sharing very little. And it is only after three weeks of class that have passed, when I finally admit to her that I'm taking it.

"A writing workshop?" she says as if she's misheard me, but the expression on her face suggests something else. I tighten up after just three words and a look.

"It's focused on second generation survivors. At Drew University. English and Psychology professors are running the class. And it's free. It ends before the kids are done with school."

I can't figure out if she thinks that doing this is an indulgence or if she's concerned that it will take time from me taking care of her grandchildren. The workshop is a creative endeavor and she generally supports creative endeavors, so I'm taken aback. But this isn't so unusual either. Supporting my interests is not my mother's strong suit.

"But your father wasn't a survivor," she says in an astonished way.

I take a long pause here. It's not as if she doesn't know his history. The fact is, it wasn't until the 1990s that *Kindertransportees* became classified as Holocaust Survivors. They didn't face the atrocities of living in camps, but they did journey to England alone, without their parents, not knowing if they would see them again. In most cases, they did not.

“Well,” I say, “not in camps like Sonya and Roz, but they did travel without their parents, Ma, and they are all recognized as survivors.”

“Yes, yes,” she says. I still hear the judgment in her voice.

I take another pause. I remember that even my father had a hard time saying that he was a survivor, and he suffered from survivor's guilt. He would say candidly without hesitation that he was on the *Kindertransport* if someone asked, but I can't recall him saying out loud that he was a survivor. And he did survive! He survived beatings, torture and starvation for two months on the “Hellship Dunera” which travelled from England to Australia. And he was detained in Australia alone without family for over a year. He was alone again traveling by ship back to England, circling the other half of the globe. And he also survived serving in the British Army from 1941-1947. He absolutely was a survivor.



For more information about the Dunera, consult:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMT\\_Dunera](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMT_Dunera)





*Dad, a Sergeant in the British Army,  
Seesen, Germany, 1947.*

“So, what are you writing about?” she asks, and this time her expression suggests that I couldn’t possibly have anything to write about. The question stings like a shot. I breathe. Then I lie.

“We haven’t started writing yet.” But the truth is that we started writing when the class began. So why do I lie to her? I can’t remember the last time I lied to my mother. I lie because once again she has stymied me in a manner that leaves me deflated. There is nowhere to go from here. I am certainly not going to convince her that anything I want to write about is worthy of taking a class. I simply haven’t the strength at fifty. I’ve had enough of her doubt.

And then I consider her “Holocaust-ness.” She is a 3G who knew nothing. Most of her grandparents and aunts and uncles (eight, not counting spouses) and cousins and great aunts and great uncles were murdered in Auschwitz. They lived in Poland and are gone. All but three—three—survived. Life for her started in Israel, where she was born in 1936 (her parents moved there in the 1920s). All life starts in Israel as far as she is concerned. Looking back doesn’t exist.

Her father and mother never spoke about it; they were never introspective, they were never able to convey their deep repressed feelings of loss, they were never able to explain their hardened ways, they were never able to express the hate they felt for the wrongs done to them, they were never ...

I might have told her that I will be writing about the past. I want to engage in my history. I want to flesh it out a bit. My father courageously looked back, told me his stories willingly,

opened up about his experiences. So will I, on paper, in case someone wants to read this essay years from now. But I don't say any of this to her.



*Mom, Esther Manela at the time of this photo, a cartographer in the Israeli Army, 1954.*



*Mom and I in Santa Monica, 2011.*

I'm in my early thirties sitting at my office desk. At the time, I'm a Creative Services Manager for a large corporation. The phone rings. I recognize the number. It's my father. He's calling for the first time that day. He calls me every day, a couple of times. He wants to make sure that I am where I told him I would be. I pick up.

"Hi, Dad," I say. "Hi, Orale," he responds. He is the only one who calls me by this name. It is a Yiddish way of making my name affectionate, and he is altering the name he never liked. "I let your mother choose your name." I was named "Ora" from "Tzipora," my mother's mother.

"Do you know what today is?" he asks in a very loud voice. He's already suggested that I ought to know. "Today is 11.9—it's *Kristallnacht*. 1938. Do you remember?" I'm absorbed in work. No, I had not made the connection between the current date and the one fifty years earlier. I am not proud of myself.

“This was the beginning of the end for the Jews. It was a sad, sad day for me in Hamburg.” He pauses, then asks how I am. He says nothing more about history and hangs up quickly to let me get back to it.

In 2000, my father and I go to London. It is a trip we look forward to. He certainly. There is a *Kindertransport* Reunion. And I—well, of course—I will be happy not to be at work and instead outside of the country doing something meaningful with him.

The conference passes quickly. We meet many, hear a book’s worth of stories though none are quite my father’s, only the start. It is a rare thing to be saved by the English, but then to have them turn around and arrest you and send you to Australia for over a year before sending anyone to help. “To the bottom of the earth” my father said. Even after Winston Churchill’s paranoia and that wretched experience, he opted to fight in the British Army. How? I knew why: To be in the same hemisphere as his older brother Boris who was, by then, in Palestine with his wife. But still...

After the reunion, we tour. One day we had been out since morning and we had tickets to see “Swan Lake” in the evening. That means returning to our hotel to change, have something to eat and make it to the theatre by 7:30 p.m. It’s already 5:00 p.m. Down the tube we go. We move quickly, but I, forty-seven years his junior, am mindful that he can’t run. We are deep down at one of those stations that feels like we have journeyed to the center of the earth. It is rush-hour. The platform is filled many people deep. How will we manage to get on the train? Will there be time enough to do all we need to do? We could forego changing and go straight to the theatre, but the tickets are in my room.

We hear the train coming. My father pushes and shoves, pushes and shoves. I can’t stand what he is doing. I can’t do it.

The train comes. He manages to get on. I don’t. He calls out to me. I try to move forward; I don’t make much progress. He gets off the train; if he doesn’t, we will be separated. The train departs. He walks over to me and stands to my side. We both look out at the empty tracks. He is

annoyed, perhaps even angry. Then he turns to me and says, “Do you think I would have survived the war if I hadn’t been pushy?”

I can’t speak. And he doesn’t say anything more. I know. I can feel it from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. I understand a lifetime of behavior I had witnessed in him that at times made me cringe. But I say nothing. I don’t acknowledge him in any way. I don’t have the words to apologize to him, not in the way I would have wanted to. I don’t have the words to say that I am sorry for all the unfathomable things he had to live through and endure. I don’t have the words to say that I am heartbroken by what he had to go through in order for me to exist. Instead, I am frozen. I am silent. And the silence lasts a long, long time.

When I think back to the beginning, I don’t feel it. The choices are not my own. I am just a child.

I attend Hebrew Day School for a number of years and when the decision is made to continue middle school at a local public school, I don’t complain. My class is very small; the only other two girls are moving onto public school, so I feel it is time for me to go, too.

Summers are spent at a day-camp-swim-club, and starting at the age of twelve, I have summer jobs at the same camp. Many times, I ask if they could send me to sleep-away. The response is always, “We don’t have the money for that,” and I accept it.

By high school I feel like I’m being choked--it’s time to leave home. At sixteen, I start to look into colleges with hope. I do this alone. They don’t take me on tours, but the after-school Hebrew high school I attend (one night each week and on Sundays) arranges for college tours in Boston. I develop a list of schools I will apply to on the east coast, reluctantly including, on my father’s orders, the state school, which doesn't offer architecture as a major. “It was good enough for Cousin Shirley and she graduated top of her class,” he says. It isn’t a secret that I'm considering that major, but it certainly isn’t discussed. They hadn't ever discussed a career with me and, at application time, they don’t discuss what I would like to study or where. I end up paying for many of the applications on my own.

While the paperwork is out for review, in the winter of my senior year, another educational opportunity arrives: A high school abroad program in Israel for two months (and six college credits). Sheepishly, I mention it to my parents. My mother is surprisingly enthusiastic. At the start of the program, she will be in Israel visiting her father, now in his early nineties, and she feels that this is a good way for me to see him and to attend the school. I seek out scholarship monies to help defray the costs and land a small amount. I'm not quite sure, even to this day, how they had the money to fund the rest. And somehow this seed which I plant does grow. In a flash, I am on a plane and the time melts away. It is an intense, challenging, glorious adventure.

I return to the US in the spring of my senior year. Among the college acceptances I receive, two are scholarships from private colleges (School of Architecture at Syracuse and Carnegie-Mellon). I'm excited and share the news with my parents. They hardly hear me. Their answer is a hard "No!" "I don't know why you applied to colleges anywhere else," my father says. "You're going to the state college. I'm paying. That's that." I keep quiet. I assume that this conversation isn't over and I'll raise the topic again in a day or two. But I don't. I don't ask again. I don't dare. And I never get to explain to them my plan, my path...my hopes. I simply shrivel.

I also feel ashamed. I don't dismiss the opportunities I've already had. A lot of money already has been invested in my education (which also included piano and voice lessons). Do I have any right to want more? The problem is that I'm being told what to do. I'm being lectured to about what limitations I should accept. The decision, his, not mine, is a sentence, not an opportunity.

I am sullen all summer. I feel like I'm being smothered. This kind of "going away to college" is no "going away" at all.

When he drives me to college, my mother isn't there for the big moment. She has returned again to Israel to tend to her father who is now on his sick-bed. His last months are excruciating for him and for her. I dread the ride to school. I dread driving to THIS school. I

dread the vacuum our quietness creates. I dread being asked to speak, because I really have “nothing nice to say.”

He senses it. “What’s the matter, doll?” I don’t respond. Any response would be interpreted as my being spoiled. The *Kindertransport* took him to London at the age of sixteen. His formal education ended there. But Boris, ten years his senior, received a full scholarship in the 1930s from a Christian family to attend the University of Berlin to study engineering. “Unheard of,” my father would say. “A CHRISTIAN FAMILY!” He would boast about Uncle Boris’s education in Hitler’s Germany, but then in the same breath would say that he wasn’t so lucky and that he would have loved to have completed high school, forget a college education. So there it sits. Who am I to complain?

As we leave one another, he says to me that it all will be fine and that this college is good enough. I can focus on an area of study when I get my Master’s, if I want to get my Master’s, and he tells me now that I’ll be paying for it myself if I do go. Then he says, “Now you’re here at Rutgers, I can drive down to get you whenever you need.” And that’s when I learn the lesson: proximity mattered most.

It stings for a good year. It is all I can do to keep my grades up. I apply to transfer to another state college which offers an architecture program. When I bring it up, he asks who will pay the difference in cost. I haven’t a sufficient answer. He doesn’t want me to take on loans. I can’t seem to make an argument about pursuing a specific degree, even if at a state college, that he will hear. All I feel is that I will never get out of his clutches.

Junior year of college I study abroad again. Perhaps they feel guilty for ramming Rutgers down my throat. I want to go to France and learn French, but France is out of the question. “The French hated the Jews even during the war. They still hate the Jews,” he says. “If you go at all, you will go to Israel to see your family.” So much for a Romantic experience. I go to Israel for five-and-a-half months.

I graduate Phi Beta Kappa, but I don't embark on a career path. I don't have one. What I find is work. Work that will pay the bills. Work that will keep me from asking my parents for money. Work that will sustain an apartment, a car, expenses and keep me from moving back into their home.

A year out of college, I apply to graduate school. School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. An MFA program in painting. I get in. The acceptance letter does not include a scholarship and the tuition is steep. I tell my mother and her only reaction is, "You're not going to go, are you?" I don't attend.

My full-time job is structured so that I have time to paint. The architecture study is now a very distant memory. I take classes at the Art Students League on 57<sup>th</sup> in Manhattan on Sunday afternoons. Sunday mornings are spent with my father at brunch. He comes to pick me up, we go out to eat and then he drops me at class. He needs to see me weekly. It's a pact. Sometimes he also comes for dinner on Tuesday nights. When I leave for class or say goodnight during the week, after he's gone, I finally exhale.

Almost ten years after I receive my Bachelor's degree, I decide again to pursue a Master's. This time in communications design. I can attend the program part-time; it will take four years to complete the degree, but I can work while pursuing it. I will take out loans. It's my best hope.

In a poetic twist, 9/11 happens two weeks after I start the Pratt Master's program. I'm leaving my downtown Jersey City apartment on my way to close on a home in Maplewood with my first husband. We see back-to-back traffic heading into Manhattan on the Turnpike extension bridge, but I don't turn my head to see if anything has happened. When we arrive at the house, my mother, who was our realtor, says to us that a plane has hit the Towers. I hear this repeated on the radio, "A passenger plane has hit the Towers." I'm thinking a small, private plane that seats fewer than ten people.

Inside we go, waiting to do the walk-through, but no one else arrives. The owner has a thirteen inch black-and-white tv set up on the floor. We watch the news and shuffle in and out of the vacant rooms. We return again and again to the tv. At some point one of the Towers collapses. On this tv, the buildings are one inch high. I do not understand what I'm seeing—people are in those buildings—how could it fall? Later, the next one goes down. We are still there, glued. Later I will learn that the seller's attorney didn't show up because she was helping her husband who had gotten sick. He worked in the Towers. He saved his life that day by having a head cold.

We leave the house. The movers are delayed, the walk-through is delayed, the closing is delayed. My mother returns to her office. We walk aimlessly through town. It was supposed to be an exciting day and now we are walking around in a stupor of indescribable confusion. We are in shock. We find ourselves at the local library. I try to email some friends to find out if they are ok. I call my father.

Slowly I say the words, "I can't believe this is happening."

He's in retirement sitting on the couch in his living room with the tv going as it always is. "Oh Orale, this is nothing! When I was in London in the 1940s bombs were dropping all around us for days and days, and weeks and weeks." Out of respect for his experiences, I say nothing, but I'm shaken to my core. And 9/11 becomes my Holocaust.

The house manages to close on 9/12 and so does that life, my pre-9/11 life.

It was instilled in me from early on, that tomorrow is not guaranteed. Tomorrow might not proceed as you had expected, so live in the now. Before 9/11, I didn't necessarily waste time, but I did enjoy myself. I lived freely in my twenties, openly without rigorous pressures. I made art and saw shows and heard concerts and made friends and stayed out late and made some bad decisions and had a good time and got married. 9/11 is my wake-up call. All their preparation kicks in. I will get through this on my own. My papers are in order.



I decide to divorce my husband. In less than a year, the house is sold and I return to the city as planned. I complete my Master's. I travel. I make sure that the choices I make are mine and not to please anyone else.

But like the Holocaust, 9/11 is never far from me. My second husband, the father of my children, his college roommate was a pediatrician on his way to a medical conference. He left from Boston on his way to LA when his plane took a turn. Fred's plane struck the second Tower. He's gone. So is a high school classmate who worked on the 93<sup>rd</sup> floor. So is my brother-in-law's business partner. I know many, too many stories. Too many people are gone.

Four years pass, I finish the degree. From a career standpoint, I didn't do all that I could to land better. I couldn't afford to take off from work to do an internship that would have positioned me in a design firm. Instead, I work as a designer in-house. Now I am deeply resentful. And I realize that I carry the resentment of my misguided education for over thirty years.

I am mad at myself for not being stern about what I wanted very early on. I am mad at myself for not being more confident. I am mad at myself for not taking out loans to attend those schools which offered programs I wanted to attend. And I am so bitterly angry that I didn't take out even more loans to complete the Master's program properly with an internship at the end.

Years pass and I am still a drive away from my father. I am still having Sunday brunches and Tuesday dinners. This was true in my twenties and it still is in my thirties. It isn't until my second husband lands a position across the country that I finally will be away from my parents. I am forty-one. We have a five-month old. When we tell my parents the news, my father says that we cannot go. He says many things. Has many reasons--his age, my mother's age, his most recent grandson. I remind him that when he met my mother in Israel, he married her there and then moved her to America away from her father. He doesn't acknowledge this truth. He only knows that he is hurt. Deeply hurt. Hurt in a way that can never be repaired.



*My father, Alex/Abrascha with Zach, my first child, West Orange, NJ.*

Weeks later he tells me that he understands, that I need to follow my husband, but he's still hoping that I will change my mind. I don't. We go. We move out west. Within five months, my father is very sick and a month later he dies. At eighty-nine. I knew that he wouldn't last long. I knew that my lack of proximity would kill him.

I breathe out. I have to.



*My husband, Jonathan, and our second son Xander, Manhattan Beach, California, 2016.*



## **A Gift of Strength and Resilience**

Monica Hartman

I am an adult child of Holocaust survivors, a member of the Second Generation, as we often are called. My parents lost so very much in the Holocaust, so much that is unimaginable and unfathomable. It is only now, as I reflect back on my childhood, after writing and thinking about it, that I realize the many ways my parents worked to mold me, to shield me from the abyss of paralyzing grief and to instill in me many strengths for life, for living this beautiful life.

My mother, Lina Baum, was born in Vienna, Austria, a city whose beauty and culture she recalled with much fondness, but she and my dad (also born in Vienna) had conflicted feelings about the city. It was their beloved home but it was also the city that threw them out, that shipped their whole families to concentration camps, most to their murders.

My mother's mother, Ann Baum née Pollak, came from Prague. My mother always spoke fondly of visiting family in Prague in the summers. My grandmother was a single mother who had worked long days doing hand laundry, which left her with red raw hands. Her husband and father of my mother and her sister Gretl walked out on the family when my mom was only three and Gretl six, never to be seen again.

As I was growing up, my mom spoke gently and with cheer about her wonderful, wise and positive mother and her dear bright older sister, Gretl. Usually that same positive attitude and cheerfulness enveloped my mom, although on recounting stories, I could detect deep emotions as tears quietly flowed down her cheeks. Nevertheless, my mother—like her mother before her—was determined to make the best of life.

Often in telling her story about leaving Vienna, Mom told us sadly and incredulously how her mother wouldn't leave Vienna with her in September 1938. My mother begged her and warned her of the coming peril. (Mom had read Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*, and believed that he was honest about his stated goals.) My grandmother protested that at fifty she was too old to leave. She much preferred to join her married daughter, Gretl, and baby granddaughter in Prague.



My dad, Johann (Hans) Deutsch, came from a lower middle-class family in Vienna, Austria. His parents owned and operated a pastry bakery, which required long hours. My dad graduated from Gymnasium (a type of higher high school). Later, he and my mother met on a blind date. When Nazi threats became clear, he tried in vain to convince his parents to flee, but like my mother's parents, they would not leave. My father left on his own. Years later, he spoke of his parents, only briefly and in sad, hushed tones.



*My parents with dad's mother, Vienna, 1938. It is evident from the grim looks on their faces that they are aware that they may never see each other again.*

After fleeing Austria in the cold of December 1938, my dad waded through a narrow section of the Rhine River and escaped to Diepoldsau, near Zurich, Switzerland. There a farmer directed him to a nearby work camp for Jewish refugees, where my dad and other young men worked building mountain roads by hand labor. Two years later, miraculously, the men were recruited by a representative from the American Joint Distribution Committee to volunteer as settlers in the new colony of Sosúa in the Dominican Republic. Eager to escape from Europe, many signed on to go although they knew nothing about Santo Domingo (as the Dominican Republic was then known). For the rest of his life my dad, and later my mother, maintained a close and dear friendship with Herr Jaeger, the farmer and his family.



*Work camp in Diepoldsau, near Zurich, Switzerland, where Dad learned about Sosúa, Dominican Republic.*

Meanwhile, my mother also had escaped to Antwerp, Belgium in September 1938 and later to Nazi occupied Paris. From Sosúa, Hans wrote to her about the good life there, urging her to join him. This required travelling to Marseille, where a visa was arranged and then travelling to Casablanca to catch the ship to the Dominican Republic. Unbeknownst to all, this was the last ship to bring refugees to Santo Domingo. On December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1941, the young couple finally was reunited and married. I was born there a few years later. When I was four, my family joyously emigrated to the United States, New York City! Years later, a dear friend pointed out that unlike most refugees who were all alone, Sosúa offered an instant support group, an extended family of people, all of whom had lost loved ones in similar ways, providing understanding and support to one another.





*My parents' wedding picture, December 12, 1941. My dad purchased the polka dot silk fabric which Mom then sewed into the dress.*

My memories of growing up are like numerous snapshots. Sometimes, my parents recounted a brief memory, a story of a person or an encounter: their heart-breaking effort to try, in vain, to convince their parents to flee with them; the escape all alone without friends or family, at times threatened by bombings, often by the police or gestapo. The stories were brief and tenderly recounted to me; they engendered in me a feeling of guilt, a deep sadness, that I failed to be there to help. I wished I had been there to protect them, although rationally, I knew this was a physical impossibility. Nonetheless, I wished I had helped them. Perhaps this is partly why I have always wanted to and did help others. I became a teacher. My students were very dear to me as students and as people. Their successes were a joy to me.

When we emigrated from the Dominican Republic to New York, I attended very integrated schools and daycare. We all played together and learned together. Despite the discrimination they had experienced, my parents emphasized that we are all human beings. I always thought that my parents' stories, their escape, our emigration to America, their grief for their lost families formed me, formed the WHO that I am. I always took pride in being a bit

different from my classmates in elementary school and those at daycare. I was aware that I didn't want to be just like everyone else. I think it was my parents' encouragement to stand up for my differences in dress, behavior and even my goals. Later in High School, I took pride in not following the "in crowd."

I have two memories about "standing out and standing up." On freezing cold days in elementary school, I would be dressed in long warm pants, which had to be worn under the thin cotton dress that was typical for little girls in the 50s. My mom was right. It was bitter, so bitter cold, and little girls should not have to go around with their bare legs exposed to the cold. (In America those long, European, woolen [ugly and itchy] stockings for kids could not be found). However, pants under my skirt meant an embarrassing routine of secretly and quickly removing those long trousers in the wardrobe (closet). I alone was delayed in returning to my seat. I alone stood out, half prideful and half tense.

Much later in eighth grade, the "in crowd" planned a party. The girl who was hosting invited ME. So exciting! However, I had to invite a boy. I invited a very shy and unpopular boy who accepted, but the girl in charge told me, "No! If you bring him, you can't come." What to do? I wanted so much to join them. My mother counseled me. If they don't want your friend, they can't have you either. Friends stand up for What's Right. Scared, but determined, I let the girl know my decision, knowing that I never would be included again.

In retrospect, I see how these little steps were crucial in pushing my scared, shy child self, who cried a lot, into a self-confident adult who could enter into new situations and see them as adventures. A new job, an interview, a social gathering or political meeting. I often went on my own. It was ok to do it alone.

I've been interested in politics and current affairs. My parents always discussed current events. It was a tradition. They read the newspapers and magazines, also the New York German Jewish paper, *Die Aufbau* ("The Rebuilding"). We always watched the evening news together. My parents often told me that awareness of current events and the horrible plans of politicians in Vienna is what gave them awareness that they had to flee.

My parents also shaped my independence by pushing me to do things on my own. Both my parents worked full time. I witnessed their drive always to do their best and to aspire toward the best. In word and in expectations, they taught me to strive toward the same. It's clear to me today that they fostered so many qualities that I have learned: to be a loyal friend; to stand up for yourself; to be resilient; to show tenacity and drive; to carry on despite setbacks and sadness; to be self-confident and independent.

I learned these qualities by example. When we first came to America, I was four and a half. My parents placed me in daycare. They needed to go to work. The place and the children were unfamiliar to me. I spoke only German and Spanish. This was nearby at the Manhattanville Neighborhood Center. Although my parents were always gentle and loving to me, it was assumed that I could manage this new situation. Meanwhile they looked for work. It was all very matter-of-fact. My mother worked at a very elegant clothing boutique and my father as a photographer. Over time, he worked simultaneously as a studio and wedding photographer weekdays and weekends and evenings printing photos for a newspaper service. They showed me by example resilience at work and even more, pride in their achievements.

Later when I was eleven years old, I had to commute on my own from our Manhattan neighborhood to Flushing, Queens, the end of the line and then a bus ride to my new school. I have memories of that first trip. I held the homemade map in my hand. It was autumn. I was about to begin seventh grade. It would be a new school, yes, but, instead of the local Junior High School, it was to be a new school in a new neighborhood. A neighborhood totally strange to me. My parents had found a house, far away from the grayness and loneliness of our apartment; far away from gray Manhattan and its dirty gray sidewalks and somewhat scary neighborhood. We were moving to what seemed to me to be the countryside. We were moving to the greenness of Flushing, with huge Dutch Elm trees and a green lawn in front of each house, each one-family house. To me, it was more than I had dreamed of!

However, we could not move until October. No one explained to me why. So, for the first three or four weeks of the new school year, I was to travel, all alone, by subway and then by

bus. I think I remember my mom accompanied me the first time or two to show me the route. (Later, when I was on my own, I do recall getting lost one afternoon and ending up in Harlem, but only one phone call to my calm and understanding mom at work and I was on my way to the correct route again.)

My mom and dad took it naturally. They took for granted that this could be navigated. They took for granted that I, as a responsible child, would travel all by myself by subway and do this for several weeks so as to begin the year in my new school. I guess I expected it of myself, too! I recall them later showering me with praise that I could, and did accomplish all this, all on my own. It's only now, as a parent and grandparent, when I look back that I realize the courage it took for my parents to assume I'd be just fine. They prepared me to be independent and confident in my own independence. What a wonderful gift they gave me!

My parents also modeled for me how to move ahead, despite sadness, despite pain. One of my strongest memories is of my mother in bed—again. My dear, tender, loving mommy has exiled herself again to her bed. Now it's only me and daddy, his mood uncharacteristically subdued. He, too, is probably missing her loving presence. 'Mommy's back is hurting again', he explains. My mother had fallen from a horse in Sosúa years before, shortly after settling in the Dominican Republic.



*My parents and I on horseback in Sosúa.*

Mom continued to suffer from spells of terrible back pain all her life, but it didn't keep her from leading a normal active, joy-filled life. Yet, now there we were, Daddy and I, a quiet, empty evening yawning before us, the liveliness temporarily snuffed out of our sparse rooms. Now, so many decades later, as a mature woman, I realize that mom's terrible back pains were compounded by depression, by her loss and longing for her dear family and even for my dad's family whom she had barely come to know. She never saw any of them again. My dad stayed with me so devotedly, in his own way trying to keep me company and to distract me with a game of Parcheesi or a short walk to the park. Now I imagine that these were the times when he'd talk about his parents, and as I grew older, about his escape to Switzerland. I feel a sense of gratitude for the gentle way he shielded me from the pain and from the emptiness of those evenings.

Although my mom and dad looked to the future and emphasized the good things in our lives, I became aware of friends, other refugees who couldn't overcome the trauma. One of these was my Uncle Norbert. He sat there staring into nothingness as if impervious to his surroundings, all hunched over. He sat there apart from the others staring into emptiness. All around him were loved ones, among them his lonely young son, his brother, the sister-in-law (my dad's cousin), the little girls, all cousins, playing. All playing or catching up on news of late, all celebrating just being together on a Sunday afternoon in that large Washington Heights living room. Each one of us celebrated the relaxed cheerfulness of being together.

Yet, Norbert was not, could not. He sat staring at the floor as if a shell enclosed his motionless body dwelling in the corner. "What's wrong with 'Uncle' Norbert?" I asked my parents later that night. (Although I called him Uncle, he was my cousin's uncle; I had no extended family. All were dead.) "He lost his family in the Concentration Camps, and even his wife, Herbert's mother. It's so hard for him," my mother explained, as she soothed my cheek with her warm steady hand. At that time, I thought to myself, 'Mommy you lost your whole family too! Daddy did too! You both lost your whole family in Vienna. I'm so happy that you are my parents and not Norbert. I'm so happy that you are so good to me...And what about Herbert? His father ignores him! I'm so sad for him! I'm so happy that you're not like that!

While I am very much like my parents, I also differ from them. I am the American Dream. Because they brought me here, I was able to attend college and graduate school in New York City tuition free. I became a teacher and later a Special Education teacher and tutor. I met my amazing and wonderful husband when I was a Sunday school teacher. However, it was also because I still had what I thought were old fashioned traits and Jewish traditions, of caring for others, humility, non-conformism and delight in and reverence for my elders and my religion. I think that my parents' finest legacy is to look for the positive side where hope dwells and their enduring example of living life to the fullest.

My parents died in 1987 and 1995. For my mother, this was the first time that she could actually bury a loved one, my dad, her beloved husband. Her family had perished in the chimneys. On my parents' stones are engraved:

“They Will Live in Our Hearts Forever”

“They Taught Us to Savor the Joys of Life”

## **Living Amid the Ghosts of the Holocaust** Vera Kalina-Levine

My early life in Czechoslovakia, where I was born in 1949 and lived until the age of sixteen, was suffused with the ghosts of the Holocaust. We lived in a building in Bratislava's Old Town, where my father, along with nine other Slovak Jews, had spent the last eight months of the war in hiding in the cellar and in empty apartments above. The seven-story building stood right across from Gestapo Headquarters, which at war's end was torn down and replaced with a beautiful park.

My parents were an unlikely pair, with a large difference in age, temperament, and upbringing. My father, Ladislav Kalina, thirteen-years older than my mother, came from a modest, Hungarian-speaking background in Eastern Slovakia. Having lost his mother when he was just four years old, he and his family lived through the hardships of the First World War. Nevertheless, he seemed to find and enjoy a rich and varied life as a young man, including studies in Prague, working as an electrical engineer upon his return to his native Preshov, skiing and hiking in the Tatra Mountains, and traveling with devoted friends to renowned spa towns in Czechoslovakia and to France, Italy, and Croatia. When the first deportations of Jews from Slovakia began in 1942, he was granted an economic exemption because electrical engineers were useful to the Nazis. Later on, he obtained false papers and a fake baptismal certificate.

Although he was able to avoid deportation, the well-ordered world he had known before the war was in tatters. His father's small grocery shop had been Aryanized and he himself was brutally beaten by the virulently anti-Semitic Slovak militia (Hlinka Guards). His desperate, valiant efforts to save his parents and brothers from deportation to Auschwitz and Majdanek, including a letter he wrote to the President of Slovakia, Father Jozef Tiso, were all in vain.

My bilingual Czech- and German-speaking mother, Margit Raab, came from a small town, Karvina, in the Moravian-Silesian region bordering Poland. Raised in a solidly middle-class home, she cherished her life that included close friendships in school and adoring relationships

with her parents, her brother Poldi, and a cousin, also named Poldi. She was not yet seventeen when her well-ordered world was shattered in the most frightful way.

Following Germany's dismemberment of Czechoslovakia in 1939, with Bohemia and Moravia becoming a German protectorate and Slovakia becoming a separate, client state of Nazi Germany, my mother, her brother and her parents fled to Eastern Poland, which soon became part of Soviet Ukraine. The day Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, my mother's father, manning an ice cream kiosk he had bought on the outskirts of Lwow, was killed in a bomb attack. A year later, after fleeing from town to town in search of an elusive safety, her mother was shot by the Gestapo in Tarnow for having written a letter to her Czech friends in Moravia. My mother, who had waited in vain outside that Gestapo headquarters for her mother to emerge, was soon deported to a labor camp at Plaszow, near Krakow. In both the Tarnow ghetto and in Plaszow, she worked in a factory owned by Julius Madritsch, who like Oskar Schindler, had done much to protect his Jewish workers. In the spring of 1944, she was put on a transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau and from there on a Death March to Bergen Belsen in Nazi Germany. She miraculously evaded death in these concentration and extermination camps; her beloved brother Poldi and forty other close relatives did not.

My mother and father met soon after the war, when my mother came to Bratislava to live with her only surviving uncle Salo Hornik and his family. Marrying just five months later, my mother and father, who had changed his last name from Klein to the more Slovak-sounding Kalina, found mutual understanding in their Holocaust traumas and in their determination to quickly start a new life, establish a family, and resume some modicum of normalcy.

Their pursuit of that normalcy led them to build a family life that tried as much as possible to replicate some of the comforts and ways that they had remembered from their pre-war years. Despite the scarcity of all manner of daily necessities in communist Czechoslovakia, my brother Yuri and I never wanted for anything. Thanks to my father, who would wait on long lines to buy meat, fresh fruit, toilet paper and other essentials that were rarely to be found in stores, and thanks to my mother's wonderful cooking skills, we always had plenty of food on the table, including delicious home-baked Viennese cakes and pastries every weekend. I always had nice



clothes to wear, with simple dresses either handmade by a neighborhood seamstress or knitted by my mother.

In addition, starting in the mid-fifties, we were granted rare official permission to travel to Vienna to visit my mother's uncle Salo, almost every summer. Thanks to Salo and his wife Greta, owners of the famed Café Mozart right behind the Vienna State Opera, we returned home with suitcases filled with fine clothes and such toys as a miniature furniture set for dolls and a badminton set, all unknown in Czechoslovakia during those years. My father was never allowed to come with us since he had to serve as a human guarantee of our return to Bratislava.

Family cohesion was all-important in our home, particularly to my mother who, more than anything, wanted my brother and I to develop a close friendship that, as best as it could, would resemble the relationship she had with her brother Poldi. Indeed, well into our adulthood, I and my brother, just eighteen months older, spent much time together, enjoying common activities, friends, and interests.

Just as my parents had done before the war, we went on family vacations to the mountains and spa towns. Sundays were reserved for family hikes in the hills on the outskirts of Bratislava or walks along the banks of the Danube River that ran through our home town. Sometimes, we hiked up to the castle that before its later restoration loomed like an upside-down table over the city. Our path to the castle wound past the remnants of the now disappeared old



*My brother, my mother and I, Bratislava, 1953.*

Jewish Quarter. After these outings, my parents would host or visit friends for coffee and cake on those Sunday afternoons.

As I grew older, I realized that virtually all of my parents' friends were Jewish, people who seemed to forge a bond based on their horrific experiences during the war. With much of their conversation revolving around the Holocaust, at a young age I became aware of the heavy shadow it continued to cast on all their lives. Whenever my parents got together with someone new who was Jewish, the first topic of conversation was where he or she had been during the war. I inherited this habit and to this day, whenever I meet a second-generation survivor, one of my first questions might be about the whereabouts of his or her parents during the Holocaust.

As for interactions with others, both my parents and I approached new people in Bratislava with apprehension, lest they might have been Nazi sympathizers or just plain anti-Semites. After both my brother and I became targets of anti-Jewish taunts in school, we quickly learned to avoid neighbors and schoolmates who, as our father was apt to say, imbibed Jew-hatred with their mother's milk. Neither my brother nor I would reveal our Jewishness until we established that it was safe to do so. I maintained this habit well into adulthood, whenever I met anyone from Eastern Europe.

Although I knew from a very young age that I was Jewish, I did not know much about what it meant, except that it had been the cause of my parents' pain and suffering. I have an indelible image of my mother sitting at the edge of my bed before I went to sleep, telling me about her Holocaust experiences. I couldn't have been more than six or seven years old when I began the painful process of trying to understand the enormity of her ordeal. When I was older, I asked, wondering then and to this day whether I could have done the same, "How were you able to go on amidst all the misery and killings around you, including those of your mother, father, and brother?" She replied, "I had to survive in order not to give Germans the satisfaction that they had succeeded in killing us all." She felt it was her obligation never to give up, not to succumb to the dehumanization and threat of death all around her. After the war, she saw my brother and me as the ultimate proof that she had achieved her goals.

With no grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins present in our lives and with the Holocaust having extinguished my parents' belief in God, my family observed no holidays and no religious traditions. Whatever remnants of my parents' disenchantment with faith and God survived were funneled into matzo ball soup at Passover and infrequent reminiscences about Jewish traditions in their childhood homes.

New Year's Eve and birthdays were our biggest days of celebration. My mother would bake a Sachertorte, a chocolate walnut torte or another of her fabulous Viennese cakes and at times take me or arrange for me to go with one of my best friends to attend an opera, a concert, or a ballet at the baroque Reduta Concert Hall or at the Slovak National Theater. At Christmas-time, my father adopted the widespread Slovak tradition of the season, looking to buy a live carp. As soon as word came around that a store not far from our house had carp for sale, he rushed there and waited in line for two or three hours, hoping they wouldn't run out before his turn. We kept the carp in the bathtub for a few days, feeding it breadcrumbs, before my father chopped off its head and prepared it for cooking.

Perhaps because I felt some void in my home life, missing something I couldn't quite put my finger on, I loved going to the ornate, pastel-colored Blue Church down the street from our house. A number of times on Saturdays, I sneaked in to watch Catholic weddings, standing behind the last pew, shrouded by the darkness.

One day, I was in the church observing a wedding, when all of a sudden, my father stormed in and commanded me to leave. He was angry with me not only because he didn't know where I had gone, but also, adding insult to injury, because I had gone to a church of all places. My father, who sneered at all religious beliefs, was particularly resentful of the Roman Catholic Church. After all, it was a Catholic priest Jozef Tiso, president of the Nazi-aligned Slovak State, who was in charge of the destruction of Jews in Slovakia, including most of my father's very large family.

My parents' constant fear that physical harm would come to me and my brother determined much of what we could and could not do. Although I was always allowed to go out

to play in the playground in the park across from our apartment building or in the large courtyard in the back, my parents soon worried when they could not see me from either the front or the back balcony of our fourth-floor apartment or, especially, when I did not respond to their insistent calling of my name. They set out to look for me, ringing neighbors' doorbells or searching places they knew I liked to go. The thought that I had somehow "vanished" filled them with dread.

They also always worried that I would suffer some physical injury or worse, and they often enjoined me from playing some of the games, popular with neighborhood children. No tree climbing; no hanging down on the jungle gym; and later on, no horse-back riding. My brother and I shared a beautiful green bicycle, but I only could ride it when my parents had me in their sight. After all, I could have gotten hit by a car while riding up and down our dead-end street, even though no cars ever drove there.

It was little comfort to them that the Czechoslovakia of my youth was a safe land for children, with neighbors and even total strangers keeping a watchful eye over all of us. Children in my apartment building were particularly well supervised. An elderly white-haired woman living on the ground floor, her elbows seemingly permanently planted on a small grey pillow in her open window frame, tracked everyone's comings and goings.

As I grew older, I was given much more freedom, indeed a great deal of encouragement, to pursue all kinds of activities. These required my roaming the city to get to my piano and German lessons in the old part of the city or taking the streetcar alone to get to swim practice at far-flung pools. If I came home even five minutes later than expected, my mother would be panic-stricken.

I never questioned my parents' insistence that I adhere to strict timetables. As I entered adolescence, I came to understand that if they could not account for where I was for even a short time, it stirred up frightful memories of fulfilled forebodings from their war years. I had no right to cause my parents any further grief in life. While they needed to protect me from any and all harm, I needed to shield them from their painful memories and the sadness those memories brought on.

I felt especially responsible for the peace of mind of my mother, with whom I was always very close. After all she had suffered in the Holocaust, I did not want to add to her sadness and underlying melancholy, even as she herself made huge efforts to mask those feelings. I needed to protect her from disappointments, difficulties, and the bad things that happen in even the best of lives. The only way I could do that was by being a perfect child, always obedient, happy, and capable, put on earth to help her reclaim her life. I never argued or fought with my mother, never contradicted her, never had the luxury of going through a period of teenage rebellion. I always had a happy face on, which led people to call me “smiling moon.”

Although my mother often lived under the cloud of fear that any joy she found would inevitably end in catastrophe, she also had deep reserves of positivity and the ability to retrieve some of the verve and trust in people she had remembered from her childhood. I have fond memories of the periodic occasions when she was delightfully mirthful with some of her friends as well as with me, bursting into an unstoppable laughter at one or another of the many absurdities to be found in our daily lives.

From time to time, my mother succumbed to feelings of dark anxiety and agitation that always seemed to lurk beneath her composed exterior. Retreating into her innermost thoughts, she sequestered herself in the dining room, furnished with the Chippendale furniture and the August Foerster baby grand piano that were miraculously retrieved from her childhood home after the war and that now seemed to offer her some fragile solace. Or, she sat all alone in a darkened kitchen, slowly smoking cigarettes. “It’s my nerves,” she said in a doleful voice. “Don’t worry, it will pass.” Once she regained her outward calm, she said that her parents, whom she missed so terribly, would have known how to help her cope with life’s difficulties.

My desire not to bring disappointment to my mother, whom I always held up as a model of grit and courage, propelled me to strive for success in all my undertakings. After all, if my mother could survive the horrors of the Holocaust and then forge a new life, it shouldn’t be hard for me to overcome whatever challenges I faced. If she could resume her disrupted schooling and

pursue a master's degree in library science, while working full-time during the day, in a country where life was a constant grind, I could also master anything that came my way.

My father never found a way to cope with his anger and disillusionment with people, after he had seen what murderous cruelty lurks beneath the surface of so many. Whatever joy and meaning there was in his life after the war came from the existence of his family and from his ability to be a good provider and a skillful fixer and arranger of the material things in our daily lives. Despite his love and desire to do everything he could for the well-being of his family, he never found the inner wherewithal to support us emotionally. He periodically flew into unexplainable and seemingly uncontainable rage both at the world in general and at us, the family he treasured.

Shortly after I turned sixteen, my parents, my brother and I emigrated to Israel, and, after a year and a half, to America. We settled in Providence, R.I. where I went to high school, and after just one semester, to Brown University. Eager to make up for lost time and the discontinuity and double dislocation in my schooling, I went on to pursue a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale. After completing my studies, I found a long and highly satisfying career as an industry analyst at a major Japanese bank in my new home town of New York.

While still in graduate school, I began to re-examine some of my life's attitudes and assumptions. I soon came to understand that much of what had shaped me was passed down to me as my parents' Holocaust legacy. I was determined to overcome this legacy, to find a life that would be free of my frequent feelings of unease, mistrust of people, and a vague sense that something horrible could happen at any moment.

My future husband Gilbert, whom I met early in my graduate school career, became an important anchor as I began to grapple with some of my inherited Holocaust sensibilities. Although orphaned at a young age, he was a person who brimmed with optimism, fearlessness about life, and openness to the world and people. Through his deeply held belief in Jewish values and traditions, I was able to open myself to greater spirituality, while also beginning to reclaim the Jewish faith my parents had abandoned in their post-war years.

After getting married in the Orthodox Touro Synagogue in Newport, R.I., my husband and I established an essentially Jewish home for us and our two wonderful sons, David and Gabriel. To this day, we all celebrate Jewish holidays; and our weekly Shabbat dinners - sometimes via FaceTime - are a reminder of our faith's thousands-year long heritage.

Although my husband forged a distinguished international career as a symphony conductor, both his artistic calling and our desire to sustain our Jewishness were an anathema to my father. He was particularly baffled when my husband accepted a position as music director of the Krakow Philharmonic in 1987, in Auschwitz's backyard. In contrast, my mother found satisfaction in my husband's going to Poland, yet another proof to the world that Hitler's final solution had failed. When my husband conducted his first concert for Pope John Paul II, my mother was proudly in attendance, while my father could not bring himself to come to Rome. At the historic "Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah" in April 1994, also conducted by my husband, my mother was one of six survivors from around the world who in the Pope's presence lit a menorah candle in the Vatican—in memory of the six million. The Pope's recognition of the horrendous ordeal she and so many others had suffered, due in part to the Church's own abdication of responsibility for Jewish fellow human beings, was a source of much comfort to her. Her own warm meetings with the Pope went a long way to helping her tame the ghosts of the Holocaust that had hung over her life for so long.



*After the Papal Concert to Commemorate the Shoah, 1994. My mother, my husband and I, with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican.*



## **My Story** Sonia Kaplan

To write about my life is difficult, especially when I have grown up in the shadow of my parents' experiences surviving the Holocaust. It seems like the past, present and future are intermingled. Their stories are interwoven with mine in such a way that there is no definitive separation. My life has been shaped by theirs. Currently, I am in a Writing Workshop of second-generation survivors. We are writing our stories and I find myself immersed in a world of memories.

I am seriously beginning to wonder, "Who am I?" Is it possible to separate myself from the Holocaust? To answer this question, I need to step back into the past and revisit the lives of my parents. In 2019 my husband and I fulfilled a long-delayed wish to visit Poland, as well as Germany where I was born in the Lampertheim Displaced Persons camp in 1946. We visited the neighborhood in Lodz, Poland, where my parents were born and resided. We toured three concentration camps as well.



*Here I am as a two-year old in Lampertheim  
Displaced Persons Camp.*

In 1916, when my mother Ella was an infant, her father Shmuel, my grandfather, was indiscriminately shot in the head by an unknown assailant while walking down the street,

shopping for his family. The death of the father meant that the family was barely able to subsist. My mother lived with her grandmother, mother, older brother and sister. She believed an eye infection, contracted during infancy, left her legally blind. Thankfully, her brother Leon provided some income for the family, but the two young sisters eventually were placed in an orphanage to avoid starvation. I think that they lived there for many years until the next tragedy occurred. My mother's sister, Chayela, died after dancing in a school performance, the result of an intestinal rupture. Upon comprehending that her sister was gone, my mother escaped the orphanage and made her way home through the streets of Lodz. This is no small feat for a little girl five years old.

My grandmother remarried and gave birth to another daughter, Surela. My mother was trained to become an expert seamstress following in the footsteps of her brother, a tailor. She married her first husband and lived in Lodz, remaining in the sealed ghetto until she was taken to Auschwitz, Bremen and then Bergen-Belsen, where she was liberated by English soldiers. Most of her family members, including her husband and his son from a prior marriage, perished. She remarried in the Displaced Persons camp.

My father Zalman was born into a Hasidic family. I was told he was a master at mathematics as well as a young Torah scholar. He was one of nine siblings, second to the youngest. My grandfather Luzer worked, like so many in that city, in the textile industry. So, he was able to provide for his family. When my father was eight years old, his father died of cancer.

Eventually, my father's interests turned from religion to worldly events, focusing on socialist activities. My father's mother Chava died in 1937, after which he and his first wife decided to leave the ghetto and relocate to Russia, where their daughter Chava was born. Some of his years in Russia were spent in the army, even working as an assistant in an operating room in an army hospital located in Siberia. At some point during the war, he and his first wife could not find each other. After the war, my father searched from one displaced persons camp to another looking for survivors. He found two sisters. Soon after, in Germany he obtained a divorce and married my mother. The three of us arrived in America in 1949, joining family in the United States and Canada.



*Me with my Mama Ella and Tate Zalman (Saul) in the U.S.*

My initial reaction in recognizing who I am emerged in elementary school. I usually did not have anything to bring to school on “Show and Tell” days. My response at that time was learning that those possessions were far less important than items less tangible. As a result, flashy cars, huge houses, an array of expensive jewelry, for example, never held much meaning for me. What was significantly important involved relationships, love, education, and being available to help family and friends on various levels. Striving for strength and resilience was learned from my parents.

With a background of the Holocaust, and a foundation of moving forward when obstacles complicate the way, I lived my life. Even though I started school as a Yiddish speaker, I soon became proficient in English and became one of the best students in public elementary school. Friends were an integral part of my life. My home was open and welcoming. My parents could not afford to send me to college. I paid for it, as many students did, by myself. Eventually I was

awarded a fellowship to study Special Education. I was lucky to be in a position that I loved and was able to use my skills effectively. My parents were proud of me.

There is a definite uniqueness in being a second generation. I often felt different from my peers because of this connection. I can't remember exactly how old I was when not having a grandmother became the focus of my thoughts. I think I was somewhere between eight and ten. I cannot recall how the conversations were initiated. At the time, I knew and accepted that three of my grandparents had died before World War Two nearly destroyed Europe. Eventually I was told that my mother's mother Shayndel (for whom I am named) and her youngest child, Surela, were deported from the Lodz ghetto. They were unaware that they were traveling to their death by murder at the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp.

My mother did not tell me where my grandmother was headed, but she did recount their tearful goodbye. Shayndel attempted to reassure my mother that she was being taken to a "better" place, where work and food would be available. In a final gesture, my grandmother handed her ration of bread to my mother. My grandmother told my mother that she needed this meager portion of bread more than she did. Shayndel was convinced that a better life was waiting for her and her younger child. This incomprehensible scene is engraved in my mind forever.

When I was about ten years old, I asked what the name of "that" place was. "Auschwitz" was her quiet reply. I demanded to know what happened to her there. My mother told me that her mother and sister died there. I demanded, "How do you know that she died?" "Because she died." I persisted and asked the same question over and over. Then I added, "But you don't know!!" Patiently my mother stated that everyone died there.

After a few seconds of thought, I stated, "You didn't look hard enough for her!" I accused my mother of not looking everywhere imaginable for her own mother and proclaimed that she must still be alive. I told my mother that she needed to resume her search and look everywhere. She offered additional confirmation. "After the war, everyone looked for each other—and if my mother was still living, she would have found me." But I was too young to

digest such a narrative and was not satisfied with any given explanations. I simply did not, could not accept the truth. My poor mother was subjected to this interrogation many times. How could I have been so insistent?

Not having grandparents in my life has been and will always be a painful loss. Once, this emptiness was almost filled. When I was four, my parents and I frequently shopped at the small corner grocery store on my block. I enjoyed engaging with the older couple who owned it, and they took pleasure in spoiling me with small trinkets or treats. It was their idea to ask my mother if they could possibly take on the role of grandparents. My mother was adamant in her reply that one day I would discover that they were only posing as grandparents. She imagined that this only could lead to disappointment on my part, so she forbade it. I'm not certain if this is my memory or what my mother later told me, but her final words will always stay with me: "Sonia has to know the truth and the truth is that her grandmother was murdered."

A favorite great aunt (actually my grandmother's younger sister) fulfilled a bit of a grandmother's role when I was a small child. Whenever she visited, there was plenty of attention and many gifts. *Tante* (Aunt) Bleema initiated my love of small tea sets which has lasted throughout my life. It was *Tante* Bleema who made sure that her sister's and niece's names were inscribed at Yad Vashem.

This brings me to words said to me at a get-together. I brought up the topic of not having grandparents and the impact that this loss has had on my life. A person stated: "You can't miss what you never had." Stunned at the time, now I frequently replay the situation in my head. I begin to list all that someone may never have had: a parent, enough food, a real home, a bed, an education. The list is endless. The consequence of not having grandparents may mean that your life is not complete. You *can* miss the love you were deprived of, the arms that never held you, the words that told you how wonderful you are, the knowledge that your parents were once children and had parents.

How grateful to have seen my own children grow up with grandparents. How lucky to have grandchildren (Ethan, Arielle, Jordan, Zoe and Noah) and to be given the opportunity to be their *Bubbe* (Grandmother).

Was I “overprotected”? Research shows that Holocaust survivors tend to be overprotective of their children. I was brought up by parents who were anxious when I was late returning home. Yet, as a young child, I was given many responsibilities and freedoms. I recall taking care of my two-year-old brother when I was only six years. I even was permitted to take him outdoors to play. Living in the city of Newark, we went many places by ourselves. Eventually, I was permitted to do some of my mother’s shopping and handled small amounts of money. My teenage friends and I were minimally supervised as we went about our social activities.

The only restriction was “time.” I always had to be home at the agreed upon time. On those few occasions when I was late, I could picture my mother in a quiet panic. I knew she was pacing and more often than not, experiencing colitis-type discomfort. When possible, I always hurried home to prevent her from feeling sick. This anxiety/panic occurred whether it was my father, my brother or me breaking the rule.

As I matured, I believe I “inherited” some of my mother’s behaviors. I sometimes respond to a situation as she might have. This is not to the extent that my mother experienced uncertainties, but it is still present in my response to the possibility of something terrible occurring. In the event of a potentially adverse situation, my mind will flow to negative possibilities. I allow these thoughts to linger a few seconds before I come to grips with the reality that the individual I’m worried about must have a reasonable explanation for being late. Engraved in my mind is the thought and the reality that “people don’t always come back.” This message evolved from the numerous stories I heard about family separations.

I can vividly recall a favorite episode. In middle school, one of my teachers made the entire class remain for detention. I repeatedly glanced at the clock. My mother definitely must be pacing, I thought, as the minutes slowly passed. Then to everyone’s surprise my four-foot

ten-inches tall mother knocked on the door and entered the classroom. She announced that I was leaving. I was late for Hebrew school. Not embarrassed at all, I was grateful to leave. I suppose my mother and I were both relieved. I know I was smiling on the walk home and enjoyed recounting this story to my other friends.

Growing up in Newark, New Jersey, during the 1950s and 60s, I assumed that my parents, my younger brother Leslie and I were living a typical family life. We could not afford “extras,” but our needs were met – food, shelter, emotional support. There were summer escapes to the country and the Jersey Shore. Our lives were shared with numerous other Holocaust survivors and their children.



*My family at my Sweet Sixteen, 1962.*

I can recount many of the details my parents shared of their pre-war lives and war years, including episodes of Holocaust horrors. My memory of their stories is that they revealed information frequently. These conversations and those not meant for me, but overheard nonetheless, were part of my life. I was usually a passive listener, the recipient of information, but rarely questioned the speaker. I thought that I knew everything, but there was one story no one ever shared with me – that I had an older sister.

One day, when I was attending graduate school at Teachers College in New York City, I went to visit my cousin Paul, who was a professor of psychology at Columbia University. When he inquired about my sister, I was shocked and answered, “You know I don’t have a sister!” He replied: “You need to talk to your mother.” With increasing anxiety, I had to wait until I could go home to New Jersey, to confront this situation. When I next saw my mother, I immediately asked her about my sister. She told me that my father had been previously married and had one daughter, Chava. My father and her mother left Lodz for Russia just before the ghetto was sealed in 1939. Chava was born in Russia but she was never told the

location. My mother disclosed as much as she felt I should know. I believe she felt it wasn't her place to divulge too much about other people's secrets. Therefore, she was selective about what she was willing to talk about.

I don't know the circumstances of how, when or why my father and his first family were separated in Russia, ultimately losing touch for years. After being reunited in Germany, they obtained a divorce which also dissolved my father's rights to see Chava. Her mother remarried and she and my sister emigrated to Israel. I was sworn to keep this new knowledge to myself, and I did. I remained silently obedient, but nonetheless carried the guilt of not sharing this revelation with my brother Leslie.

My mother told me that she was abiding by my father's wishes not to disclose his sensitive and painful story. She also related that both she and my father had hoped that Chava would be able to spend time in New Jersey. My father (in contrast to my mother) was reared in an ultra-orthodox family. He believed that in the orthodox world, divorce was a shameful act. In memory of his beloved, religious mother, he was being respectful by not discussing it. In my opinion, giving up rights to his child was too heartbreaking to disclose.

Many years passed. When my father was seriously ill and awaiting a surgical procedure at the hospital, he turned to me and said, "You know Sonia, I don't know how many children I have." This statement, I believe, only refers to one child, Chava. I did not respond but just nodded. The time and situation were inappropriate (and the time was never right—the words were never to be uttered). We stopped speaking and just waited in silence for his name to be called. The opportunity was lost forever.

And this silence lasted a long time—until my father's death. Upon looking through my father's wallet, my brother Leslie unexpectedly found a picture of my father with Chava. This was the first time he learned of having another sister. My father did not carry photos of my brother or me. It never occurred to me to even think about this. But now it makes sense to me that it was all he had left of her to cherish. I was and continue to be terribly saddened that he loved her so and all he had was a picture of the two of them holding hands.



Before I was born, Chava and her mother found their way to the Displaced Persons camp in Germany, and it was there that my father and Chava's mother divorced. Afterward, each of them remarried. After my birth, Chava recalls the two of us spending time together with our father. These are Chava's recollections of being in the Displaced Persons camp.

After Zalman's passing, contact was made through my aunt, my father's sister, who knew phone numbers and addresses. To our astonishment, this aunt and a network of friends kept my father informed, throughout the years, of Chava's life. As related to me by my sister, Chava's mother adamantly opposed our meeting. Gratefully, my aunt willingly shared information with us. I was pleased to find out that my sister knew about us. I believe that she was quite happy and relieved that finally we would establish a relationship. I feel the same way!

Today my sister Chava, who lives with her family in Israel, and I speak frequently. Our children, the third generation, maintain relationships with their cousins. Chava is part of our family and in our hearts.

So many loved family members and friends, material possessions and memories were taken forever from us. An entire world was lost. And here, a small piece of that lost world was given back. By finding my sister, a fragment of that precious wholeness has been restored. Silence did not win.

These events shaped my parents and later on helped shape my life. Yet, my memories are filled with happy times and lots of laughter. My parents' friends (and mine too) were mostly Holocaust survivors and their families. I recall many noisy parties where my home was filled with some twenty to thirty individuals. Lots of "discussions" took place and always laughter. The stories they told were animated and endless. I saw that they were courageous, resourceful and most of all had a strong desire to live and go on. Summers spent at a bungalow colony, primarily with other second-generation children, were wonderful. As I matured, my everyday life was filled with experiences, both good and bad, but typical. How could I allow the sadness of the Holocaust to prevent my growth as a person? That's not what I witnessed during my childhood.

Ultimately, I ask myself the question: “Who am I, and how has this affected me?” I understand why my responses are negative before I can make sense of them. I live with and respond to certain trigger words such as: train, camp, bread, Germany. Luckily, these are fleeting thoughts replaced by the positive thinking person I feel I am. My parents’ experiences are mine too. They eventually had a good life and I, without doubt, have had a wonderful life also. I comprehend that my experiences belong to me but they certainly don’t define who I am.

How to develop a way of positive thinking in the shadow of memories of starvation, torture, death and more unthinkable trauma? By observing the manner in which my parents lived their lives. Perhaps, I didn’t quite realize it, but I was following their principle: life is to be enjoyed. Life means to be resilient. The strength they displayed taught me that not everything happens by chance. Individuals must help themselves to reach a goal. The strength my family displayed was an example to follow. Obstacles, whether they be physical or emotional, can be controlled. Negative behaviors can lead to positive outcomes. It is certainly not easy, but then again, I observed it happen.

The person that I grew up to be enjoys life and shares that life with a devoted husband. We modeled positive values for our three wonderful daughters. They and their partners are lucky to have children, who are the grandchildren we adore. I was given the opportunity to be an independent thinker and was lucky to be in a profession that advanced my dedication to Special Education.

The absence of hate, bitterness and evil allowed me to make my own decisions. The choices I made in my life were my choices. However, my reaction to the world is based on my parents’ unspoken message of hope and learning to move on. The only choice in life is to live that life to the best of one’s abilities. The point of my story is that I understand that there will be obstacles along the way, but the goal is to move ahead and overcome. Finding some humor in everything is a must but we also have an obligation to remember. I think our children acknowledge this way of thinking also.



*My husband, children, grandchildren and I. A happy family!*

Does evil exist in the world? Yes. Can a Holocaust happen again? Yes. I am grateful that I did not learn to hate. Instead, I learned to be respectful and kind.

I can conclude that I am not my parents, but they have contributed to building my foundation. How could anyone find joy and peace after what they experienced? Yet, they did. Now it's my life. It's my version. I want to be who I am. The blueprint was handed down to me. I believe that most survivors would want this to be their legacy. Maybe we can't change the world or human nature, but we can make contributions to make it a better place.



## Letters in a Suitcase

Rozsa Kovesdi

In 1990 my brother and I got the phone call from Hungary that our mother had passed away. The two of us together briefly returned to Hungary. One of our somber tasks was to empty our parents' apartment, our childhood home, in a hurry. We could not bring back much with us. We took the family films and photographs, a vase that used to belong to our maternal grandparents and another vase that belonged to our paternal grandparents, who perished in Auschwitz. Everything else we pretty much gave away or threw away. One thing we could not throw away. We found letters, the family correspondence our mother had saved from before, during, and after WWII—from people who had survived and from those who had perished. There was no time to sort out or read them. I shoveled the letters into a large suitcase and brought them with me to America. That was almost thirty years ago. This year I turned seventy, the age my mother died. The time has come to open that suitcase, to open the past and to honor the history of my family.

I was born and raised in Budapest, Hungary. I left Hungary as an adult, at age thirty-three. My life experience is different from the children of Holocaust survivors who were born in faraway countries, having only a vague sense of the home countries from which their survivor parents emigrated. I am neither "First" nor truly "Second Generation." I feel I am somewhere in-between, "First-and-a-half." I grew up in a country where the Holocaust happened. I lived among the people who participated in those events. I speak the language. I absorbed the culture firsthand. My identity is inextricably intertwined with the place and with the family stories I grew up hearing.

My parents, Dezső Kövesdi and Katalin Káldori got married in October 1939 on my mother's twentieth birthday. It was a marriage of deep, eternal love and commitment that lasted throughout their lives. Each one of them wanted to survive the war for the sake of the other. For the vicious persecutions they faced fell not just on him or on her, but were an equal threat to their shared life as devoted husband and wife.

In 1942 my father was drafted into forced labor service. These Jewish labor battalions were attached to the Hungarian Army and treated with extreme cruelty. My father spent the next three years on the Eastern Front, in the swamps of German-occupied Ukraine. He sarcastically called that three-year harrowing experience “The Great Jamboree.”



*My parents, Dezső Kövesdi and Katalin Káldori, in Hungary, 1939.*

My parents did not know about each other’s fate during those three long years from 1942 to 1945. My father wrote in his diary in 1945, when he was just hoping but not yet sure my mother had survived: *“I need you very much. I stayed alive for you. I felt you are holding my hand and telling me what I needed to do, how, and when. The hope that you survive and wait for me has lived inside me all along. Wherever I was, in whatever situation, I just summoned you, ‘My Little One, help me.’ I believed with almost fetishistic, cabalistic conviction and perseverance that we are helping each other even from afar, and nothing can harm us.”* My mother felt the same way. She called my father “My life.”

The bravery of my mother saved her and her sister’s lives. In October 1944, the Hungarian Arrow Cross (Hungarian fascists) took over the government and all hell broke loose. At age twenty-five my mother and her younger sister took a train from Budapest toward Eastern Hungary where the Soviet Army was advancing and fighting the Germans and Hungarians. The hope was that they would be liberated by the Soviet Army in a matter of days or weeks. The battle for Hungary took much longer. My mother and her sister spent three months wandering through villages between the German and Soviet Army lines, sometimes in no man’s land. Villages were changing hands back and forth. My mother and her sister were not hiding; they worked as farmhands. They pretended they were Christian refugees from Transylvania, who had been bombed out and had lost everything, including their documents. By then all the Jews in the Hungarian countryside had been deported to Auschwitz. The remaining Jews in Hungary were confined behind the high walls and barbed wire of the Budapest Ghetto. As there were no Jews

left in the villages, it was inconceivable to people that the two young women wandering around freely could be Jews.

My father told stories of his survival. He was taken to Ukraine in 1942 with thousands of young military-age Hungarian Jewish men. Only a handful returned. He survived the cruelty of Hungarian sergeants, death marches, starvation, extreme cold, mines blowing up in front of him and behind him, and enemy fire. My father was a fatalist. He often said his survival was due more to fate and luck than to anything he did. But he was too humble. It was not just fate and luck. He saved himself by acting when others were passively waiting.

Initially, his talent and skills helped him survive. My father was a superb engineer who kept the generator running for his army unit under often difficult conditions. But his physical stamina was important for his survival too, he recognized. With stubborn determination, he did everything to keep his body in top condition; not to get sick, not to get weak. He wanted to survive as revenge against the people who wanted him dead. Toward the end of the war when the Soviet Red Army started its offensive, the Hungarian Army began shipping the Jewish labor battalions from Ukraine to concentration camps in the West. My father and his friend stepped off the train and escaped into the mountains somewhere in Slovakia. The Hungarian Army had its problems—they were losing the war. At that point, they did not pay much attention to guarding railroad cars. Still, only my father and his friend stepped off the train. It was easier to wait passively for events to take their course and hope for the best than to act.

My brother and I were born right after the war. My brother was born in 1946, in a UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) displaced person camp. I was born in 1949, back in Budapest. My earliest memory about being a Jew is that my parents, my brother and I were hiking in the Buda Mountains in



*My parents with my brother Imre in 1946 in a UNRRA DP camp, Admont, Austria.*

Hungary, as we did every Sunday. We were a very close-knit family, a unit of four. There were no grandparents, uncles, aunts or cousins. While hiking, my parents sometimes talked about the war. The war was a great adventure and the heroes were my parents—Jews who were brave and resourceful and could outsmart the Hungarians and Germans who tried to kill them. I was a naïve child; I did not know that if your parents were Jews then you were, too. I wanted to be a Jew and sheepishly asked if I was. My parents assured me that I, too, was a Jew, and I was thrilled.

We had a small, colorful rug in our living room where I grew up in Budapest, Hungary. I knew from my mother that the rug was made by my father's father. Almost everything I knew about my father's family was from my mother. My father was the sole survivor of his family. His parents, his beloved older sister, Béba, and her nine-year-old son Tibike were all deported to Auschwitz in July 1944 and sent to the gas chamber immediately upon arrival.

As a child, I was intrigued by the rug in our living room and asked my father about it. My father did not answer; he could not. He looked at the rug and tears swelled in his eyes. I had never seen my father crying. Those tears did not roll down his face. They stayed in his eyes, just as his unbearable pain always stayed inside. At that moment he did not need to talk. I felt the depth of his pain for the loss of his family. I understood his silence and never asked again.



*My parents, my brother, and I on a hike in 1952.*

Looking back, I have so much admiration for the strength of my parents that they were able to select the parts of their harrowing experiences that they could portray as a “great adventure.” It is not that we children did not know about the part of our family that perished in the Holocaust. However, the overwhelming message was a positive one, survival against all odds. I am sure that the main force that drove my parents was protecting



us children from the horrors and trauma they went through. I also want to believe that their positive framing of the past was helping them move on with their lives. I will never know for sure. They both passed away a long time ago. They have my eternal gratitude for giving us a happy, and “normal” childhood.

Finally, I dragged out the heavy suitcase from the closet and opened it. It was filled to the brim with letters. How would I read so many letters? It seemed like an insurmountable task. Then I started sorting the packets of letters tied with strings and opened the first packet from 1937.



I am completely absorbed in the letters. I am meeting my paternal grandparents and my aunt in their own words for the first time. They were murdered in Auschwitz before I was born. I am meeting my parents’ younger selves. They struggled and suffered a lot more than I understood as a child. My father wrote to my mother in 1940: “*I keep thinking how long, how long, how*

*long. How long can it go on that they can commit injustices without any purpose or reason, how long will this go on. You are my life and I am yours. This torment will be over, this night of agony. We will live as we imagined it, and we will be happy. That's what life owes us and that's what we must have.*”

As I read the letters, the past becomes the present. It is like sitting in a time machine and living their lives, their feelings, their thoughts. I do not want it to end. As long as I am reading their letters, they are alive.



**So Many Years after the Holocaust, Still an Unbearable Silence**  
Hedi Molnar



*They were full of hope when they married in March 1947; nine months, eleven days later, in the historic blizzard of '47, my sister, Susan Linda was born.*

Long Ago . . .

She died too young, too, too young. So, memories are few. It's the boiled tongue I remember, the very large cow's tongue – like yours and mine. Don't recall the cooking. Did water get changed in the very large pot, before it was done? Sliced from the thick, in the throat, end; the pink meat was speckled with white. What did it taste like – sliced thinly, delicately. Yet, I don't have a sense of the flavor but know I wasn't repulsed by it.

Then there was the stuffed cabbage, with leaves so soft and thin, wrapped around the ground beef with rice, cooked in a light tomatoey sauce. Were there supermarkets? Where did the ingredients come from? No recollection of food shopping with my mother, except, once, at the butcher shop; glass cases filled with raw beef, liver, chicken. We must have walked there. Was it a Saturday? Otherwise, I would be in school. I see a narrow wood bench and someone asking for a glass of water. The butcher is clearly annoyed by the request, but fetches a glass.

My mother is having her first heart attack. She is less than forty, and I'm about ten. We must have taken a cab home; hospitalization followed. When I was sixteen, she had her last heart attack, on a snowy Tuesday night in February. She left in a zippered black bag. I can still hear the zipper closing. The fragile four-person family shattered, we three followed separate paths to grieve, to survive.



*At twelve, my mother left Germany for the U.S., as an unaccompanied minor.*

Silence . . .

The little once-white card has a photo of my mother, at twelve years old. It is a document used for her departure from Germany, on the SS Washington, in 1935. A white shirt, a red neckerchief, the photo is black and white, but I know the scarf is red, from news photos I've seen. This is one of the few items illuminating her beginnings. The identity card is a wee glimpse into mother's past.

I grew up not knowing what I did not know. A word that describes my mental condition: dislocation. Mom, born in Germany, arrived here, without her parents, as an adolescent. Dad came to the U.S. in 1947, at twenty-five, a Hungarian Romanian. How they met was not passed on to me and my sister. I know they wed quickly, and my sister was born, nine months, eleven days after their March 17, 1947 wedding. My father was stateless when he arrived here from Rome, with a Swedish passport that expired in six months and—a new name. Memories say that Dad adored my mom. That she already had U.S. citizenship must have been appealing, too. Aside from two daughters, my parents had no obvious commonalities except their very different, histories dominated by the upheaval of the Holocaust. The air was infused with their layered pasts, absorbed by us, through snippets of family lore.

Words, perhaps overheard, and feelings transmitted by proximity: sadness, loss, frustration, lack of money, but despite the mental anguish, external order: neat home, nice clothes, tasty food. We had dignity, little money. Sweaters knit by Mom – a thin strand to her youth in Germany. She must have learned to knit as a child, before she came to the U.S., alone, when she was twelve.

Home: neat, organized, clean. These are values transmitted to me by Bela and Ruth. And dignity, by example, despite low income. When I was eleven and we, a family of four, moved from a one-bedroom to a two-bedroom apartment, my mother was in the hospital – recovering from a heart attack. Her relatively short life (she died at forty-four) was dominated by illness. But, this time, she recovered and life as a family continued.

I see her on the couch, needles clicking, absorbed, yes, consumed by the repetitive rows of stitches, making another garment. Her stitches so tight and fine; the variety of designs, colors, shapes: vests, jackets, pullovers, scarves; warmly comforting for my father, sister, and me. Fifty years on, how many still cling to me. . . perfectly knit row, after row, after row of stitches, still keep me and my mother together. Recently, I started again wearing a so warm brown wool vest.

Dad made simple furniture, like a round hassock covered in vinyl, gray and red, secured with fancy thumbtacks in a perfectly spaced circle. “Like a doll house” he used to say, “like a doll house.” This image of our surroundings comforted him. The picture, in color, is vivid: the television, the stereo, the nubby silk-like blue drapes adorned with gold braid. Mom on the couch with her knitting, or cards arranged for countless games of solitaire. However, as I didn't know, for so very long, what I didn't know, I couldn't—wouldn't form the questions—for Mom or Dad.

Aside from looking like Dad, I share his sense of humor and pain. The notion that comedy is birthed from personal discomfort (like a pearl!), certainly applies to Dad and me. As I grow closer to the age my father was when he died, I can see the arc of his life, and take a backward look at mine, too. Our shared love of comedy, to mask our ever-present searing pain, binds us together. Dad, with his quite limited English, loved puns. Our dentist, Dr. Saperstein, he called Dr. Lunchstein! In my 30s, I took a comedy workshop, and developed a stand-up routine. Although, I didn't pursue comedy, I still, often, make people laugh. And, I would love to try on the role of brassy female comedienne.

For families like ours, suffering the aftermath of the Holocaust, often parents don't reveal their past until near life's end. Well, Dad died at seventy-eight, and for me, never got old. For the last fifteen years of his life, we lived on opposite coasts and discussed nothing of significance in our rare times together. He did make sure to pass his wedding album, our family photo album, and some documents, to me. I am the archivist. But the few documents I possess do not provide answers.

Because my parents survived, could have a well-appointed home and a family and food on the table, it was all treasure. So telling, so telling: my father collected toiletries (toothpaste, soap, deodorant, mouthwash), often bought at discount stores, some with expired dates. He would gift them to me. Visiting him in California, I went to the post office and spent lots, to mail pounds of toiletries home. I've thought, how very, very dirty Dad must have been during the war.

Where were you born, Dad? When did your mom die? Am I named for her? Tell me the story of your escape/travels in the war. The tattoo on your forearm was a heart with a skull and cross bones and Ploesti. Was that a forced labor camp in the oil fields of Romania? I imagine you wanted a tattoo for an identifier, if you died in the war. And how did you end up in Rome, in a singing group? You had dreams of singing opera, being on the stage, I imagine. How you loved to listen to opera; and took great joy in your "50 Great Moments in Music" record. Yes, Dad, I would have liked to have known you, Besides the deep pain, besides the loss that cemented us together.

And Mom, never a word, that I recall, about your German childhood, the crossing to America, the orphanage, the foster home in New Rochelle, dropping out of New Rochelle High School, meeting Dad.

Unmoored, I am incomplete. And, for so many years now, the silence is unbreakable. Unbearable.



*The only remnant of his life in the war, a tattoo identified him: a heart with daggers, a skull and cross bones, dice, and the word death. Dated 1943, he was twenty-one years old, and probably a forced laborer at Ploesti, Romania, bombed by the U.S. in 1943.*

Written during the Drew University Writing workshop; previously posted on *The Jewish Daily Forward* at [forward.com](http://forward.com).

## **Seeking the Light: Child of Holocaust Survivors Reclaims Judaism**

Hedi Molnar

I can't tell you how many people asked if it was my first marriage when they saw my engagement ring, a traditional round diamond chosen by my intended.

Indeed, it was a first marriage and I was bucking the odds at forty-two years old. We had a lot in common: both New Yorkers, similar interests, single, and we wanted to start a family. The difference—I am Jewish and my (now) husband is Roman Catholic.

Looking back at our dating days, in the early nineties, my husband Michael says, “Well, you didn't seem very Jewish.” I led a secular life, having had no religious education as a child. Fast forward more than a decade, we are members of a Reform temple, have two daughters who were adopted in China, who are being raised Jewishly. How did we get here?

It was only after my marriage and adopting our first child that I began to confront feelings related to being the child of Holocaust survivors. Creating a family, after I was raised in a home filled with un verbalized sadness and loss, pushed me to examine my Jewishness. Had my husband not been a practicing Catholic, perhaps I wouldn't have been impelled to reclaim my heritage. We began our marriage with the understanding that we would raise our hoped-for children with both faiths.

Dr. Irit Felsen, a psychologist who specializes in treating Holocaust survivors and their families, noted that 2Gs often intermarry to escape Judaism. That isn't my story: when hopes of marrying were dimming—I was already past forty—I found someone to share my life. I had lived a secular life on my own since I was eighteen, so finding a Jewish partner was not a priority.

Shortly after our marriage, which took place less than a year after our first date, we focused on creating a family. Distant as I felt from Judaism, I wasn't drawn to my husband's religion. As we began to discuss raising children, my husband looked to the Catholic Church for interfaith guidance, but didn't find support at that time—in the early nineties. We found an interfaith group at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, and that was our first attempt at resolving how we would raise our children religiously.

The more we talked, the more convinced I became that our children needed to be raised Jewishly. “From generation to generation” (*l'dor v'dor*), a touchstone in Judaism, so lacking in my own family, began rattling in my brain.

Initially, we considered having both religions for our children. But discussions in the Jewish-based interfaith groups led us to feel that it was an obligation as parents to choose one religion for our children. My conviction that the children needed to be Jewish—to honor family I have lost and to continue our legacy—was, after years of parsing our dilemma, accepted by my husband, who finds nothing in Judaism contrary to his Catholic beliefs.

We were married for three years and living in New York when we adopted our first child in 1995. When we moved to New Jersey, in 1996, we found Pathways, a program that helped families explore Judaism and, if they felt ready, find synagogues where they would be comfortable and accepted.

About four years after we moved to New Jersey, we chose to raise our then only daughter Jewishly. As the years passed, my husband became increasingly at ease with Judaism. Much of what we learned in the Pathways family program was familiar to me to as a culturally Jewish person, but it made me thirsty to develop my religious knowledge further. My husband's adherence to Roman Catholicism motivated me to learn more about Judaism. If he were less attached to his faith, perhaps I wouldn't have regained my Jewishness—mostly lost in the tumult of being a child of survivors.

My husband was educated in his neighborhood Catholic school and attended a Jesuit high school, Regis, in Manhattan. Catholicism is his foundation and his church attendance regular. Growing up, we didn't attend synagogue but we did celebrate Jewish holidays at home. My parents, though persecuted for being Jewish had, as far as I know, no formal religious education. Had I married a non-religious person, whether Jewish or not, religion would not have been a clear issue for our family. Perhaps I would have found my way back to synagogue, but given our divided family, I was compelled. Michael was steeped in his religion, and we wanted to raise Jewish children; I needed to learn how to be a practicing Jew.



Today, we have two religions and three cultures in our family: my European-Jewish ancestry, my husband's Italian-American background, and the heritage of our two daughters, who were born in China. We visit with my husband's family on Christmas and Easter. On Christmas Eve, the children decorate a tree with ornaments we've collected over the years, a few paper *dreidels* and a blue star that my older daughter once cut from a piece of paper. For Hanukkah we light two menorahs that my father brought back from Israel—which the girls cherish. Bringing Judaism into our home has been a unifying force: the music, the prayers, the candles, the holidays, the foods, and belonging to a synagogue.

Reconnecting myself to Judaism after I became a mother, I learned my *alef-bet* (Hebrew alphabet), pursued Jewish studies and in 2004 became a *Bat Mitzvah*. Standing on the *bimah* (raised platform) and reading my *d'var Torah* (analysis of my *Torah* portion) was a chance to honor family I have lost and to link my daughters and husband to my heritage. I concluded my *d'var* with: “The Jews left Egypt and my family lost their homeland in Europe. But as the slaves in Egypt, I feel that I have earned my freedom. My freedom to choose to be a Jew: To do and to learn.”



*At my Bat Mitzvah. Rachel was nine, and Renata, who wandered on the Bimah while I spoke, was three.*

The joy of having the *Bat Mitzvah* was scarred by loss—other than my husband, our two daughters, and my sister, not one relative was at the service. My mother died when I was a teenager and my father died five years ago—both having shared their stories with me. I did not know that my mother came to the United States from Germany, at about twelve years old, one of one thousand children who were sent here without their parents. My father, who was born in Hungary, never spoke of his time in Europe—except for a short stint in Rome after the war, before he came to the U.S. in 1947. His death left me with so many mysteries and so few answers.

So, what is the source of my relatively recent sense of Jewishness, my need to be a practicing Jew, and my determination to have our children follow the Jewish faith? Echoes in my heart, echoes in my mind, of what once was—my German grandparents, who were practicing Jews with five children. And my given names—so European, so unlike my parents' first born (Susan Linda). My middle name (Edith) memorializes my mother's lost sister, and about my first name my father never

said and the atmosphere of silence left questions unspoken—it may have been for his mother. Culturally, my father was strongly Jewish although I doubt that he ever received any religious education.

Whether a choice or a legacy – I am the “memorial candle.” A Jewish light destined to carry the shreds of our family to the next generation. I've read children raised Jewishly in interfaith families often don't continue their observance and don't choose Jewish partners. When she was ten-years old, my daughter and I sometimes mused that her ideal partner would be a Chinese-Jewish man. Nonetheless, we have created a foundation so that our daughters will hopefully continue their Jewish legacy.

Judaism has been evolving. At our Reform temple, we are warmly welcomed, and multicultural families are encouraged to become members. We were overjoyed when Rachel (who is named for my mother, Ruth) became a *Bat Mitzvah*, followed five years later by our second daughter Renata (also named for my mother and for a Holocaust survivor named Renate, who was my neighbor for many years).



*Like her sister Rachel, who was nineteen in this photo, Renata became a Bat Mitzvah in 2014.*

Renata graduated from our temple's religious school and is looking forward to her first trip to Israel. For now, Rachel is distant from Judaism but maybe, as I did, she will find her path back to our religion.

The *Ner Tamid* (eternal light) is shining and its brightness remains in our sight.

Essay was originally published on 18Doors.org.

## Growing into 2G

Judith M. Sills

I don't remember when I first learned about my parents' Holocaust experience, but I knew at an early age that I was unlike the children in my neighborhood. My father retained his thick accent, and most of their close friends were Polish Jews whom they had known or met along the way. Both my parents came from educated, non-Yiddish speaking households, my father from a textile family in Lodz, Poland, and my mother from Dubno near the Russian border in Western Ukraine, where her father owned a stationary store and her mother was a pharmacist. My father spent most of the war in the Lodz ghetto and was sent to Auschwitz, quickly moved to several work camps and ultimately liberated from Dachau. My mother was a hidden child who went to live with a former maid who was a nun and was taught how to "act" Catholic. She spent a good part of the war under Russian rule after that part of Poland was conquered. My parents met in a Displaced Persons camp after the war and came to the US in 1949 on a visa obtained through the American Joint Distribution Committee. They came with my mother's father, the only other person in both families who survived but who died before I was born.



*My parents, Julia and Eugene in 1953.*

My father would occasionally talk about life before the war, and as I got older, he shared some of his experience in the ghetto, the camps, and liberation. I rarely asked questions and grew up feeling guilty that I should probe more but couldn't bring myself to ask. I was afraid that the pieces I didn't know were the horrific ones I couldn't bear to know. The details of pain and suffering in people I knew and loved were something I could not deal with. I had the same distancing and shutting-down reaction when I visited the Holocaust Museum in DC and saw in the lobby videos of survivors I actually knew. It touched too close. My guilt was somewhat assuaged when my mother-in-law gave me a book entitled *Children of the Holocaust* by Helen Epstein. Reading interviews of other 2Gs, I discovered that I was not alone in my guilty feelings of not being able to ask the questions I thought I should be asking.

My father bought every book he could find about the Holocaust and read them voraciously, over and over. He seemed especially focused on what the US government, Roosevelt in particular, knew and when. When the movie *Shoah* was released in 1985, he watched all nine hours of it to my amazement. When I asked how he could watch what he had already lived through, he said that he only knew what he had experienced and wanted to understand the rest and how it all fit together. In an abstract way I could understand this, but could never bring myself to watch the film or read much about the Holocaust.

My mother rarely spoke about her experience during the war and mostly talked about what it was like when they came to the US. "We came to the US with only five dollars and spoke no English. We were just two kids who had nothing." Over time I learned that her father had been conscripted into the Russian Army and sent to Siberia as a bookkeeper. He came back after the war and found her and got them both out of Poland to Germany. But mostly she was tight lipped, and again, I rarely asked. Occasionally, though, I would be surprised by her strong reaction to some trigger. She worked for the National Institutes of Health and her division sponsored visiting scientists. Because she spoke Polish, she was asked to help the Polish scientists get acclimated in the US, but she refused for years. When I mentioned some of the friends I had made in college, she recognized the Ukrainian last names and proclaimed that they were anti-Semites because their parents definitely were. I should not be friends with these girls. The Romanian scientist I worked with and the Ukrainian handyman who was doing work in our house, both of whom told me that their parents had hidden Jews, were not believable—

according to her. She was always skeptical that there were some good people in Europe who did try to help, despite her own experience of being saved by a nun.

As they moved forward with their lives, neither of them ever “forgave” the Poles, Germans, and Ukrainians, yet they disagreed on certain things. For example, my father seemed to want to remember and review again and again everything about the Holocaust, while my mother wanted to put it behind her and not look back. I don’t remember what would spark these conversations at the kitchen table, but every few years my father would mention that he wanted to go back to Poland and my mother would immediately shut him down, saying, “And what will you do there.....let them watch you vomit over the graves?” That ended the conversation until he raised it again at some future point. My mother always said she would never set foot on European soil again; she was true to her word except for briefly touching the Greek Islands on a cruise to Turkey. I think my father always regretted not going back to Poland, but he never would have gone without my mother.

In my twenties and forties. I discovered two “secrets” that my parents had never mentioned. The first and most shocking was that they had changed their last name from Rozenblum to Miller. My mother’s first cousin casually mentioned this in a conversation, assuming that I knew. When I later confronted my father, he refused to discuss it. I suppose it must have been a painful memory, so I let it go. Years later when I asked my mother about it, she explained that when my father wanted to apply to college in the 1950s, he was advised that he would never be admitted with a name like Rozenblum, so he changed it to a neutral name. When I got married and was debating whether to take my husband’s name (it was the late seventies and women keeping their own name or hyphenating their old and new name was very much in vogue), one of the thoughts that went through my mind was that Miller wasn’t my real name anyway, so if it meant that much to my husband to take his name, it wasn’t that important. Yet I couldn’t drop the name I grew up with so easily; I ultimately dropped my middle name and have used Miller as my middle name unhyphenated with Sills.



*Matthew Sills and I were married on June 1, 1980 in Bethesda, MD. I am now Judith Miller Sills.*

The second “secret” was that my parents had sat for taped interviews in 1998 for the Shoah Foundation. It turned out that the same first-cousin had convinced them to do it. Again, it was casually mentioned as something I of course knew about. I again confronted my father who very firmly said, “They are in the safety deposit box and you can watch them after I’m dead.” There was no point in asking my mother; she had no say in this and went along with this decision. For the same reason I could not bring myself to ask more questions about my parents’ Holocaust experience, I accepted this answer without argument. I knew what I knew, and knowing that the tapes were there waiting for me when I was ready to watch them gave me comfort. When DVDs started to replace VCR tapes, I asked my father to give me the tapes so I could convert them and be able to watch them in the future. I promised I wouldn’t watch them, but he never gave them over to me. When he was declining with dementia in the last few years, I again asked for the tapes, and when he said OK, neither of us was able to find them. I eventually found my parents’ video testimonies on the Shoah Foundation website and ordered three sets of DVDs: one for me and my husband and a set each for our children.

My children had been told that my father had requested I not watch the tapes until he died, but they were quite interested to see them, yet reluctant to not abide by this request. I suggested that they ask my mother who said to watch them but “don’t say anything to Grandpa.” And so my husband, both children, and daughter-in-law watched the tapes and I didn’t/couldn’t. The only thing I heard about their reaction was from my daughter-in-law, who said that I would appreciate the pride and visible happiness on my father’s face when he spoke about me.

After my father passed away in December 2018, those tapes continued to haunt me. It took me nine months until I could bring myself to ask my husband to watch my father’s testimony with me. Over a few nights in August, I finally watched the three hours of my father’s testimony. I learned a few new things, some of which were the painful details that I had feared, but for the most part it was a positive experience. My father had died of dementia at age ninety-five and was no longer the person I had known. It was very special to see him at age seventy-five, so animated and engaged in telling his story, and for three hours, it brought him back.

I always tell people I grew up among the Catholics. In elementary school on the Irish south side of Chicago I was subjected to singing Christmas carols in Latin. While I never went to church, I was well versed in the church lingo of “the sisters, holy communion, and altar boys” that I would hear from the neighborhood children. When I was ten, we moved to suburban Maryland, to a mixed, mostly non-Jewish Catholic area. I think the decision to live in non-Jewish areas was, in part, affordability and, in part, that they didn’t want to feel they had to compete with the ostentatious upwardly mobile American Jews they observed.

My parents said they joined a synagogue only because when I mimicked my childhood friends, they realized that they needed to expose me to a Jewish environment. So, I went to Sunday school, Hebrew school, and confirmation class, but we were culturally Jewish and devout Zionists more than anything else. Israeli music was always playing in our house, especially after the 1967 war. My brother had his Bar Mitzvah in Israel, not in our synagogue.

When I was in junior high school and it started having social events, I experienced for the first time the dichotomy between my parents’ seeming desire to assimilate but “not too far.” I asked to

attend a school dance and was told no. When I asked why, it was because I might “meet someone not Jewish.” Despite my protests that I was fourteen and wasn’t getting married anytime soon, it didn’t matter; they never relented. I questioned why we had moved to this neighborhood and even challenged with “what if I brought home an Ethiopian Jew,” but I was never allowed to attend school social functions. Instead, they found a chapter of B’nai B’rith Girls in Jewish Silver Spring and drove me to social events.

When I went to college, one of the first things I did was start dating non-Jews; but I could never relax and let myself “like” any of them. My feelings were always on guard. I knew my parents would never forgive me if I became serious with someone not Jewish and I couldn’t do that to them. I eventually stopped dating non-Jews and ultimately met and married my Jewish husband. As a few lovely non-Jewish spouses entered our small family of cousins, my father appeared to soften with the years. He would say that this was the way of the world now and seemed to accept what he thought was inevitable, but not really. I am still convinced that if his grandchildren were to marry non-Jews he would be crushed.

Applying to college, I encountered the next hurdle of expectations. I knew cost was an issue and a private college was out of the question, but when I expressed interest in being an English major, a subject I excelled in and liked, I was told that that I needed to have a profession. “They can take everything from you but your education” was a continuing refrain as I grew up, and in my parents’ minds, an undergraduate liberal arts degree was not a useful education. They pressured me to apply to Hershey Medical School for a six-year combined undergraduate and medical degree. If I wanted to be an English major, I could live home and attend the county college since it was a waste of money. I wanted to go away to school in the worst way but had no interest in medical school and strongly resisted. Neither of us would give in, but ultimately, I was not the one paying the bill. I reluctantly agreed to apply to pharmacy school and was accepted at Rutgers as an out-of-state student. Except for meeting my husband, I hated every minute of it, but as a dutiful daughter I studied hard and did well. In my final year we were exposed to clinical pharmacy, a new and upcoming area of practice for pharmacists which involved being in a hospital or clinic setting and more direct involvement with patient care, exactly what I would have been exposed to in medical school. I went on to get a Doctor of Pharmacy degree in Clinical Pharmacy, had a successful professional career which took advantage of



the communication skills I enjoyed so well in high school, and never admitted to my parents that I probably would have liked medical school.



*I received my Doctor of Pharmacy degree in May 1983 from the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science, Philadelphia, PA. I am in the 2nd row, 2nd from the left.*

Growing up, I never felt my 2G status was a burden forced on me. My parents were not overprotective, never said things to make me feel guilty or that I owed them for anything they had experienced. They were always working, always striving, always wanting to put the past behind them and move forward. Yet I often felt “other” with two full-time working parents in a neighborhood of Christian stay-at-home moms, a father who still sounded like “he just got off the boat” with his thick accent, and a mother who was preoccupied and not especially interested in American teenage life. My Jewishness and especially my 2G status was something I kept private. As religious holidays like Easter and Christmas came up and I was wished a Merry Christmas or Happy Easter, I sometimes shared that I didn’t celebrate these holidays, but many times just said nothing. I never sought out support groups or got involved with anything that had to do with the Holocaust. I rarely had friends over to meet my parents and they never participated in community or school events, so it never had any reason to come up. My parents would say they were grateful to be in the US, and I believe they sincerely meant it, but there was always an undercurrent that those who were not like you could turn on you under the right

circumstances, just as had happened in their home towns when their neighbors confiscated their belongings and refused to talk to them when they finally returned after the war to see what was left.

As I entered the business world of international pharmaceuticals, I worked in diverse settings where many of my interactions were with Europeans. Being around people who I was raised to believe were mostly anti-Semitic and traveling to Germany were especially difficult. I found that Europeans do not talk about religion because they assume everyone is Christian and their differences mostly revolve around country of origin and its stereotypes. In the eyes of my colleagues, I was an American who didn't act like most Americans. My dilemma was whether to say I had European parents which would prompt the question "from where?" which I didn't want to answer. My parents had always made it clear that they were not "Polish" but "Jews who happened to have come from Poland." I tried my best to avoid this question.

As time went on and my career progressed, I took a stronger stance on owning my Jewishness, refusing except for a rare compromise, to travel or attend meetings on the Jewish holidays, but still keeping my 2G status private. In my personal life, over time I started to be more open to sharing my background and started to make the annual Holocaust commemoration at our synagogue a no-miss event. I told a few close Christian friends that my parents were Holocaust survivors and joined the local Federation 2G list-serve, although I never participated in anything related to 2G until now. For years I avoided interfaith events and took a "live and let live approach," always concerned that there are anti-Semites lurking everywhere. I have started to rethink my prejudices in recent times. Following the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, members of the Beacon Unitarian Church stood vigil outside our synagogue for Shabbat services. I posted on Facebook, something I rarely do, that this "this kind and generous gesture helps restore my faith in humanity."

I have now started the process of applying for Lithuanian citizenship. Initially, I thought of Lithuania in response to my daughter-in-law reaching out about where we can escape to when it becomes clear our democracy has failed. It was my father's birthplace and his mother's family had owned land and businesses before being pushed out and killed by the Russians. I wasn't serious about pursuing this but my daughter-in-law sent me a website explaining the process, and a link to a company which could help prepare all the documents. After spending several months reflecting on my motivation to do this (I would never move to Lithuania or any country in Europe), I decided that it was

my birthright and I should take back the citizenship my grandmother's family had for generations. I am determined and proud to show the Lithuanian government that neither the Russians nor the Germans killed off the Laucknicki family!



*The Miller family at Julia and Eugene's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 2018. The last family picture in which Eugene was alive.*



*Passover 2021: Julia with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.*



## Writers' Acknowledgments

The writers of this portfolio would like to thank the Drew University Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study for the opportunity to participate in the Writing Workshops for Children of Holocaust Survivors (2G). It was a rewarding, enriching, memorable learning experience, even transformative. The writers extend special thanks to the workshop leaders, Bob Ready and Ann L. Saltzman, who provided motivational discussions to stimulate the writing and then generous, thoughtful guidance for completing their essays.

In addition:

**Elaine Citron** wishes to acknowledge her husband, Dr. A.S.S. Reddy, her daughter Tammy, and grandson Ryan for their love, support and encouragement.

**Judy Elbaum** would like to thank her husband, Steve, for his support, encouragement, insight and wise counsel.

**Sister Eleanor Francis** would like to thank her sister Marie Johanson for all her help, especially with the photos. Also, Rabbi Shefa Gold for her inspiration and Rabbi Deb Smith, who has been her primary teacher of Judaism.

**Ora Gordon** wishes to acknowledge the six million Jews who were murdered during World War Two, among them 1.5 million children. They didn't have a chance to grow up, to attend school, to go to camp, to apply to college, to travel or to have families of their own. As she remembers them, she feels remarkably lucky for the life she lives today.

**Monica Hartman** would like to thank her husband, Dr. Robert L. Hartman, for his insight and encouragement, and her son, David, for his unwavering technical assistance. In addition, she would like to thank Rozsa Kovetski and Elaine Citron, members of the Writing Workshop, for encouraging her to complete this essay. And finally, she would like to acknowledge the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the book *Tropic Zion* by Allen Wells, a child of Sosúa, like herself.

**Vera Kalina-Levine** thanks her husband, Sir Gilbert Levine, for his unwavering interest, encouragement, and perceptive observations. She is also grateful to him for honoring her parents' Holocaust memory and the lives of the six million who perished, through concerts of remembrance, peace, and reconciliation.

**Sonia Kaplan** is grateful to her parents for instilling in her life foundation of resilience and compassion. She is also thankful for the encouragement of relatives and numerous friends to write about segments of her life that relate to the Holocaust. A loved-filled thank you to her husband, Sandy, for his technical assistance and for reading her essay many times. She appreciates his sensitivity to the experiences Holocaust families endured. A thank you to her daughters, who read her essay, supported her writing, and demonstrated an abundance of understanding.

**Rozsa Kovesdi** would like to thank her brother, Dr. Imre Kovesdi who is always her first reader. She also thanks her friends, Dr. Carmela Patrias and Steve Frankel, for their insightful comments. Last but not least, she is grateful to Dr. Eva Vogel for encouraging her to apply to the Workshop in the first place.

**Hedi Molnar** is grateful to her friend and former colleague at *The New York Times*, Andrew Yarrow. She thanks him for his enthusiastic encouragement to publish her writing. She also thanks her husband, Michael, and daughters, Rachel and Renata, to whom she gives her story with endless love.

**Judi Sills** would like to thank her husband, Matt, for holding her hand while she watched her father's Shoah Foundation oral testimony nine months after his passing at the age of ninety-five.

## Brief Biographies of Second-Generation Writers

**Elaine Citron** is the daughter of a Polish Jewish Holocaust survivor. He was the sole survivor from his family. Elaine's father came to live with the liberator from the American army he met in Germany who then asked him to become part of his family in Newark, New Jersey. There he met Elaine's mother, an American Jew. Elaine is the founder and president of an art licensing agency. Elaine previously worked in industrial sales and has worked as an art teacher in the Cranford NJ school system. She is also a jewelry designer. She is married and has one daughter and one grandson.

**Judy Urman Elbaum** is the only child of Holocaust survivors from Poland. She is married to Steven Elbaum, whose parents were also Holocaust survivors from Poland. Judy and Steve are the proud parents of Lawrence and Sally, both of whom are married; they have four precious grandchildren. Judy graduated Cornell University in 1974 with a B.A. degree in Semitic Languages and Literature. She is the editor of two books: *Our Families Remember the Holocaust* (Published by the Solomon Schechter Day School, 1996); *The ARC Family Diaries* (Published by the ARC of Essex County, 2002). Judy and Steve are involved with non-profit community service organizations that provide Holocaust programming as well as services to children with special needs and underserved inner city neighborhoods.

**Sister Eleanor Francis** was born in Santa Barbara, California. Her mother and maternal grandmother were Holocaust survivors from Hungary. Sr. Eleanor's mother met her father in Sweden in 1945, after being liberated from Bergen-Belsen. The young couple moved to this country in 1947. Eleanor was born the next year. Sr. Eleanor is a member of the Episcopal Community of St. John Baptist. She is also an Episcopal priest who earned her Master of Divinity from Drew in 2006. In the past year, she has shared her Holocaust story "The Search for My Jewish Identity" with several synagogues, as well as the Holocaust and Human Rights Education Center of New York.

**Ora Gordon** grew up in a classic New Jersey suburb. Her father escaped Nazi Germany for England on the *Kindertransport* program, was deported to Australia as an "enemy alien," and served in the British army. His testimony is archived at the Shoah Foundation, and he appeared in the documentary, *Into the Arms of Strangers*. Ora's mother was born in Palestine to Polish parents who made *Aliyah* in the 1920s. The majority of their families, still in Poland, perished in the *Shoah*. Ora has an M.S. degree from Pratt and worked as a designer for a number of years. She is married, has two young children, and together they currently live in West Orange.

**Monica Deutsch Hartman** was born in the Jewish Refugee Colony of Sosúa in the Dominican Republic, founded primarily by Dorsa, part of The Joint Distribution Committee. She is the daughter of Holocaust survivors; forty-five of their respective families did not survive. Her family emigrated to New York City in 1948. She received a BA and MS, from Queens College. . She taught elementary school in New York, and in New Jersey. and later taught Special Education. Monica is married to Dr. Robert L. Hartman, a physicist and director at Bell Labs. They have two wonderful sons and daughters-in-law and four beautiful grandchildren.

**Vera Kalina-Levine** was born in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, to a mother who survived Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen Belsen and a father who spent part of the war in hiding. She and her family immigrated to the U.S. in 1966. After earning an A.B. from Brown and a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Yale, she enjoyed a career as Vice President/Industry Analyst at major international banks, including 30 years at Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group. She translated a number of literary works from Czech and Russian, including Arnošt Lustig's Holocaust novel, *The Unloved: From the Diary of Perla S.*, which won the 1985 National Jewish Book Award. She is an active board member of the Society for the History of Czechoslovak Jews in New York. Vera and her husband are the proud parents of two sons, both married.

**Sonia Kaplan** was born in the Lampertheim Displaced Persons Camp (near Mannheim, Germany) to two Holocaust survivors from Lodz, Poland. She came to the United States with her parents at age two and was brought up in Newark, NJ along with her younger brother, Leslie. After graduating from high school, she attended Newark State College (now Kean University), obtaining a BA degree in Special Education. She then received a fellowship and earned an MA degree from Teachers College, Columbia University. Sonia taught students with special needs including those on the Autism Spectrum. Along with her husband Sandy, she has three daughters and five grandchildren. Since retirement, she has focused on reading and researching the Holocaust, specifically as it relates to the "Second Generation."

**Rozsa Kovesdi** was born in Hungary to two Holocaust survivors. Her father survived three years of forced labor service in the Eastern front during WWII. Her mother survived the Shoah by refusing to move to the Budapest Ghetto and pretending to be a Christian refugee from Transylvania. Rozsa spent her first career as an architect in Hungary. In 1982 she immigrated to Canada and later to the US. In 1988 she earned a Master's Degree in Computer Science. Her second career as a software engineer spanned almost thirty years including ten years at Bell Labs R&D, leading-edge technology startups, and work in the financial industry. Rozsa is now working towards her third career as a genealogist-family historian.

**Hedi Molnar** was born and raised in the Bronx. She graduated from The City College of New York. A writer and editor, Hedi is a former *New York Times* staffer. Her articles have appeared in the *Times*, and other publications. She is writing a memoir about the culture scene in NYC.

**Judith Miller Sills** (Judi) was born to two Holocaust survivors who met in a displaced persons camp in Munich, Germany. She earned a Bachelor's Degree in Pharmacy from Rutgers University and a Doctor of Pharmacy degree (Pharm.D.) from Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and Science (now known as University of the Sciences in Philadelphia). Judi spent her career monitoring the safety of drugs for pharmaceutical companies and currently consults with small biotechnology companies on the regulatory requirements for monitoring drug safety during clinical trials and post-marketing. She is also Chair-Elect of the Grotta Fund for Senior Care, an advisory fund of the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater MetroWest NJ (JCF) which aims to enhance the lives of older adults in the surrounding counties by helping older adults and their families age in place, with independence and dignity. Judi and her husband have two adult sons and twin granddaughters.



## Brief Biographies of Editors

**Robert Ready** (A.B., M.A., Ph.D., Columbia University) is Professor Emeritus of English, and former Donald R. and Winifred B. Professor of Humanities, National Endowment for the Humanities Distinguished Teaching Professor, and Dean of the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies. He has taught nineteenth-century British Literature, Western Literature, twentieth century American writers, interdisciplinary humanities, and creative writing. His novel, *Eck: A Romance*, was published in 2021 by Atmosphere Press.

**Ann L. Saltzman**, Professor Emerita of Psychology at Drew University and Director Emerita of Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study, earned her doctorate in Social-Personality Psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Most of her scholarly work has been at the nexus of Psychology, Holocaust Studies and History. She has presented at both Psychology and Holocaust Studies conferences and published book chapters, articles and reviews on the subject. Her awards and honors include a Grant-in-Aid from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues; Drew's Presidential Award for Distinguished Teaching; the Honey and Maurice Axelrod Public Education Recognition Award and the Sister Rose Thering Award from the New Jersey Commission for Holocaust Education for her work in educating for prejudice reduction, inter-faith understanding, and social justice.