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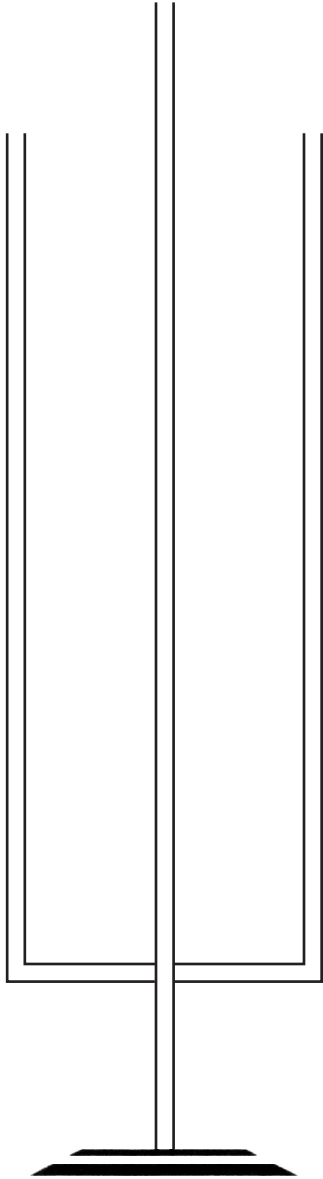
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## Introduction

We are delighted to share the good news that our journal has won a prestigious award from the Association of Jewish Libraries! Presented to me at the 2016 AJL conference in Charleston, South Carolina, it was awarded “in recognition of the excellence of the *PRISM* journal” and the editorial work that makes the journal a reality year after year. It is fitting, therefore, to begin with special thanks to those deserving of praise.

Dr. Charles Adès Fishman, our poetry editor, is tireless in his pursuit of excellence and never says no to our requests for help and advice, no matter how full his work schedule. Our art editor and prolific, devoted contributor, Dr. Pnina Rosenberg, has brought to these pages invaluable, rich, and complex stories and analyses of the best and most accessible works of Holocaust art. She is peerless in her ability and willingness to bring to our readers original art from museums around the world. Dr. Moshe Sokolow, our associate editor, and David B. Greenberg, our copy editor, are the backbones of this endeavor; their keen eyes and superb grasp of both English and Hebrew helped to make our publication the AJL winner of the year. Thank you, all!

The theme of this issue is the end of innocence. We wanted to explore moments of knowing: When and how did Americans learn about the events in Europe? What happened when the Holocaust, or any particular aspect of it, became known to those directly affected by it or to those uninvolved who later became aware of the events—perhaps from word of mouth, perhaps from newspapers? What happens to a child of survivors whose inchoate knowing, a process ever ongoing, becomes adult understanding, or to a member of the third generation who learns the truth about his heritage only as an adolescent? What happens today to a student unrelated to Jews whose innocence is ended by a history class, a piece of literature, or a film? Once one knows, what is the next step, and how does that step differ from person to person? How does such new knowledge inspire and affect university students who plan to become teachers?

Our issue is anchored by the responses of two historians who are frequent contributors—Rafael Medoff and Pnina Rosenberg—and two other historians and a journalist who are warmly welcomed to these pages: Nancy Lefenfeld, Monty Noam Penkower, and Ron Hollander. The issue is buoyed by the work of our poets, 11 in all. Gail Newman writes of the knowing coming to a Jewish family in a most tragic way. Breindel Lieba Kasher and Barbara Helfgott



Hyett craft poetry from direct testimony of survivors (Kasher) and, uniquely, liberators (Hyett), creating powerful and engaging teaching opportunities. R. H. B. Fishman, Nicholas Samaras, Joan Jobe Smith, and Kirtland Snyder are new to us and very welcome; their poems each offer a fresh vision of the power of slowly unfolding knowledge and of the wounding caused by sudden and visceral understanding. Kenneth Wolman is a new contributor of two pieces; his short narrative provides a vivid back-

story to his poem. The poem by Stephen Herz, three excerpted newspaper ads, offers incontrovertible proof that the truth was known while there was still time for the world to intervene. We have also included a poem by the late Bernard S. Mikofsky, who wrote of a “strange wind” that in 1945 “moved slowly across Europe / and even beyond,” advising the world that well-being was merely a dream.

We were extremely saddened to learn that poet Gail Fishman Gerwin had passed away and are grateful that three of her poems appear in this issue. We will miss her clarity of vision, her integrity, and her ability to capture the nuances of the very personal memories that she chose to share with our readers.

This topic engendered a wealth of first-person narratives from a wide variety of readers. Though the genre is uncommon in this journal, it is opportune and crucial for an authentic understanding of our theme. We wish we could have included many more of them, as each provides a different perspective on one moment of knowing, and we thank all who contributed.

Among the narratives we were able to accept are poignant and revealing tales of discovery by survivors, among them Gerda Krebs Seifer, and an interview of survivor Renee Fink. Memories of children of survivors, sometimes called the hinge generation, also grace these pages; the authors, new to us, include Suzanna Eibuszyc, Bella Rubin, and Ellen R. Singer. Willie Balk, a survivor's grandchild and first-time contributor, reflects on his discovery of an unexpected legacy.

We feature as well responses from the second and third generations after the Holocaust that are unrelated to survivors, including a memoir by Jennifer Robertson and a short story she adapted from a survivor's diary, and a narrative from Mary Todd, who explains how her journey to knowing laid the foundation for her present work. A fascinating set of responses comes from Polish students, many of whom I had the good fortune to meet at Jagiellonian

University in Krakow, who responded to our query of when, how, and what they learned about the Holocaust and what it means for them today as they learn how to be teachers. Agnieszka Kania, my coauthor for this piece, and I are now soliciting responses from pre-service university students around the world, because we believe this topic promises to be well worth additional research.

We continue to lose—and mourn—respected and beloved survivors.

Our teacher Elie Wiesel passed away in 2016 at the age of 87. We honor and pay tribute to him. He urged us to tell the tales; he insisted that we remember; he spoke for those who could not speak. His stories ended our innocence and introduced us to a terrible knowledge; his writings guided us as we traveled the twisted path to the understanding that supports and reinforces our work on this journal. As long as we live, he, too, shall live.

We lost as well historian and survivor Yaffa Eliach. Renowned for *The Tower of Life*, her three-story exhibit of 1,500 pre-war photographs of the people in her hometown of Eishyshok, Lithuania, on display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Eliach was a pioneer in Holocaust education, opening the first Center for Holocaust Studies in the United States (in Brooklyn, New York) and teaching techniques to interview survivors in ways that would elicit their experiences most accurately. I had the honor to co-teach a class with her at the Azrieli Graduate School a decade ago; she was a gracious, elegant woman who mentored me as she introduced me to the people who populated the world of her childhood.

As always, we extend our sincere thanks to Henry Rothman and the Rothman Foundation for their continued generous support, which we all greatly appreciate, and to our incomparable support staff. Dr. Rona Novick, our dean; Steven Schloss, our project director; and Emily Scherer Steinberg, our art director, as well as those mentioned above, work untold hours with great skill, patience, and devotion to bring this journal to fruition each year, and we are grateful for their commitment and for their friendship. *PRISM* could not and would not exist without their talents.

—Karen Shawn, Ph.D.

How did those who endured the Holocaust discover the truth about what had happened to their loved ones? In this poem by Gail Newman, "For one year / they waited, then halfway through another." Finally "a notice came"—and a package . . .

*Gail Newman*

## *Poland, 1940*

After her father was taken away  
and her mother's hair turned white  
overnight my mother began to grieve.  
The younger brother, born sickly,  
lay in bed shivering. They drank glasses  
of milky tea and locked the doors. Waited.  
On the streets, in fedoras and dark clothes,  
Jews walked close to buildings, eyes averted.  
Shops boarded shut, signs posted in windows.  
Yellow stars sewn onto coats. For one year  
they waited, then halfway through another.  
Schools closed. Friends disappeared.  
Snow melted into slush. Yesterday  
melted into tomorrow. Then a notice came,  
and my grandmother went out into the city,  
along roads where the branches of the trees  
were black as ash, and came back with a package  
in her arms, and she set it on the table,  
opened it and as the children watched,  
lifted out a bundle of clothes —  
socks, pants, blood-soaked shirt,  
the scent of flesh, hair, his body,  
the empty smoldering sleeves.



"This story," writes author Jennifer Robertson, "is based on a short extract from a diary published in Michal Grynberg's (1988) collection of Holocaust memoirs from Warsaw. The diarist, Henryk Ryzewski, held antisemitic views that were challenged by the crimes he witnessed in Warsaw. The incident of the officer and the young smuggler, integrated within the narrative, comes from a brief overview in the same collection of an account by Rela Sapot, a Jewish woman who frequently smuggled herself out of the ghetto to find food for her family and witnessed the bravery of many such children and their fate when caught."

*Jennifer Robertson*

## A Silver Cigarette Case

One summer's day in Warsaw, Pan Ludwik adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles, checked his inner pockets to see that his wallet and silver cigarette case were safely in place, brushed his lips against his wife's cheek, put on his stiff straw hat, picked up his briefcase, and left the house.

It was a day like any other, if any day could be the same during those panicked years of war. Ludwik glanced up at the cloudless sky. A single aeroplane circled against the vivid blue, while red and black banners with the hated swastika fluttered in the early morning breeze. Ludwik averted his eyes from those banners as he walked towards the small coffee house where he was to meet a fellow journalist from *The National Voice*, a newspaper for which they had both worked before the German occupation, when the Nazis had closed down all forms of Polish media and he and his colleague had lost their jobs.

Ludwik imagined the conversation he would begin. It might go something like this: "How are you, old man? Any joy on the work front? I'm helping my wife with the small sewing business she started up. I'm doing the accounts for her, but it's not easy to make ends meet."

As he walked, he found himself recalling with some distaste his own much applauded article "Why the Jews Are Our Misfortune." He had written it because that had been his job, and at the time he had believed every word of it, but now he

recalled his Jewish colleague, Bernie—what a decent guy Bernie had been! Ludwik felt ashamed of the way he'd argued with him; he hated Jews in general but had no problem with any of them in particular, and now he hated the Nazis more. But the article had said what his readers had wanted to hear, and many of them believed: that Poland's economic problems would be solved if the Jews somehow disappeared. Even now, when food was scarce and prices soaring and the German soldiers were unusually brutal, Ludwik thought that if the Jews were gone, perhaps his own lot under the occupiers would be better.

Still, as conditions for the Jews worsened and the Nazi stranglehold tightened, he and his wife, Jadwiga, wondered, when they thought about it at all, whether it was right to imprison all Jewish people from Warsaw and its environs behind those closely guarded walls in unsanitary, overcrowded conditions. How long were they to be kept there? What would be done with them? If they were released, though, they would come back into this part of the city and want their homes and property back . . . and what then?

Then just yesterday, he had come home to find his wife greatly distressed. She had told him something that he had dismissed as preposterous, a crazy rumor. She had said that Jews had already been taken in the hundreds, even thousands, into the forests further east, where they had been shot, yes, all of them. When they went

on the trains, they were not taken to work, as they had been told, but to their deaths.

"No!" Ludwik had protested vehemently. "That's a monstrous lie; there's no way that can be true." Images of Nazis shoving and beating Jews on the streets flooded him. Some probably deserved it, but all of them? Later he had asked more calmly, "How do you know?"

"Zusanna told me," Jadwiga had said.

"Zusanna? That pretty blonde girl who you told me is your best seamstress?"

"Blonde?" Jadwiga bit her lip; her eyes flickered away from her husband's face. When she looked back, her blue eyes were troubled but stern. "I bought the dye myself." She braced herself for an argument, but Ludwik was silent. Zusanna, a Jew?

"Zusanna told me that trains are already leaving the center of the ghetto for an unknown destination. They are cruelly overcrowded, but they come back empty. No one knows where they go, but no one who is taken returns. I don't know, Ludwik, but I think we need to help our fellow human beings in these terrible times, not condemn them to death. I employed Zusanna because I wanted to save her."

Ludwik turned away. He felt an unexpected surge of admiration for his wife's taking such a risk, but it was mixed with fear. He was the practical one, the one who knew better how to survive in the Warsaw he no longer recognized. "We're not condemning anyone to death except ourselves," Ludwik replied, his anger intensified by his anxiety. "You know the penalties for hiding a Jew. You're putting us both in danger!"

"Well, you needn't worry," Jadwiga responded. "Zusanna left yesterday. She said she could no longer hide as my worker, not knowing what was happening to her family. She wanted to go back to them, to be with them no matter what happens. At least they will be together."

Now the memory of that conversation chilled Ludwik. In spite of the heat, he realized that he was shivering. A new tremor gave him an uncomfortable feeling. *If it's true that they are taking people away and they don't return—and my wife wouldn't tell lies—should I do something to help? Maybe we could sneak some money into the ghetto . . . some food. . . . "Love your neighbor as yourself,"* the admonition came to him, unbidden. . . . Love

your neighbor.

Just then he heard the crack of a pistol shot and screams—children's screams. A child lay dead on the ground across the street. Others scattered in terror as a thug in uniform with a pistol in one hand grabbed a remaining boy by his ragged collar. Passersby moved hastily out of the way, eyes averted, but Ludwik, without thinking, went towards the boy. One old woman remained at the scene, ignored by the soldier; she stood still and crossed herself. Tears streamed down her wrinkled face. She turned her red-rimmed eyes towards Ludwik and sobbed as the Nazi laughed at the boy's futile kicking. The woman began to talk and Ludwik bent towards her to hear what she was saying.

"They crawl out through the holes in the wall like little kittens, all they want is food. They're starving but they never eat anything, they take it back to their families. I live close by. I come here most days to try to feed them a piece of bread. Oh no, oh no, look what the beast is doing now!"

The soldier held the boy above a closed manhole. The child kicked and struggled as the man pointed his pistol towards the metal cover and yelled at Ludwik. "*Aufmachen, aufmachen!*" "Open it, open it!"

"He'll throw the child into the sewer," the woman sobbed. "He's done it before. It saves a bullet."

Ludwik hesitated for five quick heartbeats, then patted his inner pocket and pulled out his cigarette case, stepping closer to the enemy. The silver case glinted in the sun. It had been a present from the staff of *The National Voice* with thanks for all those splendid articles. They had even inscribed the inner cover: "To Pan Ludwik, a true friend of the best national values."

Ludwik swallowed hard, tried to muster up some German. "*Bitte, mein Herr. . . .*" Oh, how it grated to speak like this to the enemy, and how frightened he was, but he had to swallow his fear for the sake of the child, swallow his fear and risk his own life. "*Bitte nehmen, Kind weglassen.*" "Please take . . . let the child go. . . . Please take this, and let the child go. Look, it's solid silver, worth a lot," he added, hoping against hope that the soldier's greed would triumph over his cruelty.

The soldier hesitated, holding the boy still as he looked at the silver case, and then released

the child, shoving him hard to the ground as he took the case and sauntered away, opening and closing it.

Tears rolled down the little boy's thin face, making lines in the dirt that crusted his skin. He was thin and ragged and looked six or seven but could have been older. Ludwik bent towards the boy. "Do you have family, a mother?"

"My mamele died," he spoke Polish with difficulty. "My little brother—shot!" he pointed to the dead child.

The old woman had come up to them now. "She just died two days ago," she said, and the child nodded.

Ludwik looked around anxiously. The soldier had disappeared and there were no grinning bystanders in sight, but one never knew what others might be lurking nearby. "We mustn't linger here, it's not safe. Will you take the child for now? There's an orphanage; I'll ask my wife to try to find a place for him there. Give me your address." She told him, and he pressed a bank note into her arthritic fingers. "Go quickly, perhaps we can arrange to bury the little dead one, too. Go."

He did not wait to see the woman wrap her shawl around the child's dark curls and lead him gently away, nor did he go to the coffee house, where his onetime colleague checked his watch with increasing anxiety. Instead, he hurried to the small workshop where Pani Jadwiga sat with her seamstresses amidst whirring machines.

She rose in alarm when she saw him and he drew her aside, away from her workers.

"We must talk," he told her. "I was sick. I have been ill since my youth with a terrible sickness. It's called Jew-hatred. But now I think am cured." Quickly he told her about the boy he had, for the moment, saved. "You must find a place for him in the orphanage. If there is no room, we must take him into our home. We must do *something*. We must save anyone we can, hide them and keep them safe. You were right, and I support you."

Jadwiga glanced behind her to be sure no one was able to hear them. Her face remained passive; only her eyes lit up with gratitude. "We will do what we must do. I have plenty of blonde dye left," she said, and allowed herself a small smile. Her mind raced as she considered possibilities. "We can sleep in the lounge and make room in our bedroom. We can remove boards

from the back of the wardrobe to make a hiding place. We have a coal cellar. We have a back exit that no one can see. . . ." Yes, together they could do something.

At home that evening, Ludwik confessed his dismissal of the Jews, his distaste, his lack of concern for their welfare. "But the murder of children . . ." He looked away, the image of the little, still body before him. "A terrible crime is being committed. I have been a sick man, my dearest, and I did not much care, but I am well now, so let us help our desperate neighbors. Although," he added with a smile, "I no longer have a silver cigarette case to offer as a bribe or to sell for food."

Ludwik and Jadwiga together sheltered and rescued many Jewish families, and it may be that later, after the war, one of his Jewish friends presented him with a new silver cigarette case with the inscription: "With thanks to Pan Ludwik, a true friend indeed."

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"It is indisputable," writes journalist Ron Hollander, "that news of the Holocaust was carried early, widely, and often prominently in American newspapers. Yet prominent as coverage could be, it is true that it was also frequently buried." Hollander's examination of news coverage during the years of the Holocaust serves as our introduction to the dichotomous theme of simultaneously knowing and not knowing about tragic world events, a phenomenon very much in evidence even today.

*Ron Hollander*

## America's Press Reports the Holocaust: What Did We Really Know?

### **WE KNEW.**

Despite self-protective myths to the contrary, the American newspaper-reading public during the Second World War knew early and in excruciatingly explicit detail of the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe.



**FIG. 1.** Franklin D. Roosevelt, ca. 1942. Courtesy of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

Not just in 1945, when we stumbled unpreparedly upon Dachau and Buchenwald while chasing the retreating Germans, but for at least the last three years of the war, while 3.5 million Jews were being murdered: we knew. Not merely did we know that the Jews of Europe were having a rough time or had been rounded up and sent to ghettos, or that tens or even hundreds of thousands had been shot, along with many others, by the indiscriminately brutal German occupiers, but we knew from at least 1942 on that the Germans were systematically murdering the Jews using gas chambers and crematoria, even to the point of being able to identify the main death camps by name.

Nor was it just Franklin Roosevelt [Fig. 1] and State Department officials with access to diplomatic cables who knew.

The American public could read in its morning and evening papers—and hear on its green-glowing console radios—that the Jews were being wiped out. Across the country, whether in cities with large Jewish populations or in rural areas, in accurate detail . . . we knew.

The myth that was fostered at the time and that we have nurtured in the intervening 70 years is that Americans, the ordinary woman and man on the street, first learned of the Final Solution in April and May 1945, when Fox Movietone newsreels showed the walking skeletons and the bodies stacked like cordwood.

"Nazi Bestiality Revealed" and "Nazi Murder Mills," intoned the narrators, who in fact were not even describing

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An earlier version of this essay was published in *Why Didn't the Press Shout? American and International Journalism During the Holocaust*, ed. Robert Moses Shapiro, 2003, Jersey City, NJ: Yeshiva University Press/KTAV.

the death camps of Poland but rather the less horrific concentration camps of Germany. Broadcasting for CBS from Buchenwald on April 15, 1945, in a report still anthologized today not only for the content of its supposedly newly shocking information but for the beauty of its language, Edward R. Murrow spoke as if he were breaking the news for the first time. "I pray you to believe what I have said about Buchenwald," Murrow begged his presumably skeptical audience. "Murder had been done at Buchenwald" (Bliss, 1967, p. 95).

Three days later, *New York Times* reporter Gene Curran wrote from the camp, "Not until today has the full impact of the atrocities been completely felt" (1945, p. 1). Supreme Allied Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower was so shocked by what he found in what several inmates described as the "best" concentration camp in Germany that he cabled home for senators, representatives, and newspaper publishers to come see what he had discovered.

On April 22, 1945, Representatives Gordon Canfield of New Jersey and Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington, among others, toured Buchenwald. Two days later, Kentucky Senator and future vice president Alben Barkley arrived. From all came stunned expressions of "we had no idea." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* four days later summed up this inexplicable shock with the headline "Nazi Horrors Too Awful For Belief" (Boyle, 1945, p. 10).

What else could America claim but that it knew only belatedly of the Holocaust? If we acknowledge even these many years later that we did know all along, then how can we explain our failure to do anything, to drop intentionally even one bomb on Auschwitz-Birkenau when we were repeatedly bombing factories, including the Buna artificial rubber plant only three miles away?<sup>1</sup>

The reality is that in October 1941, two months before Pearl Harbor, the story of the Germans' so-called resettlement of the Jews had been sent by the Associated Press to papers around the country. The *Times's* headline of October 28 said it straight out in all-capitals: "NAZIS SEEK TO RID EUROPE OF ALL JEWS." Though the *Times*, in a pattern that would plague it throughout the war and that continues to stain its legacy today, downplayed the story with a single-column headline on page 10, the wire service story was distributed throughout America.

If there was some ambiguity in the headline's use of the word *rid*—meaning that perhaps Germany merely wanted to relocate the Jews—such vagueness vanished by June 1942, as the mainstream press across the country printed stories, not infrequently on page 1, documenting the assembly-line murder of the Jews. Indicative of the national distribution of such stories, in Seattle—hardly a center of Judaism in 1942—a paper as regional as the *Seattle Daily Times* ran, on June 1, a bold, all-caps headline across the very top of page 1, above even the paper's name:

"JEWS SLAIN TOTAL 200,000!" Under the subhead, "MILLIONS DRIVEN TO GHETTOS," the United Press International wire service story read, "Adolf Hitler's agents, in the most terrible racial persecution in modern history, have killed at least 200,000 Jews in Russia, Poland, and the Baltic States." The article went on to remind readers that Hitler had prophesied to the Reichstag on January 30, 1939, in a speech still documented in newsreels ([www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1939-1941/hitler-speech-to-german-parliament](http://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1939-1941/hitler-speech-to-german-parliament)), that another world war would result in the destruction of the Jews, "and correspondents know that his agents have done everything possible to make the prophecy come true" (United Press, 1942, p. 1).

On the East Coast, the *Boston Daily Globe*, on June 26, 1942, ran a story by reporter Edward L. Deuss under a three-column headline making clear that the deaths were not random, but the implementation of a specific policy: "Mass Murders of Jews in Poland Pass 700,000 Mark; Many Made to Dig Own Grave" [Fig. 2]. Filing from London for the Overseas News Agency, Deuss wrote, "A systematic campaign for the extermination of the Jews in Poland has resulted in the murder of more than 700,000 in the past year" (p. 12).



**Mass Murders of Jews in Poland Pass  
700,000 Mark; Many Made to Dig Own Grave**

**FIG. 2.** *Boston Daily Globe*, June 26, 1942. Courtesy of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

Four days later, on June 30, the United Press International upped the death toll to 1,000,000. True to form, the *Times* buried the story on page 7, again under a modest headline, "Nazi Toll of Jews Set at One Million," but the story also appeared in papers throughout the country. The United Press International reported, "The Germans have massacred more than 1,000,000 Jews since the war began in carrying out Adolf Hitler's proclaimed policy of exterminating the people." In an early reference to the death camps, the story continued, "The Nazis had established a 'vast slaughterhouse' for Jews in Eastern Europe," and stated that about one sixth of the pre-war European Jewish population of 6,000,000–7,000,000 "had been wiped out in less than three years" (1942, p. 7).

On the West Coast, the *San Francisco Chronicle's* version of the UPI story, appearing on page 2 the same day, added, "The slaughter is part of the Nazis' policy that 'physical extermination of the Jew must from now on be the aim of Germany and her allies.'" The *Philadelphia Inquirer* increased the toll in its page 3 headline: "1,125,000 Jews Slain by Nazis During War, Spokesman Says."

### MAKING IT EASY NOT TO KNOW

It is indisputable that news of the Holocaust was carried early, widely, and often prominently in American newspapers. Yet prominent as coverage could be, it is true that it was also frequently buried. The discrepancy between the enormity of the news—more than 1 million slaughtered—and the play that the *Times* gave its six-paragraph story on page 7 under a small, one-column headline embodies in microcosm the American press's schizophrenic coverage of the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> The news was there, but not always prominently displayed. The stories, while covered, often were minimized for many reasons, as Deborah Lipstadt (1986) argues in her seminal *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933–1945*. The Final Solution was carried out in secret, deep in German-held Poland, far from the eyes of Western war correspondents. The press had to rely on sources that were not fully verifiable, such as the Polish underground or even escapees from the camps, who were often skeptically regarded as exaggerating their stories to make the plight of the Jews seem worse. For news of the war against the Axis, journalists could use their eyes. For news of “the war against the Jews,” in historian Lucy Dawidowicz’s (1975) scathingly accurate phrase, journalists had to rely on second-hand, possibly suspect sources.

This skepticism was fueled by the absence of any historical precedent. Even such genocides as the Turks’ of the Armenians, or America’s of the Native Americans, were driven by national identity and the desire for land or possessions, not the intentional, continent-wide total extermination of a people. This made the news hard to accept for editors and readers alike. Even Jewish advocates struggled to digest the facts. When the heroic Polish courier Jan Karski told Jewish Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter in August 1943 that Europe’s Jews were being systematically slaughtered, Frankfurter said he couldn’t believe him. Please, Mr. Justice, Karski begged, what I’m telling you is the truth. Replied Frankfurter, I didn’t say I *didn’t* believe you; I said I *couldn’t* (Laqueur, 1980, p. 3).<sup>3</sup>

### UNBELIEVABLE

The utter annihilation of a people seemed especially illogical and thus unbelievable because in wartime a nation needs all the labor it can get. Why would the Germans murder skilled workers? Why would they expend so many men and so much material to do it while fighting a two-front war? This skepticism was shared even by many Jews in the ghettos, who rejected as lunacy tales brought them by escapees from the camps that the trains to the East were not resettlement trains but death trains. If those who were barely subsisting under the Germans, in daily contact with their homicidal brutality, found hard to accept what we now know was a holocaust, how much harder for

Americans an ocean away in their fortified country? Some assumed that Germany would not take so many resources from the war to kill the Jews, a choice made by the Reich that many find difficult to understand even today. Yet for Germany there were two wars, and the ideological, racial one perhaps took precedence over and even drove the territorial one. Many survivors have described their trains bound for the death camps steaming through on the main line while trains of flat cars loaded with tanks and artillery waited their turn on sidings (Grynwald, personal communication, 2015).

Also an old story by the 1940s were atrocities against the Jews, and some editors were suffering from atrocity overload due to the war. Papers of the 30s had consistently covered the Nazis’ antisemitic acts, culminating in *Kristallnacht*, which was the front-page, lead story in virtually every paper in the country on November 11, 1938, including many editorials condemning the violent pogroms (something woefully absent from coverage of the Holocaust in the 40s). Even in the 30s, however, through the progression of the Nuremberg Laws and beyond, the press was growing jaded, and *Time* magazine, on September 18, 1939, referred cynically and cruelly to the “‘atrocities’ story of the week” (“Europe,” p. 59).

The press also was wary of being suckered during World War II by tales of German atrocities as it had been during the First World War. In that time of the birth of modern propaganda, the papers were full of stories of Germans raping Belgian nuns, chaining them to machine guns, and bayoneting babies (Lipstadt, 1986, p. 9). Most of them proved false, and when the press started hearing even more bizarre reports from the shrouded Eastern Front, it was wary and hedged its bets, carrying the stories but often downplaying them or distancing the paper from them with phrases such as “reports have reached us,” or being sure to attribute them to “spokesmen” (p. 139). However, the inescapable truth is that erratic and deemphasized as coverage may have been on occasion, it was there in overwhelming and compelling detail.

### KNOWING WAS POSSIBLE

As early as June 26, 1942, the *Chicago Daily News* Foreign Service sent a story from London that its subscriber newspapers across the country carried in which correspondent David M. Nichol wrote, “Polish sources . . . held successive press conferences in Washington and New York, confirming further details that had been smuggled out of Germany and Poland.” Combined with similar information released at the same time by the Polish government-in-exile in London, the news was published nationwide.

If there was little reason by mid-1942 for readers to doubt that the Jews were being murdered in great numbers, there was even less excuse after November and December.

Until then, some skeptics could make the claim, however feeble, that the news did not originate with “official” sources, that it came from advocates for the Jews, that it lacked the gold-standard imprimatur of government agencies. In those two months, however, the news of the Final Solution was not only carried throughout America but was also confirmed by the State Department.

The *Washington Post* ran the Associated Press story on November 25 on page 6: “2 Million Jews Slain, Rabbi Wise Asserts.” The story reported that “Wise . . . said that he had learned through sources confirmed by the State Department [emphasis added] that approximately half the estimated four million Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe had been slain in an ‘extermination campaign.’” An accompanying article, headlined “Half of Jews Ordered Slain, Poles Report,” described the Jews being jammed into freight cars: “The people are packed so tightly that those who die of suffocation remain in the crowd side by side with those still living. Those surviving are sent to special camps at Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor. Once there, they are mass-murdered” (Associated Press, 1942, p. 6).

The *New York Herald Tribune* (November 25, 1942) ran the story on the front page with a two-column headline: “Wise Says Hitler Has [sic] Ordered 4,000,000 Jews Slain in 1942.” Moving west, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* put the story at the top of page 1B, the beginning of the separate, second section: “Nazis Accused of Plan to Kill 4 Million Jews.” In Colorado, the *Denver Post* eschewed the numbers game and simply wrote, “DEATH FOR EVERY JEW IN EUROPE IS CALLED NAZI GOAL” (Associated Press, p. 25) [Fig. 3].

On the same day, the *Times*—besides carrying the Wise information—reported in a story headlined “Details Reaching Palestine” that “concrete buildings on the former Russian frontiers are used by the Germans as gas chambers in which thousands of Jews have been put to death.” The story detailed “methods by which the Germans in Poland are carrying out the slaughter of Jews,” with “trainloads of adults and children taken to great crematoriums at Oswiecim near Krakow” (“Details,” 1942, p. 10). Oswiecim, a half-hour from Krakow, was, of course, Auschwitz, so named by the Germans.

### OFFICIAL KNOWLEDGE

At long last, the Holocaust was condemned officially by the Allies in an unequivocal declaration.<sup>4</sup> Issued by the United States, England, the Soviet Union, and the governments-in-exile of eight occupied countries, the declaration confirmed explicitly Germany’s “intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe” and decried “this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination” (“11 Allies,” 1942, p. 1). It was so unambiguous that even the *Times* felt compelled to carry it on page 1, albeit at the bottom of the page, below the fold: “11 Allies Condemn Nazi War on Jews.” The item

was on page 3 in the *San Francisco Examiner*, page 4 in the *Los Angeles Times*, page 2 in the *Atlanta Constitution*, and page 10 in the *Washington Post*. Other major papers carrying the declaration included the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the *Los Angeles Examiner*, and the *New York World Telegram*.

More stories followed. On December 20, the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* ran a story headed “Charge[:] Germans Make Poland a Jewish Abattoir,” with the subhead “Shootings, Electrocutings, Gas Killings Told.”



FIG. 3. *Denver Post*, November 25, 1942. Courtesy of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

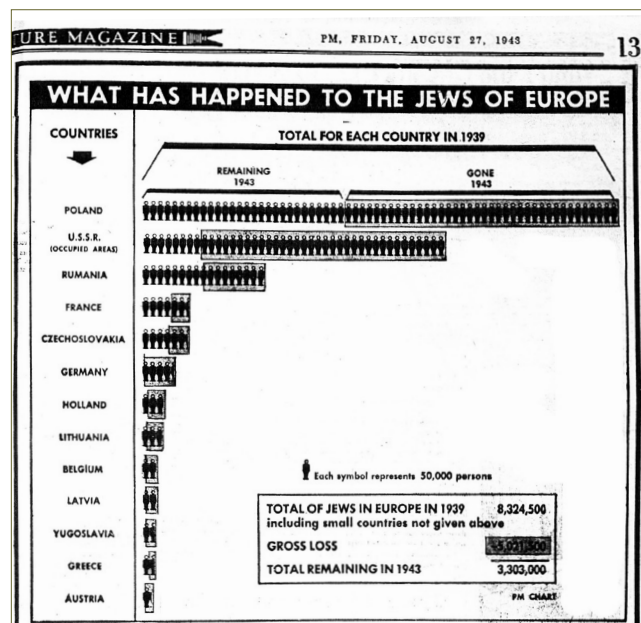


FIG. 4. *PM*, August 27, 1943. Courtesy of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

# Polish Document Shows Nazi Policy of Eradicating Jews

WASHINGTON, April 25 (AP)—From the Polish Underground has come a grim document purporting to show how the Nazi extermination policy has reduced Poland's prewar Jewish population from 3,500,000 to barely 50,000.

Contents of the report were made public by John W. Pehle, Executive Director of the War Refugee Board. It was written shortly after a series of "liquidations" last November.

In releasing the report, Mr. Pehle asserted that the work of the WRB should not be regarded merely as a humanitarian enterprise. The public generally, he says, "does not realize to what extent such peoples as the persecuted Jews of Poland have taken up arms against the Nazis."

"Just as we have given aid to our other Allies by Lend-Lease, he says, "it is incumbent upon us to help these people by the activities of the War Refugee Board."

### Underground Report

The Underground report — all details concerning it are a closely guarded secret—said:

"Last month (October) we estimated that there were only between 250,000 and 300,000 Jews left in Poland. It is our opinion that in a few weeks there will only remain about 50,000.

"We want all Jews, and the world at large, to know that our youth nobly defended the life and honor of its people. Since the heroic epic of the Warsaw ghetto we have in recent months written the grand and glorious chapter of the Jews of Bialystok.

"On the 17th of August there began the liquidation of the only large ghetto in the east of Poland, in Bialystok, where there were approximately 40,000 Jews. During the first three days of this action seven transports of victims were taken to the "death camp" at Treblinka. In addition, a passenger train, filled with children, left Bialystok. There were two Jewish nurses in each car.

"It is the general conviction that, before going to their deaths, these children were to furnish their blood for wounded German soldiers.

### Jews Fight Back

"On the fourth day of the action the fight began. Bloody combats took place in a number of streets. Just as in Warsaw, the Germans entered the ghetto in armored trucks and equipped with field artillery. They brought along about 1,000 gendarmes and SS

men and a number of Ukrainian detachments.

"The Jews retaliated mostly with grenades and incendiary bombs; they also had a few machine guns. They fought with frantic determination which aroused the admiration of the population of the city and the district. Several hundred Germans and Ukrainians fell or were wounded.

"In order to crush the uprising the Germans did what they had done in Warsaw—they set the ghetto afire. . . ."

While the Germans still were trying to put down the Bialystok uprising, the report continued, "the final liquidation of the ghetto of Tarnow took place" in early September.

"All the children were concentrated in one building," the story said. "They were told that they were to be taken away to a nursery. The building was then hermetically seal and blasted into the air."

### Children Shot

Two months later, "on Wednesday, Nov. 3, at 6 a. m., all the men in Trawniki (concentration camp) were called out for the alleged purpose of digging air-shelter trenches. After two hours they were encircled with machine guns and all of them, without exception, were shot down. In the meantime 50 trucks drove into camp. All the remaining women and children were loaded on them and taken to an extermination point where they were forced to strip off their clothing and were then machine-gunned in the same fashion as the men. After this massacre 3,000 Italian Jews were brought to this camp and the same fate awaits them."

Mr. Pehle, directing head of the Refugee Board composed of Secretaries Cordell Hull, Henry Morgenthau, and Henry L. Stimson, quoted a recent report from the WRB's special representative in Turkey, Ira A. Hirschmann.

"I am sure," it said, "you will be gratified to learn that although still on the threshold, the work of the War Refugee Board has injected new life and hope into thousands of downtrodden, tormented refugees throughout the European continent. . . . The first Jewish refugees of Turkish origin just arrived from France said to me feelingly, 'for two years there has been only one phrase on everyone's lips, "when are the Americans coming?"'"

FIG. 5. *Christian Science Monitor*, April 25, 1944. Courtesy of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

In January 1943, a Gallup poll asked whether it was true that 2 million Jews already had been murdered. With two years' worth of news reports still to come, almost half of those polled said it was true. The others said they didn't know, or that the report was just a rumor. On August 27, 1943, a graph was published by *PM* that explained "What Has Happened to the Jews of Europe," showing that 5 million had already been murdered (p. 13) [Fig. 4].

2
THE JEWISH STANDARD
Friday, June 9, 1944

## EYE-WITNESS REPORT FROM OSWIECIM

**GRUESOME DETAILS OF HORRORS**  
Shooting of Helpless Prisoners a Favourite Pastime

The number of Jewish and other victims tortured to death or exterminated in gas chambers in the notorious camp of Oswiecim and the neighbouring Birkenau up to the first half of 1942 was estimated by the Germans themselves at several hundred thousand, it was revealed in London by the first eye-witness to reach this country from Oswiecim. Some observers, he said, put the figure as high as 800,000.

laced people and expectant mothers, indeed for all those not considered fit for the heavy work the members of the labour gangs were forced to do. On the way to the gas chambers the victims were escorted by strong S.S. detachments. "Almost every day," the informant said, "we could see from Oswiecim the smoke rising from the pyres in Birkenau on which the bodies of people killed in the gas chambers were burnt. Members of labour gangs unable to stand the strain of heavy work were constantly selected for execution in the gas chambers."

**Experts in Torture**  
An appeal to Great Britain to keep her hands off the Jews by establishing a Jewish National Home in Palestine was made by Mr. William Green, President of the American Federation of Labour, addressing the convention of the International Garment Workers' Union in Boston. Green strongly condemned the White Paper policy and declared the "American Labour Movement" embittered and disappointed at English treatment of the Palestine problem. "Our hearts bleed when we read of the atrocities committed by the Nazis against the Jews, and we consider the closing of the doors of Palestine as a great crime. He added that "at the peace conference

**Terrible Experiences** | railway station. Almost day by day | association of Jews. From all parts of

FIG. 6. *London Jewish Standard*, June 9, 1944. Courtesy of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

A year later, on April 25, 1944, the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote an article headlined "Polish Document Shows Nazi Policy of Eradicating Jews" (p. 11) [Fig. 5].

On June 9 of that year, the *London Jewish Standard* noted "Gruesome Details of Horrors" in an article titled "Eye-Witness Report From Oswiecim" (p. 2) [Fig. 6].

Yet on December 3, 1944, the *Washington Post* carried a story headlined "Gallup Finds Mass Murders Underestimated," which said that 76% of Americans believed that "many people" had been murdered in German concentration camps.

### WHY BURY THIS STORY?

Newspaper readers of the time recalled the clarity of the reports even decades later. Vito Farese, a camp liberator and the father of one of my students in Short Hills, New Jersey, said, "The news was there for all to see." Of the Holocaust, Farese said, "People would have to have been pretty oblivious not to know that extermination was being committed. If they didn't know, it was because people just turned their backs" (personal communication, 2016).

With historical hindsight, we ask in disbelief how the press could have run a story that 1.1 million Jews had been liquidated, and then placed it deep within the papers' pages. How could it not be the lead story on page 1? For us, teachers and students of the Holocaust, for whom the murder of 6 million Jews may be the central historical fact of our lifetimes, the decision of the press—even with the foregoing caveats—is inconceivable and smacks of anti-semitism. Yet the Holocaust was hardly the only major story of the day. In the phrase of the period, "Hey, buddy, there's a war on." Strictly military news took precedence. Editors and readers followed correspondents' eye-witness accounts of the progress of armies and the outcomes of battles, not often-murky reports of civilian deaths in bizarre circumstances. That war of territory and dominance, involving the entire world and virtually every person on the planet, directly or indirectly, was justifiably the main news of the day.

Further, the Holocaust was without precedent. The numbers were "beyond belief" (Lipstadt, 1986, title). Who could believe that the nation that had produced Schiller and Goethe was gassing even 2 million Jews? Antisemitism,



too, played its inevitable role. In June 1944, a poll by the Opinion Research Corporation of a scientific sampling of 2,296 Americans asked which groups constituted the greatest “threat” to America (Stember, 1966, p. 128). With the war in the Pacific having more than a bloody year still to run, with Americans fighting the Germans in Normandy, and with more than 4.5 million Jews already dead, 24% of those queried said that the greatest threat to America was posed by the Jews!<sup>5</sup>

### NOT WANTING TO KNOW

That the destruction of Europe's Jews was reported in detail long before 1945 is incontrovertible. That many learned the news and consciously or not chose to reject it is also true. In the years following, journalists, no less than ordinary citizens, suffered temporary amnesia when it came to what became known as the Holocaust. Perhaps the moral consequences of having known and done nothing were too great to integrate into the American self-image.

Yet that is the irrefutable, disquieting legacy bequeathed us by America's yellowing, crumbling newspapers of more than 70 years ago. They constitute an indictment not merely of official American foreign policy but also of mass American moral will to speak up and to act. The more the horrors were confirmed, the more became our reflex to claim, “We didn't know; our hands are clean.” It is not so simple, though, to rewrite history, especially when the papers are there to rebuke us. This is the unwanted bequest of the past. We would do well to be guided by it as we survey the world today.

*With the research assistance of Kristin Cancellieri*

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### END NOTES

- [1] As aerial reconnaissance photos show, U.S. bombers flew directly over Birkenau, and in at least one case released bombs over the death factory . . . but by mistake! When I teach my university course on press coverage of the Holocaust, this is the most troubling issue for my students: the fact that their country, their beloved America, knew—and did nothing. They are ashamed and mortified.
- [2] The *Times's* downplaying of the Holocaust was also a special case, as the Jewish-owned paper was paranoid about appearing “too Jewish.” In fact, the *New York Herald Tribune*, a Republican, Protestant-establishment paper, ironically always ran a given story about the Holocaust more prominently than did the *Times*.
- [3] There are several versions of the exact exchange. The most common is that Frankfurter, after hearing the news, says to the Polish ambassador, “I did not say this young man is lying. I said I am unable to believe him. There is a difference.”
- [4] In lieu of concrete action, however, the declaration pledged feebly that those responsible would be punished at the war's end. This would become a tragically familiar pattern of lip service.
- [5] Five percent of those polled said Catholics posed the greatest threat. Six percent named the Germans. Nine percent said it was the Japanese. Eleven percent identified the “Negroes.”

Survivor Gerda Krebs Seifer shares these memories of her years in hiding, when she usually knew nothing of what was happening to her family. She writes, "I desperately wanted to know what happened to my parents, but the knowledge almost destroyed me." Now, though, she is a Holocaust educator and, she explains, for over 40 years "it's been my mission to make sure everyone knows" about the events of the Holocaust and the people who endured it.

*Gerda Krebs Seifer*

## Not Knowing, and Then Knowing: The Summer of 1942 and the Aftermath

I live in the third-largest city in Poland, Lvov. The Jews of Lvov and of all the surrounding villages are in the ghetto. My father, who works at a safe job on the "outside," brings us news: There is going to be a large-scale *akcja*. All people with no jobs are going to be resettled where jobs are waiting. It sounds as if it is good news, and we want to believe it, but we are frightened. We know what that really means, even though we don't know the facts and we don't want to believe the rumors. We have heard about concentration camps, and we have heard all kinds of horror stories about what is happening to Jews who go on the trains, but we still don't want to believe them. Nevertheless, we just know: An *akcja* is bad.

My father whispers to me to pack a few pieces of clothing because I am going into hiding. There is no time for questions or discussions; I have to obey. On my way out of our room, I hug and kiss my beloved mother and ask her to promise me that she will also go into hiding. Richard, my cousin, whose mother disappeared while queuing in a breadline before we moved into the ghetto, is also going into hiding, although not with me. Richard is a couple of years younger than I am and he has become a precious part of our family.

A Polish woman, our ex-neighbor, is waiting for us outside the ghetto gate. She's agreed to hide me in her cellar—for a price. Evidently, the payment she is getting from my father is worth the risk.

We walk at a good pace to the section of the city where she lives and where we used to live before we were forced out of our home and into the ghetto. We don't talk, just walk side by side. It is very dangerous to help or hide Jews. The Poles are threatened with death by hanging—their own and that of their families—if they are found to have

helped Jews. Yet this woman is fairly certain that she won't be discovered hiding a young Jewish girl. I don't look Jewish. I have no typical Semitic features, and I speak perfect Polish, so I don't look or act suspicious.

After we arrive in her apartment, she takes me down to her cellar and gives me a wooden box to sit on. She hands me a candle and matches and tells me to use them only in an emergency. Otherwise, I must remain in darkness. The cubicles adjoining my cellar belong to the occupants of other apartments in the building, and they must not find out I am there. If they hear anything, they may become suspicious that a Jew is hiding in that cellar. She leaves a jug of water and a chamber pot and, after giving me all the instructions about staying silent, she leaves me, promising to see me in the morning and bring some food.

Imagine yourself at not quite 14, sitting in darkness, in a 4-by-6-ft. section of a cellar. It is pitch black there; it smells of dampness; the floor is just soil. There are a few wooden shelves for storage of canned fruit and vegetables, but they are empty. Above, just below the low ceiling, there's a small window with a metal cover, used in the fall for pouring coal or wood directly into the cellar from the street.

I remain there, alone. There is nothing for me to do. The metal window cover lets in a sliver of light during the day, and I can hear noises of marching boots and some voices of pedestrians walking on the street. I can't see them; I can't make any noise; I can't read or write, because there is not enough light and I have no books or pencil or paper anyway. What I can do is sit on my wooden box and think. I am nervous and worried about my mother and Richard. I wonder whether they are hidden, as I am. What's happening in the ghetto? How is the *akcja* progressing?



**FIG. 1.** Gerda's mother (far right) and Gerda on vacation in a mountain resort area called Szczawnica, ca. 1936. Courtesy of Gerda Seifer.

I shiver when I think of what is happening there. I don't know, but I can imagine.

Then lighter thoughts come to mind, and to pass the time, I think about the wonderful dishes and tortes my mother used to make before the war. I can smell newly harvested potatoes cooked in butter and fresh dill. I remember our luscious berries with sugar and sour cream, berries picked fresh in the forest; I can almost taste their sweetness. I think of my favorite desserts my mother would bake for my birthday, a napoleon or a walnut torte with layers of coffee crème between thin layers of walnut pastry. I think of my school, called a *gimnazjum*, of my friends, my teachers, and what I learned there. I think of our wonderful, carefree vacations in the Carpathian Mountains, skiing in wintertime with Mamusia (Mommy) in Sanki and Zakopane [Fig. 1].

I remember the High Holidays, with relatives sitting at our long table, eating chicken soup with matzo balls as light as air, my mother's famous gefilte fish, and all the other gourmet dishes she would make—so many wonderful memories and experiences all crowded into this dark little cellar. If only I knew when I could return to that life!

Oh, how I would love to be out, to run and skip on some grassy field, feeling blades of grass between my toes, sun caressing my shoulders and the breeze rustling my hair! Is that what freedom is? Is that what I took for granted, only to realize now that I no longer am free? Such a simple wish, yet completely forbidden. Hours seem to last forever. I feel as if I am suspended between the danger on the out-

side and the darkness and fear in the damp cellar. How long will this go on? I don't know how much longer I can stay, how much longer I can keep still and quiet in this pitch black, smelly cubicle. Not hearing any news of my family, not knowing, makes my isolation more frustrating, and my despair grows from moment to moment.

One morning I decide to leave my hiding place. I know it is dangerous, but I feel I have no choice—I can't take the isolation, the silence, the not knowing any longer. I tiptoe to the cellar gate and open it quietly, walk gingerly up to the ground floor, and then I am out on the street. The sun is shining, the sky is oh, so blue, and I blink my eyes, not used to the brilliant light. The street is quiet and empty; no one is at the window watching for any activity, and I just stand in the middle of the road, unable to move and not knowing what I should do. What was I thinking? Where would I go?

The only person who looks through the window at that moment is the woman who has hidden me in her cellar. She lives on the ground floor and just happened to glance out at the street before going on with her chores. She sees me standing in the middle of the street looking stupefied. I am wondering to myself, is this the end?

The woman runs out of the building, checks to make sure no one sees her, grabs me by my arm, and drags me inside the building.

"Are you crazy?" she hisses at me. "Do you want us both to die?"

All I can say is, "I don't care, I don't care, I can't take

it anymore!" She takes me into her kitchen, makes me a cup of ersatz tea, and convinces me to go back downstairs to the cellar.

### WHERE IS MOMMY?

I spent six long, frightening weeks in that cellar, hearing nothing from my family, knowing nothing more than I knew on that first day. One day, though, the woman came to tell me that my father had sent for me. The *akcja* was over and it was safe for me to return to the ghetto.

My knees were buckling under me while we walked toward the ghetto. I wanted to know everything that had happened. I kept asking the woman how my mother was and she kept telling me that she was fine, but somehow she was not convincing. Something inside me felt cold; I felt as if a brick of ice were lying in the pit of my stomach.

Finally, I saw my father and ran to him, leaving the woman with only a quick "thank you!" My first and only thought was for my mother: Where was she? My father put his arms around me and gently sat me down. The brick of ice spread to my chest. He had sent my cousin, Richard, into hiding as he had sent me, he began to explain, but Richard had been afraid to stay in his hiding place and had fled back to the ghetto. My mother could not take him with her to her haven, so she sacrificed her safety to remain with Richard in the ghetto. As the Nazis came, my father first tried to bribe them. When they refused, he had to stand by helplessly as my mother and Richard were taken and sent in cattle cars with thousands of other Jews to Belzec, an extermination camp. "I would have gone with them," my father told me, "but I could not leave you alone."

Now I knew, and it was the worst day of my life. The shock and the knowledge were unbearable; I froze completely and shut down. From the moment I learned about my mother's death, I retained no memory of anything that happened to me. To this day, I have no recollection of events

while I remained in the ghetto: Those next eight or so weeks are a complete blank.

My father was desperately worried that I would not survive; he tried to get me out of the ghetto to save my life. Eventually, he did. He arranged for me to hide again, this time in the open. He found a Catholic woman with four children. The family was starv-



**FIG. 2.** The photo Gerda used for her ID when she assumed the false identity of a Catholic girl, 1943. Courtesy of Gerda Seifer.

ing, and my father offered to pay the woman for keeping me, so she agreed to take me in. As before, it helped that I didn't look Jewish and spoke perfect, unaccented Polish. I began a new life with false papers as "Alicja" [Fig. 2], taking the name and identity of the woman's illegitimate daughter, who had died.

Sometime in early 1943, my father sent for me and we met in secret. He had been working in a factory making textiles for soldiers' uniforms. He had heard that the ghetto would soon be liquidated and he saw the end coming. He told me he had secured for himself very legitimate-looking false papers, and he planned to go to Germany as a *Volksdeutsche*, a term used for a person of German descent. He felt that it would be easier to survive on false papers in Germany than in Poland. He spoke fluent German and, like me, had blue eyes and fair hair and didn't look Jewish.

He told me he had secured a secret room on the outside, in Lvov, and paid for the rental, although he returned to the ghetto each day after work. When the right time came, he planned to go to his secret room and stay there until the situation had stabilized enough for him to escape. Then he would go to the railroad station, armed with his papers, dressed in lederhosen and a Tyrolean hat, and make his way to Germany.

"I will not write to you," he said, explaining that it would be too dangerous for me to receive mail from Germany. Once again, I would not know where or how he was.

"Be a good and brave girl," he told me, "and we'll meet again after the war."

He took out a tiny white pill hidden in his belt buckle. He told me it was cyanide, the fastest-acting poison, and said to me, "I will not let the Nazis torture or kill me. I will take this pill."

I did not know then, but those were the last words my father was to say to me.

I remained in hiding with the Polish family until the end of the war. In the summer of 1945, my need to know the fate of my father, our store [Fig. 3, p. 16], and our possessions drew me to my childhood home in Przemysl to see whether I could find anyone who knew him and to search for any items or documents that my parents might have hidden.

I was standing in the middle of a busy marketplace when a young man came up to me and asked whether I was Gerda Krebs. I didn't recognize him, but he knew me, and he told me that he was aware of what had happened to my father. He asked me whether I wanted to know.

I was in shock. "Yes," I said, "I want to know."

He told me about my father's secret room, which confirmed to me that he was telling the truth. He said that as my father was preparing to leave the ghetto, some men approached him and asked whether he would take them with him, to save their lives. My father, someone who always tried to help and to do the right thing, agreed, and



**FIG. 3.** Gerda's paternal grandfather's textile store, located on Franciszkanska Street in Przemysl, ca. 1918. Courtesy of Gerda Seifer.



took them into his room. Because my father was the only one of the group who did not look Jewish, this young man went on, he was the one who had to go out and get food for them all. That is when someone on the street recognized him as a Jew and pointed the finger at him.

Listening to this, I was in such a state of shock that I didn't ask the young man his name or how he got this information. He left, and I never saw him again. I still did not—and do not even now—know what happened to my daddy, or how, where, or when he died.

At that time, everyone wanted to know who among his family had survived. They turned to the Red Cross to find out. That is how I learned that out of some 40 of our close family members, only two remained: a cousin, Zygmunt, and I [Fig. 4].

I had desperately wanted to know what had happened to my parents, but the knowledge almost destroyed me.

**FIG. 4.** Gerda and her mother with her cousin Zygmunt, the only other family member who survived. Courtesy of Gerda Seifer.

Historian Rafael Medoff asks, “Why didn’t American Jews protest the refusal of the US to bomb Auschwitz?” Many knew both about the slaughter of the Jews in Europe and that the railroad tracks could have been bombed but were not. Was this yet another example of people being unable to know in a way that made them able to act? Read with the Hollander essay, pp. 7–12.

*Rafael Medoff*

## When Knowledge Did Not Lead to Action: American Jews and the Refusal of the US to Bomb Auschwitz

The failure of American Jews to organize protests demanding the bombing of Auschwitz has been cited in many post-war discussions concerning US Jewish responses to the Holocaust. This question was raised even at the time; an editorial circulated by the Independent Jewish Press Service (IJPS) on July 7, 1944, asked:

Hungarian Jewry is facing extermination: Trains, with Jews suffocating in sealed cattle cars, are speeding across the Polish border. . . . By the time liberation comes, there may be few Jews to welcome it in Europe. And yet what are we US Jews doing to arouse public opinion? . . . [Our] protests should not merely register expressions of compassion . . . but demands for vengeance now—to be wreaked in terms of explosive tonnage upon the cities from which the Jews are deported to their death and upon the camps where death is meted out to the Jews. . . . We have done nothing of the kind. . . . The sun rises, the sun sets—but the executioner does not nod and does not sleep. We do. Our awakening may be an unhappy one. (IJPS, July 7, 1944, p. 1-A)

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1944, American Jewish leaders and organizations repeatedly asked the Roosevelt administration, in private, to bomb Auschwitz or the railway lines leading to it. All such requests were denied. Yet there were no public protests by American Jews in response to those rejections. Was the Jewish community at large aware of the possibility of bombing the death camps? If so, why was there no organized outcry over the administration’s position?

### FIRST CALLS FOR BOMBING

The definitive analysis of the Roosevelt administration’s position on bombing Auschwitz was a lengthy essay in *Commentary* in May 1978 by David S. Wyman, which was later expanded in his best-selling 1984 book, *The Abandonment of the Jews*. Wyman found that the administration knew what was happening at Auschwitz in time to do something about it; that by the spring of 1944, American planes were within close striking distance of the death camp when they repeatedly bombed military targets adjacent to the camp; and that administration officials used specious and disingenuous arguments to rebuff bombing requests (Wyman, 1984, pp. 37–46).

Subsequent research by other scholars has demonstrated that several senior members of Roosevelt’s cabinet were approached by bombing advocates (although there is no evidence President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself was part of the discussions) and that many more officials of Jewish organizations submitted bombing requests than Wyman initially realized, but no evidence has ever emerged to challenge Wyman’s essential findings regarding the opportunities for bombing and the administration’s refusal to do it.

The bombing question first arose in the spring of 1944, against the backdrop of the German occupation of Hungary. Unlike earlier phases of the Holocaust, the destruction of Hungarian Jewry took place in full view of the international community. Just as the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz was getting underway, in May 1944, the *New York Times* reported that the Germans had prepared “huge gas chambers in which one million Hungarian Jews are to be exterminated in the same fashion

as were the Jews of Poland” (Levy, 1944, p. 5). At the same time, the Allies had finally reached the point of dominating the skies of Europe, meaning that the notion of using American military power to interrupt the mass murder process was at least conceivable.

As a result, even before the idea of bombing Auschwitz began to circulate, there were scattered calls in the American Jewish press for US military strikes against the Nazis as retaliation for deportation of the Jews to the death camps. A May 19, 1944, editorial in *Congress Weekly*, the official journal of the American Jewish Congress, pleaded: “Thousands of Allied planes swarm through the European skies every day. . . . A fleet of Allied planes, raining down the warnings against this inhuman crime together with the more eloquent bombs, may save those lives” (pp. 3–4). A similar appeal was published in an American Orthodox magazine, *The Jewish Forum*:

For the sake of saving many thousands of Jews among other vassals of Hitler, Hungary must be taught a lesson similar to that of Berlin. Air squadrons must be sent to Budapest until it is wiped off the face of the earth. (Rosengarten, 1944, p. 2)

The same argument was made in several editorials circulated by the IJPS that spring and summer. One urged the Allies to use both “diplomacy and bombings” to pressure the Hungarians. “Bomb ruthlessly the cities from which Jews are deported, so it becomes a matter of personal security for the enemy to have the Jews remain,” the IJPS implored. “Follow this up with a warning that the bombings will continue until the Jews are permitted to depart for neutral lands” (IJPS, July 28, 1944, p. 3-A).

A contrary view was offered by G. George Fox, a Reform rabbi and columnist for the Chicago Jewish weekly *The Sentinel*. He chided “our more emotional Jewish editors who are demanding that the government of our country strafe the Hungarians for their brutal treatment of our people.” Fox wrote that he

would not agree with any action in this war, which would select any special group to be avenged. . . . Let us face this situation as a part of the American Allies, and do all that we can, rather than as a particular group, whether religious, national, or ethnic. (Fox, 1944, p. 3)

to calling for bombing the death camps began in May 1944, when two escapees from Auschwitz provided Slovakian Jewish refugee activists with details of the Auschwitz mass murder process, including maps showing the location of the gas chambers and crematoria. This resulted in the first proposals, made by European Jewish activists to US diplomats in Switzerland, for the bombing of Auschwitz and the railways leading to it. Coincidentally, during the preceding weeks, Allied planes had begun carrying out photo reconnaissance missions in the area around Auschwitz in preparation for attacking oil factories and other industrial sites that were part of the Auschwitz complex [Fig. 1]. This meant that bombing Auschwitz was, for the first time, militarily feasible and would not require diverting planes that were engaged in operations elsewhere.

In early June, members of the Jewish Agency Executive, in Palestine, took up the issue. Mistakenly believing that Auschwitz was only “a large labor camp” (Medoff, 2013, p. 173), they initially decided to refrain from asking the Allies to bomb it. Some two weeks later, however, the



**FIG. 1.** Aerial surveillance imagery of Auschwitz, 1944. Courtesy of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

### THE ESCAPEES' REPORT: THEY KNEW

The shift from calling for retaliatory bombings

Agency leaders received the aforementioned Auschwitz escapees' report and reversed their stance. In the months to follow, agency representatives in Palestine, Egypt, Turkey, Hungary, Switzerland, the United States, and England (including agency president Chaim Weizmann) met with Allied diplomats to urge them to bomb the camp or the railways (Jewish Agency, 1944, pp. 4–7).<sup>1</sup>

The first bombing request from an American Jewish leader was made by Jacob Rosenheim, president of the Orthodox organization Agudath Israel, on June 18. After receiving information about the bombing idea from his colleagues in Switzerland, Rosenheim wrote to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau and the US government's War Refugee Board urging bombing of the railways over which Jews were being transported to Auschwitz (Pehle, June 24, 1944). Without waiting for a response, Rosenheim dispatched a deputy, Meier Schenkolewski, to Washington the next day to press the matter in person. Schenkolewski met with Secretary of State Cordell Hull, who passed the buck, claiming the matter was within the purview of Secretary of War Henry Stimson. Stimson, in turn, told the Aguda emissary that the matter was "within the competence of the Russian Military Command" (Rosenheim, 1944, pp. 240–241).<sup>2</sup>

These contacts were all conducted behind the scenes. Yet discussions of the bombing idea must have begun circulating in Jewish circles wider than Agudath Israel, because on June 27, Jacob Fishman discussed it in his regular column in the New York City Yiddish-language daily *Morgen Zhurnal*. Fishman recommended three possibilities for Allied action: The Allies should warn that Bucharest and Budapest "will be bombed and reduced to ashes" (p. 2) if the transports continued; the Allies should "bomb the death camp at Oswiecim [the Polish name for Auschwitz], with its gas chambers, and also the other death camps in Poland" (p. 2); and the Allies should consider bombing Hitler's Berchtesgaden residence "and saying that this is punishment for the mass murders" (p. 2). Fishman noted that although some Jews would be killed in a bombing of the death camp, doing so would be morally comparable to the decision by the inmates at Treblinka to stage a revolt, in which many Jews were killed "but hundreds of Jews succeeded in escaping to the woods and joined the partisans who are fighting against the Nazis" (Fishman, June 27, 1944, pp. 1–2).

### THE STUDY THAT NEVER WAS

On July 4, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy finally replied to the Agudath Israel bombing request. In what would become the Roosevelt administration's stock answer to appeals for bombing, McCloy asserted that after "a study," the War Department had concluded that bombing the railways was "impracticable," because it would require

"the diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations" (Wyman, 1984, p. 291). In reality, no such diversion would have been necessary, because as noted above, Allied planes were already carrying out reconnaissance missions over Auschwitz and were about to begin bombing the oil factories there. Moreover, historians have found no evidence that the War Department ever conducted any study of the matter as McCloy claimed. The rejection of the bombing requests was simply an unthinking expression of the mindset in the administration: that no military resources, however minimal, should be expended on humanitarian objectives (p. 291).

When nervous British government officials asked whether the creation of the government's War Refugee Board in January 1944 meant that America intended to use its forces to rescue Jews, the War Department reassured London:

It is not contemplated that units of the armed forces will be employed for the purpose of rescuing victims of enemy oppression unless such rescues are the direct result of military operations conducted with the objective of defeating the armed forces of the enemy. (Wyman, 1984, p. 291)

Internal War Department memoranda the following month stated unequivocally that "the most effective relief which can be given victims of enemy persecution is to insure the speedy defeat of the Axis" (pp. 291–292). This attitude would govern the administration's responses to bombing requests in the months to follow.

Also in July, leaders of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) began lobbying for the US to bomb Auschwitz. WJC Executive Committee chairman Nahum Goldmann repeatedly raised the issue with administration officials, as well as with Soviet and Czech diplomats in Washington. Maurice Perlzweig, of the WJC's New York office, and A. Leon Kubowitzki, chairman of its Rescue Department, forwarded bombing appeals from Europe to War Refugee Board director John Pehle. Kubowitzki also urged the Allies to use ground forces, rather than aerial bombardments, to destroy Auschwitz (Medoff, 2013, pp. 177–178).

Meanwhile, the issue continued occasionally to go beyond the confines of private meetings and spill out into the public realm, however briefly. On July 7, for example, the aforementioned editorial distributed by the IJPS urged the Allies to deliver "explosive tonnage" to "the camps where death is meted out to the Jews."

That same day, American bombers began attacking the Blechhammer oil factories, which were situated 47 miles from Auschwitz. They struck that site on 10 occasions between July and November. The oil war, as it was



called, was well known to the public. A front page article in the *New York Times* on August 21, for instance, reported that “the Fifteenth Air Force bombed the former Vacuum Oil company refinery at Czestochowa and the I. G. Farbenindustrie synthetic oil and rubber plant at Oswiecim, in Polish Silesia” (“Blows,” 1944, p. 1). A page-six article in the *Times* on September 14 likewise listed Oswiecim among the Allied bombers’ targets (Gruson, 1944). Most of the Jewish public likely did not recognize the name Oswiecim or perceive any connection between that oil target and the scattered references in the Jewish press to the idea of bombing the death camp. American Jewish leaders, though, did understand the connection. In an interview in 1979, Nahum Goldmann recalled replying to the objection of one US official to the bombing proposal with the question: “We were informed by the underground we are bombing industrial factories twenty miles from Auschwitz; why can’t we use one of the planes to bomb Auschwitz?” (Goldmann, February 11, 1979, interview by L. Jarvik [in possession of author], p. 63). There was also bombing-related correspondence in 1944 between Goldmann and Ernest Frischer of the Czech government-in-exile containing references to the fact that “fuel factories” in the vicinity of Auschwitz had been “repeatedly bombed” recently (Frischer, 1944).

In late July, the bombing idea received its widest exposure yet, this time via the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), a wire service considerably larger and more influential than the IJPS. On July 20, a JTA dispatch from London reported that “liberal circles here are demanding that Britain and the United States act to save the Jews of Hungary by, first, bombing the extermination camps of Oswiecim and Birkenau in Poland” (JTA, July 20, 1944, p. 1).

Apparently picking up on the JTA’s report, an editorial in the *National Jewish Ledger* (Washington, DC) on July 28 noted: “Demands are being made that the British Government make its position clear by ordering the bombing of gas execution chambers at Oswiecim and Birkenau” (“Horthy,” 1944, p. 6). Similarly, Rabbi Theodore Lewis, a columnist for the monthly magazine *Opinion* (edited by American Jewish Congress leader Rabbi Stephen Wise) wrote, “Some Englishmen deeply aroused by this senseless slaughter have demanded that the British government bomb the localities of Birkenau and Oswiecim where the gas chambers of execution are located” (Lewis, 1944, p. 6).

On July 31, the American Jewish Conference (AJC), a coalition of major Jewish organizations, held a rally at Madison Square Garden to appeal for Allied intervention on behalf of Hungarian Jewry. Forty thousand New Yorkers attended, and the protest received nationwide press coverage. The organizers adopted an eight-point plan for rescue, formulated primarily by officials of the World Jewish Congress (WJC). Point number eight reads: “All measures

should be taken by the military authorities, with the help of the underground forces, to destroy the implements, facilities, and places where the Nazis have carried out their mass executions” (JTA, August 1, 1944, p. 3). The WJC announced on August 14 that it had sent a similar, 11-point rescue plan to its London office to present to Allied officials there. Point number 11 urged “that immediate measures be adopted to destroy the murder installations and facilities of the extermination camps” (JTA, August 15, 1944, p. 3).

The wording of the AJC and WJC resolutions was intended to encompass both the Goldmann-Perlzweig requests for bombing, and Kubowitzki’s preference for an attack by ground forces. American Jewish leaders were not military experts and had no way of knowing which method of military action was the most feasible or effective. Hence, in some meetings with Allied officials, Jewish leaders spoke simultaneously of bombing the railways, bombing the gas chambers, and enlisting the Polish underground to send in ground forces. The Jewish leaders also had no way of knowing which of the Allies would be most capable of action, or most willing, so they addressed their appeals to American, British, and Soviet diplomats alike, as well as to the Polish and Czech governments-in-exile.

Each of the three proposed methods of military intervention had its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of bombing the railway tracks was that it involved relatively little risk to Allied servicemen. On the other hand, the effectiveness of bombing the tracks depended upon the ability of the bombers to hit their targets—something impossible to determine in advance, given the many factors involved—as well as the ability of the Germans to repair damaged track lines. Likewise, with regard to a possible bombing of the gas chambers and crematoria, it was impossible to predict how successful Allied bombers would be in carrying out precision attacks on those targets. Also, some inmates could be harmed in such bombings. The proposal to send ground troops was the most radical. It would almost certainly involve casualties among the attacking forces, and for that reason was the proposal least likely to be accepted by Allied military commanders and political leaders. Moreover, requesting an attack by ground troops meant risking one of American Jewish leaders’ deepest concerns—accusations that Jews were willing to sacrifice the lives of Allied soldiers for their own narrow interests.

#### **GOLDA MEIR’S ROLE**

Bombing requests continued throughout the summer. The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe (better known as the Bergson Group) wrote to President Roosevelt on July 24 urging bombing of the railways “and the extermination camps themselves” (Smertenko, 1944,

p. 4). The committee did not receive a response. Labor Zionists also took an interest in the issue. In July, Golda Meir (known then as Goldie Myerson), who was a senior official of the Histadrut labor federation in Palestine, sent the US Histadrut representative, Israel Mereminski, a report from Europe about the mass murder, together with an appeal to ask US officials to undertake “the bombing of Oswienzim [sic] and railway transporting Jews” (Pehle, August 7, 1944) to the death camp. Mereminski subsequently spoke with War Refugee Board officials about the need for “destruction [of the] gas chambers [and] crematories” (Pinkerton, 1944). Shortly afterwards, the August 1944 issue of *Jewish Frontier*, a US Labor Zionist journal with which Mereminski was closely associated, published an unsigned editorial calling for “Allied bombings of the death camps and the roads leading to them” (“Last chance,” 1944, p. 4). The *Jewish Frontier* editorial marked the first time that an American Jewish organization went public with an explicit demand for bombing the death camps.

Meanwhile, US air raids on German oil sites were drawing the bombers ever closer to Birkenau, the mass-murder section of Auschwitz. On August 7, they attacked the Trzebinia oil refineries, just 13 miles away. On August 20, US bombers, accompanied by a fleet of planes piloted by the all-African American unit known as the Tuskegee Airmen, struck oil factories less than five miles from the gas chambers. Sixteen-year-old Elie Wiesel, a slave laborer there, witnessed the attack and later wrote about it in his best-selling memoir *Night* (1969, p. 71).

Simultaneously, a separate development was bringing Allied bombers within close proximity of Auschwitz: the revolt by the Polish Home Army against the Germans in Warsaw. On August 8, Britain's Royal Air Force began air-dropping supplies to the Polish rebels. The flight route between the Allied air base in Italy and Warsaw took the planes within a few miles of Auschwitz. They flew that route 22 times during the two weeks that followed. In September, President Roosevelt, sensitive to the need for Polish American votes in the upcoming presidential election, ordered US planes to take part in the Warsaw airlift mission. He did this despite warnings from his aides that many of the supplies probably would be intercepted by the Nazis. Of the 1,200 containers of weapons and provisions the Americans dropped, fewer than 300 reached the intended recipients (Wyman, 1984, pp. 305–306).

### **KNOWLEDGE, BUT NO PROTESTS**

Certainly by the time of the Hungarian deportations, American Jews were well acquainted with the fact that the mass murder of European Jewry was underway. More than a year earlier, the Allied leaders had confirmed that the Germans were carrying out a “bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination” (Wyman, 1984, p. 75) of Europe's

Jews, and numerous subsequent reports about the slaughter had reached American Jewry throughout 1943.

Media coverage of the Hungarian situation provided considerable information as to what was unfolding in the spring of 1944. That does not mean, however, that the average American Jew was paying such close attention that he or she recognized the names of the individual death camps or was thinking about specific avenues of military action that the Allies might take in response. It seems unlikely that many ordinary Jews would have been aware and focused to that extent, especially at a time when news of the war in general, not to mention the fate of their loved ones serving overseas, competed for their attention.

Moreover, a new public policy proposal cannot gain traction overnight. It takes time for ordinary citizens to learn about the proposal, to be persuaded of its merits, and to take sufficient interest in it to elevate it to the communal agenda. In the case of the bombing idea, there were only brief, scattered mentions in the American Jewish press at the time. An editorial here or a column there could not attract serious, sustained attention or analysis. Likewise, the references in the press to “Oswiecim” as a target in the oil war—without any accompanying acknowledgment that the oil sites were close to the world's largest mass-murder facility—would have been noticed and understood only by a handful of “in-the-know” Jewish professionals.

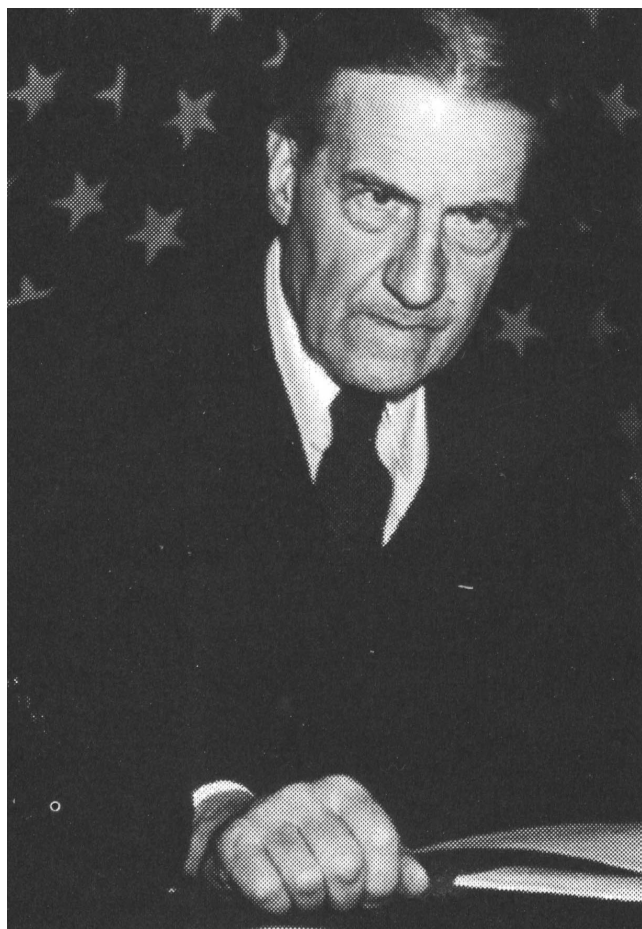
Another factor undermining the possibility of grassroots Jewish protests was the Roosevelt administration's opposition to the bombing proposal. Ordinary citizens, lacking military expertise and intimate knowledge of battlefield considerations, likely would not have felt confident that one particular method of action—bombing—was necessarily the most feasible or most effective way of helping Europe's Jews. It would have been natural for them to defer to the highest authority in the land and trust that the administration's position was well founded—especially when the nation's leader was so fervently admired by most American Jews.

Furthermore, in all likelihood, most Jews would have been reluctant to publicly criticize a popular president in the middle of a war, for fear they would be accused of being unpatriotic. It is instructive that the October 1943 march to the White House by 400 Orthodox rabbis was the only Jewish rally for rescue that was held in the nation's capital during the Holocaust years. Many American Jews did not yet feel sufficiently a part of American society to be psychologically ready for such a forthright step. Those Jews who were especially acculturated—a not insignificant portion of the Jewish community—would have been the least likely to take part in such protests. Recall the aforementioned Reform rabbi G. George Fox, who was worried that asking the Allies for retaliatory strikes would make it seem Jews wanted to be treated as a “special

group” that was demanding “to be avenged.” Fox wanted American Jews to avoid being seen as “a particular group” and instead “face this situation as a part of the American Allies.”

### PROBLEMS OF LEADERSHIP

On the other hand, a different stance by mainstream Jewish leaders conceivably might have brought about a different response from grassroots Jews. A serious effort by the Jewish leadership to educate the community at large about the bombing proposal, conducted through appeals in Jewish newspapers and communal events, might have succeeded in mobilizing Jewish public opinion in favor of the bombing idea. That, in turn, could have paved the way for public protests on the issue.



**FIG. 2.** Rabbi Stephen Wise, ca. 1942. Courtesy of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies.

Such an effort, however, would have contradicted everything we know about the American Jewish leadership of that era. The most prominent and influential Jewish leaders, such as Rabbi Stephen Wise [Fig. 2], were strongly loyal to President Roosevelt, the New Deal, and the Democratic Party; the very idea of publicly challenging FDR was unthinkable. Fear of provoking antisemitism was also in

the uppermost thoughts of many Jewish leaders. Wise, for example, told Goldmann in 1943 that publicly criticizing FDR's Jewish refugee policy would be “morally and perhaps even physically suicidal” (Wise, 1943). From this and similar remarks that Wise made privately to colleagues on various occasions, it is evident he believed that inappropriately forthright Jewish behavior could result in antisemitic violence in the United States. It did not help that by 1944, Wise was 70 years old (at a time when the average life expectancy of an American male was 63.6) and suffering from a variety of ailments. The most important Jewish leader of that era was not physically capable of leading an energetic protest campaign to aid European Jewry—yet he was entirely unwilling to step aside in favor of younger, more vigorous individuals.

Nor were American Jewish leaders solely focused on the plight of Jews under Hitler, much less on the narrow issue of whether to bomb Auschwitz. Even at the peak of the Holocaust, their agendas were crowded with a wide range of other issues and interests. An examination of Jewish leaders' activities during this period does not reveal any special sense of urgency. The IJPS was not off the mark when, in its July 7, 1944, editorial, it bemoaned the fact that among Jewish leaders, “everything is perfunctory and routine” (p. 1–A). The editorial argued that instead of “Washington-delegations-as-usual” and “memorandums-as-usual,” Jewish groups needed an energetic, out-of-the box attitude and a serious protest campaign. The era's Jewish leaders, in short, were unprepared for the task of mobilizing pressure for the bombing of Auschwitz, and the community at large was incapable of serious mobilization without such leadership.

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#### END NOTES

- [1] For details of the lobbying efforts by Jewish Agency officials, see Medoff (2013), pp. 173–177.
- [2] A third cabinet member, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., was informed by War Refugee Board director John Pehle of the board's discussions regarding the bombing idea, but there is no record of Morgenthau ever commenting on the proposal (Pehle, September 6, 1944).

Poet Bernard Mikofsky wrote that the Holocaust was “searingly personal” to him. He lost a dear uncle and aunt, his three close cousins, and all of their children. His poem allows us to hear the “echoes of the anonymous cries / of numbered millions,” stirring us, if only “for an instant / from our dream of well-being.”

*Bernard S. Mikofsky \**

*1945*

And that year  
When the fires ceased  
And the ovens were finally cool  
A strange wind moved out  
In slow, grief-laden eddies  
And sooty swirls  
Across Europe —  
And even beyond.

And those with conscience  
(And even those without)  
Heard faint sounds from afar,  
Echoes from an age-old abyss,  
And sometimes these seemed to come  
From inside one's ear —  
So tiny and yet so persistent,  
Echoes of the anonymous cries  
Of numbered millions.

And far from the ovens,  
Far from the funeral fires,  
This wind still carried  
Wraiths of soot  
Too fine to water the eye  
Yet searing the heart.

That year the strange wind  
Moved slowly across Europe —  
And even beyond,  
Now and then pausing  
To eddy into the deepest corners  
Of our minds  
To remind us,  
To stir us for an instant  
From our dream of well-being.

*\*deceased*

Nancy Lefenfeld writes: "I first met Renée Fink in 2010, while attending the Chicago/Skokie conference of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Descendants. Renée, a hidden child from the Netherlands, was warm and engaging, and our friendship has grown. I asked her if I might interview her, and she agreed. I recorded and transcribed our conversations in October 2015 in Houston and in February 2016 at Renée's home in North Carolina. I am grateful to her for sharing her vivid memories and for her ability to convey how she felt as her knowledge of her experiences unfolded."

*Nancy Lefenfeld*

## Memory, Knowledge, and Family Love

When knowledge comes, memory comes too, little by little. . . .  
Knowledge and memory are one and the same thing.  
—Gustav Meyrink (Friedländer, 1979, p. 182)

**F**ritz and Edit Laser were German Jews who, alarmed by the rise of Nazism, fled their homeland in 1933 and settled in Scheveningen, a seaside district of the Hague. Taking flight meant not only abandoning their material possessions and middle-class lifestyle but also leaving



**FIG. 1.** Renée's mother, Edit Laser (née Loewenstein), undated. Courtesy of Renée Fink.

all whom they knew and loved. Unable to pursue his profession, the 37-year-old Fritz, born in Königsberg, drove a taxi; the 22-year-old Edit [Fig. 1], born in Breslau, worked as a secretary. Within a few years, the couple was joined by Edit's mother, Sophie Loewenstein (née Moses). In December 1937, they welcomed the birth of a daughter, whom they named Renate [Fig. 2, p. 26].<sup>1</sup>

Renée Fink, the baby whom Fritz and Edit named Renate, has scant information about the early years of her life. She knows that her family lived in a modest brick row house at Gevers Deynootweg 36, a few blocks south of the beachfront Grand Hotel Amrâth Kurhaus. She knows that she was loved and doted upon by her parents and her grandmother, whom she called "Omi."<sup>2</sup> She knows that after German troops occupied the country in May 1940, the family was forced to move away from the coast and that they settled outside of Utrecht.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the rise of Nazism, the Jewish population of the Netherlands numbered approximately 112,000 and comprised 1.4% of the total Dutch population (Moore, 1997, p. 25). Nearly 60% of Dutch Jews lived in Amsterdam; most of the remainder lived in Rotterdam and the Hague. The 1930s saw the influx of some 33,000 Jews, the majority of whom came from Germany (pp. 32–33). The Dutch government and Jewish relief organizations urged new arrivals to continue on to other countries, and some did; most who remained took up residence in the major cities.

In June 1940, the Third Reich installed a German civilian government to oversee and manage the Dutch administrative apparatus. Installed at the top of this govern-



**FIG. 2.** Baby Renate and her father, Fritz Laser, 1938. Courtesy of Renée Fink.

ment as *Reichskommissar* was Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the Austrian politician who had enthusiastically presided over the Anschluss and had served as deputy to Hans Frank after the invasion of Poland and the establishment of the Nazi-controlled General Government in that country. In January 1941, Seyss-Inquart issued a decree stating that anyone who might possibly be classified as a Jew was required to register and complete a questionnaire. The level of compliance was high.<sup>4</sup> To address the question of the size and composition of the Jewish population in the Netherlands prior to the state-sanctioned murder that began in 1942, one must rely on information derived from the registration process. Those defined by the Nazis as full Jews (i.e., having three or four Jewish grandparents) numbered approximately 140,000 (Moore, 2010, p. 65). German full Jews accounted for about 10% of the total.<sup>5</sup>

As in France and Belgium, the first two years of the German occupation of the Netherlands saw the implementation of numerous measures directed at identifying and isolating Jews. The first group of Jews was deported from an assembly point, Camp Westerbork, on July 15, 1942. From that point, the machinery of deportation operated exceedingly efficiently.

As some point in the summer or fall of 1942, Fritz and Edit sought out or were presented with an opportunity to have their 4-year-old daughter taken to live with an Aryan family in the countryside. Tens of thousands of other Jewish parents in Europe during this period of time had to make similar heartrending decisions about whether

they should place their children in the hands of complete strangers to maximize their chances of surviving the cataclysm. On a day whose date is unknown, Fritz and Edit placed Renée, their only child, on the back of a bicycle and saw her off.

### MEMORY IS KNOWLEDGE

Although she was very young, Renée remembers the moment of separation, remembers that it was a woman cyclist who ferried her the approximately 18 km (11 miles) to the van den Brink home. She recalls her earliest impressions and how she felt:

I find myself in a great big house. It seemed enormous. It's really just a house, you know, but when you're so little and you're not very tall, the world appears larger. And I remember people coming in. I didn't know why I was there and who these people were. Of course, they became my brothers and sisters, but what I remember was being so *homesick*, and I am told, after the fact, that I didn't eat anything, and I didn't say anything.

Renée would spend the next three years living in the van den Brink home at Lingenskamp 21, in the town of Laren [Fig. 3].<sup>6</sup>



**FIG. 3.** Painting, commissioned by Zus as a gift to Renée, of the van den Brink home at 21 Lingenskamp, Laren. The structure shown is a duplex; the van den Brink family occupied the left side. Courtesy of Renée Fink.

Before she begins to describe what life was like during those years, she smiles broadly, takes a deep breath, and says that whenever she thinks of the van den Brinks, “every little fiber of me lights up.” This is indeed the wondrous irony of the story of those three years.

## KNOWING COMPLETE ACCEPTANCE AND LOVE

Maria Zoon and Gijsbertus Johannes van den Brink were devout Catholics who had eight children. At the time of Renate's arrival, the five boys and three girls who became her siblings ranged in age from approximately 10 to 24.<sup>7</sup> Like many who are today referred to as *hidden children*, Renate was in open hiding, that is, she was treated as if she were another one of the van den Brink children, and her Jewish identity was kept secret. Renate's name was immediately changed to Rita. "Renate was a little too German, too other," she explains. "It was not a normal farm girl's name." She did not look like she belonged to the family. "They had larger bone structures. They were lighter, and I had black eyes, and I was very small-boned and dark-haired. The best they could do was change my name."

Bert, whose nickname is Beppie, was 10 years old when Rita joined the family. In 2014, he wrote of "Rita's" arrival:

One day my Dad took me aside to speak to me. I thought, what have I done wrong now? But he said, "Tomorrow we are going to have a little girl come here and she is going to be your little sister and her name is Rita, and if anyone ever asks you about her you must always say she is your sister." The next day a little, dark-haired, brown-eyed girl came. (B. van den Brink, 2014, personal correspondence to Renée Fink)

Mama and Papa van den Brink were stern parents. Speaking many years later, Gerard, who was 19 years old when Rita arrived, recalled that on one occasion, Papa went around the table and patted each child on the top of his head. It was, he insisted, the only instance he could recall during his entire childhood that his father had been physically demonstrative towards him and his siblings. With the benefit of Gerard's perspective, Renée marvels at how extraordinary it was that Papa [Fig. 4] showed her compassion in many small ways. From the very beginning, he took account of the fact that she was too homesick to eat and seated her immediately to his left at the dinner table. "Papa fed me and took me under his wing and took care of me. I think he spoon-fed me. This stern man—his children were afraid of him—he was a no-nonsense father, but he was fair, and *I loved him.*"

Rita and her three sisters shared the *meisjes kamer*, the girls' bedroom, which she estimates measured about eight by ten feet. Although she has no memory of the four of them sharing a bed, she assumes that it must have been the case. All 11 occupants of the house shared one toilet. It was the only place in the house where Rita had complete privacy, and so it was there that she allowed herself to surrender to the deep feelings of homesickness she felt.

Like all of the children, Rita was assigned household

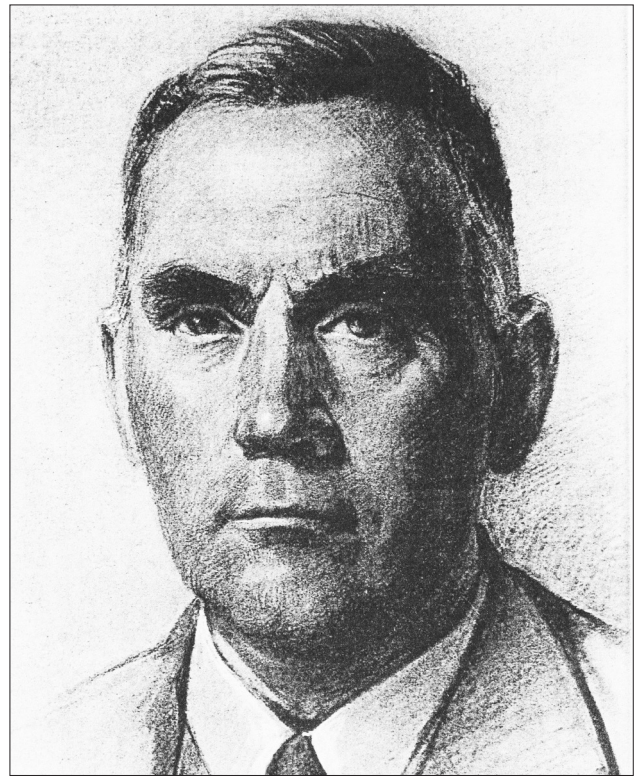


FIG. 4. Charcoal sketch of Gijsbertus Johannes van den Brink (Papa). Courtesy of Renée Fink.

chores. Each morning, she fed the chickens and the pigs. Despite the smell of the pig slop, she didn't mind tending to the animals. However, the rooster ("a nasty animal that pecked at my legs") terrified her. Papa was a master gardener who tended to apple, cherry, and pear trees in the yard and who owned and maintained a nearby orchard. One of Rita's chores was to slice apples and string the slices so that they could be hung to dry. She also helped to keep the house clean and tidy. "I went and picked up with my thumb and forefinger everything from the rug, every day." (The house had no electricity and so, of course, no vacuum cleaner.) At night, she would help the older girls wind skeins of yarn into balls.

Renée recalls that she was punished in the same way that the other children were, and that this reinforced her sense of belonging to the family. Punishment meant standing on a triangular landing at the top of the cellar stairs, which were very steep.

I do remember that Papa put me on the top of the stairs to punish me. But I say it with affection, because I wasn't singled out. I was equal with his children. That meant in being accepted and loved and in being punished. So I have no trauma. Another child would say it was horrifying [because] it was pitch dark, and you stood on this tiny platform, and you just stayed there until he decided time was up and then you got to





**FIG. 5.** Charcoal sketch of Maria Zoon van den Brink (Mama).  
Courtesy of Renée Fink.

leave. I think, if you lost your balance, you could tumble down the stairs. But you know, I have no negative feelings. You never took it personally. It's very odd. It's like I'm almost happy.

The van den Brinks were a devoutly religious family. There was a holy water basin on the doorjamb of each bedroom, and family members would dip their fingers and cross themselves before crossing the jamb. All of the family members attended church regularly. Renée describes herself as having been “a very good little Catholic.”<sup>8</sup> She was unaware of the fact that she was Jewish.

The mother of the family, Maria Zoon van den Brink [Fig. 5], suffered from brain cancer during much of the time that Rita was a member of the family and would not live to see the war end. Consequently, the eldest daughter, Wilhelmina, nicknamed Zus, shouldered a great deal of responsibility and seems to have served as a surrogate mother. Rita was old enough to attend primary school, but doing so would have increased the danger to the family, because it would have raised questions impossible to answer. Zus's best friend was the mistress at a nearby nursery school. Confident that her friend would safeguard the family's secret, Zus arranged for Rita to attend the school. Renée describes it as a “kind of holding area.” She explains, “We didn't have pencils. We didn't have paper. I didn't learn anything.”

We spent mornings there. All we had was a little string of wool, like this long [she demonstrates], and we had knitting needles. So every day, all we did was knit and purl. Of course, the wool kept running out, and so we would unravel what we did and start all over. It's a Sisyphus tale. There was no toilet paper. There was nothing. So every noon—and it must have been attached to the church, because every noon, the nuns came, and they combed the lice out of our heads. This went on forever. I was always riddled. I mean, we all had lice. We had worms. Later, I would have fleas as well. I couldn't sit still.

### KNOWING FEAR AND HUNGER

Far from dwelling on the fact that her schooling was delayed for three years, Renée emphasizes that by taking her in, the family not only made a great sacrifice but also willingly exposed themselves to danger on a daily basis. They received no payment from any quarter to care for the little girl. In this heavily occupied region, German soldiers frequently searched private homes, looking for Jews and contraband. Apparently, those conducting the raids had information on the composition of the household, viz., the number of children by gender. Renée recalls that whenever they received word that searches were underway, Papa would send one of his own daughters out of the house:

Truda was sent out of the house when we knew that they were coming to take a count. Because I was there. *They sent one of their own daughters out in the streets. It's incredible, what they did. She would be such an obvious Christian and Dutch that she could just say, “I'm on my way to visit my aunt” or “I'm going to a cousin's house.”*

Ensuring that the count did not exceed the expected number was essential, but it did not eliminate the risk: There was always the fear that those conducting the searches would notice that Rita did not resemble the other children and would ask questions. On the occasions when they had a few moments' warning of an impending search, the van den Brinks implemented a ruse. “They threw me into a bed upstairs [and pulled the covers up]. They knew how frightened the Germans were of communicable disease, and they would say ‘TB,’ and the Germans really took off.” Sometimes, though, there was no advance warning. In those instances, Rita knew that her place was to be seated in a corner with a dunce cap on her head, and she knew to keep silent.

Four of the five boys—Nico, Wim, Gerard, and Antoon—were old enough to have been conscripted by Dutch or German authorities for military service or forced labor.

Renée recalls that there were times that they went into hiding, and she believes they were avoiding conscription.

The boys sometimes hid in the hayloft in the barn . . . sometimes . . . in the attic in the house, above the bedrooms. I heard Antoon crying. I mean, they were afraid for their lives. Antoon was the most feeling of the boys—the others were strong—but he could not hide his emotions, his fear. He was our favorite brother, of all the girls. He was the soft one. Falling asleep and hearing the boys hiding above, crying—it was horrible.

Fear, cold, and hunger were constant companions. Renée recalls that like the other children, she did not have shoes that would have protected her feet during the cold months. She had two pairs of shoes: a pair of white canvas sneakers and a pair of wooden clogs. As she outgrew the sneakers, the toes of the shoes were cut out so that she could continue using them. She used the wooden clogs to walk in the snow. “Maybe they fit over my sneakers or maybe I went just in them, but the snow clumped under and then you teeter totter. You can’t balance.”

Food was in short supply. “I went to bed thinking about food every night,” Renée says, “missing my parents and being hungry.” Each day, they baked a loaf of what Renée calls “false bread”—that is, ersatz bread made of whatever was available. The daily loaf was cut into 11 equal portions, one for each family member. Rita looked forward to meals when it was her turn to receive one of the heels of the loaf, as the heel was more satisfying, more filling. Each day, people came by the house begging for food. “There were endless knocks on the back door,” Renée recalls. Although they had little to spare, “Zus was always getting up from the table—quietly, stoically—to give out food.”

Rita had no contact with, or communication from, her parents during the three years that she lived in the van den Brink home. However, she does recall that on one occasion, her Omi arrived at the home to wish her a happy birthday. She had walked a great distance in the cold and put her life at risk in order to do so.

Despite the privations they endured, Rita did not suffer from any serious illness during the time that she lived with the van den Brinks.

We had no doctors. We had no dentists. I was never sick that I remember, but I do remember getting very sore throats. They had a jar of honey that was for *dire emergencies*, and if you got a sore throat, you got a little spoon of honey. It just kind of coated it. That was the extent of our medical care.

She and the other children were plagued, though, by large, persistent, and painful styes, pimple-like eyelid bumps

caused by common staphylococcal bacteria that most people harbor within their bodies.

#### **KNOWING BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT AND TRAGEDY**

The last nine months of the German occupation are, in the collective memory of the Dutch population, a period of bitter disappointment, profound hardship, and great tragedy. In the summer of 1944, Allied forces swept through Western Europe, liberating France and most of Belgium. During the first two weeks of September, word spread that small detachments of Allied soldiers had crossed into the Netherlands, and many dared to hope and believe that the country would be liberated within days or weeks. On September 17, the Allies launched Operation Market Garden, a massive assault whose aim was to seize strategic points in order to open a corridor between Eindhoven and Arnhem. This would allow the Allies to mass troops north of Arnhem and prepare a thrust into the heart of Germany. The most challenging part of the operation lay in wresting towns and bridges from German hands. The Allies succeeded in crossing the Meuse and Waal Rivers but were defeated at the Nederrijn, the river that flows through Arnhem. By the end of 1944, Allied troops had liberated most of the southern part of the Netherlands. The northern part of the country, including the major population centers of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague, and Utrecht, would remain in the firm grip of German occupiers until the following May.

On the day that the Allies launched Operation Market Garden, the Dutch government in London ordered a rail strike. Its purpose was to stop the enemy from bringing in additional troops and supplies. Fearing arrest and deportation, 30,000 Dutch railway workers went underground or into hiding. Although the strike had some effect, it did not achieve its aim. German administrators brought in men and materiel on German trains. Under the pretext of arresting railway strikers, they rounded up approximately 120,000 men and sent them to labor camps. Further, they took advantage of the railway strike as an opportunity to cut off all food and fuel shipments to civilians living in the territory still under their control and blockaded such shipments to prevent them from arriving by truck or barge. The strategies that the occupiers employed to starve the Dutch population, combined with unusually cold temperatures, led to the tragedy that is remembered as the *Hongerwinter* (Hunger Winter). An estimated 20,000 people starved to death.

Renée has vivid memories of these final, terrible months of the war. Bombing raids were frequent. When bombs were falling, the family would go into an underground root cellar normally used to store apples and potatoes. This improvised bomb shelter was separate and apart from the house, not beneath it. One particular day on which an

aerial attack took place is indelibly etched in her memory:

We had to run for the shelter, and it was very frightening. But that was nothing. Mama was so sick. We couldn't move her. That's just a nightmare. We—none of us wanted to go without her. We had to leave her in the house and run for safety, and it just seemed like the most horrible—besides immoral—horrible, gut-wrenching, emotional thing to do. That was the worst. That day was the worst. Then—I didn't remember the series of events, just that [that was] the worst, the worst feeling. And my siblings told me recently—well, later in life—that that was the night she died. After that, Papa lost it. He ceased to function. He went into some kind of, I mean, it wasn't a catatonic state but it wasn't too far removed. This is the man who's the all-powerful, kept everything going, held everything together. It took a seemingly long time for him to start being functional.

The two eldest girls, Zus, 25, and Truda, 18, took charge of running the household. Generally, those living in the countryside were in a better position to survive the Hunger Winter than were those living in cities. Even so, as the famine persisted into the early months of 1945, the van den Brinks were reduced to subsisting on what Renée describes as “flour and water and tulip bulbs.” She knows that there came a day when Zus had to stop opening the door to beggars because she had nothing more to give.

The northern and western parts of the Netherlands remained in German hands until the very last days of the war in Europe. May 5, 1945, marks the official date of the country's liberation by mainly Canadian troops. Not long afterwards, Renée's Omi appeared at the van den Brink home, and although Renée did not want to leave, she had no choice. The two returned to Bilthoven and were joined by Renée's aunt Ilse, her mother's youngest sister. Renée knows little about how either her grandmother or her aunt survived the occupation. She knows only that “Omi was moving from place to place throughout the war” and that “Ilse had been in the underground and was on the run.”

### **I WANTED TO KNOW, BUT HOW COULD I ASK?**

So began what Renée describes as “the toughest part of her ordeal—surviving survival.” Particularly in the cities, liberation did not mean the end of food shortages or a return to pre-war living conditions. Renée remembers that the house in which they lived, whose address was Parklaan 43, was so cold and damp that toadstools grew on the walls of her bedroom. They survived by foraging for food and collecting kindling in the nearby woods. The small, black wood-burning stove in their living room served as both kitchen stove and heat source. Most troubling and incomprehensible to the 8-year-old was the fact that her parents

had not reappeared and she had no idea where they were or what had happened to them.

It was very, very difficult, because my overriding question was immediately, “When are they coming back? When are they coming back?” There were no answers. I maintain that children pick up all sorts of subtleties from adults that don't have to be articulated. You can ask so many times and not get an answer and feel that your questions are not welcome. So I stopped asking, which was awful.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, even as information on the fate of individuals was not yet available, the scale of the Jewish tragedy in the Netherlands was known. Of the estimated 140,000 Jews living in the country early in the occupation, approximately 25% had survived. The survival rate in the Netherlands was lower than that in any other Western European country. It was significantly lower than survival rates in France (76%) and Belgium (56%).

In 1948, Omi and Renée, now 10, arrived in the port of Hoboken, New Jersey, and were met by Aunt Ilse, who had arrived in 1947, and her new husband, Walter. It was mainly thanks to the efforts of Walter that the three surviving family members found themselves in the United States. A first cousin of Renée's father, Walter had immigrated to the United States from Germany in the mid-1930s and had served in the army as an intelligence officer during the war. In 1946, he had located the three in Bilthoven and had begun making arrangements to bring them to the United States.



**FIG. 6.** Renée, ca. 1949. Courtesy of Renée Fink.

Walter was worried that Americans would mispronounce Renate's name as "Re-nayt." Almost as soon as she had stepped off the boat, he announced that her name would now be Renée [Fig. 6].

Although Ilse had promised her sister that she would care for her niece in the event that Edit and Fritz did not survive, the newlyweds were not in a position, financially or emotionally, to support the newcomers. Within two weeks of her arrival, Renée was sent to live with relatives whom she did not know—in Chestertown, a small town in the Adirondack Mountains of New York.<sup>9</sup> The S. family (their full name has been omitted for reasons of privacy) consisted of a married couple, both of whom were physicians, and their 8-year-old daughter. Renée was separated from her grandmother, whom she loved and who was the last real connection she had to her parents. It was another devastating loss. From that point on, Renée would see Omi only sporadically and for brief periods of time.<sup>10</sup>

Renée's first night in Chestertown foreshadowed difficulties she would contend with to varying degrees until she was married and lived with her husband. The S. family lived in a 17-room house, which also accommodated the couple's medical practice. Although there were several unused bedrooms, the parents "decided that we [Renée and their daughter] would be sisters and that we would share a bedroom." Their 8-year-old-daughter, accustomed to being an only child and receiving the full attention of her parents, was extremely upset by the arrangement. Renée remembers:

The daughter did nothing but cry and suck her thumb, and both the parents sat on her bed for what seemed to me, my first night in that house, like an eternity. They kept reassuring her. She was carrying on, and I was invisible.

Renée describes herself as having been "painfully shy," and it is clear that she felt lonely, isolated, and unable to give voice to her needs during those first few months in Chestertown. She did not speak English and had no way to communicate. Her foster parents spoke to her in German; having spent her earliest years in a German-speaking household, she was able to understand much of what they said, but she did not speak German and could not respond, ask questions, or express herself in that language. The Drs. S. made no effort to understand her when she spoke Dutch. They joked about the language in a way that was callous and cruel, saying, "Dutch—that's not a language, that's a throat disease!"

Although the Drs. S. had good intentions when they made the decision to take Renée in, they were never able to integrate her into the family, and Renée would never receive the equal treatment or feel the love and acceptance that she had experienced in the van den Brink home.

The Drs. S. lacked the capacity to ascertain or address Renée's needs, even those that should have been readily apparent. For example, the daughter S. had a bicycle. Inexplicably, the parents did not provide Renée with a bicycle, nor did they instruct their daughter to share her bike. Some children have a keen, innate sense of fairness, and finding themselves in this kind of situation, happily share their belongings. But the daughter S. did not. Renée recalls that "the child's way of playing was, 'I ride my bicycle and you run after it.'"

Of course, having suffered great loss, trauma, and deprivation during and after the war, Renée also had needs that were different from those of other children, needs that were not so readily apparent or easily met. Her foster parents did not strive to understand, acknowledge, or address these needs. One might have expected her aunt Ilse to have some understanding of what Renée had endured during and after the war, but this was not the case:

My aunt said to my daughter, unbeknownst to me—my daughter repeated this to me—it was very, very upsetting and it seems to be very typical—"Oh, she was little and protected and nothing happened to her. Obviously, the war. She was little and protected and nothing happened to her." I think this is what a lot of children suffered—in the eyes of the adults, we were written off as not even being part of the family of man and having feelings. I think it's a recurring theme with child survivors.

For most of the 70 years since the end of the war, the survivors whom we today call hidden children were not regarded as survivors. The term *Holocaust survivor* was usually equated with *camp survivor*. Renée emphasizes that children who had survived were "thought of as a nuisance and then dismissed."

Totally dismissed. I mean, I can't articulate it, because it makes me very angry, but so dismissed by adults and so having our needs never really met. Not that anybody could meet them, but that they didn't try and you know, you were kind of more emotionally abused and that there was no forthcoming love other than [from] my grandmother. In her own way, my aunt loved me, but she couldn't really take care of herself, never mind somebody else.

One of Renée's needs was to be able to ask questions about what had happened to her parents. Even when such questions are welcome, asking them can be difficult or impossible. Those to whom Renée might have directed such questions, however, did not want to talk to her about the past. Renée recalls, "I do have an implicit sense and feeling

that my questions are not welcome, and then I stop asking.

### KNOWING, NOT KNOWING

At the same time that Renée needed to know what had happened to her parents, her own psychology—that is, the feelings of psychological trauma she had experienced and the coping mechanisms she had developed—worked to prevent her from absorbing and processing such information. She recalls an experience she had when she was 15 or 16 years old. Although her memory of the experience is indistinct, she believes it was the first time she found herself confronting the fact that her parents had been murdered. It happened on a Thursday night. (She remembers this particular detail because she was usually left alone on Thursday nights; her foster sister had been sent to a prestigious boarding school, and her foster parents did not work on Thursday and would go out for the evening.)

I was often alone in this house . . . and I would blast chamber music. There was a good collection . . . and I loved chamber music. So one night I was looking at books. Uncle Hans had written his memoirs. They were not a secret. I mean, they were there. So it's not like I was doing anything naughty. They were written in very formal, old-fashioned, flowery German, which meant that a sentence could be a paragraph. . . . So I'm trying to make head and tail out of this long saga, and then I saw a letter from Ilse to Uncle Hans after the war explaining—I don't remember what, I don't remember the letter—and it was like, Oh my God. At some point, I read somewhere . . . [Renée paused; it was difficult for her to speak about this.] I don't like [the term] *perish*. Most of the child survivors [don't like to use the word *perish*]. We find it too soft. This is *murdered*. If I read it, it probably flew out of my head. You know, I don't think I was psychologically ready to hold onto it.

### “ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES”

In 1957, while a student at the University of Vermont, Renée had met Eddie Fink, and they were married the following year. Together, they raised two children and built a happy life. Their 45-year marriage was, she says, “the best thing that ever happened to me.” Every couple of years, Eddie would attend trade shows in Germany. These trips would often include a visit to Holland so that he could see Papa and other members of the van den Brink family. Invariably, he would return home laden with gifts—carved wooden animals and household objects that Papa had lovingly made with his own hands.

On February 23, 1966, Papa van den Brink, with whom Renée remained in touch, wrote a long letter to “Rita” in which he thanked her for her Christmas and New Year’s wishes, brought her up to date on family news, and remi-

niscated about the time she had spent in his home. In it, he calls himself her “Wardaddy.”

In May, when everything goes all right, I shall have my 80th birthday, but I’m still able to do my work and that’s why I like to send you some presents you can use every day. [The parcel included several items that he had made out of wood.] The little box can be used for spoons or cigarettes, so you will have to think at me every day. As you see, it is a little from personal motives but that is in every person.

We very much enjoyed the letter you send us but even more your pictures. Your little daughter is just like you when you came to live with us. The only difference is that you were a little bit thinner. When you came to us, your mother told us you were not a big eater, but with dinner you were always seated beside me and I was arranging your food on your plate and you always took everything.

Now you are in America and you have a family of your own and from the pictures I see that you are doing very well. You have a nice house with a large garden and everything looks very nice. (G. J. van den Brink, 1966, correspondence with Renée Fink)

In 1972, the whole family made a visit to Laren so that Papa could finally meet the couple’s son and daughter, then 9 and 12 years old. “He told them to be good human beings,” Renée recalls. It was the last time that Renée saw Papa; he died in 1975. Upon learning of his death, Renée immediately flew to Holland to attend the funeral. Along with all of the other van den Brink children, she walked behind his casket in the funeral procession. She could not stay and mourn with her siblings, however: Saturday was the day of her son’s bar mitzvah. Her siblings pressed her to take home various items that had belonged to their parents, but she demurred. Finally, they insisted that she accept one special memento—a large bronze ashtray—featuring several figures dancing, their hands joined in a circle [Fig. 7]. It was the only bronze piece that Papa had ever made.

During these years, Renée continued to live as a hidden child, not speaking of what she had experienced, what she had lost, or what she felt. She continued “living with questions that you would be ashamed you didn’t have the answers to.” Like many or most other child survivors, Renée had internalized the message that she had received from others—that as a child survivor, she was “one of the lucky ones” and had been shielded and protected from the ravages of war.

### CROSSING THE ABYSS: KNOWING A DIFFERENT TRUTH

The situation changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Renée was about 50 years old. Particularly impor-



**FIG. 7.** Bronze ashtray made by Papa. Courtesy of Renée Fink.

tant was a seemingly minor encounter that occurred while she was riding in a car with an acquaintance who was also a German-born survivor from the Netherlands. The woman had been an adolescent during the war. As she had often done, Renée described herself as being “one of the lucky ones, one of the lucky children who survived.” Upset and appalled that Renée would make such a statement, the woman contradicted her, insisting, “Plenty happened to you and you’re not lucky at all.” Her strong reaction “kind of pulled a switch,” Renée remembers. “Like, why are we apologizing, because we spent our whole lives apologizing, kids like me.” For the first time, she realized that the message she had internalized was neither valid nor helpful.

Renée’s experience coincided with major cultural shifts underway in the United States regarding the Holocaust. Significantly greater interest in the subject was accompanied by greater understanding of the fact that it was not only survivors of the camps who had suffered. During the 1980s, those who had been children during the war began to see themselves and one another as survivors and to share their experiences. In May 1991, the First International Gathering of Children Hidden During World War II was held at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York. Renée was among the 1,600 child survivors who attended this event.

It was about that time that Renée would finally hold in her hands documentation regarding how her parents’ lives had ended. In 1989, she again visited Holland and spent time with her oldest van den Brink sister, Zus [Fig. 8], who introduced her neighbor Irvin van Gelder, a survivor and a prominent member of the post-war Dutch Jewish community; he had been involved in the establishment of the Camp Westerbork Memorial Center. He showed Renée a copy of the *Nederlandse Staatscourant* (Dutch government gazette) of June 28, 1951, which listed the names of all individuals deported from the Netherlands because of

their “crime” of being Jewish.

Their initial search of the list proved fruitless and left Renée feeling angry and incensed. She condemned the Dutch authorities for “not even having the decency” to include the names of her murdered parents. A short time later, however, she realized that she had not looked for the name Laser but for some other name, and she was extremely embarrassed. How can one explain mistaking one’s own last name? As on some other occasions when she had had to confront this traumatic subject, she had felt “completely undone” and unable to think clearly. Realizing her mistake, Renée was then able to locate her parents’ names in the gazette. For the first time, she learned the recorded date of death of her mother and of her father from the entries, which indicated that her parents had been deported to Auschwitz in November 1943, that her mother had been murdered on November 19, 1943, and that her father had survived for four months and died on March 31, 1944. This information satisfied Renée’s need to know what had happened to her parents. She acknowledges that some child survivors need to delve deeply, to extensively research and meticulously document all that they can. She, however, does not wish to pursue this kind of quest.



**FIG. 8.** Wilhelmina (Zus) Willemsen (née van den Brink), 1993. Courtesy of Renée Fink.

### KNOWLEDGE IS MEMORY

What is it that enables one family to embrace you as one of their very own, to share what they have in good times and in bad, even though you are not related by blood, even though your mere presence poses a great danger? What is it that prompts another family to exclude you from their small, tight circle even though they have plenty, even though you are a blood relative and your presence poses no danger? Perhaps there are answers to these questions somewhere, although not here, in these pages.

Over the years, Renée’s bonds with Loewenstein family

members in the United States, bonds that were weak and brittle to begin with, have broken. Her bonds with the van den Brink family remain strong, despite the fact that only two of her siblings, her brothers Beppie and Gerard, are alive. Both live in Australia. Her nieces and nephews are scattered around the globe, but she keeps in touch with them and with their sons and daughters. In 2014, upon learning that Renée was going to visit Holland, one of her nieces organized a family reunion. More than 50 family members attended; eight made the trip from Australia, and others came from as far away as Mexico, the United States, and England. They are engaged in many types of occupations, “ranging from house cleaners and carpenters and farmers to an ambassador.” Renée marvels at the fact that despite their differences, they feel a strong affinity towards one another and exhibit the humility and fundamental goodness she felt when she lived in the van den Brink home. She recalls:

I was with some of them one night after the reunion. They went into the regional dialect and although I could barely understand a word they were saying, I loved the informality and warmth of that little cluster after the big party.

Like the roots of trees, Renée's life and the lives of the van den Brinks and their children and grandchildren have grown together, intertwined and tightly bound to one another. She shows me folders containing hundreds of cards and letters she has received over the years and albums of family photos, some taken during her visits to Holland and others taken when her loved ones visited her in her home.

In her bedroom hang charcoal sketches of Mama and Papa and a colorful painting of the house at 21 Lingskamp in Laren. On the coffee table in her living room sits the large bronze ashtray with the dancing figures, their hands joined. In truth, it looks more like a piece of sculpture than an ashtray. It doesn't much matter what it is supposed to be. To Renée, “it symbolizes everything good.”

*On July 9, 1987, Maria Zoon and Gijsbertus Johannes van den Brink were formally recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations for rescuing Renate Laser.*

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Moore, B. (1997). *Victims and survivors: The Nazi persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940–1945*. London and New York: Arnold and Oxford University Press.

Presser, J. (2010). *Ashes in the wind: The destruction of Dutch Jewry*. London: Souvenir Press.

#### END NOTES

[1] Biographical information regarding the Laser and Loewenstein families is from Renée Fink (née Renate Laser). Quotations of Renée included in this essay were made during extended interviews conducted on October 10–11, 2015, and on February 8–9, 2016.

[2] Oma is the German for *grandma* or *granny*.

[3] Although the timing of the family's forced resettlement is unknown, it is likely that it occurred within weeks of the beginning of the occupation. Speaking of August and “the first weeks of September” 1940, Presser (2010) states that “German Jews were ordered to leave the Hague and the coastal area” (p. 15).

[4] Reasons for the high level of compliance are explored by Moore (1997), pp. 64–65, and Presser (2010), pp. 36–37.

[5] It is not clear what criteria were used to designate German Jews (i.e., whether these individuals had been born in Germany or they had been living in Germany prior to their arrival in the Netherlands).

[6] Laren, directly northeast of the city of Hilversum, is part of the province of North Holland.

[7] For reference, the names and birth years of the van den Brink children are as follows: Nico (male), 1918; Wilhelmina (nickname Zus, female), 1919; Wim (pronounced “Vim,” male), 1921; Gerard (pronounced “Hair-ard,” male), 1922; Antoon (pronounced “Anton,” male), 1924; Truda (female), 1926; Riet(je) (female), 1929; and Bert (nickname Beppie, male), 1932.

[8] In one sense, her church attendance probably placed her and all of the members of the family at some risk. Others who lived in Laren and who attended church would have noticed Rita, and as Renée emphasizes, “Anyone in the town could have turned them [the van den Brinks] in.” However, as noted earlier, Rita was in “open hiding”—that is, she was not prevented from going outside from time to time or being seen by neighbors and others. Therefore, her failure to attend church regularly would also have raised questions.

[9] The woman of the house was a first cousin of Renée's mother. Omi's husband, who had died at a young age, and Hans, the father of the woman, were brothers. In Breslau, the families had occupied different floors of the same house.

[10] From the beginning, the Drs. S. gave Omi a chilly reception, so Omi did not feel comfortable staying in their home even briefly. Renée describes Omi as a hardworking, professional woman, highly respected and universally loved by those who knew her, and feels that the treatment Omi received from the Drs. S. was completely unwarranted.

In these interview poems by Breindel Lieba Kasher, we hear testimony from three witnesses to the Holocaust: Lily, who explains, "When they took us to the trains / We didn't know where we were going"; Abraham, who says, "We knew they wanted to finish the Jews"; and Bela, who remembers well, "Yeah, we knew / They killed Jews / On our street too."

*Breindel Lieba Kasher*

## *Abraham*

What did we know?  
People were being sent out of the ghetto  
This was the time of Chelmno '42  
They were promised work  
They never returned  
We heard the word "extermination"  
The news spread that  
Jews from the small cities were shot dead  
We knew they wanted to finish the Jews

*You knew? You were only 11*

I knew everything  
I was already an old man  
The only thing I did not know was  
What happened to me?  
Why did I survive?



## *Lily*

In '41  
They took so many people  
We thought  
They would not take us  
The Germans came  
Maybe if I didn't open the door  
It was metal  
They could knock and knock  
Until tomorrow  
They couldn't break it down  
We were so naïve  
They took us to the trains  
Normal trains, not for cows

One thing  
The windows wouldn't open  
I was thinking, that is a bad sign

People ran  
My brother wanted to  
He said: I am running  
I said: Don't  
Our parents will worry  
He could have run home  
No one would have known  
I kept him back  
I cannot forgive myself for that  
We packed  
We didn't know where we were going  
I was laughing with friends thinking  
About living somewhere else

But then  
The windows wouldn't open  
I was thinking, that is a bad sign

## *Bela From Munkács*

*How much did Hungarians Jews know  
About what was happening to the Jews of Poland?*

We knew!

*About Auschwitz?*

Not about Auschwitz, but what  
If they killed Jews?  
Yeah, we knew  
They killed Jews  
On our street too  
They beat up my father  
For hiding  
Jews from Poland  
Who were running for their lives  
I saw people killed on the streets  
One, who was only 14  
An officer told him:  
"Boy, clean my shoes!"  
And the boy said no  
He was very wild  
Somehow, he had a gun  
And he fired  
He killed the officer  
Another officer killed him  
Heshey Goldstein  
He was a wild kid

Suzanna Eibuszyc, a child of survivors, explains that the seeds for writing about the Holocaust were "planted in my childhood. My entire life was a preparation to be a 'memorial candle.' I knew about the Holocaust from the time I was born," she believes, perhaps because "the terror my mother experienced was passed on to me through the sinewy strands of chemical inheritance known as genes," and "her knowing became mine." Read this personal reflection along with Bella Rubin's "The End of Innocence," pp. 44–49.

*Suzanna Eibuszyc*

## My Mother's Scars Became My Scars

**M**y very first knowing is the vivid memory of the sensation of fear. I was born being afraid. I believe the Holocaust left in its path a darkness and despair that enveloped both survivors and their children, those born in its aftermath, as I was. I am convinced that the terror my mother [Fig. 1] experienced was passed on to me through the sinewy strands of chemical inheritance known as genes.

I remember an image from when I was a baby in a stroller under a big tree. I wake up from a nap. I am alone, my only companion the canopy of leaves that move gently above me in the soft wind. The breeze soothes me, but I am scared. I sense that my mother is not with me and somehow know that I need her if I am to survive.

I experienced this fear for my survival repeatedly throughout my childhood. Once, my mother became physically ill and was taken to the hospital. My father learned quickly that as much as he tried, I could not accept him as a substitute for Mother, and our home life was anguished as my father, sister, and I waited, desperate for her to return.

I remember vividly the trauma I experienced as a 5-year-old when our city of Ziebice, Poland, held army maneuvers in the city square, right in front of our house. Although I understood that they were just exercises, showing off what the Polish army could do, I was inconsolable. I often wonder whether my oversensitivity to the sounds of gunfire and tanks rolling through the streets that day had something to do with my mother's surviving the bombing of Warsaw 15 years earlier. Were those sounds already familiar to me; were they part of my inherited genetic memory, passed down to me from my mother?

I was 6 years old when my mother took me to an art exhibit that came to our town. The exhibit was a tribute to mothers and children who suffered during the war. The art was frightening: It showed SS soldiers ripping children from mothers' arms, mothers being killed, and mothers



**FIG. 1.** The author's mother, Roma Talasiewicz-Eibuszyc, 1946, in a photo probably taken in Ziebice or Wroclaw in a photographer's studio. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Suzanna Eibuszyc.

begging for mercy. I was overwhelmed, not so much by the art, horrific as it was, but by the tears my mother shed as we walked through the gallery. When I think back to that day, I realize my mother had no idea the exhibit would be as disturbing as it was. She also probably thought I was too young to understand what I would see. The next morning, still lying in bed, I had a hallucination. SS



**FIG. 2.** Roma with her daughters in Ziebiec, 1955. Courtesy of Suzanna Eibuszyc.

soldiers were standing on each side of my bed. I knew I was not allowed to move. If I did, I was sure, they had orders to shoot me. I remained motionless, afraid to take a breath until my mother came looking for me.

That morning, my mother came to my rescue. I never burdened her with my daydream, though, because I remembered how she had cried as we walked through the exhibit and because I wanted to protect her.

My mother lived with the ghosts of her vanished family. Her decision to run away from Warsaw after the German invasion haunted her all her life. As a young woman of 22, she had said goodbye to her entire family thinking she would be back in a few weeks. To stay alive, she had to keep going east into the unknown on trains crammed with other refugees. Rather than returning home, she found herself deep in Stalinist Russia, far from family, full of remorse and regret. It was a decision, though, that saved her life.

She often talked about this large and loving family she had lost, but I never saw any photographs that connected her to them or proved that they had once lived. From my viewpoint, there was never any evidence that my mother's family had ever actually existed. Throughout my childhood, I grieved with my mother, although in truth, I could not comprehend how her family could have simply disappeared. I was frightened and confused when she told us stories about her parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, and also ashamed, because I did not believe her stories. As a child, I remember my mother mourning her five nieces and nephews. "So young and innocent, they should be among the living," is what she repeated. I tried to understand how they could have vanished, Adek, Sala, Anja. . . . In order for my child's mind to reconcile something I could not comprehend, I decided that my mother had made this family up.

Often my mother's gloom was too intense for me, but I continually found myself being pulled back into her world despite myself. Even as a small child, I found a way to protect myself when I imagined my life was in danger by withdrawing and retreating into my world. I would exile myself and build walls of protection around myself. I found this protection under our large kitchen table, which was covered by a crisp, white tablecloth that reached to the floor. I remember having an abnormal fear of people who came to our home often. I hid in my sanctuary and would not come out until they departed and the world was safe again. Under the table I felt safe and protected; no harm could come to me there. As a child in post-war Poland, countless times I had to watch our friends and neighbors pack their belongings and leave. From those early experiences, I learned that friendships were short-lived and that nothing around us was permanent. In that respect, our life after the war was oddly similar to my mother's description of life during the war.

I always knew about the Holocaust. As far back as I can remember, my mother shared her stories with me. The tales she told filled me with overwhelming sadness, but they also brought color to my drab existence in southwestern Communist Poland. My mother's childhood in Poland, her survival during the war, and her life after the Holocaust became part of me. I grew up in a home where my sister and I lived, day by day, haunted by a deep and inexplicable knowledge of my parents' experiences [Fig. 2]. Their psychic injuries, their traumas, were transmitted to us, the second generation. I absorbed my mother's abandonment and helplessness and I felt her fears and resignation. I lived with her habits, where every crumb of bread was precious, where fear of being cold was magnified, and where suspicion of others and secretiveness and mistrust watched over how she interacted with the outside world. Her scars became my scars. Her knowing became mine.

What treasures are housed in one mother's "metal filing cabinet, four drawers with a push lock," a cabinet so familiar in a previous era? Gail Fishman Gerwin writes of a "find of all finds."

*Gail Fishman Gerwin*

## *Find*

My mom's metal filing cabinet, four drawers with a push lock that bounces out with the key turn. My mom's grey

filing cabinet, moved from Paterson after her last illness, our loss. It sat alone, cold, unopened, for three decades.

Metal pick-up day looms, the township's big trucks on the way, time for the cabinet to go. I empty the drawers, one at a time,

the one with baby books, my sister's growth noted in detail, mine underneath hers, afterthoughts from a busy mother.

Candle that burned for seven days after my father died that January day before stents that might have saved him. And then:

the drawer of drawers. My parents' marriage certificate, letters *she* wrote, the telegram *he* sent, photos of cousins in Detroit,

aging parents, scattered sisters, all gone (she the baby, the last). Suddenly, find of all finds, two by five inches, a photo of

a jovial fellow, balanced atop a bench back, his feet on the seat, his shoes not unlike the low boots today's teens crave. Behind

him the park's trees. The photo inscription says he's in Plauen, 1929. He writes *To my beloved parents — to remember.*

He wears a tie, a white shirt, dark pants. A lunch break? Letters to Mama and Papa eight years hence describe those who will not

allow him to open his business. But here, atop the slatted bench in the peaceful park, one hand covering his left knee, he poses.

Elbow on his other knee, he holds a pipe between his teeth, perhaps teeth filled with gold, so important to those who will

send him, his wife, his family, to Eternity. In my mother's filing cabinet, he'd rested in sepia, two by five inches, my uncle — Louis.



Photo of Louis Stetzki in Plauen, Germany, 1929.  
Courtesy of Gail Fishman Gerwin.

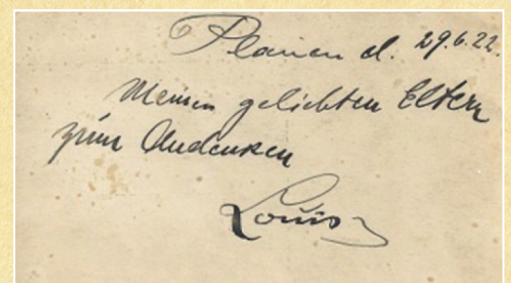


Photo inscription: Plauen, June 22, 1929.  
"To my beloved parents—to remember. Louis"  
Courtesy of Gail Fishman Gerwin.

Another find-of-all-finds from Gail Fishman Gerwin, also a photograph of a beloved relative, found in a box left to her by her mother. How many more photos that bring to life those who were murdered remain to be found in old gray file cabinets, in boxes bequeathed?

*Gail Fishman Gerwin*

## *I Find My Aunt Frieda in Sepia*

Oh Frieda my Aunt Frieda,  
there you stand in your weekend best,  
sunshine face, your frozen shadow  
reaches to the slatted fence behind you.

You gaze down at that round-cheeked  
baby in her pram, your eyes wide with  
the love of her, could you know you'd  
be leaving, your life turned vapor?

Oh Frieda, Frieda Diamant, your  
grandlove sparkles like your name,  
your finger wears the ring of devotion,  
*I am my beloved's, my beloved is mine.*

Next to you your pregnant daughter,  
polished nails curled 'round her husband's  
neck, the other hand reaching behind her  
back to clasp his arm, her smile serene, safe.

Will the gate behind you close soon? Is it  
late afternoon in the Poland you love?  
Does the rubble outside this corral alarm you  
though you still can walk through the portal?

Frieda, only forty-four yet you look years older, bunned hair, dark stockings, you look like someone I know, yes, you look like your sister – my mother. She cried, told me Hitler killed you, that you and your brother were lost, that this young couple, their child, escaped the gases, but how?

Oh Frieda my Aunt Frieda,  
the back of the photo, your writing,  
26.II 1938. Sent to my mother.  
Found in a box she left. Why now?

Frieda my Aunt Frieda, my notes  
across the wires to Yad Vashem,  
where spirits hover, waiting waiting,  
*find us, bring us home to those who follow.*

You cannot read the form I found online,  
precise records left by your careful-careless  
murderers, the tale of your travels – ghetto,  
boxcar to the camp, [click here](#), says the site,

***Final Solution***



Photo that inspired "I Find My Aunt Frieda in Sepia." Courtesy of Gail Fishman Gerwin.

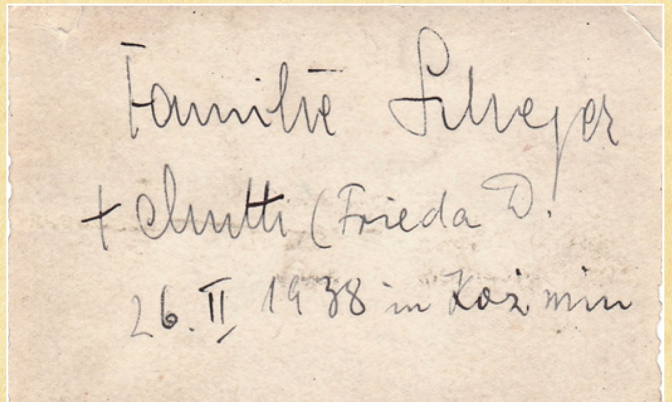


Photo inscription: From Frieda Diamont to the author's mother, 1938. Courtesy of Gail Fishman Gerwin.

**IN MEMORIAM**

My friend Gail Fishman Gerwin was a Renaissance woman of the highest order. A graduate of Goucher College (MD), she earned her Master's degree in creative writing from NYU, where she discovered an abiding love for writing poetry. Her first book (a poetry memoir), *Sugar and Sand*, was a 2010 Paterson Poetry Prize finalist; her second, *Dear Kinfolk*, received a 2013 Paterson Award for Literary Excellence. Her poem "A State in Mind" was a third-prize winner in the 2015 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Awards. Her most recent book, *Crowns*, was published in 2016. Her poetry, book reviews, short fiction, essays, and plays have appeared in a wide range of print journals and anthologies, in online literary journals, and on stage.

Gail loved presenting workshops, giving readings, and sharing her love of poetry with audiences of students, seniors, and every age in between. She was generous and caring, always ready to think of others before herself; her intelligence and quick wit were graced by a wonderful laugh. Her death diminishes us all.

—ADELE KENNY

"I am only nine," writes Kenneth Wolman, remembering the first time he saw the numbers, "jagged, purple," tattooed on the arms of two men who came into his Bronx, NY, living room to hang drapes.

*Kenneth Wolman*

## *The Drapers: A History Lesson*

Silent, they measure the windows,  
pass tape and yardstick back and forth,  
silent, the father and son,  
heavily, heavy, to shut out the light,  
filling the room with their silence.

Only their numbers speak:  
jagged, purple, like wounds that themselves are knives  
seeming even now to stab the wearers' arms.  
When I hand the father the tape he has dropped,  
I stare at the numbers, then into his face,  
and his eyes jump as from a soft shock,  
swirling away from the question he fears.

But I am only nine, the ignorant son  
who cannot conceive, so cannot ask.  
And seeing so, he takes the tape, nods,  
then turns to his son who watches,  
and in their faces, the smiles of knowledge  
harden like putty lips on a sacrificial mask:  
not from mockery of an ignorant boy,  
but from hiding still that special place  
where nothing grew, not even questions.

Kenneth Wolman writes about the genesis of his poem and the questions raised in this issue: When did you know? How did you learn? What was the effect of the knowledge on your heart and soul?

*Kenneth Wolman*

## The Drapers: A History Lesson in Our Living Room

The two men in my poem—father and grown son—were real: my mother had hired them to cut and hang drapes in the apartment. In 1992 or 1993, when I wrote it, what stuck was what sticks now: their silence. It was as though they either didn't know how to speak or had lost the need for it. Maybe, I sometimes think, speech

would have reminded them of life before the War, before the experiences that changed them into forced-smiling mules. I don't know their original nationality or where they were imprisoned. I don't know whether they were in an extermination camp, were "simply" interned, or were slave laborers. In the end, it makes no difference. For all they did not say, they were the first two people ever to show me the Shoah, and they did so by having their sleeves rolled up on a warm day in the Bronx. Those tattoos got my attention, their attention that I was paying attention, and a world of both curiosity and fear that has never left me.

If we ourselves are not the children of survivors, how old are we when we first learn about the Shoah? We are not born knowing about it: the knowledge creeps in gradually, perhaps even insidiously. I recall that when I asked my mother about the numbers, she was evasive. Only years later did I learn the frightful truth behind those obscene purple tattoos and intuit that those two men were the recipients of a miracle, but a backhanded one. Father and son both had lived, but they did so to enter a world of silence and memory. Wherever they are now—for I must presume by now they both are dead—may their souls have found rest and peace.



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"How did I feel," asks Bella Rubin, "when I first became aware of the Holocaust? What did I know? What did I understand? In what ways was my life transformed by this knowledge and understanding? As Elie Wiesel said, 'I write to understand as much as to be understood' (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 8). I wrote this essay so that I, as well as my readers, might better understand the experience of losing my innocence as I gained knowledge of the Holocaust."

*Bella Rubin*

## The End of Innocence

I may never know for certain how my life choices were affected by my knowledge of my survivor parents' experiences and of the Holocaust itself or why I behave as I do, but as my story unfolds and is reflected in the experiences of two of my friends, certain common threads are revealed, weaving themselves in and out of our lives.

I was born in Germany, in the Föhrenwald displaced persons (DP) camp [Fig. 1], in 1945. I grew up in Brooklyn, was schooled there from elementary school to Brooklyn College, married an Israeli, and moved to Israel, where we raised our children.

My parents had never been in a camp or ghetto. They were partisans, members of the Bielski Otriad (partisan camp), the largest Jewish family partisan camp in Poland, today Belarus. My mother, Taube, was the sister of Tuvia, the legendary commander of the Bielski Brothers brigade, as well as of Zus, Asael, and her youngest brother, Aron. My earliest recollections of hearing about the Holocaust are from vivid, life-affirming stories told by my parents when I was very young. Not only did they often speak about their experiences of hiding out in the Naliboki forests in great detail, they also relived those days again and again through these tales, usually when gathering with our large extended family of aunts and uncles, cousins, and partisan *lantzmen* (countrymen) at the Belle Harbor, New York, home of my uncle and aunt, Walter and Ruth Bell, where the food was plentiful and the vodka flowed [Fig. 2].

"C'mon, have another schnaps, Avremel," Uncle Zus used to shout, slapping my father on the back. My father, red-cheeked and smiling, was only too happy to raise his glass again. Walter, the eldest of the 12 Bielski children, and his brother Nathan had made their way to the US before the war, settling in New York but remaining faithfully connected to the rest of the Bielski clan. Walter, as our guarantor, brought us out of the DP camp in 1949, gave



**FIG. 1.** The Dzienciolski family in the Föhrenwald DP camp, Germany, 1945. The author as an infant (middle, seated) with her parents, Taube and Avremel Dzienciolski; from left, Aunt Rachel and Grandmother Idke; on right, Aunt Haya and baby cousin Assi. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Bella Rubin.

my father his first job at his Rotuba Plastics factory, and later did the same for the other Bielski Brothers survivors and their families when they eventually arrived from Israel, where they had been living after the war.

It was at these family gatherings that the partisan stories rolled out like waterfalls splashing down into a canyon, among animated voices and bursts of laughter, till late in the evening. For the Bielski kids, it was great fun. For me, it was a chance to play with my cousin Albee's trucks and my cousin Marilyn's dolls, toys the likes of which I had never seen before. At the same time, I remember listening to the stories and connecting pieces of a puzzle that when fitted together would form a picture of my parents as heroic partisans, though at the time I had no idea what a partisan was. This became a treasury of infor-



**FIG. 2.** The extended Bielski and Bell families in New York, ca. 1953. Third from left standing are the author's father and mother, Avremel and Taube Dzienciolski; the author is seated in the middle. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Bella Rubin.

mation and emotions absorbed by my curious mind, imprinted in my memory forever. I remember begging my parents on many a snowy day when schools were closed and my father was stuck at home to tell us about their time in the forests, sitting around a campfire roasting *kartuffle* (potatoes). We called them *tsigeiner misces* (Roma stories). I so much loved listening to these tales of my parents hiding from the Germans. My father's face, often downcast, would brighten up as he laughed at how they kept themselves warm dressed in layers of clothes or how they ate potato soup cooked in a big pot over the camp fire. They slept in *zimlankas*, wooden dugouts, buried deep in the forest ground, covered with snow in winter. My mother, sometimes silent, sometimes intensely animated, would proudly describe my tall Uncle Tuvia, the camp commander, riding around on a white horse, respected by everyone.

In these stories of their past, my parents were simply having an adventure, living freely in the safety of the forests, defying the Nazi guns and tanks. I had no idea who the Nazis were or why my parents were heroes. In our everyday life in America, they could hardly speak English, looked different, and acted differently from my friends' parents on the block. They had very little money and never took vacations or went to restaurants, never sent us to summer camps like the American kids. When they were not among family members, they were often quiet and unhappy. To my young mind, typical heroes they were not.

They had, though, lived an exciting life. Why, then, was the mood in our home so often somber and tense? I felt, but could not understand, the ambivalence that structured and shaped our family life. On one hand, I felt guilty, because along with the happy accounts they often gave of their time in the forest, I knew that they had also suffered through freezing cold winters with little food, living with uncertainty, always in fear of what would happen if the Germans discovered their camp. Most of all, although this was not a topic of conversation, I knew somehow that they had been forced to give up their first child, Lola [Fig. 3], when she was only nine months old, in the hope of saving



her life. They had given her to a childless Polish couple to be raised as their own Christian child until they could return to take her home, and they never stopped worrying that they would never see her again. Even when they were finally reunited, guilt over giving

**FIG. 3.** The author and her older sister, Lola, Föhrenwald DP camp, Germany, ca. 1947. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Bella Rubin.

her away and their fear of being separated from her again colored their emotions and shadowed our home.

While my parents and paternal grandparents were partisans, my mother's parents were not, and feelings of guilt would envelope me when my mother mourned the loss of her mother and father, who were rounded up and murdered along with more than 4,000 other Jews in 1941 in Novogrudek (Duffy, 2003, p. 51). From time to time, she would lapse into a melancholy state.

"I dreamt about my father," she once said. "I thought he was here sitting at the table. Where has he gone?"

Understandably, my mother was prone to nervous breakdowns, as they were called then. During one episode, she lay in bed, grabbing onto my hand, not allowing me to go to school.

"Don't go out," she instructed. "Don't let your sister go out. The Germans are after you. They'll kill you!" I was about 13 at the time and felt frightened and confused, not knowing what to do. I felt a sense of responsibility and wanted to help my mother, but I was unable to. My older sister, Lola, had married young and moved to another state, leaving me to care for my younger sister, Charlotte. We both had to go to school. I began to feel trapped. This may have been the first time that I sensed that the terrible things that had happened during the Holocaust had had a powerful and destructive effect on my mother. This knowledge changed me: It depressed me, but it also fired my desire to set myself free of the grasp that the Holocaust had on my parents, and I started feeling that I had to escape.

My mother's paranoia returned many times, as she relayed to me, again and again, that the world was a hostile place, full of dangers. Somehow, though, my mother pulled herself out of her depression. She had the resilience and the resources, some form of mental strength that enabled her to find the will to go on with life and not succumb completely to her emotional burdens.

Perhaps this ambivalence was why I had grown up feeling as if I had another world inside me, an inner world full of vivid images of the past. It was as if there were a secret door, similar to the one described by a child survivor in Savran and Fogelman (1979, p. 149) or to the iron box in Helen Epstein's account (1979, p. 9). I lived an ordinary life filled with school activities, music, and friends, but from time to time, a secret door would open and I would picture myself in the DP camp, feeling afraid. I saw myself walking with my father across railroad tracks, my hand held tightly in his, imagining what would happen if he let me go. I saw a huge balloon floating down toward me, threatening to sweep me away from my parents. My inner world, replete with intense emotions—feelings of loneliness, the fear of separation—grew and grew, not to be shared until I began a journey through psychotherapy in my early 20s.

Fortunately, I developed ways of escaping these negative thoughts by being active in sports with the boys in the neighborhood—playing ball, swimming, roller-skating, and riding sleighs—and by playing the piano. I also began reading voraciously and succeeded, temporarily, in wiping out dreadful thoughts of seeing myself as a 2-year-old separated from my mother while I was kept in the DP camp clinic during a bout of illness. It was only after I started reading Holocaust literature as a teenager that I learned about the enormous suffering of the Jews and the millions of deaths in the camps. I was in a state of shock. Knowing these things completely changed the way I understood the Holocaust. It was no longer about my family's terrifying but thrilling adventures in the forests. It was about evil—evil people committing evil acts against my family and other Jews.

While growing up, I was unaware that I was experiencing a range of feelings common to children of survivors—feelings of guilt, separation anxiety, fear of the future, an uncomfortable sense of being different from others. I often felt that something ominous hung over me, especially when good things were happening in my life. Nothing good could possibly last. Somehow, I did not deserve happiness.

According to Savran and Fogelman (1979), "being a child of Holocaust survivors is an identity" (p. 149). I must have been developing this identity from a young age, because unlike in many other survivor families, my parents and extended family members actively and regularly brought the Holocaust and all of its implications into my life. As did many other children of survivors, I wanted very much to please my parents, to accomplish what they had not. As I look back at those formative years and try to understand what I knew and did not yet know, I realize I must have been trying both to gain everything that my parents had lost—acceptance, recognition, economic stability—and to give back to my parents what I felt they deserved because of their suffering in the forest.

An incident comes to mind. When I was about 14, I brought home from school a borrowed violin to practice on for an upcoming concert. I began to play "Orchichonia," a tune I knew they would recognize. Their eyes lit up, smiles breaking out on their faces: How happy they were that their daughter could bring them back into the *shtetls* (Jewish villages) of the pre-war old country, where fiddlers strode around during weddings and holidays! My father loved the fiddle and began singing his favorite song, "Berlele Mit den Bas." I had managed to make my parents and myself happy, if only for the moment. At the same time, I was terribly disappointed, even angry, that they did not buy me my own violin and pay for private lessons, which would have improved my chances of excelling in music—and wouldn't that have been a great way to show Hitler that we had won, after all!

## RECOLLECTIONS OF A CLOSE FRIEND: THE STORY OF RACHEL

"I don't know why, but I always felt that something was hanging over me, something bad was going to happen," said Rachel, the daughter of Holocaust survivors. I had asked Rachel how she had learned about the Holocaust and about her parents' experiences. Her mother had survived Auschwitz and was liberated at Zaltzwedel in 1945, and her father survived forced labor in Hungary at the Komaron coal mines, and later the Red Army. They had met in 1946, married, gone to the Garbese DP camp in Germany, had their first child, Rachel [Fig. 4], in 1947, and emigrated to the US in 1949.



**FIG. 4.** Rachel and her parents, Bella and David Pearl, in the Garbese DP camp, Germany, 1949. Courtesy of Rachel Bitan.

Rachel and I have many parallels in our lives. She describes feeling different from the Americans in her Brooklyn neighborhood: "I was carrying a secret with me always. I was the only one of my friends who was the child of survivors; I never talked about it, because they never asked." She remembers her teacher asking, "What's your name?" When she replied, "Rachel," clearly a Jewish name, her teacher, apparently unfamiliar with it, said, "We'll call you Ray." Embarrassed, Rachel timidly accepted her teacher's decision.

In another incident, when she was about five, one of Rachel's friends asked, "Why did you kill Christ?" Rachel had no idea what she was talking about.

Her parents' entire social life centered on relatives and friends from their hometowns in Czechoslovakia. In Rachel's words, "The Holocaust was always there. It wasn't hidden. It was part of my family life, part of my identity. It wasn't taboo." Unlike in many other families, Rachel's parents spoke about their past, but in carefully chosen words. Her mother would tell about everyday incidents, mentioning that at times she had been cold and hungry, but always withholding graphic details about death or illness or the brutality of the camps. She never revealed to Rachel what had happened to her when she arrived at the entrance to Auschwitz and experienced the selection process. It was only during the *shiva* (week of mourning) after her mother's death many years later that Rachel learned from a close friend of her mother's what had taken place there—that her mother had seen her mother and other family members sent to the crematoria.

"I was in shock," recalls Rachel. "How many other terrible things did my mother go through that she didn't tell me about? How much did I not know?" She knew that her mother tended to bury things that were too difficult for her to talk about, but now she would always wonder about the other unknowns in her mother's life, the true extent of her suffering. She reflected on the fact that her mother, too, underwent a period of depression. In recalling her mother's emotional state at that time, Rachel said, "I think all these things came from the Shoah."

Rachel believes, as I do, that many aspects of her life have been shaped by her knowledge of the Holocaust. As a teenager, she began reading a great deal of Holocaust literature and became deeply depressed. She often thought, "What's the purpose of life? Who wants to live in a world like this? There's no sense living in such an evil and indifferent world." She felt disillusioned with the world, "as if a cloud were hanging over me," she recalls. Her life would never be the same after this knowledge of the Holocaust.

## A KIBBUTZNIK'S PERSPECTIVE: ILAN'S STORY

Ilan Bomfeld's childhood serves as a counterpoint to Rachel's and mine. Born in Paris in 1949, the son of survivors, he grew up in Israel. His mother [Fig. 5] had survived the Lodz Ghetto, Auschwitz, and a death march, and had been liberated by the American army in May 1945.

His father survived as well, but died suddenly when Ilan was only three. The family had lived in relative comfort, but after her husband's death, Ilan's mom had to work for the first time, leaving her only son in the care of others. She tried various arrangements but eventually decided, when Ilan was six, that Kibbutz Hatzetim, where 11 children from outside who had been adopted by the kibbutz lived



**FIG. 5.** Ilan's mother in Lodz, Poland, ca. 1938. Courtesy of Ilan Bomfeld.

without their parents in a group known as *Yaldei Hutz*, was the ideal place for him to grow up, even though it meant they would be separated while she lived and worked in Tel Aviv. She arranged to pay for his care while he lived and went to school there. Every two weeks she took the four-hour bus ride from Tel Aviv to visit him [Fig. 6].

Ilan's memories from his early childhood are generally pleasant. He never felt abandoned by his mother, but he remembers inventing a story when the other children asked where his father was and why he didn't come to visit. He told them his father had been a war hero, fighting with the resistance. In actuality, his father had been conscripted into the French Army reserves and died of a stroke after the war; Ilan has no memory of him. Wanderman (1979), in early studies of survivors and their children, notes, "Children of survivors tend to emphasize the heroic aspects of the parents' past, negating or denying their suffering" (p. 121).

Ilan, too, saw himself as being different from the other children. He was blond and blue-eyed [Fig. 7], not a typical child of refugees. He had no accent in Hebrew, having decided to stop speaking French, and was chosen to represent Tel Aviv when the president of Israel came to his school. He recalls how proud he was of himself; this was



**FIG. 6.** Ilan and his mother in Tel Aviv, ca. 1953. Courtesy of Ilan Bomfeld.

proof, he felt, that he had been transformed from being the son of an immigrant into a true Israeli.

According to Wanderman, some children of survivors developed a "self-image of elitism" (p. 122). Years later, he would identify with Dahn Ben-Amotz, a symbol in Israeli popular culture of what was considered to be an authentic Israeli, escaping from and wiping away the past, suppressing his feelings about being the son of survivors.

He remembers learning many details about the Holocaust during the Eichmann trial in 1962, when the facts of the survivors' ordeals began to emerge on daily radio broadcasts. His mother then also began talking about her experiences. Ilan listened in horror when she described what happened to her when she arrived at Auschwitz. During the selection, she made herself 10 years younger, hoping to survive incarceration by appearing fit for work. Her mother and sister were sent to the left; she was sent to the right and wound up in Birkenau, later working in a munitions factory. She never saw her mother and sister again. Ilan, 13 when he first learned his mother's story, remembers feeling deep hatred for the first time in his life—toward all Germans. Later, Ilan learned more of his mother's experience. She revealed an incident in which the *Kapo* (prisoner with supervisory responsibilities) told the inmates that

there was soup left over and asked who wanted more. Ilan's mother refused on principle, insisting, "I wouldn't ask for more!" even though she was starving. The Kapo gave the leftover soup to the two who didn't ask: Ilan's mother and another inmate.

Ilan admires his mother's physical and moral strength, her strong will to survive, her ability to live and enjoy life despite what she had endured, and the fact that "my mother made a break [from her past] and she lived her life."

Although entire aspects of his mother's past were not open to discussion, Ilan eventually became aware of the extent of her suffering, and he feels that because of this, he has acquired a sense of empathy toward others.

### THE MOMENT OF KNOWING

For Rachel and me, the moment of deep knowing came when we were teenagers reading about the Holocaust and connecting what we read to our parents' experiences, filling in the gaps in the stories of our childhood. We learned that evil exists in the world and each in our own way decided to live out our lives in recognition of this knowledge. Ilan's ultimate end of innocence came when his mother began describing details of her past and what she had suffered, evoking in Ilan feelings of hatred at first, but later a deep sense of pride in his mother's strength and determination to live her life to the fullest. This led him to approach life in the same way.

Knowing about the Holocaust thrust us into a reality different from what we thought we had known before. It

made us see ourselves and the world through a different lens, and what we saw shaped our choices in and our approach to life. For Rachel and me, it committed us to living in Israel and raising our family there. As for Ilan, it transformed him from someone trying to live an idealized version of himself, separate from his past, into a man with a more realistic understanding and acceptance of his legacy and of who he is. The knowledge ended our innocence. It has also enriched us: We understand more completely where we came from, who we are today, and where we may be going.

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FIG. 7. Ilan (left) on the kibbutz, ca. 1961. Courtesy of Ilan Bomfeld.

The protagonist in "Skating with Kurt" is 12, so this poem in particular can help your students understand the necessity of thinking beyond themselves to touch those with whom they interact. What is *their* history? What makes *them* who they are? How can this knowledge contribute to understanding someone else's actions and enhancing human relationships? Read with Kenneth Wolman's "The Drapers: A History Lesson," p. 42.

Gail Fishman Gerwin

## *Skating With Kurt*

He'd come to our flat on Madison Avenue,  
Mr. Schlossberger, a young man with thick hair  
and a heavy accent that usually marked the old.  
He'd climb the painted stairs to our front porch  
and, despite his sweetness, his soft voice, I felt terror  
when I heard those footfalls. *She practices at her lesson,*  
my mother would say, eyes narrowed with disappointment.  
I hadn't practiced.

Final piece — *The Skater's Waltz* from John Thompson's  
red book. My right hand banged chords without grace,  
the left added the bum bum to move the melodic line —  
*daaaa, bum bum, daa, bum daa daa* — Mr. Schlossberger  
counting *von two szree, von two szree*, as he tried to match  
my tempo. That piece ended my piano career; the Sohmer spinet  
went silent.

I once walked all the way to Fourteenth and Thirtieth  
to visit Mr. Schlossberger, met his wife, his young sons.  
At twelve, I didn't know, while my practice lessons took me  
up and down a keyboard that loomed like doom, that he'd trekked  
in silence through Europe and beyond, that his treacherous journey  
over mountain peaks took him away from Evil, that the notes  
he proffered freed him from this memory.

"This true story," writes Ellen R. Singer, "is dedicated to the men and women who found the resolve and courage to survive the Holocaust and bring into being a second generation." Singer's personal reflection is about her survivor father, "someone I only thought I knew." Compare this narrative with the recollections of Suzanna Eibuszyc (pp. 37–38) and Bella Rubin (pp. 44–49).

*Ellen R. Singer*

## Second Survivor

Family life is not a neutral reality that we achieve by research and consensus, but a story, in which the characters and the crucial actions are different depending on who is telling the story.  
Lanchester (2007), pp. 35–36

No matter who we are, our life has a mind of its own, unwinding on a journey that unexpectedly turns messy now and then along the way. Its pathways twist and turn on a random course, while an emotional dance repeats itself with habitual regularity.

We are all born into an abiding story with a unique history of its own. I knew from the start that other families were not like mine. I am the sole offspring of two Holocaust survivors whose entire immediate families were annihilated by Hitler's Third Reich. Unlike typical American families, mine did not include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other close relatives. The loss and absence of an extended family support system contributed to my primary learned emotions: depression, grief, guilt, and helplessness. Children of Holocaust survivors—the Second Generation, as we are also known—were in secondary ways victims of the Nazi death camps, a victimhood different from that of their ancestors who had experienced the horrors of the camps in the flesh. How could these survivors have raised children without transmitting to their offspring the traumas of their past? I speak only for myself when I say that my communal birthright has had a mixed yet long-lasting influence on my life, and I assume it has also left a permanent impression and scars on the lives of many other second-generation offspring as well. No matter what direction my life takes in the time left ahead, I have learned a valuable lesson from the Holocaust and its effects. Ultimately, life's fickleness has changed me forever.

My biological parents met and were married in a displaced persons camp following World War II. After they came to America, the war unfortunately took its toll on my mother. She was institutionalized when I was about two

years of age, and their marriage ended in divorce. My father assumed custody of me and placed me with relatives and in foster homes until I was 10 years old. At this time, he married a woman who was not a survivor, and I was raised by her. He sheltered me from the truth about my biological mother until adulthood. Sadly, after learning it and meeting her, I moved out of the state and was unable to develop a relationship with her before she died.

Long past the time of innocence, I continued to hold fast to my childhood beliefs that families endure forever. I continued to adore my father as I did when I was a little girl. He meant everything to me. I wanted to do everything for him, if only to remove the grimace from his face, the slump from his walk, the sadness from his eyes, and the eerie stillness from his voice, all of which I often didn't see, failed to understand, or chose to ignore. These melancholy mannerisms, which surfaced now and then, seemed to belong to someone I only thought I knew.

An unusual man, he spoke softly, in a thick, European accent. No matter how hard he tried to overcome his greatest language difficulties, he always pronounced W as V and imperfectly vocalized *th*, saying *Marta* instead of *Martha*. Talented in so many ways, he invented, constructed, and repaired anything and everything. When I cried and cried about my broken Susie Walker doll, he made her new and whole again. He was musical and light-footed, crooning to me like Perry Como as he readied me for bed. I transformed my night clothes into a fancy ball gown while he, in a makeshift tuxedo, twirled me around. His dance steps mimicked Fred Astaire's and he turned me into his glamorous partner, Ginger. We danced along to Perry Como's recording of *Catch a Falling Star*.



“Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket, never let it fade away. Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket, save it for a rainy day. . . .” And each time he sang the song, he placed a coin in my piggy bank.

“Always save your pennies, Malkie.<sup>1</sup> You’ll never know when they might save your life.”

On special Saturday nights, after a welcome taste of schnapps, he took out his cut-rate harmonica. He held it gently and blew into it softly as if his breath were touching a woman for the very first time. A self-taught yet satisfactory musician, he played for me the only two songs he knew well: *Hatikva* (the Israeli national anthem) and *You Are My Sunshine*, the only American tune he had memorized and the only melody he had ever mastered on his harmonica. His rendition of *Sunshine* made me feel warm inside. I loved his mellow, exotic baritone voice and the words of that playful song, but above all, I loved the lyrics. He wasn’t one for saying, “I love you,” but I always heard the sentiment through the lyrics of that song.

“You know the words, Malkie,” he said, but I always preferred him to sing the homespun, schmaltzy lyrics, and I made him sing them again and yet again: “You are my sunshine, / My only sunshine. / You make me happy / When skies are gray. / You’ll never know, dear, / How much I love you. / Please don’t take my sunshine away.”

Some of my favorite memories bring to mind times when we dressed up in whatever finery we could muster and pretended to be rich American folks. When he could afford it, we went to Radio City Music Hall to see the Rockettes. On those Sundays, we ate hot, tasty knishes with mustard at Katz’s Delicatessen and drank Dr. Brown’s black cherry soda to wash them down. Although I finally got used to it, it sometimes bothered me when he ate so quickly and with such an incredible gusto, allowing mustard to flow down the sides of his mouth and potato filling to stick to the sides of his cheeks.

On occasion, when he worked overtime and money wasn’t a problem, we shamelessly stuffed ourselves even further with something expensive, sweet, and gooey. I usually chose a chocolate sundae topped with whipped cream, sprinkles, and a maraschino cherry. From time to time, he mentioned America’s abundance and extravagant attitudes concerning food and compared them to the starvation that had been rampant in Europe not long before.

“What about the poor children, Daddy?” I asked. “What did they have to eat?” He had no answers for me back then. He rarely talked much about his life during those days and quite frankly, I wasn’t especially interested in them at the time.

Despite the despair of a man who suffered immensely, if silently and secretly, his entire life, he presented himself to the world as a friendly, cheerful, and down-to-earth immigrant. Everyone liked him: Jews and non-Jews alike;

men and also women; co-workers, union reps, and bosses; shopkeepers and government officials; old people, children, and babies. Even dogs and cats seemed to take a fancy to him. Little did I know that my one-sided optimistic portrayal of the man I once called Daddy corresponded to a profound and darker side. [Fig. 1]



**FIG. 1.** Esther (Malkie) and her father, Avram. Esther is approximately seven years old. Courtesy Ellen R. Singer.

### FRAGMENTS OF KNOWLEDGE

The story of his life unfolded piecemeal. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t have at least a dim awareness of his experiences of organized hate and mistreatment, but it was only through fragmentary knowledge and isolated details. Although I can’t precisely remember the first time I heard the terms *Nazis*, *concentration camps*, and *mass murder*, I do recall my formative years being consumed by a curiosity about the Holocaust that exceeded the normal boundaries of childhood inquisitiveness. At a tender age, I doubt whether I possessed the emotional or intellectual capacity to conceptualize images such as gas chambers or numbers as great as six million. At this time, the extent of my knowledge about the Holocaust amounted to Dad’s concise, watered down, and dispassionate accounts.

“There were some bad people in Germany and Poland who didn’t like Jews, just because they were Jews. So they hurt them.”

“Will these bad men come here and hurt me, too?”

“No, Malkie. That was a long time ago and it was far away from here. We live in a free country and are safe here in America.”

When I asked him why he had KL tattooed on his right forearm and also asked, “Did it hurt when the needle went

through your skin?" he flippantly countered with, "It wasn't any worse than going to the dentist." My wide-eyed expression displayed complete astonishment!

"Daddy, why did your family die and you live? Why didn't God come and save them, too?"

Dad answered, "The last time I saw my mother alive, Malkie, she said this to me: 'Avram, you are young, you are strong, and you are smart. Of all my children, you will be the one to live and tell the world what they did to us.' She was right, Malkie. I was strong and I survived, but I never will ever be able to talk about what they did to us."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He did not face me directly, but continued, "I refused to let them destroy me. Somehow I found the strength to suffer the hardships and come out alive when no one else in the family was able to or lucky enough. I survived to be your daddy, Malkie. That's all I can tell you. That's all I know. Enough questions now. *Genug iz genug* [enough is enough]!"

From the age of 13 until the conclusion of the war, he had survived each horrific phase of the Holocaust: ghetto, forced-labor camps, concentration camps, and a death camp, entirely on his own. As I matured, I realized that he had protected me, for his benefit as well as for mine, from something more heinous than I could ever have imagined. How could a young, naive American girl make sense out of the knowledge of such an evil world? Without much help from him, I was left to work through his unfinished business and make it my own.

My father lived a productive, American life, yet he continued to keep his secrets buried, even from me. In his 60s, a strong and resonant inner voice emerged. He spent his remaining years lecturing to high school and college students about the Holocaust. At age 82, my father succumbed to melanoma. Although I continue to have unanswered questions about his life, I have been able to make peace with the "unknowing."

*And yet they, who passed away long ago, still exist in us, as predisposition, as burden upon our fate, as murmuring blood, and as gesture that rises up from the depths of time.*

Rilke (1903), p. 21

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#### END NOTES

[1] Although my Hebrew name is Esther, Dad sometimes called me by the nickname Malkie, a diminutive of the name Malka. In his understanding, Malkie meant "little queen" rather than "little Malka." I believe that this was in remembrance of his fraternal twin sister, who perished during the war.

“What was it that propelled my quest to understand events that I had stumbled upon as a child?” asks Mary Todd. She concludes, as have others, that “the work of dealing with this matter” will—and must—last a lifetime.

Mary Todd

## Remember That

Lisa Derman stood up. “Why are you doing this?” she asked. “You’re not Jewish.” I stood more slowly and searched for words. “I have to,” I replied. “I need to understand.” I had just finished taping an oral history with Lisa and her husband, Aron, for my master’s thesis on the spiritual resistance of Jewish women in the Holocaust.

Her question spoke aloud the very one I had been asking myself for years: What was it that propelled my quest to understand events that I had stumbled upon as a child? What drove my curiosity about images that had never left me once I had first seen them?

I was 11, possibly 12, when I discovered it in my mother’s desk: a souvenir booklet from Dachau. My eldest brother had brought it back from a military tour in Germany in the late 1950s. I knew I was not meant to see this, but my curiosity got the better of me. I was transfixed by what I was holding in my hands, a book with three titles. More accurately, the booklet had one title repeated in three languages—English, German, and French. The only words I could read were stark, yet puzzling: *Remember That*. [Fig. 1.]



FIG. 1. Book cover. Courtesy of Mary Todd.

I don’t recall ever reading the actual text of this visitor’s guide at the time, as the photos and graphics were more compelling. I knew one thing: I could not ask anyone to

help me make sense of what at my age I should never have been looking at, images of ovens and corpses and graves, with fragments of identification as captions. I had never seen anything like it.

Printed in a three-column format, one for each language, the booklet has no date, no copyright; it identifies no author. The voice of its sparse text is seemingly that of a former prisoner at the camp and echoes survivor memoirs in its detail of endlessly oppressive conditions: hard and often pointless labor, punishments, medical experiments, roll calls, and executions.

The reader is cautioned that graphics “must compensate for the photographs” of events too awful to be captured on film or, if captured, included. The graphics, themselves awful enough, are the work of Jan Komski, a Polish artist and resister who had been interned in Auschwitz and liberated at Dachau. The grainy black-and-white photographs are stark, depicting one grim aspect of the camp after another: prisoners, crematorium, transports, barbed wire. [Fig. 2.]

The title of the Dachau booklet—*Remember That* (*Denket Daran* in German)—is a shortened version of the words on a commemorative stone at the entrance to the crematorium: *Remember how we died here*.

Dachau, the first Nazi concentration camp, opened in 1933 on the site of a World War I munitions plant as a facility for political prisoners. It became a model for the vast camp system the Nazis established, first in Germany, then across the Reich. The only color in the otherwise monochromatic booklet is in a chart of the badge system used in the camp, noting the colored triangles prisoners wore—red for Communists, green for criminals, pink for homosexuals, blue for emigrants, black for asocials—and then a second row showing a triangle of each color superimposed on an inverted yellow triangle, indicating the prisoner was Jewish.

### THE JOURNEY

Growing up in a German American family, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, I was a church nerd for as long as I can remember. Preachers’ kids can be like that. As a child, I

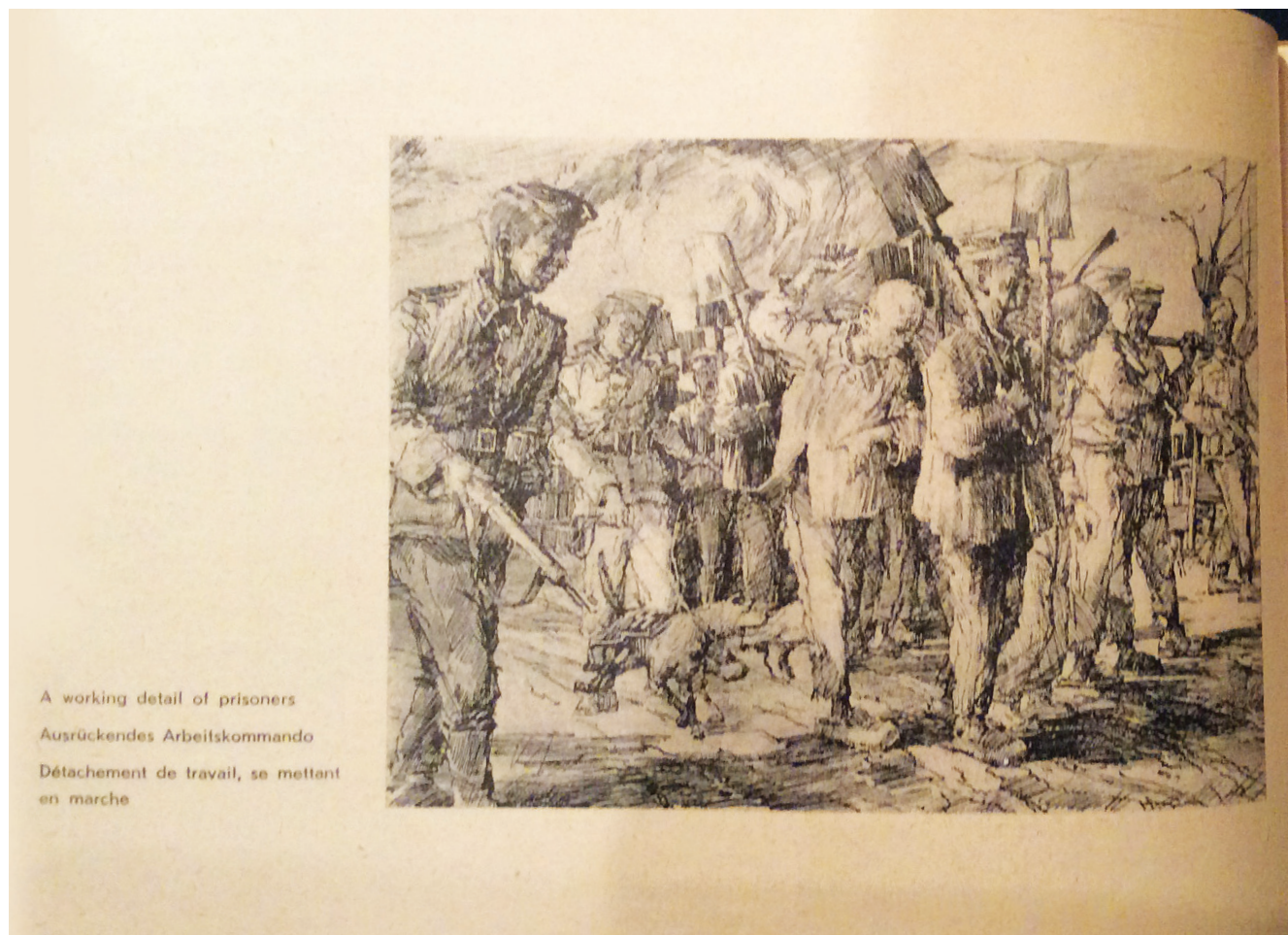


FIG. 2. Page 10 of *Remember That*. Courtesy of Mary Todd.

was surrounded by a family of adults, as my siblings were all grown when I came along. We lived in a parsonage next door to the church in a blue-collar suburb of Chicago, and I attended a local Lutheran school until we moved to suburban Cleveland, when I was 11.

The 1960s were my high school and college years. Despite being a history major, I learned little about World War II and nothing about the events I had seen in the booklet. In the religion courses I took at my Lutheran university, I studied Judaism's influence on Christianity and cutting-edge scholarship on the Hebrew Scriptures, but nothing of Jewish history, and nothing at all of the Holocaust.

I began my professional career as a high school social studies teacher, teaching everything but history. Soon after college, reading William Shirer's massive *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1970) provided a foundation for my slowly emerging awareness of what had happened only 25 years earlier. Two passages confounded me, and I returned to them over and over. They had to do with Luther's influence on the German people:

There is not space in this book to recount adequately the immense influence that Martin Luther, the Saxon priest who became an Augustinian monk and launched the German Reformation, had on the Germans and their subsequent history. But it may be said, in passing, that this towering but erratic genius, this savage anti-Semite and hater of Rome, who combined in his tempestuous character so many of the best and the worst qualities of the German—the coarseness, the boisterousness, the fanaticism, the intolerance, the violence, but also the honesty, the simplicity, the self-scrutiny, the passion for learning and for music and for poetry and for righteousness in the eyes of God—left a mark on the life of the Germans, for both good and bad, more indelible, more fateful, than was wrought by any other single individual since. (p. 134)

Later, more directly linking Luther to the Third Reich, Shirer adds:

It is difficult to understand the behavior of most German Protestants in the first Nazi years unless one is aware

of two things: their history and the influence of Martin Luther. The great founder of Protestantism was both a passionate anti-Semite and a ferocious believer in absolute obedience to political authority. He wanted Germany rid of the Jews . . . advice that was literally followed four centuries later by Hitler, Goering, and Himmler. (pp. 326–327)

Lutherans revere Martin Luther as the founder of their tradition, a brilliant theologian who, when facing not only the papal representative but the Holy Roman Emperor himself, refused to recant his writings, saying, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.” Shirer’s description of Luther profoundly challenged my perception of this hero of the faith. How does one reconcile antisemitism in a champion of Christian liberty?

The 1970s introduced a new genre in television drama: the miniseries. Best known among these productions was *Roots*, Alex Haley’s powerful story of Africans brought to the United States to be enslaved in the American South. A year later, in 1978, a four-part series simply called *Holocaust* featured a young Meryl Streep in the story of a German Jewish family’s increasingly perilous journey through the gathering darkness of Nazi Germany. The series was my first visual encounter with the events of the Holocaust since my discovery of the hidden booklet, and though it was fictional—and in Elie Wiesel’s assessment, “an insult to those who perished and to those who survived”—my need to know more about the Shoah was revived by the riveting drama.

My subsequent return to graduate school offered me opportunity to pursue the topic beyond personal reading. At Roosevelt University I studied with Leon Stein, who had been instrumental in the development of the Illinois mandate on Holocaust education, the nation’s first. He handed me a list of books from which I was to review one. So I spent a summer with Franklin Littell’s *The Crucifixion of the Jews* (1986), drawn by its subtitle, *The Failure of Christians to Understand the Jewish Experience*. Finally I had found guides for my quest, one in person and one in print. I determined from that first course that I would write my master’s thesis on the Holocaust, and that somehow I would incorporate my interests in women’s history and religion.

Stein introduced me to Holocaust survivors I might interview, women he worked with at the Holocaust Memorial Foundation of Illinois, which is how I came to be in Lisa Derman’s living room one afternoon. Each of the three, all teenagers during the war, experienced the Shoah differently—Derman survived three ghettos before joining the Jewish resistance; Felicia Brenner spent years in the Lodz Ghetto before being transported first to Auschwitz, then to Bergen-Belsen, and finally to a labor camp from which she was liberated; and Fritzie Fritzhall was a

survivor of Auschwitz at 15 and later became a tireless advocate of Holocaust education after not speaking about her experience for 40 years.

Meeting these women and hearing their accounts of survival affected me deeply, and transformed my research by helping me recognize the resilience of the Jewish people when confronted by the Nazi horror, in contrast to the spurious claim that Jews offered no resistance to their captors. Their stories were terrifying, and yet they recounted them over and over again in detail as they spoke publicly, often, and particularly to schoolchildren. When I began teaching the Holocaust to college students, Fritzie accepted repeated invitations to speak to my classes, and if she could not make it, asked her friend Aaron Elster, also a child survivor, to fill in for her.

My experience with survivors and further study in my doctoral program convinced me that there was purpose in my quest for knowledge and understanding—it was to teach about the darkest chapter in modern history. Even in courses not directly addressing the subject, I embedded a unit and exposed students to readings they might otherwise never engage.

Of all the benefits of teaching, recognition that the teacher continues to learn along with her students may be the greatest. In developing courses on the Holocaust, I learned not only through crafting assignments and reading new scholarship on the subject, but also from my students and especially from their questions. I also continued to identify opportunities to learn with and from peers and was fortunate to participate twice in faculty seminars conducted by the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Wrestling with readings on ethics after the Holocaust with eminent scholar John Roth and university faculty from multiple disciplines challenged each of us to think more broadly about the Shoah. Ten years later, an equally diverse group of faculty studied, with Sister Mary Boys, the impact of Christian scripture on Jewish–Christian relations.

I’ve now taught the Holocaust at four very different universities, public and private, church-related and not. In every course, I share with students my little Dachau artifact. Moving from full-time faculty to administration left me fewer opportunities to teach, but when I did, the topic was always the Holocaust, most recently the intersection of gender and the Holocaust, for the Shoah remains the most powerful example of the way in which history unfolds through the choices individuals make from the options before them.

## THE QUESTIONS REMAIN

So am I any closer to understanding what drove my insatiable curiosity about the Holocaust, a word I had not yet heard when I discovered the booklet from Dachau? In

rereading my interviews with survivors, I found they shared the same quest. Their recollections are suffused with questions they asked aloud, less so in the moments they concentrated on survival, but frequently when remembering: How could this have happened? Weren't these people our neighbors? Why didn't we know more about what was going on? Why?

Then I listened to a video of Lisa Derman at the 2002 Illinois Storytelling Festival, where she spoke for the first time. It would also be the last time she spoke, as, sadly, she died of a heart attack just as she was finishing her story. She spoke that day of the goodness of people who helped her survive, if even for a day or overnight. Then she challenged her audience: "Remember that. You have a responsibility to care. You have a responsibility to stand up and be there when the call comes." There were those words again: *remember that*. Lisa had that awful urgency one hears in survivors' voices, an urgency that obligates those listening to heed their words. We do not, cannot, hear their stories and remain unchanged.

Compelled by questions raised by survivors and scholars alike, my study expanded to include perpetrators—how could someone participate in such an atrocity?—and bystanders—how, for example, did the *mentalité* of the German people contribute to the Shoah? Why were so many Christians silent in the face of Hitler's evil? I found shards of hope in accounts of Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church, the White Rose, and the people of Le Chambon.

The church body in which I was raised, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, was founded by German Lutherans who migrated to America in the late 1830s. My roots as German American and Christian connected me to a history I had not lived through, and only added to my questions, but I discovered in the work of Lutheran theologian Dorothee Soelle someone who struggled with the same identity-based issues as I. Soelle wrote eloquently in her memoir, *Against the Wind* (1999), about being German, Christian, and a woman after the Holocaust, an event that framed her work as a scholar and teacher. As a young woman in the post-war years, she found herself preoccupied by questions and frustrated by non-answers, and finally came to realize that "the work of dealing with this matter" would last a lifetime. "I do not want to forget anything," she wrote, "because forgetting nurtures the illusion that it is possible to be a truly human being without the lessons of the dead. The truth of the matter is that we need their help" (p. 17).

Dorothee Soelle's theology was grounded in her quest for answers. She felt a deep sense of shame for what her people, the Germans, had done. She spent many years teaching in the United States, where she advanced through activism a radical liberation Christianity that addressed injustice and oppression wherever they occurred, whether

in Vietnam or South Africa. Her memoir recounts conversations with Elie Wiesel to which she brought her nagging questions. On one occasion he responded, "The essence of Jewishness is never to give up. Everything that has to do with Auschwitz leads in the long run into the dark. And what is the dark? The questions must remain questions; there are no final answers" (p. 131).

In Soelle's lifelong journey to "take possession of one's own history" (p. 138), I found a companion for my own. Her quest to somehow reconcile her faith with the tragedy of the Shoah led her to focus on a mandate to *remember*, a word she defines literally as "to become once again a member of the whole" (p. 132). David Rieff, in his book *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies* (2016), would agree:

To remember is to be responsible—to truth, to history, to one's faith, to one's country, to the tradition of one's own people or gender. . . . Anything less is an act of irresponsibility that threatens to undermine both one's community and, in our therapeutic age, oneself as well. (p. 59)

The final image in the Dachau booklet is a photo of a memorial plaque with the words *Never Again*. Those words, first seen on signs held by inmates during the liberation of camps, are a clarion call to remember, to never forget the enormity of the Shoah. As the years pass, however, and survivors do as well, memory fades. The urgency does not. And I am drawn back to my furtive discovery and the command on its cover to Remember That.

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*Kirtland Snyder*

## *I Was 17*

I was 17, in my senior year at Archbishop Stepinac High School, when I was discovered by the Holocaust. Why had it singled me out? Why was it murdering my family and me? Weren't we innocent and blameless? Weren't we God's children? The Holocaust made me a Jew by making me a victim — of history.

Compelled by conscience to stand with Jews, I became a Jew. For me, resolving the dilemma of the Holocaust has been a process of becoming a Jew: beginning with moral identification with the victims and repudiation of the killers, followed by an ingathering of Jewish culture and an unfolding Jewish life. A life that repudiates the Christianity that spawned Hitler and Nazism, the Christianity that taught me, as a child, to hold Jews in contempt for the death of Christ, the Christianity whose moral weakness was manifest in its failure to prevent genocide.

What good was it if it failed to prevent what Elie Wiesel calls "Total, absolute death — of man and of mankind, of reason and of the heart, of language and of the senses"?

How many of us have, on an accidental journey, chanced upon the Holocaust? In this personal narrative, Jennifer Robertson describes her path to a lifetime of learning. Compare this with the journeys of Mary Todd (pp. 54–57), Kirtland Snyder (p. 58), and Willie Balk (pp. 89–91).

Jennifer Robertson

## Discovering the Holocaust: A Memoir

**M**y ongoing quest for knowledge about the Holocaust and the people who endured and witnessed it all began with a few poems discovered a lifetime ago.

Later came facts and statistics, memoirs and diaries, letters, academic books, works of art, music, museums. Each is necessary for one's learning and understanding, but statistics can be overwhelming, personal stories repetitive, works of art forgotten, while poems, such short yet intense distillations of experience, stay in the mind and refract their own truth.

The poems that opened the way for me came from a collection I chanced upon (or was it waiting for me?) when I was still a student. The anthology was called *Dein Herz ist Deine Heimat* (*Your Heart Is Your Homeland*), and it included Jewish writers from Austria and the former Galicia. Several poems were about the Holocaust; they were the ones that mattered to me most. Phrases still stay in my head: "I have no names / I am a Jewish child. . . / I speak many languages, / unlearn them all again, / because for the things which we endure / all languages are dumb." I copied this poem, called "Jewish Child," into my journal and noted the author, Herman Hakel (1911–1987). The poem impressed me because those simple words encapsulate the lived experience of so many and voice a complex philosophical dilemma: how to represent the enormity of the Holocaust despite the inadequacy of language. Yet words hammered to their bare essence can convey loss, pain, and sorrow, as in the seemingly simple untitled elegy that begins, "Aspen tree, your foliage shines white in the dark, / my mother's hair will never be white. / Dandelion, the Ukraine is so green, / my blonde mother has not come home." I copied this poem, too; noted the author, Paul Celan (1920–1970); and only later learned more about Celan's life, work, and tragic death in Paris.

The important point for me was that such poems worked their way deep into the fiber of my being: As I read, I absorbed the truth of the Holocaust without knowing the facts.

A post-graduate year in Warsaw opened new windows,

including my visit to the Monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which towered over empty space as a silent witness to that as yet unexplained event. At the end of that year, I bought Zofia Nałkowska's *Medallions* (1965). The Polish edition, 5 in. in length by 4 in. in width and barely a quarter-inch thick, had been reissued to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, and the stories became an indispensable part of my library. I read the book so often that phrases and scenes would repeat themselves in my mind and consume my thoughts.

The next big awakenings for me were an album containing children's poems and drawings from the Czech ghetto Terezin; Roman Vishniac's wonderful black-and-white photographs, collected in *A Vanished World* (1986), which showed Jewish life before the Holocaust; and Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1982), but the real revelation came in 1988 during a brief visit to Poland, when a brand new book appeared in the bookstore in the grandiose Palace of Culture: *Pamiętniki z getta warszawskiego* (*Warsaw Ghetto Diaries*), edited by Michał Grynberg. I knew at once that it was for me, so I bought it, went outside, sat on the steps of the towering palace, and started to read. From the 272 diaries and memoirs in the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) in Warsaw, Grynberg chose fragments of the 65 accounts about the Warsaw Ghetto. Written in both Yiddish and Polish, all but eight, which were composed after the Holocaust, were reported as the people lived them in the ghetto. Some of the diaries were named and the fate of their authors is known; the authors of others, published as NN, are unknown. These narratives given to the JHI after the war and stored in the archives had been handed in by the authors themselves or by others who had found the diaries in attics or cellars. Grynberg had organized the excerpts in such a way that they traced the ghetto story from the enforced building of the walls to the final destruction of Jewish Warsaw. When I realized that people had hidden their memoirs and letters in milk churns to ensure that if no one survived the destruction, people outside would learn what had happened to them, I knew that



I, too, must give them voice in my writing life, and I began a collection of poems that was published as *Ghetto* (1989).

My deeper immersion in the Holocaust came when I lived in Warsaw for a longer period and discovered that our apartment was right beside the remaining fragment of the ghetto wall [see Robertson's "The Apple," Spring 2016, pp. 4–5—Ed.]. I read and studied, travelled to Vienna with the members of the Polish–Israeli Friendship Society to meet Simon Wiesenthal, and also visited Mauthausen with a survivor of that camp. I visited Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz; I joined a study group touring southeast Poland and discovered remains of lost Jewish life from Krakow to the Ukrainian border.

Later, visits to Western Ukraine opened my eyes to the totality of the Holocaust, still largely unmarked in Ukraine. I stayed in Kremets, where the only remaining synagogue is a ticket office in the bus station, but the historic cemetery still remains. In Dubno, where the sounds of klezmer music once filled the air summer long, I saw the large synagogue, now closed and unvisited without even a plaque to say what it was. In Buchach, a town that seemed to grow organically from the hilly countryside, a local guide pointed out houses that had once been lived in by the Jewish community. He showed me the plaque on the house where the Nobel Prize winner Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970) had lived. He showed me as well the memorial to the murdered Jewish community and pointed out the place where their mass murder had taken place, visible still from the large, neglected graveyard. Simon Wiesenthal had been born in Buchach, as had Emanuel Ringelblum, a major historian of the Warsaw Ghetto. Finally, in Brezany, I discovered the beautiful but woefully ruined and abandoned synagogue. Impressed by what I could see it had once been, and profoundly saddened that it no longer was, I took a tiny piece of broken brick from this historic place of worship. Today it sits on my bookcase, along with a stone from Auschwitz and three tiny pebbles from Mauthausen.

After Poland, I visited the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam and continued to read voraciously: memoirs, stories, everything I could. I watched films as well and was moved to write another book, *Don't Go to Uncle's Wedding: Voices From the Warsaw Ghetto* (2000), as well as another collection of short stories, *From the Volga to the Clyde* (2014).

My journey into knowing was accidental, gradual, step by step, with each uncovering leading to more, and then to still more. Each new learning left me less innocent but with an increasing passion to share my new knowledge with a new generation.

It all began with a few poems discovered a lifetime ago.

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Joan Jobe Smith writes: "My great-grandmother Mariah Schneider married Wilhelm Eli. They Anglicized 'Eli' to 'Ely' when they fled a pogrom and emigrated from Germany to Texas to take advantage of the Homestead Act ca. 1885. They passed for gentiles, concealing their Jewish heritage in order to qualify for a homestead, and few of their descendants know that fact. Mariah died in Texas at about 80, knowing about the early days of the concentration camps and grieving over relatives who died there."

*Joan Jobe Smith*

## *Hollow Cost*

My mother told me about the hollow cost  
one Saturday morning as I lay  
in her bed beside her where I read  
comic books while she moaned  
for just forty more winks, it was her  
day off from the Payless Café,  
and when she finally yawned,  
stretched, and woke, after I'd  
turned the *Little Lulu* pages  
as loudly as I could, sometimes  
she told me stories about when  
she was a little girl in Texas  
riding horses, milking cows,  
cooking on a wood-burning stove.  
But that one morning she cleared her throat  
the way she always did before she scolded me  
and she told me she had something to tell me  
that I should hear first from my mother  
hunger  
gas showers  
shaven-headed women  
human-skin lampshades  
the war so much more  
than white oleo  
F.D.R. speeches on the radio  
letters from my father in Algeria. Oh,

how you wish you had never heard  
some of the things your mother told you  
that six million were more  
than all the stars in the sky  
on a clear winter night

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The occasion when my mother told me about the concentration camps was also the first time she informed me I was Jewish. She told me never to tell anyone. I didn't, for decades. When I see film footage of the Jews who died, I can't help wondering which of them are my family.

"As graphic novels have evolved as an artistic medium and attained critical acclaim, they have become one of the media with which younger generations grasp the inner struggles of characters and the sanctity of life" (Lipman, 2011, n.p.). Pnina Rosenberg illustrates this trend in her essay on Michael Kovner's graphic novel, which he created in an attempt to come to terms with the legacy he carries from his father, Abba Kovner, renowned leader of the 1943 Vilnius (Vilna) Ghetto Uprising.

Pnina Rosenberg

## The Graphic Novel as a Way of Knowing: Michael Kovner's *Ezekiel's World*

The last decades have witnessed an unprecedented number of graphic novels rooted in the (hi)story of the Holocaust. Many of them, serving as almost incontestably important educational tools, were initiated by various Holocaust museums and remembrance institutions, such as the Amsterdam Anne Frank Museum (Houevél, 2009, *A Family Secret* and *The Search*; Jacobson and Colón, 2010, *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography*); the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum (Gałek, 2009, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, *Episodes From Auschwitz*); and the Sousa Mendes Foundation (Ruy, 2015, *Aristides de Sousa Mendes: Hero of the Holocaust*, in Mattis, 2016). These fully researched comic books, although they narrate personal stories, embed their protagonists in the wider context of the Holocaust, thus enabling students to get a broad perspective on the phenomenon through a hybrid medium of text and images. The effectiveness of this genre in teaching history can be summarized with the words of Rafael Medoff (2015), under whose direction the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies published a graphic novel on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*: "Teenagers are much more likely to read a comic book than a 300-page history book, and I say that as the author of more than a few 300-page history books" (in Gustines, n.p.).

No doubt the popularity of this medium is rooted in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), in which the author describes his father's survival of Auschwitz as well as records a poignant confession of a tense father-son relationship. *Maus's* intergenerational dialogue encouraged survivors and second- and third-generation artists to expose, in comics, their coming to terms with their traumatic past and their almost unbearable legacy. Thus survivor Miriam Katin reconstructs in *We Were on Our Own* (2006) her experiences as a 2-year-old child who fled with her mother from

occupied Budapest and their life in hiding; in *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (2006), the Canadian artist Bernice Eisenstein unfolds her parents' past and the burden she carries as a child of Auschwitz survivors, while in *Deuxième génération*, Israeli Belgian Michel Kichka (2012) confronts his father's metamorphosis from keeping silent about his past to becoming a "bearer of testimony" who frequently and publically unveils his Holocaust memories.

Alongside those autobiographic novels are innumerable comic books that use fictive or historical figures to narrate various chapters of World War II history. The famous Jewish American comic artist Joe Kubert, who created the iconic superheroes Tarzan and Batman, narrates in his what-if story *Yossel: April 19, 1943, A Story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (2003) the tale of a family's life in the Warsaw Ghetto through the lens of a gifted 15-year-old artist (Kubert, 2003). Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* (2003) reconstructs life and death in the camp through memories of a fictional couple who recollect their Holocaust experiences while awaiting their fatal destiny in 1993 in the former Yugoslavia. Croci authenticates the narrative by supplementing it with survivors' testimonies and scenes from Lanzmann's *Shoah* and Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, thus demonstrating that the memory of the Holocaust has become a blend of real and imaginary texts and images (Boyes, 2005).

### MICHAEL KOVNER-ABA KOVNER: A VIRTUAL DIALOGUE OF FATHER AND SON

Against this background, Michael Kovner's graphic novel, *Ezekiel's World* (2015), stands out in its singularity of purpose and unique approach, as manifested both in its technique and in the complexity of its multilayered content. While second-generation artists typically try to excavate their parental past to reveal their familial archeological

layers, the role of Kovner's father during the Holocaust is well known. Michael, born in 1948 on Kibbutz Ein HaHoresh (in Israel), is the son of the former partisans Vitka Kovner (née Kampner, 1920–2012) and Abba Kovner (1918–1987). The well-documented biography of the latter, the renowned leader of the 1943 Vilnius Ghetto Uprising, is interwoven with the history of Jewish rebellion during the Holocaust (Porat, 2009). Yet despite the vast amount of historical material concerning Abba Kovner, his son, at the age of 60, attempted to create “a posthumous dialogue with my father,” who had passed away some 20 years earlier—“a dialogue that was regrettably incomplete during our lives” (Brawarsky, 2013, n.p.).

### **EZEKIEL'S WORLD: ART AS A MEANS OF LEARNING AND KNOWING**

While visiting family friends in the US in the 1970s, Michael Kovner decided to pursue art as a vocation. He studied at the New York Studio School, following in the footsteps of his father, who before the war had studied art at the University of Vilnius. After graduating, Michael returned to Israel and settled in Jerusalem while continuing to pursue his artistic activities in New York. In both countries, the artist focused mainly on painting landscapes and building facades, motifs that are incorporated into his graphic novel (pp. 9, 124, 141).

Contrary to his father's belief that art is the only means of transmitting the Holocaust, Michael once argued that it was impossible to make art out of this subject. To this his father replied, “The time will come.”

“Now,” Michael confirms, “without really acknowledging it, I, as a member of the second generation, am telling the story of the Holocaust” (Anderman, 2015, n.p.; author's translation) using an artistic medium.

Once he had conceived of the idea of portraying a mixed real and fictive dialogue with his father, Michael decided, despite some reservations, to produce it as a particular kind of graphic novel:

I wanted the book to be like a poem, with a lot of associations, and wanted the plot and the readers' perception to be based on color and painting. . . . I saw that adult graphic novels were rapidly evolving, but I did not want that. I did not want, for example, to use balloons for speech: It breaks the color composition and attracts too much attention. (Anderman, 2015, n.p.; author's translation)

Having no previous experience in graphic art, Michael learned to use various technologies, such as Photoshop, to turn his oil paintings into computer graphics, lending his *oeuvre* a painterly quality. The outcome, Michael explains, is an “amalgam of the real and imagined” through which

he narrates complex and painful familial relationships: “a conflict between a father and son, a connection between a grandfather and grandson, and the lingering effects of the Shoah and the consequences of decisions made a lifetime ago” (Brawarsky, 2013, n.p.).

Indeed, the result is unique. Sandee Brawarsky (2013), the *Jewish Week's* book critic, notes that the approximately 300 pages of *Ezekiel's World* are

dynamic, filled with striking paintings, not necessarily arranged in panels as in other graphic novels. He codes the pages in color, marking whether the sequences are dreams or flashbacks, or whether they take place inside or outside; some pages are splashed with light and others are much darker. The experience of reading is to be drawn into the images. (n.p.)

Michael based his protagonist—Ezekiel—on his father, Abba Kovner, but did not feel obliged to maintain historical accuracy, as can be seen from the opening page, in which he introduces Ezekiel:

Ezekiel is a lonely old man . . . His wife died a few years earlier. . . . Ezekiel was an important historical figure as a resistance commander in World War II and a political leader. He was also a respected poet and writer. (Kovner, 2015, n.p.)

The story is set during the 1991 Gulf War. Abba Kovner passed away in 1987, and his wife, Vitka, in 2012, so we understand that Michael is deliberately fusing facts and historical reality with fiction. He is accurate when presenting Abba Kovner's public persona—“resistance commander . . . respected poet and writer”—yet imprecise in portraying his private identity as a father and a husband. Michael explains:

There is the Abba Kovner of the historical documents, but I have an Abba Kovner of memories, thoughts, and feelings, and I wanted to devote myself to that, and not to historical truth. Still, I included some of my father's memories in the book, too, and with these events, which have their foundation in historical facts, it was important to me to be precise. Concerning everything else, it was important to me to feel free, not to account for some collective sentiment about who he was, but to present the psychological character that I'd become attached to. (Anderman, 2015, n.p.)

The story introduces us to the widower Ezekiel, who lives alone in Jerusalem, estranged from family members. His daughter has committed suicide; his only son, Amos, an architect, has left Israel, partly due to a rift between him

and his father, and lives in San Francisco with his Israeli wife, Yvonne, and their 6-year-old son, Noni. With the outbreak of the Gulf War, Yvonne, who is worried about her relatives, goes with Noni for an indeterminate period to Israel.

As the story unfolds, Ezekiel, who suffers from chronic arthritis, falls while at home, alone. Following a sequence of rhythmic and dynamic frames that capture the fall and the old man's vulnerability (pp. 88–90), the agonized and helpless Ezekiel lies on the floor and visualizes the tragic events that unfolded in the Vilnius Ghetto on July 16, 1943 (pp. 91–96), when the Germans demanded that the members of the Resistance Movement turn over their leader, Yitzhak Wittenberg, threatening that if they failed to do so, the 20,000 remaining Jews would be liquidated. The Nazi ultimatum stirred the ghetto inmates, many of whom demanded that the resistance turn Wittenberg over. Eventually, Wittenberg turned himself in, but not before appointing Abba Kovner as his successor (Kovner, 2015, p. 282).

The nightmarish images—from those of the agitated partisans until Wittenberg turns himself in—reflect the sequence of the events of this Machiavellian dilemma. They are accompanied by hand-written text in Yiddish (the language of the ghetto inmates and the resisters), rendered in red and translated into English [Figs. 1A & 1B], and explained at the back of the book in historical footnotes.

To help the ailing Ezekiel, a physical therapist comes regularly to his home. She brings a Lego set for him to play with with his grandson, Noni, a frequent visitor now that he and his mother are in Israel. Playing with Noni reminds Ezekiel of happier times when he and his son played together. The recollections are presented in two frames based on old black-and-white photographs. One depicts young Michael building a Lego house; the other, a younger Abba Kovner with Michael in his lap (p. 109). Not only do these harmonious images stand in sharp contrast to the story's tense father-son relationship, but they also reveal that the constant fusion of Michael and Abba with the fictional Amos and Ezekiel is not accidental.

### LEARNING THROUGH LEGOS

As he recalls the happier father-son bond, Ezekiel looks at the Lego figures and announces, "I just got an idea what to do with Noni" (p. 108), an idea that leads the story to its climax: He will transmit his legacy to his grandchild through a joint reconstruction of the Vilnius Ghetto with Lego pieces.

"Noni," he begins, "see what we have here."

"LEGO!" the boy says.

Ezekiel continues, "I want to tell you what happened during the big war . . . do you remember I promised to tell you about the ghetto? . . . We will build a ghetto from Lego pieces . . . Now I'll tell you what happened to your great-

grandparents and all the Jews of Vilnius" [Figs. 2A & 2B].

The joint construction/reconstruction of Ezekiel/Abba's past is depicted from various points of view. It is done during three nonconsecutive days and consequently is not narrated sequentially but in three separate sections (pp. 158–161, 194–196, 230–245). In each section, the dilemmas confronted by Ezekiel/Abba—the bearer of the testimony—are intensified, culminating in a third act (pp. 230–245) much as in classical Greek tragedies.

We learn through the story that following the failure of the resistance fighters' uprising and the liquidation of the ghetto, Abba Kovner, the resistance commander, proclaimed that only armed ghetto inmates would be allowed to escape through the ghetto sewage, a requirement that excluded his mother, who was left behind to her inevitable tragic end. Thus, contrary to Greek tragedies, this act does not culminate in a moment of *deus ex machina*, an unexpected intervention that leads to a happy ending, or in a purifying or cleansing catharsis that comforts the protagonist. The hero of the graphic novel is left with traumatic anguish that torments him the rest of his life.

Noni, at 6, understands very little and asks Ezekiel questions. Noni does not understand the cooperation of the ghetto's Jewish police with the Germans and their role in the liquidation of the ghetto; he does not understand Nazi cruelty towards the defenseless, hiding Jews; he wonders about different opinions of Jewish ghetto inmates concerning fighting the Germans—to which Ezekiel patiently furnishes explanations. However, when Noni asks his grandfather to explain his escape plan during the liquidation of the ghetto, Ezekiel becomes agitated, loses his temper, and cries in despair, recalling the event that keeps on haunting him.

"Grandpa, what was your plan?" Noni asks.

Ezekiel replies, "To leave the ghetto through the sewage tunnels. . . . It was the only way to avoid capture" (p. 238).

Against the background of the burning ghetto, the grandfather's oral testimony appears, relating the fighters' escape strategy and the ghetto inmates' demands to also be smuggled out by the sewers [Figs. 3A & 3B, p. 69]:

Rumor of our plan had spread out and more and more people began gathering around [the sewer entrance], demanding that we take them with us. Fighting broke out. *I gave an order that we would not take anyone with us who had no weapon, including parents and siblings. It was the worst moment of my life [emphasis added].* (p. 238)

Noni naively asks the obvious question: "What about your parents?"

Ezekiel answers, "My father had already passed away. Yes. My mother came and asked: 'What about me?' I told



Jenia and the commander are back from the Party meeting. We all know that whatever the Party has decided - he will do. I can see the dark expressions on their faces.

הוא קולט עכ  
 \* Here they are

\* What have they decided?

די טאג איז האט געשטעלט אלס צער  
 קאממנאנט האט זיך איבערגעגעבן  
 נדי צו האט צולויבן די געטא.

\* They decided that the commander must turn himself in to the Gestapo, to save the ghetto.

\* Is it final?

\* Yes.

מען האט געזען  
 נישט מסכימים  
 סוף סוף 13  
 מענטשן

\* We must do something.

\* It's too late.

אויס נישט די מענטשן  
 די צייט איז און אונזערע  
 אונזערע און אונזערע

\* Too late?

This is a disaster, a disaster.

אין האט  
 צענקסטו?

\* What do you want to do?

די טאג איז האט געשטעלט אלס צער  
 קאממנאנט האט זיך איבערגעגעבן  
 נדי צו האט צולויבן די געטא.

\* I want to know what each of you thinks.

איך וויל דען וואס  
 יעדער איינער פון אונד  
 האט צו זאגן.

FIG. 1A. Michael Kovner, *Ezekiel's World: A Graphic Novel*, p. 92. Courtesy of the artist.



FIG. 1B. Michael Kovner, *Ezekiel's World: A Graphic Novel*, p. 93. Courtesy of the artist.



FIG. 2A. Michael Kovner, *Ezekiel's World: A Graphic Novel*, p. 158. Courtesy of the artist.



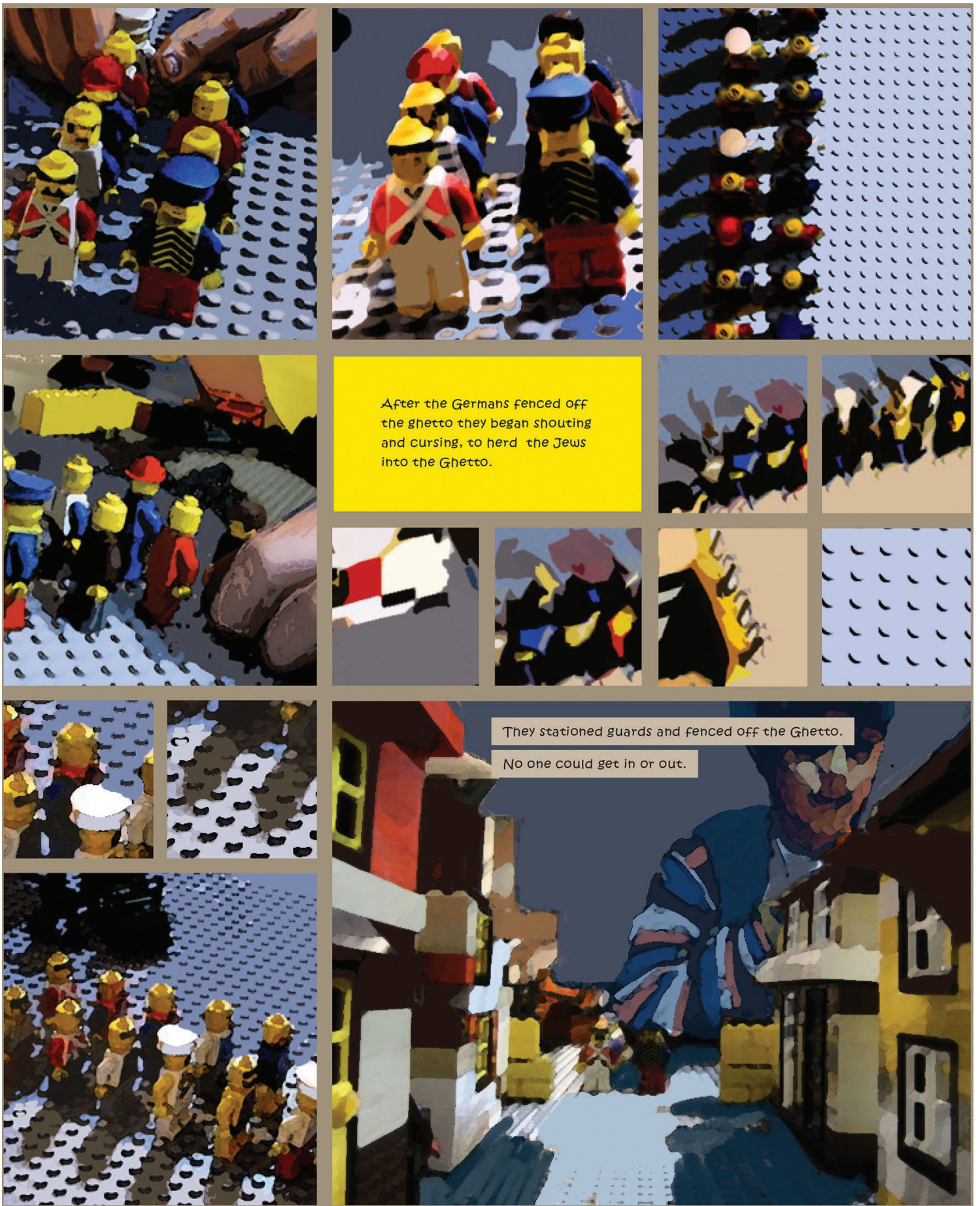


FIG. 2B. Michael Kovner, *Ezekiel's World: A Graphic Novel*, p. 159. Courtesy of the artist.

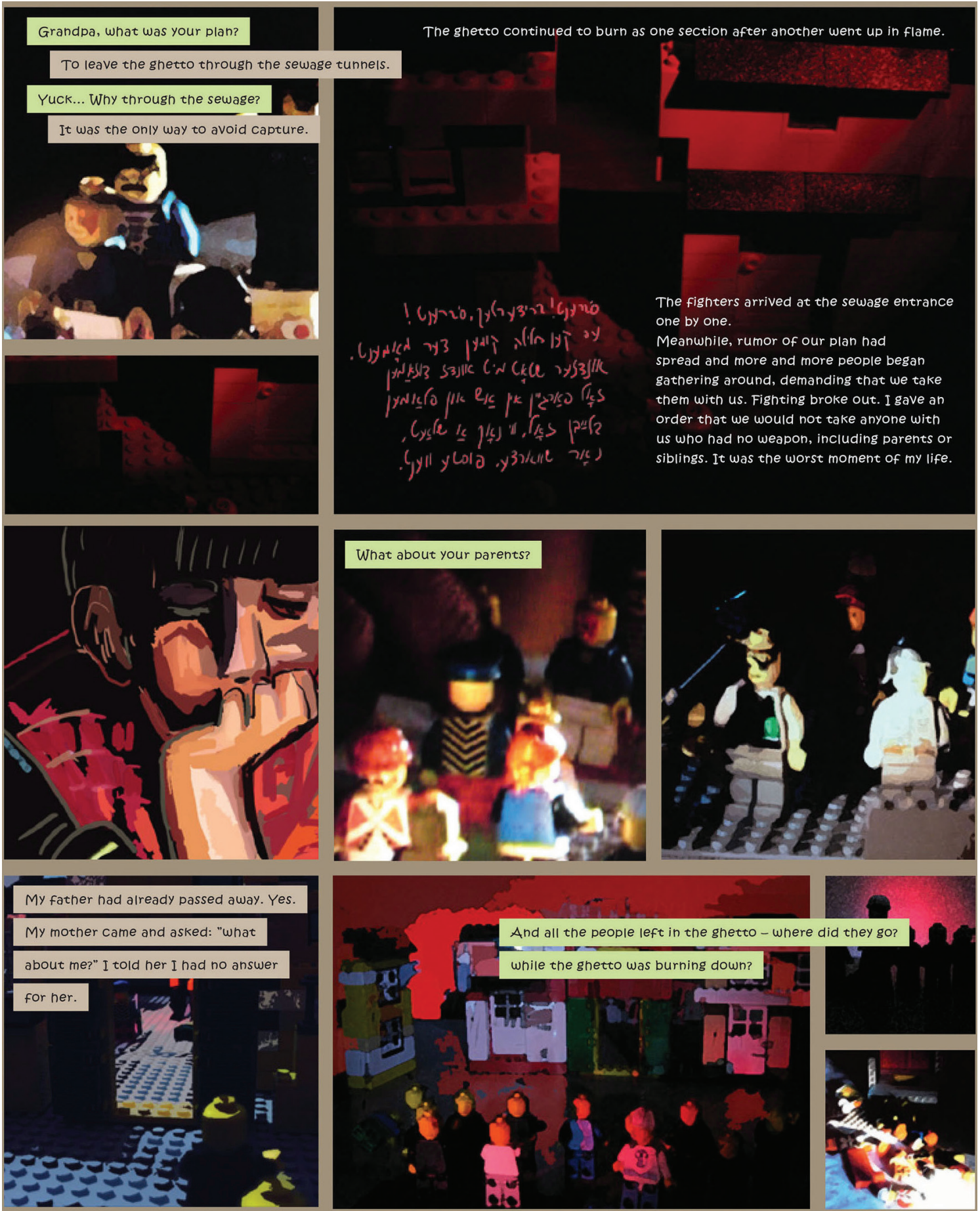


FIG. 3A. Michael Kovner, *Ezekiel's World: A Graphic Novel*, p. 238. Courtesy of the artist.



FIG. 3B. Michael Kovner, *Ezekiel's World: A Graphic Novel*, p. 239. Courtesy of the artist.

her I had no answer for her.”

“And all the people left in the ghetto—where did they go? While the ghetto was burning?” Noni asks.

“Most of them were already gone.” [Fig 3B]

“And you? Grandpa, why did you run?”

“We did not run. We left according to an orderly plan. That was the end. There was no alternative.”

Noni asks yet again, “Grandpa, why did you run away?”

Ezekiel, distressed and in despair, destroys what they have built, puts his head and hands on the table, and cries, “Why don't you understand? Why??? We did not run away. We did not run away.”

“Enough!” Noni cries. “Grandpa, enough!”

Ezekiel transmits this painful story to his grandson with neither censorship nor embellishment of the most difficult dilemmas he faced. Using Lego pieces, the two of them together build the Vilnius Ghetto and the various segments of its population—the Germans, the Jewish police, those imprisoned in the ghetto, and the resistance. Noni's childish queries sharpen the unfathomable reality and accelerate the pace of their joint construction and then destruction of the ghetto, as well as Ezekiel's intense emotional reaction. When Noni cries, “Enough! Grandpa, enough!” it is not clear whether the child means that he cannot hear any more or that he wants to shield and comfort his distressed and suffering grandfather. The final scenes, which depict Ezekiel's brutal deconstruction of the Lego ghetto, can be seen as Abba/Ezekiel's exorcism, trying to evict the demons of his past that keep on tormenting him for his decision that is described as “the worst moment of my life” (p. 240).

#### AN INTERGENERATIONAL BRIDGE TO KNOWING

When Noni and his mother are leaving the house after coming to say goodbye to Ezekiel before their return to San Francisco, Ezekiel sees that his grandson has forgotten the Lego set. The therapist calls the boy back: “You forgot your Lego!” Noni retrieves it, and turns back, holding the Lego box in one hand and waving to Ezekiel with the other. In the next frame, Noni is seen from the back, asking, “Will I see you again, Grandpa?” (pp. 278–279). Only after the transmission of the legacy can the grandfather and grandson say goodbye properly, with the Lego set serving as a significant bridge.

Constructing the Vilnius Ghetto Uprising with Lego pieces not only bonds Ezekiel and Noni, but also implies that Noni, who carries with him the Lego set and the legacy, will serve as an intermediary who will bridge the gap between father (Ezekiel) and son (Amos). Both Ezekiel, as the semi-fictive Abba Kovner, and Michael himself recall pleasant memories of when they played with Legos with their young children.

#### TANGIBLE TESTIMONY

The grandfather's fingers and the images of him and Noni serve as a scale for the dimensions of the reconstructed miniature ghetto, which is similar to scale models of camps and ghettos that are displayed in Holocaust museums, quite often reconstructed by survivors. It is no coincidence that a scale model of the Treblinka camp is the focal point of the permanent exhibition *Concentration and Extermination Camps* in the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum (GFHM) in Israel [Fig. 4].



FIG. 4. Jakow Wiernik, *Treblinka Concentration Camp*, scale model. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, Israel.

The exhibition, which emphasizes the value of commemoration and testimony, is centered on the scale model that was built in the 1950s by Jakow Wiernik, one of the few survivors of the Treblinka concentration camp, and was presented as evidence in Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem. Hence it is not only a three-dimensional visualization of the Nazi death industry but also a tangible piece of evidence transmitted plastically by a survivor (GFHM, n.d.).

Unlike such museum objects, sometimes shielded by a transparent vitrine and off limits to touching by the public, in *Ezekiel's World* the scale model traces a very intimate and emotive testimonial process. Noni, who takes an active part in reconstructing his grandfather's past, is accompanied and guided by a survivor's firsthand testimony. The 6-year-old child not only sees and hears the survivor, but also uses his own concrete tactile sense; hence, it is a multi-sensory intergenerational transmission, tangible as well as oral, that makes the memorialization all the more vivid. Moreover, the reconstitution process enables the third generation to grasp an unimaginable history and helps the traumatic survivor confront his memories.

Being grounded in his personal familial past, Michael constructs a very sophisticated, multilayered narrative. Not only does he present the intergenerational transmission as part of the protagonist's way of coming to terms with his estranged son, but by basing the account on accurate historical evidence, the author, who is also the survivor's son, blends the literary hero and the historical persona. By doing so, Michael Kovner helps his real father relive and be relieved, posthumously, of his unbearable pain and guilty conscience associated with the decision that haunted him always. This anguish can be heard in Abba Kovner's poem quoted on the last page of Michael's graphic novel:

No one will carry my mother's bier with me  
 No one will come close to my mother's bier with me  
 Come to the vast plains  
 Lead your eyes to the white river  
 it scoops out its channel and shoves  
 like the prow of the heavy  
 ship in the ice  
 and say with me  
 imi  
 imi<sup>1</sup> (p. 281)

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#### END NOTES

[1] The Hebrew word for my mother is *immi*, which is homophonic with the word for *with me*.

"It was in high school," writes poetess R. H. B. Fishman in a composition that will surely prompt discussion among students, that she "learned the truth" about the origin of her name. For a narrative on a grandson's discovery, read Willie Balk's "Not Since I Left Dagda," pp. 89–91.

*R. H. B. Fishman*

## *Named For*

I was called "Chelley," written as "Shelly" or "Shelley" and, rarely, "Shellie," and my life did become salted with sand and sea sanctuaries beyond the crowded Atlantic, beyond the rugged Pacific, the manicured Virgin Islands, the untrampled Bahamian beaches, back then.

"Shelly" was short and sweet for "Rachelle Helaine," a name given by my parents, among that first generation of American post-World War II Jews, the children of Eastern Europe's escapees who made it out, eluded the conflagration — but I didn't know any of this then,

only that I was named after a French relative who died during the war. That was all I'd been told, yet this tradition of honoring the dead made me feel more alive, as if she'd survived through me.

I imagined her as elegant, sporty, a woman of intelligence, and wondered who she was, what she looked like, but when I asked, my mother looked away, didn't say a word.

Perhaps her soul had somehow met my own: me, the keeper, her namesake.

It was in high school, Midwood, in Brooklyn, in the 60s, that I learned the truth from my Aunt Renee, z"l\* — that she had been taken, along with her family and so many others, had been forced to walk naked, to dance, and had then been chosen for her beauty to serve German soldiers, her body a vessel for their lust and disgust.

How she died, my aunt didn't know, but, from then, my heart was replete with unrest, fighting sadness, even shame, until I learned enough to understand that this did not become that woman of valor, Rachelle Helaine.

\*Z"l is a Hebrew acronym that means "of blessed memory."



This personal narrative from historian Monty Noam Penkower details how two books sparked his interest in learning more about the Holocaust and another “opened my heart and my eyes to the need for rigorous analysis of the Shoah,” leading him to write a seminal contribution to our knowledge: *The Jews Were Expendable*.

Monty Noam Penkower

## *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust— Thirty Years Later*

I had known something of the Holocaust. Although no courses on the topic were available in the early 60s, during the years of my studies at Yeshiva College or in Columbia University's graduate history program, and no member of my close family was killed in Nazi-occupied Europe, two books in my parents' library first sparked my interest and concern. *The Black Book: The Nazi Crime Against the Jewish People*, published in 1946 by the World Jewish Congress, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the Jewish National Council of Palestine, and the American Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists, and Scientists, presented a most damning indictment. So did, in a far different fashion, Ben Hecht's autobiographical *A Child of the Century* (1954). Nothing prepared me, however, for Arthur Morse's searing critique of the US government's response during world Jewry's most tragic hour. *While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy*, a best seller when it first appeared in 1968, opened my heart and my eyes to the need for a rigorous effort rooted in primary documentation to analyze the various dimensions of the Shoah. Slowly, I made my way through Raul Hilberg's magisterial *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1973) (undertaking this with a one-volume paperback edition!) and Lucy Dawidowicz's *The War Against the Jews* (1975), reading Holocaust memoirs along the way. Important volumes by David Wyman (1968), Henry Feingold (1970), and Saul Friedman (1973) on the American government, with an admirable study by Bernard Wasserstein (1979) about its British counterpart, took their place together with *Yad Vashem Studies* and many others on my rapidly burgeoning bookshelves.

I came to realize, to my surprise, that while numerous

works ably reviewed the actions of German and other killers and of their Jewish victims across the European geography of grief, a broad analysis of what could be termed the world of bystanders had yet to be written. Gerald Green's 1978 *Holocaust* television series scarcely touched on this vital third leg of the triad, but the attention the show garnered worldwide convinced me that the effort had to be made. With some trepidation, and hardly aware of what such an endeavor would entail, I contacted Richard L. Wentworth of the University of Illinois Press, which had published my first book, a study of the WPA Federal Writers' Project. I suggested that covering various aspects of bystander reactions could present a much-needed and welcome contribution. Wentworth readily agreed, and I set out on a demanding journey of exploration.

Rereading now my first essay on the Palestine dilemma in World War II—published in the *Herzl Yearbook* in 1978—I am struck by these lines in the concluding paragraphs:

Hitler's paranoid rantings to the contrary notwithstanding, the Jews were anything but a powerful international force. Having no state of their own—the Zionists had always grasped this—Jews could conveniently be considered expendable in the war years.

The democracies' silence about the rescue of European Jewry and Palestinian Jewry's war contribution was also exemplified dramatically in the [1943 Anglo-American] joint statement. . . .

Adolf Hitler had won his war against the Jews: The 4,000,000 victims reported in August 1943 were joined by an additional 2,000,000 when the Third Reich's

Götterdämmerung sounded. Against his determination and the failure of his opponents to meet the unparalleled crisis of the Holocaust with extraordinary measures, the Zionists' rare success regarding the joint statement ultimately counted for naught. It would be up to the post-war world, stricken by a guilty conscience after the event, to try and make some amends. (pp. 234–235)

Herein, as it would turn out, lay the kernel of the thesis for the subsequent volume. The future title itself surfaces as well: *The Jews Were Expendable* [Fig. 1]. Yet all this remained in embryo. Countless hours of research would be required before I could commence to paint a very broad but much detailed canvas. How to set out? What issues merited scrutiny?

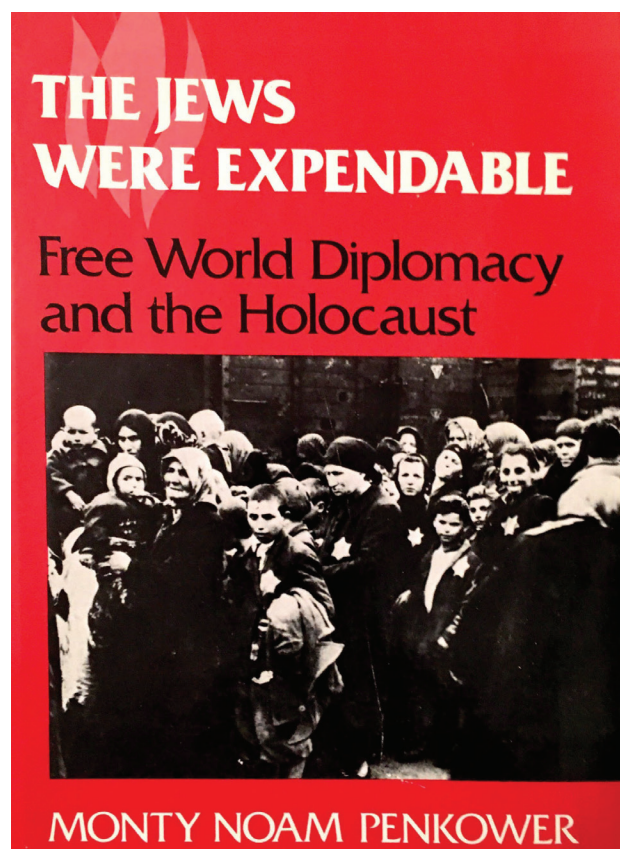


FIG. 1. Book cover, *The Jews Were Expendable* (1983). Cover illustration from *The Auschwitz Album*, published by the Beate Klarsfeld Foundation. Courtesy of Monty Noam Penkower.

Quickly understanding that the subject at hand was too vast and complex for inclusion between the covers of one book, I ultimately chose nine case studies on the diplomacy of the Holocaust. I hoped that the conclusions of these separate studies, when taken together, would possess an underlying unity. Chronology would guide the chapters. As month after month rolled by, I became especially mind-

ful of Fustel de Coulanges' (1875) trenchant observation that "years of analysis are required for one day of synthesis" (Kelly, 2003, p. 210).

I began with the struggle during World War II for an Allied Jewish fighting force and the "illegal" immigration of Jewish refugees to the national home in Palestine. These issues appeared paramount to many concerned about Jewry's fate under the swastika before the true nature of the tragedy was realized beyond the borders of Hitler's *Festung Europa*. The unveiling in the free world of what the Third Reich leadership deemed to be the Final Solution of the Jewish Question, as well as the immediate responses that followed, was traced in the third chapter. A fourth examined the 1943 Bermuda Conference and its aftermath once the Anglo-American Alliance had officially acknowledged, on December 17, 1942, the relentless annihilation of European Jewry. The genesis of the US War Refugee Board in January 1944 was then described at great length. Succeeding chapters explored various attempts to rescue Jews from the Balkans and the martyrdom of Hungarian Jewry—the Holocaust in microcosm. The final stage in the murder of Europe's Jews was then viewed from two distinct perspectives: the confrontation between the World Jewish Congress and the International Red Cross, and the overtures to *Reichsführer*-SS Heinrich Himmler by the Sternbuchs of Montreux and Hillel Storch of Stockholm. The epilogue presented an overview of the Shoah and its implications for human survival.

The understandable anguish that a Holocaust historian experiences proved palpable, but significant revelations throughout made the arduous task worthwhile. Four examples will suffice. A letter in the Haganah Archives disclosed that Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), then the chief political officer of the Jewish Agency, gave the signal in November 1940 to place a small bomb on the ill-fated French liner *Patria* in an attempt to halt the British deportation from Haifa Bay of more than 1,700 Jews who had fled Nazi persecution and lacked Palestine immigration certificates. A reading of Leon Kubowitzki's overlooked diary in the Yad Vashem Archives uncovered, for the first time to the public, the identity of Eduard Schulte,<sup>1</sup> a highly placed German industrialist who transmitted word to the West of a program discussed in Hitler's headquarters in the autumn of 1942 to build huge crematoria to eradicate all of Europe's Jews with prussic acid. Sitting in the YIVO Archives with trembling hands, I held a forgotten memoir, written in Yiddish in a Polish forest by a man who escaped during the Treblinka death camp revolt of August 2, 1943. I was also able to trace the remarkable activities of a group of young Palestinian Jewish emissaries in Turkey who, discarding legal convention and political differences, brought a few thousand souls to the Jewish homeland and safety in 1944.

## PERCEPTION AND ACTION

What ultimately emerged from the years of painstaking labor? This first overview of the failure of the free world to respond decisively to the Holocaust revealed a fundamental reality: The confluence of disbelief, indifference, antisemitism, and above all, political expediency that obtained in Western counsels helped doom a powerless people to the diabolic realization of the Nazis' mechanized kingdom of death.

Allied callousness toward the Jewish people reflected a different elementary failure of perception. Having at first misjudged the dimensions of the Holocaust, London and Washington continued to reject the communal distinction that had accounted for Jewry's mysterious survival the past 4,000 years. Heir to the Enlightenment's emphasis on personal freedom and the good inherent in all human beings, the West concluded that according the one people lacking national sovereignty special consideration as an independent entity would mean the vindication of Hitler's philosophy of *das Volk*. The post-war world, these officials publicly declared, should ensure Jews the full rights of citizens everywhere. Paradoxically, this meant that the unique fate of European Jewry was either concealed under "Poles," "Belgians," etc., or refused sympathy because Jews were classified as "enemy aliens" when found in countries loyal to the Axis. In either instance, Hitler—who thought otherwise—secured his primary objective.

Thus it never occurred to the Anglo-American alliance, which alone could have checked the tempo of slaughter and rescued thousands of innocents, that Europe's Jews, like other peoples opposed to the Third Reich, should be assigned any role in the general war strategy. Greeks would obtain relief to avert famine, Poles and Czechs arms for resistance, but not Jews. French youngsters in very impressive numbers could be spirited to safety across the Pyrenees, but not a targeted people to haven in neutral Spain and Turkey. Tens of thousands of Yugoslavs and Greeks received a cordial welcome in Middle East refugee camps, yet throughout World War II, His Majesty's Government in London continued enforcing the draconian 1939 White Paper limiting immigration to Palestine for those most needing their accessible homeland. The two major Western powers, worried that the German leadership might "embarrass" the Allies by "flooding" them with unwanted Jews, sought to stifle public discussion of Palestine's future as long as the war lasted. For the same reason, they mutually consented not to alter their respective limited immigration quotas. Enemy prisoners fared far better: Boats were found to ferry some 430,000 prisoners of war to detention camps in the United States during the world conflict.

Churchill and Roosevelt, along with Stalin, omitted the Jewish people from the 1943 Moscow Conference's

formal, lengthy statement about those who fell victim to Nazi atrocities. Neither leader, in the course of their secret correspondence with one another, raised the possibility of rescuing the particular targets of Hitler's obsessive hatred. Both focused on the period after the war—too late for those found on a globe, to cite World Zionist Organization president Chaim Weizmann (1936), "divided into countries in which the Jews cannot live and countries which they must not enter" (Penkower, 2014, p. 356). Not a word of the infamous SS death marches from the fall of 1944 onward appeared in SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) directives or in the Western press. The Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, the Bermuda Conference on Refugees, and the War Refugee Board all omitted mention in their titles of the one principal group for which each had been created. For most of World War II, these officially designated nonpersons did not fare better with self-professed guardians of humanitarianism and morality, such as the International Red Cross and the Vatican, or with the five neutral governments. Moscow ignored the entire matter.

Only one Jewish battalion and a tiny parachute unit from the yishuv (Jewish community) in Palestine saw action, and these grudging concessions from 10 Downing Street and 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue were not granted until toward the end of the war. Nineteen RAF de Havilland Mosquito bombers escorted by Spitfires successfully attacked an Amiens prison in Operation Jericho on February 18, 1944, to free nearly 100 members of the French resistance (Penkower, 1983, pp. 208, 299), but the Auschwitz crematoria and the railroad lines leading to them, near which Allied bombers regularly flew to bomb German oil factories that summer, never became prime targets. The director of the War Refugee Board gave an account of the Amiens assault to the US undersecretary of war in a failed effort to have the lines to Auschwitz-Birkenau bombed.

The idea of reprisals on German cities expressly for atrocities against Jews, the dispatch of funds for underground rescue, and delaying negotiations over the Adolf Eichmann "goods for blood" offer were all ruled out by the West. Responses to specific, practicable evacuation proposals concerning Jews in Transnistria, France, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary were not commensurate with the urgent need. Szmul Zygielbojm's suicide in mid-1943, meant to move Churchill, Roosevelt, and the free world to action, went unheeded. FDR fled from 400 Orthodox rabbis who marched on Washington that October; the British prime minister avoided Weizmann. Instead, to defeat the enemy and have the Jews return to their European "homes" after the war served as the fixed objective for the duration. Alas, the pursuant policy proved a cruel mockery of the one entire people singled out for death in the war years.

## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

Few scholarly volumes, however carefully prepared and impressively praised, are without their flaws, and *The Jews Were Expendable* is no exception. Rising antisemitic sentiment in the United States, the apathy or negligence of various other government agencies that paid no more heed than the State Department (Treasury and Interior proved to be the exceptions), and why American Jewry overwhelmingly supported Roosevelt deserved more focus. Sustained explanation of the moral collapse of the free world at large in the face of ongoing mass murder was necessary. The same is true of other concerns that pressed in upon the bystanders during World War II, preventing a full grasp of the reality of the Holocaust and the taking of possible action.

The conclusion to Chapter 3 in particular should have been rephrased. Its last paragraph stated that European Jewry “would fall victim to the democracies’ procrastination and unsurpassed callousness, as well as to the Nazis’ prussic acid, first mentioned to London and Washington in [Gerhart] Riegner’s cable of August 8, 1942.” No. As Richard J. Evans (2015) recently observed, losing one’s moral compass is not the same as setting it to mass murder. Rather, the sentence should have read that European Jewry “would fall victim to the Nazis’ prussic acid.” The final sentence of that chapter can stand: “And from Allied and Axis camps alike, thunderous silence” (pp. 301–302).

*The Jews Were Expendable* also details how a few courageous souls attempted to shatter the Allied conspiracy of silence, as well as the prevailing illusion that nothing could be done. Yet their valiant race against calculated mass-production death wrested only limited successes. Hitler, Himmler, Eichmann, Ion Antonescu, Miklós Horthy, and others like them believed with apocalyptic certainty that a demonic international Jewry controlled Germany’s opponents; the West, in whose councils the stateless Jews commanded no political leverage, consigned the Third Reich’s primary victim to one category: expendable. Behind the mask called 20th-century civilization, as a consequence, countless more worlds were destroyed.

Humanity has forgotten too soon. As Vilna partisan Abba Kovner expressed it years later, “something terrible had fallen like a meteorite into history” when the Holocaust showed the whole world that the blood of a people could be shed with impunity. Radical humanist action, perhaps taken through transnational constituencies, is needed to rescue blameless victims from oblivion and to have complacency give way to personal commitment. The concluding thoughts expressed in *The Jews Were Expendable* appear as relevant in the 21st century as they did more than 30 years ago:

Once and for all, the calamitous fallacy that what happens in one part of the globe is not another’s affair

must be shed, lest one day a brother’s keeper be again found wanting in the face of extremity. . . . The cancer of bestiality is the concern of us all, and the infinite preciousness of life requires daily affirmation. (pp. 301–302)

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## END NOTES

- [1] A comprehensive study about Schulte subsequently appeared in *Breaking the Silence*, by Walter Laqueur and Richard Breitman, 1986, New York: Simon and Schuster.

This poem captures the testimony of one of the liberators interviewed by poet Barbara Helfgott Hyett. The soldier, whose unit stumbled upon the camps as the war was ending, was totally unprepared for what he saw as he gazed upon the corpses and the skeletal prisoners still alive.

*Barbara Helfgott Hyett*

## *You Know, the Funny Thing Is*

You know, the funny thing is  
the memories I have —  
I'm not sure that I could say  
where I was, what I was doing.  
The only thing I have  
is the picture that I know  
I took. I took the picture.  
I had the camera. I had to  
have been there. Otherwise  
I wouldn't have known.

"I had only two questions in my mind: How was it possible? Is it repeatable?" Aleksandra K., a pre-service teacher at Krakow's Jagiellonian University, reflects on learning about the Holocaust in this edited collection of thoughts offered by 15 Polish students. Authors Agnieszka Kania and Karen Shawn explain, "Our many conclusions from this small project include the fact that education matters, that it is never too late to reevaluate the curriculum we follow and the ways we teach students on every level, and most of all, that the knowledge, attitude, and involvement—or indifference—of the teacher can change students' lives and the world itself."

*Agnieszka Kania and Karen Shawn*

## What We Never Knew, What We Learned, and How: Polish Students Reflect on Their Introduction to the Holocaust

**KAREN SHAWN:** When I lectured at Krakow's Jagiellonian University at the request of Professor Anna Janus-Sitarz and her doctoral student Agnieszka Kania, I was impressed by the students' interest in the Holocaust and their eagerness to learn as much as they could about appropriate pedagogy.

**AGNIESZKA KANIA:** I asked 15 of these students to write about when and what they had learned about the Holocaust and what their response was when they did. I was not looking for any particular theme; I merely wanted to learn the background that led to their current interest in this subject.

**SHAWN:** When we read their thoughtful, lengthy essays, we decided that these edited excerpts, which detail both an end to their innocence and the beginning of their search for knowledge of the story of the Jews in Poland, might serve as initial data for a qualitative research study in which students around the globe reflect on their own learning in the same way. How do students become interested enough in the subject of the Holocaust that they decide they want to teach about it?

### **THE BACKGROUND**

In the summer of 2015, after Shawn's lectures at the university, Kania participated in the Centropa Summer Academy in Poland, where she met Sharon Azaria, an Israeli scholar and educator. [For more on Centropa, see the spring 2015 issue of *PRISM*, pp. 8–45.] As they learned together, they

realized, much as Shawn and Kania had recognized, that they had obtained quite different educations about the terrible times of World War II and the Holocaust, which happened mostly in today's Poland, and the same was true of their knowledge, understandings, and perceptions of that time. In an attempt to discover the genesis of this difference, Kania and Azaria began a joint project called "Polish and Israeli Pre-service Teachers: The Healing Process" with 15 Polish students, mostly from the Faculty of Polish Language and Literature, and a similar group of Israeli students from Talpiot Academic College in Holon, Israel, all studying to be teachers of English. Through this project, young people from two countries began their journey from the past to the present. They explored and shared their beliefs, opinions, stereotypes, and sometimes even emotions that thankfully were healed, in the main,<sup>1</sup> in the process of gaining historical awareness and understanding each other and each other's point of view.

### **KNOWLEDGE "TEACHES HUMILITY"**

International contacts open minds and hearts in unexpected ways. As one of the participants stated, such knowledge

teaches humility, teaches us not to base our opinion about another nation on the basis of fragmentary information. Having new knowledge of the Israeli educational system [with regard to Holocaust education] and politics of the country helped me to be able to understand their [i.e., Israelis'] way of thinking and to give up judging.

The first task for Polish participants of the project was to write about their school experience connected with the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> They were asked to describe when and how they had been introduced to the topic, what their feelings or thoughts had been, and how they currently evaluated their education, knowing that they were about to start an exchange with Israeli students and would face some perceptions and historical facts that they might not have discussed at school.

**KANIA:** I asked them to do this because I believe that writing our educational autobiography is always a good thing before we start learning something new. It is enlightening to know what our experience is and what we have been taught well—as we see it from a distance—and what seems to have been missed in our educational background. When we realize where we are at the moment, what we know, and with what we begin, we are ready and open for new knowledge. Afterwards, our teaching becomes more reliable and not based on educational stereotypes, schemata, or patterns.

**SHAWN:** The students participating in the project were eager to share their thoughts with an international audience and appreciated the opportunity to do so. As we analyzed their responses, we saw that they focused on five main aspects: their knowledge, if any, of the role of their hometown at the time of the Holocaust; what they have learned about Jews, both as their fellow Polish citizens and as individuals who endured the Holocaust; their first visit to Auschwitz; the content of their Holocaust curriculum; and their opinion of the Holocaust education they received in the primary through high school grades, as well as of the teachers who taught them—or failed to teach them—about this subject.

In the initial excerpts below, students recall visits to local Jewish cemeteries and question the silence about the history of their towns, one of which was on the route of the death march taken by the prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

#### **WHAT WE NEVER KNEW**

**KATARZYNA S.:** When I was 10, our art teacher took my class for a walk. He told us we only needed to take our pencils and a piece of paper. We reached our destination just 10 minutes later: an old Jewish cemetery next to the forest that surrounds my hometown, Niepołomice. Although I had lived there since I was born, I never knew about the existence of that cemetery, which, surprisingly to me, was just a few blocks away from my home. Some of the grave-stones were still in good condition, while others were partially decayed or simply lying on the ground, slowly turning green with mold. My teacher neither explained

anything to us nor said what this place was all about; he just asked us to sit on the grass and draw.

I picked the grave with a crown on it. I did not understand that symbol or what I later learned were the Hebrew inscriptions around it. When we tried to ask questions about this place, the teacher told us that it was all for us now to find out. I think it was a kind of cultural shock to me—Jewish graves in my neighborhood, in my own small hometown? I sat there, intrigued, and drew.

From that day, we visited that cemetery once a year, on Earth Day, to clean the whole place from autumn leaves and weeds on the graves. Initially, we started to clean off the little rocks lying on the headstones, and when the teacher noticed that, he got very angry. He told us to put them back and explained what those rocks stand for in Jewish culture. We felt really bad about it, so the next day we brought some new rocks and placed them on the headstones so others who came would know that these graves had visitors.

Now, thinking back, I praise the teacher's decision not to tell us anything specific about the cemetery. I believe that made me curious, and more eager to solve its mystery on my own. Yet I did not connect the graves to the Holocaust, which I still knew nothing about. In primary school, it was quite a surprise to find that we had any Jewish community in Poland at all, and because I had seen the graves, I assumed the Jews who once lived there were all dead now.

**MARIANNA S.:** I remember that in middle school some students went with our history teacher to a Jewish cemetery in my town. Students from my school often go there even now and clean this place. This was possible thanks to my teacher, who knew the man who was very involved in the local history of my town. This man often narrated stories of our town to the students and also had a key to this cemetery.

**MAŁGORZATA K.:** In primary school, I was not told much about the Holocaust, not a result of teachers' negligence, but because this subject is too frightening for children. Of course, teachers never ignored topics related to the war. We talked about memorial sites; we visited the cemeteries and graves of soldiers. We were told about partisans (among them, the brother of my great-grandmother). We focused on the history of my city—Skarzysko-Kamienna.

**NATALIA K.:** We didn't talk about the Holocaust in my primary school despite our village being just about 10 km from Auschwitz.

**PAULINA S.:** In my case, education in high school about the Holocaust and the history of Jews was insufficient. Of course, we had lessons about the Third Reich and totalitar-

ian systems, of Auschwitz and concentration camps and how many people were killed. But I don't remember lessons about Polish–Jewish relations (1,000 years of history of Polish Jews!), about the life of Jews in Poland, of anti-Judaism and antisemitism. It is strange to me, because the town where I came from, Zory, was on the route of the Death March of prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

### WHAT WE LEARNED

Below, students discuss what they learned—or did not learn—about Polish Jews and the events of the Holocaust:

**KATARZYNA S.:** I do remember pictures in black and white—long, wooden sheds, tracks, skinny people behind the fences, all dressed in the same, striped clothes, children with sad eyes. The pictures were shown every now and then in the Polish TV news, I think at least once a year. I was a little girl then, and I had no idea where and when those pictures were taken, or what they meant.

I learned about the Holocaust in school officially when I was about 12, but I must have heard about it earlier. In the Polish school system, we learn the whole of Polish history three times: In primary, middle, and high school, each time more detailed, so it's fair to say we know it pretty well at the end of that process. I remember, though, Polish history classes didn't include much about the Jews. Of course, they taught us about Polish Jews just to explain events of the Holocaust, as if there were nothing after and nothing before that.

Everything that I learned about Jews in Poland before high school was connected with the Holocaust, ghettos, death camps, and World War II. Only later did I find out how many Polish writers and artists are of Jewish descent. Finally, I moved to study in Kraków, and my high school teachers were really keen to show us the full image of Jewish contribution to Polish culture as well as more difficult topics, such as antisemitism and the tensions rising between the two nations. I'm not sure about this term *nations*—after all, Jews have been living in Poland since the 10th century. I wonder, how long do you have to live, work, have children, and bring them up in a country for its natives to finally consider you one of them?

**PIOTR F.:** In history classes we were taught basic facts of the Holocaust as a part of World War II, focusing on the statistical data and national socialist ideology behind the process. I'm not really sure if anyone at that point really understood who the “Jews” mentioned in various lectures, books, movies, and museums actually were. I don't remember my thoughts at that time, but I considered a Jew to be someone unique, unusual in terms of religion and clothing, although I knew no background for thinking that.

**SYLWIA S.:** I learned about the Holocaust when I was still in primary school. Our Polish language teacher wanted to explain to us—children—what the Holocaust was. Standing at the map, she showed us the locations of the extermination camps while explaining what happened there. In arranged meetings after classes, she read us *Medallions* by Zofia Nałkowska [see “Zofia Nałkowska: *Medallions* and the Bonds of Life, pp. 8–13,” and “In the Darkness,” pp. 14–15, in *PRISM*, Spring 2016—Ed.]. I was too young to understand, and I remember very little.

**ANNA P.:** We read literature about the Holocaust, including stories about life in the concentration camps and ghettos and also some on pre-war Jewish life in Poland, but we were mostly exposed to the Jewish people in the context of antisemitism and World War II. The social, cultural, and political aspects of the proximity of both Polish and Jewish nations were virtually nonexistent in our education.

**EWA W.:** It is worth noting that the knowledge that young people receive in school is from the perspective of the Poles. The books describe the fate of the Jews, but they are written by Poles and consequently slightly blur the overall picture of the Holocaust by focusing the Polish nation on their own tragedy, unconsciously moving the Jewish narrative to second place. In high school, if we talked at all about the situation of Jews during World War II, it was only a history to be noted in the notebook, taught by the teacher, and learned by heart by students.

### VISITING AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

A visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau was a major cause of the end of innocence for many, but not all, of these students:

**KATARZYNA S.:** When I was in sixth grade, the teachers planned a trip to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Parents had to choose whether they want their children to go, and mine did not. I'm glad I didn't—we were only 12 or 13 years old, too young to comprehend such a thing. I remember some of the boys coming back to school the next day, claiming with pride that they “weren't scared at all.” They took the visit as if it were a trip to a haunted house in some amusement park. I do believe it was too soon to take them there, as they were unable to process it and understand it fully.

**MONIKA Z.:** In middle school, we read multiple pieces of poetry and prose on the Holocaust, especially about Auschwitz-Birkenau, which we also visited. What I remember is how surprised I was that all my fellow students, 15 years old at the time, were very mature about the visit.

**ANNA P.:** Because I knew so little, the most important and



shocking event to me was my visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. After this visit, we had one hour to talk about our feelings and reflections—and that completed our knowledge about the Holocaust. I had a really serious problem with sleeping for nights afterwards.

**PAULINA S.:** My first visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau took place in the third year of middle school. Unfortunately, we were not at all prepared, historically or emotionally. I regret that this visit didn't take place in high school, when we had some knowledge about the Holocaust.

**PIOTR F.:** In middle school, we went to Auschwitz-Birkenau. To be honest, that visit was too early for us. We weren't mature enough, and it was traumatic because we did not have enough vocabulary to talk about it. Of course, we knew that this was a very sensitive issue. All of us had heard a little bit from family. None of our teachers talked about that massacre, only the guide.

**EWA W.:** In middle school, we went to visit Auschwitz. Our guide was boring and it was in June, so the weather was nice and my class didn't listen and didn't think about that place and its history. The day was more like a walk than learning about a place of murder. After that tour, there was no discussion about what we had seen, I think. If there was, it wasn't good if I can't remember it now.

**ALEKSANDRA K.:** The most traumatic moment in my learning was a visit to Auschwitz. Silence was a queen of that day. A silence was needed to watch the history and realize the crime committed here not so long ago. From time to time, only a quiet comment happened. In general, our seriousness was full of silence—everyone was like that. It happened rather rarely, such behavior that everyone respects the place he visits. Auschwitz was like that—quiet, engaging, and very serious, with emotional harshness. I have only two questions in my mind: How was it possible? Is it repeatable? Our lessons cannot answer this.

**MARIANNA S.:** My education wasn't abundant in knowledge about the Holocaust. I don't remember talking about this in primary school, but in middle school we visited Auschwitz-Birkenau. Our teacher had prepared us to visit this place before the journey, so we knew that we should behave respectfully, because the camp is a place of the deaths of many people. I remember that after this visit I was very agitated. When the guide was talking, I felt very sad about the people who were murdered there.

**SYLWIA S.:** The one thing that I regret very much is that my teachers never organized a trip to Auschwitz. They tried, but there were never enough students who wanted

to go, either because they felt they were not ready or because they simply did not want to confront the place.

## THE CONTENT OF THE CURRICULUM

The students discussed the content of the Holocaust curricula in their history and literature classes. Notably, all students who discussed literature mention the eye-opening power of three particular texts, along with a few others: *Medallions*, by Zofia Nałkowska; "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen," by Tadeusz Borowski; and *Shielding the Flame*, by Hanna Krall. Unlike Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Anne Frank's diary, which they do not read in school, the texts they all read are not typically taught in American high school classrooms, yet their hold on readers is evident in these responses.

**ANNA P.:** In my opinion, studying the Holocaust is relegated to the background at school. During history lessons, the material is elaborated chronologically. World War II and the Holocaust belong to the final units in school textbooks, so teachers don't spend enough time talking about them. (Why? They don't have enough time? Maybe they don't want to have enough time? They are afraid?) Only in middle school did I find out that for the mass murder of people in Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau, the people of Germany are responsible, not the Russians. In high school, we sometimes talked about the Holocaust. These themes were discussed in literary works such as *Shielding the Flame* and others, but it was not a subject that we were eager to discuss.

**SYLWIA S.:** In middle school, my history teacher showed us documentary films, papers, and statistics connected with World War II and the Holocaust. Most importantly, he was the first person to tell me that extermination was not only the effect of German operations. He noted that there were many Polish people who helped Jewish people and also Polish collaborators helping the German occupiers.

**IWONA B.:** My first experience with the Holocaust was in middle school during Polish lessons. We read some short stories about World War II and the situation of people from other countries. I remember one short story by Maria Konopnicka: "Mendel of Gdansk" (first published in 1897), which was about a young Jewish boy and his grandfather. It was a very sad story for me, because I couldn't understand the jibes and the nasty and brutal behavior the boy suffered from his peers. We learned about the Holocaust only very briefly and superficially.

**AGATA K.:** My education about the Holocaust started mostly in high school. We learned facts about the Holocaust in history classes. Our teacher explained to us that there were Germany's death camps in Poland, where this horror

happened. He told us that in those camps were mostly Jewish people, but not only: there were Polish people, too, and Greeks, Gypsies, and other nations, as well as political prisoners. Those were very hard lessons, but our teacher tried his best to make us aware of this subject. We talked about the Holocaust as a tragedy of humanity, as something that we have to remember so it will never repeat itself. In Polish language classes, we read books by survivors. We were trying to understand what was happening in the camps from the inside. We discussed Tadeusz Borowski's short story "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen." This account taught me what a horrible place the death camps were and made me aware of what terrifyingly organized killing structures there were under totalitarianism and a maniacal leader.

We learned about the Holocaust through historical facts and discussed our points of view. I think that what my teachers tried to do was to create in us an opinion based on solid knowledge. Those classes have stayed in my mind to this day and made me realize how important it is to keep refreshing our memory of those events and teaching about them to others.

**MAGDALENA R.:** I still remember the shock after reading the stories by Tadeusz Borowski, Hanna Krall's *Shielding the Flame*, and Zofia Nałkowska's *Medallions*. These lessons taught me important issues ranging from the murderous mechanisms of the camps and how they destroyed the human psyche, through the attitude of people towards evil and danger in extreme situations, through the conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto, and understanding what is really meant by the word *Umschlagplatz*.

**NATALIA K.:** In middle school, there were just few facts about concentration camps. In history class, we didn't talk about it a lot. The Holocaust was presented as a part of World War II, not as a different problem. Our teacher showed us a film in which some people from the Third Reich government are sitting and talking about what they should do with the Jews. The main part is just talking people, without any action, so my class started to protest and didn't want to watch it.

Only in our Polish language lessons did we discuss the Holocaust. We read short texts ("This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen"; "Farewell to Maria"; "Among Us, in Auschwitz"). We talked about the authors' camp experience, about cruelty, and about how people were dehumanized. We learned a bit of poetry by Tadeusz Różewicz and Czesław Miłosz, among many others. We talked about the Holocaust a lot; it was an important subject for our teacher, who explained that she thought that the Holocaust was started many years ago, when people were joking about the Jews, using stereotypes and not trying to understand

Jewish culture and tradition. She thought it remains a big problem until today and believed the Holocaust could come about for any nation and religion, so we should be careful when we want to tell abusive jokes. Part of the class agreed with her, but a few students did not want to look at the Holocaust this way. The discussion lasted for the entire lesson, but those few people couldn't understand her point of view.

**ALEKSANDRA K.:** I think that the first time I touched this subject was at my primary school. The next lessons I remember are from high school, mainly from Polish language classes, where we talked about books. I remembered *Medallions* very well, in particular the story "The Adults and Children of Auschwitz." I remember the silence among my classmates after the sentence said by two young children in the story who were asked by an adult what they were doing. They replied, in the last sentence in the book, "We are playing at burning Jews" [p. 49]. It wasn't just muteness because of our lack of knowledge. Most of us were touched by her stories and wanted to compare our feelings, but there were no proper words to describe them. How to judge? How to talk about the Holocaust? What kind of language to use? These were the common questions in our group.

With Hanna Krall, it was different, easier in a way, maybe because her book is an interview, a conversation between two people. It gave us some basics, showed us a language we could use, and with that, we were able to talk about Marek Edelman and the events in the Warsaw Ghetto.

With time, discussion became easier. In history class, we watched scenes from a movie about the camps, which made a huge impression on us—and this time we were ready to talk. I remember that I wanted to share my views very much and I actually did. That class discussion accompanied us home and for a long time after, even during the semester break.

**MARIANNA S.:** In my Polish language lessons, we read literature connected with the Holocaust, including the poem "Warkoczyk" ("Pigtail"), written by a Polish poet, Tadeusz Różewicz [who was 18 when the war started]. He writes, in the final stanza: "In huge chests / clouds of dry hair / of those suffocated and a faded plait / a pigtail with a ribbon / pulled at school / by naughty boys." Różewicz wrote this after visiting the Museum in Oswiecim in 1948. His reporter style, without emotions, metaphors, or other means of artistic expression, made an impression on the reader. I will never forget this poem.

**MAŁGORZATA K.:** In middle school, for the first time, we became familiar with the term *Holocaust*. My Polish teacher was not confined to material published in textbooks, and

therefore she taught quite thoroughly the history of Jews, Poles, and other nations affected by the Holocaust. I will never forget what she told us about the fate of Polish children who were imprisoned in the concentration camp created inside the Lodz Ghetto. She showed us the movie *Angel's Face*, directed by Zbigniew Chmielewski; I still think and talk about it. During this period, my parents encouraged me to watch *Schindler's List* (directed by Steven Spielberg) and *The Pianist* (directed by Roman Polanski).

In high school, we discussed the same authors; however, the selected content was much harder to read and accept. The protective jacket was taken off. The school organized a trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau. We learned about the Poles who saved Jews. Teachers never forgot about the other side of the coin. They tried to show us that both Poles and Jews have their heroes but also their traitors. We watched *In Darkness* (directed by Agnieszka Holland), which made a huge impression on me, but a part of the class did not understand the conditions in which Jews had to live and thought that film was a little like a fairy tale. I think that it was easy for me to understand thanks to having seen the other films.

**KLAUDIA M.:** In high school, teachers were talking with more mature people who are ready to talk about suffering. So my education about the Holocaust significantly changed compared to previous learning. I think it is due to compulsory books about World War II. We had to talk about that: it was our duty. I had an amazing teacher—he wasn't afraid of talking about history. We discussed non-fiction, novels, texts from newspapers (about the Holocaust, World War II, etc.), and the best part—movies. We went to the cinema very often. Not everyone read the compulsory books, so film was a better alternative. After seeing each movie, we had to write a review that included our emotions. I remember a lot of films, but my favorites are *In Darkness*, directed by Agnieszka Holland, and *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler*, by John Kent Harrison. It was very difficult for us, but our teacher tried to help with interpretation. I think it shows us that discussion of the Holocaust is necessary to protect our world and honor the victims. They deserve our respect and memory.

### **GIVE THE HOLOCAUST A VOICE OF ITS OWN**

Below, students write candidly, and at times movingly, of what they perceive to be the strengths and the gaps in their education about the Holocaust, showing their desire to turn their knowledge into action as they learn to teach.

**ANNA P.:** My school did not devote much time to the history of the Holocaust. This was due to many factors, such as upcoming matriculation examinations and lack of interest from students.

**MONIKA Z.:** Each of my teachers helped me in creating my own opinion and vision of the Holocaust, which grew from one that was really immature to one that was much more aware.

**PIOTR F.:** Memories are tricky things, for they change depending on a person's state while he or she is recalling them. Until a few moments ago, I'd never really thought about how I first learned about the Shoah, and now that I've started to think about it, my memories are starting to re-form—slightly, but undeniably. Thus, I cannot guarantee that I learned about the Holocaust the way I describe it, but I can guarantee that that's how I remember it.

It would be best to start with texts about the Shoah that were introduced in my pre-college education—and it won't be a long list. Reading two books, having a few lessons, and seeing a death camp doesn't sum up to a lot of hours spent on learning about such a terrifying experience as the Holocaust. When I think about it now, though, with a bit of knowledge about teaching and the reality of Polish schools, I think it's still quite some amount of time that my teachers managed to get for this topic. I don't think the problem of my education about the Shoah lies with how many lessons about it I had. The problem is somewhere else.

During my last four years of studying, I've gained some knowledge about methods and “laws” of the teaching process. When I look at my education about the Holocaust with this knowledge, I notice an interesting thing: I've never been taught about it—I've never had a lesson about the Shoah. It was never the subject of a lesson. I was gaining information about the reality of concentration camps during lessons about behaviorist narration in short stories after World War II. It's as if the topic of the Shoah was “hidden” behind some kind of other topic. If I were to accuse my education about the Holocaust of something, I wouldn't accuse it of not giving this topic enough time. I would accuse it of not letting the subject of the Shoah have a voice of its own.

**KLAUDIA M.:** Talking about the Holocaust and war in my schools depended on teachers. I feel lucky that I had one who cared about the subject.

**MAŁGORZATA K.:** As a future teacher, I would like to dedicate much more time to themes related to the Holocaust. We have to take into account that times have changed. Now, the market offers many more books about the Holocaust—even for the youngest readers. This new literature should be a part of the curriculum and the themes raised should be discussed in all grades.

**PAULINA S.:** Teaching about the Holocaust can't be limited to a few hours on the lessons of history, and then only in

the context of “racist policies of the Third Reich.” We cannot communicate only the facts and give only the numbers. The Holocaust has consequences: It did not end suddenly in 1945. Similar phenomena, such as contempt for human life, exist in the modern world. Teaching about the Holocaust and its aftermath is necessary (although a challenge for all participants in the educational process) in order to shape attitudes and sensibilities.

#### WHERE DOES THE KNOWING LEAD?

While reading students’ recollections and reflections, we came to our strongest conclusion: So much depends on the teacher! Because so many different teaching tools and techniques can be used to introduce this difficult and complex topic, it is crucial to educate teachers first, before we expect them to enter a classroom and teach about the Holocaust. What use is a mandate to teach if there are no mandates for learning what, when, how much, and how to teach? The knowledge, attitude, and involvement—or indifference—of a teacher can change students’ lives and the world itself. Thanks to this exchange project, we all gained knowledge, expanded our perspectives, and discovered the answer to the question “Who’s going to change the world?” *The teachers are*—those who are well educated and open-minded, those who have received excellent training and broad and deep knowledge of the history and the pedagogy of this topic in college and university.

**KANIA:** In our Polish group, we saw that asking simple questions may evoke complex and deeply thoughtful answers. Why didn’t I hear anything about the Jews living in Poland before World War II? What happened with those who survived? Were the Jewish children who were hidden by Polish families and in Catholic convents told about their origin? If so, when and how? How did they respond to this knowledge? These are just examples of some of the questions with which we grappled and that some students chose for deeper research on their own.

In Poland, there is no core curriculum for teaching about the Holocaust as a separate subject. It has always been introduced in the classroom as a part of the history of World War II, which involves so many tragic episodes for the Polish nation—some three million non-Jewish citizens of Poland were killed by Nazis and Soviets between 1939 and 1945—that the Holocaust sometimes seems to be merely one of them, as Ewa W. notes (p. 83). Further, high school literature teachers were obliged for decades to include texts about the Holocaust in their units on World War II, as noted in the student responses, yet there was not any obligatory book about the Warsaw Uprising (1944), considered to be the most tragic and painful experience in the history of Poland, with more than 200,000 people killed within 63 days and the entire capital city brought to ruins.

What implications does this omission, which contradicts Ewa W.’s further perception that the Jewish narrative is moved “to second place” (p. 83), have for teachers and students and for the future of reconciliation between Poles and Jews?

In recent years, the Jewish culture in Poland has returned and is coming back to life, more and more visible in the public space. Renewed communities of Jews are growing. Polish citizens discover their Jewish origins, and Jews with Polish roots come to visit the country of their ancestors. New films are made and books published; centers for Holocaust education are thriving. Cultural centers, museums, and synagogues are open, and visitors from all over the world come to Poland to touch the Jews’ past and taste their presence today, creating both new possibilities and new challenges for education.

Further, Israeli students come to Poland regularly, now not only on pilgrimages to the camps but also to explore the cities and meet Polish students, so soon it will not be possible for a Polish youngster to say, “I have never seen a real Jew.” For years, in post-war Poland, Jews were “mythical” people—we were to believe they existed and were murdered, but it all seemed to belong to the sphere of fantasy or fairy tales, as Małgorzata K. noted (p. 86), rather than real life. It is all changing now. There will no longer be the mythical Jew. As students from both countries get to know one another as peers, the Holocaust will not be the only knowledge shared between them.

**SHAWN and KANIA:** The remarkable results of the project, well seen in these responses and in both groups’ additional comments and discussions, prove that it is never too late to reflect on the curriculum we follow and the ways we teach students on every level. Teaching about the Holocaust at the right time and in the right manner, helping students to know broadly and deeply but only as they are ready to learn, and letting the subject “have a voice of its own,” as Piotr F. insists, have far-reaching implications that we have only begun to assess.

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#### END NOTES

[1] More work needs to be done to clear up still-lingering misunderstandings between students, as illustrated by this recollection of an earlier meeting shared by Agata K., a Polish participant:

My history teacher had chosen my class to help organize the student exchange program with Israeli students from Rishon LeZion, who were in Poland mostly to visit extermination camps, such as Majdanek, in my home town of Lublin. This experience was unique. Our guests were my age, so we talked like teenagers, but we were all dealing with a tough part of our history. It was emotional, but mostly we all were kind to each other, making new friends.

However, I got quite confused when we were talking casually and a guy asked me how I felt about my grandparents killing his in Majdanek. I didn't understand where the question came from; I still don't know. I'm Polish, and my grandma's sister was a prisoner in Majdanek; their father helped to hide a young Jewish girl. This teen couldn't possibly have known that, but he accused the wrong people. I don't understand why he assumed that some random Poles, such as my own grandfather, were those who helped Nazis. Poland was under Nazi occupation, so the more probable story was that we hated them.

[2] While the Israeli participants also performed this exercise, space did not permit inclusion of their responses. However, we hope to publish them as well. We suggest that other interested groups share their reflections on their learning and their "end of innocence" and send the results to Agnieszka Kania ([agnkania@poczta.onet.pl](mailto:agnkania@poczta.onet.pl)), Karen Shawn ([shawn@yu.edu](mailto:shawn@yu.edu)), and Sharon Azaria ([sharonandisrael@gmail.com](mailto:sharonandisrael@gmail.com)), who are eager to work with others to examine these data and pursue this potentially valuable qualitative research.

Willie Balk, a student at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education, muses on his discovery of an old notebook, his relatives murdered in the Holocaust, and his still-forming response to his new knowledge of this sad truth.

*Willie Balk*

## Not Since I Left Dagda

For most of my life, I was ignorant. I had no idea. I was oblivious. It wasn't hidden outright, talked about in hushed tones, or swept under the rug. I simply did not know.

I discovered while I was still in high school—and only when I came across, quite by accident, a plain red, three-ring folder—that I had family who perished in the Holocaust. Originally thinking it was a long-forgotten graduate school assignment of my mother's, I didn't pay much attention to the find. Only when my father saw it and told me what this actually was did I begin to show any curiosity whatsoever. The decades-old document that I had unearthed from the bookcase in my living room was the autobiography of my great-grandfather Harry (Israel) Chanen, one that he and his daughter-in-law, my great-aunt Audrey, wrote in 1969 about his experiences during the first decades of the 20th century. I never had the privilege of meeting Grandpa Harry, as my father, aunts, and uncles called him, but I am lucky enough to be one of his great-grandchildren who bear his name (William Israel).

Grandpa Harry hailed from Dagda, which is found on the eastern side of Latvia near Belarus. It's about a three-hour journey from Riga, Latvia's capital. A cursory glance online will tell you that today there are slightly fewer than 2,500 inhabitants in Dagda, more than double the 1,104 people living there in 1935, of whom 585 were Jewish.

As the tide turned in Europe with the advance of the First World War, the Chanen family looked to flee and join their patriarch, Feivel, and Harry's brother, Louis, already living in Iowa.

I read Grandpa Harry's words:

We experienced antisemitism. We did not know that this was the beginning of what, many years later, would come to be called the Holocaust. Along with that defeat [that of World War I] started the general movement of the refugees eastward. We were separated from Father and Louie. We didn't hear a word from them during the war and there was no way to

communicate. Our family didn't have a leader, but Mother, like all the rest of the heroines of Israel [Jewish women], decided that we had to move in order to survive. She had a nephew in Vologda whom she hadn't seen for 40 years. Without writing anything ahead, we decided that we'll go there and somehow, God will provide and take us.

Mother, Leah, Sam, Max, and I climbed upon the wagon and started out into what would be, for us, [the belated arrival of the] the 20th century. I'll never forget the two people who followed our wagon. The rest of the family were all busy with making a living except Michel and Sara, the children of Uncle Uriah and Aunt Hinda. We left them walking after our wagon, crying like babies, repeating, "Our teachers and our friends are leaving, whom have we got left?"

It is hard to describe the inner feelings of a human being so excited about going out into the world and being the blacksmith of your own destiny, and yet, you were sorry to leave the dear little place where, beneath the trials and tribulations, true humanity and friendship prevailed. Yet today I would give a lot to be able to visit that Godforsaken corner of the earth.

Grandpa Harry's narrative explains that his brother, Louis, had enlisted and fought in the American army during World War I. He survived and returned to Iowa, where his father had stayed behind, working in his scrap metal business. Wartime and the Russian Revolution severed all avenues of communication, and Feivel Chanen was unable to find any information about his family. Louis suggested that the only way to help assuage his father's loneliness was to go and search for Harry and the others left behind. He journeyed back to Europe, determined to find the remaining members of his family.

Three years after Louis began scouring Russia, Latvia, and Lithuania for any trace of them, he found Grandpa Harry and other remnants of his immediate family, who had trekked over 617 miles (994 km) to Vologda, Russia,

and eventually back to Latvia, when they met Louis on their way to Riga.

Grandpa Harry writes: "Probably at what was the Dvinsk station, the door of our car opened up, and in walked a young man, small in stature and well dressed. We at once recognized our brother, Louis, after six years of separation." Together they planned the emigration of the remaining Chanens, which they completed in 1921. Grandpa Harry was 19 years old. He weighed 95 lbs.

The account of what life was like for my great-grandfather in Dagda and beyond is fascinating. I read it avidly and then again more than a few times, yearning to be close to someone I'd heard so much about, yet never gotten to meet. Here was a true family man. He loved my great-grandmother, Grandma Jeanne, whom I got to know before her passing and remember vividly. Her sister had married his brother. Jeanne came once to visit the couple, and Harry was smitten. They married and lived together happily, first in Iowa and then in Quincy, Illinois, a river town that Harry wrote was just like Dagda. He bought Grandma Jeanne the biggest Buick that General Motors made—so big that he had to extend their garage because the car protruded from it. He loved his grandchildren; he had nicknames for them, and he relished their visits.

Sometimes, when my father hears me serve as *chazzan* (prayer leader), he'll remark to me after services, "Not since I left Dagda have I heard it like that!" The first time it happened, I must have looked at him curiously, because he explained that this was the response Grandpa Harry would give my uncle after hearing him lead prayers.

**"NOT SINCE I LEFT DAGDA"**

At the beginning of the account in the red folder, when writing about the members of his extended family, Harry lists his father's family and their whereabouts next to their names. X "settled in America," he writes; Y "moved to Israel," with no further commentary. However, as I looked at the name of a cousin and what my great-grandfather had written next to it, my heart sank. *Uriah Chanen: murdered by the Nazis.*

I sat transfixed as I read that statement over and over again. I had not possessed a naive assumption that somehow my entire extended family had escaped the Nazi death machine, yet this revelation was jarring. Every time I had visited Yad Vashem or perused the online database it maintains, I had searched for family members and found nothing. This time, I had a name—Uriah—spelled there, Urija Hanin—and I was determined to find him. After searching through a litany of interesting and unusual variations of spelling, I did just that [Fig. 1.]. The database entry reads:

Urija Hanin was born in Dagda, Latvia in 1875 to Leib. He was a merchant and married to Hinda nee Lev.

Prior to WWII he lived in Dagda, Latvia. During the war he was in Dagda, Latvia.

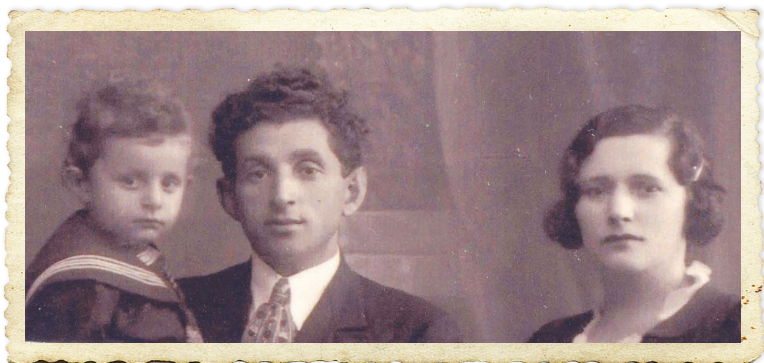
Urija was murdered in the Shoah. (Yad Vashem, Page of Testimony, n.d., n.p.)

This testimony was added to the Yad Vashem archives in 1957 by Urija's daughter, Ahuva Hanin Brandwein, who somehow escaped the horror and settled in Kfar Saba, Israel. She lived there until she died in 1972, at the age of 61.

Urija wasn't the only Hanin in the Yad Vashem database. Three of his children are listed as victims: Michl (Misa), Sara, and Leah. Michl was married to Leah (née Scherel), [Fig. 2.] and they lived in Dagda, where Michl, too, worked as a merchant. The couple had a son named Chaim [Fig. 3.]. Sara was married to Yisrael (Zilu) Erenstein, and they had one daughter, Hinda. They lived in Tukum, 40 miles (about 64 km) east of Riga and 205 miles (about 330 km) from Dagda. Leah, Urija's youngest child listed, was a student. There was also Yankel Hanin, a different first cousin of Grandpa Harry's, and his wife, Genda, and children, Mere and Bar. And then there were Avraham Hanin, Reina Hanin, Samuel Hanin, and Tzila Hanin. They, along with the overwhelming remnant of Jews in Dagda and surrounding towns in southwest Latvia, were forced to march over 40 miles (75 km) to the Dvinsk

FIG. 1. Page of Testimony, Yad Vashem's Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names.

Ghetto in July 1941. They were murdered by the Nazis in the Pogulianka Forest in Lithuania one month later. On August 1, the Jews who remained in Dagda were brought to the Jewish cemetery and murdered. Gone. Just as quickly as I learned they had existed, they were gone.



**FIG. 2.** Michl Hanin, Leah Scherel Hanin, and son, Chaim. Page of Testimony, Yad Vashem's Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names.

#### WHAT ABOUT ME?

My original query may have been answered, but it ultimately became the catalyst for a mountain of other questions. I have yet to figure out or fully process what this all means. Armed with this new information, I find myself at a loss. I've unearthed material of great significance, yet the pit in my stomach grows when I think about how much still remains unknown. Were the Hanins murdered in the Lithuanian forest? Did they meet their demise at the very local cemetery where they mourned the deceased of their community? Did they even survive the march to Dvinsk?

Does it make a difference to me if the majority of my family was already nestled safely in America while this happened? Do I pay no mind to the fact that these family members were cousins of my great-grandfather, so far removed from my own life? Would my great-grandfather even have known these relatives had he seen them with his own eyes walking out of synagogue, heading to the market, or going in and out of shops on the streets of their beloved Dagda? How did I not know? How did we not talk about this?

#### I DO NOT KNOW. I'LL NEVER KNOW.

This influx of new information only fuels my desire to learn more. I want very much to visit Dagda and see the history. I assume their houses are gone. Information I gathered online says the building that was once a synagogue is now a flower shop. Pictures of the lush, green cemetery can be accessed on the Internet as well as records of who is interred there. Some of the tombstones are illegible. I can't find any Hanins there.

I set out to merely read the autobiography of my great-grandfather, who had lived safely in America for decades

after his emigration. In it, I uncovered information about one of my great-grandfather's cousins who were martyred: I was determined to discover his story. This quest brought me to 15 more relatives who met that same fate—and there may be others. The database listed more Hanins, some who I know ultimately escaped Dagda, and others whose destiny I still do not know and most likely never will.

Last year marked the 75th anniversary of the destruction of Dagda Jewry. Four words in my great-grandfather's autobiographical work caused me to dig deeper, to demand answers: *Killed by the Nazis*. I may never have met them or heard their individual stories, and I do not know where this knowledge will lead, but I do know I won't forget them.



**FIG. 3.** Chaim Hanin. Born, 1935. Murdered in the Shoah. Page of Testimony, Yad Vashem's Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names.

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"My children were silent," Nicholas Samaras recalls, "silent in that place," as they tried to comprehend the enormity of the Holocaust through five memorials in a field at Dachau.

*Nicholas Samaras*

## *Five Memorials, Dachau*

All I can say

is that my children were silent  
in a field of five memorials, silent

as we ventured inside the one, starkest chapel —  
a hollow, towering, stone tumor framed by barbed wire —

in its black-basalt lava center, a single, silver strip rising  
to a pinnacle of light  
at an open circle in the roof.

In the distance of a century, we were silent in that place

and, together, we got it —  
the memorial we inhabited in that moment  
a good thing,  
the brilliance of its solitary, unspoken statement.

We were touching the world  
and the history of the world.

The tree-lined path to the crematorium, quiet.  
All the efficient paths around us, quiet.

My son lit a candle.  
Silent, we walked out over human ash.

A good thing to feel  
this bad, to see somberness turned

into magnitude, comprehension, witness,  
a pinnacle of light rising.

Determined that no one who could read would be able to say he did not know, the Bergson Group (profiled by Rafael Medoff in the spring 2012 issue of this journal, pp. 112–119) never ceased their attempts to call America to action to help the Jews of Europe. Below are three excerpts from the more than 200 advertisements sponsored by the Group in their 1943–1944 ad campaign in the *New York Times*, reprinted here as they appear in Stephen Herz's (2014) *Marked: Poems of the Holocaust* (New York: NYO Books), p. 146.

*Stephen Herz*

## *Four Million Jews Waiting for Death*

FOUR MILLION JEWS waiting for death.  
Oh hang and burn but — quiet Jews!  
Don't be bothersome; save your breath —  
The world is busy with other news.



Time Races Death:  
What Are We Waiting For?



HOW WELL ARE YOU SLEEPING?  
Is There Something You Could Have Done  
to Save Millions of Innocent People —  
Men, Women, and Children —  
from Torture and Death?

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