

# From Rovne, Against All Odds

By Rochelle Friedlich

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I'd like to thank the rabbis and Myriam Abramowicz for honoring my family by asking me to share a part of their story with you today.

I grew up in a family of survivors, in a community of survivors in Brooklyn. While I'm lucky to still have my parents and my mother's sister, Pearl, who's now 93, the rest are mostly gone. The passing of that generation is difficult for me to fathom, since with them disappears the possibility of a first-person account of a particular way of life, native speakers of a language, and the witnesses to the perpetration of a great inhumanity. Although both my parents survived the war, today I will focus on the story of my mother's family and, in particular, on my grandfather, Isaac Steinberg, whom I called Zaydeh.



**My grandfather, Isaac Steinberg**

Zaydeh was born in Ukraine in 1895 and died in 1988 at age 94. He was a house painter; a proud, stubborn man, with a strong will and a hot temper, and an avid reader of politics and history. He outlived my grandmother, Rivkeh Gitt Steinberg (whom I called Baba) by more than twenty years. In his living room, on the wall across from the chair where Zaydeh always sat, was a painting of a dark-haired young woman with her hands clasped in her lap. I came to understand that the woman in the painting was my mother's middle sister, Ruchel, for whom I was named. Zaydeh had the painting made from a small photo he had salvaged. As a young person, I often wondered about this mysterious woman who shared my name and whom no one

ever talked about. I very much felt her presence, though, and felt a kind of responsibility to carry on for that life that was so tragically cut short. Why did she perish, I thought, and why am I here?

Before the war, Zaydeh and Baba, and their three daughters—Pearl, Ruchel, and my mom, Pepa, the youngest—lived in Rovno, a city in the heartland of Ashkenazic Jewry that was Eastern Poland and later Western Ukraine. The family was poor. Zaydeh's work as a house painter was hard to come by during the long, cold winters. When Poland was jointly invaded by Germany and Russia in 1939, Rovno came under Soviet sovereignty. Then, on June 22, 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union.



**My grandparents, both 25, with my aunt Pearl, in 1920.**

*Boshevikes? v'est kimen tzurik un hoyzen* (if you follow the Bolsheviks, you'll lose your pants). They ultimately concluded, *"Vos vet zayn mit alemen vet zayn mit mir"* (What will be with everyone will be with me). But Zaydeh knew that they simply did not understand.

The bombing of Rovno lasted three days, signaling the approaching occupation by Nazi troops. Two days into the bombing, Baba had prepared lunch for the family, and she, along with Pearl (who was then twenty) and my mother who was twelve years old, waited for Zaydeh to get home before sitting down to eat. Just as Zaydeh came in, the air-raid alarm sounded, as it had many times in the prior few days. They left everything where it was and ran out the door.

As they had during the two previous days, the family headed across the street to a brick building more substantial than their wooden house, where they and their neighbors sought safety. While running, Baba lost a slipper. In the minute or so that it took her to retrieve it, their former safe haven had filled with people, leaving no room for them to enter. The planes were flying very low. Zaydeh quickly led the family to an empty lot nearby, where they hid behind large piles of wood. All at once, the brick building that had sheltered them during the first days of the siege was squarely hit by a bomb, and most of those inside were killed. The lost slipper had saved their lives.

Dazed and frightened, the family wandered onto Chechegomaya Street, the city's main thoroughfare, where Zaydeh noticed the Russian soldiers preparing to leave. He knew then that he and his family could not return home. The German army would be there soon. So, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, they began to walk.

But Ruchel, my mother's middle sister, who was then eighteen years old, was not with



**From left: my mother's sister Ruchel, my mom, and her sister Pearl, late 1930's.**

them. Two weeks before, she was taken on a holiday by the cinema company where she worked. This vacation to the Yaremchuh spa near the Roumanian border was in recognition of her good work inspecting film that came from abroad. Pearl, the eldest sister, remembers Baba's tears and foreboding as the family accompanied Ruchel to the train station. Pearl tried to reassure Baba that Ruchel would be away only two weeks. She would not, however, be reachable there.

Through streets lined with the dead and wounded, the family followed the retreating Russian Army, leaving their city behind in flames. "*Rovno mayn, die bist eybik zayn*" (My Rovno, you will always be in my heart).

As it began to grow dark, a large truck of Russian soldiers stopped nearby. Zaydeh begged the soldiers to take them to Kiev. He had heard that Ruchel and the other young cinema workers might have been moved there for safety. The one who seemed to be in charge suddenly yelled out "*idityeh sudah*" (go up and sit down). So, they climbed onto the truck. As night fell, one of



the soldiers covered them with a blanket, and they traveled through the night.

When they arrived, Kiev was in bedlam with thousands of people displaced and Ruchel nowhere to be found. It was only after the war that they learned that Ruchel had refused to go to Kiev with the others. She insisted on returning to Rovno. There she would have found the front door to her house wide open and her family gone. She made her way to her Aunt Enya's house nearby.

**My grandparents in the 1960's.**

Four months later, on November 6, 1941, the police told all the Jews without work permits to report for resettlement. Over 17,500 Jews were transported to the Sosnikes, the nearby woods, and were shot into

pits dug earlier by Soviet prisoners of war. The remaining ten thousand or so Jews were forced to live in a ghetto in the worst part of the city.

On July 13, 1942, the remainder of Rovno's Jews were herded by the German police and the Ukrainian auxiliary and forced to walk from the ghetto to the train station, where they were enclosed in train cars. After two days without food and water, they were transported to a quarry outside the town of Kostopil and shot. The victims of these *actziehs* included five of Zaydeh's brothers and sisters and their families, and Baba's four brothers and their families—in all, 42 men, women and children of the Gitt and Steinberg families.

In 1989, while visiting Rovno with my mother, my aunt Pearl, and my cousin, I heard a first-person account of that November 1941 mass murder from a woman who had been there and miraculously survived. Unlike the others, she was not hit by a bullet, but fainted and fell into

the pit with the force of the other bodies. She woke up that night and crawled, naked, out from under the corpses. A Ukrainian guard saw her and looked the other way. She was saved by a local farmer who took her in. This woman returned to Rovno after the war, where she was still living at the time of our visit. She told us that Ruchel had been wounded by flying shrapnel and, because she was hospitalized, she was among the first group that was killed that November in 1941.

In the chaos that was Kiev, Zaydeh managed to get to the train station and gain passage for himself and his family in a boxcar of a freight train headed deeper into Russia. They sat atop coal, along with other refugees, and traveled for about one week. At each stop, Zaydeh jumped off to find some food for his family, hurrying back before the train left the station. At one station stop, the train started pulling out sooner than he'd anticipated. He dropped the food he was carrying, and managed to grab on to the end of the last moving car with one arm, and hoist himself up to rejoin his anxious, tearful family.

Zaydeh's plan was to get to Soviet Georgia, where the climate is temperate, but as they arrived in a town called Derbent near the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, in the province of Dagestan, the train came to a halt. *Vilizay!* (get out), the Russian troops shouted. They needed the transport to bring the wounded back from the front. Zaydeh had no choice. He instructed his family to wait near the train station while he ventured out to explore the town. Zaydeh made his way to the central market and on an impulse, stopped a woman on the street, "*Di retst Yiddish?*" (Do you speak Yiddish?) He had guessed right! Through this woman, he was able to find a barn where the family could sleep for the night on a dirt floor covered with some straw.



**My grandparents and their grandchildren about 1966. My grandmother died later that year.**

To stay in town, however, each family member would need a chlebnaya kartichke (a bread card), which entitled you to 400 grams (about 14 ounces) of dense corn bread that had to last for two days; and the only way to get a bread card was by being employed in the town. Zaydeh went to the office of a hospital in the town center and asked for the director, who turned out to be a Dr. Schwartz. Zaydeh told him that, with all the wounded soldiers coming in, the hospital would surely need someone to paint and freshen up the rooms. He was awarded a job and a bread card. "My wife helps me," he added; and he was promptly given another bread card for Baba.

But the children too would need bread cards in order to stay. My mom, a twelve-year old then, made friends with two sisters from Besarabia, who introduced her to the foreman at the

factory where they worked making canned goods for soldiers going to the front. My aunt Pearl got a job in an assembly line sewing long underwear for the troops. Food was scarce, and they were always hungry. The line for bread formed at 3:00 am, and Baba would go out early to get a place in line. Sometimes, though, the local men would arrive just before the bread came and force the others back with long swords. On those days, there was no bread. The family survived in Derbent for four years.

In 1944, with the war still raging, Zeydah volunteered for the dangerous assignment of escorting two wounded soldiers back to Ukraine. His plan was to get to Rovno's City Hall in order to obtain the necessary papers to allow the family back home. One night, while riding on top of a train on his way back to Derbent, Zaydeh was accosted by two men saying, "Here's one Hitler missed." He managed to get away from them and find a place for himself inside the boxcar, while they took his place on top of the train. That exchange inadvertently saved his life that night. The next morning, Zeydah found that they had been killed when the train entered a tunnel.



**My mother (left) and her sister Pearl three years ago.**

In 1945, at the end of the war, Zaydeh, Baba, Pearl, and my mom returned to Rovno. There they found their home destroyed and no surviving family members. They eventually moved to a displaced-persons camp in Austria where they lived in barracks for five years until they were able to get visas to come to the United States.

My parents met for the first time in that DP camp. My father, who was just 13 when the war began, lost his parents in Auschwitz, although his sister survived the ordeal. He and his older brother survived the war by

hiking from Poland to Hungary. Constantly on the run, they escaped from various work camps and posed as gentiles with false papers obtained from the underground. There were many close calls, but that's a story for another time.

Thank you for helping me to keep my family story alive, and for all that I learned about them and myself in the process.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah—May you be inscribed for a good year.

*Rochelle Friedlich has been a member of BJ since 1995. She has served as a past Trustee on the BJ Board and is currently co-chair of the Aging Hevra of Panim el Panim, BJ's Social Action/Social Justice initiative. She is the Director, Case Management, at The Carter Burden Center for the Aging in Manhattan.*