

Eleh Ezkerah

Delivered on October 3-4, 2014
Yom Kippur 5775

by

Barry Lichtenberg

Shira Nadich Levin and James L. Levin

Leslie Nelson

■ My Father's Story

By Barry Lichtenberg

In July 1939, two months before the Germans invaded Poland, Vladimir Jabotinsky, the leader of Revisionist Zionism, spoke in Warsaw. Once again he called for the immediate evacuation of Poland's Jews. He told his audience:

"I must say to my shame that the Jews are behaving as if their doom has already been sealed. I know of nothing like it in all the history books. Millions of educated, well-mannered people, are being driven towards the edge of a cliff. What do they do? One cries, one smokes a cigarette, one sings but no one can be found to jump to his feet, grab the reins and change the wagon's direction. That's the mood we are all in."

My grandparents were there. Rosa and Beresz ("Berish") Lichtenberg returned home shaken but where could they go? How could they leave behind their elderly mothers? What country would take them in?

Their teenage son, Zevulun (Zvilin), my father, was filled with dread and determined to leave. He had read *Mein Kampf*. He listened on the radio to Germany's leader ranting against the Jews. He read Simon Dubnow's harrowing history of medieval massacres of German Jewish communities. Kristallnacht, Germany's national pogrom against its Jews, had taken place a few months earlier. A Jewish family recently expelled from Germany lodged in his family's apartment. A cousin had been admitted to Warsaw medical school, exceedingly rare for a Jew and a woman in the late 1930s, but under new regulations, she had no seat and remained standing during class. When she returned from school, my father would sometimes help her soak her swollen feet in a pail. A beloved uncle (Elchonon Levin) on his deathbed said Germany would enter a Poland filled with Jews and leave it with no Jews.

But maybe things would get better. They couldn't get much worse. Lichtenbergs had lived and prospered in Warsaw for centuries. "Tuta Nasha Palestina" my great-grandfather had said, "this is our Palestine." When my father's cousin, Victor Bialer, was mobilized with the Polish Army in that unusually hot summer, the entire Lichtenberg family went to the railroad station to see him off. Victor's last words were "See you all in Berlin." Another cousin laughed at my father's worries. "There are three million of us here. What can they do to us?" My grandparents prepared as well as they could. Relatives in Paris sent gas masks. One tenant delivered cartons of vegetables and another delivered coal.

On (or about) September 10, 1939, my father bid his parents farewell. The previous week, following the German invasion of September 1, there had been heated arguments as to what he and the family should do.

From the roof of the massive apartment building on Nowolipkie Street where our family lived together with many relatives, my father could see the German bombers releasing their payload in the opening days of the war. But then the bombing stopped. Tentatively at first, people walked onto their terraces and waived at their neighbors across the buildings' inner courtyard. Perhaps the

worst was over. Polish radio played martial music, oddly enough mostly American marching band compositions of John Phillip Sousa. My grandfather, Beresz Lichtenberg, whose name I bear, urged my father to remain.

Try as I might, I could never really get my father to talk about his parents. The few photos I have reveal a sharply dressed couple standing or sitting close together, my grandmother, Rosa, smiling warmly at the camera, and my grandfather, his eyes averted, gazing off into the distance. It is not easy to miss grandparents you never knew. So I grew up trying to learn something of them, and perhaps through them, to better understand my often indecipherable father. Here are photos of my grandparents:



I suppose today my grandparents might be called “modern orthodox,” but that label does not begin to do justice to a large, diverse and sprawling family. My father was raised as a committed Jew and Polish patriot. One of my father’s uncles, Herschel Eisenstadt, represented the orthodox Agudath Israel party in the Polish Parliament. One of my father’s Aunts studied psychiatry in Paris.

My father attended the Chinuch School, which was a modern Jewish high school, a pre-war Polish version of the Heschel School. Mordecai Anielewicz, the hero of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, was two grades ahead of my father. Every September, with the start of the school year, Dr. Meir Balaban, a leading Jewish educator, would address thousands of Jewish students and their families on the steps of the massive Tlomacki Synagogue. Apparently, the speech didn’t change very much from year to year and my father would sometimes recite it to me in Polish. The Germans burned the Tlomacki Synagogue during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Perhaps my father’s greatest influence was his one sibling, his older brother, Zvi Lichtenberg, a’h, who headed the Warsaw branch of Jabotinsky’s Revisionist youth movement, Betar. My uncle made Aliyah in 1935 and was wounded in the Arab uprising of 1936. His parents brought him back to Warsaw for medical treatment, but as soon as Uncle Zvi recovered, he returned to Palestine. The Jews of Poland had no future, he said.

At the last moment, my grandparents gave their blessing and told my father to go. They suggested he head east and would meet up with him in two weeks, as soon as things settled down. My father left, carrying a rucksack, a couple of zloty, and two buttered rolls. And so my father began a journey unlike any other—an odyssey that Homer could not have imagined. (“Lekh lekha”—go—with no promise of “ha’aretz asher arecha”—the land that I will show you.)

My father left without Divine promise. He was on his own. He literally took the last bus out of Warsaw, commandeered by some relatives with a Polish officer they had bought off standing guard at the door. The bus made it to the outskirts of town until it ran out of gas. My father and a few others walked east. Those who remained were later killed. The scene on the road resembled

a nightmare version of a Marc Chagall tapestry, with Stuka bombers in place of flying angels: masses of refugees walking along the road and preventing the precious few military vehicles from getting through; a Hassidic family holding hands around a large tree such that they looked to be dancing when in fact they were running in circles in fright; a lone policeman firing his pistol against a dive bomber. Zvilin and his friend diving into the high grass when a Stuka returns to strafe the road. Zvilin emerging from the high grass alone and never again seeing his friend. My father made his way to Kletsk just in time for the Russians to enter. Then onto Vilna where he met his uncle Herschel, the Agudah representative. My father remained in Vilna for a few months. He hoped the situation had stabilized.

He registered in University, Stefano Bartorega. His mother even managed to send him his winter overcoat. He ripped open the lining. Perhaps Rosa had also sent money, a letter. But there was only the overcoat. The situation deteriorated. One night a large group of students called my father a "Jhid" and set on him and beat him to an inch of his life. My father said he knew that unless he could break away, he would die then and there. He somehow managed to flee the gang and knew he had to leave Vilna.

There was a flight leaving for Stockholm and his uncle provided airfare. The Russians did not permit men 16 and older to leave, so my father dressed in shorts like a 12-year-old and did his best to look prepubescent. Unfortunately, he forgot to shave, but the Russian soldiers didn't seem to notice and he made the flight.

From Stockholm, he made his way to Malmo.

From Malmo to Copenhagen.

From Copenhagen to Amsterdam.

From Amsterdam to Brussels.

From Brussels to Paris, always one step ahead of the German onslaught.

From Paris to Marseilles, where he befriended some Jewish longshoremen and hitched a ride on a freighter to Beirut.

And finally, from Beirut to the Port of Haifa, perhaps the first refugee of the German invasion.

Zevulun headed to Palestine because his brother was able to obtain a student visa for him—a lifesaving exception to the British White Paper then in effect that severely restricted Jewish immigration. In May 1940, Zevulun arrived in Haifa, penniless. A Jewish Agency functionary greeted him. The Jewish Agency had been granted autonomy in processing Jewish immigration. There was a two pound entrance tax. My father had no money and the functionary threatened to send him back. For the first time since leaving Warsaw, my father broke down and cried. A compromise was reached. The Jewish Agency took my father's overcoat as collateral, pending remittance of the two pounds.

Presumably the coat still sits in some government warehouse gathering interest. My father had arrived in Eretz Yisrael. He later told me that at the time he thought, "If I do nothing else in my life, I will have accomplished this." He was 19.

Zevulun eventually attended and graduated from American University of Beirut. AUB was a positive experience. My father spoke fondly of his experiences there. Another strong influence was Judah

Magnes, President of Hebrew University and a leading advocate for binationalism. Before becoming president, Judah Magnes had served as rabbi of this synagogue, BJ.

My father eventually settled in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, married and started a family. His wife, my mother, was born in Lithuania as Vichnah Vilkomirska. She arrived in New York shortly before war erupted and her name was Americanized to Vera Wolk. And Zvilin Lichtenberg became William Lichtenberg. William worked for 32 years at Barton's Candy Corporation, rising from stock boy to Treasurer. He seldom left New York.

My father left Warsaw in 1939 with only a rucksack. Forty-four years later, in 1983, he returned for the first time with a couple of suitcases, some kosher food and me. We found a living fossil, a retired lawyer (Mishlanko) who knew my grandparents and was with them in the Warsaw Ghetto until they were killed.

On Yom Kippur, 1940, my grandfather Berish went to shul, even though the Typhus epidemic was then raging in the Warsaw Ghetto and he had been urged to stay home. Four days later, on the eve of the Sukkot holiday, he died. My grandmother continued to live in the family's apartment, now located within the confines of the Warsaw Ghetto. Shortly before Rosh Hashanah 1942, she was sent to the Treblinka death camp.

In total, over 25 members of the Lichtenberg family were killed in the Shoah. My grandparents' name and their values live on in their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, in America and Israel. Their names are contained in BJ's Scroll of Remembrance that was displayed and recited on Yom Hashoah.

I am deeply grateful to the rabbis of BJ, Roly, Marcelo and Felicia, and Ari for weaving the lives of the six million martyrs into the tapestry of the Yom Kippur service. I also thank Myriam Abramowicz who has inspired and led BJ's Holocaust programming. Finally, thank you all for listening to my father's story.

Any Jew living in Europe in 1939 who was still alive in 1945 has a story to tell. This has been my father's story. But it is not over yet. One river's churning waters is heard on another's shore. A decision Zevulun Lichtenberg made 75 years ago ripples across time and into this sanctuary on this holiest of days. Today, we too have decisions to make, decisions that may profoundly affect, and perhaps change for the better, our relationships with our families, our friends, our God and ourselves.

May we all be granted a sweet, healthy, happy and peaceful new year. Thank you and G'mar Hatimah Tovah.

Barry Lichtenberg practices law in Manhattan. He has been a BJ member since 2006, when he married Sandee Brawarsky in BJ's sanctuary. They are the proud parents of Akiva, Meir and Miriam.

■ Judah Nadich

By Shira Nadich Levin and James L. Levin

SNL: Today, Jimmy and I have the privilege of talking about the role that my father, Judah Nadich, zichrono livracha - or rather our father, since Jimmy's relationship with my parents was that of a son - played during and after World War II and, particularly, in his role as the first advisor on Jewish Affairs to General Eisenhower, directly after World War II and the Holocaust.

To understand what my father brought to that role, and how it affected him, it is helpful to get some understanding of who he was.

JLL: Adolph Judah Nadich was born in 1912 in Baltimore, the child of East European Jewish immigrants. His father, Isaac, barely earned a living as a grocer. The family lived above the store, and included his mother, Leah, who died when he was 10 and then his father's second wife, Nessa, (who became his "second mother"), and his sisters Fannie, Gertie and Esther. My father-in-law initially rebelled against the Jewish education he received at the hands of unappealing and even incompetent teachers, and his mother was in despair "what will happen to this boy? He'll become a truck driver." Happily, a fine teacher inspired him, and his mother made sure he had the opportunity to go to New York to attend Yeshiva High School and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (today, Yeshiva University). He also attended The City College of New York at night, receiving a Bachelor's Degree. After graduating from both institutions, he matriculated in the Jewish Theological Seminary, which appealed to him as being more modern. He happened to be a student at JTS during what many would call its "golden age."

Following the rise of Hitler, he understandably dropped the name Adolph and became Judah.

At 24, Judah was ordained and became a pulpit rabbi, serving in Buffalo and Chicago. He later served in Brookline, Massachusetts and for 30 years was the rabbi of the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York.

Pearl Harbor transformed his life. He enlisted in January 1942 as a chaplain in the army, and soon became the first Jewish chaplain in the European theater, initially sent to the United Kingdom, where he was stationed until a few days after D Day. My father-in-law did not remain the only American Jewish chaplain in Europe for long, but he was the highest ranking among them. His experiences during the war are a topic for another occasion.

My father-in-law described in his book "Eisenhower and the Jews" the first service held at the Rothschild Synagogue in Paris after the liberation of Paris—in the presence of American soldiers and thousands of French Jews: "All of the pent up feelings—fear, grief, despair under the Nazis, mixed now with elation, relief, hope because of the liberation, burst forth at the sight of an American rabbi—he could have been any American Jewish chaplain—speaking in a service of liberation from German rule." In a book by Debra Darvick, she described the experiences of an American soldier who was present that day in the synagogue: "Despite the fact that the announcement of this service for Jewish soldiers had been hush-hush, it seemed as if every Jew in Paris caught wind of it. When I approached the synagogue, police officers were still removing the boards that had covered the

ornate doors and windows of the Rothschild synagogue during the four years of Nazi occupation. The courtyard outside the synagogue was mobbed—men, women, children, mothers pushing their babies in perambulators all wanting to enter. When I finally made my way into the synagogue, I immediately heard Shalom Aleichem echoing from every corner of that magnificent building. Tears of joy streamed down the cheeks of all who were gathered.” The soldier goes on to describe the reaction of the French Jews to hearing Major Judah Nadich preach in English, Hebrew—and then in French—and how my father-in-law handed him a Torah scroll to carry around the synagogue, which forever transformed the soldier’s life.

In the months following the liberation of the concentration camps, the American army came under criticism in the United States for its treatment of the Jewish survivors, some of whom were forced to share their camps with Nazi prisoners of war, and almost all of whom were confined behind barbed wire. The report stated: “As matters now stand, the military appears to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them, except that we do not exterminate them.” President Truman was shocked and angry. Many changes were put into place as a result of this report. Jewish Displaced Persons were recognized as a separate national category.

In August of 1945, my father-in-law was ordered to Frankfurt, Germany to assume the new role of “Advisor to the Commanding General, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, on Jewish Affairs.” In that position, Judah visited the DP camps in the American zone and reported directly to Eisenhower on those visits, advising the general as to how conditions could be improved. He helped sensitize the military to the conditions of the Jewish DPs and to what they had suffered during the war. My father-in-law wrote a series of reports that are considered invaluable historical documents concerning the conditions of the DPs. He quickly had former Nazis removed from being held together with the DPs, had the rations available to Jewish refugees increased and also persuaded General Eisenhower to have the barbed wire removed from around DP camps. In his memoirs, Judah revealed that he used his position to help free Jewish children who had been hidden in French convents during the war and now were in danger of being kept there. Like many Jewish chaplains, he also secretly assisted the “Breichah” - the so-called illegal immigration to Palestine. He helped relay information, assisted in procuring food and supplies and was otherwise useful in helping refugees fulfill their desire to immigrate to Israel. Years later, he received a decoration from the State of Israel for his services.

SNL: We believe that my father’s role as advisor on Jewish Affairs had a profound impact on his life. We know from his diary and book about this period, when he left this position and the army he felt that he could not go back to his former life as a pulpit rabbi. He described addressing a large meeting in New York after the war with emotion and even anger. He could not reconcile what he saw as the normal life of the Jews in the United States with the murder of so many Jews and the destruction of Jewish life in Europe. As a result, for over a year, he spoke throughout the United States, and later in South Africa, to raise money for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and then for UJA, to be used to aid the displaced persons. This speaking tour helped bring first hand accounts of the Shoah and the condition of the survivors to American and South African Jews. Long before the Shoah was known as “the Holocaust,” my father spoke and wrote about it, hoping that Jews and non-Jews would come to understand its significance.

It is hard for us, his family, to picture my father turning away from the pulpit and away from G-d. I have never known a more religious person. The rabbinate was not a job for him—it was a calling,

it was who he was. I grew up in a home that was steeped in the joyous observance of Judaism, in a beautiful environment created and nurtured by my father and my mother, Martha Hadassah Ribalow Nadich. My mother was the daughter of Hebraists (her father was the editor of the Hadoar, the Hebrew weekly published in the United States), and she had gained an impressive secular and Judaic studies education, later working with, among others, Louis Finkelstein, the chancellor of JTS. She was a true partner to my father—but to talk about her is another presentation, for another day.

Friday night and holiday dinners in my parents' home were continuing threads of joy, made up of my mother's fabulous meals and pastries, z'mirot, and great conversations, together with the most wonderful mix of the Jewish community—from Mordecai Kaplan and Arthur Hertzberg to Isaac Bashevis Singer, to student rabbis and cantors and to many members of the synagogue where my father served as rabbi. Judaism and Zionism were key ingredients in the life of my family, and defined us. I viewed my father as having a personal relationship with G-d. When my sisters, Leah and Nommi, and I surrounded his bed in the emergency room when he was not well, although I thought he was sleeping I noticed his lips moving. When his eyes opened, I asked him what he was trying to say. He told me he was thanking the ribbono shel olam, the master of the universe, for giving him such daughters. This was the man I knew, who saw the good in every situation and who thanked G-d for the good in the world (even while he was ill and in the hospital).

The answer to this puzzle was provided to us in interviews of my father conducted and taped by the Shoah Foundation, the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust Museum, which we viewed after his death. He described to the interviewers what he witnessed in Europe and his resulting difficulties with his faith in G-d. But he explained that with the passage of time, while he questioned Judaism, G-d, and this world as a result of what he had seen, he realized he would have many more questions if he did not believe in G-d. He talked about the indescribable joy he found with my mother and from his family, as well as the incredible beauty of a flower and other wonders of nature, and he realized that pondering how these beautiful things came to be would present even greater questions for him without his belief in G-d.

JLL: Some of his experiences in his role as Eisenhower's advisor hold a key to how he found his way back to G-d and to his life as a rabbi. We would like to share some of those with you, in the words of my father-in-law:

"On my very first trip to Feldafing, I visited the hospital nearby at St. Ottilien. When the American army was approaching Dachau, the concentration camp's officials herded many of the Jewish inmates aboard a train's cattle cars, thinking they would take their Jewish prisoners south to be exterminated at their convenience. But the American army moved faster than expected and the train was abandoned not far from Dachau, close to a large monastery. One of the inmates was a young Jewish doctor from Lithuania, Zalman Grinberg. When the German guards fled, he led the Jews into the monastery, took over its hospital buildings, seized medicines and hospital supplies and opened a hospital for the sick and exhausted Jews, suddenly freed. By the time I visited the hospital, some 1200 patients had already been discharged and 785 were still occupying beds. Some of the patients had been brought from Dachau and others from DP camps.

Dr. Grinberg took me on a tour from ward to ward. He saved the children's ward for last. As we entered the ward, I saw about fifty or sixty boys and girls with all kinds of wounds and injuries.

Here there was a child without a leg, there, a child without an arm. In one bed a child's skull was completely bandaged, in another, a child's eyes were covered with bandages. Dr. Grinberg looked at me and, seeing the emotion on my face, said, "I can see that you are moved by the sight of the injured children. But worse than their visible scars and injuries, are the scars that these children carry within themselves. Remember that each of these children came to Dachau with a family. Each of them has seen the members of their family go, one by one. Perhaps an older brother was shot down by a machine gun, an older sister dragged away screaming before being killed, their mother pulled from their clutches, their father shot in the head by the bullet of a guard's revolver. The survival of each of these children is itself a miracle."

Then Dr. Grinberg turned to the children and said, "Boys and girls, you see we have a guest, an American army officer. But he is also a rabbi. Children, sing a song for our guest." The older ones started, the younger joined in, and they sang the song, "*Am Yisrael Chai!* (The Jewish People Lives!)" The tears rushed to my eyes as I thought, after what these children have experienced—they can still sing "The Jewish People Lives!" Then, certainly, the Jewish people will live."

SNL: "I was called to the office of a member of General Eisenhower's staff, shown a telegram from Paris requesting permission for a prominent Jewish leader to enter the American zone of Germany and asked whether I recognized the name of the person referred to in the wire. The name was David Ben Gurion, then the head of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. When I assured the officer that I knew who the person was, he asked whether I thought it would be advisable to admit him into our zone of Germany. My answer was that his visits to the DP camps would certainly raise the morale of the Jews in the camps. The officer told me that he would at once send back approval of the request.

That night I was in Paris and I visited Ben Gurion at his hotel, where we talked for a while, and then arranged to meet later in the evening on the platform of the army train to Frankfurt. His concern, voiced to me in our conversation, was about the stamina of the survivors. Are they altogether broken people? He wanted to know. Are they crushed in spirit? Will they, when brought to Palestine, need institutionalization or could they adjust to living and working in the Jewish homeland? Quickly, I assured him that these Jewish survivors were strong. They had to be to survive. I had no hesitation in saying that they would make excellent citizens of any country where they would live. But he was anxious to see for himself.

That evening, Ben Gurion and I were to travel to Frankfurt by overnight train. I arrived early to the train station. My accommodation on the train was a bedroom which I was to share with another officer. I put down my bag and went back to the platform. After a short while, Ben Gurion arrived and I learned that he was given a seat in coach. It did not bother him but I could not let him sit up all night. I looked for the train captain. When I met him, I thought it was good luck that, by chance, he was a young Jewish officer. "Do you know who Ben Gurion is?" I asked him hopefully. "No," he answered flatly. "He is the head of all of the Jews of Palestine," I told him, trying to make it simple. I continued, "He is coming to Frankfurt as General Eisenhower's guest, and you cannot permit him to sit up all night in coach." "What do you expect me to do about it?" he asked. That was my opening. "Tell the major sharing my bedroom - that you are very sorry, but a guest of General Eisenhower has to be taken care of, and have the major take a seat in coach, since no other bedroom is available." In that way, I was able to arrange for Ben Gurion to share my bedroom. We spoke for hours as I tried to answer his many questions about the displaced persons, the camps in which they were temporarily living, about Eisenhower and the American army. We finally got to sleep until we arrived in Frankfurt.

I took him to the general's office and, upon entering, I said, "General, if there were a Jewish state in Palestine, I should be introducing you now to its prime minister, Mr. David Ben Gurion." The two men chatted for a while. General Eisenhower told Ben Gurion that he was anxious to satisfy his curiosity about the DPs. He would provide him with an army car and driver to take him to any DP camps that he wished to inspect. He concluded by asking Ben Gurion to see him again after his visits to give him a report of what he had seen, together with his recommendations.

In the afternoon I took Ben Gurion to Zeilsheim, the DP camp nearest Frankfurt. We pulled into the camp and stopped. Several of the Jewish survivors saw me and came over to chat. I had been there many times before. One of the men followed the others but looked into the army car. Suddenly he let loose an unearthly scream. "Ben Gurion!" he shouted, "Ben Gurion!"

The others, who had been talking with me, left me and gazed into the rear of my vehicle. They too took up the scream. Other men nearby came running. Ben Gurion in Zeilsheim? How could that be? I feared a riot and, quieting the men, I said to them, "Yes, it is Ben Gurion. I want you to show him the discipline of which you are capable. He has come to speak to you. Spread the word that Ben Gurion will speak in the auditorium." They at once took off, running.

Zeilsheim had a camp population at the time of about 3,500 people. In a little more than half an hour, the large auditorium was full, all the seats taken, all the aisles and the wide space in the rear filled with standing men and women. Looking through all the open windows and doors, were the people who could not get in, all of them quiet, trying to see and hear.

Finally, Ben Gurion and I walked out on the stage. Those seated rose to their feet and, without any signal, began singing *Hatikvah*, the Jewish national anthem, voicing the hope that some day Jews will return to the land of Israel, "the land of Zion and Jerusalem, Eretz Tzion Ve'Yerushalayim" As they sang, tears rolled down their cheeks. On the stage, Ben Gurion and I were also singing, with tears rolling down our cheeks. The survivors could not believe their eyes. Through the dark years of hell under the Nazis, in concentration camps and in flight from their tormentors, they cherished one hope. If they miraculously would survive to see freedom again, they would leave the lands of the anti-Semites, the countries of the killers, and go to the land of Israel. Now, here in this DP camp, on the cursed soil of Germany, the land of Israel had come to them in the person of Ben Gurion! For the first time they believed that the nightmare was over, they were really free!"

We are so very grateful to the rabbis and to Myriam Abramowicz, for providing us with the extraordinary privilege of talking about our father and his experiences, particularly on this day, which was a source of great spiritual inspiration for him throughout his life. G'mar Hatimah Tovah.

Sixteen years ago, James Loren Levin, who is the chief operating officer of the Columbia/Barnard Hillel, and Shira Nadich Levin, a partner at Cooley LLP, and their sons Alex, Gideon and Ben became members of BJ; in 2013 Sara and Ben were married. Shira co-chairs the Minyan committee, has worked on community building initiatives at BJ and is currently co-chairing the Israel Dialogue Initiatives at BJ.

■ George & Julia Nelson and Ethel Greengold

By Leslie S. Nelson

It is my great honor to have been invited to share the story of my parents, George and Julia Nelson, and my grandmother, Ethel Greengold, all of whom survived the Shoah. As you will hear, lives that began in ways that were quite conventional during the first third of the 20th century in Europe became remarkable sagas of perseverance, strength, hope, faith and survival.



Let me begin with my father. My father, George Nelson, was born in Yugoslavia in 1912, the youngest of three children, with two older sisters. His father, Louis, was a cabinetmaker who made furniture. He must have been excellent at his work, since some of the furniture he built was made for the Hungarian Palace. As you have probably guessed, my father's surname was not originally Nelson; it was Nuszbaum, and his given name was Georg. He was raised in a traditional Jewish home, and at the age of thirteen, he had his Bar Mitzvah at the famous Dohány Street Synagogue in Budapest, which still stands today.

Georg was educated in public schools in Budapest, and after high school he received a degree in architecture and design. He then was hired at a textile concern, and went to work in Gyor, Hungary, in 1940.

It is in Gyor that my parents' lives came together—so let me turn to the early years of my mother's life. My mother was born Juliana Gruengold on February 23, 1921 in Bonyretalap, Hungary, the daughter of Adolf and Ethel Gruengold. She had a brother, Samuel, six years older than her, whose name I am honored to carry as my middle name. He was tragically killed during the war doing forced labor under the Nazis in the Soviet Union, shot while trying to secure some food for the group of forced laborers, of which he was a part. What made his death more tragic was that he was a Zionist and wanted to emigrate to Palestine, a move which he was prevented from making by his parents. It is not surprising that my grandmother carried an unrelenting feeling of guilt for his death.

At the age of one, Juliana's family moved to Gyor, Hungary, a town of 50,000 people. Her father owned a shoe store. Juliana went to a Yeshiva for her elementary school education, and did so well that she received a scholarship to the gymnasium, the equivalent of high school in the United States. Her parents were quite strict, and her father insisted that she excel in her studies, in particular languages and music. He also instilled in her a great sense of loyalty. As you will hear, languages and loyalty came to be very important to her life.

In 1940, Juliana Gruengold met Georg Nuszbaum at a regatta club on the Danube River. She confided to friends soon thereafter that she intended to marry Georg. Anyone who knew my mother and her

determination could have told him at that point that he was a destined to become her husband. Not surprisingly, two years later, on December 31, 1942, they were married in Budapest in a civil ceremony, followed by a Jewish wedding on January 3, 1943.

Juliana and Georg lived as newlyweds in Gyor. They both worked: Georg as a textile engineer and Juliana as the office manager for a prominent architect. The normality of their lives came to an abrupt end when the German army occupied Hungary. On the morning of March 19, 1944, my mother woke up, looked out the window of their apartment, and was startled to see German tanks in the town square below. German tanks and artillery in the center of the city were clear evidence of a new reality. All Jews in Gyor were required to wear clothing emblazoned with yellow Stars of David to clearly identify them as Jews.

Soon after the Nazi occupation, my father was ordered to go to the textile mill where he worked and forced to remain there because keeping the mill running was viewed as critical. At about this same time, the Jewish residents of Gyor were ordered by the German authorities to abandon their homes and move to the outskirts of the city. Instead of going directly from her home to the edge of town, my mother took a great risk in order to say goodbye to Georg. Hiding her yellow Star of David, she got a bicycle and rode to the textile mill. There, they said goodbye to one another, not knowing whether they would ever see each other again.

My father continued to work at the mill for some period of time. It was ultimately shut down, at which time he was put into other forced labor jobs. At one point, he was part of a group harvesting corn; later, he worked in a quarry smashing rocks. During this time, he was part of an escape attempt—which was foiled when the Hungarian guard whom they had paid to help them escape turned them in.

Meanwhile, my mother and her parents were ordered—with all the other Jews in Gyor—to board a cattle car train, she in one car and her parents in another. Two and a half to three days later, the train arrived at the Auschwitz concentration camp. The cars were unloaded, and she was reunited with her parents.

As they entered the camp, men and women were separated. She saw her father turn toward where she was standing and blow her a kiss as he walked off, never to see him again. Juliana and her mother were in a line together when they came face-to-face with a man who directed my grandmother to go one way and my mother in another direction. At that moment, my mother drew upon her knowledge of German to say “aber das ist meine mutter (but that is my mother).” The man motioned that my grandmother and mother could stay together—this saved my grandmother from being gassed. It was only later that my mother came to learn that the man to whom she spoke those words was Josef Mengele, the German SS officer who was notorious for his role in selecting victims to be gassed and the deadly, horrific experiments he performed on people at Auschwitz.

At Auschwitz, my mother and her mother reversed roles, with my 23-year-old mother having to take control of my grandmother’s life and survival. Approximately six weeks after they arrived at Auschwitz, it was announced that 500 women would be needed to go to a work camp. Volunteers were solicited and my mother, realizing that remaining at Auschwitz meant almost certain death, volunteered herself and her mother. They were selected, and two days later they found themselves on

a train—again in a cattle car—bound for Lippstadt, Germany. The camp at Lippstadt was a subcamp of Buchenwald and held women—predominantly Hungarian Jews—who had been deported from Auschwitz when the sub-camp opened in the summer of 1944. The women were forced to work in the armaments industry at Westfälische Metall-Industrie AG as part of the SS Kommando Lippstadt I. Working 12-hour shifts, they machined and assembled bomb parts, engaging in sabotage by purposely machining some parts out of the tolerances that were required to successfully assemble the bombs.

When Yom Kippur came in 1944 at Lippstadt, the Jewish workers fasted, despite being fed very little. My mother and others heard a German military officer say in German: “[We will] never be able to kill the damned Jews. Look, they get almost nothing to eat, and yet they fast on their holy day.” My mother told us that this proved to be a very uplifting moment for her and the other Jewish workers.

At Lippstadt, my Grandmother Ethel became very ill. Her weight dropped to 75 pounds; her skin turned black and shriveled. At one point, my mother learned from someone who worked in the office at the factory that her mother was on a list to be transported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where she would certainly be killed. With the help of a sympathetic civilian foreman, my mother hid her mother in an overgrown field behind the barracks attached to the factory. The German guards did come looking for my grandmother, referring to her as “the black one,” but gave up looking when they could not find her. The train for Bergen-Belsen left without her on board.

Ultimately, Lippstadt became a target for Allied bombing. As Allied ground forces approached, the 830 women who worked in the factory were ordered on a forced march directed by the Germans. At one point, the group of women got to a brook and the German guards told the prisoners that they needed, without any assistance, to jump the brook without getting wet. The German guards said that anyone who got wet would be shot. My mother, knowing that this would be at best a difficult task for my grandmother, told her, “For God’s sake, take off your wooden shoes and jump over the brook.” My grandmother made it. At that moment, she told her daughter that she felt as if she had crossed the Red Sea and would be free.

Shortly after crossing this brook, the 830 women were told that they could sit and rest in a clearing near the village of Kanitz, Germany. As my mother looked around, she noticed that white sheets were hanging from the windows of nearby houses. Then she noticed that the German guards were gone. A group of Russians approached and told them to look around because “Amerikansky” tanks were approaching from behind. The 830 women ran towards the tanks. The hatches of the tanks opened, and American GIs popped out, throwing food rations, soap and toothpaste to the women. Liberation Day was April 1, 1945, the day that the U.S. 2nd Armored Division made contact with the 3rd Armored Division at Lippstadt, seizing it with only scattered resistance. April 1, 1945, their liberation day, was also the 18th day of Nisan, 5705, the fourth day of Pesach.

Occupying a house in Kanitz, my mother nursed my grandmother back to health. My mother’s knowledge of languages made her an invaluable part of the staff of UNRRA (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), at a displaced persons camp in the city of Ulm. In 1946, she began to work for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which was instrumental in providing assistance to Holocaust survivors.

Meanwhile, my father continued to be part of a forced labor group that had been marched into Austria. One day, as this group was being force-marched, they suddenly noticed that all of the personnel guarding them had disappeared. As in the case of my mother and grandmother, the approach of Allied ground forces caused their captors to flee.

With all of the confusion in the aftermath of the war, it took two years of searching for my parents to be reunited. At one time, they were both in the same city; unaware, they headed in opposite directions. After being reunited, at my mother's insistence, they and her mother applied for visas to come to the United States. As time passed and the visa process dragged on, my mother came to inquire as to what was causing the delay. She learned that her immediate supervisor at the displaced persons camp where she worked had been holding the visa application because of the excellence of her work. She had some choice words for her supervisor; soon thereafter, the visas were issued. The three of them—my father, my mother and her mother—came to the United States aboard a U.S. Army transport, the U.S.S. General W. G. Hahn, arriving in Boston on April 19, 1949. Settling initially in Paterson, NJ, my mother and grandmother got work at a shoe factory where my mother inked the soles of shoes and my grandmother sewed. My father quickly got a job in New York with a textile firm, Jeri Silk Manufacturing, where he worked as a textile engineer and designer until he retired as vice president of the company 41 years later. He was known for solving both very difficult technical and design problems. Among his many professional accomplishments was the recognition he received from *Vogue* magazine; the work that he did with well-known fashion designers, including designing a fabric that was worn by Jacqueline Kennedy while she was the First Lady; and having one of his fabrics placed in the textile collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

My parents saved and bought a home in Wayne, NJ, where my brother Rob and I were raised. My parents were one of 14 couples that founded the first synagogue in Wayne, Temple Beth Tikvah (House of Hope). My father, like his father, was a fine craftsman; to this day, the table that stands in the center of Temple Beth Tikvah's bimah is one that he designed and built, dedicated to the memory of all of the members of his and my mother's family who died in the Shoah.

My mother became a successful businesswoman, owning a business that designed and fabricated furnishings and accessories out of Lucite. When my father retired, they moved to Florida, where they lived until his death in February 2012, nine months before what would have been his 100th birthday, and 10 months before what would have been my parents' 70th wedding anniversary.

My father's death took a great emotional toll on my mom. She struggled physically for the last several months of her life. Although she said she was ready for death months before she died on November 8th, 2013, the spark that kept her going through great physical and emotional adversity during and after the Shoah would not let her pass easily.

My parents both completed interviews for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation established by Steven Spielberg, now archived at the USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education. During my father's interview, the interviewer asked him how he survived the horror of the Shoah when many others did not. He said that there were two things that he thought were fundamental: a strong will and a strong sense of hope—that is, the will to want to survive; and a belief, or hope, that things would change and could be much better.

How did this translate into his life? First, these beliefs kept him alive—not just through the war, but alive and active for over 99 years. Well into his 90s, he was still going to the gym several times a week. Second, these views gave him a strong sense of optimism, which is best illustrated by what he said when we asked him to make a few remarks at his 90th birthday celebration. He stood up and recounted his life, describing only the positive experiences growing up: meeting and marrying our mother; coming to the United States; having two sons who married women that he loved and admired; having Remy and Micah, his grandchildren from my wife Jill and me, as part of his life; and having our mother, Julia, as his wife and best friend. The wartime experience was not how he chose to remember his life, indicative of his desire to think about the good, not to dwell on the bad.

What does my mother's story say about her? First, that she was a woman of great strength and determination which propelled her through very difficult experiences. She was fundamental to my grandmother's survival until she passed away in 1982 at the age of 85. She was able to fully appreciate and celebrate the many good things in her life: the birth of two sons; their marriages to exceptional women who became her daughters-in-law; and the birth and blossoming of Remy and Micah, who she loved with all her heart and soul. And she was able to remain the loving and loved wife of George for nearly 70 years.

I am most grateful to the rabbis and to Myriam Abramowicz for providing me the opportunity to share the story of my parents and my grandmother with you.

Seventy years ago on this very day, the German officer at Lippstadt that I mentioned earlier was overheard saying that our people would survive. My brother, my children and I—and all the survivors of the Shoah and their descendents—are living proof of this survival.

Thank you, and G'mar Hatimah Tovah.

Leslie Nelson and his wife, Jill Hayman, have been BJ members since 1997. Their daughter, Remy, and son, Micah, were BJ B'nai Mitzvah. Les currently serves on the Mekusharim Committee.