

Holocaust Survivors

The Indestructible Spirit



The Sala and Aron Samueli Holocaust Memorial Library
Chapman University

Presents

Holocaust Survivors

The Indestructible Spirit

Photographs by Bill Aron

An Exhibit Honoring
Sol and Fay Chase, Holocaust Survivors

Featuring

Members of The 1939 Society, a Holocaust Survivors Organization

Made possible by a generous gift from
Irving M. and Nancy Fainbarg Chase

Summaries by Dr. Marilyn Harran

Dedicated to
William Elperin
Son of Survivors, President of The 1939 Society
Visionary, Selfless, Dedicated
Witness to the Witnesses

In each of Bill Aron's remarkable photographs, you see the face of a person who embodies the indestructible spirit of humanity. Most of the photographs offer no hint that those portrayed are Holocaust survivors or that they continue to this day to grapple with memories of a world defined by inhumanity and indifference.

The faces in the photographs radiate kindness and joy in life. Their surroundings demonstrate that they have led successful and meaningful lives. Yet, these same individuals have known intense suffering and immense loss. In most cases, they lost their closest and dearest family members: mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. They lost their homes and friends; sometimes they lost their names and identities and became simply numbers. They refused, however, to allow their humanity to be destroyed.

Some of them were children while others were teenagers or young adults. They survived ghettos; labor, concentration, and death camps; and brutal death marches. Some survived in hiding due to the protection of righteous gentiles, who also represent the highest ideals of humanity, and who remind us that during the Holocaust individuals were not helpless to intervene and save lives.

To retain one's humanity under such circumstances, to find the spiritual and physical strength to go on, to share what little one had with someone in even greater need is truly a testimony to the indestructible spirit of humanity. To relive these experiences in the hope that we can learn from them and join together to create a world free of hatred, racism, and genocide testifies to their belief in our humanity.

After liberation and the end of the war, the survivors tried to pick up the threads of their lives before the Holocaust. They returned to school; they began careers and businesses; they learned English; they immigrated eventually to the United States. They married and began their own families. Most now have children and grandchildren and some even have great-grandchildren. They rejoice in their families and their lifetimes of achievement; they celebrate life but never do they forget what might have been or those whose futures were taken from them. For them, memory is not past but present.

Each summary you will read is unique, but these accounts share common themes of courage, faith, and hope. Each of these survivors would also emphasize that sheer luck played a crucial role in their survival. It would be a terrible mistake to think that the six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust somehow lacked the initiative or the will of those who survived.

I hope these summaries will encourage you to learn more about these and other members of The 1939 Society by accessing the oral and video testimonies on the Society's Web site, www.the1939society.org and on the USC Shoah Foundation Institute's YouTube channel, <http://www.youtube.com/user/USCShoahFoundation>. You can also access many other resources on the Holocaust at The USC Shoah Foundation Institute's Web site, <http://college.usc.edu/vhi>.

These summaries are part of a major project, an extraordinary union of images and texts, made possible by the generosity of Irving and Nancy Chase. I am grateful to Liam Maher IV for his work on several of the summaries, to Dr. Jan Osborn for her editorial review, and especially to the many Chapman students whose interviews provide the basis for these summaries. And finally, I want to express my gratitude to the Office of Strategic Marketing and Communications at Chapman University, and especially to Suzanne Meler, for her extraordinary creativity matched by her exemplary dedication to this project.

We thank the members of The 1939 Society for entrusting Chapman University with their experiences and for believing that we will be the vigilant guardians of their memories and their witnesses to the future. May we seek to emulate in our lives their indestructible humanity.

Marilyn J. Harran
Stern Chair in Holocaust Education
Director, Rodgers Center for Holocaust Education
Professor of Religious Studies and History
Chapman University

Revised February 8, 2019

Chapman University Student Research Assistants

Lindsey Alipio	Nolan Dunbar	Melissa Klotz	John Rocco
Erin Anderson	Mitch Fait	Jennifer Kowarsky	Amanda Rodriguez
Brittany Arabe	Katie Falcon	Nathan Lammers	Zachary Roth
Stevee Asch	Lara Filbert	Krista Lange	Kimberly St. Clair
Shawn Bai	Casey Fitzgerald	Lauren LeDuc	Nathan Samdahl
Jessica Bates	Michael Frazier	Elsa Lindstrom	Monica Santana
Marissa Becerra	Allison Frey	Kat Lombard	Jack Scholz
Jonathan Bergquist	Sarah Ganderup	Jos McCain	Lindsey Schumacher
Sarah Booher	Eliana Garcia	Kristen McClurken	Emily Scott
Mallory Bremner	Marissa Garcia	Austin McElvaney	Shelby Scott
Jacklyn Brown	Anthony Gerstner	Elizabeth Mack	Gregg Sherman
Leslie Brown	Felicia Gill	Kira McMurrin	Cambria Shimmon
Jenna Brunette	Napoleon Gladney	Liam Maher IV	Eric Shulman
Alia Burdick	Jennifer Grabot	Eric Marty	Janessa Simms
Rebecca Campbell	Bobby Graham	Amy Migler	Samantha Sleigh
Chelsea Campodonico	Jeffrey Griswold	Lucas Milliken	Blake Slyter
Sarah Cary	Lauren Grosz	Jennifer Mousseau	Bari Smith
Rebecca Chatham	Rachel Hansen	Travis Nekonchuk	Katelyn Smith
Lauren Claassen	Caitlin Hanson	Kendra Noyes	Ashley Spence
Potter Clark	Kathleen Hasay	Billy Otteman	Alexis Still
Bonnie Coil	Mallory Heida	Lindsey Petersen	Joseph Thiel
Alexander Cole	Shinae Hickey	Renee Peterson	Katherine Thompson
Taylor Cotton	Jenelle Hills	Andrew Pham	Jennifer Thongnoi
Adrienne Crowley	Paul Hirshman	Sophie Phillips	Lindsay Thorsen
Eliza Daniels	Kanani Hoopai	Denelle Plummer	Robert Tsai
Shannon David	Aimee Hutchins	Melissa Polsenberg	Bryan Wage
Alice Davis	Vanessa Jimenez	Shebah Potter	Tiffany Warch
Jenny Dehner	Layce Johnson	Sumit Raghuvanshi	Diandra Weldon
Vicki Dehner	Chelsea Judy	Claire Richardson	Mark Wolf
Brian DeWolf	Maya Kalinowski	Christine Rineberg	Jessica Yoshikawa
Addie Donnell	Daniel Kassabji	Joy Ringgold	Marta Zabaryla
Anuheha Dooge	Steve Kent	Nathaniel Robbins	Jaclyn Zeider

Joseph Aleksander, z"l

“I wanted to study the liberal arts, but my father insisted that I learn a trade. He told me that if I did, I could always make a living. It turned out that being a machinist is what gave me a chance to survive.”

Joseph Aleksander was born in Warsaw on August 3, 1923 to Abraham and Paula Aleksander. His older brother Joel went to the United States in 1938 and so was spared the suffering that Joseph endured.

In grade school, Joseph experienced antisemitism, including verbal and physical abuse. Although he was drawn to the liberal arts, his father, Abraham, insisted he learn a trade, so Joseph continued his education at a Jewish trade high school where he learned to become a machinist. Little did he know that his father's insistence would save his life.

In the 1930s, the family suffered financially, but kind-hearted Abraham never passed a beggar without giving him a coin. His mother Paula, beautiful and ingenuous, began to sell and later manufacture ladies' undergarments to help support the family financially.

Soon after Joseph graduated, the Germans invaded Poland. In the Warsaw ghetto, the family faced terrible hunger. His mother turned to her gentile customers for help, but none responded. One woman even turned her dogs on Paula. Meanwhile, Joseph's father grew weaker and more despondent at his inability to provide for his family. He was seized in a *Aktion*, round up, and murdered at the Treblinka death camp.

In May 1941, Joseph, at his cousin Maryla's urging, responded to a call for machinists for a "good" labor camp. Joseph worked at the Luftwaffe



The Aleksander family in 1937: Abraham, father; Paula, mother; Joseph; Joel, brother.

Mokotov camp until May 1942 when the camp was liquidated and the prisoners marched back to Warsaw where they were assembled for deportation. In the crowd, before he was shoved into a cattle car, Joseph glimpsed his mother. In the stifling, overcrowded conditions, half of the Jews in the car died, and Joseph became delirious. He dreamt of lying on green grass next to a cool stream. His dream of beauty in the midst of horror kept him alive.

When they reached Majdanek, Joseph had a moment's reunion with his mother. In August, he was shipped to Auschwitz where upon arrival he had another fleeting glance of his mother, for the last time.

At Auschwitz, Joseph was tattooed with number 127915 and assigned to Buna as a machinist. One day he was carrying a heavy resistor when his partner let go of his end. The resistor came crashing to the ground and broke into pieces. Knowing that there would be severe punishment, his companion blamed Joseph who was beaten and re-assigned to a brutal commando where he had to dig and shovel dirt onto lorries. It was a death sentence. Feeling his life slipping away, Joseph dared to go to the *Lager Älteste*, the prisoner in charge, telling him that he was a trained machinist and asking for a job. His risky maneuver paid off and he was re-assigned.

In winter 1944, as the Russian army neared, Joseph was sent on a death march to Gleiwitz. When the bread he carried on a string around his neck was stolen, a Slovakian Catholic prisoner shared his bread and helped to save Joseph's life. From Buchenwald he was taken to Dora and then returned to Buchenwald. When the guards began to execute their prisoners, Joseph hid in the mud under the barracks for three days until he saw American tanks crash through the gates of the camp. He survived but became desperately ill with typhus and was hospitalized.

Sent to convalesce in the nearby town of Weimar, Joseph met a pretty dark-haired girl named Joanna, a fellow survivor. Although he was smitten, he never expected to see her again. When Weimar came under Soviet control, Joseph fled west illegally, crawling for hours on his stomach to avoid detection until he reached the American zone. In a displaced persons camp near Stuttgart, he once again saw the dark-haired girl who had made such an impression on him. They married on the first anniversary of Joseph's liberation. On June 15, 1946, they left for the U.S., visiting Joseph's cousins in Denver before settling in Los Angeles.

Severyn Ashkenazy

“In 2000, 10 Jews attended the first Shabbat service at Beit Warszawa. Now more than 100 often attend. Jewish culture in Poland is being reborn.”

Severyn Ashkenazy was born in Tarnopol, Poland (now the Ukraine) in 1936. His mother, Bronislawa, was a talented musician who spoke several languages. His father, Izydor, was a chemist, mathematician, and scholar of Judaism. Severyn and his brother Arnold, three years older, studied Talmud at their father’s knee.

In September 1939, as a result of the secret pact between Hitler and Stalin, Tarnopol was occupied by the Soviets. Targeted as members of the capitalist elite, the family lost their home and business. The Soviets sent them to the town of Trembowla where both parents were required to work.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the family returned home to retrieve what they could. At the age of 5, Severyn witnessed public hangings and death by starvation.

In August 1941, the Germans announced that only essential workers would be spared deportation. The couple hid their children and reported to the authorities with their stamped permits in hand—only to learn that the directive had been a ruse and all who appeared were to be deported. Only Bronislawa’s beauty saved the couple’s lives. A German officer admired her and allowed husband and wife to remain in the city.

Thanks to his training as a chemist, Izydor was appointed a food inspector for the army. The work assignment gave him precious time to search for a hiding place for the family. Since Izydor had followed the Talmud’s injunction to save one third of his wealth in gold, he had the funds to bribe a farmer to construct a hidden cellar under a cellar. The family escaped first with Izydor joining them eight months later. For two long years, Severyn stayed in the tiny bunker, reading, studying French, and playing chess. He learned always to let the farmer win.

In February 1944, the Germans ordered the area evacuated. The farmer insisted the Ashkenazy family leave. Izydor believed they should search for another hiding place in town, but Bronislawa argued they should secretly return to the cellar. She won the argument. The decision saved their lives since the Germans and Ukrainians hunted down and murdered any Jews they found in the open.

The family’s greatest challenge was finding water. Afraid that the Germans had poisoned the wells, they drank only melted snow. Severyn’s uncle, who always gave his small ration of water to the children, died of malnutrition shortly before their liberation in April 1944.

After liberation, the family traveled west with the Soviet army, settled first in Lvov and then in Krakow. In 1946, the family moved to France where Izydor started a successful clothing business. Severyn completed high school and began his university studies. He accompanied his family when they immigrated to the

United States. On the ship, he was amazed when it seemed that everyone knew of and was celebrating his 21st birthday. He learned later, however, that the decorations were in honor of George Washington’s birthday!

The family settled in Los Angeles where Severyn graduated from UCLA. He advanced to Ph.D. candidacy in French literature before going into business, becoming a successful hotel and real estate developer. Deeply committed to the rebirth of Jewish culture and progressive Judaism in Poland, in 1999 Severyn founded the Beit Warszawa Jewish Cultural Association. He now divides his time between Los Angeles and Poland.

Sonia Berson, ז"ל (née Konsens)

“It was a miracle to survive when so many people did not. Sometimes certain things you did could save you even when you didn’t know why you were doing them.”

Germany’s invasion of Poland brought the life that Sonia Konsens had known to an end. Her family’s home in Belchtow, a small town near Lodz, was hit by German bombs and destroyed. Sonia, her parents, and younger brother and sister were fortunate that they could move in with her maternal grandparents who owned a bakery which, as Jews, they were now prohibited from operating.

Soon more members of their extended family came to live in the bakery. Her father, a respected craftsman who dyed cotton for the area’s large textile industry, was forced to sell the family’s few possessions for food. Sonia, 17, helped support the family.

When the Germans set up a factory to manufacture army uniforms, Sonia’s uncle, a tailor by profession, arranged for Sonia to work there. On August 8, 1942, Sonia was separated from her family and taken to the Lodz ghetto. A ghetto policeman assigned her to harvest vegetables and work in a factory that made mattresses. Sonia thought constantly of her family.

The Jewish policeman who was Sonia’s boss became her protector. Sonia later learned that he had once been engaged to her cousin and had recognized Sonia’s name. Since single people were deported before families, he would warn her of an impending *Aktion*, round up, and she would hide, but one day in August 1944 the Germans returned to the place they had searched previously and Sonia was captured and deported.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz she was stripped naked and her hair brutally sheared off before being assigned to an overcrowded, lice-filled barrack. In September, Sonia was sent to a women’s concentration camp near Danzig (now Gdansk) where she was assigned to backbreaking work building a road. Sonia labored alongside a friend of her aunt who now became her surrogate mother. When the woman became too weak to work and was shot before Sonia’s eyes, it was almost too much for her to bear.

Sonia was sent next to the Stutthof concentration camp and then moved to a succession of camps as the Russian army approached. Ordered to march west toward Germany, Sonia knew she did not have the strength to continue and made the decision to hide, first in an outhouse and then in an underground bunker.

In late March 1945, Sonia was liberated. She made her way to Lodz where she stayed with a childhood friend as she searched for her family. One day, while standing in line, a man struck up a conversation with her. He told Sonia that she reminded him of his wife who had been killed. Sonia had little interest in him, but her friend reminded Sonia that she had nowhere to go and no family. On June 25, 1945, only a few weeks after returning to Lodz, she married Alter Symson. For Sonia, her wedding, attended by only a few friends, only reinforced her heartache at the loss of her family. None had survived the war.

Sonia’s husband was a gifted chemist who before the war had worked in his family’s soap factory. He began to make and sell soap, but antisemitic Poles were angered by his success and threatened his life. The Symsons left Poland, going first to Berlin and then to Munich where their son Morris was born. In 1952 they immigrated to the United States. The couple faced many obstacles and both husband and wife had to work to support the family. In 1963, Sonia lost her husband to cancer.

Three years later, Sonia met and married Kal Berson, to whom she has been married for more than forty years. Her son and his family live nearby and Sonia rejoices in spending time with her three grandchildren, knowing full well that family is life’s greatest treasure.

Engelina Billauer (née Lowenberg)

“The Gestapo officers stared at my sister and me. They were stunned we were Jews since we both had blonde hair and blue eyes. ‘Are you maybe 60 percent Jewish?’ one asked. ‘No,’ I said. ‘I am 100 percent Jewish!’”

Engelina Billauer was born on July 29, 1927 in Berlin, Germany. She was the youngest of three siblings with a brother, Wilhelm, nine years older, and a sister, Frieda, seven. Her parents, George and Taube Lowenberg, were deaf mutes. Engelina learned to speak and read sign language, as did her two siblings.

Although the Lowenbergs were the only Jewish family in their building, Engelina initially felt no hostility. Until 1935, she attended a public school and then went to a private Jewish girls’ school. Life became increasingly difficult with restrictions on when Jews could shop and what they could purchase and with vandalism of synagogues and Jewish-owned stores.

From her bedroom on *Kristallnacht*, November 9, 1938, Engelina heard the sound of shattering glass and saw the night sky lit up in flames. The next morning, on her way to school, she saw her synagogue still burning. The children were sent back home. Fearing for her safety, Engelina’s parents sent her to stay for a week with friends. As Engelina learned upon her return, during that week her brother Wilhelm had committed suicide.

Engelina’s school was merged with another which she attended until June 1940. In September 1941, all Jews over the age of six were required to wear the Star of David affixed to their clothing. The Lowenbergs were now visible targets. On September 23, 1942, two Gestapo officers arrived at their door. Thinking they must have the wrong apartment since the blue-eyed, blonde-haired girls did not “look Jewish,” the officers confirmed their identity and then ordered the family to pack their suitcases and leave. As they walked down the stairs and out of the building, their neighbors stood by watching silently.

The Lowenbergs were packed into the Levetzow synagogue with some 1,000 other Jews. On September 27, they were marched through the streets of Berlin to the railroad station. This time their fellow Berliners not only watched but hurled abuse, saying “It’s about time we got rid of the Jews.”

The train passed through Riga, Latvia, where one group was taken off, and then traveled on to Estonia. Upon arrival, Engelina and Frieda were ordered to the left and their parents to the right and onto a bus. The girls ran to join their parents but the SS officer sent them away, promising them they would see their parents soon. It was a lie. Their parents were driven into the forest and killed in a mass execution.

The girls were sent to Talinn, Estonia where they worked in a shipyard. They, and three other girls with whom they became friends, were helped by a gentile worker at the shipyard who risked severe punishment to sneak them extra food. From Talinn the five girls were sent to a succession of camps, Ereda, Goldfilz, and

Stutthof before arriving in October 1944 in Neuengamme, a sub-camp of Sachsenhausen, where they worked 12-hour shifts making hand grenades.

In March 1945, they were moved to Bergen-Belsen. On arrival, female SS guards set their dogs upon the girls. To this day, Engelina has scars on her legs and a deep fear of dogs. The five girls were assigned the gruesome duty of carrying bodies to a huge pile—a horrible task that defies description.

On April 15, 1945, the British army liberated the camp. Engelina, ill with typhus, was hospitalized for three weeks. After she recovered, she joined her sister in the displaced persons camp now set up at Bergen-Belsen. There Frieda met and married a fellow survivor. When the couple moved to Lübeck, Engelina went along. They rented an apartment above a jewelry store owned by Holocaust survivor Julian Billauer whose son, Richard, Engelina married in February 1950.

In 1951, the Billauers came to the United States and settled in the Bronx. Now living in Santa Monica, they are the proud parents of two and grandparents of four, one of whom, Jesse, suffered a surfing accident which paralyzed him from the waist down. A motivational speaker, Jesse has found inspiration in his grandmother, her courage, proud affirmation of her identity, and refusal ever to quit.

Richard Billauer, ז"ל

“I learned only when the Soviets released me that the war in Europe had ended the year before. I began the long journey to Lübeck, Germany, to rejoin the father and brother I hadn’t seen in seven years.”

Richard Billauer was born to Julian and Malka Billauer on January 1, 1925 in Warsaw, Poland. His brother Adam was born in 1931. His parents put in long hours at the two jewelry stores they owned. Even when the family went on summer vacation, Julian joined them for only a few days. Richard attended a private school where he was one of five Jewish students. He enjoyed his studies and playing soccer, but since Richard loved to eat, his favorite time at school was the lunch hour!

The family’s situation changed dramatically with Germany’s attack on Poland in September 1939. The Billauers’ apartment, along with all their possessions, was destroyed in the bombing and they moved in with Richard’s maternal grandfather. An acquaintance of his father, a prospective business partner, betrayed Julian, directing the SS to his store and pointing him out as a Jew. The SS beat Julian and ransacked the store. With their life in chaos, the Billauers’ greatest concern was for Richard, now, at 14, old enough to be seized for forced labor. His parents made the decision to send him to stay with friends in Bialystok.

When the situation in Warsaw seemed more stable, Richard tried to return, but the Russians who governed the area as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty sent him as a forced laborer to a camp in Siberia near the town of Kotlas. From May 1940 to June 1941, he worked cutting trees and sending

the logs down the river. Although he received no pay and could not leave, Richard was allowed to write his family and receive packages. He exchanged the clothes they sent for extra food to supplement his meager rations.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the camp was disbanded and Richard was sent to Chimkent, Kazakhstan where he worked first in the oil fields and then on a farm. Only in 1946, when he was released by the Soviets, did Richard discover that the war in Europe had ended in May 1945.

Richard began the long journey from Kazakhstan to Lübeck, Germany where his father and brother, who had survived Auschwitz and several other camps, were now living. Along the way, Richard spent several months working with the British Brigade smuggling Jews to Palestine.

In Lübeck, Richard found that his resourceful father was already running a small jewelry store. His brother, he learned, had gone to Palestine. The meeting between father and son, after seven years, was an emotional one, especially as they grieved for Richard’s mother who had died in the Warsaw ghetto.

Julian trained Richard to become a skilled watch maker. After being separated from his father for so long, Richard greatly enjoyed working alongside him. One day, a beautiful young blonde walked into the store. Although Richard was immediately attracted to her, Engelina, also a Holocaust survivor, found Richard merely annoying, but Richard persisted, persuading her to go on a movie date. Eventually, he won her heart, and they became engaged on June 12, 1949. When Julian decided to join his younger son Adam in Israel, Richard and Engelina accompanied him, and, on the spur of the moment, wed under a *chupah* in Tel Aviv. Since Germany did not recognize their religious ceremony as legal, they had a civil ceremony when they returned to Germany. Their son George, named for Engelina’s father killed in the Holocaust, was born in April 1951.

Not wanting their son to grow up in a country that only a few years before had been responsible for so much death, the Billauers immigrated to the United States in June 1951, settling in the Bronx. While Richard worked as a watch maker, Engelina cared for their sons George and Michael, born in 1957. In 1984, after 33 years in New York, they made one more journey, following their sons to California.

Ruth Birndorf (née Bernstein)

“I always asked questions. The school principal worried that my teachers, some of who were Nazi sympathizers, would report me.”

Ruth Bernstein was born on August 13, 1931, in Munich, Germany. From an early age, she demonstrated an independent spirit. Ruth despised the fairy tales her nanny read her and so she taught herself to read.

Ruth's father, Hugo, was an engineer who worked in the shoe industry. He frequently traveled, and Ruth looked forward to his return when she, her older sister Esther, and parents would go for outings in their car. When the trips ceased, Ruth thought it was her fault since she was sometimes car sick, but the reality was that Jews were no longer allowed to own cars.

Ruth attended a private Jewish school since Jews were excluded from public schools. On November 10, 1938, Ruth arrived to find her school engulfed in flames while soldiers in a nearby barrack watched and laughed. However, not all the family's neighbors turned against them. One young man, who had joined the SS to protect his outspoken father, shopped for them, buying butter and other items that Jews were no longer allowed to purchase.

Ruth's father left the country on an extended business trip to the Netherlands in 1937 but did not return. In December 1938, Ruth's mother began preparations for the family to join him. Before leaving, they went through the ordeal of an “inspection,” with the SS poking bayonets into their laundry hamper to make sure no one was hiding. Only the intervention of their neighbor enabled them to leave with their belongings. After the war, when Ruth tried to find their protector to thank him, she learned that he had been killed on the eastern front.

Life in their new home of Tilburg, the Netherlands, was difficult for Ruth. An inquisitive child, she always asked questions in school. Since some of the teachers were Nazi sympathizers, the school's principal removed her from her classes and assigned her to work in his office so she would not draw attention to herself.

The German invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940 placed the family in new danger, especially Ruth's father who was a member of the resistance. In May 1943, a sympathetic policeman warned them of a German raid in time for Hugo to flee to Amsterdam and for his family to find a hiding place in Tilburg. The school principal and others protected them until the town was liberated in November 1944.

Ruth's father was not as fortunate. In late summer 1944, he was deported to Auschwitz. He survived a winter death march but lost his right arm to a bullet. The Soviets who liberated him compelled him to work for them as an engineer. Only after great hardship was he reunited with his family.

After the war, Ruth attended a Catholic school where the nuns helped her catch up on the years she had missed. She studied at universities in Leiden and Amsterdam where she excelled in the sciences and received degrees in chemistry

and medical technology. In 1956, at the invitation of Johns Hopkins University, she came to the United States and later joined her sister in Chicago where she worked in a research laboratory at the University of Chicago.

Ruth married Raymond Birndorf, a physician, in 1961, and the couple had two daughters, Lori and Debbie. In 1973, the family moved to Los Angeles. Ruth retired from laboratory research at age 70, but remains engaged in the active questioning of life that has defined her character since childhood.

Eva Brettler (née Katz)

“In my barracks in Ravensbrück, I saw a woman who gave birth to a child. The other women hid the mother and the baby. I don't know how they managed. This miracle became our happy conspiracy. I remember thinking that someday I too would like to be a mother with children, in a normal house, in a normal place. To have such an outrageous dream in the concentration camp gave me hope, the belief in a possible future.”

Born in Cluj, Romania in November 1936, Eva Brettler remembers the Holocaust through the eyes of a child. She was visiting her maternal grandparents in Tashard, Hungary in the summer of 1944 when German soldiers suddenly appeared. Warned to hide, she watched as the soldiers took her grandmother and aunt. Hours later she emerged from her hiding place, packed a knapsack and walked across town to the rabbi who succeeded in contacting her parents. In the months that followed, while her father Sandor endured forced labor, Eva's mother Margit tried to save herself and her daughter. First they hid in a house protected by the Swedish government. Then Margit secured a false identity card allowing her to work as a gentile, but shortly afterwards she was recognized and denounced. Mother and child were arrested.

With thousands of other Jews, in September 1944, they were sent on a forced march toward Germany. With no time to prepare for the arduous journey, dressed only in light summer clothes and wearing high heels, Eva's mother struggled to keep up. When she could no longer walk, she asked the guards to allow her to ride in the wagon with her daughter. This request became her death sentence. That night Eva, only 8 years old, tried to understand why her mother did not come for her.

Moved by the little girl with the big sad eyes, a fellow prisoner took pity on her. Eva tried her best not to cry so the woman would not tire of her. Eventually the prisoners reached the Ravensbrück concentration camp. There Eva formed a close bond with another woman who became her protector and surrogate mother. When Eva awoke one day to find the woman lying dead beside her, it was too much for her to bear and she lost her will to live. The women of her barracks united around her, refused to allow her to give up, and insisted that she must go on.

With the Russian army advancing, the Germans moved their prisoners once more, this time by cattle car to Bergen-Belsen. There prisoners lived among mountains of rotting corpses. Eva survived by faith, luck and ingenuity. She turned her small size into an advantage, squeezing through the wire fence into the refuse area of the kitchen in order to bring back potato peelings for herself and other prisoners.

After liberation, Eva spent 18 months in a Swedish orphanage until her father located her and brought her back to Hungary where she lived for 10 years. In 1956, following the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, Eva fled her country. In January 1957, she reached the United States where she met and married fellow survivor Marten Brettler. She became the mother of four—making her dream a reality. With her husband's encouragement, Eva returned to school, earning a degree in psychology from UCLA in 1983. She became a social worker, carrying on the acts of compassion that had once given hope to a little girl who had lost her mother.

Jack Bruck, ז"ל

“The Germans told me to pick the tree where I would be hanged. I refused. Luck was with me. My execution was cancelled.”

Jack Bruck was born to Israel and Dina Bruck in Lodz, Poland on June 15, 1918. Jack had four older sisters, Nadine, Sarah, Rose, and Bella, and two younger brothers, Sal and Barry. He had a wonderful childhood with many playmates.

War changed everything. In February 1940, the Germans ordered the Jews of Lodz into a ghetto. When a call went out for volunteers who were promised better living conditions outside the city, Jack, then 21, responded. The promise proved false. Jack was sent to a labor camp near Spiegelberg in Germany where the barracks were not yet completed and where the men slept in the snow for six weeks. Jack worked on the Autobahn, supervised by a brutal foreman.

Next he was sent to a munitions factory in Eberswalde where he constructed bombs, dangerous work that left his wrists permanently scarred by burning oil. Jack risked his life to sabotage the bombs so they would not fit in the casings. When his actions were discovered, the guards savagely whipped him. Only the intervention of the French prisoners of war, who heard his screams and refused to work until the beating stopped, saved his life. He was to be hanged as a saboteur, but the officer who ordered the execution was reassigned, and Jack was allowed to recover in the hospital.

In 1943, Jack was ordered to Auschwitz-Birkenau and then to Buna where he was reunited with his younger brother Sal and where their German foreman showed the men rare kindness and humanity.

In late 1944, Jack and Sal were sent to Buchenwald and assigned to clearing rubble in the nearby city of Weimar. One day, as Jack was moving stones, he suddenly smelled bread. He dug at the rubble until he uncovered a bakery that had been shelled and found warm loaves of bread. The discovery was a rare stroke of luck.

Next Jack was transported to Flossenburg where he again cleared rubble before being sent by open cattle car to Gleiwitz. The men traveled for eight days with no food and with snow as their only source of water. They were then ordered to march and Jack was forced to pull a wagon filled with Nazi war loot. He assumed they would be machine gunned when they reached their destination, but their long ordeal ended when American tanks rolled in on April 23, 1945.

For a time Jack worked for the American Counter Intelligence Corps. In 1947, he married Nina, a fellow survivor, and in 1949 they had a daughter. That same year they immigrated to the U.S., arriving in New York and continuing by ship to New Orleans. Jack worked in a printing shop and began the slow process of learning English.

Jack and Nina didn't feel at home in New Orleans, especially with the racism that was part of life in the South, and so they decided to move to Los Angeles where Nina had a cousin. The couple struggled to establish themselves and

make a living. Jack often worked 18-hour shifts, leaving little time for family, but he was determined to succeed. His efforts were rewarded when he opened his own store and eventually purchased several others.

The couple's second daughter was born in 1955. In 1957, Jack's youngest brother, Barry, who had immigrated to Canada, moved to LA. With children and grandchildren, and with his brother nearby, Jack has the full life for which he worked so hard.

Barry Bruk

“My father always put the well-being of others above his own. He was truly a righteous man.”

Barry Bruk was born the youngest of seven children, four girls and three boys, in 1924 in Lodz, Poland. His parents, Israel and Dina, were Orthodox Jews. After services, Israel often invited those less fortunate to share dinner with the family.

Easily recognizable by his attire as a Hasidic Jew, Barry was a target for antisemitic bullies, but his big brother Jack's fists helped protect him. When he was 8, Barry and a friend resolved to walk to the port city of Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland) and sneak aboard a ship to the United States. They heard that in the U.S. Jews were treated like anyone else. Their empty stomachs halted their journey after only half a mile.

Barry completed the seventh grade before war ended his studies. In early 1940, the Germans ordered the Jews of Lodz into the newly established ghetto. The family's apartment, already located within the ghetto, became crowded with relatives forced to leave their homes. Barry and his brothers slept on the dining room table.

In December 1940, Barry's brothers Sal and Jack were deported to forced labor. Barry's job as a mechanic, maintaining the sewing machines in one of the ghetto's factories, exempted him from deportation. His four sisters also worked in the factories.

Throughout 1942, starvation ruled the ghetto. To help his family, Barry secretly tore out cobblestones and planted seeds. He and a friend took

turns guarding the plot at night to make sure no one stole the precious beets. Yet, even these vegetables planted with so much love were not enough to sustain life, and in summer 1943, Barry's beloved father died from starvation.

When the ghetto was liquidated in 1944, Barry, his mother, and sisters were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. His mother, only 57, was sent immediately to the gas chambers. He lost track of his sisters.

Barry spent two weeks at Birkenau. He seized the chance when the guards asked for mechanics for assignment to another camp. He made sure his brother-in-law, a tailor, also stepped forward so that they could stay together. They were sent to a labor camp near Chemnitz, Germany. When the camp was bombed, the guards ordered the prisoners to remain in the open, exposed to the phosphorus bombs, while they took cover in the air raid shelter. When the dust cleared, none of the prisoners was hurt, but the shelter had been demolished, killing all within.

The prisoners were marched to a nearby camp. One day, seeing men lying starving and unfed in the hospital, Barry picked up a pot of soup and began to feed them. A guard brutally assaulted him, but Barry's courageous act, emulating the altruism he had learned from his father, helped the sick men to survive another day.

In mid-April 1945, Barry and some 400 other prisoners were marched south into the Sudetenland. They slept in forests and pigsties until May 8, 1945, when their SS guards disappeared, American tanks rolled in, and they learned the war in Europe was over.

Barry returned to Lodz where he was reunited with his sisters and his brother Sal. From there he went to a DP camp near Flossenburg, Germany. His foremost goal was to leave Europe. When he learned there would be a long wait to immigrate to the U.S., he chose Canada. He arrived in Montreal in September 1948.

In 1957, Barry and his wife Selene, also a survivor, moved from Montreal to Los Angeles where his brother Jack was living. Barry had finally reached the destination of his boyhood dreams.

Although they spell their names differently, Barry Bruk and Jack Bruck are brothers.

Lidia Budgor (née Gryngras)

“One day I noticed a woman covered with a dirty gray blanket, staring at me at the window where I was cutting the bread. Her eyes were sunken and begging. I opened the window and threw out some crumbs. The next day the shadow appeared again and the next day. So I threw out pieces of bread. She was a complete stranger to me. Little did I know that my good deed would bring about my survival.”

The eldest of five children, Lidia Budgor was born Lola Gryngras on August 23, 1925 to middle class Hasidic parents in the Polish city of Lodz. Lidia lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood and attended a Jewish school where she learned several languages. The Germans invaded Poland in September 1939, and by early February all the city’s Jews, including Lidia’s family, were ordered into an overcrowded ghetto in the Baluty slum district.



Photo taken in 1939 of Nina and Bluma Gryngras, sisters of Lidia. Nina and Bluma were murdered in Auschwitz.

Eventually Lidia became the family’s breadwinner. Assigned to the meat-distribution department, she smuggled out horsemeat scraps and fat to keep her family alive. Eventually denounced, she was sentenced to pull wagons of excrement to the outskirts of the ghetto—a death sentence for herself and her family who she could no longer protect from deportation. But influential acquaintances on the Jewish Council saved her and enabled her to return to her family. They remained together until August 1944, escaping numerous deportations, until their luck finally ran out. The family was taken—along with nearly 75,000 others—to Auschwitz. Lidia still remembers the painful separation with her little brother running to her mother to give her a final kiss. Lidia was saved by one of the *Sonderkommando* (special prisoner squad), but the rest of her family was sent to the gas chambers.

Lidia was shipped to the Stutthof concentration camp, east of Danzig (now Gdansk), where fortune singled her out yet again—better quarters and a job in the kitchen. She quickly used her position to help another, throwing bits of bread out the window to a starving woman in the shadows. This risky *mitzvah* (good deed) ultimately saved her life when in January 1945 the Germans evacuated Stutthof, sending the prisoners on a death march. Feverish, stricken with typhus, wearing a lice-infested blanket and broken clogs, Lidia would never have survived had it not been for that same woman who fed her bits of snow and helped her to keep moving. When the march ended at Kolkau, the friend, Mary Procell, brought Lidia soup and bathed her. The Germans abandoned them on March 10, and the arriving Soviet troops declared them free. For Lidia, there was no elation, only a profound sense of loneliness.

With no family and nowhere to go, Lidia drifted with other girls to Slupsk in Pomerania. She met her future husband, Wolf Budgor, and stayed behind when the others moved on. From there, Lidia and her new husband made their way to Vienna and eventually to a displaced persons camp in Munich. In May 1952, the couple, with their young son Aaron, obtained entry visas to the United States, settling in New Jersey until Wolf heard unexpectedly from a brother whom he had not seen for forty years and who lived now in Los Angeles. The family moved west.

Recognizing the need for survivors to help one another—even as she and Mary had done—Lidia helped to found both the Los Angeles Holocaust Museum and the Lodzer Organization, composed of Lodz survivors and their descendents. She twice served as president of the Lodzer Organization and currently is president of the Council of Holocaust Survivor Organizations.”

Fay Chase, z"l (née Swidersky)

“My sister Razla, only 21 years old, could no longer continue the march. She was lying half-dead in my arms when a Ukrainian guard pulled her from me. She died alone in a field about 50 feet away from me. I was now completely alone.”

Fay Swidersky was born in Lodz, Poland, on August 6, 1928. Her mother and father, Chava and Itzhak, were poor, but they gave their children a rich family and religious life. Fay’s family—her parents; older brothers, Wolf and Mordechai; older sister, Razla, and younger sister, Zelda—always gathered to observe *Shabbat*. Fay’s father was a shoemaker, but he found work difficult since he had been severely injured, losing sight in one eye, fighting as a soldier with the Russian army in World War I.

Fay attended a Jewish public school until Germany’s attack on Poland and the onset of war brought her schooling to an end when she was only 11. Her older brother Wolf fled to Russia but did not survive the war. Fay and the rest of her family were ordered into the Lodz ghetto, located in the Baluty slum, on March 10, 1940. They stayed in the ghetto, working in various factories that manufactured clothing, until the ghetto was liquidated. Fay’s father Itzhak died there of disease and starvation at the age of 52.

In August 1944, Fay, her mother, her brother Mordechai, and two sisters were deported to Auschwitz. Fay, then 16, and her sister Razla, 21, were the only members of the family to survive the initial selection. Her mother, brother, and sister Zelda were sent directly to the gas chambers.

Fay and Razla spent about six weeks in Auschwitz before being sent by train to a labor camp near Stutthof, by Danzig

(now Gdansk), Poland. Each day there were more deaths from hunger, disease, and ill treatment by the Ukrainian guards. In early March 1945, the sisters were among the prisoners taken by train to a large farm near the Baltic Sea. With little water and no food or sanitation, only 125 of the 700 women survived the terrible journey. Dark-haired women were especially tormented by the Ukrainian guards, but since Fay had blonde hair and blue green eyes, she was spared.

From the farm, the few survivors were marched to a slave labor camp near Lauenburg. More prisoners died on this journey, including Fay’s sister Razla. Now on her own, Fay was forced to continue the death march until they reached a large German estate where she was liberated on March 10, 1945 by the Russians. Terribly ill with typhus and weighing only 68 pounds, more than 30 pounds less than she weighed when the war began, Fay was treated in a Russian military hospital until early July 1945. From then until January 1946 she lived in a Jewish orphanage in Lodz where she met her future husband, Sol Chatinsky (now Chase), a fellow survivor from Lodz.

With the help of an aunt who had immigrated to the United States in 1905, Fay and her husband Sol came to the U.S. in May 1949. They settled in Los Angeles. Fay worked as a seamstress until Sol purchased a liquor store in 1961 where the couple worked together while raising their three children, Irving, Felicia, and Rosalind. Having lost her parents and siblings, becoming a wife, mother, and now grandmother of six—Matthew, Rebecca, Ryan, Blair, Brandon, and Catie—has given Fay the greatest joy and meaning in her life.

Sol Chase, ז"ל

“The camp commandant threatened to kill me for running away. I told him to shoot me now since I would keep trying to escape. I said I would rather be dead than freeze or starve to death.”

Sol Chase was born in Lodz, Poland on January 18, 1925 to Fruma and Moses Chatinsky. His siblings included two younger brothers, Itzsak and Mordechai; an older sister, Sara; and a much older half-brother, Moses. Sol’s father owned a fabric and textile business and was also a Talmudic scholar. Judaism was central to the family’s daily life, and Sol attended *cheder*, a Jewish private day school, from the age of 5 until he was 13, when Germany’s invasion of Poland brought his studies to an end.

On March 10, 1940, the family was ordered into the ghetto. Although the entire family could not escape, Sol’s grandfather, to whom he was very close, told him that he was smart and strong and should save himself. Although the decision to leave his family was agonizing, Sol obeyed his grandfather. On March 11, 1940, as the last wall enclosing the ghetto was completed, Sol fled, walking between two passing streetcars to avoid detection.

When he arrived at the family’s townhouse he discovered another Jewish boy hiding there. They decided to hide together but were soon betrayed by the building superintendent who turned them in to the Gestapo for the reward of a pound of sugar.

About March 13, the Gestapo took Sol from his family’s townhouse to a special holding camp next to the now walled off Lodz ghetto. On his own initiative, Sol started moving coal from a storage site to an area near a chimney. Asked by an SS officer what he was doing, Sol replied that he was tired of simply waiting and that moving the coal to where it could be used made sense. His act of initiative could have cost him his life; instead, the officer took the boy under his protection, giving him food and work and allowing him to sleep in the SS kitchen.

On March 15, the officer ordered Sol to leave on the next day’s train. Sol argued, unwilling to give up proximity to his family, food, and a warm place to sleep, but the officer insisted, giving him a bag of food and going with him to make sure he actually got on the train. This time it was following an order that saved Sol’s life. Only later did he learn that while that day’s train took the prisoners to labor camps, the next day’s train took them to the death camps.

Sol’s first destination was a labor camp near Limanowa in southern Poland where he cut trees and cleared roads. Once again Sol was guided by his grandfather’s words. Three times he tried and failed to escape, but his fourth attempt succeeded and for nearly a year, until mid-1941, he found refuge with Jewish farmers. When they too were ordered into a ghetto, Sol found a hiding place with Catholic farmers who risked their lives to protect him. Even the village priest was in on the secret. But in late 1944, Sol’s luck ran out when he was questioned and arrested. He was sent first to a labor camp and then by train to Germany. Once again Sol

dared to escape and was hidden by farmers near Czestochowa until the Germans found him and sent him first to the Ravensbrück concentration camp and then to Ludwigslust. He was liberated there on May 2, 1945 by the U.S. Third Army.

Sol learned that of his entire family only his half-brother, Moses, had survived. In Lodz, Sol met his future wife, Fay Swidersky, at an orphanage operated by a Canadian Zionist relief organization. The couple left Poland with the goal of trying to reach Palestine. After two failed attempts, they decided instead to immigrate to the United States. On May 5, 1949, their ship, filled with thousands of refugees, landed in Boston Harbor. The couple traveled to Los Angeles where they have lived ever since. Sol and Fay have three children and six grandchildren. Sol’s daring, inventiveness, and luck enabled him to do what his grandfather had wished—to escape and to live.

Harry Eisen, ז"ל

“I arrived as a penniless immigrant determined to succeed. When I learned that I had the same first name as the President of the United States, Harry Truman, I took it as an omen that I would.”

Harry Eisen was born in May 1917 in Izbica Kujawska, Poland. His parents were Orthodox Jews, and his father taught in the *yeshiva* (rabbinical school). Harry’s mother died when he was very young, and his father married a widow whose son, Abe Kmiotek, became Harry’s best friend.

When he was 13, Harry chose work over study. He moved to Warsaw where a gentile friend ran a meat production plant. Harry quickly learned the trade and became a partner in the firm when he was only 15.

Harry was drafted into the cavalry in 1938. With the outbreak of war in September 1939, Harry, as a corporal, led 300 men into battle. Although he fought bravely, even the best trained and toughest cavalry unit was no match for German tanks.

Harry was captured and sent to a forced labor camp where he did back breaking work in a coal mine. In 1942, he was transferred to Auschwitz where each day was a struggle to survive hunger, disease, and brutality.

In January 1945, Auschwitz was evacuated, and Harry was sent on a death march. He knew that he could not long endure the bitter cold, so he, Abe, and two friends made a daring break. They found a cabin with hot cocoa and soup cooking on the stove, left by German soldiers whose bodies they discovered nearby. To the freezing, starving men, it was a miracle, especially to Harry, who years

before had dreamt that he was running through the forest and chanced upon a house with cocoa cooking on the stove.

Harry and his friends hid in the cabin until they were discovered by Russian soldiers who suspected them of being Germans and nearly shot them on the spot. Their commander tested the young men’s claim to be Jewish by asking them to recite the Hebrew prayer, “Shema Israel,” “Hear, O Israel.” When they did, he broke into tears that they were fellow Jews.

Harry and Abe made their way back to Izbica but found no family. There Harry met Hilda, a former classmate and fellow survivor. They were married in 1945 and moved to Munich where Harry’s cousin was living.

The Eisens came to the United States in 1948. Harry was thrilled to learn that he and the President of the United States shared the same first name. He took it as a positive omen. The couple settled in Arcadia, California and raised enough money to buy 100 chickens. Each day Harry bicycled around town selling eggs. The hours were long and the work hard, but Harry and Hilda were determined to succeed. In 1952, Harry bought the facility he was renting, and in 1958 the family moved to Norco where Harry established the Norco Egg Ranch as one of the largest egg suppliers in the western United States. In 2000, Harry sold his business. He now consults, as well as managing various properties.

A generous philanthropist, Harry has been honored with the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year award for his contributions to the agricultural industry. However, it is his family that means the most to Harry: his wife Hilda; their four children, Ruth, Mary, Howard, and Frances; and eight grandchildren. In July 2005, Harry and Hilda celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary surrounded by family and friends. A determined young man from Poland had indeed achieved the American dream.

Ralph Fischer, z"l

“I have always believed you have to have a little luck and a little chutzpah.”

Ralph Fischer was born in Lodz, Poland on November 28, 1922. He had an older brother and sister and a younger sister. The family lived in a large apartment above their factory.

As a boy, Ralph was especially taken with American culture, particularly American movies, and even more so with those that featured cowboys. Before the war brought his education to an end six months before his high school graduation, Ralph planned to study engineering and come to the United States.

In spring 1940, the family was ordered into the ghetto. A gentile acquaintance, forced to move out of the area designated as the ghetto, gave the family his house. It had a beautiful garden which Ralph tended. However, the head of the Jewish Council, Chaim Rumkowski, insisted it was his prerogative to determine who lived there. The Fischers were evicted and assigned a single room in the poorest area of the ghetto. Outraged, Ralph took every fruit and vegetable he could carry with him. As punishment, he was arrested, jailed, and then deported by the Germans to a labor camp in Poznan.

Ralph was moved from labor camp to labor camp within the Poznan area. Sometimes he was lucky in his work assignments; sometimes not. In one camp, because he had the same last name as his German supervisor, he was assigned to carry light surveying equipment. Sometimes through sheer *chutzpah*, audacity, Ralph made his own luck. Finding a box car full of potatoes, he tied the bottom of his pant legs and stuffed the legs full. His strange walk gave him away, and he was sentenced to the same number of lashes as potatoes he had taken—44. Undeterred, after the whipping, Ralph went back to the box car and took more.

In early 1943, Ralph was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. A prisoner he knew from Poznan alerted him to raise his hand when the Germans asked for bakers, even though Ralph had no experience. His advice, which Ralph followed, spared him grueling physical labor, but it did not spare him suffering. One day Ralph saw a group, guarded by soldiers with machine guns, walking slowly to the gas chambers. They were small children, one little girl holding a doll as big as herself. For the first and only time, Ralph wept.

In late 1943, he was sent to Mauthausen and assigned to a work detail carrying granite blocks up 186 steps, known as the “Stairway of Death.” If someone died working—as happened frequently—the remaining men had to carry the body, as well as the blocks, back to the top. Ralph knew he wouldn’t survive long in the quarry, so one day, finding his luck in an abandoned broom, Ralph began sweeping. Afterwards, he started white washing the gutters. The guards assumed that the job he had created for himself was indeed his work assignment.

In late 1944, Ralph was sent to Ebensee, a sub-camp of Mauthausen. Once again he had good jobs, keeping the stove going in a shed, and bad ones, drilling tunnels through the mountains. He even turned a leg injury into opportunity

when the hospital director gave him a job after he recovered.

Ralph was liberated by the U.S. Army on May 7, 1945. He returned to Lodz to search for his family only to find that none had survived. He left Poland, going first to the American zone in Germany and then to Paris where he found work. He married Auschwitz survivor Rosette Cygelfarb on January 19, 1947. The couple had their first child, Claude, in 1948. Three years later, sponsored by Ralph’s uncle, the family came to the United States and settled in Paterson, New Jersey where their second child, Cathy, was born in 1956.

In 1962, the couple moved to Los Angeles where Ralph became a partner and then the owner of a lumber business. The dream of his youth—to come to America—had been achieved by luck, courage—and *chutzpah*.

Rosette Fischer (née Cygelfarb)

“We are stronger than iron. If I would read about my story, I would say it was just a made up horror story, but I know it is true. I lived it.”

Rosette Cygelfarb was born on January 12, 1923 in Lodz, Poland to Esther and Szmul Cygelfarb. Szmul, who owned a store, often traveled to Paris for new fabrics, bringing back with him presents for Rosette, her older sister, Cecile, and younger sister, Rachel. His daughters were so full of energy that Szmul lovingly joked that he would trade his three daughters for six boys.

In 1937, when Rosette was 14, the family, except for Cecile who stayed behind to marry, moved to Paris. The move was a difficult one for Rosette who missed her extended family, and who, as a Jew and a foreigner, was treated as an outsider by her classmates.

When the German army marched into Paris on June 14, 1940, the Cygelfarbs tried to flee, but their car broke down and they were forced to stay. In June 1942, the government took away Szmul’s license to operate a business. Rosette found work so for a brief time the family was protected from deportation, but when her job ended so did their protection. In January 1943, they were arrested and taken to the Drancy transit camp. They were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on June 23.

Szmul was sent to the coal mines in Jawornzo. Rosette and Rachel marched into the camp with their mother between them, hoping to make her appear younger and stronger. Their ploy worked. They were shaved and tattooed, their clothes exchanged for old military uniforms, and their shoes for uncomfortable wooden clogs.

For three months they worked in a commando carrying heavy stones back and forth. Rosette especially dreaded the beginning and end of each day when the prisoners were assembled in sometimes interminable roll calls. At one roll call, Rachel, ill with a high fever, collapsed and was taken to the clinic. A friend promised to sneak Rosette in to see her, instead, when they met she embraced Rosette and told her that her sister had died. Rosette insisted on seeing her beloved sister one last time. Taken to a wooden shed, she saw a huge pile of skeletal bodies and at the very top her beautiful sister Rachel.

Rosette made the agonizing decision not to share her grief, fearing that if her mother knew the truth she would no longer want to live. Rosette told a lie of love that Rachel had been sent to a better camp. She would later make the same decision when she learned her father had died, telling her mother that he was at the same camp as Rachel.

In late September 1943, Rosette and Esther were moved to another commando. They were helped by a fellow prisoner, a friend from France, who worked in the kitchen and smuggled them extra food whenever he could. On one occasion, Rosette was discovered with a package of margarine and whipped so badly by a guard that she went into shock. Only the support, quite literally, of her friends who held her upright during roll call enabled her to survive.

On January 18, 1945, Rosette and Esther were ordered on a death march toward Germany. When Esther wanted to give up, Rosette refused to let her. They reached Ravensbrück where they spent a month before being marched to a sub-camp, Neustadt Gleve. They were liberated by the Soviet army on May 2, 1945.

Rosette and Esther were sent to Paris, then to the south of France, before being assigned a little house in Paris with other survivors. They were reunited with Cecile, and Rosette met Ralph Fischer, the sole survivor of a large family from Lodz. They were married in 1947. Initially reluctant to bring children into a world of so much hatred and death, Rosette rejoiced when her son Claude was born in 1948. The family came to the U.S. in 1952, and the Fischers had a daughter, Cathy, in 1956.

The Fischers, Esther and her second husband, and Cecile and her husband moved to Los Angeles in 1963. Rosette remained especially close to her mother who lived with Rosette and Ralph after her second husband passed away. Rosette remained her protector until the end of her life.

Frances Flumenbaum (née Blady)

“I turned around and saw my father making a gesture. He put his finger to his lips. I knew he meant that I was never to betray the person who had given me the cloth. And I remembered his telling me that if I kept my promise, I would survive.”

Frances Flumenbaum was born in 1923 in Slavkov, Poland (now the Czech Republic). She was the eldest of five children, with two brothers, David and Herschel, and two sisters, Phyllis and Sarah.

Frances was especially close to her father, Wolf Bar Blady, who owned a grocery store in the nearby town of Sosnowiec. Wolf was a devoted father, helping his children with their homework in the evening and readying them for school in the morning. Frances’ mother Bela was a teacher in whose footsteps Frances hoped one day to follow.

The school Frances attended was closed shortly after the German occupation of Poland, but for a time she was granted permission to attend classes in Sosnowiec. On one of her trips in summer 1940 a relative gave her several yards of valuable cloth for the family to trade with their Christian neighbors for food. Frances smuggled the cloth to her parents by wrapping it around her body. Her ruse worked and she made several trips undetected. But on one trip her luck ran out and she was arrested. When her father learned of what had happened, he made Frances promise that she would never betray their benefactor, the father of seven, who would be hanged for his good deed. Her father told her that if she kept silent, she would survive. Frances promised that no matter what she would keep the secret.

When questioned and assured that she could return home if she gave up the name, Frances steadfastly asserted that she didn’t know. Even when the guards tortured her—burning her arms with cigarettes—Frances kept her promise. She was sentenced to six months slave labor picking fruit in an orchard. Ironically, it was Frances’ capture that spared her life. When her sentence ended, she learned that all of her family, except her sister Phyllis, had been deported to Auschwitz.

From Sosnowiec, Frances and Phyllis were sent as forced laborers to Ludwigsdorf, Germany. Frances was assigned to a leather factory where she again dared to break the rules, stealing leather so the camp shoemaker could make shoes for prisoners who had none. Caught, she miraculously escaped serious punishment and for a brief time was even assigned as a maid to the camp’s female commandant, cleaning her clothes and shining her boots. That job was followed by one in a munitions factory where the constant exposure to gunpowder seriously damaged Frances’ lungs.

Following liberation in 1945, with nowhere else to go, Frances remained in the camp. There she met Sam Flumenbaum, a survivor of Buchenwald, whom she married in December 1946. They stayed in Germany until 1960 when Frances was well enough to immigrate to the United States. With their son William the couple settled first in Springfield, New Jersey and later in Los Angeles.

Of the Blady family, only Frances and Phyllis survived. Frances thinks often of her sister, brothers, and parents and of the promise a devoted daughter kept to her father.

Shirley Frankel (née Rotstein)

“When my sisters and I heard the shouts and screams, we knew our family had been taken. We begged the woman guarding the entrance to lower the ladder and let us leave the attic and join our family. She refused. Her stubbornness saved our lives.”

Szaindl (now Shirley) Frankel was born to Joel and Rachel Rotstein on December 30, 1930, in Radzyn, Poland. She had five sisters and one brother, Moshe, who worked with their father in his tailor shop until he fled to Russia shortly after the German invasion in September 1939.

The family kept kosher, observed the Sabbath and High Holidays, and spoke Yiddish as well as Polish. Shirley attended Hebrew school until it was closed by the German authorities.

In late 1940, rumors circulated that Radzyn’s Jews would be moved to a ghetto. Such topics were not discussed in front of children, but Shirley, an inquisitive 11-year-old, listened at the door of the synagogue when her father and the other men debated what to do. A few months later, in spring 1941, the family was ordered into the already densely populated Jewish quarter.

In the late fall of 1942, the Rotsteins were among those taken to the Miedzyrzec ghetto where they shared a single cramped room with several other families. The day they arrived, three of Shirley’s sisters, Sarah, Feigy, and Chaja, moved to the attic to find a place to sleep. Shirley followed while her parents and sisters Basha and Toba remained downstairs. When German soldiers raided the house early the next morning, those in the attic remained undiscovered. A strong-willed woman had pulled up the ladder when she heard the

dogs and soldiers. She sat over the entrance, barring anyone from leaving. Her stubbornness saved their lives. Shirley’s parents and two sisters were murdered in the death camp Treblinka.

The group of 20 stayed in the attic for two weeks. Desperate for food, they sent Shirley and another girl to buy bread. They succeeded in their mission, but on the way back they were spotted by a policeman. Terrified, they dropped the precious bread and ran. Shirley hid and later returned to the attic. Although her sisters were ecstatic, the others were angry that she had lost the bread and fearful that she might have been followed.

A few months later, Sarah, blonde and fluent in Polish, made the decision to leave the hiding place and try to pass as a gentile. Instead, she was recognized as a Jew and shot. When the ghetto was liquidated in June 1943, the three remaining sisters were loaded onto an overcrowded, stifling boxcar. Immediately upon arrival in Majdanek, there was a selection. Shirley, skinny and still recovering from typhus, was sent to the left, to be gassed, but was spared when a female SS guard decided she could work. To Shirley it seemed that her parents must have intervened from heaven to protect her.

For two months, the sisters moved rocks from one side of the road to another. Offered the opportunity to go to another camp, the sisters volunteered, but their acceptance depended on passing another selection. Feigy and Chaja passed, but Shirley did not. Her sisters pleaded with the SS officer, and for whatever reason, he let her live. The girls were sent to the Skarzysko munitions factory where they spent about a year before being transferred to another forced labor camp in Czestochowa. Shirley, now 14, was assigned to the night shift. Starving and exhausted, she fell asleep on the job and was severely injured but knew she must keep working. Fortunately, liberation by the Soviet army came soon thereafter on January 16, 1945.

At 19, Shirley came to the United States. She found life in New York difficult and lonely without her sisters. In September 1951, she married fellow survivor Karl Frankel. They are the parents of four and the grandparents of nine. They moved to Los Angeles, where Shirley resumed her education, interrupted in 1939, graduating from high school 40 years later, in 1979, the same year as her oldest son graduated medical school.

Barbara Gerson (née Nomberg)

“I am so grateful for the fact that I grew up in a home where faith was so important. It was my faith that gave me courage.”

Barbara Gerson was born in Warsaw to Viktor and Bela Nomberg. She grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home in Lodz, attended a private secular girls’ school, and, until war intervened, planned to continue her studies at the university in Warsaw.

Her father’s wholesale textile business was confiscated when the Germans occupied Lodz. Both her father and grandfather were publicly beaten. Her brother Izak, six years older, fled to Soviet-occupied territory in October 1939. Her parents also made plans to leave, but her grandparents were too old for such an uncertain journey. It was decided that they would go to relatives in Czestochowa. Barbara was sent ahead to make the arrangements.

As he said goodbye, Barbara’s father told her to do whatever was necessary to survive. She would later draw strength from remembering his words. On December 18, mother and daughter, wearing matching scarves as a sign of their love, walked to the train station. Barbara would never see her parents again.

When the SS boarded the train and ordered all Jews into the last car, Barbara made a courageous decision. She went to the bathroom and removed the Star of David she wore. She then lied to the SS saying in perfect Polish that she was not a Jew. Six days later she arrived at her destination.

In Czestochowa, where she lived with her aunt and uncle, work meant survival. Barbara made another risky decision—to buy a false identification card, stating her age as 18 not 15, therefore making her eligible to work. For two years she did hand crocheting and knitting for the wives of German officers.

In November 1942, Barbara met and fell in love with Robert Gerson, also a teenager. Under normal circumstances, their parents would have considered them too young to marry, but these were not normal circumstances. Using the ring belonging to a friend’s mother and a wedding dress from a neighbor, the two were wed, surrounded by friends and relatives—it was a rare moment of joy in the ghetto.

Barbara was assigned to clean the houses of Jews deported from the ghetto and to gather what they had left behind, from pots and pans to down pillows and quilts. She saw half-eaten meals still sitting on the table—evidence that the deportations occurred without warning. As food in the ghetto became increasingly scarce, Robert risked his life to smuggle out furs in exchange for food.

In June 1943, Barbara and Robert were sent as forced laborers to the HASAG munitions factory where they often worked 19 hours a day. Robert again risked his life, this time smuggling bullets from the factory to the Polish underground in exchange for food and information.

Only rarely did the couple have a moment alone, so it seemed a miracle when Barbara discovered she was pregnant. What should have brought them joy

instead brought the heartbreaking realization that the pregnancy must be terminated since any woman found to be pregnant was executed. The procedure was performed in secret without anesthesia by a Jewish doctor. Soon afterwards, Barbara became desperately ill with an infection. Since the doctor would have been severely punished if discovered, he lied and listed her condition as pneumonia. It was Robert who saved Barbara’s life, trading bullets for medicine with the Polish underground.

When the Germans evacuated the camp, ordering all the prisoners on a death march, Robert and Barbara made another daring decision, to hide and risk being discovered and shot. Their courage paid off and they were liberated on January 17, 1945.

They spent three years in a displaced persons camp in Germany before immigrating to the U.S. in 1949, settling first in Brooklyn, where Robert had family, and then moving to Los Angeles where they raised their two children, Victor and Sandra, both now attorneys. Barbara’s brother, Izak (now Jack) survived the war in a Russian labor camp and also immigrated to the U.S.

Robert became a frequent speaker for the Anti-Defamation League and was elected president of The “1939” Club. Since he passed away in 1979, Barbara has continued his work of remembrance and witness, speaking frequently and serving as president of The “1939” Club from 1989-91.

Fela Gipsman (née Fiszel)

“The guards at Schatzler made a conscious effort to break our spirits. They told us that we were doomed to work until we dropped and that we would never be liberated.”

Fela (Faigusz) Gipsman was born to Mosze and Sara Fiszel on September 6, 1926, in Bedzin, Poland. Fela had three brothers, Jakob, two years older; Szymon, two years younger, and Kalman, four years younger. Her father owned a wholesale business that sold oil and other products, and Fela and her family lived very comfortably. Mosze and Sara valued education and sent all four of their children to private Hebrew schools.



Photo taken in Bedzin, Poland, in 1927 of Fela, age 1; her brother, Jacob, 3, with parents, Sara, 30, and Mosze, 32.

Growing up, Fela was a tomboy, enjoying the same activities as her brothers, including volleyball and swimming. She especially enjoyed riding her bike. Her brothers and their friends were not amused when Fela—a girl!—proved that she could ride a bike faster than they.

Fela’s carefree childhood ended with the German invasion and subsequent occupation of Bedzin on September 4, 1939. She could

no longer attend school and her father’s business was confiscated. As Jews, the family faced constant harassment and restrictions—from when they could shop for food to which side of the street they could walk on. One day, Fela, only 13, was caught walking after curfew without her Star of David armband which all Jews were required to wear. Her punishment was kneeling on the hard ground all night without moving. Fela never went out without her Star of David again.

Late on a December night in 1942, SS officers came with no warning to the Fiszel home and took Fela from her bed for forced labor. Fela, then 16, saw her father cry for the first time as he begged them not to take her. Only much later would she learn that in August 1943 her parents and three brothers were deported to Auschwitz and murdered.

Fela was sent first to the Sosnowiec transit camp where a selection took place to determine who was capable of work. From there, she was taken to Blechhammer for a brief time before being transported to the Schatzlar labor camp (now Zacler, Czech Republic) where she spent two and a half years. Fela worked long hours in a textile factory making thread, her feet and hands submerged in mud, strenuous work that exhausted her arms and back. But worse than the hard labor and lack of food was the pain of separation from her family. The guards made a conscious effort to destroy the prisoners’ will to live by telling them that it was their fate to work until they died—they would never be free.

Fela refused to give up hope and lived to see the guards proven wrong when the Soviet army liberated the camp on May 8, 1945. Desperate to find her family, Fela, although very weak, began the journey back to Bedzin, but in Prague the Red Cross removed her from the train, saying she was too ill to travel. As soon as she could, Fela continued her journey home.

To see her hometown empty of those she knew and loved was a shattering experience. Finally, Fela met two cousins, the only family she would find, and moved in with them before the three left Poland, ending their journey in a displaced persons camp in Stuttgart. There she met Natan Gipsman, a fellow survivor from Bedzin, who became the love of her life. Fela and Natan were married in Munich on March 29, 1947.

In 1949, the couple immigrated to the United States, spending a few months in Lancaster, Pennsylvania before moving to Detroit, where Natan worked at Chrysler and both attended night school to learn English. Deciding that California offered a better climate and more opportunities, they moved to Los Angeles, arriving on the 4th of July, 1953. Natan attended a trade technical college and obtained his license as an electrical contractor. The couple worked hard to give their two sons, Jack, now a regional attorney with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Marc, a highly respected anesthesiologist, the education they had been denied, the education Fela’s parents had taught her to value so highly.

Natan Gipsman

“My first job, working in the electrical supply store, saved my life. When I arrived at the Sackenhoyim labor camp, they asked who had a skill. I identified myself as an electrician and even though I was no expert, I knew enough to survive.”

Natan Gipsman was born in Bedzin, Poland on January 19, 1925. His parents, Isak and Chaja Gipsman, owned a confectionary shop that sold chocolates, along with fruit in the winter and ice cream in the summer. Natan and his sister Manusia, five years younger, attended a private Hebrew school. Each year, Natan felt a special sense of pride when his school’s flag was carried in the parade on Polish Independence Day.

Natan was 14 when German tanks rolled into Bedzin on September 4, 1939. Immediately, the Germans implemented anti-Jewish decrees, mandating that all Jews wear an identifying arm band with the Star of David, obey a strict curfew and walk only on one side of the street. Any violation—even jaywalking—could result in arrest and “resettlement,” deportation to forced labor. To remain with his family it was crucial that Natan find a job. Fortunately, in 1940, a family friend whose electrical business had been taken over by a German arranged for him to be hired. For the next three years, Natan was spared deportation as he gained the skills that would repeatedly save his life. His father was not so fortunate and was deported to forced labor in Germany in September 1942.

In March 1943, when the authorities came for Natan, his mother, desperate to save her son, lied about his whereabouts. As a reprisal, they took her hostage and threatened her with deportation to Auschwitz if Natan did not appear. As soon as he learned of what had happened, he turned himself in, sharing a brief tearful embrace with his mother. He would never see her or his sister again. They were deported to Auschwitz in fall 1943 and murdered there.

Natan was taken to Sakrau, a transit camp, and then transported to the Sackenhoyim labor camp. Although he knew less than he pretended, he presented himself as a skilled electrician and then learned on the job what he needed to know. His bold gamble spared him from hard labor. In 1944, he was sent to Blechhammer, a sub-camp of Auschwitz, where he was tattooed and given threadbare rags and wooden clogs that caused painful blisters. Identifying himself once again as a skilled worker spared him from the heaviest labor, although he suffered through the same interminable roll calls and beatings as the other prisoners. He once received 25 lashes for failing to remove his cap quickly enough as a guard passed.

In the summer of 1944 the camp was hit by Allied bombs. Natan was temporarily buried and nearly killed when a bomb detonated near him, but the bombing also gave him hope he would be liberated. On January 21, 1945, two days after Natan’s 20th birthday, the Germans evacuated the camp and sent the more than 4,000 prisoners on a death march. The wooden clogs he wore made walking in the heavy snow sheer agony, but he kept going, singing Jewish folk songs with his fellow prisoners to lift their spirits on the interminable march.

Their guards, who earlier would have beaten them for singing, no longer cared. Less than half the prisoners who began the two-week march survived to reach Gross-Rosen.

From Gross-Rosen Natan was sent to Buchenwald and then to a satellite camp, Schoenebeck. When the Germans again ordered their prisoners to march, Natan escaped and evaded capture until he was liberated by the Russians on May 8, 1945.

After liberation, Natan went to Bedzin but finding no family returned to Germany. He later learned his father had survived and been liberated at Bergen-Belsen. In a displaced persons camp he met his future wife Fela, also from Bedzin. They married in 1947 and came to the United States in 1949, moving to Los Angeles in 1953. Natan eventually became an electrical contractor. The knowledge that had spared his life for so long now enabled him to provide for his family and to build a new life.

Samuel Goetz, ז"ל

“I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was eleven minutes past one. As hollow-cheeked figures emerged from the gate and swept the GI off his feet, I saw a large, white star on the tank. At that moment, I became a free man.”

Sam Goetz was born in Tarnow, Poland on June 8, 1928. Sam’s father ran a small import-export business dealing in fur products. He often travelled outside Poland and always returned with gifts, sometimes a stamp, one time a watch, for Sam and his older brother Bernard.

The German invasion of Poland in 1939 destroyed the family’s peaceful life, although Sam’s parents tried to maintain a sense of normalcy, even arranging for Sam’s *bar mitzvah* in June 1941. Had the ceremony been discovered by the Nazis, it would have meant the death penalty for everyone present. When the Nazis prohibited Jews from attending school, Sam’s parents made the daring decision to enroll him in clandestine classes in private homes—until the deportations brought even this secret study to an end. Little did Sam know this secret education would one day become the foundation for his future.

In June 1942, Sam’s parents were deported. His aunt, uncle and cousins were rounded up only a few months later. All were murdered at the death camp Belzec. Only 14 years old, Sam was left on his own. With occasional smuggled food from his Polish Christian nanny Tekla, Sam survived the next year. He was among those sent to Plaszow in the suburbs of Krakow and then in the spring of 1944 to the concentration camp Gross-Rosen in Lower Silesia and subsequently to the sub-camp Falkenberg where he labored in the tunnels being built to protect



Photo taken in 1918 of Joseph and Eugenia Goetz, parents of Samuel. Both perished on June 16, 1942 in the Belzec death camp.

German industry from Allied bombs. There he befriended a Hungarian boy named Willie, with whom he shared day dreams of freedom and food, until they were separated during a death march. Sent eventually to Ebensee, a sub-camp of Mauthausen, Sam was put back to work in the tunnels—only this time, he bonded with no one.

On May 6, 1945, American tanks arrived at the gate, and 16-year-old Sam, barely clinging to life, was freed. Nearly sixty years later, he would meet his liberator, Sgt. Robert Persinger, who commanded the first tank to enter Ebensee.

In a displaced persons camp in Italy, Sam met a 14-year-old girl from Vienna named Gerti with whom he began to share his hopes for the future. In August 1949, Sam departed for the U.S., settling in the Bronx. In a mere six months he attained his high school diploma and made the decision to move to Los Angeles, where Gerti was now living with her family. In July 1950, Sam and Gerti wed. By 1955, both had earned degrees from UCLA and continued on to graduate school, with Sam completing a doctorate in optometry in 1960 and Gerti subsequently earning a Ph.D. in German Literature.

In 1962, Sam joined The “1939” Club and later became its president. Refusing to allow Holocaust deniers to go unchallenged, he led the Club’s effort to establish the nation’s first endowed chair in Holocaust studies at UCLA in 1979, assuring that Holocaust memory will never be lost.

Freda Goldstein (née Weinstock)

“I found a potato that had fallen off a truck. It was a treasure. When the guards discovered it, they whipped me until I passed out. They didn’t care that I was starving.”

Freda (Frajdzia) Weinstock was born in Olkusz, Poland in October 1926. Her parents owned a general store and worked hard to give Freda, her three sisters, and two brothers a good life. In 1939 when Germany invaded Poland, everything changed—Freda could no longer attend school, her parents lost their store, and the family was forced to leave their home and move into a two-room shack.

In March 1942, the Germans conscripted Freda and the other girls to do forced labor. When the soldiers broke down the door of the shack to take her, Freda’s mother stood between them and her daughter and tried to fight them off. The officer in charge brutally kicked her to the ground. Freda never saw her mother again.

Freda was taken first to the Klettendorf labor camp near Breslau (now Wroclow, Poland). After a year, she was sent on an excruciating journey by cattle car, with no food, water or sanitary facilities, to Ludwigsdorf, a sub-camp of Gross-Rosen where conditions were even worse than in Klettendorf. Working in the munitions factory was both exhausting and dangerous.

One day Freda found a potato that had fallen off a truck. To the starving girl, it was a treasure. The guards refused to allow her to have it—it was after all the property of the Reich which no Jew could take. They whipped Freda until she passed out from the pain.

On May 5, 1945, Ludwigsdorf was liberated by the Soviet army. Freda was gravely ill with pneumonia. Her legs were swollen and covered with sores from the chemicals in the factory. As soon as she was able to travel, a few weeks later, she returned to Olkusz to search for her family. The news was the worst she could have imagined. Neither her parents nor her siblings had survived. All had been killed in Auschwitz.

In her home town she met Sheldon Gleitman, a neighbor and friend of the family, who had returned to look for his relatives. Like Freda, he too found no one. The two comforted one another and together made their way back to Germany, to a displaced persons camp near Munich.

Freda and Sheldon married in December 1945 and came to the United States in 1947. The next year, Freda gave birth to the couple’s first child, Steven, and five years later to their second, Richard. The couple worked hard to give their children the education and opportunities they had missed. When their sons became accomplished professionals—Steven an attorney and Richard the owner of a real estate company—they felt their dreams had been realized.

Sheldon passed away in 1989. Five years later, Freda married survivor Irwin Goldstein with whom she shares a life centered on family—children and grandchildren—life’s most precious and irreplaceable gift.

Irwin Goldstein

“In telling my story, I have two great hopes—that people never forget what happened and that genocide never happens again.”

Irwin (Arman) Goldstein was born the youngest of eight children on June 10, 1926 in Vlachovo, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic). Irwin’s father, David, came to the United States in 1927 to find work. He went from job to job but never failed to send money home. When the war began, he could not return to Czechoslovakia. He died of a heart attack in the U.S. in 1943.

Following the German seizure of Czechoslovakia in 1938, Vlachovo was given to Germany’s ally, Hungary. As a Jew, Irwin could no longer attend school, and his older brothers who served in the Czech army were transferred to the Hungarian army and then demoted to forced labor. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, they became human mine sweepers locating and detonating bombs. All three were killed.

In 1942, Irwin was sent to a labor camp in the forest where he did hard manual labor, felling and hauling trees. He escaped after six months and returned home. In March 1944, following the German occupation of Hungary, Irwin and his family were sent to a brick factory where they worked in mud up to their knees. Then, Irwin, his sisters, mother, nieces, and nephews, were forced onto a cattle car and sent to Auschwitz.

Upon arrival, the prisoners were selected for life or death. Irwin was deemed fit, but his mother; his sister

Rachel and her six children; his sister Henchie and her eight children, and his sister Feigie were sent to the gas chambers.

When a call went out for carpenters, Irwin volunteered even though he had no experience. He was transferred from Auschwitz to a succession of camps in Germany. As the front neared, Irwin was among the prisoners sent on a two-week death march before being loaded onto a cattle car and sent to Bergen-Belsen.

The camp had no food or water, disease was rampant, and corpses were everywhere. The interminable roll calls drained Irwin of his remaining strength. When he collapsed, the guards tossed him onto a heap of corpses. Somehow he found the strength to stand and join the prisoners assigned to drag the bodies into ditches, douse them with kerosene, and set them aflame. His act of nearly superhuman will saved his life.

Irwin was liberated on April 15, 1945. He was 18 years old, weighed 75 pounds, and had typhoid fever and tuberculosis. He spent two weeks in a makeshift British hospital before being evacuated to a Swedish hospital where he spent a year and a half. There he learned that only his sister Gilda had survived.

At the age of 20, Irwin married Hanal Szuster, a fellow survivor. Shortly after their daughter Ruth’s birth in 1948, the family immigrated to the United States. Irwin worked days and took classes at night at Brooklyn College. In 1954, the couple had a son, David, but Irwin’s joy turned to grief when Hanal died 10 days after childbirth. Irwin was a widower with two small children. He had no choice but to place Ruth in the care of friends while David was placed in a foster home.

A year later, Irwin married Frances Palmer and reclaimed his children. The couple enjoyed a beautiful life together until Frances died of cancer in 1992. Irwin was again blessed by meeting a wonderful woman, Freda Gleitman, also a Holocaust survivor. They married in 1994 and share a life centered on their children and grandchildren.

Rena Goldstein (née Braunstein)

“I was nine years old. I had to learn quickly and grow up fast because death was always present.”

Rena Goldstein was born to Marcus and Lola Braunstein in Stryj, Poland (now Ukraine) in 1933. An only child and grandchild, Rena was doted upon by her parents and maternal grandparents.

Following the onset of war in 1939, the Germans briefly occupied Stryj and then relinquished it to the Soviets. In July 1941, following Germany’s surprise attack on the Soviet Union, they reoccupied Stryj. Jews were immediately targeted and Rena’s beloved grandparents were killed in the first deportation.

To save their child, Marcus and Lola made the agonizing decision to give her to a childless gentile family outside the city. Rena studied the Catholic catechism and learned that she must never speak Yiddish. Friends of her parents took her to the couple. Although they were kind, Rena could not bear life without her parents. She pleaded unrelentingly until the friends brought her back.

The next months brought more frequent raids. The family slept in their clothes and often hid in the basement with other families. One night Rena witnessed a mother accidentally suffocate her baby when its cries threatened to betray their hiding place.

In 1942, all the Jews of Stryj were sent to the ghetto. Rena experienced constant hunger. One day she had only a pickle to eat, the last one left in the barrel; her parents had nothing.

Fearing that the ghetto would be liquidated, Rena’s father and a few companions secretly prepared a bunker, a basement below a basement, in their old house. Her father bribed the guards to allow Rena and her mother to leave the ghetto. Before he could join them, the ghetto was closed and he was deported to his death.

The bunker was meant for 6 or 8 people, but 35, including 18 women, 10 men, and 7 children, hid there. One of the women prophesied that they would somehow survive because 18 means “chai” or life in Hebrew. Courageous gentiles risked their lives to drop bread through the chimney. After 16 months, their clothes began to rot away. They suffered from painful heat rashes, unrelenting hunger, and the terrible stench from the hole that served as their latrine.

They emerged from hiding when Stryj was liberated by the Russians in August 1944. Rena’s mother remarried, and a few months later, Rena, her mother, and her stepfather, who had also survived in hiding, went to a displaced persons camp in Bamberg, Germany. At a dance there, Rena met David Goldstein, who fell instantly in love with her. When David moved to the U.S. in 1947 to live with his aunt in Chicago and Rena moved to Israel two years later, it seemed unlikely they would ever be together. It was David’s aunt who reunited them, telling her nephew that he would always wonder what could have been if he did not send for the woman he loved.

In May 1950, Rena, barely 17 years old, arrived in Chicago. She was away from her mother for the first time and knew only a few words of English. They lived with David’s aunt and attended school. They married in October 1950. Their daughter, Flora, was born in 1952 and a second daughter, Sandi, in 1955. In 1963, the family moved to Los Angeles.

Every day Rena remembers her parents and their determination to save their only child. It is part of the legacy she has passed on to her two children and four grandchildren.

John Gordon, ז"ל

“Soon a young man with an Arrow Cross (Hungarian Nazi Party) insignia came to our door with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He couldn’t have been more than 16 or 17 years old. When my mother opened the door, he grabbed her hand and pulled off her wedding ring. I watched this scene anxiously, literally hiding behind her skirt.”

Although John Gordon lost his father when he was only 2 years old, he remembers his early childhood as a happy time with a loving mother and grandparents. His childhood came to an abrupt end when Germany invaded and occupied Hungary in 1944. What first seemed to the 8-year-old boy to be an unexpected vacation from school soon took a more ominous turn as the Jews of Budapest were evicted from their homes and sent to overcrowded “Star houses.” Even then, John took comfort in the fact that he and his family were together. But soon his mother was ordered to report for forced labor. He would never see her again. For years John would struggle to understand how his mother could leave him.



Photo taken in August 1937 in Budapest, Hungary of Janos (John), age 11 months, with his father and mother, Illés and Magda Szücs.

In the care first of his grandparents and subsequently his aunt, John was among the thousands of Jews who Raoul Wallenberg and the War Refugee Board sought to protect,

moving them to houses flying the flag of neutral Sweden as the Nazis sought to exterminate the last major Jewish community in occupied Europe.

For months, John and his family hid in a crowded, dark basement and endured nightly Allied bombings. On January 1, 1945, members of the Arrow Cross, Hungarian Nazis, shot off the padlock of the house in which they were hiding, ignoring the sign that it was Swedish property. Only Wallenberg’s swift arrival saved the lives of the eighty occupants. Elsewhere in Budapest, Jews were not so lucky. They were executed by the Arrow Cross and their bodies tossed into the Danube.

A few days later, the family was liberated by the Soviet army. But freedom proved illusory as the Iron Curtain descended upon Hungary. Rejected for admission to the university because he did not have a “proletariat” background, John made the wrenching decision to leave those he loved and risk death to find a better future. He dared not say goodbye to his family, his beloved grandparents and the aunt and uncle who had raised him as their own son, lest they be tried as co-conspirators to treason. At night, with a few companions, John crossed a no-man’s land filled with mines, reaching Austria and freedom.

At the age of 20, in 1957, John realized his dream to come to the United States. He received a scholarship to Penn State University, graduating with a B.S. in electrical engineering in only four years and later earning a master’s degree in business administration from the University of Southern California. In 1962, John became a U.S. citizen. At that time, he legally changed his last name from “Szücs” to “Gordon”, a name already in his family and one more easily recognized in English.

John’s daring flight to freedom brought a life of professional accomplishment and personal meaning as husband, father, and grandfather, and as president of the Child Survivors of the Holocaust, Los Angeles.

Zelda Gordon, ז"ל (née Grodzienska)

“I can still hear my mother’s voice saying ‘Zeldele, think of us, don’t forget us. I know you will survive.’”

Born in the historic city of Grodno, Poland (now Belarus), Zelda Gordon was 16 years old when war changed her life forever. Her four older brothers and two older sisters were married with families of their own. As the baby of the family, Zelda had a wonderful childhood in a home filled with love and laughter, respect and responsibility. On Fridays, before *Shabbat*, Zelda helped her mother deliver food to those less fortunate. She excelled in her studies and was one of two Jewish girls admitted to the city’s prestigious public college. War ended her dream of continuing her education.

As part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviets occupied the city in September 1939, and Grodno was annexed to the Soviet Union. In June 1941, on the first day of Operation Barbarossa, the German army moved into Grodno, and in November two ghettos were established a short distance apart. Zelda had family in each.

Zelda joined the Zionist resistance, engaged in acts of sabotage, and tended secret vegetable gardens that provided the ghetto with much needed food. In two separate raids, in November 1942 and January 1943, thousands of Jews, including all of Zelda’s family, were deported to the death camps of Treblinka and Auschwitz. Zelda hid to avoid capture, but in February 1943 tear gas forced her out of hiding and she was deported. She knew that all her family was dead.

Her youth spared her from the gas chambers at Treblinka. With some 100 young women, she was sent to Majdanek and then to a Lublin labor camp where she sorted through mountains of clothes taken from the Jews.

When Zelda became ill with typhoid fever, luck again was with her. The strain she contracted was prevalent within the army, and doctors, desperately seeking a cure, selected Zelda as a test subject for a new drug. It worked and Zelda recovered.

In her next camp, Blizyn, Zelda was briefly reunited with a cousin, Ely Grodzienski. From Blizyn she was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Ordered to dig potatoes out of the frozen ground, Zelda grew steadily weaker. She feared that if she were sent to the gas chambers all memory of her family would be obliterated. Only her will and her friends kept her going.

In January 1945, Zelda was put on a train to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. The conditions in the camp were horrific: no food, no sanitation, and no one to bury the dead. Typhus and dysentery were rampant.

Liberation came on April 15, 1945 with the British army. Zelda remained in the camp since she had nowhere else to go. She was surprised when two men came looking for her. They told her that they had survived Dachau because of her cousin Ely and that he had sent them to find her and bring her to Munich. It meant the world to Zelda to know that someone cared for her.

Ely and Zelda registered for three destinations: the U.S. where Ely had a brother in Los Angeles; Sweden where he had a sister, and Palestine. They agreed that they would go to whichever place accepted them first. It proved to be the U.S. where they arrived on September 16, 1946.

On December 29, 1946, Ely and Zelda were married, and in 1950 their daughter Frieda was born. Zelda rejoices in her role as mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, sharing with her daughter, granddaughters, and great-granddaughter the traditions, values, love and determination that were her family’s lasting gift to her.

Jeffrey Gradow, ז"ל

“Freedom is the most important thing in life.”

Jeffrey Gradow was born Chaim Gradowicz on January 5, 1925 in Mlawa, Poland, northwest of Warsaw. He was the oldest of three children with two sisters, Dena and Shayna. His father, Nochim, a shoemaker, was socialist in his politics and progressive in his religious beliefs; his mother, Feiga, was more traditionally Jewish. The family, while not wealthy, lived comfortably. Jeffrey attended a public school for Jewish children.

Mlawa was among the first towns shelled by the German army in September 1939. The German occupiers installed Poles of German descent as the town’s administrators. They used their power to humiliate and persecute Jews, ordering men to clean streets and outhouses and women to clean and work as housekeepers. When Nochim learned that a neighbor was using his new authority to resolve an old dispute and that the police were about to arrest him, he fled with Jeffrey to Russian-occupied territory. Nochim expected that in a few days they would return or be able to send for the rest of the family. Both proved impossible. They made their way to Bialystok where Jeffrey’s father earned money by repairing shoes. Jeffrey attended school and tried to learn Russian as quickly as possible. Both father and son deeply missed their family and Nochim felt tremendous guilt about leaving his wife and daughters behind.

On June 21, 1941, the Germans launched a surprise attack on the Soviet Union. As bombs fell and gunshots resounded, Nochim told

his son to move behind a brick oven. That order saved his life when a grenade exploded in the house. Nochim, standing in front of Jeffrey, was severely injured and died later that day. The teenager was now alone.

Ordered to forced labor, Jeffrey dug ditches in a cemetery and then threw the bodies of Russian soldiers, executed by the Germans as partisans, into the mass graves. Subsequently, he worked building a new railroad station and then constructing a road for German military vehicles. Day after day, from sunup to sundown, he performed backbreaking work in deep mud. Knowing that he would soon drop from exhaustion and malnutrition, Jeffrey made the dangerous decision to escape. During a rest break, he slid over to a ditch and then ran into the dense forest. He subsisted on wild blackberries until he eventually located a group of partisans, some Jewish, some escaped Russian soldiers, who first suspected him of being a spy but then allowed him to join their ranks.

Jeffrey learned to use a gun and participated in the partisans’ nightly raids to get food, salt and other supplies. The group moved their camp frequently to avoid capture by German patrols. In 1943, the partisans, supplied with more weapons and aided by Russian paratroopers, went on the offensive. Jeffrey was one of six men who blew up a train. In spring 1944, he was among the partisans absorbed into the Russian army, becoming a member of an elite division. At the end of summer 1944, in a battle east of Warsaw, he was severely wounded in both legs and his right hand, nearly losing his hand to amputation. He was hospitalized for six months.

In 1945, at the age of 20, Jeffrey returned to Mlawa. He learned that all his family, mother, sisters, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, had been murdered at the death camp Treblinka. With no reason to remain in Poland, Jeffrey went to Germany where he lived in a displaced persons camp, run by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, in the French sector of Berlin. In 1949, sponsored by his great-uncle, he was permitted to immigrate to the United States. Within days of his arrival in New York, knowing only a few words of English, he started work as a “cutter” in the garment industry.

Jeffrey married fellow Holocaust survivor Feiga (Fanny) Podeshwa in 1954. On his 30th birthday, Jeffrey and his wife headed to Los Angeles where he became a successful businessman and real estate investor. They became the parents of two and grandparents of three. Feiga passed away in 2004.

Starting in his teenage years as a partisan, Jeffrey has demonstrated a tenacious commitment to freedom, even when it meant risking all, even his life.

Toni Green (née Eichner)

“When I was liberated, I got dressed and went looking for my sister. I said to myself, I am fortunate, lucky, if I will have one sister still. Please, G-d, I ask only that she survive.”

Toni Green was born in the town of Oswiecim, Poland, on June 17, 1923. Next to the youngest of seven children, she adored and admired her older brothers and sisters. Her parents established a loving home where both religion and education were highly valued. By the age of 10, Toni already spoke Polish, Yiddish, and German, but her education was cut short by the war. Jews were no longer permitted to learn.



Photo taken in 1927 of sisters Toni and Selma with their family. Front row: Mania, Isaac, Toni; mother Rose; father Izak; Selma. Second row: Joe, Ann, Leopold. Only Toni and Selma survived the Holocaust.

A few months after the German invasion of Poland and the start of the war, Oswiecim was renamed Auschwitz and became part of the territory incorporated into the Greater Reich. The family struggled to cope with harsh conditions, including curfews and little food.

Finally, Toni's parents agreed that their four older children should flee to the Soviet zone. They would never be heard from again. In April 1941, the Jews of Auschwitz were expelled to make room for the growing concentration camp complex, now including the factories of IG Farben. The town of Auschwitz was to be "Jew free."

Toni, her younger sister Selma, and parents were sent to Sosnowiec, a holding area, while her brother Isaac was sent to a labor camp. Soon the family was faced with a terrible decision—the Nazis required that one of the two girls be deported to a labor camp. Secretly Selma and Toni agreed that Selma should leave while Toni stayed to care for their sick mother. The two sisters did not know if they would see each other again. In August, the remaining Jews in the Sosnowiec ghetto were required to register. Toni's parents, judged too old and ill to work, were sent to their death at Auschwitz. Toni was spared and sent to a succession of labor camps. Finally, with the Soviet army drawing near, the workers at Graben were forced on a six-week death march, followed by a week of train travel in an overcrowded cattle car with no food or sanitation before reaching Bergen-Belsen. Like so many others, including Anne Frank, Toni fell desperately ill to typhus. Only the arrival of the British army on April 15, 1945 saved her life.

Liberation brought Toni news that her sister Selma was also in Bergen-Belsen but was even more ill than Toni with typhus. In the chaos of the camp, Toni miraculously found Selma, near death, in a stable surrounded by the dead. She nursed her day and night, even giving Selma her own rations, and finally was able to get her sister into an overcrowded hospital where she slowly regained her health. Liberation also brought news that their youngest brother, Isaac, had died in Dachau, a week after liberation. Of seven children, only Toni and Selma had survived.

Once they were well enough, the sisters were sent to a displaced persons camp in Bamberg. Toni, who married fellow survivor Jack Green in 1946, came to the United States in 1949; her sister followed a year later. Until Selma's death in March 2008, Toni and Selma were not only sisters but best friends, living near one another in Los Angeles and rejoicing together in their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Lola Gross, z"l (née Pariser)

“All of us who survived are not just regular people, we are miracle people.”

Lola Pariser was born on December 5, 1926 in Pilica, Poland. She was the youngest of five with three sisters, Sara, Marka, and Pola, and one brother, Hershel. Lola's parents were Orthodox Jews who owned a store which sold men's shirts and women's lingerie. In 1936, the family moved to the more cosmopolitan city of Sosnowiec, but they returned to Pilica two years later. With antisemitism on the rise, they thought they would be safer in a place where they were well-known. That proved not to be the case.

Following German occupation in September 1939, Lola's father and brothers, easily recognizable as Orthodox Jews, were routinely humiliated by German soldiers who made them pick up horse and chicken droppings with their bare hands. The heartbreak of what he experienced contributed to Lola's father's death in 1940 at the age of only 49.

In 1942, the Jews of Pilica were deported. Lola's mother, also 49, was sent to the death camp Treblinka. Her sister Sara refused to be separated from her newborn baby and was sent to her death in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Lola was sent to Neusalz, a sub-camp of Gross Rosen, where she worked 12 hours a day in a factory making thread and spinning it onto spools. Rations were meager; there were long roll calls, and frequent beatings.

Lola remained at Neusalz until January 1945 when the Germans liquidated the camp, sending the prisoners on a death march. Lola

suffered from the bitter cold and from terrible blisters especially after she wore through the soles of her boots and had to walk barefoot through the snow. Eventually, the prisoners were loaded onto cattle cars and sent to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, an overcrowded dumping ground for prisoners from many camps.

On April 15, 1945, Lola awoke to the miracle of liberation. She came to think of this date as her second birthday at age 19. She was terribly ill from malnutrition and from the shock to her system of eating the rich food which the British soldiers made the mistake of giving the starving prisoners. Lola spent the next months in the hospital where she recovered from typhus and malnutrition.

Through a distant cousin, Lola learned that her sister Pola had survived the war and was at the Föhrenwald displaced persons camp. Lola soon joined her. They were the only members of their family to survive.

At a dance, Lola met survivor Sam Gross. Sam, a clumsy dancer, frequently stepped on Lola's feet until she suggested that instead they sit and talk. Their conversations led to love and the two married in 1946 in a double wedding with her sister Pola and her fiancée.

In May 1949, after waiting three years to gain a visa, the couple and their baby daughter, Sally, immigrated to the United States. They settled in New York, worked hard and saved much of what they earned, even when it meant living on very little. Both attended night school classes and Lola gained her high school diploma. Their second child, David, was born in 1951.

In 1971, the couple took a vacation to California and fell in love with the sunny climate. They moved to Los Angeles and were later joined by Pola and her husband. They built a strong circle of friends, most of whom were Holocaust survivors. Sam passed away in 1993 and Pola in 2007.

At the center of Lola's life today is her family. She is the proud mother of two, grandmother of ten, and great-grandmother of five.

Felicia Haberfeld, z"l (née Spierer)

“Hitler and his henchmen tried to destroy us physically, but they did not break our spirit. And all this started Friday, September 1, 1939. It is therefore important that the year 1939 should be remembered as a symbol of man’s inhumanity to man.”

Not every survivor saw evil first-hand; some were forced to stand by helplessly, as everyone and everything they loved was taken from them, and wait for news that would never come.

Felicia Haberfeld was born in Krakow, Poland, on July 21, 1911. She grew up in a large family. As the eldest grandchild, she was especially close to her grandparents, and along with her extended family she spent almost every evening with them. As a youth, Felicia was involved in Zionist organisations. While attending Jagiellonian University she first experienced antisemitism, witnessing fights between Jewish and Christian students that led to the death of one classmate.



Photo taken on August 11, 1936 at the wedding of Alfons and Felicia Haberfeld.

After spending a year in Vienna to complete her studies, she was awarded a master’s degree in philosophy. In 1936 she married Alfons Haberfeld, a leading Jewish industrialist in pre-war Poland. The couple lived in the famous 19th century Haberfeld House in the city of Oswiecim, later known as Auschwitz. Felicia gave birth to their daughter Franciszka in 1937.

On August 1, 1939, Felicia and Alfons sailed from Danzig to New York for the World’s Fair, where Alfons was to exhibit products from the Haberfeld Distillery. As they were returning home, Germany invaded Poland, World War II broke out and their liner, the *M.S. Pilsudski*, was intercepted on the high seas by the British navy and diverted to Great Britain. Following several weeks’ detention on board, the Haberfelds were admitted to the UK on a “temporary basis.” Life in wartime Britain was hard. To pay for their passage to the United States, Felicia had to sell her jewelry and other personal items.

After a brief stay at Ellis Island, the Haberfelds re-entered the United States as stateless, friendless, and penniless war refugees. They ended up in Baltimore where Alfons found a job in a distillery. All the while they were terrified for their family, still in Poland under Nazi occupation. Finally the Haberfelds found a woman who said that she could get Franciszka out of the country, but it would cost them two thousand dollars. With no other way to raise the money, Alfons went to his employer for a loan. Although Alfons was a hard-working and

valued employee, in the end his boss was unwilling to risk such a large sum, and Franciszka was lost forever.

The Haberfelds went on to have another child, Stephen, in 1944, and in 1948 they moved permanently to Los Angeles. In 1967 the Haberfelds returned to Poland to find news of their family; what they learned only confirmed their worst fears—Felicia’s entire family had been killed.

She may never have seen the inside of a concentration camp or struggled to keep quiet in a secret attic, but Felicia Haberfeld is a survivor of the Holocaust. And as a co-founder of The “1939” Club, Felicia has done her part to see that those whose lives were taken in the Holocaust are never forgotten and that families are never again torn asunder by hatred.

Lola Halpern (née Kopelman)

“In the dark, stifling cattle car my aunt gathered my cousins and me around her. She said to us, ‘You must try to survive. And, if you do, you must promise you will never forget what happened. Tell of it!’”

Lola Halpern was born to Joel and Menucha Kopelman on December 25, 1926 in Lodz, Poland. She had three sisters, two older and one younger. Her father owned a fabric store for which her mother helped select materials. The family had little monetary wealth, but their home was rich in love and faith.

In the summer of 1939, the Kopelmans sent their two youngest daughters, Lola and Blimka, to stay with their aunt in the countryside. The girls enjoyed swimming in the lake and playing with their cousins. They were about to return to Lodz when Germany attacked Poland. Travel became impossible, and Lola and Blimka were cut off from their parents and sisters. In early 1941, for the first and only time, the girls received a postcard—somehow smuggled out—from their mother. She reported that they were confined to the ghetto and that their father was very ill. After the war, Lola learned that her father died later that year, and that her mother and sisters were killed at Auschwitz in 1943.

In fall 1941, Lola, Blimka, their aunt and her family were ordered to the Suchowola labor camp—the first of many camps Lola survived. Soon after their arrival, a selection took place, and Blimka, then 11, was sent to the death camp Treblinka. Lola worked at Suchowola for about a year, until she, along with her aunt and cousins, and hundreds of other Jews, was marched out of the camp. With no water or

food, many died along the way. When they reached the town of Miedzyrzec, they were loaded onto a train, crammed into overcrowded, stifling boxcars.

Believing that they would soon be killed, Lola’s aunt gathered her children and Lola around her and told them that they must promise to do whatever they could to survive, and if they did, they must witness to what they had seen. Soon after, Lola realized that a girl had successfully sawed through the wooden bars covering the car’s small window and had jumped out. Keeping her promise to her aunt, Lola followed, dodging bullets from the guards. She crept to a train station where a worker took pity on the shivering and starving girl, gave her food and water, and told her that her aunt’s premonition was correct—the train was only a short distance from Treblinka.

Lola’s only desire was to see her parents and sisters again so she began walking the long distance to Lodz, but soon realized that she would never make it past the many patrols. Instead, she returned to Suchowola where relatives sneaked her into the camp. When Suchowola was liquidated, Lola and the other prisoners were taken by truck to Majdanek near Lublin. There she survived a brutal commando assigned to “beautifying” the camp, carrying heavy rocks from one place to another.

Three months later, Lola was transferred to Skarzystko where she worked for two years in a factory assembling sticks of dynamite. It was monotonous and dangerous work. Considered a skilled munitions worker, she was transported in May 1944 to a factory in Leipzig, Germany. In March 1945, as the Russian army neared, the prisoners were divided and sent in different directions on a death march. Somehow Lola kept going even when it meant walking in her sleep. On May 7, 1945, she was liberated by the Russian army.

After liberation, 19-year-old Lola was sent to a displaced persons camp in Kassel, Germany where she met and married fellow survivor Rubin Halpern. The Halperns moved to Hanover where their daughter Genia was born in 1949. Two years later, they came to the U.S. and settled in Los Angeles. In 1955, Lola and Rubin had a second daughter, Michelle.

Lola never forgot her promise to her aunt. For all those who were murdered—her parents, sisters, aunts, and cousins—Lola has remembered and witnessed.

Rubin Halpern

“In 1938, my sister Henia entered a local beauty pageant and was crowned Miss Lutsk. I still have the photo of her from the newspaper. I was so very proud of her. When I look at my daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughter, I see her.”

Rubin Halpern was born in Lutsk, Poland (now the Ukraine) on April 10, 1922. His father, Mosche, was in the lumber business and his mother, Goldie, cared for Rubin; his sister, Henia, three years older; and brother, Selik, five years younger. Rubin was especially close to his sister Henia who in 1938 was crowned Miss Lutsk. She was both beautiful and talented. Until the war ended his education, Rubin attended school, studying Polish and Hebrew, among other subjects.

In 1939, as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty, Lutsk came under the control of the Soviets. Germany broke the treaty and launched a surprise attack in 1941. After extensive bombing, the German army entered Lutsk on June 25, and the city’s Jews became immediate targets.

On July 4, the SS ordered all Jewish heads of households to bring a shovel and go to the Lubart fortress, a 13th-century castle located on the outskirts of the ghetto. Rubin watched as his father and some 2,000 other Jewish men marched to the fortress for what they assumed would be a day of forced labor. Instead, the men were ordered to use the shovels to dig their own graves and were then shot. When his father did not return at nightfall, Rubin knew that something had gone terribly wrong and that his father had been killed.

In early December, the remaining Jews were ordered into a ghetto. Since Rubin’s home was already within that area, the family did not have to move, but they struggled to cope with the horrible conditions—meager food and sanitation and terrible overcrowding—while grieving for Mosche. Hard physical labor drained Rubin of what little strength he had. In these months, Rubin stuck close to his brother-in-law who had promised his father he would look after Rubin.

During the week of August 19, 1942, some 17,000 Jews, including Rubin’s mother, sister, and brother, were taken from the ghetto to Polanka Hill where giant pits had been dug. Members of a special SD (Security Service) unit manned machine guns at each corner and slaughtered everyone.

Following the murder of his mother, brother, and sister, Rubin became separated from his brother-in-law who was later killed. Rubin was among the few to escape from Lutsk. For more than two years, he hid, going from village to village, sometimes living with partisans in forests and caves. He endured hunger, illness, and brutally cold winters. He was liberated, a few miles from Lutsk, by Soviet soldiers in early 1945.

After liberation, Rubin was sent to a displaced persons camp in Kassel, Germany where he met his future wife, Lola, also a survivor, whom he married in 1948. The couple immigrated to the U.S. and settled in Los Angeles, where they raised their two daughters. Having lost all of his family by the time he was 20, Rubin

finds his greatest joy and purpose in life in his roles as husband, father of two, grandfather of five, and great-grandfather of three.

Regina Hirsch (née Landowicz)

“In April 1940, I came down with typhus and fell into a coma. I awoke, lying in a bathtub filled with ice, with a young woman watching over me. She exclaimed: ‘You are the luckiest kid in the world.’ Not only had I survived typhus, but I had narrowly missed being taken in a round up and killed.”

Regina Hirsch was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1928. Hers was a large family that eventually came to number nine girls and one boy. The German invasion of Poland in 1939 meant immediate restrictions and harassment for Regina and her family. On one occasion, her father was made to scrub the sidewalk before his beard was shaved off by laughing German soldiers. Regina would never forget the sight of her father crying at this terrible humiliation and violation of his beliefs as an Orthodox Jew.

Soon the Landowicz family was forced into the Lodz ghetto. Gentile neighbors offered to take Regina’s sister Lily, but their mother refused to be separated from her youngest child. Regina, her parents and three sisters, Ruth, Sally, and Lily, still only a young child of eight, all worked in the ghetto’s factories. Even with everyone working, the family typically ran out of food by the end of the week. To help out, Regina would eat only a portion of the bread she received, hiding it until the end of the week to share it with her family when they had none.

In April 1940, Regina came down with typhus. After falling into a coma, she awoke in a ghetto hospital in a bathtub full of ice with a young woman watching over her who exclaimed, “You are the luckiest kid in the world!” As the woman told her, had she arrived at the hospital only a day earlier—the day before the ghetto

was closed—she would have been murdered in the Nazi roundup of doctors, nurses, and patients. But all Regina could think about was the fact that during her illness her gorgeous head of hair had been shaved off. She was so ill it took her six months to walk again.

Over the next years, the family narrowly avoided deportation several times, but in June 1944, the ghetto was liquidated. Their attempts to hide, first in an abandoned factory and then in a cemetery, failed, and Regina, her mother, and three sisters were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on August 27, 1944.

The family was immediately separated. Ruth, Regina, and Sally were selected to live, while 12-year-old Lily, who looked much younger because she was so malnourished, was sent to the gas chambers. Again refusing to be separated from her youngest child, Regina’s mother went with Lily.

Regina and her two sisters spent six weeks in Auschwitz before being transported to Öderan, a sub-camp of Flossenbürg. From there they were taken to Theresienstadt (now Czech Republic) where they were liberated by Soviet troops on May 9, 1945.

Following the war, Regina spent 4½ years in the Landsberg displaced persons camp in Germany. She learned that of her large family, only she and three of her sisters, Ruth, Sally, and Judy, who had spent the war years as a slave laborer in the Soviet Union, had survived.

Regina immigrated to the United States in 1949 and settled in Los Angeles. Soon after arriving, she began attending dances to meet people her own age. At one occasion, her date introduced her to Phillip Hirsch who, as she discovered, was not only from Lodz but had lived quite near to her. They felt an immediate connection and were married less than a year later. They have now been married 58 years.

Today Regina lives very near her three sisters, Ruth, Sally, and Judy. They see or talk with each other by phone almost every day; three sisters who share an unbreakable bond of family and memory.

Marie Kaufman

“I suggested honoring them and their parents at Yad Vashem. They were silent. I asked again. They responded at last, ‘But why? It was normal to do the right thing.’”

Marie Kaufman was born in Vichy France on March 19, 1941, at the height of the war. Before becoming a couple, her parents, Michael and Anna, both born in Poland, had travelled west in the 1930s, crossing the border into France illegally, in search of work. In the face of the imminent occupation of Paris by the German army in June 1940, each had fled south seeking safety in the “free zone” administered by the French government. On the train, mutual friends introduced Michael and Anna to one another.



Photo taken in 1920 of Marie Kaufman's maternal grandparents, Marie and Armand Zaidner. Armand died before the Holocaust; Marie was killed in the Podlaski ghetto.

Arriving in Albi, near Toulouse, Michael told a Red Cross refugee settlement worker that he was with Anna—news to her. But his quick thinking making them a couple earned them a small house in the village of Milhars. It did not take long for the illusion to become reality; Marie was born nine months later.

In December 1942, Michael's employer at the cement factory told him that the authorities were ordering him to a labor camp. His employer had not divulged his whereabouts, but it was crucial that he immediately go into hiding. Michael spent eight months in a cave, but eventually it became too difficult and dangerous for Anna to bring him food. The couple decided that Michael should hide in the basement of their own house. To

enable Anna to stay out of the house all day, making the gendarmes think that no one was home, Marie was placed in the care of teenagers from two village families who told anyone who asked that she was their cousin. The parish priest joined the mayor in the conspiracy of kindness, providing false papers and identity cards for mother and daughter while the factory owner falsely listed Michael as among those sent to the labor camp.

When Marie's sister, Helene, was born in 1943 the priest concealed the baby's Jewish identity, performing a mock baptism. A gendarme looking for Michael chose not to search the house even though it was the most obvious place to look. And the owner of the cement company secretly gave half of Michael's salary to Anna. The conspiracy of kindness worked; the couple and their two children survived.

The family remained in Milhars for a year after the occupation ended, then returned to Paris, where Michael and Anna finally married in 1947. They learned that both their families in Poland had been killed, except for Michael's sister Fela. In 1951, the Kaufman family immigrated to the United States, settling in Los Angeles.

Marie married, had two children and is now the grandmother of four. In 1996, she returned to Milhars to meet the people who had saved her. When Marie suggested to the adults, then teenagers, who had protected her that they and their parents should be honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations, they refused, saying that they deserved no special recognition for their acts of ordinary decency, for choosing to participate in a conspiracy of kindness.

Cesia Kingston (née Rozental)

“The last time I saw my mother was at the point of Mengele's baton. My mother, sensing her own fate and that of her three daughters, said to me, ‘You stay with your older sister. You can survive if you stay together. I am going to stay with the baby.’”

Cesia Kingston was born in Lodz, Poland in 1926. Her Zionist parents highly valued education and worked long hours in their restaurant to enable their children to attend a Jewish private school. All that would change with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939.

In February 1940, Cesia, then 14, and her family were forced into the ghetto. Living in a single cramped room, Cesia, her four siblings, parents and grandmother, struggled to make the best of the overcrowded conditions and the steadily decreasing food ration. Survival depended on meeting one's daily production quota and when Cesia, her hands bloodied by the work, couldn't keep up, her younger brother stepped in to help. Cesia tried to ease the hunger of her baby sister by entertaining her with stories of the world outside the ghetto—the smell of a flower, the taste of an egg, and the pure delight of eating chocolate.

In August 1944, the family—including Cesia, her two brothers and two sisters, mother, and grandmother—were sent on the next to the last transport from Lodz to Auschwitz. Her father had already been deported. Upon arrival at the camp, her mother, somehow sensing what lay ahead, ordered Cesia to stay with her older sister Nadzia while she remained with the baby. She told the sisters that if they stayed together they would *überleben*, survive. Her mother's

decision meant life for the two girls but death in the gas chambers for herself and her baby. Cesia's brothers were sent into another line.

Throughout the next months of brutal labor and near starvation, Cesia remembered what her mother had said, *überleben*, survive. That word kept the two sisters going in Auschwitz and later in Stutthof. From there, in the depths of winter, they were sent on a death march, wearing only flimsy clothing and with only one pair of shoes between them. Those who could not keep up were shot. When the march reached the Baltic Sea, the guards jammed the prisoners onto leaky boats and pushed them out into the tumultuous seas. In the split second when the guards were distracted by Allied bombers flying overhead, Cesia grabbed her sister's hand, and the two girls fled into the woods.

Close to starvation, with no identity papers and no warm clothes, the sisters somehow managed to present them as homeless Polish Christians seeking work. When Nadzia's toes became gangrenous because she had given her shoes to her sister on the death march, Cesia carried her to the hospital on her back.

Following liberation, Cesia and her sister returned to Lodz. Everywhere they went, the two girls faced hostility. They learned that their parents, baby sister, and youngest brother had all been killed in Auschwitz. Only one brother had survived.

Cesia married fellow survivor Morrie Kingston in 1946. Recognizing that Poland held no future for them, the couple immigrated to the United States. Eventually, Nadzia would follow—two sisters who had been saved by their mother's admonition, by luck, and by their own unwavering promise to *überleben*.

Selma Konitz, z"l (née Eichner)

“We have tried not to live in the past, only to remember it. Both my husband and I never knew what growing up meant. What it was like to be a teenager and not to have to worry about beatings, ovens and gas chambers, death and the fight to live. So we gave our children the dearest gift, and the only gift we had, the gift of love and the will to survive no matter what the obstacles.”

Selma Konitz was born in Oswiecim, Poland on November 17, 1925. The youngest of seven children, Selma had a wonderful childhood that ended abruptly when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Her parents had hoped to send their daughter to the university; instead, Selma spent the next years learning to survive.



Photo taken in 1927 of sisters Toni and Selma with their family. Front row: Mania, Isaac, Toni; mother Rose; father Izak; Selma. Second row: Joe, Ann, Leopold. Only Toni and Selma survived the Holocaust.

With only an hour's notice, in April 1941, the family was ordered to pack a few belongings and leave Oswiecim, renamed Auschwitz, which was to be “Jew free” while the nearby camp was to be expanded to become a massive killing site to make all of Europe “Jew free.”

In Sosnowiec, the family endured terrible conditions and nightly raids by the SS. When Selma was 16, she received a letter ordering her to report to a labor camp. Heartbroken, she complied only after her uncle secretly told her that if she did not the SS would take away her entire family. Knowing that her mother, in poor health, would protest, Selma left without saying goodbye. A few days later her father came to see her and told her always to remember the family's love for one another. She would never see her parents again.

Selma was sent to Neusalz where she labored 15 hours a day. When the guards weren't looking, Selma and the other prisoners ate leaves from the trees to ease their hunger. Each day, those too weak to work were “selected” to be killed. Miraculously, for four years Selma survived.

In January 1945, the inmates were sent west on a death march. People died by the thousands from starvation and the bitter cold. Selma longed to trade places with one of the dogs to whom the guards threw pieces of salami. Finally, the prisoners were herded into cattle cars and sent to the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. Packed tightly into the cars, living and dead were held upright by the pressure of one another's bodies.

Upon arrival, Selma was sent to a stable where the prisoners were literally stacked on top of one another. Lice the size of large ants consumed the prisoners. Selma slept with the dead, walked on the dead, and was forced to carry the dead to mass graves. Ashes from the crematoria stuck to her skin, and the stench of burning bodies filled the air.

On April 15, 1945, Bergen-Belsen was liberated. Desperately ill from typhus and weighing less than 70 pounds, 19-year-old Selma was too weak to welcome the British. Her life was saved by her sister Toni who found her among the dead and dying, cared for her, and carried her to a hospital. Gradually Selma recovered her health.

A year later, Selma met and married handsome survivor Louis Konitz. The couple, with their infant son Jack, immigrated to the United States in 1950. They settled in Los Angeles the next year, and in 1952 had another child, Russ. Family would be at the center of their lives as it had been for the parents they both had lost. Selma passed away in March 2008.

Henry Kress

“You would be amazed how you can get used to misery because if you can't get used to it, you can't survive. To survive you make the best out of the worst.”

Born Heniek Krzesiwo in Sosnowiec, Poland on July 26, 1924, Henry Kress, his sister Esther, and his parents enjoyed a comfortable middle class life. The Friday *Shabbat* (Sabbath) service was a highlight of the week since the rabbi often invited Henry and the other children into his study afterwards for a special treat—an apple or a piece of chocolate.

The next year Henry was seized and sent to a labor camp near Heidelberg, Germany. He had no chance to say goodbye to his parents. Assigned to building roads, Henry, only 15, had to do the same exhausting physical labor as the older and stronger men. As a result, he developed a painful hernia, making it impossible for him to work. Fortunately, he was allowed to go home for a few weeks to recover. He was so changed that his mother at first didn't recognize him.

His sister Esther was able to get Henry assigned to the same factory where she worked. The family remained together even when they were moved to the Bedzin ghetto. Then in August 1943 the Germans liquidated the ghetto and sent everyone to Auschwitz. Henry's parents were murdered in the gas chambers there.

Upon arrival, Henry was quarantined in Birkenau before being sent to Auschwitz where he was assigned to searching clothes for valuables. His next job, delivering coal, took him out of Auschwitz and gave him a moment's reunion with Esther in Birkenau. That encounter gave each the strength to continue.

On January 18, 1945, with the Russians approaching, the prisoners were sent on a death march. Henry and a friend managed to escape while a guard was pursuing other prisoners. In terrible danger, they spent the next weeks sneaking from farm to farm, hoping that no one would betray them. Freedom came on March 21 when the Russian army arrived, but the Russians arrested the two as German collaborators. They were released when the Russians realized they had been concentration camp prisoners.

For a time Henry served with the Russian security police, hunting down and bringing to justice members of the SS. When he learned that his sister had been liberated at Bergen-Belsen, Henry decided to leave Poland, smuggling himself across the border into Czechoslovakia and then into Germany to join her.

In 1949, after a three year wait for his visa, Henry came to the United States. He and his wife Mary, also an Auschwitz survivor, eventually moved with their two children to Los Angeles. Hope and luck had enabled Henry to make the best out of the worst, to survive, and to build a new life.



Photo taken in 1932 of Heniek Krzesiwo (Henry Kress), his sister Esther and mother Helena.

In 1939, the family moved to Krakow where Henry planned to become an electrician, but the onset of war ended his education. Thinking they might be safer from Nazi persecution in a smaller town, Henry's parents moved the family to Olkusz, some 25 miles away. When it became difficult for Jews to obtain food, Henry got up at 2 a.m. to wait in line for six hours until the bakery opened so that he could buy bread before he left for work.

Adam Krispow, z"l

“Every day more prisoners died. The stench of death was overwhelming. William and I knew we must escape if we hoped to live. We knocked out the barbed wire from the window of the box car and jumped into the darkness and the unknown.”

Adam Krispow was born on September 12, 1923, to a middle-class Orthodox Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland. He enjoyed school and hoped to study metallurgy, but the German invasion of Poland brought his education to an abrupt end. Although Adam and his family survived the relentless bombardment, his father’s business did not. At the age of 16, Adam went to work to help his family. No longer did he think about the future, only about surviving the present.

In fall 1940, the Germans established a ghetto, but since the Krispows’ home was within the ghetto’s boundaries the family did not have to move. On May 12, 1941, Adam was seized in an *Aktion*, a round up, and sent to forced labor. He would never see his family again.

His first job was widening and repairing roads as Germany prepared to invade the Soviet Union. Next he was transported to Pustkow, where he spent three years building an enormous SS training camp.

In August 1944, Adam was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. He had no idea that he was among the fortunate few to be chosen to live. He was tattooed with the number A18164 and quarantined before being taken to the sub-camp Gleiwitz. There he faced a life or death decision. When a large steel plate dropped on his hand, Adam endured the pain of a festering wound and a badly broken finger and kept working rather than admit that he was hurt. He knew that the inability to work was a death sentence.

On January 18, 1945, the Germans evacuated the camp. The prisoners were marched in the snow and freezing rain and then loaded onto a freight train and sent first to Gross-Rosen and then to Buchenwald. From there Adam was moved once again, this time to Fliesberg, a brutal labor camp. In April, the prisoners were again loaded onto box cars with no food or water. Knowing that escape was his only hope, Adam and his best friend William knocked out the barbed wire over the small window, hoisted themselves up, and jumped into the Czech countryside.

Their next days were spent evading the Germans as Adam became weaker and more desperately ill. After he was liberated by American soldiers in early May 1945, he was hospitalized for two months with pneumonia and typhus. When he was well enough to travel, he was moved to a displaced persons camp near Salzburg, Austria where he found work at the American military motor pool. It was there that he met his future wife Lola.

The American soldiers to whom he told his story were outraged and offered him a chance to take revenge on their prisoners of war. Adam refused, saying that if he committed murder he would dishonor the memory of his family

and demean himself. Given an opportunity for retribution on those who had taken everything from him, he chose to take nothing from them.

When the motor unit moved to Vienna, Adam went with them. There he met an American army officer who enabled Adam to come to the U.S. The officer paid for Adam’s passage, met him when he arrived in New York, and took him to his hometown in Pennsylvania. This act of extraordinary altruism helped Adam regain his faith in humanity.

Only a few days after arriving and knowing no English, Adam started working in a local factory. He wrote Lola who had arrived in the U.S. a few months earlier and was living in Philadelphia. He soon joined her and the couple married on January 11, 1948. They became the parents of a son, Jeffrey, and are now the grandparents of two. They moved to Los Angeles in 1962. In 2008, they celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary—two survivors who embrace life and celebrate family while always remembering those they lost.

Lola Krispow (née Lerer)

“The officers went down the line shooting each girl. I knew I would be dead in moments. Then they stopped. There were four of us left. It was unthinkable that they would leave witnesses to such a crime. I had the feeling my father was looking down upon them and saying, ‘Don’t touch the baby!’”

Lola Krispow was born on October 2, 1923 to Szymon and Golda Lerer in Lodz, Poland. Lola was the adored baby of the family with three older siblings, two brothers, Akiva and Sol, and one sister, Rose. Her father owned a general store in Lodz and was also president of the local synagogue. He was known for his generosity and charitable acts, often allowing customers to purchase items on credit when they had no money for food or other necessities.

When war seemed imminent, Lola’s brother Sol urged his father to move the family to Russia, but Szymon, who had served in the Russian army in the Great War, was reluctant to give up all he had built in Lodz. Sol left and was able to survive the war.

Lola’s home was within the area that became a closed ghetto on April 30, 1940. Szymon’s acts of kindness were now reciprocated as the ghetto’s leadership helped the family avoid the round ups and deportation to the Chelmno death camp that began in January 1942. Szymon’s connections also gained Akiva a position with the ghetto police. Lola’s mother, however, fell victim to the hardships of the ghetto, dying in May 1940 at the age of only 46.

Lola, her father, brother and sister remained in the ghetto until it was liquidated in the summer of 1944 and the remaining inhabitants were

sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Upon arrival, Lola and Rose were separated from Szymon and Akiva. What occurred at Auschwitz was no longer a mystery to those arriving and in the shower Lola and Rose held hands and prayed that water, not gas, would come from the pipes. Although she and Rose were spared, Szymon and Akiva were sent to their deaths.

For the next four months, Lola and Rose experienced the horrors of Auschwitz as ditch diggers. Each found her strength in the other. In January 1945 as the Russians neared, the Germans sent the Auschwitz prisoners on a death march, an experience that nearly broke the sisters’ bond. Rose, unable to walk because of frostbite, was ordered onto a bus. Lola refused to be separated from her only remaining family member and so feigned injury, but her ploy to join her sister failed. She was sent to another bus which traveled a brief distance before Lola and the twenty other girls were ordered out and into the forest. There the SS officers began systematically shooting the girls one by one. Lola, near the end of the line and knowing that she would soon be killed, wrestled with agonizing questions: Would anyone find her body? How would anyone know who she was? Then, suddenly, the shooting stopped and the four remaining girls, including Lola, were allowed to go. Their survival was quite simply a miracle since it was unthinkable for the Germans to leave witnesses to such a crime. She knew her life must have been saved by her father looking down on her crying, “Don’t touch the baby!”

Lola was reunited with Rose about four months later. Together they were liberated by the U.S. Army and sent to a displaced persons camp in Salzburg, Austria. It was there that she met fellow survivor Adam Krispow who would become her husband. Rose fell in love with and married a GI.

Lola arrived in the U.S. in late December 1946, joining her sister and brother-in-law in Philadelphia. She started work right away, attended night classes, and learned English. Adam joined her, and the two married in January 1948. In 1962, they moved to California for Lola’s health. She remains in close touch with her sister Rose, who lives in Florida, and with whom she shares an unbreakable bond of loyalty and love.

Sophie Lazar, ז"ל (née Bielawska)

“In 1938, I heard the founder of the Zionist organization, Betar, Ze’ev Jabotinsky, speak. He said, ‘The roofs are burning over your heads.’ He tried to warn us, but I was young and idealistic and couldn’t imagine that what he was saying could be true.”

Sophie Lazar was born the fourth of five children on July 27, 1921, in Lodz, Poland. Her father Max Bielawska owned a fabric-dyeing company and had the means to give his children an education. Sophie completed gymnasium, preparatory study for the university, before Germany invaded Poland in 1939. Through her older brother Arie, Sophie became involved in the Zionist organization *Betar* and by the age of 16 was leading meetings with as many as 60 people. In 1938, the founder of *Betar*, Ze’ev Jabotinsky, came to Lodz and warned that “the roofs are burning over your heads”—Polish Jewry was in imminent danger. Although Sophie thought Jabotinsky must surely be exaggerating, her brother Arie took the warning literally and fled illegally to Palestine that same year.

When Germany invaded Poland, Sophie and the other *Betar* girls mobilized with the Red Cross. They cared for the wounded until they had to flee to avoid capture. In late 1939, Sophie, her parents and two sisters were ordered out of their home and into the ghetto. Sophie’s ingenuity and leadership helped both her and her family survive. She was given the job of supervising eleven male janitors who cleaned the houses of the German administrators. When she was not working, Sophie continued her involvement with *Betar* even though the group was now outlawed.

Over the next years, conditions in the ghetto worsened and more and more people, including Sophie’s father, died from disease and malnutrition. Sophie now drew even closer to her mother and two sisters. When they were seized in a roundup, Sophie was devastated.

Sophie stayed with her boyfriend’s family until they were all deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau at the end of July 1944. Only on the train did her boyfriend tell her what he had learned from secretly listening to BBC radio broadcasts—that the camps were factories of death. The shock of that news and the impact of what she saw before her—chimneys spewing smoke and prisoners with shaved heads and emaciated bodies—threw her into a state of shock. Only the support of her friends carried her through the initial selection and her first days in the camp.

A few weeks later she was transferred to Ravensbrück, a women’s concentration camp in Germany, but that was only a temporary stop on her way to Mühlhausen, a sub-camp of Buchenwald. Assigned to the ammunition factory, Sophie once again became a leader, obtaining extra rations for the younger girls and teaching them Hebrew songs to lift their spirits.

After 18 months in Mühlhausen, Sophie and the other women were transferred in early April 1945 to Bergen-Belsen which by that time had become a dumping ground for prisoners from many camps. There was no running water and no

food; lice were everywhere, and soon Sophie became gravely ill with the typhus that was endemic to the camp. Only the arrival of British soldiers on April 15, 1945 saved her life; she weighed a mere 70 pounds.

Liberation brought the realization of how much she had lost. She learned her boyfriend had died and that her brother Josef had been killed in the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Only her brother Arie who had fought with the British Brigade from Palestine had survived. Shared grief drew her to Max Lazar, 15 years her senior, whom she had known in the Lodz ghetto and who had lost his wife and two daughters. They married and moved to Palestine in 1946. The birth of her first child brought Sophie both joy and sadness as she felt deeply the absence of her own mother. Although Sophie had hoped to stay in Israel, Max believed there were more opportunities in the United States. In 1951, they and their daughters, Chana and Frieda, arrived in Los Angeles. For years Sophie told no one about her experiences, but the presence of Holocaust deniers made her realize she must once again become a leader, speaking for those whose lives had been taken from them.

Paula Lebovics (née Balter)

“I found my voice and haven’t been silent since. I speak whenever I’m asked and sometimes even when I’m not asked. I believe that silence is not an option.”

Growing up in Ostrowiec, Poland, as the youngest of six children born to Israel and Perla Balter, Paula had to find her voice early on. Surrounded by many relatives on the family estate, Pesalle, as her family affectionately called her, developed a love of the limelight and enjoyed singing for her musical family. She spent her early childhood blissfully unaware of the increasingly threatening political situation.

In September 1939, just a few weeks before Paula’s sixth birthday, her idyllic life was shattered by Germany’s invasion of Poland. In late 1940, an open ghetto was established and Paula’s once wealthy family was ordered into a cramped single room. Fortunately, Paula’s older brother Herschel secured work with the division of the *Judenrat*, the Jewish Council, which oversaw sanitation. Although the job exposed him to typhus and tuberculosis, it gave him access to medicine and extra food, and, even more importantly, to information.

In fall 1942, Herschel learned that a selection would soon occur. Those without work permits would be deported to the death camp Treblinka. Paula’s older sisters Chaya and Chana had papers, but, as it turned out, these meant only a temporary reprieve from Treblinka. None of the 40 members in Paula’s extended family had papers so they had to “disappear.” Herschel dug a crawlspace beneath a shed in an abandoned lumber yard and guided each person there under the cover of night. After the selection, Herschel smuggled them back into different areas of the ghetto. The Balter family would never be united again.

As the ghetto transitioned into a hard labor camp, Paula had to save herself since she was too young for a work assignment. During the day, she hid with her brother Josef in different places—an attic, a small closet, and a broken kiln in a brick factory. She experienced hunger and fear, but it is the red patches on the snow, evidence of mass executions that followed the second selection in the ghetto, that she remembers most vividly. Among those killed were Paula’s grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Josef, five years older, was able to find work; Paula was now entirely alone. She was captured and about to be shot by an SS officer. As he drew his pistol, he told her to turn around and face the wall. She refused. At that very moment a laughing, drunken SS officer came along and told her captor not to waste a bullet on a child. Paula was saved and assigned work.

In early August 1944 the Nazis closed the Ostrowiec camp and sent the workers by cattle car to Auschwitz. On the train Paula was united for a brief time with her brother and parents but was separated from all but her mother upon arrival at the camp. Though she was weak from beatings and starvation, Paula kept up the spirits of her fellow prisoners by singing for them. Eventually she was sent to the *Kinderblock*, children’s barrack. She learned to become invisible to avoid the “Angel of Death,” Josef Mengele, who regularly visited the block to select children for his “experiments.”

Paula was reunited with her mother when Auschwitz was liberated by the Soviets in January 1945. They traveled to Ostrowiec where they begged their former caretaker for a room. After the murder of ten Jewish survivors by Polish antisemites, mother and daughter fled to Lodz and were reunited with Herschel and Josef who smuggled them out of Poland and into a displaced persons camp in Germany. Paula and her mother would spend the next six years there.



Paula (4th from left), then 11 years old, at Auschwitz in late January or early February 1945, shortly after liberation.

In 1952, Paula and her mother immigrated to Detroit, Michigan where Paula worked to support her mother. In 1957, Paula married Michael Lebovics, but sadly, three weeks before the wedding, Paula’s beloved

mother died of cancer. The newlyweds moved to California the next year. Michael opened a jewelry business and the couple had two children, Linda and Danny. Throughout her harrowing Holocaust journey, the spirited young girl held fast to the belief that no one could silence her voice and that she would live to tell people what she had experienced. Guided by the motto “silence is not an option” Paula has witnessed for all those, including her sisters and father, whose lives were taken from them.

Max Leigh

“Since the beginning, I knew I was going to make it.”

Max Leigh was born in Dresden, Germany on February 17, 1920. His parents, Ludwig and Faiga Leschgold, were Polish émigrés who moved back to Warsaw in 1924 with Max; his older sister, Rosa, and younger sister, Ruth.

Max’s father made children’s clothing in a small workshop in their home. His parents dreamed of sending Max to the university to become a doctor, but they couldn’t afford to do so. Instead, at 14, Max entered a vocational school where he learned to be a machinist. This skill would prove crucial to his survival in the camps.

For a Jew, even in pre-war Poland, life was often dangerous. On one occasion, Max and his girlfriend were attacked by four gentile Poles as they were sitting in the park.

The German occupation of Warsaw in September 1939 brought the family extreme hardship. They sold everything they owned in order to buy food. One day Faiga returned home missing a tooth. When Max questioned her, he learned that she had sold her gold tooth so the family could have a meal on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

In August 1940, Max was ordered to report for forced labor. He was sent to Tyszowce in southeastern Poland but was allowed to return home in early December. In May 1941, he was summoned to forced labor at Strzyzow where he carried heavy bags of cement for road construction. In the next camp, Pustkow, his training as a machinist proved life saving. Instead of being ordered to perform grueling physical labor, he was assigned far less onerous work as an auto mechanic for German civilians outside the camp. His fluency in German earned him a measure of respect and better treatment. In 1942, he was assigned to a new work detail constructing a sub-camp.

Max was sent to Auschwitz in June 1944 and from there to Gleiwitz III, a sub-camp of Auschwitz. His experience as a machinist again proved beneficial, and he was assigned to a workshop supervising prisoners who were building a chamber to paint and dry bombs.

In January 1945, as the Soviet army approached, Max was moved to Blechhammer. He escaped for a brief time but was captured and sent to Gleiwitz. In late January, he was transported by cattle car to Dora-Mittelbau where he worked on V-2 rockets. In early April, this camp too was evacuated, and Max was transported to Ravensbrück and then to Wöbbelin. He was liberated by the U.S. Army on May 2, 1945. Max was the only member of his family to survive.

Max stayed briefly in Lubeck and Hamburg before going to a displaced persons camp in Bergen-Belsen where he was housed in one of the former guard barracks. In the camp he met his future wife, Rosaline, whom he married in December 1946.

Max and Rosaline came to the United States in 1949 with help from the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles. Max learned English quickly and once again drew

upon his skill as a machinist to find a job. He worked at a company that manufactured airplane parts and then for the Burroughs Adding Machine Company. In 1970, he began a new career as a men’s clothing salesman.

Max and Rosaline were married for 54 years until Rosaline’s death in 2000. Still energetic at 89, Max is married to his second wife Enna. He continues to rely upon the optimism which, along with skill, was his greatest asset for survival.

Beba Leventhal, ז"ל (née Epstein)

“I was terribly ill with typhus, but somehow I jumped off the barge and swam ashore. My cousin couldn’t make it. He called to me ‘Beba, remember the date.’”

Beba Leventhal was born Beba Epstein in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania) in 1925. Her father was an assistant bank manager. Beba had a younger sister and two younger brothers. She attended a distinguished private Jewish school and enjoyed sports, especially swimming. Her ability to swim would one day save her life.

When the Soviets occupied Vilna on September 19, 1939, the family’s life changed dramatically. Banks were nationalized, and her father lost his job. Beba’s school was closed, but she was allowed to attend public school where courses were now taught in Russian. In July 1940, Lithuania, including Vilna, became a Soviet republic.

On June 24, 1941, two days after Germany attacked the Soviet Union, Vilna was occupied by the Germans. Jews were now required to wear an identifying Star of David.

On September 6, Beba and her family were ordered into the ghetto. A few weeks later, Beba’s father arranged for her to go into hiding outside the ghetto with a gentile family. Letters from her family reported that their situation was steadily worsening, but Beba became even more worried when the letters ceased. She returned to the ghetto to discover that her parents and siblings were gone. She learned later that they had been killed. Beba moved in with her aunt and uncle and their two children.

When the ghetto was liquidated in September 1943, Beba was sent by

cattle car to the Kaiserwald concentration camp and then to a camp in Riga that manufactured airplane and submarine parts. When the approaching front necessitated the factory be moved, Beba and the other workers were transported as well, but when the machinery failed to arrive, the prisoners were sent to the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig (now Gdansk). The conditions there were horrific, and Beba became very ill with typhus.

On April 28, 1945, the Nazis liquidated the camp and divided the prisoners into small groups. Beba’s group was placed on a barge. The seas were rough and Allied aircraft, mistaking the barges for enemy ships, repeatedly bombed them. For five days the prisoners had no food or water as the boats circled. Some became so desperate that they drank sea water. Then, as the barge approached the Baltic coast, the guards ordered the prisoners to jump into the water and swim ashore. Some were shot in the water, but the guards reserved most of their bullets for those too weak to jump off the barge. Beba’s cousin was one of them.

After she reached shore, Beba hid with Russian POWs until British soldiers found her on May 3. She received care at a hospital near the Danish border and then in Sweden.

Beba’s only relative was an uncle living in New York who paid her way to the U.S. She found work as a translator and social worker for the Jewish community. Beba met her future husband, Lee Leventhal, who lived in Mexico City, when he was visiting New York with his father. They were married in San Antonio, Texas on August 5, 1948, and Beba joined Lee in Mexico City. When he was accepted as a graduate student at USC, the couple moved to Southern California where they raised their two children, Mary, who became a physician, and S. Michael, who became an attorney. In 2008, Beba and Lee celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary, a wonderful occasion made possible by a girl’s desperate swim for freedom.

Jack Lewin

“My mother was a seamstress and my father was a house painter. I was an only child. My parents sacrificed so that I could attend a private Yiddish school. That school gave me a love of Yiddish language and literature that has stayed with me for nearly 75 years.”

Born in Lodz, Poland, on April 13, 1927, Jack Lewin had both Jewish and Christian neighbors as he was growing up, but because of the pervasive antisemitism, he never had a Christian friend. His parents, Hersh, a house painter, and Dinah, a seamstress, worked hard so that their only child could attend a private Jewish school where he studied not only the required Polish curriculum but also Yiddish language, literature, and culture. Jack’s childhood was happy and secure, with family gatherings, summer camp, and the special thrill of riding on his grandfather’s wagon when he made deliveries.

In February 1940, the Germans ordered the Jews of Lodz to leave their homes and move into the ghetto, which soon became extremely overcrowded. Jack and his parents were fortunate to share a room with Jack’s maternal grandparents. Food became increasingly scarce and when the Nazis promised a small salary to anyone who volunteered for the Poznan labor camp, Jack’s father accepted knowing that the money he earned would enable his family to buy food and other necessities. For a time the wages came, but one day they stopped, and Jack knew without being told that his father had died.

For the next three years, Jack worked in a ghetto factory that made confiscated furs into linings for German army uniforms while his mother worked in a factory sewing uniforms. The two survived on less and less as starvation ruled the ghetto.

In August 1944, the ghetto was liquidated and Jack and his mother were deported to Auschwitz. Dinah, only 45 years old, was sent to the left to her death while Jack was sent to the right, judged young and healthy enough to work. Ordered to Birkenau, he spent two weeks in what had once been the gypsy camp, crammed into a barrack with 1,000 other boys before being taken by truck to Trzebinia, a sub-camp of Auschwitz, where he was assigned to rebuilding bombed out IG Farben oil refineries. Jack’s job was carrying bricks, exhausting physical labor that sapped the little stamina he still had. His daily ration of food, a tiny portion of bread as hard as a rock, was not enough to sustain him. His attempt to steal potatoes failed and he was severely beaten, drenched with ice cold water and then made to stand outside in the bitter cold of winter.

In mid-January 1945, the Germans evacuated the camp and marched their prisoners back to Auschwitz. Exhausted by the many hours of walking in deep snow without food or water, Jack could not go on. When the officer in charge asked those who were too weak to continue to step out of the line, Jack stepped forward. He realized as soon as he looked at the emaciated creatures alongside him that his decision meant death. Yet, rather than fear, Jack felt a sense of peace, believing that in death he would be reunited with his beloved parents. To his surprise, the prisoners were marched not to the gas chamber but to Block 28 at Auschwitz, the so-called medical ward, where the guards simply dumped Jack

and the others. Jack’s spontaneous decision turned out to mean life not death since the prisoners, no longer guarded, could eat their fill of the soup left in the camp barracks.

Ten days later, on January 27, 1945, the Russian army entered the camp, and for the first time in five years, Jack experienced freedom. He returned to Lodz to search for his family but found no one. Not yet 18, Jack decided to leave Poland, going first to Berlin where he worked in a U.S. Army kitchen peeling potatoes—staying as close to food as he could—and then in January 1946 sneaking aboard a train to Brussels, Belgium.

In Brussels, Jack met his future wife Regina whom he married on May 8, 1947. Prohibited as refugees from applying for Belgian citizenship, the couple immigrated to Melbourne, Australia in 1950. In August 1965, with their two daughters, Dinah and Sylvia, they moved to the United States.

Over the years, Jack never forgot the Yiddish education which his parents had sacrificed so much to give him. In Melbourne he acted in the Yiddish theatre and in Los Angeles he remains an active member of the Yiddish Culture Club, helping to publish the Yiddish literary periodical *Heshbon*.

Regina Lewin (née Szwarcfeld)

“I was only 15 years old when I saw my parents for the last time. For the first year I was in the slave labor camp, I received letters from them. Then the letters stopped coming. That is when I knew I would never see them again.”

Regina Lewin was born on October 3, 1927, in Bendzin, Poland, a coal-mining town situated on what was then the Polish-German border. Her father owned a shoe factory, and Regina enjoyed a comfortable, middle-class life. Although her parents were aware of the growing danger from Germany, they were convinced that the situation would be resolved politically and believed that even if Germany attacked, Poland’s Jews would be treated as humanely as they had been during the Great War.



Members of the Szwarcfeld family in 1939. Top row: Helen, aunt; Sala, mother; Mania, cousin; Genia, cousin. Bottom row: Henry, cousin; David, cousin; Regina.

In the days immediately following Germany’s invasion in September 1939, Regina and her parents, Hersh and Sala Szwarcfeld, discovered that this time German policy would be

very different. Suddenly there were decrees forbidding Jews from walking on the sidewalks, and a strict curfew was imposed. Adults were required to wear armbands with the Star of David so they could be immediately identified. Some of the city’s leading Jewish citizens were publicly hanged. Regina’s education at the Jewish public school, Maria Konopicka School for Girls, came to an abrupt end as she was starting the sixth grade. Jewish children were no longer considered worthy of receiving an education. Yet even during this difficult time, Regina and her parents found comfort in the fact that they were together.

In May 1942, the family was separated, and 14-year-old Regina, along with other girls under the age of 20, was sent to the slave labor camp of Oberaltstadt, a sub-camp of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. The beauty of the alpine landscape contrasted starkly with the harshness of life at the Kluger factory where Regina worked producing thread for German army uniforms. The work was monotonous, exhausting, and dangerous. Regina was assigned the difficult job of monitoring a machine that fed and wound the thread onto the spools. When the thread became tangled, she had to reach into the machine to untangle it, a dangerous maneuver in which she could easily have lost a finger.

During her first months in the camp, Regina’s spirits were lifted by letters from home, but those letters ceased after about a year. Separated from their families, Regina and the eight girls in her barrack supported and encouraged one another to get through the frequent selections that meant life or death. They even dared to share a laugh and secretly make fun of their supervisors, but Regina knew how precarious life was, especially after she saw a long line of emaciated male prisoners march past the factory on what she later learned was a death march.

On May 8, 1945, Jewish partisans and the Soviet army liberated Oberaltstadt. With the help of the Red Cross, Regina made her way home and later traveled with two of her cousins to Berlin where she lived in a displaced persons camp until her aunt living in Brussels, Belgium located her and arranged for Regina to go there.

At 18, Regina began her life anew, taking classes to become a seamstress. On an evening outing at the movies she met her future husband, Jack Lewin, who had survived a death march similar to the one that Regina had witnessed. They married on May 8, 1947, the second anniversary of Regina’s liberation, and in 1950 moved to Australia where they lived until 1965 when they joined Regina’s aunt who had settled in the United States. With their two daughters, the Lewins made their home in Los Angeles. On May 8 each year, Regina and Jack celebrate their anniversary—62 years in 2009—and the day that made possible their marriage, family, and life together.

Leon Leyson, ז"ל

“While Schindler was looking through the railroad cars full of people, he spotted my brother and offered to take him off the train, but my brother declined because he didn’t want to abandon his girlfriend who was with him. They both remained on the train to the end of the line and to the end of their young lives. Tsalig was 17.”

Leon Leyson was born Leib Lejzon, the youngest of six children, on September 15, 1929, in Narewka, a small town in northeastern Poland. In the summer, Leon and his friends ran barefoot in the meadows and swam in the river; in the winter, they had snowball fights and skated on the river.

In 1938, Leon’s parents moved the family to Krakow, some 350 miles away, where Leon’s father had a job. Life in the big city was exciting for a country



Photo taken in 1932 of the Lejzon family. Front row: Aviva; David; mother Chana. Top row: Bezalel (Tsalig) and Hershel. Not pictured Leon and father Moishe. Hershel and Tsalig were murdered in the Holocaust.

boy—streetcars, indoor plumbing, electric lights. But exploration ended with the German invasion in September 1939. His father lost his job, and Leon was prohibited from attending school. The family was ordered into the overcrowded ghetto where they shared a bedroom with two others.

Life in the ghetto meant constant hunger. Leon ran errands for elderly people, always giving his mother the

slice of bread he earned so she could divide it into tiny portions for the family. Yet the Leysons were better off than some because Leon’s father, Moishe, and brother, David, were hired by Oskar Schindler, a Nazi businessman who had come to Poland to make his fortune. Although they received no pay, father and son could leave the ghetto for work and smuggle back in their pockets a bit of food or a piece of coal to fuel the stove.

The family faced the constant danger of deportation. In one *Aktion* (round up), Leon’s 17-year-old brother, Tsalig, who could build a radio from scratch and was his younger brother’s hero, was seized along with his girlfriend. Schindler saw him and offered to get him off the train but could not do the same for his girl friend. Tsalig refused to abandon her. Both were murdered in the Belzec death camp. Leon’s oldest brother, Hershel, who had fled Krakow for Narewka, was murdered with all the town’s Jews in August 1941. He was 21 years old.

Sent to the Plaszow labor camp, run by the sadistic Amon Goeth, the family survived only because Schindler placed them on his “List” and moved them to his camp. Schindler treated his workers as people, pausing to talk with little Leon,

who had to stand on a box to reach the controls of the machine he was operating, and afterwards, ordering that he receive an extra bowl of soup.

The Leysons were among the 1,200 Jews Schindler saved by bringing them to his new factory in Brünnlitz in the Sudetenland (now Brnenec, Czech Republic) where they were liberated on May 8, 1945.

Leon and his parents spent three years in a displaced persons camp in Germany. There he resumed the education that had ended when he was 10. In 1949, he and his parents immigrated to the United States. Working days and attending school at night, Leon earned a high school diploma. He served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War and afterwards gained a college degree. He taught for 39 years at Huntington Park High School. He married, became the father of two and the grandfather of four. Since 1993, when the film *Schindler’s List* appeared, he has inspired thousands of students by sharing his story.

In 1965, Leon was among the “Schindler Jews” who welcomed their rescuer to Los Angeles. Twenty years had passed and Leon was uncertain if Schindler would remember him, but Schindler looked at him, shook his hand and said, “You’re little Leyson.”

Marta Lightner (née Goldstein)

“Late at night we were supposed to cross the border, but there was flooding and all the villagers were outside working on sand bags. As a child, I remember that the car was speeding towards Hungary and all of a sudden, the car turned, and we were on our way back home. I didn’t understand what had happened. Later on, I realized that turning around saved my life.”

Born three years apart, Lydia and Marta Goldstein had a wonderful childhood in Michalovce, Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia), surrounded by loving parents, grandparents, and friends. Marta, the younger of the two, was born in 1934. The girls’ father, Marek Goldstein, was a prosperous businessman, owning a large hardware store on the town’s main street. The two sisters’ carefree years ended in March 1939 with the establishment of a pro-Nazi satellite state in Slovakia. Hoping to save their children, the parents made the difficult decision to send their older daughter illegally across the border to Hungary to live with an uncle in Budapest. Marta was to follow later with her grandfather, but their attempt to cross the border failed. Following the occupation of Hungary and the realization that their older daughter was now in grave danger, the parents desperately tried to sneak Lydia back home, but she was caught crossing the border, arrested, and deported to Auschwitz.

Considered too young to work, Lydia would have been sent immediately to the gas chambers had not a *kapo* (a prisoner in charge of other prisoners), Lydia’s former kindergarten teacher, intervened. Risking her own life, she lied about Lydia’s age, falsifying documents to make Lydia three years

older and so eligible for work—and survival. The rations she shared gave Lydia strength to endure the brutal conditions.

Meanwhile, hoping to evade capture, Marta and her parents fled west to Trnava. The family moved into a small apartment in a building owned by the Blataks, who also gave Mr. Goldstein work. Wealthy and respected, the Blataks nonetheless faced danger themselves since Mrs. Blatak was Jewish. After Marta’s father was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, Mrs. Blatak risked discovery to help Marta and her mother, guiding them to a succession of hiding places.

In April 1945, Marta and her mother were liberated by the Soviet army. They returned home and were eventually joined by Lydia, then 15, who had survived slave labor and a death march. The girls later learned that their father had been murdered at Auschwitz.

Following the war, Marta joined a Zionist organization and, with other Jewish teenagers, joined the youth *aliyah* (immigration) to Israel, settling in Kibbutz Kfar Masaryk, named in honor of the first president of Czechoslovakia. Thirty years later, in 1979, Marta, with her husband and son, moved to the United States, settling first in Chicago before moving to California. Her husband passed away in 1992. In 1994, she met and married Al Lightner, establishing a home with him in Newport Beach until his death in 2007. Thanks to the courageous women who risked their lives to save them, Marta and Lydia were able to reach adulthood and lead the full lives denied to so many children of the Holocaust.

Esther Livingston, ז"ל (née Katz)

“We went toward the tanks yelling wildly in Russian. The first tank did not stop but closed the hatch. Then a tank stopped. The Russians couldn’t believe what they saw. They thought they had come upon an insane asylum. That was my liberation.”

Born as Stirke Katz in Michaliszki, Belarus, then part of Poland, Esther grew up in a Byelorussian Catholic community with a small Jewish population. She remembers the thrill of shopping for *Shabbat*, summertime swims in the Vilia River, and the music performed in the town’s public hall. She also remembers the rising tide of antisemitism, with young men vandalising the markets and discouraging business with Jews.

Following a secret treaty with Germany, the Soviets invaded Poland on September 17, 1939, and Esther’s village was incorporated into the USSR. For the most part, life went on as before, although lessons were now in Russian and



Photo taken in 1939 of Stirke Katz (Esther Livingston) with friends. Front row: Beilinke Kupershtoch; Stirke (Esther); Frumke Gubiesky. Second row: Sorke Abramowicz; Menuchke Kupershtoch; Peshke Orenshtein.

religious life was curtailed. But worse was to come. The Germans took Michaliszki three days after breaking the treaty and marching into the Russian sphere in Poland in June 1941.

A section of Michaliszki was designated a ghetto, and Jews from nearby villages were packed like sardines into the small houses. Esther’s father was taken to a labor camp, and when the Germans came for her mother, Esther volunteered in her place, knowing that her mother could better care for her two younger brothers. In 1943, the family was reunited when the ghetto was liquidated.

March 27, 1944 is Esther’s most heartbreaking memory. On that day, the SS ordered a selection, consigning to death children too young to work. Esther’s mother refused to allow her youngest child to die alone and so went with him. Esther tried to join them, but her mother pushed her away. She would never see her mother and brother again.

A few weeks later, her father was taken, and Esther and her surviving brother were sent to the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig, where they were separated. Esther was sent to several other sites, working on a farm, collecting dead bodies, and digging trenches in the woods. One day she literally touched the horror facing the Jews of Europe. Looking for a replacement for her broken

pick, she lifted one out of the snow—with fresh blood on it. Reaching under the snow, she found blood-soaked clothes. She later learned that Jewish women had been taken there from a hospital and buried alive.

After surviving a six-week death march in the winter snow, Esther, suffering from typhus, was liberated by the Soviet army. But liberation did not mean freedom since the Russians compelled all the women they liberated to work for them. When Esther was finally able to return home, she discovered that everyone in her family had been killed. Desperate for companionship, she joined Kibbutz Ichud where she met her future husband, Leon Lewinstein. In time, the entire kibbutz was smuggled into West Germany; Leon became an administrator of the Displaced Persons Camp Gold Cup, near Kassel, and in March 1947 the couple wed. In 1948, they immigrated to Canada and moved to the United States in 1951.

Esther found her greatest joy in her three children and five grandchildren. She passed away in 2008.

Curt Lowens, ז"ל

“Now my head began to spin. I could not allow myself to be checked a second time. The ID card could be suspected as a fake, my bag contained papers revealing my activity, they could even discover that this young school teacher was a Jew traveling for the Resistance.”

As a respected character actor, Curt Lowens has mastered the art of taking on another identity. Yet this profession was actually thrust upon him out of necessity. For Curt, a German Jew, taking on an assumed identity, that of a Dutch gentile schoolteacher, became a matter of survival.

Born November 17, 1925, in Allenstein, East Prussia (now Olstyn, Poland), Curt Loewenstein spent his childhood in a home filled with music and laughter, feeling loved and protected even after Hitler’s ascent to power in 1933 brought an unprecedented rise in antisemitism. Yet in time his parents could no longer shield their children from the growing hatred. Curt and his older brother were singled out for abuse at school and their father, whose services as an attorney were once in great demand, now became the “Jew lawyer” with no clients.

In 1936 the family moved to Berlin, hoping to find safety in the large Jewish community there. But conditions worsened daily, and with Curt’s brother Heinz safely in England, the Loewensteins began making plans to immigrate to the United States. At last, after months of waiting and red tape, the family received their visa, leaving Berlin for Rotterdam, where they were to board the *SS Veendam*, bound for America and a new life.

But the day before the family was to leave, May 10, 1940, Germany invaded Holland. Curt’s father secured a

position with the Jewish Council in Amsterdam which meant a temporary reprieve from deportation. But in June 1943 the family was caught in an unexpected roundup and sent to Westerbork, a transit camp, before deportation to Auschwitz. Luck intervened and the family was miraculously released. They wasted no time in going underground.



Photo taken in 1944 of Curt Lowens by the Maas River with the satchel in which he carried documents for the Resistance.

Curt was the first to be taken into hiding by the student resistance. He received a false identity card and the new name “Ben Joosten.” In January 1944, with his mother dead and his father safely hidden in the countryside, “Ben” became an active member of the resistance, helping to hide Jewish children, and even

saving two downed American pilots from capture. In the vortex of danger, the 17-year-old showed courage and ingenuity far beyond his years. The British who liberated “Ben” found his knowledge of English, Dutch and German an invaluable asset and offered him the opportunity to join the British Eighth Corps as an interpreter. In a twist of fate beyond fiction, “Benny” served as the interpreter for two British officers of the Military Government Detachment who placed the leaders of the Nazi government under house arrest. Not yet 20 years old, Benny stood face to face with Grand Admiral Doenitz, Hitler’s successor. No longer did he have to hide his true identity.

In 1947, Curt, his father and stepmother immigrated to the United States. Curt found a job and explored his love of acting with night classes at New York’s famed Berghoff Studio. It was there he met Katherine Guilford, his scene partner, and later his wife. Now, in America, he was free to choose the roles he would play, from Broadway to film and television.

Elisabeth Mann (née Mohr)

“There were nine girls in the camp with whom I made a pact. Every morning we had to stand at roll call five in a row so we agreed always to stand together. The two strongest stood on the ends and the three weakest in the middle. We literally supported each other. We wouldn’t let one another give up. We became very good friends—we became sisters.”

Elisabeth Mann was born in Kecskemet, Hungary in December 1925. Her father fought in World War I, receiving several medals for heroism, and the family was proud to be Hungarian. Elisabeth grew up in a house filled with music. Her father played the violin, her mother sang, and each of the four children played an instrument.

On March 19, 1944, the German army occupied Hungary. Jews were now compelled to wear the Yellow Star and allowed merely a few hours each day to buy food. Often Elisabeth waited in line only to be told by the grocer that there was no more milk or bread—but the gentile behind her received those very items.

Then in late April the family was ordered into the ghetto. Fifty people shared two rooms. A month later, with ten minutes notice, the family, along with hundreds of others, was deported. They could take only what they could carry. As Elisabeth walked to the train station she saw classmates who only a few months before had been guests at the family’s musical evenings. Now they simply turned their heads away.

Loaded into cattle cars, Elisabeth, her parents, and younger brother Laci began a torturous journey with no benches, no blankets, and soon, no food or water. The noise, the stench and the heat were overwhelming. After five days, the train reached its destination—Auschwitz-Birkenau. Upon arrival the family tried to stay together, but men were ordered into one line and women and children into another. Laci, who had recently turned 13 and by Jewish law was now a man, asked Elisabeth which line he should join. Since he was very ill, Elisabeth told him to go with their mother—not knowing that decision would send him to his death in the gas chambers, where their parents were also murdered.

Over the next months as death surrounded her, Elisabeth often closed her eyes and in her imagination returned home. Her faith and memories of her family’s love gave her strength, as did the love of her nine “camp sisters.” She was also sustained by a chance meeting with her older sister Klari who had been seized by the SS at the beginning of the occupation.

In October 1944, Elisabeth was sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she slept in a tent in the mud and bitter cold before being marched further west, eventually reaching Padborg, Denmark where she was liberated on May 2, 1945.

After the war, Elisabeth spent several years in Sweden where she met her husband, also a survivor. The couple immigrated to Canada and from there in 1955 to the United States. They became the proud parents of two daughters and a son. Eventually Elisabeth learned that her sister had been shot at Bergen-

Belsen shortly before liberation and that her older brother Imre had survived slave labor on the Russian front only to be killed by an antisemitic Hungarian Communist in 1951. Stripped of her own family, Elisabeth would never lose touch with her camp sisters—girls who became family to one another.

Mary Natan (née Rybowski)

“Even in the cattle car, my father kept his humanity, sharing his bread with a little boy crying from hunger. That was the kind of man he was.”

Mary Natan was born Manusia Rybowski in April 1929 in Lodz, Poland. She was the youngest of five children with three brothers, Sevek, David and Zenek, and one sister, Irene. Her father was a popular dance teacher and nightclub owner. Her parents led a vibrant social life with both Jewish and gentile friends.

When war began, the family was at their rented summer home in the countryside. Their return to Lodz was difficult and dangerous. The Germans allowed Mary’s father to reopen his nightclub and the family to live in their looted apartment, but the SS soon stripped the family of business and home. At first, some of their gentile friends remained loyal, but eventually all of them deserted the family.

In early 1940, the family was forced into the overcrowded ghetto. Mary, only 11, secretly sneaked through the ghetto’s barbed wire fence to buy food. Her brothers, Sevek and David, volunteered for slave labor outside the ghetto in 1941. For a time, their wages enabled the family to buy food on the black market. Mary worked in a ghetto factory to qualify for the daily ration of thin soup.

In September 1942, the Germans ordered the deportation of children, the elderly, and the infirm. Fearing an *Aktion* (round up), Mary’s father had prepared a hiding place under the floor for her and her brother Zenek, but at the last moment, Mary couldn’t bring herself to enter the

claustrophobic space. Although she and Zenek escaped, their mother did not. She intervened to help a woman whose baby was being pulled from her arms, was seized and deported to her death, probably at Chelmno.

When the Lodz ghetto was liquidated in May 1944, Mary, her father, brother, and cousin Zosia were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Mary survived the initial selection only because the high heels she was wearing made her appear older and taller. Over the next months, she narrowly escaped selection several times, thanks in part to her own daring and in part to the compassion of older prisoners who saw in her their own daughters. Although she was always hungry, whenever Mary received an extra bit of food, she acted as her parents would have, sharing it with Zosia and with a mother and her two daughters who became her friends and bunkmates.

In late 1944, Mary and Zosia were sent to Bergen-Belsen and subsequently to a Sachsenhausen forced labor camp. This journey almost resulted in death when the girls suffered such severe frostbite that it appeared their feet would have to be amputated. A miraculous but painful folk remedy saved their lives. They worked as forced laborers in a factory making parts for airplanes and tanks until they were liberated in April 1945.

Freedom brought both grief and joy as Mary learned that her parents had perished, but her siblings had survived. They reunited and spent the next months in the Zeilsheim displaced persons camp near Frankfurt-am-Main. On January 16, 1947, Mary and Zenek were among the orphans, sponsored by former First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, to arrive in the United States on the ship the *SS Ernie Pyle*.

Felice Newman (née Winer)

“When I returned to my home in Lodz, the door was opened by a gentile acquaintance of my family. I looked through the open doorway and saw the furniture, even the bedspreads, just as we had left them. I felt as if I were looking into a photograph of the past.”

Felice Newman was born in Lodz, Poland on January 16, 1921 to Wolf and Gita Winer. Her father was a journalist who wrote for English language Zionist newspapers and was a leader in the Zionist labor organization, *Hitachdut*. He was an avid reader and self-taught scholar. Felice grew up speaking Polish and Hebrew. Although it was a financial hardship, her parents sent Felice and her brother Benjamin, seven years younger, to private Hebrew schools. These were happy days, especially in February 1938 when there was a reunion of some 300 family members.

Felice dreamt of studying in Jerusalem and becoming a teacher, a dream shattered by the German invasion. On September 13, the Gestapo arrested Wolf—the first Jew to be arrested in Lodz—on false charges of spying for the British. He was sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin where he died in April 1940. The same week her father was arrested Felice received permission to travel to Palestine, but she knew she must stay and look after her brother and mother.

In late February 1940, the family was ordered into the ghetto. Felice was given an office job by the Jewish Council—a sign of respect for her father. Her mother was permitted to work at home, sewing earmuffs for German soldiers while Benjamin, only 12, worked in a soup kitchen. Assigned to tabulate statistics for births, deaths, and marriages, Felice learned firsthand how many were dying in the overcrowded and disease-ridden ghetto.

On August 28, 1944, Felice and her family were deported to Auschwitz. The cattle car was so crowded, with some 150 people, that everyone had to stand, pressed against each other, for the journey that lasted three horrific days.

Upon arrival, the SS separated the men, women, children, and elderly. Benjamin, still a child, was sent to the left to his death while Felice and her mother were ordered to the right. Seven weeks later Felice’s mother was taken from the barrack. Felice was told that she was being sent to another work site, but in reality, at 44, she was judged too old and useless to live.

A week later, Felice was sent to the labor camp Halbstadt where she built bombs, which she and the other women secretly sabotaged. Felice shared her bunk with a cousin and her barrack with many girls from Lodz. They became family, at night telling stories from the books they had read when life was still normal. Felice held her listeners spellbound when she recounted *Gone with the Wind*.

Felice and her cousin were liberated on May 9, 1945. She remained at the camp a few weeks to regain a little strength, but fearing that she would be raped by drunken Russian soldiers, she left as soon as she could. When she returned to her home in Lodz, she found a Polish acquaintance living there. Looking

through the doorway, Felice felt as if she were looking into a photograph from the past—the furniture, even the bedspreads, were just as they were when her family lived there. Felice told the man she only wanted her family’s photos and documents, but he pushed her out, saying that he would never keep the papers of a Jew in his house and had burned them all.

Shortly afterwards, Felice left Poland and joined a group of young people hoping to immigrate to Palestine, but her journey ended in the displaced persons camp in Landsberg, Germany. There she met Morris Newman, a Dachau survivor. They married in 1945 and had a daughter, Gail (Gita), whom Felice named in honor of her mother. In May 1949, the family came to the United States, settling in Los Angeles near Morris’ brother and sister.

Felice joined The “1939” Club in 1956. With her fellow survivors, she relives not the horrors of the past but the beautiful days before the war when a young girl could look forward to family reunions and a future full of promise.

Doris Ostrow (née Grinbaum)

“I couldn’t go on. I told the guards to shoot me. Mala refused to let me die. She gave me her shoes and took mine, lifted me out of the snow, and made me walk.”

Doris Grinbaum was born on March 26, 1928 in Sosnowiec, Poland. She was the youngest of five siblings with two brothers, Romek and Szymek, and two sisters, Jadzia and Hela. Her father, Tojwie, owned a factory that made oatmeal and processed coffee.

In September 1939, life changed with a knock on their door. Two German soldiers entered and ordered the men to assemble outside. Doris, Hela, and their mother, Ruchla, watched in horror as all the men in their building, including Romek, Szymek, and Tojwie, were executed.

The shock of losing her husband and sons drove Ruchla into a deep depression. At the age of 11, Doris became the provider for the family while her sister Hela cared for their mother. The Germans took everything of value from their home but allowed them to remain until the fall of 1940 when they were moved to a building near the factory where they worked. In early 1943, Doris and her sister Hela were deported to Gleiwitz, a sub-camp of Auschwitz. The two would never see their mother and married sister Jadzia again.

In January 1945, Doris, Hela and many other prisoners were loaded onto cattle cars and shipped west. The sisters decided to jump from the train even though they risked being shot. Doris leaped, plunging into a river. Hela, who jumped later, was convinced that her sister had drowned.

Doris survived the plunge, but was captured by the Germans who took her first to Buchenwald before ordering her to Bergen-Belsen where she was to be hanged as an example. When a blizzard made it impossible for their train to move forward, the guards ordered the prisoners to march on foot. Doris, whose shoes were weighted down with snow, could not walk and told the guards to shoot her, but an older woman prisoner, Mala, a friend of her sister Jadzia, refused to let her die. She exchanged shoes with her, pulled her up, and made her walk.

At Bergen-Belsen, Doris escaped execution but was assigned the gruesome task of removing dead bodies from the barracks and stacking them on top of one another. Both she and Mala contracted typhus, but they survived to be liberated by the British on April 15, 1945.

Doris thought that none of her family had survived. She had no reason to return home and so remained at Bergen-Belsen, which became a displaced persons camp, where she worked in the hospital. She married survivor Izek Schnaper a few months later. One day she received the miraculous news that her sister Hela was alive and living in Bologna, Italy. Doris and Izek traveled there at once. After Doris gave birth to her daughter Rose in 1946, the two couples moved to Germany, first to Magdeburg and then to Berlin. Doris and Rose moved in with Hela and her husband. Izek never recovered from the camps and passed away in 1948.

In 1949, Doris married survivor Henry Ostrow. They moved to the United States in 1952, and Doris gave birth to a second daughter, Sharon. The couple settled in Los Angeles where they opened a restaurant. Doris learned English from her customers who were charmed by her pronouncing boysenberry pie as *poisonberry* pie.

Doris remained in touch with Mala, who moved to Florida, until her death in 2008 at almost 90.

Mila Page (née Lewinson)

“The camp was not ready for us yet, we slept on straw on the floor, the food was scarce, but nothing mattered anymore, as long as Mr. Schindler was with us. We started to believe that we would survive.”

Born on July 15, 1920, Ludmila Page was the only child of two physicians. She enjoyed a privileged childhood in Lodz, Poland, attending a private girls’ school where her friends included Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.

When she was only 14, Mila lost her father. Her mother now became her “Rock of Gibraltar,” giving Mila love, strength, and confidence in the future. In 1937, following her parents’ wishes, Mila enrolled as a medical student at the University of Vienna, but the German *Anschluss* (Annexation) in March 1938 ended her studies and compelled her return to Poland. Mila and her mother decided she should continue her education in Switzerland, but before she could leave, war began. Mila took comfort in the fact that she and her mother were together.



Ludmila Page with Oskar Schindler at a reunion in Munich, 1946.
Photo credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Avi Granot.

In November 1939, Mila’s mother was arrested in a roundup of influential citizens. Given no time to pack, mother and daughter were deported to Krakow. A young man, Poldek Pfefferberg (later Page), and his mother generously

offered them a room in their apartment, where a chance meeting with a German visitor, seeking to hire Poldek’s mother to decorate his apartment, would one day save their lives. The man was Oskar Schindler.

Mila and Poldek married in June 1940; in March 1941, they were ordered into the Krakow ghetto. Mila’s mother was deported to Warsaw and later to the death camp Belzec. In a last note she wrote that the “big storm” was approaching and enclosed her only possessions, her wedding ring and a piece of fabric.

In March 1943, Krakow’s remaining Jews were sent to the Plaszow labor camp. Although Mila and Poldek initially worked elsewhere, Schindler subsequently added them to his “List.”

Hoping to protect his workers, in November 1944, Schindler persuaded the Nazis to allow him to move his factory and workers to Brännlitz in the Sudetenland (now Brnenec, Czech Republic). But there was a misunderstanding and the women were detained at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Three weeks passed

before they were loaded onto a train and then marched to an unknown destination. They learned it was Brännlitz only when they saw Schindler. For Mila, arrival meant reunion with Poldek, her second “Rock of Gibraltar.” He even had gifts for her, an old mirror, a toothbrush made of horsehair, and a needle—priceless presents of love.

After liberation by the Soviets on May 8, 1945, Mila and Poldek initially intended to go to Palestine, but in 1947 the couple immigrated to the U.S., living first in New York before moving to Los Angeles. Poldek, who had hoped to return to his profession as a teacher, opened a small handbag repair shop to support his family and later owned a luggage and handbag store. Mila worked there and cared for the couple’s two children, Fred and Marie.

In 1952, the couple joined with 12 friends to found The “1939” Club, an organization of Holocaust survivors. Mila and Poldek never forgot Oskar Schindler. When the story Poldek told to author Thomas Keneally became a best-selling book, *Schindler’s List*, and later an award-winning film, the couple fulfilled their vow to honor their rescuer and to be witnesses to the truth.

Jack Pariser

“After considerable discussion that night, I was selected to be the last with no one to push me out. I had the greatest probability to succeed. I was the smallest and most agile and therefore most likely to stand the cot against the wall like a lean-to ladder, run up the incline, extend my arm through the hole and have my dad pull me through.”

Thanks to his parents’ ingenuity, the help of righteous gentiles, and sheer luck, Jack Pariser survived the Holocaust without ever seeing the inside of a concentration camp.

Born on December 14, 1929, Jack and his older sister, Rose, lived in Jodlowa, Poland, a small town south of Krakow. His father Abraham sold wholesale lumber and his mother Sarah sold fabric.

Following Germany’s invasion of Poland in September 1939, life for Jodlowa’s Jews changed. At first, the SS were content with terrorizing the town’s Jews. On one occasion, Jack’s grandfather was beaten unconscious when he refused to walk on the sacred Torah. He died shortly after.

In early August 1942, Jack’s mother was tipped off by a Polish policeman that the Germans were planning to murder the town’s Jews the next morning. His parents spread the word and then fled. Their quick action saved them. The gunshots the family heard the next day attested that the slaughter was now a reality.

After months in the forest, as winter approached, Abraham appealed to one of his Christian workers, Andrej Porembski, for shelter. Knowing he risked death for hiding them, Porembski agreed. The Parisers spent months in a barn and in a bunker under the woodshed floor. The space

was so small that they could only lie on their sides and when one person wanted to turn, everyone had to do so. To pass the long hours, Jack learned crafts, including re-knitting his sweater into intricate patterns.

In December 1942, Abraham moved the family to another hiding place where their host subsequently betrayed them. The Polish police arrested the family and threw them into a jail cell. Their jailers laughingly debated whether a table knife or a pen knife—given them to cut bread—would be of less use in helping them escape. They settled on the pen knife. But they underestimated Abe’s ingenuity and Sarah’s tenacity. Working during the night, Abe made a hole under the barred window high on the wall. But one of the four would have to go last—reaching the hole without aid. Agonizing over their decision, they agreed Jack had the best chance and that if he failed, three lives saved were better than none. Fortunately, Jack succeeded; all the family escaped. When they reached the forest and stopped to cut off a bit of bread, the knife broke, but it had saved their lives.

The Parisers again stayed with the Porembskis from January 1943 to December 1944 when they went to another family, the Swieczeks, righteous gentiles who had aided them throughout the war and who now hid them in the barn, under the very noses of the Germans. The family’s years in hiding ended on January 16, 1945.

The Parisers immigrated to the United States in 1949. Jack married, and he and his wife Leah moved to California. Jack retired as chief scientist at Hughes Aircraft in 1987—an extraordinary life of achievement made possible by his parents’ tenacious ingenuity, a small pen knife, and the courageous action of righteous gentiles.

Renee Petlak, ז"ל (née Rubinstein)

“My mother believed that when you change where you live, you change your luck. The doctor said there was little hope I would recover, but my mother insisted I would. Miraculously, I did.”

Renee Petlak was born Rifka Rubinstein in Wyszkwow, Poland in 1934. The youngest child of Leib and Tauba Rubinstein, she had two brothers, Aaron and Abraham, and a sister, Anna.

A few days after Germany attacked Poland in 1939, German planes bombed Wyszkwow. Rena was too young to understand why her parents made the sudden decision to leave their home.

The entire family, including 4-year-old Renee, walked all night to reach the city of Stok, only to discover it was occupied by the Germans. They escaped by sheer luck.

The Rubinsteins eventually made their way to Bialystok in Soviet-occupied territory. There Leib faced a risky choice—to accept Soviet citizenship and stay in Bialystok, knowing that the authorities might never permit them to leave, or be deported to a Siberian labor camp. His refusal to accept citizenship proved to be the right decision.

The family endured a 10-day journey by cattle car to Siberia. The brutally cold winters and the harsh conditions in the camp taxed their limits, but they found strength in one another. In 1943, the Soviets allowed them to leave. When their train reached Jizzakh in eastern Uzbekistan, a center of trade in central Asia, Leib decided this was where the family would begin a new life.

Renee, however, became desperately ill with typhus and dysentery. The doctor held out little hope for her recovery, but Renee’s mother was convinced that a move would change their luck. This time her mother proved to be the prophetic one. Once they reached Samarkand, Renee’s health began to improve.

To support their family, Leib and Tauba made and sold clothing. Often the family had barely enough food to survive. Renee went to school, but the name calling and threats against her as a Jew made her dread going.

After the war, the Rubinsteins returned to Poland, but they never dared go back to Wyszkwow to reclaim what was theirs. Renee spent eight months at a school run by a Jewish organization before she was smuggled out of Poland and into Germany. Her parents joined her a short time later, and the family moved to a displaced persons camp in Bamberg where Renee’s sister Anna and her husband were living.

The family spent three years in the DP camp. Compared to Poland the camp seemed like heaven to Renee. In 1949, Renee, her parents and brothers immigrated to the new nation of Israel. However, her parents, Orthodox Jews, opposed their daughter serving in the military, and in 1952, Renee left Israel and went to Frankfurt, Germany where one of her brothers was living.

In 1955, Renee’s sister Anna, her husband, and two children immigrated to the United States. When Renee visited in 1960, Anna persuaded her to join them in Los Angeles. There she attended Fairfax High School and focused on learning English as quickly as possible.

In 1961, at a singles dance, Renee met her future husband, fellow Holocaust survivor Charles Petlak with whom she shares a passion for dancing. Renee and Charles married in 1962.

Renee’s life has been shaped by many journeys, from Poland to Siberia to Uzbekistan to Germany to Israel and finally to the United States, but no matter where she has lived her love of family has remained a constant, a deeply held value she has passed on to her three sons and six grandchildren.

Sidney Pressberg, ז"ל

“I asked Kowal to show me the location of the murders. He took me to the exact spot of the mass grave. I asked him why the grave was not marked, and he told me that the Polish government required that a next-of-kin make the request and that none had come forward.”

Sidney Pressberg was 16 when Germany invaded Poland in 1939. The second of eight children with two brothers and five sisters, Sidney grew up on the family farm in Kulno. In a village of only 500 people, everyone knew who belonged to the 15 Jewish families.

Over the next months Kulno passed from the Germans to the Soviets and back to the Germans. One evening as Sidney was walking home, he saw German soldiers take two Jews from their home and execute them. Sidney urged his family to join him in fleeing to Russian territory, but they made the decision to remain.

Wrenching though it was to do so, Sidney left his family but before reaching Russian territory, he was captured by the Germans. Only another bold move enabled him to escape and make his way to Lvov where he worked for the Russians as a laborer.

Sent to the Ukraine, he spent six months in freezing weather and horrible living conditions. Once again he made the decision to flee, sneaking onto a train and hiding for two days in a pile of coal. He journeyed to Lvov where he lived with his cousins until he returned from work one day to find them taken. Sidney went to the authorities hoping that they would send him to the same place as his cousins; instead, they put him in jail and then transported him to a camp

near the Finnish border where he worked chopping trees. In the bitter cold, more than half the men died.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, Sidney was given a choice—to fight on the front lines or to work in a Siberian labor camp. He chose Siberia, a decision that nearly cost him his life when his train was bombed in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) by German planes, destroying every car but his.

Although the war in Europe ended on May 8, 1945, the authorities refused to allow Sidney to leave Siberia until April 1946. He returned to Poland to search for his family. As he neared his home, he was recognized as a Jew and threatened with death if he continued. Fearing for his life, he went no further, convinced that no one in his family had survived.

Still on his own, he joined a *kibbutz* where he worked for food and a place to live. In late 1946, he went to Italy, but rather than going on to Palestine as he had planned he decided instead to go to the United States where an aunt was willing to sponsor him. He arrived in 1948, sending soon thereafter for his wife whom he had met and married in an Italian displaced persons camp.

The couple settled in New York where Sidney worked in a butcher shop. In 1955 they moved to Los Angeles where he opened a small meat market. With his savings, he purchased land and in 1961 began his own real estate development firm. In 1984, he opened the Orlando Hotel near Beverly Hills.

That same year Sidney decided to return to Poland to seek definitive answers to what had happened to his family. From a neighbor, a boy of 7 at the time, he learned that on July 14, 1942, SS officers had ordered the mayor of Kulno to identify all the Jews. More than 90 people, from babies to the elderly, including three Christian Poles, were taken to a nearby forest, ordered to form a circle and then shot and buried in a mass grave—still unmarked.

Determined to honor their memory, Sidney hired an architect and paid for the building of a memorial. On July 11, 1986 the site was dedicated—a gift of love from a son to his family.

Sally Roisman (née Zielinski)

“One night I walked out to the infirmary yard. In a daze, I fell near a pile of corpses ready to be cremated. When I regained consciousness and realized I was lying on dead people, I lifted myself up with all my strength and crawled away. Had I stayed, I would have been cremated with the rest of them.”

Sally Roisman was born in Sosnowiec, Poland on October 2, 1930. With 10 brothers and sisters, Sally always had playmates. Her mother made time for each child and when Sally left for her first day of school, her mother wrote in her schoolbook: “Like a fish cannot live without water, so I cannot live without you.” But even these happy days were marred by antisemitism, with gentle children sometimes throwing stones at Sally as she walked to school.

The outbreak of war on September 1, 1939 changed everything. Since German soldiers particularly targeted Orthodox Jewish males, publicly shearing off their beards, Sally’s father cut his beard, a wrenching act for a man so devoutly religious. Her parents considered fleeing but had nowhere to go. They survived by bartering jewelry for food. Sally, too young to be required to wear the identifying badge of a Jew, was often sent to make the exchange.

In 1942, Sally’s father was seized in a roundup and sent to Auschwitz. The family was moved to the Srodula ghetto outside of Sosnowiec. In 1943, Sally’s older sisters, Edzia and Mania, were deported, as was Sally herself two months later. Sent to Graeben, a sub-camp of Gross Rosen, Sally, only 13, survived because her two older sisters were there to support her. In January 1945, with the Russians approaching, the Germans sent their prisoners on a death march west into Germany. Of the 250 women who started, only 150 arrived at Bergen-Belsen.

At the disease-ridden and overcrowded camp, Sally became critically ill with typhus. Too weak to carry her to the infirmary, her sisters gave their daily ration of bread to two men to take her on a stretcher. One night, with a high fever, Sally wandered into the infirmary yard where she fainted and fell into a pile of bodies to be cremated. Had she not regained consciousness and crawled back into the infirmary, she would have been burned alive.

Sally became too ill to eat. Desperate, her sisters asked her what might tempt her. Her answer was potato *latkes*, potato pancakes—a seemingly impossible request. Risking their lives, the sisters found a piece of metal, made a pan, and fried a small bit of potato. The precious gift brought Sally back to life, reminding her of home and renewing her desire to live.

On April 15, 1945, the British liberated Bergen-Belsen. The sisters learned their brother Simon was at a nearby camp and brothers Itzhak and Nathan were at Buchenwald. Their parents, three brothers, and two sisters had been murdered in Auschwitz.

The six siblings moved first to a displaced persons camp and then to Munich. In 1951 they immigrated to Australia. On a vacation to New York Sally met

her future husband Steve Roisman. Eventually, the couple settled in Los Angeles, near Sally’s sister Edzia and brother Nathan.

After retirement, Sally began to paint, becoming an award-winning artist whose works are striking portrayals of Jewish life before the Holocaust, a legacy of beauty made possible by her sisters’ *latkes* of love.

Masza Rosenroth (née Czechanovski)

“When I was seven, my father told me that I must not stay in Poland but instead go to the opportunity—go to America.”

Masza Rosenroth was born in October 1924 to Mordechai and Malka Czechanovski in Konstancin, Poland. Her parents provided a loving Jewish home for Masza, her older brother Leon, and her two younger sisters, Gutia and Surra.

Fearing what might happen to 17-year-old Leon, Masza’s parents smuggled him out of Poland and into Russia soon after the German invasion in September 1939. Masza would not see him again until the end of the war in 1945.

Her parents’ worst fears were realized only a few weeks after the war began when they were expelled from their home and marched to a holding area where they spent three weeks housed in overcrowded conditions with little food and no sanitation. Many died of typhus.

In January 1940, the family was sent to the Baluty section of Lodz, an area that at the end of April became a closed ghetto. Masza was fortunate to be assigned to a factory manufacturing German army uniforms. The terrible conditions of the ghetto proved too much for her parents. Mordechai died of starvation in 1941, and Malka followed less than a year later.

In September 1942, Masza’s younger sister, Surra, only 12, was seized in a round up of those the Nazis considered “useless”—the old, the sick, and the children. Masza was terrified that she might next lose Gutia.

In August 1944, the sisters were deported to Auschwitz. The trip, in an overcrowded cattle car, lasted an eternity, more than eight hours, with no food or water, and little air. When the train finally arrived at Auschwitz, half of those in their car were dead.

The sisters survived the initial selection, were stripped and shaved, and sent to a barrack where they slept five to a bunk. Three days later they were transferred to Bad Kudowa (now Kudowa Zdroj, Poland) where the Germans were building V-2 rockets. Masza worked a 15-hour shift operating a complex machine with rows of buttons. She was threatened with death if, by mistake, she pushed the wrong one. Although she was afraid for herself and her sister, Masza vowed that her oppressors would never break her spirit. Her tenacity and courage gave strength and hope to Gutia. Finally, on May 8, 1945, Russian tanks appeared at the camp’s gates and the prisoners were liberated.

Although free, Masza and Gutia had nowhere to go. They were sent first to a displaced persons camp located in the former concentration camp of Dachau. Through the Red Cross, they learned their brother had survived the war in Russia. They contacted him and were reunited at a DP camp near Regensburg in the American zone. From there the three siblings traveled to Munich where Masza worked for the American Joint Distribution Committee. When they learned a cousin had survived and was living in Frankfurt, they moved again. It was there that Masza met and married fellow survivor Jakob Rosenroth in December 1947.

Masza put all her energy into leaving Europe and coming to the United States. In 1949, after two years of trying, the couple found an organization to sponsor them. They settled in Buffalo, New York where Masza worked in a dress shop while Jakob established himself in business. Life was not easy, especially at first, since the couple spoke no English and had no money, but they persevered. In 1962, with their daughters Sharon and Michele, they moved to southern California—fulfilling the dream of Masza’s father that she should leave Poland and “go to the opportunity, go to America.”

Sonja Rosenwald (née Syskind)

“Somehow we survived for almost four long years. One morning we woke up to find our guards gone and the gates of the munitions factory wide open. Just the day before, the SS had wagons ready to take us to the gas chambers. But this day would be different. We saw Russian tanks roaring past the factory, and we scattered like the wind. Running, running, running is what I remember.”

Sonja Rosenwald was born Sura Syskind on October 11, 1927 in Piotrkow Trybunalski, located 16 miles south of Lodz. Her parents, Shlomo and Rachella, owned a yardage store and kept an apartment above their business, but Sonja lived with her maternal grandparents. Sonja’s grandfather owned several businesses, including the town’s first gas station. His two-story home boasted one of the few telephones in Piotrkow Trybunalski. Sonja enjoyed a privileged childhood, including her own charge account at a local candy shop.



Photo taken in 1934 of Sonja and her uncle Joseph Szczecinski.

On September 5, 1939, the German army swept into Piotrkow Trybunalski. A ghetto was established and 25,000 Jews were crammed into a space where only 5,000 had lived before. In 1941, Sonia’s father and grandfather were seized and deported to their deaths.

Since Sonja was fair-haired and could pass as a gentile Pole, her mother arranged for her to hide with a Christian couple outside the ghetto, but after a few months the couple grew fearful and Sonja was sneaked back into the ghetto, joining her mother and younger sister. With no identity papers, Sonja was caught in a round up and sent to the HASAG Skarzysko-Kamienna ammunition plant. She

worked there, inspecting rifle bullets, until the plant’s closure in July 1944 when she was transferred to another HASAG factory, this time in Czestochowa.

As the war wound down, the SS made plans to transport their workers to Auschwitz. Instead, on January 16, 1945, the Germans disappeared without warning, and Soviet tanks were spotted moving past the factory. Sonja ran home to Piotrkow Trybunalski, but nothing was left of her life there. A gentile caretaker had taken up residence in her grandfather’s house, and she and her friends stayed with him briefly, until bullets fired into the house at night drove them to seek shelter in the Jewish Community Center. There a kindly woman, Bluma Rosenwald, befriended Sonja and introduced her to her son, Srulek. Learning that a list of survivors was being prepared in Prague, Sonja decided she must go there. Srulek gallantly accompanied her, and the journey yielded the news for which Sonia had so desperately hoped—her mother and sister had been liberated at Bergen-Belsen. Srulek and Sonja rushed there immediately, finding them seriously ill but recovering.

Miraculously, guided by a vivid dream of her mother, Sonja was able to discover valuables hidden by her grandfather in the family home. It was as if her grandfather was still protecting her. This cache helped Sonja and Srulek to survive six years in a displaced persons camp in Germany. In 1946, Srulek and Sonja wed and two years later their daughter Genia was born.

In 1951, the Rosenwalds received their American visas and sailed for New York. At the urging of a friend who had bought a farm in California, the Rosenwalds journeyed west, with little money and no knowledge of farming. Through hard work, they prospered, giving their children, daughter Genia and son Sam, born in Van Nuys in 1953, a wealth of opportunities beyond even the dreams of Sonja’s beloved grandfather.

Joseph Leon Rotter, z”l

“I have always looked at life as a one-way street. Do not look back and do not complain.”

Joseph Rotter was born on January 24, 1925 in Dej, Romania to Isador and Giselle Rotter. He had two older brothers, Eugen and Alexander, and two younger, Emeric and Ernest. In the evening, the brothers would gather around the oil lamp while their father, a shoemaker, worked, and their mother read aloud.

Joseph attended elementary school for seven years and trade school for two. When he was 15, in late August 1940, the northern part of Transylvania, including Dej, was transferred to Hungary. The next year, Joseph moved to Budapest, as his two elder brothers had done, to live with his maternal grandmother and find work.

In March 1944, Germany occupied Hungary and a few weeks later Jews were mandated to wear the Yellow Star. Joseph sometimes removed his when he needed to buy food or wanted to watch the latest German propaganda film. He knew he would be shot if discovered.

In May, Joseph was ordered to report for forced labor. He worked in sweltering heat rebuilding bombed out railroad yards. As the Soviet army advanced and the German and Hungarian armies retreated, the prisoners worked day and night, sometimes with bombs falling around them. Joseph made up his mind to escape. One night he and a friend slipped away in the darkness and hid in a stable. In the morning, they discovered that the Russians had occupied the area and they were free.

Joseph’s first priority was to locate his family. By train, wagon, and on foot

he made his way back to Dej. He rejoiced when he found his brother Eugen who had survived years of brutal forced labor.

From Dej the brothers went to Bucharest. There Eugen fell in love with and married a Romanian girl, leaving Joseph to continue the search for their family on his own. In Budapest he was reunited with his brother Emeric. Joseph later learned that his parents and his brother Ernest had died at Auschwitz. His brother Alexander had lived to be liberated but had died of malnutrition and disease shortly after.

Joseph made the decision to leave Europe. He traveled to Bamberg, Germany where he worked at the displaced persons camp as a driver for Mae Friedman, the regional director of the American Joint Distribution Committee. Without an American sponsor, Joseph faced a long wait to immigrate to the United States, but Mae was so impressed by the young man that she persuaded her family in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania to become his sponsor.

In May 1949, Joseph arrived in the U.S. He worked at the factory owned by Mae’s family until he was drafted into the army in 1950. A year later he shipped out to Korea where he was assigned to the post office in Pusan. He was discharged in 1952, returned to Pittsburg, and then moved to Los Angeles.

Joseph met his future wife, Mimi, in August 1954, and they were married in February 1955. They are the parents of two children, Marc and Gail, and are the grandparents of four. Joseph’s brothers Eugen and Emeric and their families also immigrated to the U.S. and became citizens.

Joseph worked as a plumber until he was badly injured in a job accident in 1968. He then became a realtor until his retirement in 1996. In spite of all he endured in his youth, he always regarded himself as lucky, blessed with a wonderful family and the opportunity to live his life freely as a Jew. Mr. Rotter passed away on May 3, 2008.

Ruth Fenton Sax (née Krakowiak)

“I still recall those memories as if they happened yesterday. I still think about the lost years of my youth, the lost dreams, wishes and hopes of a teenage girl, but most of all, I think about the last time with my family, my parents, brothers, aunts, uncles and cousins—the 75 members of my family who perished in the camps and who had hopes and dreams of their own.”

Ruth Fenton Sax was born Ruta Krakowiak in Tomaszow Mazowiecki, Poland. Her father was a manufacturer of men’s clothing, and the family was well-respected, often welcoming the mayor and other dignitaries to their home. With loving parents and two protective older brothers, Ruth led a sheltered and happy childhood.



Photo of Ruth's father, Eliezer Krakowiak. Ruth received the photograph of her father in 1960 from relatives in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

of her brothers had already fled to fight with the Russians. Mother and daughter survived the terrible conditions in Lodz until late August 1944 when they were sent to Auschwitz. Upon arrival, Ruth and her mother, then 49 years old, were separated. Ruth begged a German guard to allow her to join her mother’s line, but he held his machine gun at her head and ordered her to stay. Ruth lived; her mother died in the gas chambers.

Ruth survived eight harrowing weeks in Auschwitz, including a bout with scarlet fever. In the midst of evil and inhumanity she remembers acts of kindness—five women sharing equally a single thin blanket and a Jewish prisoner physician who helped her evade selection to the gas chambers.

In late October 1944, still weak from scarlet fever, Ruth was sent by train with some 500 other women to Lenzing, a sub-camp of Mauthausen in Austria where she was assigned to a ditch-digging commando. Working in freezing weather,

with only watery soup to sustain her, wearing the same sodden clothing day after day, Ruth somehow kept going. Then, on May 2, 1945, the prisoners awoke to find that their SS guards had quietly disappeared. With no food, fearing what might happen next, the women waited, locked behind the gates of the camp until on May 5, a tall, blond soldier appeared. He was an American GI. Overcome by what he saw, he fell to his knees, crossed himself, and wept. Soon American tanks broke down the camp’s gates, and the GIs rushed in to share their rations.

Taken to a former Hitler Youth resort, Ruth was slowly nursed back to health by the Red Cross. She met her future husband, a survivor of Ebensee, married, and after a four-year wait in Germany immigrated to the United States, settling in Los Angeles. Miraculously, Ruth was reunited with her brother Moniek who had fought with the Polish brigade. Of their entire family, only Ruth and her brother had survived. He would remain her best friend until his death in 1999.

Dana Schwartz (née Schapira)

“I walked the streets looking for my father. I would see a man coming toward me and my heart would beat faster. Then sadness would overtake me as a stranger walked by.”

Danusia Schapira was born in Lvov, Poland in 1935. Her parents, Sid and Lusia, worked for Sam Safier, a wealthy entrepreneur who ran the national lottery. Dana was an only child with a large and loving extended family.

On September 1, 1939, Dana was playing in the park while her nanny talked with a friend. When she spied a beautiful daisy, Dana disobeyed the rules and sneaked over the fence to pick it. At that very moment the ground shook from a powerful explosion. Only 4 years old, Dana believed her act of disobedience had started the war.

Her parents decided to leave Lvov. They reached the Romanian border before turning back. Under Soviet occupation, life was difficult but bearable.

In June 1941, Germany launched a surprise attack on the Soviet Union and German troops marched into Lvov. Six months later, all Jews were ordered into the ghetto. Dana wept as she left behind her precious dolls and teddy bear. The ghetto meant hunger and fear, and for a little girl, the baffling disappearance of those she loved, including her uncle and grandmothers. Dana learned to hide and to keep quiet.

Knowing that it was only a matter of time until they would be deported, Dana’s father bribed a gentile farmer to hide Dana and her mother in the countryside. They suffered hunger, loneliness, and constant fear of being discovered as Jews. Dana nursed her

mother when she had painful gallstone attacks and prayed each day for her father. Her prayers were not answered; her father was sent to the Janowska Road concentration camp where the guards used prisoners for target practice.

Dana and her mother were liberated in July 1944. One of the Russian soldiers who gave them a ride to Lvov took pity on them and gave them an amazing gift—a delicious can of meat called Spam that had been sent to the Soviets by the U.S. For Dana, liberation would be linked to the taste and smell of Spam.

Their search for family proved fruitless. They spent a year in Bytom in western Poland where Dana started school. Hoping to immigrate to the United States, Dana’s mother tracked down her former employer, Sam Safier, who was living in California. He agreed to be their sponsor. In Sweden, where they had moved to await their visas, Dana’s mother met and married a visiting American businessman and Holocaust survivor, Ben Grey. Dana and Lusia came to the U.S. as his dependents. Two years after their arrival, when Dana was only 17, her mother died of cancer.

Sam Safier, her parents’ former employer, became Dana’s mentor and surrogate father. He paid her tuition, room and board at UCLA. At a party soon after she graduated, Dana met her future husband, Wilbur Schwartz, a physician, who had served in the Navy during the war. Dana and Wilbur are the parents of three sons, a lawyer, a doctor, and a sports anchor, and the proud grandparents of five.

Dana became a teacher, a psychotherapist and an interviewer for the Shoah Foundation (now the USC Shoah Foundation Institute). By helping survivors tell their stories she gradually came to terms with her own and with the loss of the father she loved so much.

Rachel Schwartz (née Gastfreind)

“Our parents told us to remember that we had two aunts in Detroit. We had their names, no addresses, but the Red Cross found them.”

Rachel Gastfreind was born in Warsaw, Poland on June 20, 1931. She had two older brothers and one older sister. Her father owned a mattress factory, and the family lived comfortably with an apartment over their business and a cottage in the countryside.

When the family returned from vacation at the beginning of September 1939, they found a city gripped by fear. No one was prepared for the bombs that fell day and night and the rapid defeat of the Polish army. When the Germans occupied Warsaw, the family lost both their apartment and their business. In October 1940, they moved to the ghetto. They were always hungry but found comfort in being together.

The family lived in constant fear of deportation. The children were taught to hide wherever they could—in a barrel or behind a door—if they heard boots approaching.

On April 20, 1943, the first night of Passover, the Germans launched a massive raid, and the family was seized. At the train station, the men and women were separated. Rachel never saw her father and two brothers again.

Rachel, her sister Henrietta, and their mother Sara were deported to Majdanek. Rachel, not quite 12, and Henrietta, 14, were ordered to one side, and their mother, only 45, to another. The girls lived; their mother went to the gas chambers.

The girls spent about a year in Majdanek working in the fields and in a munitions factory. They found strength in remembering their parents.

In March 1944, the Germans evacuated the camp. Thanks to Rachel’s quick thinking, the sisters stood with a group of young women who were transported to the munitions factory at Skarzysko-Kamienna. Other groups went to their deaths at Auschwitz.

In late 1944, Rachel and Henrietta were moved to Buchenwald. Their German supervisor at the munitions factory took a liking to them and sneaked them extra food. It was the only kindness Rachel ever experienced from her captors.

On April 7, 1945, the prisoners were sent on a death march. They walked for weeks with almost no food or water. They ate grass and slept in fields. Rachel hallucinated from hunger and was unsure if the Russian soldiers and nurses she saw were real or imaginary, but they were real, and the girls were liberated.

They made the difficult journey, hitching rides in army jeeps, back to Warsaw only to learn that none of their family had survived. A Jewish organization placed the girls in an orphanage with the goal of bringing them to Palestine as soon as possible.

In the days before they were separated, Sara had reminded her daughters that they must always remember the names of their two married aunts in Detroit, Michigan. When the Red Cross visited the orphanage, the girls gave them their aunts’ names. They responded at once that the girls should come to them.

A Jewish organization smuggled the girls out of Poland and into Germany where they stayed at a displaced persons camp until their passage to the U.S. could be arranged. They arrived in New York in August 1946 and were taken by train to Detroit.

Their aunts believed that the girls should try to forget the past. The sisters immersed themselves in American culture and learning English. Rachel, who arrived knowing no English, graduated from high school at the same age as her peers.

Rachel married at 19 and had two sons. She is now the grandmother of two. Her sister Henrietta, still living in Detroit, is the grandmother of five. They remain devoted to each other, talking weekly on the phone and seeing each other frequently. As their aunts had hoped, both sisters have lived their lives with optimism and joy—but they have never forgotten the past.

Idele Stapholtz, ז"ל (née Steuer)

“Within my memory of the madness of war remains a vision of two angels, two Righteous Among the Nations.”

Idele Stapholtz was born Ida Steuer in Chemnitz, Germany on August 13, 1926. Her parents, Polish Jewish émigrés, met and married in Germany. When Idele’s mother, only 18, died of complications from childbirth, Idele was placed in the care of a woman whose own child had died at birth. Her father, a teacher, visited often, sometimes taking her with him to the cemetery where her mother was buried.

When Idele was 4, father and daughter moved to Recklingshausen in Westphalia. Idele lived with the Jacobsons, whom she called “uncle” and “mama.” She grew to love them and their four teenaged children. Idele’s father visited each day until the Nazis forced him to return to Poland.

The Jacobsons promised to look after Idele until her father could return with the documents which would enable the two to come to the United States where her father had relatives. Jews themselves, the Jacobsons believed they were safe since “Uncle” Jacobson had fought heroically in World War I.

When Idele was tormented at school by classmates who called her a “dirty Jew,” the Jacobsons decided to send her to a Jewish children’s home in the Rheinland, but the home was destroyed on *Kristallnacht*, November 9, 1938. A few days later she was taken to Cologne and then sent on a *Kindertransport* to Brussels, Belgium where she arrived on January 5, 1939.

A Catholic family, Madame Marie Goossens and her daughter Germaine, gave Idele a home. When the Germans occupied Belgium in May 1940, the Goossens went to extraordinary lengths to protect Idele. When she needed a tonsillectomy, they arranged for a doctor to perform the surgery in their home on the kitchen table. When Jews were ordered to wear the Yellow Star, a clerk at city hall told Germaine not to register Idele as a Jew. Germaine followed the advice which later saved Idele from deportation. The director of the Catholic High School, a nun in the order Les Dame de Marie, Madame Eulalie, accepted Idele as a student knowing she was a Jew. Idele’s best friend, Annie Lannoo, and her parents knew Idele’s secret and, in spite of the danger, welcomed her to their home during summer vacations.

On September 3, 1944, Brussels was liberated. For Idele, joy was tempered by concern for the Jacobsons and her father from whom she had not heard since 1941. She learned that the Jacobson children were safe but that “Uncle” and “Mama” Jacobson had died in a concentration camp. She was told her father had joined the Polish underground, been caught by the SS, and sent to a death camp in 1942. She could learn nothing more.

Idele remained with the Goossens. In July 1947, she traveled to the U.S. to meet her father’s siblings. When they encouraged her to stay and attend New York University, Idele, who had fallen in love with America, accepted. Two months later, she met her future husband Ben Stapholtz. When the couple married in 1949, Ben insisted they go to Belgium so her “aunts” could bless their marriage. The Goossens gave her only one piece of advice—“learn about your Jewish heritage and have a religious Jewish family.”

Germaine visited Idele many times and Idele’s two daughters considered her their grandmother. In 1993, with her friend Annie by her side, Idele unveiled three plaques at Yad Vashem naming Germaine and Marie Goossens; Monsieur and Madame Lannoo; and Madame Eulanie, as Righteous Among the Nations.

Sam Steinberg, ז"ל

“Hours had passed since our arrival and selection on the platform at Auschwitz on December 10, 1944. With every passing moment another piece of my identity was taken from me. Finally, I extended my arm and with a few strokes the identity of a boy born Syncho Sztajnberg ceased to exist. I was now identified as Häftling number B 1840.”

Sam Steinberg buried his Holocaust memories for 50 years, until grief at his wife’s death brought those memories flooding to the surface and compelled him to grapple with the inhumanity and loss he had experienced as a boy, symbolized by the number tattooed upon his arm.

Only 11 years old when the Germans invaded Poland, Syncho Sztajnberg remembers the humiliation of wearing the Yellow Star and walking in the gutters, but this was only the beginning of what he would experience. In a few short years, young Sam would be alone in the world. While still together as a family in the Tomaszow Mazowiecki ghetto, his mother, Sura, and sister, Faiga, were seized and deported to the Treblinka death camp. Then, with the liquidation of the ghetto in 1943, Sam, his brother, Pasach, and father, Abram, were sent to the Blizyn concentration camp, where his father died of starvation. The two boys were then sent to Auschwitz where Sam’s brother, showing symptoms of typhus, was sent to the gas chambers. In Auschwitz, Sam, now alone at the age of 16, was stripped of his name and given a permanent reminder of his nightmare world, a tattoo identifying him as *Häftling* B 1840.

Initially given a favorable work assignment in the kitchens of Auschwitz, Sam’s good fortune was short-lived and he was transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau as a laborer. Working in the disinfection unit, Sam spent months beneath a pall of thick black smoke, nauseated by the scent of burning flesh. From Birkenau, Sam was sent to Sachsenhausen and then to the Flossenburg concentration camp where he labored in the nearby stone quarry, breaking stones with a heavy sledgehammer. With the Russian army drawing ever closer, the Germans closed the camp on April 20, 1945, forcing Sam and his fellow prisoners on a brutal death march toward Dachau. Starving and overcome by fatigue when the march reached the village of Neunburg, Sam could no longer go on even though he knew he risked being shot. Instead, a guard chose simply to abandon him, perhaps as an act of compassion, perhaps because he didn’t want to waste a bullet. Sam was liberated shortly afterwards by the American army.

Without family or friends, Sam, still a teenager, was sent a few months later to a Jewish orphanage in Los Angeles. He later moved in with the Rubinstein family whose daughter Selma he married in 1946. He and his wife had four children, Rachael, Steven, Sharon, and Perry.

Deeply committed to remembrance and witness, Sam joined The “1939” Club and served two years as the organization’s president. In June 2000, he accompanied his daughter, eldest granddaughter, and a group of her classmates on a tour of the Polish camps. By confronting his past to teach others and by

creating a legacy of compassion and love, Sam has reclaimed the emotions and the name the Nazis tried to take from him—he will never be a number. He is Sam Steinberg.

Isabelle Szneer (née Lubinewski)

“I got my deportation papers. I had to present myself in the next 24 hours to the camp in Malines. I had to bring a suitcase with a change of clothing and toiletries. My father refused to let me go. I argued with my family telling them that I did not want to jeopardize their safety. My father refused to let me go.”

Devoted to her husband Leopold, also a survivor of the Holocaust, Isabelle Szneer treasures the sanctity of marriage. Yet, it was a desperate pretend marriage to a gentile more than 60 years her senior which saved her life.

Isabelle was born in Brussels, Belgium in May 1924. Her parents, Charles and Hinda Lubinewski, had emigrated to Belgium after World War I. Isabelle and her sister Adele, six years younger, like their parents, were officially ‘stateless.’ The Belgian government refused to grant them citizenship. Nonetheless, the family enjoyed a comfortable middle-class life, although the Nazi rise to power in Germany brought a more hostile and overtly antisemitic climate to Belgium.

Following Germany’s invasion of Belgium in May 1940, the Lubinewski family attempted to flee to southern France but were unable to escape. Compelled to register as Jews, the family experienced growing harassment and isolation. On August 3, 1942, Isabelle, then 18 years old, received a summons to report immediately to the transit camp Malines for deportation. If she failed to obey, her father would be taken in her place. Desperate to keep his family together, Isabelle’s father devised an imaginative solution. If his daughter immediately married a Belgian citizen, she would no longer be subject to the order. An



Photo taken in Brussels, Belgium, in 1936, of Isabelle and Adele with their parents, Charles and Hinda Lubinewski.

80-year-old resident of a retirement home agreed to the sham marriage, and the ceremony took place the following day. Sympathetic city employees obtained the life-saving marriage certificate and new identity card within an hour’s time, and Isabelle’s father had them brought by taxi to Gestapo headquarters in Malines. Isabelle was spared.

Sometimes separated, the family would spend the ensuing years in a succession of hiding places. Planning, luck, and support from the Belgian resistance enabled the family to survive until liberation in September 1944.

In 1947, Isabelle wed Leopold Szneer. Theirs is a genuine marriage of love made possible by a father’s ingenuity and a gentile’s compassion.

Leopold Szneer, ז"ל

“I have fulfilled my childhood dream. I have become a cantor. I am a survivor.”

Leopold Szneer was born to Polish émigrés, Moshe and Dora Szneer, in 1921 in Munich, Germany. His father was a successful tailor with his own workshop. Life was good for the Szneers, their son Leopold and daughters Ester and Hanna. At the age of 5, Leopold began his education at a Jewish elementary school. Even as a boy he knew he was meant to spend his life giving voice to his faith. He studied *chazzanut*, cantorial singing, with the best teachers in Munich and even performed as a soloist in his synagogue’s choir.



Photo taken in 1933 of the boys' choir at the Reichenbach Synagogue in Munich, Germany. Leopold Szneer is in the front row, left.

Nazism’s rise to power threatened to end his dream and silence his voice. His Jewish school was closed, and only Nazi propaganda songs could be sung in the public school he attended. In 1935, Leopold left Munich to attend a theological seminary in Frankfurt-am-Main; however, under Nazi pressure, it closed

in 1938. Arrested shortly after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, Leopold was sent to Dachau, but his parents gained his release and sent the 16-year-old on a *Kindertransport* to Belgium, where relatives took him in. His sister Ester had made her way safely to London, England, in summer 1938. In spring 1939, Leopold’s parents and younger sister joined him in Belgium. Unfortunately, Germany’s invasion of Belgium placed the family in grave danger once again.

In 1942, the family received their deportation order. The resistance found a secure hiding place for Hanna, but Leopold refused to leave his parents. Desperate, the family hid in a dog shelter. Eventually they were discovered and arrested. Sent to the transit camp Malines shortly before Rosh Hashanah 1942, Leopold dared even there to give voice to his faith. He gathered ten men, including his father, to form a *minyan* and, hiding in a bunk, led a short High Holiday service. Denounced by a fellow prisoner, Leopold and the entire camp were ordered to confess who had dared to pray. Leopold stepped forward. Perhaps it was his courage that impressed the SS officer who let him go with the warning, “Here we do not pray.”

The next years, including a time of solitary confinement in Breendonck concentration camp, tested the young man’s faith. Eventually, with help from the resistance, he escaped, joined the partisans, and returned to Brussels, hiding for nine months in a small attic until the city was liberated by the Allies shortly before Rosh Hashanah 1944. Only then did Leopold learn that his parents had been murdered at Auschwitz in early 1944. Yet even this devastating blow could

not shatter his faith or silence his voice. His fellow survivors in Brussels turned to Leopold to lead the first High Holiday service in freedom, attended by 700 survivors and liberators.

In 1946, Leopold met fellow survivor Isabelle Lubinewski whom he married a year later. In 1952 the couple came to the United States, and in 1953 Cantor Szneer led his first High Holiday services in his new home, fulfilling his childhood dream and inspiring decades of worshippers with his soaring voice of faith.

Michael Telerant

“I started my first day of school right after Thanksgiving. It was my first day of school ever. I was 12 years old.”

Michael Telerant was born the only child of Hirsh and Emma Telerant on November 1, 1937 in Vilna, Poland (now Vilnius, Lithuania). Michael’s parents owned a large business which sold cloth, buttons, and other goods for men’s and women’s clothing. When Vilna came under Soviet control in September 1939, the business was appropriated and turned over to the employees who remained loyal to the family and chose Hirsh, his brother, and father to run the business. During this time Hirsh was able to exchange his paper currency for gold coins which he buried in the Jewish cemetery.

On June 24, 1941, the Germans occupied Vilna. In September, the Telerants were ordered into the ghetto. They had only 30 minutes to leave their home. Michael, his parents, grandparents, as well as his uncle, his wife and their child, all shared a small apartment. His father’s work permit brought the family some protection from deportation, but unexpected round ups were a constant danger.

Michael’s maternal uncle, a ghetto policeman, introduced his father to a man with connections to farmers outside the ghetto. A deal was struck. Since the man knew farmers willing to hide Jews but had no money of his own, Michael’s father agreed to pay for his family as well. Hirsh secretly dug up the gold coins he had hidden, and the two families, 22 people in all, fled the ghetto in September 1943. The Telerants went to one farm and

their acquaintances to another. Michael’s grandparents and uncle who remained in the ghetto were later deported and killed.

The farmer’s fee was exorbitant for a claustrophobic space under the floorboards in the barn. Michael never left the hiding place. There was little food since the farmer could not arouse suspicion by selling less produce than usual. Nonetheless, there were rare moments of pleasure, as when the farmer gave Michael a small clay whistle in the shape of a chicken. It was stuffed with bread so no sound could escape.

Greedy for more money, the farmer hiding the second family betrayed them to the Germans. The Telerants were now in grave danger but were able to escape to another farm. For the next months, they hid in a space only ten feet by six feet.

After their liberation by the Soviets, they returned briefly to Vilna before traveling west, eventually reaching Italy where they stayed in a villa with thirty other families. For five years, supported by the United Nations Relief Organization and the American Jewish Agency, they waited for a visa. Meanwhile, Michael’s mother made contact with family members in St. Louis who agreed to sponsor them. They arrived in St. Louis in 1949 and later moved to New Jersey.

At the age of 12 and knowing no English, Michael started the first grade. He was determined to catch up with his age group as soon as possible. He succeeded and went on to graduate from Boston University with a degree in psychology.

Michael moved to California in 1968 and married the next year. He became an attorney. His daughter Holly followed in his footsteps and became a public defender while his daughter Robin became a physician.

The clay whistle, its sound always silenced, sits today on Michael’s mantle, a reminder of the time when a small boy lived in constant fear and danger.

Jenny Unterman (née Leijdesdorff)

“Our rescuer saved three letters from my parents, written in the winter of 1942-43. These letters are the most precious possessions I have. In them, one can read their love and worry for my sister and me and their anguish at being separated from us.”

Jenny Unterman was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands on July 15, 1938. Jenny, her older sister Hanna, and her parents, Isaac and Sarina Leijdesdorff, lived over the drugstore they owned. Her parents also owned a photography store nearby where her father sold cameras and developed pictures.

In May 1940, Germany invaded and occupied the Netherlands and in 1941 every Jew was compelled to register. By September of the following year, Jenny’s parents decided that the family should go into hiding, their daughters in one location and they in another. Throughout the next years, the two little girls would stay with a number of Dutch Christian families who risked their lives to hide and protect them.

Until December 1942, Jenny and Hanna stayed with Cornelis and Petronella Kromhout in Leiden. Subsequently, they spent a brief time on a farm near Leiden and then were placed with Gerrit and Jacoba van den Berg in the town of Ede. Jenny later learned that sometimes Mrs. van den Berg would take the two little girls out on a walk so that their parents, hiding nearby, could catch a brief glimpse of their daughters.

In April 1943, the police began to watch the van den Bergs’ house and the two girls were moved yet again. This time the sisters were separated. Hanna was placed in the home of a pediatric nurse in Breda who was already hiding nine Jewish children while caring for 10 babies of unwed Dutch mothers. There was space for only one more Jewish child, and Hanna was considered old enough to help care for the babies. Jenny was placed with Janny and Bram van Vianen in the city of Leiden. She stayed with them from April 1943 until spring 1944.

In 1991, nearly 50 years later, Mrs. van Vianen, then 93, told Jenny how she had once inadvertently put them all in danger when, as she was hanging out the window, she was spotted by children in the street who asked her name. Jenny, only 5, told them that she had to go ask whether she should give them her real name or her “hiding name”!

In April 1944 after a raid in which Bram van Vianen was arrested, Jenny was moved again, this time to Breda where she was reunited with her sister. They were liberated by the Canadian army in October 1944.

Jenny’s parents did not survive. Their hiding place in Ede was betrayed and the couple was arrested, along with two other Jews, and taken to the transit camp Westerbork. Since Isaac and Sarina had not reported in 1942 as required for forced labor in Germany, special punitive measures were taken against them. They were sent on the first transport from Westerbork to the death camp Sobibor on July 20, 1943 where they were murdered three days later.

After the war ended in May 1945, Jenny’s and Hanna’s aunt and uncle located their nieces and gave them a home in Amsterdam. In time, Jenny and Hanna came to call their aunt and uncle Mom and Dad. Jenny returned to school, completed high school and went to work.

At a dance in March 1962, Jenny met her future husband David who was completing his medical studies at the University of Leiden. They wed in August and moved to the United States where David’s mother, brother, and sister were living. The couple settled in southern California near David’s brother and his wife. The Untermans have three children and six grandchildren.

In the 1990s, Jenny began the search for her rescuers—wanting to thank them in person for their courageous acts. As an adult, she has struggled with anger and a sense of abandonment even while knowing that her parents gave her up to save her life. Only in 2003 when one of her rescuers gave her three letters written by her parents, letters filled with love and worry, did she begin to heal from the deep wound of separation. These letters are Jenny’s most precious possession.

Sally Wasser, z”l (née Kuperman)

“The dresses we wore were very dear to us. They were all we had left. They represented home. At Auschwitz-Birkenau they took even those.”

Sally Wasser was born Sara Kuperman on January 25, 1923 in Szydlowiec, Poland. Her parents, who owned a fabric store, gave Sally, her older brother, and four older sisters a home filled with love and laughter and instilled in them their own strong values of respect and compassion.

Sally was 16 when the German army occupied Szydlowiec. As a Jew, she was prohibited from attending school and her parents lost their business. To feed their family, her parents sold their furniture and even their clothes. On one occasion, her father, easily recognizable as an Orthodox Jew, was stopped by a soldier who publicly humiliated him and brutally cut off his beard before tying him to the back of a truck and dragging him through the streets.

In 1942, Sally and her sister Rachela, eight years older, were sent as forced laborers to the Hermann Göring Werke munitions factory in Starachowice where their brother Jacob already worked. They learned later that all the other members of their family had been sent to the death camp Treblinka. The sisters found it almost impossible to go on, but they knew that would be their parents’ wish.

In July 1944, the sisters were sent in an overcrowded and stifling cattle car to Auschwitz-Birkenau. When they were ordered off the train, Sally felt relief until she saw the prisoners with shaved heads who looked like ghosts. She had little hope of survival.

After they passed the initial selection, the sisters were stripped of their dresses—their last tangible reminder of home—their heads shaved, and tattooed with a number. They were assigned to backbreaking road labor. Sally worked with socks full of mud and with clogs that caused terrible blisters, but she knew that the alternative to work was death. It was at night when she dreamt of home that she felt she lived.

In January 1945, the sisters were sent on a death march to Bergen-Belsen. When her sister Rachela became too weak to continue, Sally tried to support her and keep on marching. Two friends pushed Sally aside and shared the burden of carrying Rachela. Without them, neither sister would have survived.

Sally and Rachela spent the next three months battling starvation and disease in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, which had become a dumping ground for prisoners from many camps. They were liberated by the British on April 15, 1945.

With nowhere to go, the sisters remained in Bergen-Belsen which became a displaced persons camp. They were overjoyed when they were reunited with their brother Jacob who introduced Sally to his friend, Harry Wasser. Sally and Harry married in 1946 and their son Martin was born the following year. The Red Cross sent Rachela, very ill with tuberculosis, to a sanatorium in Switzerland where she gradually recovered.

Sally and Harry arrived in the U.S. with their infant son in November 1949. They knew no English, but they were determined to succeed and to become citizens of the country they immediately loved. Sometimes Harry worked three jobs to give their son and daughter, Brenda, born in 1950, as many opportunities as possible. In 1954, Sally and Harry became U.S. citizens.

Rachela, whose health remained fragile, joined her sister in Los Angeles. Sally’s children and grandchildren treated Rachela as a second mother and grandmother, and she always joined the family for holidays and weekly *Shabbat* dinner. Sally remained her older sister’s protector and best friend until Rachela’s death in 1989.

Anna Hitter Webb, ז"ל

(née Rubinstein)

“Compared to those in the concentration camps, we were lucky. It was still a hard life. I was only 12, but I helped out a lot. I was proud to help my family.”

Anna Hitter Webb was born Chana Rubinstein on May 9, 1928. Her parents, Leib and Tauba, had three other children, two boys, Abraham and Aaron, and a girl, Rifka.

Soon after World War II began, German aircraft bombed Anna’s village of Wyszkow, 40 miles northeast of Warsaw. Anna’s parents decided to leave their home and go east to Soviet territory. The entire family, even Anna’s elderly grandmother and little sister, walked.

When they reached the city of Stok, they learned the Germans were already there. Everyone was ordered to assemble in the market place. Anna assumed they would be shot, but miraculously they were permitted to leave. It would be the first of many close escapes.

They next made their way to Bialystok in Soviet territory where Leib had to decide whether to accept or refuse Soviet citizenship. Acceptance meant the possibility of never being allowed to leave; refusal meant deportation to a Siberian labor camp. He chose future freedom.

For 10 days the family traveled by cattle car to Siberia. In the labor camp they experienced great hardship, but they felt fortunate to be together. Even Anna, only 12, worked. She was glad she could help feed her family.

In 1943, the Rubinsteins were released and allowed to travel by train. They settled in Samarkand, Uzbekistan where Leib and Tauba supported the family by making clothing which they sold at the local market. When Tauba fell ill, the family went hungry. Anna, Abraham, and Aaron begged soldiers passing through the train station to share their rations. Many found it impossible to refuse the beautiful young girl. The children often returned with enough bread,



Photo of Chana Rubinstein Hitter (now Anna Hitter Webb) with her family in 1945 after the end of the war in Europe. Front row, left to right: Abraham (younger brother); Samuel Hitter (brother-in-law); Tauba (mother); Leib (father); Rifka (younger sister). Back row: Aaron (older brother); Chana (Anna), and her husband, Joseph Hitter.

butter, and cheese to sustain the family for several days.

At 16, in 1944, Anna fell in love with Jewish émigré Joseph Hitter whom she married the next year. When the war ended, Anna, Joseph, and Anna’s family returned to Poland, but Anna and Joseph realized they had no future there, so in 1946, they crossed the border into Germany. In the

Bamberg displaced persons camp Anna gave birth to their first child, Steven. Later the family moved to Frankfurt where their daughter Sabrina was born and where Joseph became a successful businessman, dealing in European art, antiques, and jewelry.

When Israel achieved statehood in 1948 Anna’s family immigrated. Hoping that he might yet find family members, Joseph chose to remain in Germany where he eventually was reunited with his brother.

In 1955, Joseph and Anna moved to the United States. They settled in Los Angeles and became part of a strong community of Holocaust survivors. Anna was thrilled when she convinced her sister Rifka, now Renee, to join her in 1960.

Joseph suffered a severe heart attack in 1974. To support the family, Anna began a jewelry import business while also caring for her husband until his death three years later. Through vision and hard work she transformed her business into a multi-million dollar corporation.

In 1993, Anna married fellow Holocaust survivor Max Webb whom she had known for forty years. Dedicated to *tikkun olam*, healing the world, they are renowned for their philanthropy. Anna Hitter Webb has received many awards and two honorary doctorates, from Bar-Ilan University and Tel Aviv University. Hers has been a life shaped both by struggle and by unflinching devotion to family.

Max Webb, ז"ל

“My life was a precious gift given back to me for the purpose of giving to others.”

Max Webb was born Menashe Weisbrot on March 2, 1917 in Lodz, Poland. He grew up in a large family with six siblings, including five sisters and one brother. Only Max, his twin sister Lola, and brother Isaac survived the Holocaust.

Although the family had little material wealth, their home was rich in Jewish faith and tradition. Max’s schooling ended after only a few years since his help was needed to support the family. He became a popular dance and ice skating instructor.

This life ended when the Germans marched into Lodz on September 8, 1939. When Max saw German military trucks going to a Jewish hospital, he followed them and witnessed a scene of unforgettable



Photo of Max Webb (Menashe Weisbrot) in Germany in 1945.

horror as soldiers tossed babies from upper story windows to the pavement below. He ran home to tell his family that they must prepare for the worst.

The next day Max was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the notorious Sieradz prison. He spent the next five years in 18 different camps, narrowly avoiding death many times. In one camp, he was ordered to dig graves in frozen ground before filling them with the bodies of his fellow Jewish prisoners. When the graves were nearly full, the guards shot six of the 12 grave diggers and ordered the remaining six, including Max, to add their bodies.

In 1943, Max was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Here he met a fellow prisoner, Nathan Shapell, who would become his lifelong friend, business partner, and surrogate brother.

By ingenuity and luck, Max and Nathan escaped death in one of the final Auschwitz selections in the winter of 1944. They survived five Auschwitz sub-camps and a brutal death march that took them to camps at Fürstenstein, Reichenbach, and Gross-Rosen before their liberation by the Russians in Waldenburg, Germany on May 8, 1945. Of the 60,000 prisoners who began the march, fewer than 1,500 survived.

Max and Nathan returned to Reichenbach to find Nathan’s sister Sala whom Max married in December 1945. The three traveled by foot to the displaced persons Munchberg in the American zone where Max miraculously discovered his twin sister Lola. He would be reunited with his brother Isaac a year later at another DP camp in Germany.

Max and Nathan now turned to helping their fellow survivors and honoring the dead. They located space, built housing, and worked with the authorities to find and unearth mass graves, giving the dead proper burial in a local Jewish cemetery.

In 1951, Max and Sala immigrated to the United States, settling eventually in Los Angeles where they were joined by Nathan, his brother David, and their families. Max, Nathan, and David, founded S & S Construction which became one of California’s largest and most successful land development companies.

Max and Sala had two daughters, Rose and Chara, and three grandchildren. Max lost his beloved Sala in 1990. His financial success enabled him to found the Max Webb Family Foundation through which the Webb family has supported organizations in both the United States and Israel. His accomplishments and generosity have been recognized with many awards, including honorary doctorates from Bar-Ilan and Tel-Aviv Universities. In 1993, he married fellow Holocaust survivor Anna Hitter who shares his commitment to philanthropy and to *tikkun olam*, healing the world.

For Max, now in his 90s, the memories of the family members he lost remain vivid. Seeing his life as a precious gift, he has honored them by his devotion to Judaism and by his generosity to those in need.

Leon Weinstein, ז"ל Natalie Weinstein Gold

“I criss-crossed Poland for six months, until I reached her destination. The nuns took me to a large room, where countless orphan girls pleaded to be taken, each claiming to be my daughter. I recognized none of them. Finally, leaving the room heartbroken, I noticed a nun holding a skinny, hollow-eyed little girl, whom I immediately recognized as my Natalie.”

The fourth of seven children, Leon Weinstein was born on May 13, 1911 in the *shtetl* of Radzymin, Poland. His extended family numbered almost 90 members. Hasidic Jews, the Weinstains had lived in Radzymin for generations. Yet at the age of 12, without telling his parents, Leon left his home to seek work in Warsaw. While his daring venture into a gentile world worried his parents, Leon’s paternal grandfather, whose wisdom made him a trusted confidant of the Rabbi of Radzymin, supported him, saying that Leon represented the future of Jewish life. At the age of 99, he called Leon to his deathbed to receive his blessing. In the grim years that followed, Leon held fast to this blessing and his grandfather’s prophecy.

When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Leon fought on the front lines. Captured, he managed to escape, walking 500 miles back to Radzymin. In the Radzymin ghetto, he joined the underground, smuggling arms to the resistance. Alerted by a German soldier’s offhand remark, Leon fled with his wife, Sima, and infant daughter, Natasha Leya (Natalie), born in 1940, just before the ghetto was liquidated and its Jews sent to the death camp Treblinka. Of his large family, only Leon survived.



Photo taken in spring 1946 of Leon Weinstein and his daughter, Natalie.

The couple now focused all their efforts on saving their child. A gentile, paid handsomely to hide Natalie, refused to risk his own family’s safety in the face of ominous Nazi threats. Homeless and with no money, Leon and Sima devised a bold plan, abandoning their daughter to save her. They dressed Natalie warmly and placed around her neck a cross and a sign proclaiming her the daughter of a war widow unable to feed her. Then they left her on the steps of a police station, waiting nearby to make sure that she was discovered.

While Sima went into hiding, Leon returned to the Warsaw ghetto,

fighting in the heroic uprising. He was among the few to escape through the rat-infested sewers. He would never learn what happened to his wife.

At war’s end, his single hope was to find his child. For six months Leon traveled across Poland on his bicycle, searching one convent orphanage after another. He met hundreds of children, but none was his Natalie. And then at last, he saw a tiny, hollow-eyed little girl whom he immediately recognized.

Her father’s presence brought Natalie, now 4½ years old, security and love, yet confusion and fear remained. Should food be hoarded for a day she might be hungry? Was she Jewish or Christian?

A few months later, Leon met Sophie, a survivor of Auschwitz, whose tenderness toward his daughter touched his heart. They married and in 1952 came to the United States. Natalie grew to adulthood, married, had two children of her own and became a psychotherapist. In 1990, with six other child survivors, she celebrated her *bat mitzvah*, making her great-grandfather’s prophetic words a reality.

Sally Wolfe (née Nieroslawska)

“My mother’s last words were, ‘Children, don’t cry. I’ll be back soon.’”

Sally Nieroslawska was born in Lodz, Poland to Samuel and Dora Nieroslawska. Sally had three sisters: Susan, Jenny, and Esther. Her father, born and educated in St. Petersburg, met her mother on a business trip to Lodz and fell instantly in love with her. They married in 1915, but World War I prevented his returning with his bride to Russia. The couple remained in Lodz where Samuel established a successful textile business.

Sally and her sisters had a wonderful childhood. They went to a private school, had piano lessons, and spent time with their large extended family.

War abruptly ended this life. Sally’s father lost his business and the girls could no longer attend school. Fortunately, Susan and her new husband had already left Poland for England, but the rest of the family was ordered into the overcrowded ghetto where Samuel contracted tuberculosis and died in 1943.

With conditions in the ghetto unbearable and fearing that they would be sent on separate transports, in early July 1944, Sally, Jenny, Esther, and their mother voluntarily reported for deportation. They distrusted the Nazis’ promise that they would be sent to a labor camp and treated well, but they believed that volunteering was their only chance to stay together.

Their worst fear was realized. Instead of a labor camp, they were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the initial selection, their mother was sent to the gas chambers. After a brief time in Auschwitz, the sisters were

transported to Bergen-Belsen where Sally contracted scarlet fever. Her face became red and swollen—a sure death sentence if the Germans saw her, but Jenny and Esther refused to lose their sister. They kept Sally upright through the roll calls and looked after her until she improved. Without them, Sally would not have survived.

When the Germans selected 60 women for a labor camp, Sally was chosen, but her sisters were not. Now it was her turn to intervene for her sisters. She boldly went to the officer in charge and in the perfect German she had learned in school asked him to allow her sisters to go too. Miraculously, he agreed.

The sisters were sent to Geisenheim where they worked at a Krupp factory that manufactured airplane parts. They were warned that a single mistake would be judged treason, punishable by death.

On April 11, 1945, the camp was dismantled and the prisoners marched without food or water to Allach, a sub-camp of Dachau. In late April, the sisters were among the prisoners ordered onto a train bound for the Alps where the SS planned to throw them down a mountainside. Their lives were spared when U.S. soldiers arrived on April 30.

The girls were taken to the Feldafing displaced persons camp. The Red Cross contacted their sister Susan who had moved to New Jersey from England. She began the paper work to bring her sisters to the U.S.

In the DP camp, both Sally and Jenny fell in love with young men, each of whom had lost his own family. They married in a double ceremony attended by the entire camp on March 26, 1946. Both couples felt deeply the absence of their parents.

Three months later, with their sister Esther, they came to the United States. Sally and her husband Elliott settled in Los Angeles where Elliott had a relative. They learned English and found jobs. Sally attended extension classes at UCLA, earned a graduate degree, and became an executive with Bank of America, while Elliot had a career at 20th Century Fox Studios. They had two sons, James and Robert, both of whom became physicians.

Susan, a talented artist, passed away in December 2002. Sally and her two sisters, Jenny in Florida and Esther in New Jersey, remain as devoted to one another today as they were when they were girls.

Rose Woznicki, z"l

(née Rozenblum)

“I dreamed of sitting at a table with a big loaf of bread. Bread! That was my dream.”

Rose Rozenblum was born in Kozięglowy, Poland in 1924. She was the youngest child by 10 years and was doted upon by her brother, two sisters, and parents. Rose’s father was a prominent member of the community who was often called upon to settle disputes.

Rose’s education ended with the start of war in 1939. In 1940, the family was forced to leave their beautiful home for a one-room dwelling by the cemetery. One day, Rose’s sister Gela, believing no one would recognize her as a Jew, dared to remove her Star of David to walk outside and enjoy a bit of freedom. An acquaintance betrayed her and Gela was killed. Rose’s brother, Srulek, who tried to escape from the ghetto, was shot.

In 1942, the town’s Jews were deported. Rose was separated from her family and with other teenage girls was loaded onto a truck and driven to the nearby ghetto in Zawiercie. There she was put to work making uniforms for the German military. In August 1943, most of the workers, including Rose, were sent to Auschwitz.

At Auschwitz, Rose was shaved, tattooed, and given uncomfortable wooden clogs and a dress much too large. Each morning the prisoners were marched to an ammunition factory. It was difficult to walk in the clogs, but Rose knew that if she fell she would be attacked by the vicious dogs. The prisoners assembled bullets from sunup to sundown with only a brief break for a small piece of bread and a watery bowl of soup.

Eventually Rose became too weak and malnourished to work. Only a sympathetic supervisor who allowed her to spend the day hiding between stacks of crates, and her friends, who carried her from the barracks to work and back again, enabled her to survive. One friend refused to give up on Rose even when it seemed she would never get stronger. She traded her meager ration of bread for a little hot water and a bit of garlic to rub on Rose’s bread in the hope that they would revive her. It worked and Rose began to recover.

In January 1945, as the Soviet army neared Auschwitz, the prisoners were sent on a death march. Rose was among those liberated by the Soviet army at the end of January.

After a brief stay at a displaced persons camp, Rose and her friend Helen, a few years older, traveled to Frankfurt since there were rumors that survivors had found family members there. In her heart, however, Rose knew that her family had gone directly to their deaths in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Helen was more fortunate and was reunited with her older brother Ben. She set about convincing Ben and Rose that they were meant for each other. Six weeks later they married, and in 1948 Rose gave birth to their only child, Louis.

In 1952, thanks to an affidavit of support from Ben’s uncle in Baltimore, they came to the U.S. They spent three years in Baltimore and then, seeking a warmer climate

for their son’s health, moved to Los Angeles. Helen and her husband were already living there and so the close friends were reunited. Rose’s husband, Ben, passed away in April 1985.

Today Rose basks in the love of her son and two granddaughters. The dream she had as a starving prisoner is now a reality—there is always a large loaf of bread in her kitchen.

Michael Zelon

“One event is stuck forever in my memory. There was a guy, his name was Mancasz, he was from Warsaw, six feet tall. He came down from the ‘music room’ in great pain, and he said in Yiddish, ‘This beating will not help them. They will lose and we will survive them.’ For me this was a powerful statement by a Jew.”

Michael Zelon was born on April 6, 1922 in Plock, Poland, 65 miles northwest of Warsaw. He had two older sisters, Bronia and Nacia, and a younger brother, William. Life in their home revolved around religious tradition. On *Shabbat* and holidays, the house was shining and spotless, and the table was covered in a crisp white tablecloth with elegant silver candlesticks and beautiful dishes. The Friday evening meal began with prayer and ended with song.

An exceptional student, in 1935, Michael was one of 40 from hundreds who applied to be admitted to the state high school (gymnasium) that prepared students for university study. Michael was the only Jew, but he felt accepted by his classmates and played on the soccer, hockey, and swim teams.

Germany’s invasion of Poland in September 1939 brought Michael’s happy school years to an end. The Germans took over his family’s store, and a few weeks later the family was ordered into the city’s overcrowded ghetto.

In February 1941, the ghetto was closed and the family was sent to the Soldau concentration camp and then to Bodzentyn. The family struggled to survive—but they were still together and healthy.

Their life as a family was shattered in June 1942 when Michael and William were sent as slave laborers to

Skarzysko-Kamienna. Laying railroad tracks was grueling physical labor, and when the SS came looking for mechanics, Michael and William volunteered. They were assigned to the HASAG factory as munitions workers. Even with the hard work and beatings in what the Germans sarcastically called the “music room”—because of the screams of the prisoners being whipped—Michael remained determined to survive.

In May 1943, survivors of the Warsaw ghetto arrived at the factory. They brought horrifying news of the Treblinka death camp, unimaginable stories of the murder of thousands by gas. Only after liberation would Michael learn that his parents and one of his sisters had been killed there.

In August 1944, Michael and William were transferred to the HASAG factory in Czechochowa. One night their sleep was interrupted by a loud commotion; the Germans were loading the prisoners onto cattle cars. The brothers decided to escape through the German security building. They emerged undetected, feeling totally free, but their happiness ended abruptly when they were apprehended by a Russian soldier who accused them of being German spies. Taken to Russian headquarters, the boys were questioned by an officer who spoke Yiddish and believed the brothers’ story.

When Michael and William returned to Plock, they learned that their family had not survived. With nowhere else to go, the brothers opened a small leather business to earn enough money to live. Michael graduated from the gymnasium there and then continued his studies at the University of Munich, Germany, earning a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in electrical engineering. In 1952, Michael and his wife immigrated to the United States, settling in Los Angeles. Michael eventually joined the Space Division of North American Aviation where he contributed significantly to the development of the Apollo and Space Shuttle programs.



Rodgers Center for Holocaust Education
Stern Chair in Holocaust Education
Sala and Aron Samueli Holocaust Memorial Library