



Just Us



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Introduction

**by Hon. Martin Shulman, Program Co-Chair with
Hon. Deborah Kaplan**

The Jewish Lawyers Guild and the Gender Fairness Committee of the Civil Branch of the Supreme Court, New York County and the New York County Clerk's Office annually sponsor a Holocaust Remembrance Program. Why? Because, it is so vitally important to ensure that the horrors of the Holocaust becomes part of the collective DNA of humanity. It is also our sacred duty to ensure the Holocaust continues to be a living memory as we mourn the loss of millions who perished, cherish the survivors and hear their stories, the latter which should inspire all of us to create a safer, fairer world of peace and tolerance. Sadly, there is a also need for such programs to fight the bigoted haters who deny such atrocities ever happened.

Every year, we publicly read the stories of six Holocaust survivors, and after each story is read, the survivor or the survivor's children and grandchildren lights a candle to honor the memory of loved ones. These six candles also lit to honor the memory of the six million souls who perished. Finally, our annual program serves as a constant reminder of our collective responsibility to protect the civil and human rights of all people in our society and across the world.

This special Just Us edition enables other members with our court system and in the legal community to read the six stories we heard, and the keynote address of renowned Professor Menachem Z. Rosensaft, General Counsel, World Jewish Congress and Editor of *God, Faith & Identity* from the *Ashes: Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors*. Readers will also see photographs of the Amud Aish Memorial Museum's moving exhibit specially created and displayed in our courthouse Rotunda highlighting the work of a Jewish family and non-Jewish Swiss official who enabled thousands of Jews to fee over the Swiss border, escaping persecution and death.

Remembrance Issue Editor: Loren Schwartz

Candle Lighters: Gaston Silvera and Hon. Adam Silvera

Gaston Silvera was born in Sousse, Tunisia to Sassia Hadjaj and her husband Saidou Silvera on March 1, 1932. Gaston was one of nine children: six boys and three girls. Before World War II, the family was prosperous and their lives were filled with happiness. They had a house on the beach right near the Mediterranean coast. Gaston's father owned two fish restaurants that catered to the local Italian fishermen which amply provided for the family.

Their wonderful life all changed once Germany invaded Tunisia in 1942. All Jews were forced to register, wear a yellow star, and abide by mandatory curfews. Like most Jews' in Tunisia, the Silveras' property including their home and restaurants, bank accounts, jewelry, furniture and other valuables were confiscated. Gaston's father and older brothers were forced into slave labor. Food was scarce. For one month, a Righteous Tunisian Muslim family hid, sheltered and fed Gaston, his mother and sisters. Thereafter for the duration of the German occupation, the Silvera family was homeless and moved from town to town, seeking food and shelter.

Once the war was over and the Germans left Tunisia, life returned to somewhat normal. However, the Silvera family was still homeless as their beachfront home had been destroyed during the war. Sadly, they also learned that a maternal Aunt (Marcelle Garbi) was killed by the Nazis, who threw a grenade into her home when she failed to extinguish the Shabbat candles after the Germans announced lights out on a Friday evening.

There was no future for the Silvera family in Tunisia. They left in 1949 and emigrated to Israel with a brief layover in Marseilles, France. Gaston served in the Israeli military as a paratrooper in the War of 1956. He married Anne Friedman, an American, in 1968 and relocated to New York, where they still live today. Gaston and Anne have two sons (Sander and Adam) and three grandchildren (Naftali, Ahmos, and Cochava (Co HA va), who is currently serving as a sergeant in the Israeli Airforce).

Gaston Silvera and his son, State Supreme Court Justice Adam Silvera, will light the next candle.

From top, Gaston Silvera, Gaston and Anne Friedman on their wedding day, Judge Silvera with his mother and father in his chambers



Candle Lighters: Professor Annette Baslaw-Finger

As Jews, Annette's parents were prevented from attending college in Vilna, Lithuania. Independent of each other, they came to Paris, France to study at the Sorbonne, where they met. Although just 17 when they fell in love, theirs was a lifelong love story.

Annette was born and raised in Paris. When she was a mere 5 years old, her parents taught her a poem called "The Goblet" so she could participate in the literary evenings that they hosted. The goblet was said to be at God's right side in Heaven. Whenever an act of cruelty or indifference to cruelty was committed, an angel shed a tear into the goblet and people would learn a lesson. Human suffering was supposed to end when the goblet was full and people finally understood. The last line of the poem was a heartfelt plea: "Dear God, when will the goblet finally become full? Isn't it time yet?"

Although too young to remotely comprehend the meaning of the word 'suffering', her audience did and she was rewarded with chocolates and applause. However, it was not long before she understood the meaning of the word. Many were the times when she asked: "Dear God, when will the goblet become full?"

When the Germans invaded, France held out for even a shorter time than the Warsaw Ghetto. The invaders brought profound sorrow to French Jews. Like Jews across Europe, they had to don the yellow star. Moreover, they experienced the contempt of former friends and neighbors, some of whom identified the hiding places of Jewish families to the Germans in exchange for monetary rewards.

Hoping the suburbs would be safer than Paris, Annette's family followed the long lines of people similarly headed. Not being military personnel, they were excluded from most means of transportation. However, that did not

prevent low-flying German planes from strafing them with machine guns. A French film, *Les Jeux Interdits (The Forbidden Games)*, depicts the chaos and tragedies they experienced at the beginning of their long, difficult journey to safety and freedom.

From age 10-13, Annette's life was focused on finding hiding places. During this part of her childhood, she was plagued by fears that her parents would be dragged away, leaving her alone to fend for herself. Once, they found refuge on a farm. There she attended school for a month pretending to be a distant cousin with limited education.

Fearing for their safety, her parents decided to risk walking over the Pyrenees into Spain. Joined by an aunt, uncle and two cousins (Gittle and Jack Trapunsky, Eugene and Frances) who had been hiding in Toulouse, they hired a guide to steer them past the German soldiers posted along the route. Annette's two-year old cousin Eugene contracted whooping cough, which causes loud, explosive coughing. Afraid of being caught, their guide abandoned the group.

After four days and five nights of climbing, they completed the difficult trek to the Spanish side, where they found no rest or welcoming. Warned that they would soon be sent back, they began the long hike across Spain to Portugal.

Walking by night and hiding by day, the family survived on what little food her father and uncle gathered while walking the railroad tracks and passing fields. Portugal, which was neutral, welcomed the family even though they were in the country illegally. After 10 months, the family emigrated to the United States on papers prepared by Annette's father's former employer.



Annette Baslaw surrounded by family

Taking advantage of the education provided in the United States, Annette became a teacher, obtained a Ph.D., then became a professor, eventually becoming chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and International Education at NYU.

In America, Annette met and married the wonderful Al Baslaw, whom she loved deeply. After he passed away, she was lucky enough to meet and fall in love with Ambassador Seymour “Max” Finger, whose memory she also mourns. Annette’s 3 children, 9 grandchildren and 10 great

-children have retained their identity and practice Judaism with pride and joy.

Professor Annette Baslaw-Finger lights this candle in memory of the many family members who perished in the Holocaust, including her maternal and paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Among those who perished and lost the prospect of meaningful lives were respected scholars, and many generous and compassionate hearts (including the Szer and Notik families, of blessed memory).



Candle Lighters: Clara Heisler and her daughter Rosemarie Weingarten

I, Clarika, was born to Aaron and Mattie Weiss. My story of surviving the Holocaust ironically begins at a Pesach Seder at which the story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt is retold.

It was 1944. Almost all of Europe was occupied by Nazis forces. My family lived in a town along the northwest border of Hungary and Romania.

Our Seder table was set with the finest china, glistening goblets and sterling silverware, starched white table cloths and hand-stitched napkins. Gathered around the Seder table were my immediate family, my parents, my three sisters and my brother, as well as many guests. We were all singing DAYENU, a song about being grateful to G-d for all the gifts he gave the Jewish people, each one of which would have been enough.

Ominously, there was a knock on the dining room window: it was the Hungarian Police! Friendly with my father, they came to *warn* us that Nazis were coming to round us up and put us in a ghetto! They urged us to hide.

Overcome by terror and trembling, we wondered what to do. My father allayed our fears; he said: "We are in G-ds hands, and He will protect us." Just then the Nazis burst into our house, and took us to the Ghetto. It was a Passover I'll never forget.

To this day, I can visualize my father calling me aside in the ghetto and telling me: "My dear child, we want you to escape. Someone from our family has to survive to tell our story." Crying, I asked: "how can I survive, I am only 15 years old? Why not my sisters?" I was strong-willed; he knew I would persevere and survive. Being the only child with blond curly hair and blue eyes, I also had the best chance to pass as a non-Jew. My father's last

words to me were "Remember who you are, and where you came from, never forget." After many hugs and kisses, I made my way out of the ghetto.

Wandering the streets, I remember my mom's words of caution, "My child, be very careful what kind of company you mix with." Heading towards a family friend, a household my father directed me to seek out, I arrived with hope that that they would hide me.

Upon arrival, I find that my father had prepared for my escape. A suitcase with clothes and money awaited me. However, my optimism was short lived, for the family could not hide me for fear for their own safety.

Once again, I was on my own, hoping to make my way towards Budapest. My first attempt at taking the train resulted in me being outed as Aaron Weiss's daughter. A neighborhood boy advised the SS guards that I was a Jew. Quick of tongue, I explained that I worked for Mr. Weiss, first as a factory worker and then a housemaid. "Now that they are in the ghetto, I am unemployed and must seek another job." Fearful that the guards didn't believe me, I jumped from the train before the next stop.

Arriving in Budapest four days later, I searched for the address my father had given me. Planning ahead, my father provided me with another suitcase. My hopes for some rest and security were dashed when I was told that I could not stay. Like before, the host was fearful for his own family's safety. Prior to leaving, I was informed that my brother Dudi was in a forced labor camp. My courage began leaving me as I walked back into the street, heading to nowhere.

Sleeping on park benches, I was kept going only by my will to survive and to find my family again.

Coming upon a Kosher restaurant that had no food, I befriended other displaced Jews, with no hiding place, with no place to go. During this time, I was again stopped by officers, asking: "What are you doing and where are you going?" Saved once again by my quick thinking, I explained, "I came for midnight mass and am waiting to be picked up." This clever answer allowed me to live another day, and ultimately to survive.

At the war's end, I made my way back to my home town. After returning, I was informed that my brother Dudi and I are the only survivors. Two months pass and I find comfort in opening my family's home to other displaced survivors. Shortly thereafter, I was introduced to Shloimy Heisler, my future husband. With joy in my heart, and a new spring in my step, I, Clarika, was ready to take on the world.

Again, my joy is short lived, for the Communist agents arrive, making me and my new husband refugees in my own country. With no legal documents, Shloimy, my brother Dudi and I paid a handsome price to be smuggled into Germany.

Once in Germany, we were given directions to a displaced persons camp. After a year in the camp, my husband was appointed Rabbi. Our final destination was America, and we were eager to start a new life with our baby Rosemarie.

In time, we add baby Chani to the family and with the help of Hashem, our business flourished. Shloimy became the founding member of the Satmar community of Boro Park, supporting many causes in the community.

73 years have now passed. Do not think that I have forgotten! Do you think my guilt has gone away - why did I survive when the others didn't? It is my belief and faith that G-d has a master plan.

I, Clarika Weiss, am now known as Clara Heisler. My name has changed but I know who I am and where I came from. I raised my children to remember our roots, our heritage and to maintain our values. Now that you have allowed me to share my family's story, I hope that you, too, will never forget.

Clara Heisler and her daughter Rosemarie Weingarten will light the next candle.



SAR High School choir sang two moving songs to close the Remembrance Ceremony.

Candle Lighters: Ilana Marcus and her parents, Daniel and Miriam Sussman

Miriam was born in 1942 in a small town outside of Krakow. Her parents, Erna and Benno Korngut, were land-owning Jews. As Nazis invaded their town, Erna and Benno separated, and ran from bunker to bunker to escape. Erna took Miriam with her and Benno grabbed their older daughter, Hania, a 3-year-old. Benno implored a neighbor to hide Hania. The neighbor initially took in Hania, but then put her outside alone, and she began to cry. Benno returned to save his child, but was apprehended. Hania was swiftly killed and he was deported to the camps.

Erna also left Miriam with a neighbor, Marianna Byrczek (BEER-CHEK), who took in Miriam and raised her as her own along with her four natural children. Marianna's sister had recently been killed in a fire and Marianna pretended that Miriam was her niece, even though her sister had no children. Marianna was a Righteous Gentile: she not only saved Miriam, but also took in two other Jewish teenagers, and hid them in her barn. By doing so, Marianna risked her life and the lives of her entire family.

Erna lived out the war with her brother, in hiding. Benno survived several concentration camps and was eventually liberated from Dachau Concentration Camp, where he was worked nearly to death. After liberation, Erna and Benno reunited and returned to their hometown to find Miriam, who had survived in the care of Marianna. Miriam continued to live with Marianna until Erna and Benno were relocated by the Polish government. The land that Erna and Benno owned became the property of the Byrczek (BEER-CHEK) family, whose descendants still reside on it today.

After the war, Erna, Benno and Miriam were relocated to a small apartment in southwestern Poland. Confused and homesick for Marianna and her family, Miriam tried to run away many times. Erna and Benno had two more children (Regina and Yola) before Benno died in 1954, from the consequences of his captivity during the war.

Life in Poland became insufferable because of Communism and rampant anti-



Miriam Sussman as a girl



Dan Sussman with his mother, Anna, in Argentina, and Dan and Miriam at their 1969 wedding

Semitism. Erna received a tourist visa to Italy in 1967, and planned her escape with her three daughters. They eventually made their way to America as refugees.

Zelik, Erna's brother, survived the war and emigrated to Israel. Many of the other members of the Korngut and Feltcher families were murdered along with Hania, Miriam's older sister.

Ilana's father, Dan, was born in a small town 16 miles south of Lodz (WOODGE). Dan's father, Abek (AH-BEK) Brehm, was a tailor who owned a small uniform factory. Germans occupied the town in September 1939. At that time, there were about 18,000 Jews in the town. The Nazis began a program of cruel beatings, murders, and confiscation of property. Refugees from nearby towns streamed in, inflating the town's Jewish population. On October 9, 1939, the city's commander ordered the establishment of the ghetto. Abek's wife Anna, and child, Dan, remained outside of the ghetto, pretending they were German. Abek's factory was commandeered to supply Germans with military uniforms. Abek tried to hire as many Jews as possible at the factory.

A Gestapo officer knew that Anna and Dan lived outside the ghetto and he once helped Abek visit them. However, one day in 1941, Abek, along with every other Jew in his uniform factory, was marched into the street and promptly shot and killed. Upon learning that Abek had been murdered, Anna and Dan somehow escaped Poland, arriving at some point in Czechoslovakia. Anna remarried Sigfried Sussman (also a survivor) there, and Sigfried adopted Dan.

The new family managed to escape to South America. Anna kept Dan in braces (probably pretending he had Polio), during their trip and during the several years that followed so that he would not leave her side. She was concerned someone would discover Dan was circumcised, as all Jewish boys are. Having the braces prevented him from undressing without Anna. The family settled in Argentina, where Dan was baptized and where they all became citizens.

Dan did not know his Jewish heritage until he was a teenager. Anna, Siegfried, and Dan immigrated to the United States in the late 1960s. Throughout her life, and whenever possible, Anna made significant donations to the State of Israel.

Dan and Miriam met in 1967 after Anna was a patient at NYU Hospital; Miriam was working there as a laboratory technician.

Dan and Miriam want to acknowledge that some people may ask Holocaust survivors “Where was your god?” but a better question is “Where was the world?” To be sure the lessons

of the Holocaust are not lost, they ask everyone to speak out against Genocide that is happening around the world today.

Ilana Marcus, Principal Court Attorney, New York Supreme Court, Civil Division and her parents Miriam and Dan Sussman will light the next candle.



Ilana’s parents, Dan and Miriam, with their youngest grandchild, Ilana’s son Gabriel Marcus

Candle Lighters: Harry Witlin and his daughters Lisa Nadler and Abby Tolchinsky

Harry Wittlin was born in 1931 in a town near Lvov (Levov), Poland. He grew up in a Jewish home with his parents (Abraham and Clara) and sister Ester, may they rest in peace. In 1941, the Nazis invaded their town, and changed their lives forever.

Trains filled with Jews headed to gas chambers passed through their town. Many

surrounding towns were judenfrei (literally, "free of Jews"). Those who tried to escape the trains were shot.

By the winter of 1942, the Gestapo was routinely searching homes, rounding up Jewish men. Harry’s father, Abraham, would frequently run to an area behind their home and hide in the fields.

In the spring of 1942, barbed wire was going up- forming a ghetto for the Jews. The Nazi commander who searched their home spoke with his mother, whose fluent German impressed him. He lingered and told her that their family's best chance to survive was to hide. That suggestion led to their escape.

The Wittlin family didn't know where to go. Abraham, being a grain dealer, reached out to a farmer he knew named Jan Lukawski. Jan and his family were very poor but they agreed to hide Harry's mother and sister under hay in their barn.

During this time, Harry and his father wandered the woods, looking for thick bushes in which to hide, so they wouldn't be seen. They were freezing, hungry and swollen from the exposure. Soon open sores covered their skin. Every few days, Abraham would leave the woods and carefully go to the Lukawski home to retrieve food.

Eventually, rumors of hidden Jews took root. Clara and Ester had to leave the farm and join Abraham and Harry in the woods. The four of them wandered and hid together. The family fled the general area for fear the locals would search for them and hand them over to the Nazis. They were in even worse danger than before.

One day, two Ukranian security guards in charge of monitoring the woods, showed up with an axe and a rifle. The family was ordered to undress and lie down! Instinctively, Harry ran for the woods and hid behind a tree. To this day, Harry remembers saying the "shema" over and over, thinking this was the end.

Harry wandered alone in the woods for days. Collapsing, he heard a dog bark. Luckily, he recognized this bark- it was the Lukawski's dog. He

begged for help and Jan agreed to hide him. Jan dug a hole and covered Harry with hay. Once a day, a child's hand would reach through the hay and hand him a container of milk. He never actually saw the child.

Meanwhile Abraham had run in another direction. His mother and sister were chased by the peasant with the axe, captured and held captive in a farm house, awaiting pick up by the Nazis. Desperate, Clara and Ester somehow escaped through a window and searched the woods. Eventually, they were reunited with Harry's father.

Days later, they learned that Harry was alive, hidden at the farm. Jan and Magdalena were not able to hide the reunited family again- it was just too dangerous. So, the Wittlin family's suffering became much more severe.

Throughout the remaining two years in the woods, the Lukawskis remained their source for food and survival. Harry and his family hid in ditches by day and wandered by night - hungry, thirsty, exhausted and always terrified. The details of their survival are so upsetting, Harry is unable to share them all.

When the Russians liberated them in 1945, Harry and his sister were too weak to stand up. After the war, the family settled in Munich, where Harry attended school with about 40 other children, also survivors. Three of them are still alive and remain good friends.

In November 1949, at age 18, Harry and his family emigrated to America and settled with family in Brooklyn. Just a couple of years later, Harry was drafted and served in the Korean War. When Harry was discharged, he attended Baruch College and went into business.

The names Jan and Magdalena Lukawski are engraved, in Jerusalem, on the wall of the Righteous Among Na



Harry Witlin, his late sister Esther Born, and his late mother, Clara Klein

tions at Yad Vashem. Without their help, the Wittlin family wouldn't have survived.

Today Harry's two daughters, their husbands, and four of his five grandchildren reside in the United States. The fifth grandchild lives in Israel. Esther's children and grandchildren live in the US as well.



Harry Witlin with family members in 2017

The child's hand that snuck Harry milk each day while he was hidden under the hay belonged to Emilia Lukawski. Just last year they spoke, and they write to each other often.

Harry wants to thank everyone for being here and for listening to his story. Joining Harry to light the next candle is his two daughters – Lisa Nadler and Abby Tolchinsky, Esq.

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HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE PROGRAM AT NY SUPREME COURT



FROM LEFT: Presiding Justice of Appellate Term, First Department **Martin Shulman**; **Kenneth Lebovits**, Holocaust survivor **Irene Mermelstein Lebovits**; **Or Zaidenberg**; **Natalie Lebovits**; and Manhattan Supreme Court Justices **Gerald Lebovits** and **Margaret Chan** lit candles in the rotunda of the New York State Supreme Court Building on Centre St. on April 26 as part of a Holocaust remembrance program sponsored by the Jewish Lawyers Guild and the Gender Fairness Committee of the Supreme Court, Civil Branch, New York County.



The New York Law Journal covered the Remembrance Ceremony.

Candle Lighters: Irene Lebovits, Justices Gerald Lebovits and Margaret Chan, Natalie Lebovits, Kenneth Lebovits, and Or Zaidenberg

[This remembrance, written by Justice Gerald Lebovits, is a highly condensed version of his forthcoming book, *Holocaust Houdinis*. It will be published in 2019.]

It wasn't mere bigotry. Or prejudice. Or anti-Semitism or racism.

It was genocide.

More dedicated were the Nazis and their collaborators to exterminating Europe's nine million Jews than they were to winning WWII. Given their effort to rob from, enslave, and annihilate the Jewish people, less surprising is it that six million Jews died than that three million Jews lived. Every survivor suffered unspeakable horrors from 1933 through 1945. No survivor fully recovered. The survivors must be honored for who they were, for their will to live, for what they went through, for how bravely they endured.

This is the story — much of it a secret, untold until now — of two Central European

Holocaust survivors and their family members who lived and died. The first survivor, Irene Lebovits (b. Sept. 12, 1925), is nicknamed Maca, like the unleavened bread. Born Irene Mermelstein, she lives in Florida. The second is her husband, Eugene Lebovits (b. Aug. 7, 1921), who died on December 1, 1994.

Only the luckiest survived the Holocaust. But it helped to be smart. Eugene and Irene were lucky and smart. Eugene spoke 12 languages, drew like an architect, and computed college-level math in his head. He was a charismatic man and a tough Jew. Irene spoke five languages and was beautiful: blond and blue eyed, a blessed child whose father owed vineyards, a distillery, a dairy farm, and a general store. Irene and her two sisters and four brothers — all of whom had their own servants — were proud ethnic Hungarians. So were Eugene and his family.

Irene and Eugene were born five miles from each other in a province then called Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Irene was born in Komlos (Chmil'nyk). Eugene was born in Komyat



Irene's brothers, Ernest (left) and Arnold, were burned to death on the Eastern front.

(Velikiye Komyaty). Eugene's paternal ancestors, beginning with patriarch Mark Leibovitz, had lived in Komyat since at least 1728; on his mother's side, some came from Nitra, now in the western part of the Slovak Republic.

Subcarpathia was Austro-Hungarian through WWI. Then it was in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia. Hungary retook the province in 1939. After WWII, it became part of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Now it's in independent southwestern Ukraine, in a province called Zakarpattia.

Irene and Eugene's fathers were Austro-Hungarian soldiers in WWI. 50,000 Jews died in WWI fighting for Germany and Austro-Hungary. Irene's father, Ludwig, lost his hearing in an ear. Zoltan, Eugene's father, almost drowned in the June 1918 Second Battle of the Piave River fighting the British, French, and Italians. 20,000 Austro-Hungarians died in that bloodbath. Nobel Laureate Ernest Hemingway wrote about that battle in *A Farewell to Arms*, his 1929 masterpiece.

Some of Irene and Eugene's relatives left Europe between WWI and WWII. Eugene's cousin Hannah Senesh, a Palestine Mandate poet and spy originally from Budapest, parachuted behind German lines to help save the Hungarian Jews. The Hungarians captured, tortured, and shot her dead at age 23. Reinterred in 1950 in Mt. Herzl's military cemetery in Jerusalem, hundreds of thousands lined the streets for her funeral procession.

Four of Irene and Eugene's uncles moved to America and had children. Had they remained in Europe, they probably would've been murdered because of their faith.

Steve Lawrence, Eugene's first cousin, was born Sidney Liebowitz in 1935 in Brooklyn, U.S.A. Steve married Eydie Gormé. Together they were American singing sensations. Regulars on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, Steve and Eydie performed with the likes of Frank Sinatra, who always credited Steve as the greatest singer he'd



Lili, Irene, and Elizabeth Mermelstein

ever heard. A younger generation of fans might recall Steve as Maury Sline from the 1980 *Blues Brothers* movie or as Morty Fine, Fran's father's voice from TV's *The Nanny*.

Eugene's first-cousin Sheldon Mermelstein, married to Fran Greher, was born in Brooklyn in 1944. A long-time Manhattan Lower East Sider, Sheldon retired as the Director of Investigations at America's largest social-services agency, the New York City Human Resources/Department of Social Services Administration. Fran retired as the Preschool Director of the Rosenbaum Yeshiva of North Jersey.

Irene's first cousin Milton Mermelstein, from Newark, New Jersey, was an intelligence officer on a U.S. warship that landed with the first wave at Utah Beach on D-Day. An esteemed New York City lawyer, he became chairman of board of the Alexander's Department Stores. Though Jewish, his passion was Catholic charities. He received an honorary doctorate from New York City's St. John's University, a Vincentian institution that teaches how to

find God and oneself in public service. A leader of the Knights of Malta, Milton was knighted by the Pope.

Seymour (Cy) Mermelstein, another of Irene's first cousins from Newark, New Jersey, fought in WWII with the Devil's Brigade. This 1800-man unit, 463 of whom died in combat, killed some 12,000 German soldiers and captured another 7000. The Devil's Brigade was featured in books, TV, and movies (*Devil's Brigade* (1968); *Monuments Men* (2014)). In 2013, the Devil's Brigade received the Congressional Gold Medal. The Speaker of the House called

In 1922, Eugene's family moved from Komyat in the newly formed Czechoslovakia to Satmar (Satu Mare) in Northern Transylvania, Romania, because Benjamin Lebovits, Eugene's grandfather, was murdered by two Ukrainian brothers who owed him money. Everyone knew who did it. The authorities did nothing.

The Hungarians retook Satmar from the Romanians in 1940 in a deal Hitler imposed on Romania. Eugene was drafted into the Hungarian Labor Battalions in October 1942. It was slave labor enforced by military discipline. He heard that his Battalion was going to the Eastern



Above, a dog tag Irene Mermelstein wore while in slave labor at the Lorena factor. One side was inscribed with her number, on the other she engraved her nickname, Maca. Right, Irene after liberation.

Cy and his comrades-at-arms "the finest of the finest." Cy also helped liberate Germany's Buchenwald Concentration Camp, where the Nazis crucified priests upside down.

550,000 American Jews fought in WWII. 38,338 died. 52,000, including Milton and Cy, earned military honors. For these GI Jews, fighting the Germans was a personal affair. So was defending America, their home.

Unlike the handful who escaped to America, most of Irene and Eugene's relatives remained in Europe. The Holocaust destroyed their world.

Front. No Jew who went was ever heard from again. Eugene escaped in September 1943. He was lucky. The German and Hungarian armies used the Jewish Battalion slaves as human mine sweepers. Two of Irene's brothers, Dr. Arnold Mermelstein, a lawyer, and Dr. Ernest Mermelstein, a dentist, both Battalion slaves, lived through the mines but perished on the Eastern Front when the Nazi SS or the Hungarians locked them inside a barn and burned it down. Arnold and Ernest were married. Their spouses, Ettu and Rachel, survived the camps and moved respectively to Israel and Canada after the war.

Eugene eluded the fate of Irene's brothers by hiding in Budapest in September 1943. The Hungarians put a price on his head for de-

sertion. His face was on wanted posters. And Budapest was unsafe. The Hungarian Arrow Cross fascist militiamen — the Nyilas — spent their days lynching Jews from lampposts and shooting 20,000 of them into the Danube.

One day, Eugene wore a monogrammed shirt with his real initials on it. Another Jew caught him and demanded hush money. Eugene refused, saying, “You’re a Jew. You’ll never turn me in.” But he did, and Hungarian counter-intelligence arrested Eugene. Eugene was imprisoned and tortured in the Buda Castle, the Gestapo headquarters, and then turned over to the Hungarians for a court-martial show trial. He was tried in Kolosvar (Cluj) for desertion before Hungarian military judges, who sentenced him to death by firing squad. By day during the trial, the firing squad was practicing in the courthouse yard. By night, Jews, including Eugene’s family, held candlelight vigils outside his prison.

Three months before the near-total annihilation of the Northern Transylvanian Jews, the rabbis and the governing Jewish Council placed a tax on every relatively rich Jewish family in three cities to bribe Hungarian Col.-General Lajos Veress de Dálnok, the Deputy Regent of Hungary, to commute Eugene’s sentence. Redeeming Jewish captives is a religious commandment called *pidyon shvuyim*. Izrael Lieb Berko, later martyred in Auschwitz, collected the bribe to save Eugene. (Izrael’s grandson is a Legal Aid Society lawyer in New York City.) The court resented Eugene to 10 years’ hard labor.

Eugene didn’t complete his sentence. He escaped from hard labor after a few months and hid for a few months on the estate of Count János Esterházy, a righteous gentile. By then the Soviets had liberated the area. But the Soviets captured and jailed Eugene in Debrecen, Hungary, pending his deportation to Siberia as a stateless person. Eugene talked his way out of jail after two months by befriending the prison’s Soviet commanding officer, a Jewess.

He then returned to Satmar in late 1944 and joined the Siguranța Statului, King Michael I’s Romanian secret police. (King Michael had

No. No.	Name	Surname	Gr. Dist.	Religion	Destination
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Irene and Lili’s train transport from Auschwitz II-Birkenau to Lorenz on September 12, 1944, Irene’s 19th birthday

led the August 1944 coup that caused Romania to switch sides and join the Soviets against Germany and Hungary.) Part time Eugene co-owned a textile store in Satmar and made a fortune smuggling people and things. He quickly went from slavery, prison, and destitution to having a beautiful apartment, a car, and a Harley Davidson motorcycle. His best friend was Satu Mare County Siguranța Chief Lt.-Col. Ludovic Weiss, a survivor whose wife was murdered. After Romania’s Soviet occupiers demanded that secret-police commanders have a college degree, Eugene forged for Weiss an entire academic record, including a doctorate-of laws diploma.

Eugene’s return to Satmar was punctuated with the knowledge that most people he knew were now dead. Eugene’s mother Toba, father Zoltan, and sister Katie were deported to Auschwitz in May 1944 and murdered. Eugene’s brother, Carol, went to Melk, a Mauthausen Concentration Satellite camp, to dig tunnels in an extermination-through-work program. Carol complained about a kapo’s cruelty to Jews. To avenge that slight, the kapo, a Jew from Satmar named Spitz, beat Carol to death in front of other inmates. A memorial with Carol’s name on it is all that’s left of him. Eugene was the only mem-

ber of his immediate family who survived the Nazis and their collaborators.

As badly as Eugene suffered, Irene suffered more.

In 1941, the Hungarian police arrested 20,000 Subcarpathian Jews — Irene and Eugene's neighbors — on the pretext that they were aliens. They were handed over to the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police and the Einsatzgruppen, the German mobile killing units, who shot them into pits in Kaminets-Podolsk over three August days. It was the Holocaust's first industrial-scale murder.

Irene attended a Ukrainian-Hungarian gymnasium, a high school that prepares students for university. She had to quit school at age 14. Hungarian law forbade Jews to attend school.

But things got worse. In April 1944, Irene and her family were arrested and herded into two of Subcarpathia's 17 Jewish ghettos. A month later, Irene and her entire immediate family, together with 90,000 other Jews, were deported to Auschwitz II–Birkenau from an obscenely teeming and filthy brick factory in Munkachevo that served as a ghetto. (Among those in that factory awaiting deportation was

Israeli actor Gal Godot's grandfather, Abraham Weiss, who survived Auschwitz.) Irene's sister Lili met a young dentist, Dr. Harry Katz, on the three-night train ride to Auschwitz. They fell in love in their cattle-car.

Gassed and cremated the day they arrived in Auschwitz were Irene's mother Rose; father Ludwig; and one-year-old Leah, Edmund and his wife Matilda's baby. (The Zyklon B (hydrogen cyanide) gas that killed them was made by the same company that made Bayer Children's Aspirin.) The story of Leah's murder is told in Matilda's sister Gaby Kramer's book, *Andor Kept His Promise from the Grave* (2006).

The SS transferred Edmund and Harry to Gross Rosen and from there to other camps. Edmund escaped during a death march by rolling down a mountain and was liberated in April 1945 by American troops in Plauen, Germany.

Inside Auschwitz, Irene was marching one day with Lili and Elizabeth, her two sisters, when the SS told her to take a path away from her sisters. Dr. Joseph Mengele, the angel of death, stood guard at this selection. He beat with his riding crop anyone voicing discontent. But he granted Irene's plea to go with her sisters. Irene says it was because she was blond with



Irene's parents Rose and Ludwig's 1905 wedding photo



Irene and Eugene in the mid-1970s

blue eyes and thus to Mengele not a Jew. That's how the three sisters went to Birkenau, taking the path now traversed in the annual March of the Living at Auschwitz as Israeli fighter jets scream overhead.

In Birkenau the sisters lived outside, in the mud. After a month, Mengele selected Irene and Lili, because of their perfect eyesight and good hands, for slave labor at a German Sudetenland munitions factory in Ober-Hohenelbe at a Gross Rosen subcamp. The train to the factory arrived on September 12, 1944, Irene's 19th birthday. The factory, operated by a company called C. Lorenz AG and owned today by Nokia, built V-1 rockets that rained over London. Lorenz, which used 24,000 slaves during WWII, also invented and built the Lorenz Cipher, known as the Enigma Machine. The V-1 rockets from Irene's factory were duds. Two German Jewish sisters, both



Irene on her 93rd birthday

them as slaves and then often worked them to death. More than 2000 German companies made fortunes exploiting the slaves assigned to them, including Krupp, IG Farben, Bosch, Henschel, Deutsche Bank, Siemens, Daimler-Benz, BMW, Ford, Opel, and Volkswagen. German pharmaceutical companies made double profits: free slaves — and an unlimited number of non-consenting victims on whom they experimented with their drugs and vaccines and on whom they performed unsanitary, murderous surgery without anesthesia.



The Mermelsteins brothers and sisters: Alex, Lili, Irene, Elizabeth, and Edmund

kapos, sabotaged every rocket, with the help of Irene, Lili, and the other Jewish women inmates.

Irene and Lili weren't the only German captives in slave labor during WWII. Germany profited during the war from its 12 million slave laborers, including children. As to the Jews, the same companies that fired their paid Jewish employees because they were Jews later rehired

As the Soviets got closer to Lorenz, the Germans left. Irene and Lili went home. Their sister, Elizabeth, remained in Auschwitz almost until Soviet liberation. One time during a roll call Mengele kicked Elizabeth in her emaciated stomach with his jackboots while calling her "Jude!" (meaning Jew). He then sent her to the gas chamber. But it was full, and she returned to her bunk.

Elizabeth's first husband, Dr. Eugene Klein, a lawyer, was deported to Auschwitz and never heard from again. In Satmar after the war she remarried blond and blue-eyed Joseph Zelig, whose first wife and two sons were murdered. Joe, hiding in Budapest during the war, lived in the Swiss embassy and worked with Swiss Vice-Counsel Carl Lutz, who saved 62,000 Jews.

Eugene courted Irene. On September 11, 1945, they married in Satmar. Irene would turn 20 the next day; Eugene had turned 24 five weeks earlier. They had a daughter, Agi, named after Irene's best friend, who never returned from the camps. Lili married Harry upon their liberation.

Many Jewish survivors after the war tried to go Mandate Palestine to break the British blockade, in place until Israel's independence in 1948. As a Siguranța agent and smuggler, Eugene was in charge of a few hundred displaced Jews who traveled from Hungary through Romania on their way to sail to Palestine as part of the Aliyah Bet movement.

He also saved the remnants of Irene's family, including Lili, Harry, Matilda, and Edmund, by leading an armed rescue mission across the Iron Curtain from Romania into Tisza-Újlak (Vylock) in Soviet Subcarpathia (now Zakarpattia, Ukraine) and back.

(After Irene's sister-in-law Matilda passed away at age 38 in Montreal, Edmund married Polly Baron from Radom, Masovian Voivodeship, Poland. Polly had witnessed the murder of her parents Israel and Blima Baran and brother Shaiyeh Yossle Baran, three among the 3.2 million Jewish Poles murdered in the Holocaust. Polly went to Auschwitz at age 13. She, brother Albert, and sisters Manya, Shayva Rosner, and Chava Ita survived the Holocaust.)

After paying a fortune in bribes and for his service to the Kingdom of Romania, Eugene in late 1947 secured valid passports and exit visas in Bucharest, Romania's capital, to escape from Communist Europe. (In August 1948, eight months after Irene and Eugene left Romania, the Siguranța became the *Departamentul Securității Statului*, the vicious and Soviet NKVD-controlled Securitate protecting Communist Party Secretary Nicolae Ceaușescu with hundreds of thousands of informants.) From Romania, Irene and Eugene went to Belgium, where Eugene forged residence and work permits to be in Antwerp. Irene graduated from an ORT fashion school, summa cum laude. Canada accepted them in 1950 because of the WWII ser-

vice to the British Crown of Irene's elder brother, Alex Mermelstein.

Alex had fought for the Free Czech forces, stationed in Warwickshire, England, where in 1940 he married his wife Sofie Barr, a Jewish orphan from Germany. In May 1942, a team of Alex's Czech co-soldiers from Warwickshire assassinated, in a Prague suburb, SS General Reinhard Heydrich, head of the German Security Service. Heydrich was the architect of the January 1942 Wannsee Conference plans for the final solution to the Jewish question — the extermination of Europe's nine million Jews. Adolf Eichmann, later hanged in Israel as a war criminal, prepared the Conference minutes. Among Heydrich's other jobs, he commanded the *Einsatzgruppen*, which, trailing the German armed forces, murdered 1.3 million Jews by mass shooting and gassing. The Heydrich assassination, documented in the movie thriller *Anthropoid* (2016), was the only time the Allies killed a top Nazi.

From Canada, Irene and Eugene moved in 1979 to Hallandale Beach, Florida, where Irene lives happily and is planning no more great escapes. Of the seven Mermelstein siblings, only Irene, the youngest, still lives.

Most of Irene and Eugene's uncles, aunts, and cousins were murdered in the Holocaust. [Their lives and deaths will be told in the forthcoming book, *Holocaust Houdinis*.] But some survived. Here are a few of their stories:

Eugene's first cousin Naftali (Tuli) Deutsch, deported at 12½ years old, survived Auschwitz and four other camps. After the war he served in the Israel Defense Forces before moving to California. In 2008 he published *A Holocaust Survivor in the Footsteps of His Past*. His parents and two of his brothers were murdered. His four sisters and a brother survived.

One sister, Eugene's first cousin Irene Deutsch, endured Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Married to the late Sam Kreitenberg, another Subcarpathian Holocaust survivor, she died in 2016 in Beverly Hills. In April 2018, during the West Point Club's 2018 Holocaust

Days of Remembrance, 1st Lt. Zoe Kreitenberg, a 2016 West Point alumna and Irene and Sam's granddaughter, spoke with honor, love, and pride about her grandparents' Holocaust experiences. With her was Lt.-Gen. Robert L. Caslen, West Point's superintendent.

Tuli's surviving brother was Eugene's deaf-mute first cousin Harry Dunai. Harry had numerous near-death encounters in Budapest until the Soviets liberated him at age 11. With his daughter, he published, in 2002, *Surviving in Silence: A Deaf Boy in the Holocaust: The Harry I. Dunai Story*.

Isser Mermelstein, Eugene's first cousin, hid in the forests of Subcarpathia. Isser's brother was shot by Jew hunters who were tracking them down; three other brothers, one sister, and his parents were also murdered. But Isser and a sister survived. With Eugene and two other partners, Isser made a fortune after the war smuggling people and goods between Romania and Hungary.

Eugene's first-cousin-once-removed Jack Steinmetz was deported from Subcarpathia directly into Birkenau in May-June 1944. His parents (Eugene's first cousins) and siblings were murdered in the camps. Jack was 15. He was in a bunk for youths when, during a roll call, Dr. Mengele stuck out his riding crop. The boys' heads had to reach it while walking below it. Jack wasn't tall enough to reach the riding crop. So Mengele sent him to the gas chamber. He was in the chamber's ante-room, watching SS officers stuff Jews into the gas chamber, when a German officer saved him: The officer came into the ante-room and took Jack and 13 other Jewish boys away for work details, in a story told years later in the Canadian Jewish News. (Eugene saved Jack by smuggling him to and from Romania and Hungary after the war and paid for him to be smuggled into Germany.)

A cousin common to Irene and Eugene is Aranka (Meyer) Siegel, later married to Gilbert Siegal, a Harvard Law School graduate, New York City lawyer, and World War II United States Airforce officer. Aranka was deported at age 13 from Subcarpathia to Auschwitz, to Christianstadt and, following a five-week winter

death march, to Bergen-Belsen. All of Aranka's siblings but one were murdered at Auschwitz. Aranka wrote a children's book about Feige Rosner, her grandmother from Komyat: *Memoires of Babi* (2008). She also wrote two other books about the Holocaust: *Upon the Head of the Goat: A Childhood in Hungary 1939-1944* (1981), and *Grace in the Wilderness: After the Liberation 1945-1948* (1985).

Despite the evil they witnessed, Irene and Eugene always looked for the good in people. They were defiant toward their German and Hungarian fascist tormentors. Otherwise, they were optimistic and resilient. In their hearts was love, never hate. They were filled with character and courage. And heroism. More than luck and smarts, that's how they survived the Holocaust and the years that followed.

Here to light a candle are Irene Lebovits; her son and daughter-in-law Justices Gerald Lebovits and Margaret Chan; and her grandchildren Natalie and Kenneth Lebovits and Or Zaidenberg.



Sabbath candlesticks owed by Eugene Lebovits's family, the family's only possession that survived the war

Keystone Presentation by Menachem Z. Rosensaft, Esq.

On the 75th Anniversary of the Destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto, Remembering Those We've Lost

On a train from Berlin to Poland last week, I thought about my brother Benjamin, who was five-and-a-half when he was murdered by the Nazis. Today I honor his memory and the memory of all who perished in the Holocaust.

By Menachem Z. Rosensaft · April 26, 2018

Seventy-five years ago, on April 26, 1943, SS *Gruppenführer*—a rank equivalent to major-general—Jürgen Stroop reported to his superiors that his shock troops had that day combed through “the entire former living quarter” of the Warsaw Ghetto. “Practically without exception,” Stroop wrote,

the shock troops reported resistance that was nonetheless completely broken through returning of fire or blowing up bunkers. It appears that the ranks are finding the Jews and bandits most tenacious and capable of resistance. Several bunkers were forcibly opened whose inhabitants had not come to the surface since the beginning of the Action. In a series of cases the inhabitants of the bunkers, after the bunkers had been successfully blown up, were scarcely able to crawl to the surface. According to statements of the captured Jews, a large number of inhabitants in the bunkers have become insane due to the heat, the thick smoke and the successful explosions.

This was the eighth day of the Warsaw



Menachim Rosensaft

Ghetto Uprising, the first organized urban armed resistance against the Nazis in German-occupied Europe. Stroop wrote that the “result of today’s undertaking” was as follows:

30 Jews displaced, 1,330 Jews pulled out of the bunkers and immediately destroyed, 362 Jews shot in battle. In total captured today: 1,722 Jews. Thereby the total number of captured Jews was raised to 29,186. Beyond that, it is likely that countless Jews died in the 13 blown-up bunkers and through fires.

Seventy-three years ago, on April 26, 1945, tens of thousands of erstwhile inmates of the Nazi concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen near the German city of Hanover were struggling to remain alive. When British troops had

entered the camps 11 days earlier, they encountered a devastation of humanity for which they were entirely unprepared. Most of the 58,000 inmates there, the overwhelming majority of them Jews, were too weak even to walk. In the main camp, more than 40,000 prisoners were crammed into barracks that should have held no more than 8,000; between 15,000 and 25,000 more who had arrived in early April from the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp complex were in barracks of a nearby Wehrmacht army base. My mother, who had been at Bergen-Belsen since the previous November when she was sent there from Auschwitz-Birkenau, described the camp in the days prior to liberation as:

an indescribable hell. . . . The camp was overcrowded. Typhus, tuberculosis, and other epidemics raged. In the hospital and throughout the camp about a thousand people a day lay on the floor, starving and dying. . . . The small crematorium could not cope with all the corpses, even though it was kept burning day and night. The unburned corpses were strewn all over the camp. The SS, who felt that their own end was near, cut off the water and electricity. We were given one piece of bread per person only three times a week and one-half bowl of so-called soup daily. On top of this the Germans kept us in mortal fear by telling us that the camp was surrounded by mines and that we would be blown up if we tried to escape. Such was our situation on the eve of liberation. Disease, starvation, despair, fear, and not a single ray of hope.

In a lecture describing conditions at Bergen-Belsen when that camp was liberated, Lieutenant Colonel M.W. Gonin, the British officer

who commanded the 11th Light Field Ambulance during the camp's liberation, said that there were

“at least 20,000 sick suffering from the most virulent diseases known to man, all of whom required urgent hospital treatment and 30,000 men and women who might die if they were not treated, but who certainly would die if they were not fed and removed from the horror camp. What we had not got was nurses, doctors, beds, bedding, clothes, drugs, dressings, thermometers, bedpans or any of the essentials of medical treatment, and worst of all, no common language.”

Within a few days following the liberation, Brigadier H. L. Glyn-Hughes, the Deputy Director of Medical Services of the British Army of the Rhine, appointed my mother, a not yet 33-year-old Jewish dentist from Sosnowiec, Poland, to organize and head a group of doctors and nurses among the survivors to help care for the camp's thousands of critically ill inmates.

For weeks on end following the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, my mother and her team of 28 doctors and 620 other female and male volunteers, only a few of whom were trained nurses, worked round the clock with the British military medical personnel to try to save as many of the survivors as possible. Despite their desperate efforts — it was not until May 11, 1945, that the daily death rate fell below 100 — the Holocaust claimed 13,944 additional victims at Bergen-Belsen during the two months after the liberation.

The end of the war found the survivors alone, mostly abandoned, just as the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto had been alone, mostly abandoned. “For the greater part of the liberated Jews of Bergen-Belsen,” my mother recalled

many years later

“there was no ecstasy, no joy at our liberation. We had lost our families, our homes. We had no place to go, nobody to hug, nobody who was waiting for us, anywhere. We had been liberated from death and from the fear of death, but we were not free from the fear of life.”

Last Friday, I returned to New York from Germany and Poland where I participated in commemorations for the 73rd anniversary of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen and the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Both events were deeply moving, but they were also marked by an atmosphere of apprehension if not outright alarm regarding the future of Holocaust remembrance in both countries.

The right-extremist, anti-immigration Alternative for Germany—or AfD—party is now the largest opposition party in the German federal parliament. A number of its leaders have been accused of Holocaust denial.

Three months ago, Wolfgang Gedeon, an AfD lawmaker in the German state parliament of Baden-Württemberg, objected to the installation of plaques bearing the names of Jewish victims of National Socialism – so-called *Stolpersteine*, or stumbling stones – in the pavement outside their last residences before deportation. “With their actions, the stumbling stone initiators impose a culture of remembrance on their fellow human beings, dictating to them how they should remember who and when,” Gedeon declared. “Who gives these obtrusive moralists the right to do so?”

The very idea that adherents of any present-day variation of the Hitlerite ideology might be able to influence how the Shoah is remembered in Germany is abhorrent on every possible level.

In Poland, meanwhile, the enactment of a new law that seeks to criminalize holding the

Polish nation responsible for the atrocities committed on Polish soil during World War II is widely seen as an attempt to whitewash those Poles who victimized Jews during the years of the Holocaust.

Two sentences of *Gruppenführer* Stroop’s report on the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto jump out in this connection: “In the event of the capture of a Jew in the Aryan part of the city of Warsaw,” he wrote,

“the Polish police was authorized to give to every Polish policeman one-third of the cash in the possession of the Jew in question. This measure has already produced results.”

There is no question that there were Poles who helped and saved Jews at the risk of their own lives, and they fully deserved to be recognized and honored for their heroism. At the same time, there is also no question that there were Poles who betrayed Jews to the Germans during the Holocaust years, who raped Jewish women, and who murdered Jews.

We know full well that there were Germans who resisted the Nazis, but no one of any integrity would dare suggest that they were representative of the German people as a whole. Similarly, the Poles who rescued Jews were the exception, not the norm.

The Polish parliament recently established a national holiday honoring Poles who helped Jews during the Holocaust. The obvious concern is that such a holiday may enable Poles to disregard those of their compatriots who were not, in the words of the bill establishing it, “faithful to the highest ethical values.”

Along the same lines, there are also other well-intentioned but misguided individuals who focus only on the Righteous, thereby creating a false, not to say distorted, version of history. They, too, must be called to task.

Today is not the time, this is not the place, to discuss at length the contemporary political challenges that confront us with respect to

the future of Holocaust remembrance. It is critical, however, that we not allow Holocaust remembrance to become politicized. We must insist on absolute historical accuracy in the way the event is chronicled. It is only by rejecting not just Holocaust denial but any type of historical revisionism that we will be able to counter resurgent anti-Semitism and the other forms of racism and bigotry that are now manifesting themselves in the very countries where the Shoah was perpetrated.

Let us also remind ourselves that one paramount reason why we are here today is that we must not, we cannot allow our dead to fade from our consciousness.

On the night of August 3-4, 1943, a little boy named Benjamin arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau with his parents and grandparents. In her posthumously published memoirs, my mother recalled her final moments with her son, my brother:

“We were guarded by SS men and women. One SS man was standing in front of the people and he started the selection. With a single movement of his finger, he was sending some people to the right and some to the left. . . . Men were separated from women. People with children were sent to one side, and young people were separated from older looking ones. No one was allowed to go from one group to the other. Our five-and-a-half-year-old son went with his father. Something that will haunt me to the end of my days occurred during those first moments. As we were separated, our son turned to me and asked, ‘Mommy, are we going to live or die?’ I didn’t answer this question.”

Benjamin is one of between 1,000,000 and 1,500,000 Jewish children who were murdered in the Shoah. Since my mother’s death in 1997, he has existed inside of me. I see his face

in my mind, try to imagine his voice, his fear as the gas chamber doors slammed shut, his final tears. If I were to forget him, he would disappear.

But it is not enough for me to remember my brother. I must transmit his memory, his image, into the future, so that one day my grandchildren will tell their children and grandchildren about Benjamin.

With this thought in mind, allow me to conclude my remarks today with these words that I wrote last week on a train from Berlin to Warsaw:

he
drifts aimlessly
through the snow
above the snow
the ghost child
does not know
who he is
who he was
if he was
he
does not speak
cannot speak
and because
he no longer knows
how to speak
refuses to speak
he
cannot understand
cannot recognize
cannot hear
words
laughter
screams
certainly not prayers
he
will not sanctify
glorify
forgive
Curse

he does not know how many
minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years
he has drifted aimlessly
through the snow
above the snow
drenched by rain
scorched under an august sun
over grass
flowers
like the last flowers
he saw before
but always between
decaying
wooden walls
he
no longer remembers
a smile
a hug
a kiss
only faint echoes
of a lullaby

another ghost child walks
toward him
beside him
they
do not see each other
do not touch
no matter
they know they once
heard the same lullaby
became
the same ashes
dissipated into
the same grayness
two ghost children
drift aimlessly
through the snow
above the snow

Menachem Z. Rosensaft is General Counsel of the World Jewish Congress, and teaches about the law of genocide at the law schools of Columbia and Cornell Universities. He is the editor of the recently published [The World Jewish Congress, 1936-2016](#).



Menachem Rosensaft in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp hospital with his parents right after he was born

Editor's Note

Each year an exhibit of historic images and artifacts displayed during the week of the Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony in the rotunda of 60 Centre Street lends visual reality to the narratives read by the Administrative Judge. Small and carefully focused, exhibits illuminate some essential but almost unfathomable aspect of the Holocaust—the persistence of religious faith, the deeds of the righteous, the bureaucratic

machinery of state-sponsored genocide.

Jewish Rescue Activism in Switzerland—Recha and Vitzchok Sternbuch is the fourth of consecutive exhibits brought to the court by the Amud Aish Memorial Museum, whose mission is to emphasize the experience of observant Jewish communities during the Holocaust. In their own words, museum curators describe the rare objects and photographs they assembled.

Jewish Rescue Activism in Switzerland—Recha and Vitzchok Sternbuch *Amud Aish Memorial Museum*

The special exhibit on rescue activism during and immediately after the Holocaust presents three intersecting narratives.

- There is a visual dialogue between the efforts of Swiss Jewish rescue activist Recha Sternbuch and Captain Paul Gruninger of the Swiss Border Police. Both worked seamlessly together to help Jewish German and Austrian refugees enter Switzerland in 1938. As Paul Gruninger falsified entry registrations at the border, Recha Sternbuch waited on the Swiss side, offering succor,

hope and accommodations to the forlorn refugees, often in her own home.

- The exhibit is the first in the United States to document the efforts of Captain Gruninger. The Captain used his own monies to purchase winter coats for the refugees as they waited for days and weeks for their entry papers into Switzerland. For these humane efforts, he was decommissioned by the Swiss authorities and lost his pension. The exhibit contains original artifacts documenting Paul Gruninger's life, such as his Righteous Amongst the Nations Medallion



Captain Paul Gruninger



Recha Sternbuch in forefront with Rabbi Eliezer Silver, 1946
Schenkolewski Collection, AAMM

awarded under Yad Vashem Law and his authentic Border Police saber.

- Aside from their important rescue work in Switzerland with Captain Gruninger, Recha and Yitzchok Sternbuch were involved in multiple rescue activities, internationally, ranging from support for Jewish refugees in Japanese Occupied Shanghai, to negotiations with SS Commandeer Heinrich Himmler - mediated through Jean-Marie Musy, a former President of the Federal Council of Switzerland - which resulted in the release of 1,200 prisoner from Theresienstadt. The Sternbuchs were the first to give notice to Jewish leaders in September of 1942 of the mass deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto. In 1946, Recha Sternbuch

joined the Chief Rabbi of Mandate Palestine, Yitzhak Herzog, on Transport 750, taking Jewish orphans out of Poland to safety. Other unique documents on display were the Hotel Polski lists, compiled by Recha and Yitzchok Sternbuch, listing the holders of foreign visas, who were deported from the infamous hotel in Warsaw to the Bergen-Belsen Concentration camp. One of the names on yet another displayed list is that of the German Jew, Max Hirschmann. Remarkably, in the midst of the horrors of Bergen-Belsen, he had in his possession a shofar, used by the most famous passenger on the Kasztner Train, the Satmar Rebbe, in Bergen-Belsen on Rosh Hashonah in 1944. The exhibit prominently displayed this precious artifact.

Shofar blown in Bergen-Belsen by the last Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, at risk of forfeiting his life



Recha Sternbuch's passport

