Chapter 7

My Parents' Holocaust Lives

By Shirley Press

My parents are both Holocaust survivors and I would feel remiss if I did not include their stories in my book. World War II ended in 1945, but it never really ended for my parents. Although they did not go through the war together and met here, in America, their common experiences drew them together in a way that only other survivors might understand. Fate or luck made them survivors when most others perished. Their lives are a part of my life and that of my sister.

In childhood Barb and I realized our parents were different, but we weren't quite sure how. When I was 9, a Hebrew schoolteacher taught us an age-appropriate history of the Holocaust. Then the pieces started to fit together. My parents hadn't spoken much about their past. They wanted to make our lives as normal – as American – as possible.

Yet the Holocaust never really went away. Mom, when exasperated with our behavior, would sometimes remind us that she weighed about 70 pounds and was at death's door when she was liberated.

I don't know how many times while we were growing up she said, "When I was 15, I had already lost my parents and two sisters."

Therefore, Barb and I hid personal problems and did not tell her about things that were bothering us, for they paled in comparison to her life. For example, the kids at Hebrew school teased me relentlessly and I should have transferred to another school. She never knew, because I kept my distress a secret. That's what the second generation did.

Shoah is the Hebrew word for “calamity,” or “catastrophe,” and its use is now mostly reserved for the Holocaust. The push to gather testimony from survivors didn't really get underway until the 80s and 90s, long after my dad had passed away. Had my father lived, I am certain he would have also given his testimony to the Shoah Foundation, now under the auspices of the University of Southern California.

After I won the lottery, I had time to further explore my parents' lives. In 2005, Bill and I went on a trip to Central Europe sponsored by the Greater Miami Jewish Federation. We saw some of the concentration camps and visited cities and towns in Poland where Jewish life was once so vibrant.

In Warsaw, we went to a functioning synagogue. Even so, it was a place where the past refused to stay silent. “Every day Poles come to me saying, 'I think I'm Jewish and I want to learn about Judaism,' ” the rabbi told us.

But in Krakow the main synagogue had been turned into a museum; there are no more Jews left to use it. Then we went to Auschwitz. It was awful. Auschwitz looked so serene, attractive, red brick buildings on the outside. It ripped me to pieces to know that my mother and aunt had been there.

A researcher at the Auschwitz library was able to find just one piece of information about my mother, from a camp log dated August 11, 1944. Translated into English, it stated, “1,999 female Jews who are selected from the transit camp in Birkenau receive Nos. A-21001 – A-22999. There are probably Hungarians and Poles among them.” There was the number that had been tattooed onto my mother's left arm, A-21653 in that grouping – absolute proof that she had been there and the Holocaust existed. Birkenau is also known as “Auschwitz II – Birkenau” an extermination camp three kilometers from the original Auschwitz camp. The librarian suggested

that I contact the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen, Germany for more information.

The ITS is a facility run by the International Commission of the Red Cross which houses 50 million records about the 17.5 million victims of Nazi persecution, including Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, the handicapped and other “undesirables.” Most of its records can be requested for online.

When I started writing this book, I continued to research my parents’ experiences during the Holocaust. For my father’s history, I had to rely on documents and seek out stories from family and friends. According to ITS records, Gershon Press was born on June 14, 1918, in the Lithuanian town of Kovno. There are no records of my father’s parents Beines and Sonja (nee Cohn) or his younger brothers Bery, Meyer and Welre. The only recollection I have of my grandfather that my father told us was that he had been drafted into the Russian army during World War I. My father also had told us that he was really born in 1921 and that his official records were wrong. Sam Sherron who had been a childhood friend of one of my father’s younger brothers confirmed this. After Sam and my father came to America, they found each other and grew close. When I interviewed Sam in 2010 at age 84, he specifically remembered that my father had been five years older than him. Sam had also been in the Kovno ghetto with my father. Despite the horrors of the Holocaust, Sam insisted that my father survived to live the life of "a happy person.”

Another person who knows about my father’s past and remembers him well is our former neighbor, Jim Serchia – the one who gave kids nickels and dimes for answering his current affairs questions correctly. He and my dad were best friends. Jim said that Gershon had to shoulder a lot of family responsibility after his father died early from a stroke.

“He had to become the breadwinner,” Jim said.

Other facts Jim recalls is that sometime during my father’s early childhood his family moved to Sveksna, Lithuania, which is not far from the Baltic Sea. The earliest documentation of the town is in the 14th century according to *Sveksna: Our Town* by Esther Herschman Rechtschafner. She wrote a Jewish history of the town that is available online. According to Rechtschafner's research, Jews had a rich past in Sveksna. The Jewish community dates from at least the 17th century and was the site of an important Yeshiva renowned for its brilliant scholars. There was also plenty of anti-Semitism, which lasted well into the 20th century. As late as the mid-1930s, a rabbi was accused of killing a Christian boy to use his blood to make matzoh.

At the time of the 1941 German invasion, my father was living and working in Kovno, which is not far from Sveksna. His job was shearing the skin off cattle and curing it into shoe leather. His mother and younger brothers had stayed behind in Sveksna. The Nazis captured them and murdered them with machine guns, part of the Germans' large-scale immediate slaughter of the Jews. They were buried in ditches in a mass grave in Inkakliai, Lithuania, in September 1941.

My father was arrested on August 15, 1941, at the age of 20, and was confined in Kovno's ghetto. In 1943, it was converted to the Kovno concentration camp where he became a slave laborer. On July 29, 1944, he was transferred to Dachau in Germany where he was assigned the number 84847.

He told my sister and me that he was a baker inside the camp making bread for the German soldiers and hiding some for himself and his friends. On one of his official documents, his profession was listed as weaver. As we were growing up, we saw no evidence of either trade

in his life. He never ever cooked. He never sewed – with one exception. I remember that my father accidently sliced off the edge of his thumb when chopping meat in our grocery store. He calmly and without anesthetic sutured it back together with needle and thread. He saw a doctor the next day who said he did a fine job. So maybe he did know how to sew.

The only other story I have from that time is from Jim. “He said he was running away from the Germans and eventually got caught. He said he was fortunate to have served for a German officer, or non-com, and became more or less a valet. He would do chores for him,” Jim said. “He said the officer turned out to be decent and that he had enough to eat.” It’s unclear at what point this happened.

My father was liberated from Dachau by The United States Army on April 29, 1945. According to ITS records, he was registered in a displaced persons (DP) camp known as Feldafing on October 10, 1945. He also spent time in the Landsberg DP camp, the largest such camp in Europe.

In my research, I came across Colonel Irving Heymont’s description of the camp in *Generations,* the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Fall 2009 newsletter.

“The camp is filthy beyond description. Sanitation is virtually unknown,” he wrote in September 1945. “Words fail me when I try to think of an adequate description. The people of the camp themselves appear demoralized beyond hope of rehabilitation. They appear to be beaten both spiritually and physically, with no hopes or incentives for the future…” The colonel underestimated the resolve of people like my parents and other survivors.

On May 10, 1946, according to the passenger manifest form, my father boarded the "SS Marine Flasher" which also sailed from Bremen. The fare was $142, the equivalent of $1,589 in

2010. The Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS) assisted my father in leaving his devastated life in Europe. He landed in New York on May 20, 1946.

His first cousin Betty vividly remembers that date because her marriage to Sig Ettinger took place one day earlier in Philadelphia. She and her new husband were on their honeymoon 90 miles north in New York City. The next day her father, Uncle Morris Dworkin, knocked on her hotel room door.

“What are you doing here?” she asked in total shock.

“I’m here to pick up your first cousin Gershon who survived the war,” he replied.

When he arrived in America, my father was fluent in Yiddish, Lithuanian, Italian, German and English. Betty and her brother Leon told me that my father spoke English when he arrived in the United States. He must have learned it in one of the DP camps where classes were given to help the refugees with their eventual resettlement.

My father’s Aunt Rose and Uncle Morris sponsored his emigration. Aunt Rose was my father's mother's sister. They grew up in Vitebsk, Belarus, which is the birthplace of Marc Chagall. Rose fell in love with a Lithuanian dreamer named Morris Dworkin, born in 1894, who emigrated to America at 19 to find a better life. He sent for Rose to join him and they married in the United States in 1914 and settled in Camden. They had three children Harry, Leon and Betty.

After the war, my dad then went to live with his aunt and uncle in the apartment above Morris’s grocery store on Fairview Street in Camden. Cousin Leon, who was a WWII veteran, shared a room with my father – the same bedroom my sister and I shared many years later. Cousin Harry, also a vet, had married and was living elsewhere. According to Leon, my father was a good-natured man who "fit in nicely" and "adapted well to this country." Gershon, he said, felt more like a brother than a cousin.

Time spent together at home and at the family store left Leon with the impression that my father was not bitter about what had happened to him. Cousin Betty also felt that my father was not bitter.

Jim Serchia, described my father as a man "with a big heart" who "had a knack for making friends" and was open with everyone. "When he had that grocery store, if someone said, 'Gershon, could I have an apple?' he would say 'take the apple!' " Jim said. "He had a heart of gold. He was very happy to have survived the things that went on in Europe, very happy his aunt and uncle sponsored him." Jim said. "He was very happy to be here. I don't recall him ever complaining or saying anything derogatory."

He said my father was willing to discuss the war years, perhaps because Jim had his own memories of Europe. He had served with the 38th Mechanized Cavalry and landed on Omaha Beach six days after the initial Allied invasion. Jim said that his unit went through France, Belgium and Germany and he witnessed the horror of the concentration camps.

Sol Zytcer, another friend, met my father two years after his arrival in America. He spoke about my father's job switch from a 75 cent per hour presser to working in a shoe leather factory, which paid more. The latter job lasted only two days because Uncle Morris needed him to work in the grocery store. Sol labeled my father "a lovable man" who would sneak over to his house to eat schmaltz herring, butter and rye bread, which were against his doctor's orders because of his sky-high cholesterol.

Sol also remembers the night my parents met. It was at a meeting in Philadelphia where an official from Israel was speaking. Dad was talking too loudly; my mother turned around and told him to be quiet. As they say, this was the beginning of a beautiful romance.

“He just smiled all the time,” my mother said. They married on December 18, 1948, and were together until he died.

My father was the one waiting at the New York Harbor to meet Aunt Ruchel and her husband, my Uncle Herbert "Hashel" Kirschner who she met and married in a DP camp, when they arrived in America in 1949. Uncle Hashel also recalls my father's down-to-earth nature.

“He was a nice, nice man," he said, "who never thought of himself as a big shot.”

Sadly, it was an incident here, in America that seemed to finally take the heart out of my dad, who had overcome so much. Robbers came to the grocery store and locked my father in the meat storage locker. He almost froze to death. I always felt this may have contributed to his death, just a few months later on March 30, 1970. His friend Sol believes that it changed Gershon since he seemed "more depressed and less trusting" after the attack. My father’s tragic early death from a massive stroke meant that he missed out on so much in life especially knowing his five grandchildren.

I have more information on my mother's experience in Europe. Not only have I been able to talk to her but also have the ITS research and five hours on tape of her being interviewed about her life. My mother’s only surviving sister, Ruchel Kirschner (Aunt Ruchel), also recorded her story for the Shoah Foundation. We also have video recordings of my mother talking at New Jersey schools and noting what a lifetime and a world away it was from Čierny Potok, where my mother grew up with her three sisters Ruchel, Bluma and Malka, and her parents, Sheindel and Illes Grunberg.

Though the ITS has documents relating to my mother and Aunt Ruchel (and nothing about my grandparents or Bluma and Malka) it's my mother's tapes that bring the era to life in a way no document ever could.

She was born Lenke Grunberg on September 14, 1929, the second oldest of Illes Grunberg and Sheindel (aka Zseni) Schwimmer Grunberg in Čierny Potok, close to the Carpathian Mountains. Her father was a businessman who owned a farm and maybe a mill. He was an orphan. My mother remembers Čierny Potok as an idyllic small town where everyone knew each other.

“If there was a Gentile wedding, a Jewish wedding, everybody was there, whether you were invited or not,” she said. “There was no place I would rather be.”

My mother and her sister adored their mother, Sheindel. “I thought nobody in this world had such a mother as we did,” she said, remembering her as a gentle woman who never raised her voice.

Townspeople would ask Sheindel to write letters for them, and my mother remembers her reading the Bible to the girls on Shabbat. “If mother would drop something, all of us would run to pick it up,” she said. “I would rather be with her than any of my friends.”

The nightmare of her life began at age 14, on April 9, 1944, the second day of Passover. At that time, the Hungarians, who were in collaboration with the Germans, controlled the town. Policemen warned the town’s few Jews against celebrating Passover, but the family went ahead. My mother, in the tape, said it was a very different Passover from the usual happy occasion; tense and frightening.

“The worst part was when I saw tears streaming down his (her father's) face. I knew something was very wrong,” she said. “I never saw him cry before that time. He knew it would probably be our last Passover.”

The next day the police forcibly removed them from their modest home and sent them to the Mukačevo ghetto in what is now Ukraine. “Dad said 'take food; make sure you are taking food.' ”

Mukačevo is the name in Czech and Slovakian. Other names for this town are Munkács in Hungarian, Munkatsch in German (and Munkatch in Yiddish), evidence of how the ruling authority was always changing in that part of the world.

When asked by the Shoah Foundation interviewer what languages she spoke, my mother replied, “We spoke Yiddish, Ukrainian, German, Hungarian, truly, I don't think we learned any language perfectly.”

On May 11, 1944, after a month in Mukačevo, they were transported to Auschwitz by rail in a locked cattle car crammed wall-to-wall.

“We had no idea where we were going,” my mother recalls. “I remember looking through this tiny window (in the cattle car) and seeing the green grass and thinking, 'how beautiful the world is, but not for us.' It was the second time I saw my father cry.”

At the camp, those assigned to the right were selected for work, at least temporarily. People deemed too old, young, feeble or too weak to work were assigned to the left and slaughtered. Her parents and sister, Malka the youngest at age 8, were murdered in the gas chambers upon arrival.

“We arrived at night,” my mother said. “No matter how eloquent a person is, there is no way to express the feeling on arrival to Auschwitz.”

“They took away the most precious thing in my life, my mother – she was only 42 years old – and my precious sister Malka,” my mother said.

My mother, Ruchel, and Bluma were sent to the barracks after their heads were shaved, the first step in the dehumanization process.

“My sister was right in front of me and I didn't recognize her,” my mother said.

On August 11, 1944, the number, A-21653 was tattooed into her left arm. No one could escape the sight of flames and smell of smoke coming from the crematoria. My mother remembers her shock at the emaciated, hollow-eyed children in the barracks. When the other girls in the barracks told her, Ruchel and Bluma that their parents and Malka were almost certainly already up in smoke, “We just cried and cried and cried.”

At Auschwitz, survival was the only goal. My mother, Ruchel and Bluma were assigned to digging ditches.

“We gave each other some kind of hope; we will get out of here, we will make it. They could never take away from me my will to live and my faith in God, though I was very angry with God,” she said.

Every day meant standing in formation for hours. Every day there was a selection. They always took somebody. Each morning my mother and her sisters would pinch their cheeks to look healthy enough to work though they were being starved and the hunger was constant. Each day they would be given soup, one piece of black bread and a little butter.

“It's the kind of hunger that there is nothing in this world you would not give for a piece of bread,” my mother said. One day, she impulsively ran out of the barracks door with her food container when she saw the people with the soup cauldron approaching. She was lucky not to have been beaten to death then and there. She was forced to kneel for hours on gravel.

A few weeks later, they were moved to Plaszow, the concentration camp portrayed in *Schindler's List.* This camp was actually worse than Auschwitz. Lice were rampant. They

labored 12 hours a day hauling stones. There were savage, unpredictable shootings and beatings. German shepherds dogged their heels, ready to attack if someone fell.

Bluma was weakening. The sisters would try and hide a piece of bread from their rations to eat later. One day, the stash was gone. A girl came crying to them, “I took it,” she sobbed. They all began crying. “Imagine, four kids crying over one piece of bread,” said my mother.

Then in August 1944, they were transported back to Auschwitz. Upon arrival, there was another selection. It was overseen by Dr. Joseph Mengele, the infamous Nazi "Angel of Death." And the worst happened. Bluma was selected.

“With one nod, they took Bluma up,” my mother remembers. “Bluma screamed to us 'please don't let me go.' ”

Ruchel tried to intercede, begging Mengele to let Bluma go. According to a tape made by Ruchel, he said to her, “Go back in line because you will die like a dog too.”

My mother said she doesn't know if Bluma died from being clubbed right in front of them, or went to the gas chambers. “Many times I still hear her screams at night.”

Now it was getting harder to keep going. “Once our sister left us, our life was absolutely ruined, hope was diminishing,” she said.

In the fall of 1944, my mother and her sister Ruchel were transferred to Bergen-Belsen. She said the stench of the dead bodies was awful. Their last camp was Buchenwald, which she and Ruchel entered December 17, 1944. For the final months, my mother was placed in a sub-camp called Markkleeberg.

Finally, with the Allies invading from all sides, my mother, sister and about 2,000 others were sent on a death march to Theresienstadt in northern Czechoslovakia. Fewer than 200 would survive. It was during the march that my mother escaped. They were forced to walk nonstop,

with just an hour or so of sleep each night. They were given a piece of bread at the beginning of each day, then nothing. After about two weeks, my mother saw a field of freshly planted potatoes. On impulse, the same kind of impulse that sent her out for extra soup, she darted into the field.

“There I go again,” she said. “I'm thinking, 'I'm just going to dig up the plants and come right back.' ” But she fainted and when she came to, the others were gone. “I woke up and there were three potatoes and no one but God was with me. Those three potatoes were the best food I ever had.”

My mother soon met up with two other death march escapees. She told us that upon liberation, she weighed approximately 70 pounds and she is 5 feet 3 inches tall. She just began walking and walking.

After the war, my mother learned that Ruchel had made it alive to Theresienstadt. Eventually, they reunited in Čierny Potok. Their home had been turned into a school. They were given a room, but it was clear there was no future there. “At that time I was very surprised they were not happy to see us,” my mother said.

She went to work in a shop in Prague and in 1946 was placed in a series of displaced persons camps. At first, people talked about their experiences. Then they stopped.

“We had the incentive to build a new life, the incentive to work hard, not hating people,” she said.

Soon she was on her way to that new life. She began her journey to the United States on October 15, 1947, also at the port of Bremen aboard the "Ernie Pyle.” By the time my mother arrived in New York, her name had been changed from Lenke to Leah by immigration authorities. Her American relatives, who were her sponsors, Uncle Louis and Aunt Zina

Schwimmer, met her in New York. Uncle Louis was my grandmother's brother who immigrated to the United States in 1912 when he was 19 years old. She went to live with them and their daughter Dorothy, who is a year older than my mother, in Philadelphia where her aunt and uncle owned a grocery store. My mother went to work in a factory and took English lessons at night at the local high school. My mother was also introduced to two more first cousins. Her mother had another brother Jacob who also left Europe before the war. Jacob married Katie and had three children Seymour, Evelyn and Irving. My mother became close with Cousin Seymour and his wife Ruthie and with Cousin Evelyn and her husband Philip Kalish. My family got together with them and their children throughout our childhood.

My parents each dealt in their own way with the tragedy of losing their families and being tortured in the concentration camps. Both were motivated to begin anew in America. They insisted on learning proper English and rarely spoke the other languages they knew. I wish that they had taught us Yiddish. My mother worked hard to speak unaccented English. I thought her English was perfect yet people always asked where my mother was from so I guess she had a slight accent after all. Each came here with nothing. Just surviving was a miracle. To assimilate as well as they did, make a living and raise two successful daughters was very hard and quite an achievement.

Having children helped them adjust to their post-war lives. We were proof of their existence and gave them a future. I was named Shirley in memory of my grandmothers, Shaindel and Sonja. Barbara was named for my mother's sister Bluma and her middle name Ellen for our grandfather Illes. I have no middle name.

Still, my mother was very much aware of how the Holocaust affected her and others.

"Without freedom," my mother said, "the inner soul is taken away."

I am not certain if she ever got back all of hers. She was sometimes depressed, especially on the Yahrzeit - the dates of the death – of her parents and sisters.

And the past had a way of unexpectedly sneaking back. In the Shoah tape, my mother tells of how the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing brought back so much pain, especially when one newscast showed a little child's abandoned sneaker.

“I went hysterical,” she said. “How many little sneakers did I see? How many little shoes? I cried for a whole week.”

For years, neither of my parents spoke openly about their experiences. My mother would only explain her tattoo to other adults, never to children. She was forever bitter toward Germans. Products made there, no matter the quality, were not permitted in our home.

It is not surprising that my mother gravitated to life's underdogs. She would always help others, even those who took advantage of her. She never forgot what it was like to do without and ridiculously deprived herself of good food, eating only cottage cheese or chicken for days on end. It made her feel safe to save money.

Considering her experience coming close to starving to death, food took on the utmost importance in our house. She forced my sister and me to eat way beyond what was normal. It's amazing that we were never even close to fat.

My parents mostly associated with other Holocaust survivors. For decades, they referred to themselves as “greena,” because they were so green, as in new, when they arrived in America.

In later years, there seemed to be a tacit hierarchy that developed among Holocaust survivors. Some who survived the camps felt that their experiences really were more devastating than those who were hidden during the war years, passed as Gentile or lived in the forests.

My mother eventually remarried and was widowed again. In the 80s after she retired, my mother began speaking about the Holocaust to New Jersey school children, for which she was given an award by former New Jersey Governor James McGreevey. Twice she told her story on tape, once for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Southern New Jersey in 1981 and another time in 1998 for the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation established by director Steven Spielberg after he made *Schindler's List.*

"If I only make a tiny dent...there are so many (Holocaust) deniers now...I want them to know it did exist. Where there is indifference, try to be there, try not to be a bystander," she said.

The Shoah Institute interviewer asked my mother if there is anything she would like to tell her own children, and this is what she said: "I hope they remember their heritage, I hope they remember they came from Holocaust parents who loved them more than life. I hope they will be the kind of people that they have been, up until now, that they will instill the basic human kindness to the rest of their future families and just be together whenever they can. Maybe there is a misunderstanding, not to worry about that, and keep families together and just be good people."

Well said, Mom.