

HGPR

Survivors Speak

A Child's Journey

By Gloria Glantz, Shelter Rock School, Manhasset New York

The Community Synagogue, Port Washington, New York, May 2000:

The petite, middle-aged woman with "salt and pepper" curls is in front of the congregation on Yom Hashoah, the service for the commemoration of the Holocaust. She is singing the solo part of the "Bird Song," based on a poem written by a child in Thereisenstadt in 1941. She chokes up on the lines "And weave a wreath of memories there, / And if the tears obscure your way, / You will know how good it is to be alive." She is catapulted back in time to Wegrow, a small town in Poland, when her name is Gitl Przepiorka, and where a woman with a beautiful voice is singing a Yiddish lullaby, "Rhozinkes un Mandlen," to her. The woman, with a familiar mole above her lip which Gitl, too, possesses on the side of her cheek, is the person from whom she inherits her clear soprano voice and her love of music. That woman is her mother, Esther Przepiorka, who never reached her 37th birthday.



Poland, September 1, 1939:

German soldiers invade Poland and occupy the country within three weeks. Jews have to step off the sidewalk for any German passing by. All Jews over twelve have to wear an armband with a Star of David on it. Gitl's older brother Yitzchak has to wear one. On Yom Kippur the Chief Rabbi of Wegrow is rudely removed from the synagogue, tortured, and killed.

Wegrow, Poland was a small town known for its tanneries. In 1940 the Jewish population was about 55% of its entire population. Jews had lived there from the 1600's on. By 1944 the percentage was zero... Gitl's father, Mendl Przepiorka, and one of her five paternal uncles had a small, but thriving, leather factory where they made the upper parts of shoes and boots. The family lived in an apartment above it.

Her father was one of the ten children born to her grandparents, Rachel and Pinchas. Her mother also came from a large family, but they did not live close by. The love of this large family, as well as her place in it – the last after two children 10 and 12 years old when she was born, enveloped her like a soft, warm security blanket. Her mother was a teacher by training, and had a beautiful singing voice. "Don't stop, mama. Please keep singing," she would beg her mother. She celebrated milestone events and played hide and seek with her two older brothers, Yitzhak and Shmulik. Hiding under the bed was so much fun. She was the only one who could fit under it! Their home, it turned out, was very conveniently located for the implementation of Nazi policy—only about 14 miles from the Treblinka death camp.



Hiding was soon to cease being a game, and become a method of survival.

One cold dark, night in 1942, she walked through the woods with her mother. They stopped at a strange farmhouse, where an unfamiliar woman welcomed them. Her mother carried a little suitcase with her daughter's possessions, and a heavy down comforter, a "perineh". Her mother told her, gently, that she had to stay with this woman. "And you, too, Mama?" the child asked. Her mother shook her head and began to leave. Three-year old

Gitl clutched her mother's coat, began to scream, and tried to follow her mother. But she was restrained, and her mother walked out, quickly closing the door behind her. The kindly woman tried to comfort the child. "Don't cry. You'll have a glass of warm milk. You'll take a nice bath. And tomorrow you'll be a big girl." The next morning Gitl woke up with swollen eyes, and asked "Am I a big girl now?"

She had to become "a big girl" very quickly. For that was the last time she saw her Mother.

The woman, Mrs. Kowalchck, was soft-spoken, kind and patient. But there were days filled with tears, loneliness and longing. Gitl seldom smiled, ate little, and cried a lot. She especially missed the lullabies in her own mother's beautiful voice, the familiar dark mole above her mother's lip, the handsome faces and the good-natured laughter of her older brothers and her father. Time passed. As the seasons changed, the memory of her own, natural family faded. Her mother's singing, however, was imprinted on her heart and in her own voice, and has remained a blessing for her, all her life.

The gentleness and love of this generous woman, Mrs. Kowalchick, whom she called "Matka," (mother), helped her get through the dark days. Unlike others at that time, Gitl felt no material deprivation of any kind. Food always seemed to be plentiful for her. She ate hearty black bread smothered with chicken fat and salt. It was one of her favorites. There was always a huge vat of warm milk, fresh from the cow, in the big room. The little girl had even seen the cow being milked. One day Gucia, (her new name now was Gucia Kowalchik), asked for a glass of milk and a salami sandwich. Her Matka said, "You can't have milk with salami." She continued, in a hushed, almost inaudible voice, "You're Jewish, but don't tell anybody."

Gucia usually played alone for there were no children her age around the farm. She had no toys. Her favorite pastime was picking the wild, brightly-colored flowers at the side of the dirt roads nearby, and making flower crowns for herself and her matka.

In the summer she meandered in the garden among the fruit trees and the flowers. She picked fresh cherries right off the tree. She has never re-experienced the deliciously ripe taste of those cherries. She was with matka and her daughter one gorgeous summer day, when German soldiers appeared. Matka's daughter said, "Show them how you sing and dance." And the soldiers echoed, "Sing for us, dance for us, and we'll give you 'tsukerki', (candy). Somewhat shyly, she obliged them. They allowed her to live another day.

One day Gucia innocently entered the barn. There she saw two legs in the hay. She ran into the house screaming wildly, "There are Jews in the barn! There are Jews in the barn." (She had no idea what "Jews" meant, but from the conversations around her she must have assumed it meant something to be afraid of.)

"I took care of them. Don't worry," said Matka. It wasn't until many years after she left Poland that she came to understand why Matka had said that. There had been two Jewish women in the barn, but Matka transferred them swiftly into the attic. Even her husband didn't know. He frequently drank heavily so Matka was afraid he would reveal she was hiding Jews. She, therefore, kept their identity a secret even from him. Those two also survived the war.

The little girl's bed was under a picture of the Holy Mother, Mary, the Matka Boska. She had seen it in the church she attended every Sunday with Matka. More than once was she suddenly and abruptly awakened to find a flashlight shining in her face. More than once did she see that flashlight in the hands of those menacing, leather-booted soldiers. How did they know where to look? Had someone led them to Mrs. Kowalchik's in hopes of getting a pound of sugar as a reward for finding a Jew?

"Show these soldiers how you say your prayers," Matka would say. Sleepy-eyed and terrified, little Gucia kneeled, put the two palms of her hands together, and recited the prayer in perfect Polish. The soldiers left. They found no "Juden" in this house that night.

The spring and summer came and went. It was time to cover those carefree, bare feet with shoes. Roads where the flowers had been were now knee-deep in snow. The Christmas tree glowed brightly with beautiful ornaments. Among them were bell and star-shaped cookies with green sprinkles. The tree was in the room where Gucia slept. If she awoke in the middle of the night she could help herself to a crisp, sprinkled snack. In a corner of the room was a pail, so she would not have to go outside to the outhouse in the night frost.

Soon Gucia was old enough to attend school. Since she had not started her education with the other children in the class, she had some catching up to do. She had to learn the entire Polish alphabet in the space of about three days. Till late into the night, she studied. Oh the tears of frustration as she would forget some of the letters! Her matka's patience helped her learn it eventually. In school, she would be called up to the teacher's desk to read individually. She fearfully approached the teacher's desk, with knees trembling. But she must have managed to do it reasonably well, as he often gave her a backhanded compliment. "If she can do it, why can't the rest of you?" She saw those classmates who were punished for lack of preparation or school infractions holding weights on their shoulders in the back of the room, or wearing a "dunce" hat. She did not want to be one of them.

May 1945, Kowalchick household:

A slightly familiar woman, Gucia's Aunt Norma enters with a beautiful doll and carriage. She speaks discreetly to Matka, words Gucia cannot hear. Later Gucia is to learn that her Aunt Norma escaped the hell-fire by jumping off a stalled train on the way to Treblinka death camp. Since no one of her large family beside Gucia was left alive, Norma went to a Displaced Persons camp in Germany. There she met William Schneiderman who later became her second husband.

At long last Hitler was gone, and the war was over. Matka made her a beautiful new hat and coat, and told her they were "going on a

trip.” Gucia made sure to bring her doll and carriage, the first and only toy she had in many years. They went to Yelena Gura, (yellow mountain). It was a strange new place. Gucia was charmed by the huge, red windmill. Matka was certain no one would find them there.

Displaced Persons Camp, Germany, June, 1945:

American Soldiers are administering the camp. There are a number of them in a large room with a group of survivors. A young woman with lively green eyes, her curly, dark hair in a kerchief, seems agitated, her eyes darting back and forth from one soldier to another. She cannot speak English, so she just shouts out names: “New York! Bronx! New York! Esther, Max! Bernstein! Bronx! New York!” The woman is Norma Przepiorka, who along with her six-year old niece Gitl is the only survivor of the large Przepiorka family. She is trying to make some kind of contact with her older sister Esther, who has immigrated to America in the 1920’s. A tall, handsome American soldier, Phil Kaplan, hears her cries in disbelief. He speaks to her in broken Yiddish. Esther and Max Bernstein are his next door neighbors. And their son, Sam, also in the army, is his best friend! He sends the message to his mother on Mosholu Parkway in the Bronx!

Yelena Gura, Poland, August 1946:

One day two men arrived in what, to Gucia looked like a big black “moving box on wheels.” She had never seen a car, which was an oddity in Wegrow, among horses and buggies, the usual travel mode. They were representatives of the American Jewish Congress. The men entered the house and spoke to Matka—something about America. Then they tried to convince Gucia to go for a ride with them. They promised candy and cookies, interesting sights, and fun. Gucia would only go if Matka went, too. She didn’t. But Gucia was forcefully removed to the car. She never saw her Matka again.

It was nightmarish. The traumatic separation from her “Matka” yet again, deadened her memory of ensuing events. After a few days she found herself at an airport. There was a strange woman who was with her, a woman with terrible, newly formed scratches on her face. Gucia wondered where those terrible scratches came from. The woman told her that “a cat” had done it. It didn’t take her long to figure out. In her wild, uncontrollable, terrified moments she had been the “cat.”

The next stop was an orphanage run by Lutheran nuns, in Goteborg, Sweden. Their white headgear gave her an eerie feeling. Everyone looked the same. She had her own room, which she had to keep tidy and clean. As a seven-year old she felt quite proud to have this responsibility, and was conscientious about her chores. Not so satisfying were the long, institutional tables where meals were eaten. She hated the herring. Some kids even tried to force it down her throat. Whenever she could, she would throw it a few places ahead under the table. To this day, she winces if a herring dish is even in the same room with her.

It was here that she got another first name, Guta, but repossessed her family name, Przepiorka. So now she was Guta Przepiorka. It was in this place that she learned to ride a two-wheeler, had her tonsils removed, and befriended a deaf and dumb little boy. It was here that she first saw the beautiful, Swedish Christmas tradition of crowns with candles. Here she learned Swedish, her first foreign language. It was not to be her last language. A long ship voyage to Canada awaited her.

Bronx, New York, The Elsemere Caterers, May 1947:

The marriage of a young man from Montreal and his bride from New York is being celebrated. At one of the tables sit two middle-aged couples, Esther and Max Bernstein from New York, and Fannie and Abe Morantz from Montreal. They are all of Eastern European background, and both in the meat business. “I have my brother’s little girl coming, Esther says. “She and my youngest sister are the only ones left alive from my entire family. She can’t come directly to New York until her immigration quota number comes up. Can you keep her for about 3½ weeks until she can come to us? Of course I will pay any expenses.”

December 1947

There was a nauseating crossing of the rough ocean. The seven-year old was seasick the whole time. A young woman of about 21, Fela, was in charge of her. It seems there were many older children taking care of younger children.

Halifax, Nova Scotia, December 1947:

The Aquitania, a ship under British registry arriving from Sweden, docked in the port of Halifax, Nova Scotia with its precious cargo—children. They were children of all ages who had one thing in common. Not one of them was with

their parents. Among them was a cross-eyed, dark and curly-haired youngster with her ragged, cardboard suitcase. In it she carried some unmatched, ill-fitting clothing, and a treasured possession—a framed picture of Jesus.

The picture of Jesus had been a constant in her life. It was unchanging, always there, and a source of security for her. Not so her name. It had already changed three times, and it was yet to change three more times. Her voyage was not a trip—it was really part of a life’s journey.

Montreal, December 20, 1947:

The Victoria train station was a busy place. Waiting for her were about 15 unfamiliar people. A short, middle-aged, well-dressed woman with beautiful platform, ankle-strap shoes and very curly hair under a fashionable hat picked her out of the long moving line of children. “Here she is. This is the one. This is my brother’s little girl.” This was her Aunt Esther, her father’s oldest sister, who had fulfilled her brother’s request to get his baby safely to America if she were to survive. She was able to locate little Gitl through the American Jewish Congress, which sent two men to Yelena Gura, Poland after receiving a message from her sister through her neighbor’s son. This woman with the same first name as her natural mother was going to become her third and last “mother,” eventually.

But it was to a slightly younger, attractive woman in an elegant winter-white hat to whom the little girl gravitated. Who was she? She was Fanny Morantz, her Aunt Fannie to this day. She was to be Guta’s temporary adoptive mother during her stay in Montreal.

What was to be about 3 ½ weeks turned into 3 ½ years. Life was teeming with possibilities, growth, new family and friends. It was here Guta became Gloria, and her last name now became Morantz, after her new family. She got two new “sisters” and a “brother.” And as a nine-year old she became an aunt, to Aunt Fannie’s infant grandchildren. She became somewhat of a polyglot, learning French, Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. She insisted on speaking Polish for the first few months, since Aunt Fannie was fluent in it. She became proficient in English very quickly, though she refused to speak it. “Pesach is coming; you’re not allowed to speak Polish here. It’s either English or Yiddish,” ordered her new “sister” Shirley. From then on English became her dominant language.

The Morantz family cherished their Jewish heritage, and Abe Morantz was an observant Jew. Every Shabat Uncle Abie went to synagogue. You could hear his deep, rich voice chanting the traditional music on holidays and celebrations. Imagine their surprise when a little girl showed up in their home, with her most treasured possession, a picture of Jesus.

Somehow, that picture of Jesus ceased to be precious. It just disappeared, without dismay or trauma for Gloria. The richness and variety of her own, Jewish tradition replaced it. The family celebrations, the warm gatherings, the beautiful music, and the frequent visits to the Fairmount Synagogue facilitated the embrace of her “new” religion. The warmth and love of her new adoptive family cemented all this. They helped her overcome fear and shyness and join the ranks of normal childhood. Her first toys on this continent were a doll crib and a tea set, which she used for “selling” tea to houseguests. Though already eight years old, she had to recapture some games of childhood that she had missed. She had a lot of growing up to do.

Grand Central Station, New York, April 5, 1951:

The 3½ weeks in Montreal turned into 3 ½ years. Finally, Gloria’s immigration number came up. By now she had become deeply attached to her Montreal family. Leaving them was more difficult than she could ever have imagined. Though, unlike her previous families, she would be able to see this family periodically, for months she was sad, brooding, seemingly depressed. She lost her appetite. She was leaving this beloved family who gave her back her heritage, and going on the last lap of her journey, to her Aunt Esther and Uncle Max in New York.

Esther and Max became “Mom” and “Pop”; their sons became Gloria’s brothers, and she became a “Bernstein.” From teen to adulthood the journey continued. Another name awaited as she met her partner in life, Miles. They reaped the blessings of their love in two wonderful children, Craig and Jordana. Her life’s work became molding young minds as a teacher, but her passion became keeping the story of the Holocaust alive. She teaches children and adults the lessons of man’s inhumanity to man, and about the hate and indifference that led to it – in the hope that it will not happen to anyone again.

After presenting a Holocaust program in school, one of her students asked the following question: “If you could speak to your real mother and father for three minutes, what would you say to them?” She began:

“You and your pain are not forgotten. The suffering of our people is not forgotten. The Jewish people still live. You have two beautiful grandchildren, who will pass on our heritage. They are humane, intelligent, and delightful. You would have loved them dearly. You would have been proud of me, your youngest child. I have a rich and full life, filled with love, friendship, family, and joy. I have been blessed with good health and educational opportunity. My work enables me to make a difference in children’s lives. In addition, Mother, my life is filled with music, a gift from you. You are alive in my heart always.”

“Yes, the tears obscured my way, and I know how good it is to be alive”



Auschwitz: Who Does This Land Belong to?

according to the film "WITNESS: OWNING AUSCHWITZ"

by Liron Dorfman, Kiryat Moztkin, Israel

Auschwitz

Before the war, this was a village. There were homes and businesses. People lived and prospered. Now it's a cursed place. Over one and a half million people died there. Most of them were Jews. It's a place no one would wish to own or inherit, but since the end of communism in Poland, people come back to reclaim land their families owned before the war, and one of them believes she has documents which can prove that part of this death camp was built on Jewish land, her family's land.

Israel

Zypora Frank was twelve when she and her parents came to Israel from Poland after the war. She grew up and raised her own family here, and like her sons and grandchildren, she is Israeli now, a retired schoolteacher. But there's a mystery in Zypora's past. She has inherited papers that suggest she could have a claim to Auschwitz, and now, at the age 62, she decided to return to Poland in search of the truth.

Zypora and her parents and brother survived the war by escaping to Russia in 1939. The rest of the family perished in the Holocaust. Once in Israel, they never spoke of their past. But just before she died in 1991, Zypora's mother told her, that when she returned to Poland after the war, she had reclaimed the family's land, and part of the legacy was Auschwitz. Zypora has documents that were left to her by her parents, who died three months apart. They show the property in Poland. The papers are all in Polish and very old. The documents that Zypora's mother left her are related to her wealthy grandfather's properties, including a tar-paper factory in Bredginka, better known as Birkenau. Her grandfather, Joseph Meltzer, built his factory there. It was a huge factory, which used a lot of land and even had a private railroad going into the factory. They had special ovens where they boiled tar.

Zypora's mother, Rifka Jacoby, never told her about this property. All her life, Zypora's mother kept her inheritance secret. She was consumed by guilt because she believed the land she owned had been part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau

concentration camp, where her own family had been killed. Zypora: "My mother's life was affected all the time by this secret, by this knowledge, because this concentration camp, the death camp, was the most outrageous camp that was ever built, and it was built on her land. She felt guilt about it and she didn't want me to go and visit it and she didn't want to know about it." But Zypora wants to know. She is returning to Poland to reclaim the property and confront the past.

Zypora: "I want to know the truth. I want to know whether it does belong to me or it doesn't. I want to know the truth about how did they confiscate it, how did they built it, what did they do. I want to know the truth."

Before the war, Zypora's family lived in Krakow. There was a large Jewish population there. Most of the shops, and over a third of all industrial buildings, were owned by Jews. There was wide spread anti-Semitism. Zypora's grandfather had been a wealthy man. As well as the factory in Birkenau, he possessed a large house and lands in neighboring towns.

When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, all Jewish property was taken or abandoned as the Jews fled or were imprisoned and killed. During the 42 years of communism, it was almost impossible to recover property



Taken from "The Jerusalem Post" - Internet Edition - Tuesday, August 4, 1998

lost in the war. Now it has become easier, but few claimants possess as much proof of ownership as Zypora. She's anxious to know what's in the documents and particularly, if she really does own part of Auschwitz. Her first step in Poland is meeting a lawyer that would help her in finding the answers. After reading her documents, the lawyer says that the land was probably expropriated by the Polish state's treasury since no one has claimed it so far. The buildings on the parcels of land might have been destroyed. Zypora mentions that her father told her that the parcels of land mentioned in the papers as "Bredginka" is the place known as Birkenau.

After making sure that the meaning is to the camp, the lawyer says that this idea is doubtful because the papers of Zypora were written after the war, while the whole land of the camp was already a memorial and there was no private land there. Therefore, it can't be possible that in '46, the authorities wrote the land in the name of her mother. He says that it may be near the camp, but not really inside the land of the Auschwitz camp.

"Zypora, how did you feel when the lawyer said it

wasn't part of the camp?"

"Very ambivalent because it was a relief, first of all relief, and then, I thought what a pity. A pity because my mother had 'wasted' her emotions, her life, by keeping silent about it, by not talking about it, by feeling so guilty about it, when it wasn't on her land, so I really don't know but I still think it is her land." Zypora wants to know the truth. She doesn't give up. She wants evidences that will prove whether the land is hers or not. She decides to go to the place itself - to what's left of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp.

"I know for sure that my grandfather bought my aunts, my uncle and my cousin [the land (L.D)], and all of them died there, in Auschwitz. That's what's written in the documents that we found, but this connection, that they were burned there, that they were gassed there, that they lived there even, and to see the place and to know exactly that they were there, that some of my family was gassed there, it's very painful." By fleeing to Russia when the Germans invaded, Zypora and her parents survived the Holocaust. Only when they returned to Poland did they discovered the extent of what had happened to the Jews.

Auschwitz was originally a Polish military barracks. It became a concentration camp in 1940. An extension was built to Birkenau a year later. Over one and a half million people were brought there. Most were killed immediately. Some were worked to death as slave labors. Few survived. A museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau was established by the Polish state in 1947 on part of the original site. About 600 thousand visitors a year come to witness what happened there.

Walking in the museum is very hard for Zypora. A group of local school children is visiting the museum hearing the explanations of their teacher. Looking at them Zypora says, "She [Zypora's mother (L.D)] was right, I think. We've shouldn't known anything about it... I don't know if this museum can teach the children. I was looking at them. It seems that they were not so much impressed by all the stories and everything, just listened. It was like any museum for them. I don't know if it can teach a lesson about it. I really have a feeling that she was right. This document [the one indicating the belonging of the land (L.D)] should just be in the museum."

Two miles from the main camp are the ruins of Birkenau. This is the place where Zypora believes that her grandfather's factory once stood. Now, Zypora is standing in this place. "I remember my grandfather's factory. I remember coming to visit him. I remember him hugging me. I don't remember the factory but I remember buildings and a huge yard. The irony is that maybe it was on Jewish land, this camp, this death camp and on the same land they were executed, on their own land. I really hope it's not mine; it's not ours, but my parents believed that it's theirs, so there's some sort of conflict inside me. It's a very strange feeling, you know. I hope it's not mine. It's too terrifying. I hope it's not mine."

The next day the search begins. Zypora decided to look for the other properties mentioned in the documents before returning to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The lawyer she met has sent his assistant Martin to accompany her. They begin in Chrzanow, ten miles from Auschwitz. Zypora lived there before the war. She's looking for the family's home and the land surrounding it. First stop is the town court's surveying office. In the books there they find out that the plots mentioned in Zypora's papers are indeed written on the

name of Joseph Meltzer, her grandfather and his inheritor, Zypora's mother.

In the court house they find out that the plots were expropriated by the Polish state's treasury. Martin, the lawyer's assistant, explains to Zypora that according to the Polish law, while expropriating the plots, the government shouldn't pay anything to the previous owners of the land. According to this law, Martin claims, "It's not the same as confiscation. Expropriation is for public purposes. In some situations, terrains are used for the state's needs." As long as the purpose is for the good of the public, the country does not have to pay the previous owner. In this case, the plots that were owned by Zypora's grandfather were used for building some buildings and a kindergarten. According to the law, this is a "public purpose".

At this point, Zypora and Martin have tracked down all the properties except for the factory at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The town hall in Ausviechin is where the land registers for Auschwitz and Birkenau are held. This is the most important part of Zypora's search. It's her fear that she'll discover her grandfather's property was part of the concentration camp. The secretaries in the town hold and look at their documents one by one and finally they come with the answer: "The property is in the use of the "O.Z.N.S," that confiscated the plots and uses them all." The "O.Z.N.S" are the Polish initials used as the name of "The Auschwitz Factory For Repairing Cars." That means that the land owned by Zypora's grandfather was used for the building of big garages. These garages are still in use. By looking at maps, Zypora and Martin finds out that only a road separates Zypora's grandfather's land from the present day Auschwitz museum. Neither Zypora nor Martin is sure where the original camp's boundaries lie. What's sure is that the buildings that were standing on the land during Zypora's grandfather's time were destroyed and other buildings were built instead. The border of the land was a road to Bredginka (Birkenau).

Zypora and Martin go to the garages in order to see the place. These are indeed huge garages, but the gatekeeper doesn't let him in. He says that the manager ordered him not to let them enter.

Zypora: "I was really shocked when I saw the factory [garages (L.D)] and I saw how close it is to the museum, the place that was the camp. I looked at it and it made me feel... it was a bad feeling. I don't feel good about it. I can understand my mother coming here after the war and when she saw the barb wires and the chimney that were there and the ashes, and she could see how it was, what happened there. I think it all together affected her so much, the guilt about not saving her parents, her family, just fleeing taking me and my brother, just running away, fighting for her own existence, her own life, and then coming back and finding out that there was nobody left from her family and everybody had died in the camps. She must have felt terrible."

Thousands of Jews returned to Poland after the war. When Zypora and her parents came back to Chrzanow, they thought they were coming home, but many Poles didn't want the Jews back to reclaim their houses and businesses. Hundreds of Jews were murdered, culminating in a massacre of 42 men and women in a town 95 kilometers from Chrzanow in July 1946. Zypora's family decided to flee Poland forever.

Zypora: "We were driven out of here. It's not that we left from

our own choice. We had to leave. The survivors, like me, that are coming now, and the second generation that comes and claims, most of their families were killed here, but still the belongings are theirs. There is a part that I will claim [part of Zypora's family's belongings (L.D)]. I will have problems, but this is government administration, so a government took it over and the government can give it back or make all sort of arrangement with me. I don't think about money. I don't know; I just first of all think about claiming it, about putting it on a paper, black and white, that it's mine."

Zypora has been asking passersby if anyone remembers her grandfather. No one does. She starts a conversation with an old couple:

Zypora: "Are you from Chrzanow?"

Old man: "We're from a near village, but ever since my childhood I have been doing things in Chrzanow."

Zypora: "Where there many Jews here before the war?"

Old man: "Lots of them - 8,000 Jews and only 4,000 Catholics."

Zypora: "There were more Jews than Catholics?"

Old man: "Twice as much. The worst thing was that they took over all the trade in the area."

Zypora: "The Jews."

Old man: "There was only one store owned by Catholics, a fabric shop. The Jews owned all the rest of the stores."

Zypora: "At school, were the Jews and Christians together?"

Old man: "Yes, we had three or four Jews; I remember them."

Zypora: "What happened to them when the Germans came?"

Old man: "Then, the situation had entirely changed. I wanted to take advantage of the time of occupation, so one Jew taught me French. I don't remember whether it was during the fourth or the fifth lesson he gave me, when people came and took him and since then there was nobody to teach me. He was a nice fellow."

Zypora: "OK, thank you for the information."

Old woman: "I didn't live here. I came from far away after that."

Zypora: "Thank you very much. Thank you."

Zypora: "I understand the problem it causes, people come and claim their property. Even now, when I was talking to this couple and they told me that the Jews were so rich, when he mentioned the Jews, he didn't say "Jews;" he said in Polish, "jidsky." It's like "jid," so it's a nickname, and

it sort of made me feel... well, even in these days, it's still there, in him. He still resents me for coming back here and claiming, so the resentment will always be here. The problem is the property in Auschwitz. This is a problem that I have to think about."

Zypora and Martin return to the Auschwitz museum. They need to establish once and for all whether the factory site was actually part of the concentration camp. They asked one of the museum's historians to look up the property in the archives. In one of the books they find out the needed evidence. The legend of the map indicates that the number 10 in the map is a sign for a place where a paper factory was standing. In some explanations to the map it is written that "in the place of number 10, once stood a paper factory of a Jew called Meltzer." In another place in the same book it is mentioned that "the Jew named Meltzer built a short railroad in order to move things to the nearby railroad."

The railroad is still in its place. The historians

explain that the Germans destroyed the paper factory and in 1943 they built on the land a factory for ammunition. It was all part of the concentration camp. What's written in that book with the connection to the map, is the only evidence left for

Zypora's grandfather's factory. This was a very hard moment for Zypora. With tears in her eyes she explains to the historians: "This is the first time I see any written evidence. I even started thinking I may have imagined everything. I thought that maybe there is no

truth at all in this story. My mother's whole family died here. It's ironic. On Jewish land they built it; they built it and it belongs to Jews, and the atrocity, and they themselves died here."

According to the records, the car plant was built on Zypora's grandfather's land, but during the war it housed a huge German ammunition factory within the camp area. The union factory used over two thousand prisoners, mostly women slave laborers. They produced detonators and grenades for the German war machine. Zypora's worst fears have been realized, and now she has to come to terms with her inheritance. Zypora said, "Somehow I always believed in the back of my mind that maybe it's not true; maybe they just told me some sort of a story they wanted me to believe in. Even when recently we talked about it,

Dear Zypora,
If the land doesn't belong to you, there is no problem...But if it does, I'm not very sure you want back this cursed piece of land. All the fear and terror and atrocities happened there, left unseen but unerasable marks.
Do not accept it back! What do you want from it? What do you need it for? Leave the whole issue aside! It will bring you only unhappiness. I can imagine how you feel but my advice is to accept your mother was right. Let's suppose you'll receive the land back (after how many fights and turmoil and after how much money spent?) And let's suppose this will bring you some money (there are lots of visitors there). Can you bear the feeling the money is from people curious to see what your relatives' ashes look like? Even this kind of curiosity is a sacrilege. The money from such a land will bear the curse too.
I hope you'll be brave enough to stop in time. Are you sure you are so strong to bear such a burden for the rest of your life? Let sleeping dogs lie!

Warm regards, Zina
Zina Costiner
Friends of the Public Library, Somerville, MA, USA

I still thought that maybe it would come out that it's not mine and it will be a relief for me. Now, when I know it's true, I can understand why she didn't want to claim it. I can understand why she didn't want anything to be done about it. She didn't want any compensation for it; she didn't want any money from the Germans. My mother didn't want it and I don't want it."

Unlike her mother, Zypora is determined not to hide her Auschwitz legacy. "I can't take money. My mother was so against it. She said it's money for blood and she didn't want to touch it. I can't do it either. All I want is that it will be acknowledged that it was a Jewish property. It's very important for me. At the beginning, they didn't know about it in the museum [the Auschwitz museum (L.D)]. It's important for the history and for my own feeling. The most important issue in coming here was to know the truth. Does this atrocity belong to my family? Am I connected to it? That's what I wanted to know. The other property, I feel good about it. I feel I should claim it; it's mine. Somebody left it to me and I think it's mine, so I should claim it, but I wanted to come to know the truth. The whole trip was about Birkenau-Auschwitz. I wanted to know the truth, but now I think maybe it was better not to know. It affected me so much. I feel so connected to it. This camp, my whole family was gassed or shot and burned. I feel an emotional connection to this place. I don't know why was it so important to know the truth. I think my whole life was going around and around

it, and now, when I know the truth, I'm myself again."

In August 17, 1998, the story of Zypora was written in Time magazine. The next paragraph is taken from the Internet edition of the magazine (VOL. 152 NO. 7):

"As a result of press coverage [the result of the TV documentary (L.D)], Zypora has heard from an Israeli cousin on her mother's side whom she didn't know existed; the cousin has promised a picture of Josef Melzer, as Zypora has none. Zypora also received a letter from a grandson of Melzer's business partner who lives in America. Together, they are petitioning to have the property in Auschwitz recognized by the Polish authorities as theirs; the Poles consider it government land. Zypora is seeking compensation for other properties that Melzer owned but won't take money for the Auschwitz land. "I don't want anything, no compensation, just that it will be in our names," she says. Not that that will bring Zypora peace, "I don't know what it would take to come to terms with this inheritance," she says. "I am still digesting it."

The film WITNESS: OWNING AUSCHWITZ - A GRENADA PRODUCTION

Director/Producer: Joanna Head

Executive Producer: Ruth Pitt

Assistant Producer: Krzysztof Wierzbicki

Editor: Russell Crockett

Grenada Television

The Greatest Secret of the 20th Century

Phillip Balinov, German Language High School, Sofia, Bulgaria

What is the greatest secret of the 20th century? According to the historian Michael Bar Zohar, this is the saving of the Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War. There were some 50,000 Jews in Bulgaria in 1939 and not one of them was deported to a concentration camp. In fact, the Bulgarian Jews were the only Jewish community in Europe, which increased its number during the Second World War. Only a few books have been written to tell of this story and two documentaries have just come out, though the interest towards this event is rising fast. But every Jewish family contains that history and passes it on. I am one of those who have this history, and now I want to tell it to you. — *My grandfather in 1947*—



My mother's maiden name is Catalan because her family on her father's side came from Spain during the 16th century when all Jews were expelled from Spain by the king. Many of them came and settled in the Ottoman Empire, of which Bulgaria was a part. Most

Jews were middle and working class. The Jews often took the names of the regions or cities where they originated from - for example, Catalan for Catalonia, Sevilla, Behar and others like this. My family eventually settled in Plovdiv, which was a big cultural and trading center.

My grandfather was born there in 1910. My great-grandfather was in the banking and insurance business and managed to give his two sons the very best of education so my grandfather and great-uncle got their university education in France and returned to Plovdiv where they became lawyers. They were both well-known in the city for their high professionalism and intellectual activities. My grandfather was not married and lived with his widowed mother as well as his brother Isaac who had recently got married in 1940.

Nineteen forty was the year when the Bulgarian Parliament passed an anti-Jewish law that was very similar to the one adopted in Germany. The state had to enforce such a law because Bulgaria was a German

ally during World War II. Jews were only allowed on the streets only on certain hours in the day. They were not allowed to work, and their children were expelled from Bulgarian schools. Every Jew above the age of 10 had to wear a yellow star. My grandfather David and great-uncle could not provide for the family. As many others, they were forced to sell all their valuable belongings to provide for their everyday needs. The laws were strictly enforced by the police and the military.

But ordinary Bulgarians did not understand and accept those impositions upon the people with whom they had lived for centuries. The Bulgarians stood by their friends; they did everything they could to help them. My grandmother's cousin would go out with her Bulgarian friend outside of the permitted hours. They would remove her yellow star so she would become indistinguishable from any other Bulgarian. They were neither afraid nor ashamed of having a Jewish friend. Some Bulgarians offered to manage the businesses of their Jewish friends and give them the proceeds. In one school, one Jewish boy went into class only to find that all of his Bulgarian classmates were also wearing the yellow star. Various trade unions sent telegrams to the Bulgarian government protesting against the discriminatory laws.

Nevertheless secret preparations for deporting the Jews from Bulgaria were underway. On 9th March the whole of my grandfather's family, including his niece, gathered as they often did. It was late afternoon. Suddenly my great-uncle Isaac came in with a worried expression on his face. He was a member of the underground anti-fascist movement and had access to confidential information. He told everybody there to be prepared for deportation in the coming days. They were to pack their suitcases, men, women and children separately. They had to take as much food as they could, but they had to be careful about what they put in the suitcases because they wouldn't be allowed to take too much luggage. My great-aunt told her husband the worrisome news the same evening. They packed clothes and food into improvised bags and suitcases. They couldn't sleep that night. At 4 o'clock in the morning there was a loud bang on the door at my great-grandmother's place. The police ordered my grandfather, his brother and his sister-in-law, who was 7 months pregnant to leave the house immediately. My great-grandmother said: "Pack as slowly as possible, so when dawn comes the Bulgarians see what is going on here."

On the morning of 10th March 1943, a long procession was heading for the yard of the Jewish school in Plovdiv. Soldiers were guarding the Jews so as they wouldn't run away. A friend of

my grandfather's tried to talk to him, but he was brutally pushed away. Soon after that, my great-aunt's suitcase fell open and some cans started rolling down the street. Some Bulgarians picked the cans up and wanted to hand them to her, but the soldiers pushed them away and told them that she would pick her things up herself, although she was pregnant in the 7th month.

That was the first wave that was to be deported - Jews that were known to be members of



— My grandfather (in the middle) —
— in a workgroup in 1943 —

anti-fascist organizations, as well as the wealthy and the intellectuals. The members of the families that were not sent to the school could only watch their relatives through the school fence. The deportation was a well-kept secret and it came as a surprise to everybody, even to those who were expecting it. A group of Bulgarians - politicians and intellectuals - whose aim was to save the Jews, had to work really fast. They had less than 24 hours to stop the sending of the Jews to concentration camps in Poland. The church also could not simply watch how 50,000 Bulgarians were being sent to their death and take no action.

The bishop of Plovdiv, Kiril, set out for the Jewish school early that morning, immediately after he had heard the news that the Jews were being prepared for deportation. He demanded that all Jews be set free. And he would go with the Jews wherever they were sent. Bishop Kiril was in constant communication with the archbishop in Sofia, Stefan. A delegation was sent to the king with an appeal to stop the deportation.

Another line of activity was headed by some intellectuals in Sofia, including the Deputy-chairman of Parliament. He managed to collect the signatures of more than 2/3 of the MP's from the ruling party against the deportation of the Jews. Late that afternoon, the Jews were told to go back to their homes. When they got back to their houses, they did not know what to expect, as after they had left their houses that morning, they presumed that their houses had been plundered. Fortunately there had been no time for that, and the houses had

just been sealed without being touched inside.

After 10th March 1943, life changed a bit for the Jews. They still were not allowed to work, but the anti-Jewish laws were not observed as strictly as they were before. The German responsible for the deportation of the Jews from Bulgaria wrote to Germany that he was completely powerless as the Bulgarian nation simply did not want to give its Jews away. In the coming years to the end of World War II, no further attempt was made to deport the Jews from Bulgaria.

Instead, as Hitler surely wouldn't tolerate the Jews running around freely in Bulgaria, the German emissary responsible for the deportation suggested that all Jewish men work as free laborers. The idea was accepted, but the conditions from harsh. Their job was to build roads and certainly,

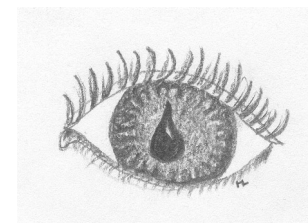


— My grandparents just before —
— their marriage in 1945 —
only country in Europe where the Jewish population actually increased - by some 100 - 200 people.

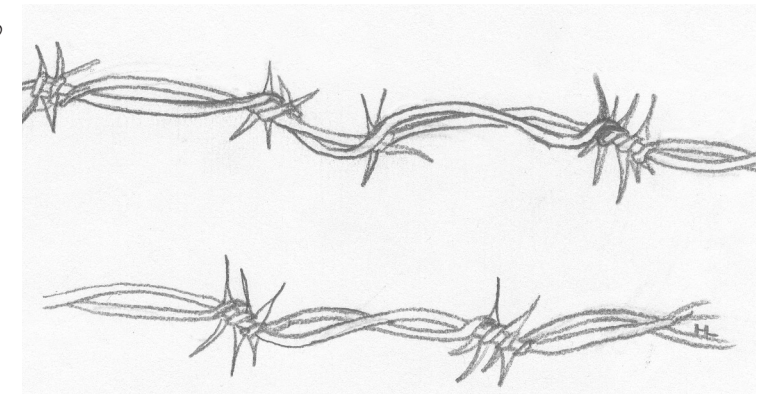
Tears in Your Lonely Eyes

*I can see the pain you're feeling inside.
There's tears in your lonely eyes.
The fear of not knowing what is going to
happen to you or when.
Then to think the S.S. Guards could even do
the things they've done, it's just a sin.
In a concentration camp all by yourself.
A couple of weeks later you have bad health.
Or maybe you have some friends.
Then one day you wake up to hear their
life has come to an end.
Don't worry, you'll make it through
alive, but there will still be tears in
your lonely eyes.*

Mona Daniels
Lakeside High School
Plummer, Idaho



Poets Speak



When Evil Comes

*Evil Flourishes when Good Men Do Nothing!
The bystanders let bad things happen and
Do absolutely nothing about any of it.
They just watch the wrong thing happen,
When they really know what is right.
The bystanders let an illegal thing occur,
And when there's questions about what occurred,
They just hold their peace and don't say a thing.
That is the main and possibly the only reason why
Evil Flourish when Good Men do NOTHING!*

Raven C. George
Lakeside High School
Plummer, Idaho