

CHAPTER

13

Lest We Forget

God has blessed me with three grandchildren: Caryn, the daughter of Tina, and Joshua and Zachary, the sons of Joseph. Joshua was born on May 24, 1996, and Zachary, the most recent arrival, was born on September 19, 1998.

Caryn is the light of my life. As I mentioned earlier, she was born the same day that Philip, Aunt Minnie's oldest son, died. My joy on the day of her birth was mingled with grief at the death of my cousin, but at least one life was given for the one taken away. I was reminded once again, in a very personal way, that the life cycle continues and that joy and sorrow are often intermingled.

Caryn reminds me very much of Tina as a little girl. When Caryn was very small and I used to bathe her, she would notice the numbers on my arm. In speaking to adults I often refer to them as "Hitler's footsteps on my body." However, I was perplexed as to what I might say to her. I was conscious that the numbers disturbed her. She referred to them as "bubu," and she wanted to wash them off with a washcloth. Finally, when she was old enough, I told her that "a bad man did this to 'Mama' [which is what she still calls me]." She has now grown into a beau-

tiful, studious, and caring young lady. I am very proud of her accomplishments, but even more of her sensitivity and kindness.

Joshua is lovable and affectionate and tends to wear his emotions on his sleeve. Like his father, he is a complete extrovert. At the age of two he is also affected by my arm with its numbers; he wants to pull the numbers out. He is very articulate, with a wonderful vocabulary, and he has the ability to gauge my feelings. He knows when I am upset and when I feel sad, and responds with "Grandma Margit, are you OK?" He comes to me with hugs and kisses, and nothing feels more wonderful to me than that.

Zachary is just as lovable and affectionate, but he is also determined to find his place in the family constellation, as are so many second children. Whenever I visit, he makes certain that he is the first to hug and kiss me.

My grandchildren provide me with joy, but I am also troubled that all three are affected by having a grandmother who is a Holocaust survivor.

Two events of recent years stand out in my mind because they brought home to me the idea that we must link the past to the present. Both events occurred in my community. The first took place at Congregation Knesset Israel in Bound Brook on the morning of November 16, 1986. At that time my family and I dedicated a Holocaust Torah in loving memory of the Buchhalter and Granat families. Rabbi Aaron Deckter, the spiritual leader of Knesset Israel, was instrumental in helping us acquire this very special Torah. Bill Rosenberg, our attorney, who is also a dear friend and fellow congregant, handled all the legal paperwork for both obtaining the Torah and transferring it to us. Without his efforts we could not have accomplished our mission, and I am deeply grateful to him.

A *Torah* is a scroll of parchment on which is written the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses. It is produced by a scribe using a special kind of ink and pen. It is rolled up and stored in a cover, and the handles used to unfurl the scroll are adorned with crowns. The *Torah* has a breastplate, a decoration that enhances its appearance. A *Torah* is housed in a sacred ark known as an *a'haron kodesh*.

The *Torah* we acquired was the Sefer *Torah*. It had survived the destruction that had taken place in the now extinct Jewish community of Libochovice, Czechoslovakia. Like countless other Jewish symbols, it had been confiscated by the Nazis and shipped to a depository in Prague, where it lain waiting to be displayed in Hitler's intended "museum" depicting what he hoped to be the remnants of the "extinct Jewish race." Some two decades after the war, this *Torah*, along with other artifacts, was released to the Westminster Synagogue in London and reposed there.

We needed a *Torah* mantle and *gartel* (the belt that holds the *Torah* scroll together) and the other accessories necessary to a *Torah* service. One day in August of that year I went with Eleanor Borow and Susan Guss to Miriam's Religious Objects, a store on Canal Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. There a memorable encounter took place.

I wanted the *Torah* accoutrements to reflect the theme of the Holocaust. To my great amazement, I discovered that the owner of the store, Miriam, was herself a survivor from Hungary. I had heard her speak in Hungarian and started to talk with her in our native language. I asked her where she was from, and she told me. Then I noticed the numbers on her arm. She said she had been in Auschwitz. While comparing our numbers we both realized that she had been only twenty-nine people ahead of me in line. We had therefore both arrived on the same

day. Since I hadn't received my numbers until my return to Auschwitz, this meant she had also been with me in Cracow!

She reminded me of an incident in which she had been involved in Cracow. Miriam had been trying to help a pregnant girl who was unable to lift a heavy stone. The girl had received a brutal beating and lost her baby. Miriam is still blaming herself today for that loss.

During our unexpected reunion Miriam and I embraced and cried. My friends tried to comfort us; at the same time they, too, had tears in their eyes. The incident proved to me, once again, that a survivor might relive the Holocaust at any moment, since none of us ever knows when we will encounter a fellow survivor or any other person or event that awakens memories of that past life.

Miriam was a remarkable designer, and she designed this *Torah* cover in a unique way. She used materials of different colors to depict flames rising into the heavens representing the burning of our people. Brown, gold, and orange "flames" reach upward against a white background. (Photos of the *Torah* cover and other accoutrements appear in the photo gallery that is part of this book.)

A metals craftsman named Stanley Miller from Flemington, New Jersey, made the *Torah* crowns and breastplate and the pointer. The two crowns resemble the barbed wire fences surrounding the camps, from which bodies and arms reach up to the skies. The breastplate resembles the burning bush of the book of Exodus in the Bible.

This Sefer *Torah* is especially meaningful to me now, as I know that our perished brethren used it and many young boys studied from it for their bar mitzvot and afterward. The *Torah* always played an important part in the life of Eastern European Jews. Because the *Torah* was not brought here merely for

ornamental purposes, but to be used by the Bound Brook congregation, it provides a vital link between the past and the future. All who study from it and read from it will be reminded automatically of the Holocaust and of the generations that were its victims.

In the ceremony held was to formally present the Sefer Torah to the congregation, my role was to present the Torah and to thank everyone involved for making the day possible. In my speech I charged my children with the responsibility of caring for the Torah and discharging its mission. I felt both inner peace and parental pride knowing how much caring for this Torah meant to them. I also expressed in my speech my sadness that, while the name of Granat will continue because my uncles who came here in the early twentieth century had male offspring to carry on the name, the name of Buchhalter will not be carried on because all who bore it have perished.

I must confess that, since I live in Bridgewater and my granddaughter, Caryn, goes to Hebrew School at Temple Shalom, Harvey and I wanted to worship there with our family. We joined that temple and about two years ago had the Sefer Torah transferred there. It took almost a year to acquire permission and release from Westminster Synagogue. Each time I am in temple I am reassured because Rabbi Isaacs makes constant use of it ceremonially.

Sunday, April 9, 1995, was one of the most memorable nights of my life. Along with others, I had long before made a commitment to speak and teach about and remember the Holocaust. But in 1995 our communities took a major step to enhance that possibility for even more people by undertaking the establishment of the Holocaust and Genocide Studies Institute at Raritan Valley Community College. April 9 was the night of a gala fund-raiser to provide the financial foundation for this vision.

The guest speaker was Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel, and I was the honoree.

That night we were also observing the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps. For me this was a reminder of all I had suffered during the terrible months in Auschwitz, Cracow, Grunberg, and Bergen-Belsen and of the gratitude I could now feel not only for having lived past those horrors, but for being afforded the opportunity to ponder in awe the miracle of transformation within my own life.

I could still remember myself as the starved and frightened girl of fifteen in concentration camp garb, her hair shorn, her appearance indistinguishable from that of other prisoners, her life worth nothing to her persecutors, who could easily have destroyed it on a whim with a bullet, a rope, or even a fist. But I also saw myself as I was that night, amid friends and loved ones who had come to honor me and to support my own vision of creating a place and an opportunity for education so that the young *and* their elders would be aware of the terrible consequences of hatred, bigotry, and persecution.

Approximately one thousand people attended the gala on April 9. There were greetings and remarks by Leonard Knauer, president of the Jewish Federation of Somerset, Hunterdon, and Warren Counties; Dr. Cary Israel, president of Raritan Valley Community College; Senator James McGreevey of the Nineteenth District; Assemblyman Christopher Bateman of the Sixteenth District; Congressman Richard Zimmer of the Twelfth District; Fred Howlett of the Somerset County Board of Freeholders; James Dowden, mayor of Bridgewater; Maury Laulich, chairman of the New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education; and Sister Rose Thering of Seton Hall University and the Holocaust Commission.

In his keynote address Elie Wiesel implored the audience not to forget the Holocaust. "The human mind is such that it

cannot retain everything," he said. "What will happen to the faces we [the survivors] have seen, the children we have forgotten?" Responding to the frequently uttered charge that we Jews speak too much about our suffering, he said that what matters is "what we do with our suffering." He continued, "We invoke memories to reduce suffering for everyone. We speak of our past because we don't want our past to become part of our children's future." He talked of his fear that the Holocaust will become trivialized. "I want the subject to remain sacred," he told us. "I admire everyone who teaches it. It is the most important subject to teach."

Wiesel told of the horrors perpetrated in the death camps and on the marches, and of his father, who had been with him during his terrible days in Auschwitz, providing him with the will to remain alive so long as they were not separated from one another. He recounted the death of his father, who had been his pillar of strength, and his own subsequent despair as a result of his loss. He told of his liberation and of the gratitude of the survivors when in April 1945 the American soldiers finally arrived to liberate them. Describing the thankfulness of the survivors in the moments when they realized that rescue was at hand, he observed, "When the liberators came, some children were so weak that when they applauded they were not at all applauding. They did not have the strength to."

Before the program had gotten under way, several protesters began a demonstration at the front entrance to the college theater. They carried signs with crude and cruel messages denying the Holocaust, mocking Jewish claims, and referring to Elie Wiesel as a "notorious prevaricator." In Wiesel's speech he referred to the demonstrators, saying, "I would never grant them the dignity of a debate. Let them be devoured by their own hatred." Sad as was the spectacle of Holocaust denial and

anti-Semitism, it brought home to us all the more clearly the great need for education at all levels about the horrors that Elie Wiesel and I and countless others had lived through.

Before Elie Wiesel spoke I was called to the stage, along with Wiesel and Stephen Offen, the incoming president of the federation. I was presented with a magnificent gift that I will always treasure: a sculpture by Marian Slepian called *Margit's Journey*. (A photo of this sculpture appears on the back flap of the jacket of this book.) Marian, a resident of Bridgewater, was the presenter. She is an artist of national renown. In creating this work, she used an ancient technique called cloisonné, in which enamel is applied to metal in cells delineated by soldered wires and then fired. The full effect of this work is both emotional in its tone and visually stunning in its fusion of line and color.

The sculpture is divided into four sections. In the lowest section is depicted a world of evil in which a serpent destroys by fire the civilized world (represented by broken rocks and crumbling buildings), innocence and peace (a dove), and the Jewish people (the Star of David). As the viewer's eye moves up to the next section, though, it sees that the burning bush is not consumed, as the Jewish people are not consumed, but rises from the ashes. In the second section, to the right is an inset that depicts Jerusalem reborn. To the left is a series of squares and circles depicting wholeness and completion.

The third section shows Jacob's ladder, symbolizing survival and return to life. Above and directly to the left of the ladder is a fish, a Biblical symbol of redemption. The open eye of the fish represents the eye of God, ever watchful, never sleeping. Between the two upper sections is the sea: the passage from captivity to freedom. In the uppermost section we find a sacrificial ram, representing the redemption of Isaac; a branch of a hewn tree, symbolizing the surviving remnant of

the Holocaust; the Eternal Light; the Star of David; and a rainbow symbolizing the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Running through the sections like a visual leitmotif are the words (in Hebrew lettering) *Ayshet Chayil* (Woman of Valor). The sculpture depicts the struggle of the Jewish people through history, but also my struggle through the Holocaust.

When I was asked to speak, I called Marian Slepian to the stage to acknowledge her and thank her for the love she had put into the creation of this work of art. I thanked the audience for the masterpiece they had presented to me. I asked all of the survivors and the members of the Second and Third Generations to rise and symbolically accept the work in honor of the survivors and in memory of those who had perished. "As long as I live," I said, "I shall cherish this evening and this gift."

I went on to welcome and to thank the varied groups who had come to honor me. I thanked them for their kindness to me personally over the years and for their willingness to support Holocaust and genocide education. I addressed Elie Wiesel in particular, acknowledging him as "my mentor and a *raddik* [spiritual leader] of my heritage." I thanked God for Wiesel's survival, since "no one can tell the world our pain, our sufferings, and our hopes as you can." And I quoted his words: "Fifty years ago, we survivors awoke and found ourselves orphans in an orphaned world."

I marveled at the fact that, given what had happened to me fifty years earlier, I could be standing before an audience of a thousand people, being honored. I said, "Fifty-one years ago, when I was a fourteen-year-old child, my world went up in flames, and the free world was silent. I was taken from my home with my family and put in a ghetto where we awaited our deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp. It was there that I saw for the last time my beloved parents, grand-

mothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins, whose faces, voices, and love will remain with me forever."

I told of the incident of my father's stepping out of line and blessing me before he was savagely attacked and taken from me forever. I spoke of the camps I was in and of Anne Frank, who had been with me in Bergen-Belsen and perished just a month before we were liberated. I reflected on the meaning of my birthday, which is both a celebration and a day of remembrance for me, for it is on my birthday that I say Kaddish for Anne Frank.

I went on to express my gratitude to the United States and to the state of New Jersey, which offered me thousands of other survivors the setting and the freedom in which to rebuild our lives, in return for which "we offer our memories and our commitment that this will never happen again."

I thanked my husband, Harvey, and my children, Tina and Joseph, for their love and understanding, and referred to "my beautiful, precious granddaughter, Caryn, in whom I see the continuation of my family." (At that time, my grandsons were not yet born, but I am certain that they will provide two other precious links in the chain of my ongoing family.)

I pledged to dedicate my life to further educating others about the consequences of inhumanity and to keep alive the memory of those who had perished. Finally, I challenged those in the audience who have power and influence "to go forward from this place" and create a model of education for the entire United States, so that people might "learn to love and respect one another, and always stand up and speak when any injustice occurs."

I concluded with these words: "I look upon tonight as a new beginning on my continuing journey, and hope that you will help me turn my dream of a permanent Holocaust and

Genocide Institute at Raritan Valley Community College into a reality.”

That dream was realized at the dedication of the Holocaust Genocide Institute on April 18, 1999.

I often think of the meaning of the cloisonné artwork that was given to me on that glorious spring night in 1995, which now graces my home. I marvel at the way in which Marian Slepian captured both individual and collective history. Sadly but surely, my life is not unique: all too many suffered what I did and did not survive. I have been among the remnant that has made the journey from suffering, dislocation, and anguish to redemption, stability, and renewal. In the end, the serpent did not destroy me, nor did the fire consume me. I found a branch of the tree that had been cut and clung to it. I cannot know for certain whether the ever-open eye of God was upon me when the day of liberation came, but I continue to believe in God's covenant with me and my people, even though my fate was sorely tested in the Holocaust.

Have I earned the title Woman of Valor? I do not know. I do know that during the time I spent in hell my main objective was not to show courage, or defiance, or extraordinary godliness. It was simply to stay alive another day, another hour, to get the next ration of food, to see another dawn. Many far braver than I perished. I survived through neither cunning nor courage; perhaps I survived only through blind luck.

Much was taken from me; much was also restored. But I must believe that I have a purpose: to bear witness, and to bear to others, particularly the young, a knowledge of the depths of evil I have seen so that they will know this evil exists, and that we can prevent it only when we do not turn our heads away from it. This is my commitment, and this is my continuing journey.