

Riches to Rags

*When I look at my life, the worst time came after the Holocaust.
There was no one to help me through.*

BY DASHA WERDYGIER RITTENBERG

I was born in Bendzin, Poland. Our family was large, loving, religious, and comfortable.

By the end of the Holocaust, out of six children, only my older sister Hannah and I had survived.

What I went through.... And yet, when I look back at my life, the worst time came after the war...when no one was there to help me through, and I had nothing to call my own.



Hannah and I were among the thousands of Jewish refugees trying to immigrate to Palestine, while the British did everything to block us. There were many setbacks....

Eventually we managed to board a cattle boat bound for Haifa. But during the voyage I contracted diphtheria. I was deliriously ill with high temperature and had to be quarantined. Later I learned that the passengers, fearing that I might infect them, held a vote to decide whether to throw me into the sea. By God's mercy, the *Eliahu Golomb* docked on the Greek island of Crete, where a Navy doctor gave me an injection of penicillin; it was then resolved that I could stay on board.

The next day we arrived in Haifa, where an ambulance was waiting to take me to Rambam Hospital.

A few days later, I was ready to join my sister in search for my father's two brothers, who had immigrated to Palestine in the early thirties, before the Nazis invaded Poland and the British imposed their blockade.

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We finally found them—one in Tel Aviv and the other on a frontier farm near Kfar Saba. While they were very happy



As I am today.

to see us, the remnant of their European family, neither offered to take us in. They were too poor themselves. Instead, they found us a room in the apartment of a very nice family in Tel Aviv while they looked to find us husbands.

For my 27-year-old sister they found a man from Lodz, Poland who had gone through Auschwitz and Birkenau and had lost his wife and two children. After the wedding they moved to a slum in Tel Aviv—one room and a bathroom shared by four families.

For 18-year-old me, they found a survivor who lived in America. He had come to Palestine to find witnesses to testify that his wife and daughter had been

killed in the Holocaust, and also to find a new wife. I didn't really get a good look at Benjamin until we were under the *chuppah* about three weeks later.



After two weeks Benjamin had to go back to the U.S. to work and to file immigration papers on my behalf. I remained alone for the next six months. Benjamin sent me money, but it didn't go very far. I lived in a room without indoor plumbing.

Then, in the winter of 1947, Benjamin arranged for me to come join him in Savannah, Georgia, where he made a modest living as the secretary of an Orthodox synagogue.

I was very unhappy and lonely in Savannah. No one understood me. I didn't speak English, and nobody except my husband spoke Yiddish. I sat at home in our terribly hot apartment (we didn't own a fan) listening to the radio, trying to learn the language.



In November of 1949 our son Moshe was born. Five years later I divorced Benjamin and moved with my son to Forest Hills, Queens. Benjamin sent me about \$300 a month, of which \$100 went for the rent of our room; the rest was barely enough to live on. When Moshe started nursery school I found a part-time job in a children's store called Little Royalty on Queens Boulevard. How I struggled to pay my bills. Once I had to borrow five dollars from a friend to buy bread.

In 1954, someone told me that Germany was paying restitution to Holocaust survivors. At first the very idea repulsed

me; I didn't want to hear about it. But then things got so bad, I filed a claim with a lawyer. After a few months, I started receiving checks for about \$400 a month, which relieved my anxiety about how I would survive if for some reason I lost my job and could no longer pay my bills.



More than fifty years have passed since I began receiving those payments from Germany. Today I am seventy-nine and still work part-time. I don't want to be working any longer, but without the income from my job I wouldn't be able to visit my only remaining family, my son Moshe, who lives in Jerusalem.



At my age I shouldn't have to depend on a part-time job for my income. A great injustice was perpetrated against me and other survivors who lost almost everything in the war. We want what is rightfully ours. My brother Leibel, who was murdered by the Nazis along with his wife and children, used to own a factory in Poland that made bicycles and

baby carriages. In Bendzin we had silver cups, Shabbat candlesticks, and other family treasures that some stranger owns today. Also, one of my uncles who died in Auschwitz owned a soda-water factory as well as properties in Poland. I am probably eligible for restitution for these lost factories, properties, and insurance, but I have no proof. They are always demanding proof. What proof was I supposed to keep with me in the concentration camp?

And so I don't expect to see a penny from all those huge multimillion-dollar insurance and bank settlements we read about in the press. Money that would make such a difference in our lives is going instead to those who don't need it—like the lawyer who took millions for himself in the Swiss banks case. Then there are the Jewish *machers* who are just waiting for us to die so they can fight amongst themselves about what to do with the millions of dollars they control.

If you asked me to decide who should receive the money from these new funds, I'd start with the sick survivors who are now in hospices or old-age homes. Most

of them do not get good care. Each one should be able to receive paid private care until his or her dying moment. Among our survivors are people with Alzheimer's; they need somebody reliable, dedicated, who's paid well. It all takes money. For me, too: I want to feel assured that when I am no longer able to care for myself, I will not become someone's inconvenience or burden—like I was after the war in Palestine. I want to be taken care of as a human being until the minute I die. Above all, a clean room, a clean bed, clean sheets. As things are, I pray that when my time comes I will be among the lucky ones who go fast.

After the survivors are taken care of, the remaining money should be used for Holocaust education. People on every continent need to learn the truth about what happened in Europe in the 1930s and '40s. They need to understand the consequences of remaining silent while others are dehumanized, while others suffer. I want to scream when I see what's going on in Darfur today, how many children are starving to death.

There needs to be an awakening. □

SURVIVORS S.O.S.



The Blue Card is the only agency in the U.S. that provides direct financial assistance to needy Holocaust survivors.

Founded in 1934 by a group of mostly Reform Jews in Germany to assist their co-religionists whose assets had been plundered by the Nazis, the organization (named after the blue identification cards it issued) has continued to help the estimated 175,000 survivors who live in or near poverty—mostly people with annual incomes of under \$12,000. Since 1940 (it ceased activity from 1938 to 1940), The Blue Card has distributed \$15 million in aid.

Because people live longer, the need for assistance has grown in recent years. In 2005, for example, The Blue Card distributed \$690,000 in

direct aid; in 2006, \$880,000; and in 2007 more than a million. Funding sources include the Claims Conference, the UJA-Federation, private donations, and foundation grants. According to its director, Elie Rubenstein, all donations and grants go directly to Holocaust survivors; overhead and salaries are drawn from endowment funds and bequests.

Today, The Blue Card offers survivors monthly stipends of \$100–\$300 a month; emergency cash assistance of up to \$2,500/person for rent, food, medicine, hearing aids, and dental care; a Jewish Holiday Program of \$500 yearly for the High Holidays (\$200), Hanukkah (\$100), and Passover (\$200) celebrations; a telephone emergency response system to insure speedy medical assistance in case of emergency; and a summer vacations program, a free one-week stay at a camp in the Poconos.

For more information contact The Blue Card, Inc., 171 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, 212-239-2251, blue.card@verizon.net, or www.bluecardfund.org.

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relationships with the broader Jewish community. Imagine if I, at sixteen, had been able to answer calmly, "I respect that you were taught a different definition of Jewish identity, but here's why this issue is more complicated than you think." All of us might have come away from this conversation as better Jews.

Today, young Reform Jews study, travel, and work alongside Jews of all backgrounds. If the Reform Movement wishes to fully support its patrilineal members, it must educate them for these potentially challenging encounters.

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Corrections: Winter 2007

The Fund for Reform Judaism contributors listing regrettably omitted the following individuals and families: Cantor Steven Weiss & Stephanie Gertz, \$10,000+ and Rabbi Simeon & Judith Maslin, \$1,000+.