

# Candlelighters

## Rose Gelbart

Rose Gelbart was born as "Rooza" Grosman on [REDACTED] in Leszno (LESHNO) Poland, the only child to Josef and Sabina Grosman. At the age of two the family moved to Kalish which had a vibrant Jewish Community with many factories, sports teams and cyclists. They lived a vibrant Jewish life with her Mother's whole family, grandparents, aunts and uncles. In October 1939 the Germans marched into the city and proceeded to make it Juden Frei. Rose and her family were given 20 minutes to gather their belongings and assemble at the square to await deportation. In 1940 her family was re-united in Zheshov. Rose's grandparents passed away prior to the establishment of the ghetto in Zheshov. The rest of the family were herded into the ghetto. The ghetto was soon divided into those who were to work and those who would be shipped to Belzec and would be gassed upon arrival. As the ghetto was liquidated Rose's father and Uncle were separated and it is assumed her father perished. As Rose and her mother were on the next list to be shipped, Rose's mother arranged to be smuggled out of the ghetto and they were on the run for three years. By many twists of fate they escaped to Warsaw. Rose's mother had false Arian papers and was able to place Rose in hiding with many different Polish families while she worked as a maid. Rose was given a false name and although her mother was able to visit her, Rose could not address her as Mother and she became like a stranger to her. The last family that hid Rose was later honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Gentiles. While in hiding Rose dreamed of her father coming to her rescue as she never had said goodbye to him.

In May of 1945 Rose was liberated by the Russian armies while still in hiding and witnessed the final battle between the Russians and the Germans, the Germans fleeing the cannons which were being shot over the farmhouse where she lived. The Russians danced and drank in their farmhouse as they celebrated their victory. Rose then reunited with her mother in Warsaw and traveled back to her home in Kalish to find her family and home which was still intact. However only her Uncle Simon Langner, her mother's brother, and one cousin returned from Mauthausen. Disappointed, again on the run, to escape a new pogrom against the survivors, they heard of a means of escape with the Haganah in Gerlitz and were smuggled by small boats to the American zone with many others; and from there by train to Munich.

In 1946 Rose's life began again at the age of 10. Her mother and uncle began to rebuild their lives in Munich on Mailstrasse, the center of Jewish life and business there and Rose felt safe for the first time. Proud to have survived, Rose attended the first and only Hebrew School in Germany and was taught by pre-holocaust educators. She was instilled there with the mission of immigrating to Palestine. During her next five years, Rose, now known as "Shoshana", built many friendships and entertained other survivors with piano recitals in her school where they held their first Purim ball. The school closed in 1951 as most of the students, survivors and the educators emigrated from Germany. Rose's mother and stepfather owned a business in Munich and decided to stay. Rose was sent to a renowned pre-war private Jewish school in Switzerland run by an orthodox Rabbi. Six months later Rose received a telegram to let her know that she and her parents received a visa to immigrate to the USA and in September of 1951, the Jewish Family Service sponsored Rose and her parents to come to Cleveland. Rose attended Glenville High School and graduated in 1954. She worked part time and soon met her husband Arthur Gelbart. They were married in 1955. They had two sons, Jerry and Michael, a doctor and Social Worker. Rose and Art have four grandchildren.

Rose founded the Kol Israel Sisterhood and served as its president for several years and was very active in the organization. Currently Rose serves on the executive board of the World Federation of Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Descendants, which works closely with the Claims Conference. In 1994 Rose established the first chapter of the Child Survivors of the Holocaust of Northeast Ohio and currently serves as its president. She and her husband have attended the yearly conferences of the WFCSH which focus on healing. Rose was responsible for bringing the international convention to Cleveland in 2012.

# Tamas Muencz

Tamas Muencz was born on [REDACTED] in Budapest.

Before the war, he had a large extended family in Hungary including an uncle, grandparents, and seven great aunts and great uncles and their extended families.

In the summer of 1944, all of Tamas' family, except for his mother, were sent to concentration camps, most were killed at Auschwitz.

Tamas and his mother were assigned to live in a "yellow star house", one of about two thousand houses which by mayoral decree were required to display the yellow Star of David and provide shelter for the city's 220,000 Jews.

Tamas' earliest memories are of the Budapest Ghetto. He remembers when older Jews were rounded up to be deported to concentration camps. He witnessed killings of Hungarian Jews by Nazis in public spaces, and he remembers when he and his family were forced to collect trash from the streets. During this forced labor, he recalls seeing dead bodies in the street sprayed with disinfectant to stop the spread of disease. Tamas' mother told him later in life that his grandfather was shot into the Danube by Hungarians. His father was sent to a labor camp in Ukraine.

Hungary was liberated in January 1945.

After the war, Tamas grew up in Hungary, raised by his mother. In 1954, his half sister was born. Two years later, on the eve of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Tamas witnessed barricades being erected on his street and heard that the Hungarian Secret Police had begun rounding up adolescents and sending them to camps in Siberia. It was then that he fled Hungary at the age of fifteen.

With the assistance of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society - HIAS - he made his way to Lintz, Austria where he had the chance to meet the famous Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal.

Tamas first considered leaving Europe for Israel, but with the Suez Crisis just one month before, and Tamas having already experienced war at such a young age, he explored other options.

Tamas was greeted at the Cleveland airport by a nurse from the Jewish Children's Bureau and brought to a foster family on Belvoir. He visited Bellefaire JCB often for Shabbat meals and to see Rudy Bund and his wife Lily, also Hungarian immigrants. Tamas learned English at John Jay High School and when he turned sixteen, he was able to immediately find work due to his training as a tool and die apprentice.

Tamas enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in 1961 and served until 1965. Just before enlisting, friends introduced him to Esther Ganz. The two were married in 1962 and returned to Cleveland to be close to Esther's family. Tamas attended night school and became a manufacturing engineer through programs at Tri-C and Cleveland State University. In 1980, he was elected chairman of the Society of Manufacturing Engineers, Cleveland Chapter.

Tamas' sister moved from Budapest to the United States in 1974 and she now lives in California with her husband and two children.

Tamas' mother visited America five times, but lived the rest of her life in Hungary.

Tamas and Esther are members of Green Road Synagogue, and in 2008, they traveled with the synagogue to Washington, DC to urge the United States to intervene in the Darfur genocide. In his words, he went to Washington because if only the United States had come for us in 1944 or earlier, maybe things would have turned out differently.

Tamas and Esther have two children and seven grandchildren.

## **Roni Berenson**

I'm one of the lucky ones; I got out with my parents. I was born in Berlin, Germany in 1930. My parents and I were able to leave Berlin in July 1941. We had a number of run-ins with the Nazis, some very scary. My father had been able to continue in his dental practice up until we left, to Jews only, of course. Finally, we received notice to show up at the Potsdamer Bahnhof (train station) with one suitcase and 10 Marks per person, and food for 3 days. We went by train to Barcelona, then got on an old Spanish freighter, whose cargo holds had been outfitted with bunk beds to accommodate the 700 passengers. During the 3-week trip we slept mostly on deck, to escape the odor of seasickness below. Luckily it was warm, and we were not attacked by the Nazi submarines in the area - probably because they didn't realize who was on our ship. It had taken my father 5 years to get permission to leave Germany and obtain visas to enter America. My grandmother, many aunts and uncles, cousins and friends weren't that lucky. Many were deported, sent to concentration camps, some only a few months after we left. Of the 20 friends in my fourth-grade class that I said good bye to, only 2 survived. I have been telling my story to middle school and high school students for more than 20 years, because the Holocaust story must be told before it's forgotten

We arrived in New York the day before my 11th birthday. My mother's first cousin, Bertha Stroom, who had provided us with the affidavits that enabled us to leave Germany, had driven to New York to meet us. She drove us directly to Cleveland, and we lived with them in University Heights for several months before we found other quarters. My father found work in the shipping room of a venetian blind factory, my mother, who had been a bookkeeper in the Bank of Berlin, was able to get a job with a clothing company. I learned English quickly, and a couple of years later I won the Cleveland Press spelling contest in my junior year of high school. I received a scholarship to Cleveland College of Western Reserve University, where I met my husband, Elliott Berenson. Elliott was a do-it-yourself guy - he could fix or make anything. I learned a lot from him, and then went into business for a few years - as Ms. Fixit. I wallpapered people's walls, did carpentry, fixed holes in drywall, repaired windows in old houses, even did some electrical and plumbing jobs. But my main desire was to work in the theater. For many years I acted in plays at the JCC, but in the 60s there was the Vietnam War, and I had more important things to do. Work for peace! Elliott and I, and our children, Vicki, Lori, Wendy and David went to lots of peace marches and rallies.

In the 70s I took a rest from activism and worked with PTA and school-community relations, went skiing, played tennis, did some more acting. But in the 80s it was political activity again. I helped organize the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign. More peace marches, locally and in Washington and New York. In 1984 I was awarded the Albert Einstein peace award by Physicians for Social Responsibility. In 1986 I walked from Chicago to Cleveland with the Great Peace March and in 1987 I was arrested with other peace activists at the Nevada nuclear test site.

In 1991 I became a Humanist Officiant. I've married lots of couples since, and sadly, officiated at several memorial services. Also, during the 90s, we had a mini nursing home at our house. My two aunts and Elliott's mother lived with us for several years. During the 2000s, we worked with Peace Action and Patriots for Change. Elliott and I were awarded certificates of recognition for our peace work.

We still keep very busy. We belong to the Jewish Secular Community of Cleveland, we're in 2 play reading groups, I'm in three monthly lunch and scrabble groups, and 2 book clubs. I'm proud of our 4 children and our five grandchildren who are following in our footsteps in many ways.

## **Harry Zelwin**

Harry Zelwin was born in 1947 in Fahernwald DP camp outside Munich, Germany. His parents, of blessed memory, were Sam and Ida Zelvianski. Both Sam and Ida were originally from Novogrodek, Poland, now part of Belarus, which is near the Polish and Russian border. His parents met and married on February 12, 1942 while hiding in the forest and both became partisans with the "Bielski Brothers Partisans". Sam was a "Soldier" in the now famous family, as most of us have seen the motion picture "Defiance" starring Daniel Craig and Liev Schreiber. Ida never really spoke a lot about their experiences in the forest. They changed their name to Zelwin in the 1950s after coming to America.

After the war ended Harry's parents tried to return to their homes, but there was nothing there to return to. Ida's brother, Jack, was the only other family member who survived the war. They then went to the Fahernwald DP camp where Harry was born in 1947 and were able to immigrate to the U.S. Upon arriving at Ellis Island the Zelwins were asked where they wanted to go. Sam said he had a cousin in Cleveland so they were sent there. The Zelwins were taken in by Estelle and Bill Paris with whom they lived for several years. Although Sam had no formal education, he could speak six languages, but he and Ida had to learn English upon arriving here.

Sam had been a kosher butcher in Poland like his father and grandfather before him. Sam worked for Hyman Golovan as well as other jobs to support his family in Cleveland. Eventually he and his brother-in-law, Jack opened Sam and Jack's Kosher Market on Taylor near Cedar in the late 50s. Sam continued to operate the shop with Ida until 1986 when he retired, but only retired for two days. He continued to work part time well into his 80s.

Sam was very active in the survivor community and a member of the Kol Israel Foundation, Taylor Road Synagogue and then B'nai Jeshurun. Sam and Ida had two other children born in the USA, Robert Zelwin and Ileen Boro, both of whom graduated from Heights High.

Harry remembers whenever there was a Simcha, many surviving Bielski Partisans and their families would attend. Although they were dispersed all over the globe, they continued to re-unite whenever they could. One survivor, a successful haberdasher, often told Harry that his father Sam had saved his life many times while in the forest.

There were approximately 1,200 survivors of the Bielski Partisans after the war. There are now approximately 30,000 descendants. As for the Zelwins and Ida's brother, there are 27 children, grandchildren and great grandchildren surviving.

Harry can remember when walking to shul on a cold morning and complaining to his father, Sam would say "You don't know what cold is!"

## **Miriam Wexberg**

My name is Miriam Wexberg, born Miriam Gross in Lwow, Poland.

I was 10 when the Germans invaded western Poland, 12 when the Germans invaded eastern Poland where I lived, and 13 when I was taken with my parents in a Nazi roundup and deportation of Jews. I was saved when my mother told me to take off my armband with the Jewish star and to run away. No one chased me, no one shot me and I was away from the roundup and lived for another day. That night I found my older sister who had not been taken in the roundup, as she looked Aryan and spent her days walking the streets in the gentile part of town. She took over and had us smuggled to Warsaw where we assumed Aryan names and identities - mine was Maria Gorczynska - and found work as maids in Polish households.

Still alive at liberation, I reunited with my sister in Lodz. She sent me a postcard with a nondescript greeting, but the important part was the return address - I now knew where to find her. My brother-in-law enrolled me in school in Lodz, but still under the name of Maria Gorczynska. Even after the War it wasn't safe to be a Jew. My brother-in-law took over making decisions for me, and we moved to Bindermichel, a Displaced Persons camp in Linz, Austria, and got on the list there to emigrate to the United States.

They took the war orphans before they took families. I came here in December, 1946, leaving behind my sister, my only remaining family. I was sent away alone. I came to Ellis Island but was kept in the medical wing for observation. They could have sent me back to Europe, but I got better and I was released. Survivors who had family in the U.S. were sent to live with family, but I had no one so I was given over to the care of HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. They asked me where I wanted to go, but what did I know about where to go in America, so they chose for me, sending me to Cleveland.

That is a strength of the Jewish community - always taking care of the orphan and the stranger, something the Cleveland Jewish community and HIAS does to this day. I was sent to Bellefaire, a Jewish orphanage, then placed with a foster family. My foster dad, Al Horwitz, had fought in Europe and liberated the camps. He and his wife, Bert, decided they wanted to foster a war orphan. Amazing - a traumatized teenager from war-torn Europe who spoke no English. It was hard and I was lonely, but there was no choice but to go forward. I was sent to John Hay High School where I graduated with honors.

My sister, her husband and child waited and waited to come to the U.S. but finally went to Canada instead. I expected to join them in Montreal when they arrived, but in the meantime I met Philip Wexberg. He was a survivor of the Nazi slave labor camps but no one else in his family survived. We married and stayed in Cleveland. No family here, no roots, but a steady job and the survivor community as our family. It was hard, but we kept going. Phil was an electrician and worked side jobs all the time to put some money aside. If he got hurt and couldn't work, we had no family to help us. We had two children, Marcia and Steve, raised in a Jewish home with education as our goal. Only in America could the children of immigrants go so far. Marcia became a lawyer and Steve a doctor, and they grew up and married and gave us our precious grandchildren, Daniel, Ella and Aden. I think I finally knew happiness when our grandchildren were born.

## **Samuel Burke**

Sam Burke, who was called "Schmeel", was born on [REDACTED] in Chust, Czechoslovakia near the Carpathian Mountains near the Ukraine with parents Moritz and Pearl Berkowitz. He had two older sisters, Ilean and Lily. As a young child Sam went to public schools and Hebrew School but when Jews were not permitted to attend, he, at the age of 12, worked to be a dental assistant to a neighbor who was a dentist.

When the war began and after leaving the Ghetto, Sam and his entire family were sent to Auschwitz. He went through the selection process and never saw his grandparents again. He and his father were separated from his mother and sisters. Sam thinks his father died on a death march from Auschwitz having been separated from him as well. After about three months at Auschwitz, Sam was transported to Muheldorf -a Satellite camp of Dachau. After some months of hard labor there, some friends, knowing Sam had dental experience and knew the camp was in need of his skills, Sam was told to approach a Capo to advise him he could help with dentistry. He became the camp's Dentist's assistant, working on the prisoners for about five months. The dentist, a Jew, told Sam he would hire him to work for him after the war.

As the war drew to its end, Sam was being transported to the Tyrolian Mountains where he thought he would be killed. While en route and waiting outside the train, Sam was liberated one day before his 15th birthday when he saw an American Tank approaching. It was General Patton's 3rd Armored Division. The German guards fled when they saw the tanks approaching.

Sam then went on to live in Feldafing DP camp in Bavaria, which was formerly a Hitler Youth Camp. He later was returned to Prague by American soldiers to look for his family. He was able to re-unite with his sisters in Budapest and they had to flee to the American Zone to avoid the Russians who occupied the city and so it was like he was liberated a second time. Sam returned to Feldafing and he was given the chance to go to England with 150 other children but was first sent to Fehrwald DP camp. He actually met General Dwight Eisenhower who came into his room during an inspection at Fehrwald. He then lived in England for 2 years with a religious family and attended a Yeshiva for a year and worked in a dental lab for a year.

Sam's aunt sponsored Sam to come to America in 1947. He arrived in New York, then came to Cleveland and attended Glenville High School. He worked in various dental labs and as a dental assistant, and he worked at the Cleveland Natural History Museum, using his artistic skills to sculpt and create models of pre-historic animals.

Sam is also an accomplished self-taught piano player. At age 24 Sam auditioned for a scholarship at the Cleveland Institute of Music and he studied there. Sam has written symphonies and has performed many times in concert, including for our own Yom Hashoah program.

He was married in 1954 to an American, Roberta Weinberger, who is deceased, and they lived in University Heights. One of Sam's sisters lives in Montreal, Canada. His other sister died in Florida in an accident a few years after she arrived in America. Sam has a son David, who lives in California and a daughter Kimberly, who lives in eastern Pennsylvania. Sam also has 2 grandchildren.