

The Lifelong Process of Holocaust Survival: How Miriam Reich Rebuilt Her Life



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Abstract

The overarching theme of this article is that the personal is historical and vice versa. The subject of this article, Miriam Brahms Reich, literally lived through the pages of history, from her birth in Lithuania until the end of her life in Canada. As a Holocaust survivor, Miriam left behind a memoir and an interview which shed light on different details and experiences in her life. Composed with secondary source historical research and personal interviews, this article paints the broadest possible picture of Miriam's life through all available materials. The mere fact that Miriam was able to put her memories and thoughts to paper and screen in the latter half of her life leads us to think about the production of history as a personal process—the weight of history bears intimate relevance to the individual's life and legacy.

Keywords

Holocaust Survivor; Miriam Reich; Memoir; Ferdinand de Saussure; Lithuania; Kovno Ghetto, Bergen-Belsen; Kuremāe Camp, Goldfields Camp; Stutthoff Camp; Oskenzoll Camp; Montreal; Victor Frankl

Dedication

I dedicate this article to my paternal grandmother, Miriam Brahms Reich, the subject of my undergraduate thesis. Learning about Miriam's life has not only helped me maintain a connection with my grandmother who passed when I was only nine years old, but it has also helped me gain meaning in and provided guidance throughout my life. I also dedicate this thesis to my Grandpa Herman, the most loving, kind, and gentle man. Even though he passed away when I was six years

old, he constitutes my first memories of love, kindness, humor, and warmth.

We must never forget the six million Jewish lives, along with those who saved Jews (Righteous Among the Nations), Roma, LGBT, disabled persons, political/intellectual prisoners, prisoners of war, and other religious minorities who were intentionally murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust. Antisemitism¹ and all forms of hatred and bigotry neither started nor ended with the Second World War. My grandfather Herman's mother, Tzipora, father, Yitzhak, sister, Rivka, and brother, Nathan were among the six million Jews murdered. My grandmother Miriam's father, Reueven and brother, Boria, after whom I was named, were never able to experience life after their vicious murder by the Nazis and their collaborators. I dedicate this thesis to the memory of all who perished during the Holocaust. May their memory be a blessing.

Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure explains that language operates as a box around people's minds, and all that we think and say is enveloped by this box.² This box, however, contains an opening and is hollow so that individuals can fill the box of language with meaning. Language is malleable and changing as one goes through life and attributes certain experiences, people, and ideas to the words and phrases that he or she hears, says, and thinks. The constant interaction between the self and language leads Saussure to conclude that there is inherent tension between what we think and how we express what we think. To outline this progression of thought into speech, it is useful to break apart the concept of language into two domains: the signifier and the signified. The term "Holocaust survivor" is a signifier that invokes a sense of trauma, attempting to define the signified—a human being who has experienced the events of the Holocaust and pushed through each and every moment until the ordeals ceased. As the events of the Holocaust became easier to portray to the public and survivors themselves developed the psychological, emotional, and personal strength to relay their stories, Holocaust survivors have become a monolithic group in the psyche of Holocaust remembrance. The problem with this group identity of "Holocaust survivors"

1 This thesis follows Dr. Deborah Lipstadt's spelling of "Antisemitism" in *Antisemitism: Here and Now* (New York: Schocken Books, 2019).

2 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 122.

is that it does not leave space for individual agency. It essentializes each survivor and does not leave room for exploring the lives that blossomed, the lives that were devastated, and the lives that existed somewhere in between those two points after the last of the concentration camps and death camps were liberated in 1945.

When referring to survivors, we must focus on how a person can take their life and transform it into something creative and positive. It is even rarer, and more psychologically uncomfortable, to come to terms with stories of Holocaust survivors, such as Primo Levi, who could not bear living their own lives even after escaping death during the genocide. Survivors' lived experiences are especially paramount to eternally commemorate and reflect on—this biography intends to complement the picture of what it means to be a Holocaust survivor. Along with the tremendous efforts put forth by Holocaust memorials, museums, and films to document, remember, and attempt to explain the Holocaust, there remains a mostly unexplored but pressing issue in the field: How and why did survivors continue living, not just surviving, after the Holocaust was over? In short, the lives that survivors lived after the actual events of the Holocaust should be neither promoted nor demoted in rank to the Holocaust portion of each survivor's life. The signifier "survivor" connotes one who continues to live. If a survivor is solely defined by the intense experiences that stripped his or her humanity bare during the events of the Holocaust, then where does the rest of the signified fit in? In Modern Hebrew, there are two terms used to describe Holocaust survivors. One word is *sordei Shoah*, שורדי שואה, *sordei* being the plural nominative form of the verb *lisrod*, לשרוד, which means to survive; *Shoah* is the Hebrew term for the Holocaust. And in fact, the more commonly used term for Holocaust survivors is *nitzulei Shoah*, ניצולי שואה, with *nitzulei* stemming from the verb *lenatzel*, לנצל, which means to take advantage of, to harness, or to capitalize on. The literal translation of *nitzulei Shoah* into English is "those who harness the Holocaust."

This article is a biographical account of my grandmother, Miriam Brahms Reich, who harnessed the Holocaust and rebuilt her life after living through Soviet occupation, the Kovno Ghetto, and Nazi slave labor camps, including Bergen-Belsen. Miriam left behind a memoir,

published by Concordia University in 2001, along with an interview conducted in 1997 by Steven Spielberg's USC Shoah Foundation. Based on her own documentation, this article seeks to paint a broader picture of her life. Both Miriam's memoir and her video interview with the Shoah Foundation shed light on her experiences growing up before the war, during the war and the Holocaust; and her liberation, immigration and subsequent life in Montreal with her family, friends, and her career. My guiding principle for depicting Miriam's life was to give her agency.

In reclaiming what it means to be a Holocaust survivor, to rebuild, I find it paramount to constantly reinforce the importance of memory. In 2021, we are seeing the last of the living survivors pass away, but their story does not end. Holocaust historian Dr. Steir-Livny, emphasizes that "everybody has their own way of remembering."³ For the next generation, any attempt to reproduce Holocaust memory is worthwhile so that the stories of Antisemitism, mass murder, genocide, and destruction along with survival never fade into oblivion. This article should serve as a living memory.

First Ten Years of Life

Miriam Abramovich, born on June 18, 1930, lived a comfortable life for her first ten years growing up in Kovno, Lithuania. Miriam spoke Russian and Yiddish in the home with Bassia, her mother, Reuven, her father, and Boria, her older brother. Miriam considered her family to be "economically well off, well dressed, and comfortable." Understanding the sociological and economic positioning of Lithuanian Jewry is crucial in understanding her family's place in society for the first ten years of Miriam's life, as the reality of the country and its Jewish community changed drastically and at an accelerated pace in 1939. In the First World War and its aftermath, many Lithuanian Jews fought for an independent Lithuania. Though well integrated into society, tensions between ethnic Jews and ethnic Lithuanians would rise depending on the economic situation at certain periods. Bassia and Reuven Abramovich represented the overall status of Jewish professionals in Lithuania.

3 TOI Staff, "Podcast: Too soon? Israeli scholar explains why Holocaust humor is here to stay," *Times of Israel*, accessed April 7, 2021, www.timesofisrael.com/podcast-too-soon-israeli-scholar-explains-why-holocaust-humor-is-here-to-stay/.

The only formal schooling Miriam received before the Soviet invasion disrupted her childhood was at Shvabes Gymnaisum, a Hebrew-speaking Zionist Jewish day school in Kovno. Miriam started school in the first grade and only received three years of instruction before her and her family's life changed forever in June of 1940. Miriam clearly remembers that the Soviet army marched on Kovno on her tenth birthday. She recalls, "the party table was set outdoors in the gazebo of our garden. My mother, father, and my brother Boria (Boris) who was two-and-a-half years older than I, were having strawberries with whipped cream, my traditional birthday fare (June was strawberry time in Lithuania too). Suddenly we heard a commotion in the street, which was not visible to us from where we were. Our property was surrounded by a tall concrete fence with a heavy wooden gate for an entrance. We ran to the street. It turned out to be the arrival of a convoy of the Red Army. The Soviet Union had invaded Lithuania."⁴

As soon as the Soviets gained control of all local institutions in Kaunas, Miriam's father's textile business was confiscated. All the silver, gold, and art that the family possessed was taken. Since Miriam lived on a large estate with two homes, they were forced to house a random family that they had never met before. Miriam's immediate family had to squeeze into a single room in the house and share a kitchen and living room with a family of strangers. She recalls that the official Soviet housing policy allotted only so many square feet per person in a physical space.⁵

Miriam's Hebrew day school that she attended for three years, Schvabes Gymnasium, was closed, and she was forced to attend a Soviet, Russian-speaking school. The Soviets closed down all Zionist and Jewish religious activity, and only a few Yiddish institutions could operate. Seventy-nine out of the 217 banned public organizations were Jewish; Yeshivot were closed, and Jewish holidays were made regular work days.⁶ Miriam remembers how she "had to learn to write and spell Russian, the language that [she] spoke but never had any formal instruction in, and all the subjects were taught by Russian teachers brought in from the Soviet Union, and focusing

4 Miriam Reich, "The Holocaust Recalled," *Witnesses Speak: An Anthology*, eds. Butovsky, Mervin and Kurt Jonassohn. Vol. 15e. (Montreal: Concordia University Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies, 2001).

5 Miriam Reich Abramovich, Miriam Reich Oral History Interview 32521-4, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, 1997. Accessed September 15, 2020.

6 Saulius Suziedelis, "'Listen, the Jews are Ruling us Now,' Antisemitism and National Conflict during the First Soviet Occupation of Lithuania," 320, yivo.org/cimages/listen_the_jews_no_corrections.pdf.

on Social Realism and Communism.”⁷ The emphasis of the education was placed on convincing young pupils how wonderful communism was going to be for Lithuanians of all backgrounds. Miriam even became a “young pioneer,” for there was tremendous social pressure on the children to conform, especially those who originated from her high social class.⁸ Penetrating everyday life, there was a “constant fear of being sent to Siberia as punishment for having been capitalists or nationalists, or both. Thousands of people were exiled to the depths of Russia, a large proportion of them were Jews.”⁹

It is important to resist looking at the Soviet occupation from a post-Holocaust vantage Point: “Antisemitism gained new strength, embedded as it was within a conglomerate of old aversions, traditional stereotypes, and distorted perceptions of the Other’s behaviour, and was further intensified by the clash of competing collective interests and geopolitical orientations.”¹⁰ The Soviet occupation accelerated years of societal and economic tensions that previously existed. The Occupation’s effects signaled a radical change in life for many Jews in Lithuania in the way that they interacted with gentile Lithuanians and with the government in power. As the Second World War fledged on, and the Nazis drew closer into their takeover of Lithuania, the societal consequences of the Soviet occupation would be major in affecting the environment of rabid Antisemitism, resulting in active Lithuanian-Nazi collaboration that killed Miriam’s father, brother, and relatives, and left less than ten percent of Lithuanian Jews alive after the Holocaust.

The Nazi Invasion and Life in the Kovno Ghetto

Miriam recalls that the day the Nazis entered Koyno, life changed drastically. From the summer of 1941, Miriam remembers that local Jews were rounded up off of the street, their plight remaining a mystery to the local community until after the War. The Nazi policy in Lithuania served as a warning for the rest of European Jewry. Since the invasion of Lithuania was a part of the German offensive into the Soviet Union, the first Jews to encounter a systematic Nazi plan of

7 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled.”

8 Reich Oral History Interview 32521-4.

9 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled.”

10 Suziedelis, “‘Listen’,” 330.

murder were in Lithuania.

Upon the Nazis' arrival, food supplies were low, and it was extremely perilous for Jews to search for food in public as they were forced to wear the infamous Yellow Star. In August of 1941, the Kovno Ghetto was established in a suburb of the city called Slovotka. All Jews in the Kovno area were herded into the Ghetto where there was very little food and the Jews were constantly monitored by Lithuanian and German guards. Reueven, the patriarch of the Abramovoich family, was often taken to perform forced labor. "By February 1942, German-organized mobile killing units in conjunction with Lithuanian collaborators had killed 136,421 Jews in Lithuania. The majority of those left alive survived in the major ghettos at Vilna, Shavli, and Kovno, where they existed purely as a slave labor pool."¹¹ Miriam's paternal grandparents, Shira and Solomon Abramovich, along with her paternal uncles were also interned in the Ghetto.

In both her memoir and her interview, Miriam "vividly remember[s]" the day she saw a hanging in the Ghetto's public square, with a puddle forming underneath the gallows. "I asked why. My father explained. The future, if there was to be a future, was totally unpredictable and very bleak."¹² When referring to life in the Ghetto, Miriam constantly invokes the uncertainty of a future. There existed a daily horror in which one never knew if he or she was going to live or die that day.

[W]orst of all were the periodic Action and Selections. Suddenly at dawn, a very loud alarm would sound that could be heard in every house in the ghetto. This meant that every man, woman, and child had to leave their home and assemble on a large field. The SS with their dogs, clubs, and bayonets would be there waiting for us. As soon as we were assembled the selection process would begin, ordering the people to go to the right or the left. We tried to look healthy by pinching our cheeks to get some colour, to walk straight, and appear confident in order to make a good impression on the SS, but at five in the morning, cold and hungry, and scared to death of the fate that awaited us, it was a task at which few of us succeeded. How did I deal with such terror? I don't have all the answers, but I do know that since I felt totally powerless to change the situation, I assumed a fatalistic approach to life. A numbness set in. During the most critical times, I put my feelings on hold and became an observer, distancing myself from time and place, a Chagallesque image hovering in space, yet at the same time remaining very vigilant and aware of the precariousness of the situation we were facing.¹³

Miriam affirms that the Action carried out at dawn on October 26, 1943 was the "most

11 Dennis B. Klein, and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 9.

12 Reich, "The Holocaust Recalled," 7.

13 Reich, "The Holocaust Recalled," 7.

horrible event [she had] ever witnessed.” Families were forcibly separated; Miriam and her mother Bassia remained together, but her father Reueven and her brother Boria went to the side for men. She vividly recalls the scene which was “unbelievably horrific. The crying and shrieking of children removed from their parents was unbelievable. Parents who refused were beaten, and the children were snatched away.”¹⁴ Miriam’s memoir continues this thought: “There are some events for which there are no words. How do you describe the cries of a child being snatched away from his parents’ embrace? The weeping and the wailing, and the screaming of the parents? These are the sounds and sights that will remain with me to the day I die.”¹⁵ The situation was so chaotic that Miriam and Bassia were not able to say a word to Reueven and Boria before they departed separate ways. A simple wave was the last goodbye between the Abramovich family.

In the Camps

From her time in the Ghetto throughout her experiences in the camps, Miriam expresses the psychological reactions to the gravest of uncertainty, whether one was going to live or die from minute to minute. Miriam was able to survive this most extreme way of living from age ten, the Soviet invasion and the initial shakeup of her life, until age fourteen, when she was liberated with her mother from Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. On the day of the Kovno Ghetto selection in 1943, Miriam and Bassia were taken to work with a large group of women in Estonia. Miriam and Bassia only learned about the fate of Reuven and Boria after World War II in a Displaced Persons’ Camp. They were also taken to Estonia and Reueven was put into a selection line because he looked weak and tired that day. Boria refused to separate from his father, so they were both led to be shot in the Eredu Forest outside of Port of Kunda, Estonia.¹⁶

Miriam and Bassia were transported to a camp called Kuremäe, a satellite concentration camp of the Vaivara concentration camps in Estonia. On the train ride there, Miriam recalls how all of the women were packed like sardines, in indescribable conditions, with weeping mothers

14 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

15 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 8.

16 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 9.

crying out for the children forcibly separated from them: “It was hell.”¹⁷ In Kuremäe, Miriam, her mother, and the other women worked on roads, cleared forests, and dug roads as slave laborers. In the camp, work was the “ticket to survival.”¹⁸ Maria Hirsch Rosenbloom explains that many experienced “psychic numbing” in the camps, “an extreme emotional detachment that helped them get through the day of hard labor, hunger, and terror.”¹⁹ In the camp, abuse from the German and Estonian guards was the norm. Miriam recalls the sights of beatings, boot kicking, violence, shouting, and barking dogs. Living conditions were horrid, and the slave laborers would work on the verge of starvation.

In either February or March 1944, Miriam and Bassia were marched to Goldfields Camp in the harsh Baltic Winter. Anyone who could not keep up with the march would be immediately shot by the Germans. Miriam explains that her mother was older and weaker compared to the rest of the group. Miriam ensured that her mother would never give up and actively instilled hope in her mother that they would make it together. Rosenbloom recognizes that survivors coped in different ways to their circumstances. Some exhibited cruelty and extreme selfishness, others remained indifferent and statically numbed. Miriam explains her complex relationship to the march: “What did you do? You donned imaginary blinders, faced the front, put one foot in front of the other and became totally self-absorbed with your own survival. You became dehumanized.”²⁰ After this description in her memoir, Miriam relays that her mother was at a point of giving up entirely. “Upon my unrelenting urging, she mustered up enough strength to continue.”²¹ From Rosenbloom’s point of view, Miriam and Bassia’s co-dependency could reflect “efforts to keep a truly human face in the midst of devastation.”²² In Victor E. Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, where he recounts his memories from the Holocaust and the lessons he learned, Frankl constantly stresses that individuals in the camps needed a higher aspiration, an unbreakable vision to the

17 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 9.

18 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

19 Rosenbloom, “What Can We Learn from the Holocaust?” 3.

20 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 10.

21 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 10.

22 Maria Hirsch Rosenbloom, “What Can We Learn from the Holocaust?” *Occasional Papers in Jewish History and Thought*, The Hunter College Jewish Social Studies Program, no. 3 (1995): 3.

future or another force that he or she dedicated him or herself to in order to make it through the camps within one's own mind. From this viewpoint, Miriam and Bassia survived together.

Arriving at Goldfields, Miriam remembers that they were clinging onto one hope, spring was coming; and they were also beginning to be more optimistic due to improved conditions in the course of the war. Once again at Goldfields, Miriam and Bassia worked on useless roads and lived in similar deplorable conditions to the previous camp. At Goldfields, Miriam relays the story of a young girl, around her age, whom she met and quickly befriended. One day, they walked together to the gate of the camp, and the Estonian guard shockingly allowed them to walk out of the camp for a stroll. Once they left the gate, an unknown person shot Miriam's new friend in the stomach. She started to bleed profusely with her intestines out and died. Miriam found it strange that that nobody questioned what happened after the girl was shot, neither the Jewish prisoners, nor the Estonians, nor the Germans. In the fall of 1944, Miriam and Bassia were taken to Germany as the Russians were gaining more territory on the Eastern front. On the train ride to Germany, Miriam said that their hope for the future was that moving camps would be "for the better, you had to [believe so]."²³ The scenes from outside the window of the train left a life-long impression on Miriam. Upon seeing the relatively normal lives of the German villagers on the route of the train tracks, Miriam noticed what a contrast existed outside of the train's windows to her own life: "When you live in dread and squalor with everyone around you, you get used to it. But when you see that there is another way, and that people lead normal lives, you ask 'why do we face these conditions?'"²⁴ The train stopped at Stutthof where Miriam and Bassia remained together and had their heads shaved. From Stutthof, Miriam and her mother were taken to Oskenzoll, a German concentration camp outside Hamburg. Miriam was put to work in a munition's factory under the supervision of a Belgian prisoner. "This was one of the better memories of [her] camp experiences,"²⁵ Miriam warmly recalls how her supervisor was nice to her, and that she was entitled to one glass of milk per day due to the hazardous work conditions in the factory.

23 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

24 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

25 Reich, "The Holocaust Recalled,"¹⁰.

By February 1945, the Germans were losing the war and the SS decided to consolidate concentration camp inmates in Germany. Miriam and Bassia were taken by train to Bergen-Belsen where Miriam was greeted with the sight of “masses of humanity” clumped together with dead human bodies lying on the floor. Pure horror covered the scenes at Bergen-Belsen—corpses lying in mounds, beatings, public executions, starvation, murder. Miriam thought that she had seen the worst before her arrival at Bergen-Belsen, and she soon found out that she was wrong. Before their liberation, Miriam and Bassia became “fatalistic [...] became detached [...] and stop[ed] feeling deeply. It’s not a conscious desire, just something that happens.”²⁶ Death “became a natural occurrence, it happened to anyone.” In her interview, Miriam explains that she does not know “to this day how [she] coped with it and remained sane—human nature takes care of that.”²⁷

Liberation

On April 15, 1945, the British liberated Bergen-Belsen. Miriam, Bassia, and the inmates were “thrilled to be liberated”²⁸ but “too sick and too weak to celebrate [their] long awaited freedom.”²⁹ Miriam and Bassia had contracted typhus at the beginning of April, and the liberated inmates were not used to eating normal rations of food or engaging in basic human activities. The British treated the liberated Jews extremely well, but over 13,000 people perished in the months succeeding liberation from “disease, malnutrition, and [Nazi inflicted] torture.”³⁰ In Bergen-Belsen, Miriam and Bassia managed to contact other Lithuanian Jews who knew the fate of Reuven and Boria. Miriam recalls that “only then did we realize the scope of the Holocaust [...] numbers were just unimaginably large.”³¹ Miriam explains that, “[f]reedom from oppression did not result in instant happiness. So many feelings and thoughts had to be sorted out, dealt with.” Miriam lost her father, brother, relatives, and her own youth. She was “anxious to get on with [her] life and was not willing to look back [...] each coped as best as [he or she] could.”³² Moving forward in strides and

26 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

27 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

28 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

29 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 11.

30 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 11.

31 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

32 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 12.

creating a new life would be the defining themes for over the next half century of Miriam's life. Upon recollection, Miriam constantly made the active choice to keep moving forward and create, embodying Victor E. Frankl's stance that "we are never left with nothing as long as we retain the freedom to choose how we will respond."³³

Bergen-Belsen was intentionally burned down, and the liberated survivors were taken to a displaced person's (DP) camp elsewhere in Germany. The British did their best to rehabilitate life among the survivors after liberation. They put on dances and young soldiers would ask the Jewish girls out. The Jewish Brigade from Palestine also arrived and set up schools to teach the Hebrew language, songs, and culture to the Holocaust survivors with the goal of immigrating to Palestine and adapting to life there. At the time, Jewish immigration to Mandatory Palestine was forbidden by the British White Paper, so many refugees were waiting at former concentration camps in limbo, stateless. Miriam and Bassia got in contact with their surviving relatives, Bassia's sister Marussia and her husband Joseph Muller, who lived in Israel. Marussia and Joseph helped to secure their sister and niece asylum in Stockholm, Sweden to wait for permission to immigrate. They arrived in Stockholm in the fall of 1946.

In Sweden, Miriam was determined to finally master a language of her own, as up until this point, Miriam had not mastered a single language, having been exposed to Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, Lithuanian, and German for the first sixteen years of life. In Stockholm, Miriam decided that she would call English her own and master it by learning it. Miriam began to read books in English and look up every single word she did not understand in a dictionary. She also used to attend the cinema to learn English from British and American films. In the summer of 1947, changes in Miriam's life began to accelerate on a positive trend. Miriam's Uncle Arno, her father Reuven's surviving brother who left Lithuania before the War, invited her to spend the summer away from Sweden with him in London and Manchester. Upon her arrival back in Sweden in September of 1947, Miriam's and Bassia's visas to Canada were approved for a December departure.

33 Harold S. Kushner, Foreword to *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Viktor E. Frankl (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), xi.

Immigration to Canada, Marriage, and Navigating Jewish Montreal

In December of 1947, Miriam and her mother Bassia arrived in North America on the Polish liner, “The Batory,” greeted by the Statue of Liberty in the New York Harbor. Miriam and Bassia did not stay long in their initial port of arrival and made their way to Montreal, Quebec, Canada where they received a warm welcome from Bassia’s surviving sister, Sonia Neiman. Miriam quickly entered the Montreal School for Girls, enrolling in Grade 10, even though she was seventeen years old at the time—she had missed her formative adolescent school years.³⁴ This new environment of Montreal posed a series of challenges, not only for Miriam and Bassia, but for the thousands of Holocaust survivors who settled in the city from 1947 through 1952. The psychosocial consequences of Holocaust survival compounded with the difficulties of establishing oneself in a new society are major themes for many Holocaust survivors, no matter their age or the place where they resettled. Research in social work with Holocaust survivors illuminates how survivors of the death camps, slave labor camps, and ghettos reacted to their traumas in different ways psychologically, which impacted how each survivor adapted to their life after the Second World War. “Many developed ‘psychic numbing,’ an extreme emotional detachment that helped them get through the day of hard labor, hunger, and terror.” Many other survivors have been “plagued by post-traumatic symptoms, both physical and emotional.”³⁵ While this is the case for some survivors, others have shown “lifelong processes of mastering massive traumatization.”³⁶ Miriam’s response to her past lies on this end of the spectrum, among those “who showed extraordinary energy in creating new lives, achieving economic success, raising wholesome families, and making contributions to society at large.”³⁷

We must recognize the psychological tension that Miriam experienced on a daily basis during the war. Miriam does indeed point to “psychic numbing” during multiple scenarios in her Holocaust experience, but she also explains how she managed to pull herself and her mother through extremely trying situations, such as death marches, selections, forced labor, and extreme

34 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

35 Rosenbloom, “What Can We Learn from the Holocaust?” 3.

36 Rosenbloom, “What Can We Learn from the Holocaust?” 2.

37 Rosenbloom, “What Can We Learn from the Holocaust?” 4.

malnutrition. These two seemingly opposing forces, dissociation and active survival, worked simultaneously at different moments throughout the war. It is almost impossible to say that there was a single reason a certain individual survived the Holocaust. It is also important to stress that Miriam's experiences were a result of the implementation of the Nazis' "Final Solution to the Jewish Question," so it was the "SS—and only the SS—[that] determined who would live and who would die—more precisely, when one would die."³⁸ The most accurate way to describe how a survivor rebuilt their life is to understand their background before the war, their experiences from the war/Holocaust itself, and the individual's resident, self-described intentions for life as he or she was finally able to make decisions after liberation from the camps.

In general, survivors in Montreal came from Eastern Europe and were a younger demographic looking to rebuild their lives.³⁹ After relaying her history in 1997 to the USC Shoah Foundation in her video interview, Miriam reflects on her intentions upon arriving in Canada:

I was intent when I came to Canada to make a new life for myself. And somehow with the past, while I did not ignore it and never denied it, I concentrated on the present and the future. I guess I did not have enough energy to do it all, and the past somehow did not get the attention it should have. I guess to this day I don't talk very much about the past. When I came to Canada, my English improved dramatically in a very short time. While I did not intentionally conceal my background, very many people did not realize that I was a refugee. They just accepted me as being Canadian and therefore never asked any questions, and that suited me fine. I never volunteered information. If someone asked, I'd talk about it and answer their questions but I never volunteered information.⁴⁰

During her first school year at the Montreal School for Girls, Miriam attended a ball for the Jewish holiday of Purim, where she met Herman Reich who had immigrated to Montreal from a village near Lviv (modern day Ukraine) in 1935, jumping at the opportunity to join his uncles in the family importing business. Within a year after Miriam and Herman met, they were married. Miriam relates that as soon as her school found out about the marriage, she was called to the principal's office and expelled, because only single women were permitted to be students

38 Rosenbloom, "What Can We Learn from the Holocaust?" 3.

39 Anna Shefiel and Stacey Zembrzycki, "'We Started Over Again, We Were Young': Postwar Social Worlds of Child Holocaust Survivors in Montreal," *Urban History Review / Revue D'histoire Urbaine* 39, no. 1 (2010): 20.

40 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

at the Montreal School for Girls. Among the survivors interviewed in Shefiel and Zembrzycki's research, "[m]ost survivors married within two to three years of coming to Montreal and had children shortly thereafter, or when they could afford to do so."⁴¹ The school expulsion did not hamper her drive to educate herself and move forward in life. Miriam found a new school called Ross Tutorial which was created for returning Canadian GIs who had served in World War II. By 1949, Miriam had completed all secondary level education and wrote her exams to obtain her high school diploma, finishing only one year later than the typical high school graduate, even though her formal education was non-existent from ages ten through sixteen. Miriam wrote her exams as she was four months pregnant with her and Herman's first son, Robert (Bob), born on November 21, 1949. On May 20, 1953, Miriam gave birth to Celia, and one year later, to my father, Mark, on November 17, 1954.

For her first four decades in Montreal, Miriam did not entwine her Holocaust experiences with forging an identity in her new country. Her main focus was securing the education she was robbed of and raising her family with Herman. Miriam concentrated on raising her three children and had "[a]t last achieved a sense of belonging."⁴² As for Bassia, she lived with Miriam and Herman in Montreal, helped raise her grandchildren, giving her life purpose, and remained a widow until her death in 1979. Miriam reveals that her Holocaust experiences and memories were always with her post-liberation. "An experience like this, you can never forget."⁴³ She explains that she feels much "more comfortable with the present and planning for the future and accepts[s] the fact that [she] did go through a horrible experience" but does not allow it to rule her life and hold her mentally hostage.⁴⁴ In his *Man's Search for Meaning* Frankl explains that "[l]ife ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."⁴⁵ For Frankl and the prisoners he was with in the Nazis' camps, those who put forth the psychological will to survive always had a why: "[I]t

41 Shefiel and Zembrzycki, "We Started Over Again," 22.

42 Reich, "The Holocaust Recalled," 15.

43 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

44 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

45 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 77.

did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us [...] ‘Life’ does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life’s tasks are also very real and concrete.”⁴⁶ At the end of her video interview with the USC Shoah Foundation in 1997, Miriam points to her husband, children, and grandchildren as “instrumental in the healing process [...] surround[ing] [her] with love and affection and help[ing] to restore meaning in [her] life.”⁴⁷ At this first stage of her life as an autonomous young adult, Miriam chose to imbue herself with familial life. A 1972 study of Holocaust survivors living on Israeli kibbutzim (agricultural collectives) shows that the communal environment of the kibbutz was a crucial element in aiding survivors readjust to life after the Holocaust. In particular, the cohesive family unit helped to re-anchor survivors with a supportive family unit.⁴⁸ Miriam’s relationship to language, particularly English, sheds light on her integration into Canada. She “wanted a new beginning. [She] did not want to remain a refugee nor a displaced person forever.”⁴⁹

In her mind, the remnants of the Yiddish, Russian, Lithuanian, Hebrew, and German she spoke represented fragments of her life that were either too painful to easily recall or like the bulb of a flower that was plucked before it could bloom. With her zest for language acquisition, Miriam not only mastered Canadian English, but also completed two degrees and made a career in secondary-school-level English language and History instruction. In 1957, Miriam decided to pursue her undergraduate degree at Sir George Williams University in Montreal and received her Bachelors of Arts in 1964. Soon thereafter, she decided to pursue a teaching degree from McDonald College and was employed by Wagar High School for twenty-three years. Miriam describes these twenty-three years as a high school teacher and counselor as the “good years.”⁵⁰ Miriam’s most beloved aspect of her profession was “dealing with [her students’] boundless energy and trying to channel it into positive directions that would lead to their growth and fulfillment.”⁵¹ Miriam’s

46 Frankl, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 77.

47 Reich Oral History Interview 32521.

48 Myra Giberovich, “The Contributions of Montreal Holocaust Survivor Organizations to Jewish Communal Life” (Master’s Thesis, McGill University, 1988), 44.

49 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 14.

50 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 15.

51 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” 15.

teaching style for her students and meaning-making from her profession were informed by the principles shaping her own life.

In her *Holocaust Survivors in Canada: Exclusion, Inclusion, Transformation, 1947-1955* Adara Goldberg explains that the refugee newcomers from 1947-1955 to Canada had to develop their own organizations within Jewish communal life, since the existing Jewish community “did not have sufficient expertise or always demonstrate sensitivity to attend to the newcomers’ physical or emotional needs.”⁵² In an interview with Sarah Nattel, Miriam’s youngest granddaughter, Sarah explains how her paternal grandparents, who were also Holocaust survivors from Poland in Montreal, were active in survivor organizations and conformed to the secondary scholarship regarding Canadian survivors and their strong social bonds to other survivors for the duration of their lives as immigrants in their new country. Much scholarship on Holocaust survivors in Canada stresses the importance of survivor circles in many Canadian cities with a significant Jewish population. Montreal could be seen as the most well-known and active survivor city in Canada. These survivor organizations were set up for survivors for multiple reasons, including integrating into the established, prewar Jewish community, mutual support for integration into Canadian and Quebec’s unique multilingual and multicultural society, and social support among survivors themselves who shared similar experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust.⁵³ Miriam did not affiliate with the organized survivor community. While Miriam did indeed share many values and activities in common with the tight-knit survivor communities in Montreal, she did not want to be pigeonholed into one identity. Miriam wanted her new life to be one without any societal, professional, or social restraints that would limit her. It is with this spirit that Miriam could master English without an accent and even teach her new language to school children. It is also the spirit in which Miriam would work for a master’s degree, raise children and grandchildren, take care of her mother, volunteer, and travel the world with her husband.

Later Life: A Shift in Perspectives

52 Adara Goldberg, *Holocaust Survivors in Canada: Exclusion, Inclusion, Transformation, 1947-1955* (University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 235.

53 Giberovich, “Contributions of Montreal Holocaust Survivor Organizations,” 110.

Miriam's integration into Montreal was not the only aspect of her life after marrying Herman in 1948. This was just the beginning of her long career as a mother of three, a secondary school teacher and guidance counselor, and an extremely active individual. To gain insight into Miriam's life as a mother and grandmother, I conducted two in-depth interviews with Celia Nattel, my paternal aunt, and Sarah Nattel, my first cousin. Both interviews shed light on Miriam's parenting style, relationship to her family members, and her general attitude towards life after she successfully rooted herself in Montreal. It is important to mention that Celia represents the second generation of Holocaust survivors, and Sarah represents the third. Both generational views offer unique perspectives on Miriam's life and what it means to come from a survivor family.

Celia always knew that her mother was a survivor from a young age. Even though she knew that her mother was a survivor, she only knew a taste of her mother's experiences, as the Holocaust was rarely spoken about at home. Celia's father, Herman's entire immediate family was murdered during the Holocaust, and he also never spoke about the war at home. "In my mind, when I was older, Grandpa [Herman Reich] wasn't really expressive about his feelings."⁵⁴

Celia knew from a young age that her mother's father and brother were shot at a camp in Estonia after they were separated from Miriam and Bassia in the Kovno Ghetto. Celia also remembers how Miriam would advocate for and befriend the children she taught and counseled at Wagar High School in Côte Saint-Luc, Quebec. Miriam had a soft spot for children who were socially marginalized. My father Mark also remembers how Miriam would invite these students to their home for meals. Celia associates the expression "things are under control" with her mother. Celia also recalls that her family never fought or screamed at one another at home. From childhood, Celia and Mark do not remember their mother being emotionally or verbally expressive, "you got a look and you knew what you needed to do."⁵⁵ Celia explains that Miriam wanted to be able to have control over things in life. Miriam believed in the importance of education and wanted her children and grandchildren to pursue advanced degrees.⁵⁶

54 Celia Nattel, telephone conversation with Benjamin D. Reich, October 29, 2020.

55 Celia Nattel and Mark Reich, telephone conversation with Benjamin D. Reich, October 29, 2020.

56 Nattel, telephone conversation, October 29, 2020.

In the Reich household, Miriam tried to raise her children as individuals. My father Mark recalls how his mother had a seemingly hands-off approach to parenting. She always instilled in her children that they were individuals, and that it was up to them “to make what [they] can out of life.”⁵⁷ As Celia’s daughter, Sarah’s perspective of Miriam comes from a granddaughter and third-generation survivor. Usually, third-generation survivors are much more open to discussing the Holocaust and their family’s history for multiple reasons. Many third-generation survivors view the Holocaust as an important part of their existence and history. Sarah knew that her Grandma Miriam was a survivor for as long as she can remember. She learned about the Holocaust first at home and then in school. Sarah vividly remembers stories from her grandmother of the Soviet invasion when the Abramovich family was celebrating Miriam’s tenth birthday in their garden in Kovno. Another vivid memory is of Miriam speaking about her wartime experiences during the Seder (a ritual meal) on the Jewish holiday of Passover.

After raising three children with Herman, witnessing the birth of her first of many grandchildren, and retiring from her career in teaching and counseling, Miriam was ready to revisit Lithuania. While researching Miriam’s later life, I asked my interviewees why they thought Miriam was able to visit Eastern Europe and start reflecting on her experiences from the Holocaust after over four decades, culminating in her USC Shoah Foundation interview in 1997 and her memoir published in 2000. Celia recalls that Miriam started to suffer from migraine headaches in the early 1990s. She went to see a psychologist, and it is most likely at this time that Miriam started engaging in therapy and writing her memories from before and during the Second World War. My father Mark postulates that Miriam began to publicly reckon with her past when she wrote a small opinion piece for the Montreal Gazette in 1985 entitled “The Zundel case is indefensible.” Miriam expressed her disgust at Ernst Zundel (and his legal defense) who was being tried before the Canadian Right Tribunal for Holocaust denial. In the piece, Miriam writes, “I am a former inmate of five concentration camps; my father and brother were first shot, and then burned, not in a gas chamber but in a forest in Estonia.”⁵⁸ This was the first time that Miriam had published anything

57 Nattel, telephone conversation, October 29, 2020.

58 Miriam Reich, “The Zundel Case is Indefensible,” *Montreal Gazette* (February 5, 1985).

related to her being a Holocaust survivor for the public to see.

The most direct experience of Miriam literally facing her past was on a 1989 trip to the Soviet Union. This trip was the first “Jewish Russian visit after perestroika,” planned by a McGill University professor.⁵⁹ During the trip, Canadian Jewish participants would have the opportunity to visit many places in the Soviet Union that were off limits since the onset of the Second World War. For Miriam and Herman, they would have the opportunity to see their hometowns. Due to Soviet restrictions, Herman was not able to visit his home village of Tershov, near Staryi Sambir in what is now Ukraine, but Miriam was able to visit Kovno with Herman and Mark. As Miriam, Herman, and Mark set eyes upon the hill in Ukraine where Herman’s family was murdered, Edna recalls a scene where Mark was staring at the hill and stated out loud, “my family was killed and thrown into the pit here.”⁶⁰ Miriam embraced her husband and her son, and they stood there hugging in front of the group. This tight-knit relationship sticks with Edna to this day. In her memoir, Miriam expresses relief at the fact that her house was no longer on the property in 1989. “While I was disappointed at not being able to see it, I also felt tremendous relief. It was gone. I did not have to confront it.”⁶¹ Mark later remarked that the powerful moment of Miriam gazing into the river Neris was the closing of a circle in his mother’s life, liberated by confronting the past face-to-face.

Conclusion

In the 1990s, Miriam started to volunteer with the “Hope & Cope” cancer support organization, helping patients at the Jewish General Hospital of Montreal. In this role, she utilized her skills in survivorship and maintaining a hopeful attitude in the face of daunting circumstances to help cancer patients develop coping mechanisms. At the same time, Miriam and Herman kept busy spending time with their grandchildren. In 2004, Miriam was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She underwent chemotherapy and surgery, and went into remission for four years. One of my clear childhood memories is when Miriam suffered a stroke while we were eating ice cream as a family, soon after her cancer diagnosis. For the four years during her battle with cancer, I remember

59 Edna Janco, telephone conversation with Benjamin D. Reich, April 10, 2021.

60 Edna Janco, telephone conversation, April 10, 2021.

61 Reich, “The Holocaust Recalled,” Postscript.

Grandma Miriam living life with her normal, cheerful, and loving attitude. At the end of our interview, Edna Janco declared that Miriam lived to the end in the only way she knew—in the “Miriam fashion.” Miriam Brahms Reich sadly passed away from ovarian cancer in July 2008 at age seventy-eight.

After Miriam’s first bout with ovarian cancer, in 2007, she wrote down her general philosophies of life, applicable to any person in any situation. She entitled this document “Getting to Know Me.” Forgiveness, resentment, change, stress reduction, love, friendship, happiness, pet peeves, death, religion, emotions, hope, optimism, the meaning of life, and control are the themes about which she wrote aphorisms. She also recorded her numerous mindfulness and meditation techniques to reduce stress and enhance relaxation. In the paragraph about “change”, Miriam explains that “at Pesach (The Jewish holiday of Passover), we talk about slavery and the Israelites’ experience in Egypt, but we finish the Seder (the ceremonial meal at which Jews recount the story of the holiday) by saying, ‘Next Year in Jerusalem.’ We acknowledge and remember our past, but at the same time express the idea of a future that leads to freedom. We have in us the germ of change that can lead to freedom.”⁶² It is with this anecdote that one can begin to understand how so many Holocaust survivors were successful in living life anew and teaching others how to do so too. Miriam’s life story exemplifies how personal life stories are directly tied to local and global histories—the historical is personal and vice versa.

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62 Miriam Reich, “Getting to Know Me,” 2007.