

Be a warrior,

Not a worrier!

The Life and Times of Holocaust Survivor Mrs. Miriam Fellig

By Her Daughter, Goldie Tennenhaus

Her name is Miriam, and she is my mother. She was born in Warsaw, Poland, in the early 1930s and raised in a non-frum home. Her parents were Jacob and Hanna Goldwasser, and they were generous people. Siblings would visit and leave laden with gifts. She recalls that every year on Yom Kippur, her paternal grandmother (who lived with them) fasted, and in their home there was no bread on Pesach. At the age of five, Miriam was taken to Otvotsk on vacation, and her mother pointed out to her "the Grand Rabbi" (possibly the Rebbe Rayatz) walking down the street with his entourage of chassidim.

Miriam was an only daughter with one older brother, born into a well-to-do family. Her father owned a chocolate factory and was an inventor...



Matushka

Hanna, my mother's mother, was one of nine children. She became estranged from her parents when she broke her parent-arranged and parent-approved engagement to a frum young man, and instead married Jacob Goldwasser, a non-religious man she had met at a party. Hanna and Jacob had two children, a girl and a boy. They were named Miriam and Yanush.

Hanna liked getting dressed up and going to parties, and often left her children in the care of a gentile nanny, a woman named Matushka. The fact that a non-Jewish woman was my mother's primary caretaker may sound like a bad thing, but in the end it turned out to be a blessing. When Hitler tore her own mother from her, Matushka was there for her. Matushka was truly one of the chassidai umos ha'olam, the righteous gentiles.

During the good years, Matushka would bring the young Miriam hot cocoa to her bed in the mornings. On Fridays she would take her to visit an old man with a beard and yarmulka who held her in his lap, patted her back and was very warm to her. Only later did my mother realize she was visiting her estranged grandfather. He may have rejected his daughter Hanna, but he did not reject his granddaughter Miriam, whom he viewed as innocent.

On Sundays, Matushka would go to church and tell my mother to wait for her outside, explaining, "Miriam, you are Jewish; this is not for you." Other days, they would go to a beautiful gated park, where they were often jeered at, pelted with stones and chased out of the park. All because my mother was Jewish.

My mother remembers feeling the fear and animosity towards Jews in Poland in the 1930s. She would worry; she'd ask her parents, "Why do we live here? Why don't we move?"

On Fridays she would take her to visit an old man with a beard and yarmulka who held her in his lap, patted her back and was very warm to her

Eventually they did. One dark night they crossed over the Polish border of Bialystok into Belarus, to freedom. They were stopped by patrols every hour but they made it. The loyal nanny who escaped with them had had a dentist drill holes in her teeth, in which diamonds were hidden. My



Miriam Goldwasser, cherished only daughter.

mother's mother felt guilty at leaving her mother-in-law behind. She saw how upset her husband was about that, so she said, "Let's go back and retrieve her." But once they returned to Warsaw there was no going back.

Leaving home and moving into the ghetto

The Nazis, may their names be erased, offered my mother's father, Jacob Goldwasser, an opportunity to work for them and receive special privileges. The Nazis wanted his famous creative talent for the war effort. My grandfather refused, saying that he would go with his people.

When the Germans forced the Jews to move into the ghetto, the Goldwassers left their big home on Marjakofsky Street, the main street of Warsaw. As they left, the maids who worked there spat at them as they walked off with the family's riches and furs. They crowed that now it was their turn to be rich and powerful. Only Matushka remained faithful, honest and devoted.

The family entered the ghetto. They found a small flat, settled in and entered the forced labor brigade. My mother was too young to be put to work, and her paternal grandmother was too old. They would spend the long days together in the apartment, waiting for the return of my mother's parents. The Nazis would make rounds to make sure that all able-bodied adults were at work. Their violent,

angry footsteps on the stairs were unmistakable.

During this time, Miriam's frum maternal grandfather was starving. He came to his estranged daughter and son-in-law, the Goldwassers, for food. The son-in-law, although he wasn't frum, wanted to show his father-in-law his deep respect, so he boiled and re-boiled the potatoes several times, trying to make them kosher, *kavyochol*, though their pots were traif.

The loud echo of the Nazis' threatening footsteps could often be heard. One day, while the able-bodied adults were at work, the dreaded footsteps came closer and closer and finally burst into the flat where Miriam and her old grandmother were sitting next to each other. One of the Nazis shot the grandmother in the head and told the other Nazi to "take care of" my mother before moving to the next



Miriam with devoted nanny Matushka.

apartment. The remaining Nazi looked at my mother, with her blue eyes and blonde hair, and said something about her reminding him of his own child. He patted her on the head, shot a bullet into the ceiling and left. My mother sat frozen next to her dead grandmother until her parents returned.

After this trauma, she would spend her days in a small hidden space between the floor of their apartment and the apartment below. She had with her a flashlight, some food,

Every night, when her parents came home from forced labor, they would move the dining room table, roll up the carpet, open the trap door and bring their little daughter back into the apartment.

a few books and some toys. Every night, when her parents came home from forced labor, they would move the dining room table, roll up the carpet, open the trap door and bring their little daughter back into the apartment. She spent her days all alone, hiding, worrying, "What if my parents don't come back? Who will let me out of here? Will anyone know I am here?"

Living in terror

There was hunger on the streets of the ghetto. My mother's first Yiddish words were, "*Bitte, a shtickele broit.*" Please, a little piece of bread. Jewish corpses lay on the street stacked one on top of the other, waiting to be collected for burial. The chevra kadisha couldn't keep up. My mother remembers people stepping right over the corpses. My mother's only sibling, her brother Yanush, went out to search for food because Miriam, his beloved little sister, was crying from hunger. She never saw him again. He was shot dead foraging for food near the ghetto wall. She developed a rather understandable fear of letting people go, because she was not sure they would ever come back.

My mother didn't realize until later how bad the hunger was, because her mother, Hanna Goldwasser, used to give her own food rations to her daughter to eat. So the little girl always had double rations while the mother had next to nothing.

My mother was once recruited by the Resistance to do an errand. She was frightened but badly wanted to do something to help fight the Nazis. She did the errand.

There was bone-deep fear on the streets of the ghetto. The Nazis were both murderous and unpredictable, so it was better not to be seen by them at all. One day, little Miriam's father spotted Nazi soldiers approaching, and he pulled his family off the street into a foyer, in which some people were already hiding. A crying woman with a small baby banged on the door and begged to be let in, but the people already in hiding protested that there was no room. My grandfather overruled the others and squeezed her in. The baby was crying loud enough for the Nazis to hear, and the people in



*Miriam's father Jacob Goldwasser Hy''d.
(Note striking resemblance to her husband.)*

the last time as he gave her a long look and hurried off. She was about nine when she last saw her parents, Jacob and Hanna Goldwasser, may Hashem avenge their blood.

Matushka's sister threatened to report her to the Nazis for hiding a Jew. Nevertheless, Miriam spent six years with Matushka, who succeeded in passing her off as her daughter out of wedlock.

Eventually, the Nazis did arrest the brave nanny. On the way to the Gestapo she ate the small bits of paper with numbers of Swiss bank accounts that my mother's parents had given to her for safekeeping. They beat her up and let her go free. (And my mother never did get the money. She didn't have enough proof to claim it.)

Convent orphanage

It had become very dangerous to keep the little Jewish girl, so Matushka placed her in a convent orphanage, promising it was only temporary. She admonished my mother never to let anyone know she was Jewish. Terrified, my mother obeyed meticulously. She had lost her grandmother, brother and both parents and was now separated from Matushka as well.

One night, the Polish orphans danced merrily in a circle, singing, "The Jews are burning." From the windows they could see the flames of the Jewish ghetto, which was burning.

The war was over. My mother had recovered from rheumatic fever, and the Nazis were no longer in power. Matushka told her, "You are a Jew. Now you have to go to your people."

One of the other girls in the convent orphanage looked at my mother. As their eyes met, they both knew instantly that the other was also Jewish. They never said a word to each other, but could see the fear in each other's eyes. After the war, they met again on a ship of refugees to Halifax, Canada. That was when they confirmed to each other that they were indeed Jewish but had both been warned not to reveal this fact to anyone in the convent.

While my mother was at the convent, she became sick with rheumatic fever. Matushka was called to pick her up. Matushka did not want to do so, because she was afraid that her sister would turn Miriam in as a Jew, and then the Nazis would kill them both. But she had no choice. So she

picked up my mother from the orphanage, and together they moved to the countryside. There my mother would lie in the bed near the window, with her arms strapped to wooden slats to keep her still. There was no medicine available to treat her illness.

My mother lay there and once again she worried. Every evening, she would wait for the train's whistle that signaled that the train carrying Matushka, her loyal and devoted nanny, had come into the station.

War over, but family gone forever

After the war, my mother waited once again for her parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. But no one came. Hitler, may his name be erased, had murdered them all. May Hashem avenge their blood. Miriam was 15 years old and all alone in the world except for the gentile nanny.

The war was over. My mother had recovered from rheumatic fever, and the Nazis were no longer in power. Matushka told her, "You are a Jew. Now you have to go to your people."

My mother did not want to leave Matushka. But the nanny insisted that her parents and grandparents would have wanted her to go back to her people. My mother knew that returning to the Jewish People was the right thing to do, but it meant leaving the only person in the world she had left who loved her. She very reluctantly left Matushka and went to live in a frum Jewish orphanage in France. On Shabbos, she used to secretly pull out the plug of the cholent pot. There was nothing else to eat – my mother would go hungry too – but that was her way of letting out her misery. Today they would say she was "acting out," expressing her pain, anger and deep loss in the only way she could.

Leaving Europe

The Jewish agency finally found a third cousin in the United States who would sponsor her so she could leave Europe. Her name was Leah Habergrutz, and she had come to America right before the war. My mother, Miriam Goldwasser, was 16 years old when she boarded the ship to Canada. (Leah could not get a visa for her to come to the U.S., so she went to Canada.)

On the boat, she saw that Jews from different European countries were able to communicate with each other by speaking the universal language of Yiddish. She vowed then to learn Yiddish, and she kept that vow.

As soon as she arrived in Montreal, my mother, with Hashem's kindness, met her future husband, my father, Joe (Yosef Mordechai) Fellig. My mother says that when she saw him for the first time, "He had the look of my father." She sensed he was a good man, one she could trust. Physically, too, he resembled her father (see photo).

My father Joe Fellig and his brother Nussen were refugees from Vienna. Their father was a Belzer chossid who



Miriam Goldwasser as a teenager.

hiding were angry at the mother for risking everyone's life. In an attempt to keep her whimpering baby quiet, she pressed her baby's face into her shoulder. After the Nazis moved on, the woman discovered that she had unintentionally suffocated her own baby. My mother says that until today she can hear the poor woman's wails as she ran off, crying desperately for help.

Into Matushka's Care

Her brother Yanush was gone. Young Miriam and her parents were rounded up and herded into a cattle car. They spent days in the sweltering, airless, foul-smelling car being transported to a camp. When they got to the camp, though, there was no room for them there, so they were sent back to the ghetto. After that, my mother's father took action. He made arrangements for my mother to escape the ghetto into the care of Matushka, for safekeeping for the duration of the war. Miriam escaped from the ghetto by lying under a truckload of soil. Enough air came through for her to breathe.

As prearranged, several days later, Matushka brought my mother to a certain corner at a specific time so that my grandfather could see that his daughter had made it into the nanny's care. My mother was warned not to show any sign of recognition. From across the street she saw her father for

died in a car accident when my father was 13. My father began supporting his family at age 13. He also was meshamesh the Rogetchover Gaon zt"l. My father, his brother and his younger sister were able to get out of Austria on a kindertransport to England. Surprisingly, they let my father go on it although he was 19 at the time. In England, he and his brother, along with other Austrian citizens, were arrested since they were from an enemy country. They were sent by ship together with Nazi captives (and the crown jewels) to a prisoner of war camp right outside of Montreal. The Frierdiker Rebbe arranged for them and other frum boys from Vienna to be released from the camp and took them into the Lubavitcher Yeshivah in Montreal. As a result, they became Lubavitcher chassidim.

Joe and Nussen Fellig would greet newcomers at the train station and drive them to where they needed to go. When my father saw my mother, he was immediately intrigued by her, a young girl all alone in the world but with her head held high.

My mother had no family in Canada and only one third cousin in the United States. A childless Jewish couple in Montreal, a dentist and his wife, took her in. The Jewish Congress paid them for her upkeep.

After she settled in Canada, my mother tried attending

high school for two months, but realized that with all she had been through, she just wouldn't fit in with carefree Canadian teenagers. She was years ahead of her classmates in maturity. She went to work in a sewing factory.

My father waited for two years, until she turned 18, and then asked her to marry him, on the condition that she would make a frum home. He paid for her wedding gown and everything else.

At her engagement party, she overheard one of my father's friends express his concerns to my father. He said to my father, "How do you know that the Germans didn't do something to her in one of those concentration camps? Maybe she won't be able to have children?" My mother soon proved him wrong... she had ten children: Yanky, Hershy, Channa, Itty, Mendy, Goldie, Shneur Zalman, Shulamis, Shloime, and Yisroel.

Adopted by the Rebbe

At the age of 18, newly married and pregnant, my mother met the Rebbe in yechidus. He had only recently become the Rebbe. She immediately felt comfortable confiding in him. She told the Rebbe that she had always wanted a large family, but was worried because she had no family to help her. She asked the Rebbe if he would adopt her, and the Rebbe answered yes. That was the beginning of a beautiful relationship. My mother would ask the Rebbe all sorts of

My mother wanted to bring Matushka out of Poland, but she could not get a visa. So until the end of Matushka's life, my mother would send her money, gifts, and items she couldn't get in Poland.

questions, and the Rebbe would answer her with patience, understanding, and a lot of kindness.

She would speak to the Rebbe about pregnancy, childcare, chinuch, housekeeping, shidduchim – topics you would discuss with your own parent. She told him of her worries and her fears. The Rebbe told her in one of her private audiences, "Be a warrior, not a worrier." On another occasion he told her, "If you want to, you can change."

My mother once told the Rebbe that no matter how hard she tried to keep the house clean, there was always a sock or

something out of place, with all the small children around. The Rebbe replied, "But I see your husband, and he looks happy." A lesson in priorities...

Once, my mother told the Rebbe that she sometimes would get nervous with her children and lose her temper. She usually ended up taking it out on whoever was within closest reach at the time, not necessarily the one who caused the problem. The Rebbe replied that everyone gets what is bashert for them to get. If he got it now, he would not get it later.

Another time, two of my older brothers, Yanky and



Miriam in the orphanage in France.

Hershy, as children were fighting in 770 and were in the Rebbe's path as he approached. My father had to separate them. My mother was mortified, and began to apologize to the Rebbe. My mother does not recall the exact words the Rebbe said, because she always became nervous in his presence. She remembers that he indicated with a smile that one day, the brothers would be good friends, and she shouldn't worry too much about their fighting now.

Every year my parents would drive from Montreal to Crown Heights for Simchas Torah, and they would proudly present and introduce us to the Rebbe. Without parents, aunts or uncles, the Rebbe was the only person to whom my



Joe and Miriam Fellig at their wedding, May 18, 1949.

mother could show off her children.

When my mother was in a crowd of women, the Rebbe would single her out with a nod. Once she told the Rebbe she did not know if we would come back next year, because it was hard to find accommodations for a big family. We had no family of our own to stay with in New York. The Rebbe sent Rabbi Klein looking for my father, with the key to the large house that is now the kollel building. We stayed there during Tishrei for several years.

The Rebbe once asked my mother what she thought of the violinist who had been playing at kos shel brachah. My mother answered that it must be what Gan Eden is like. He also asked her if she listened to Rabbi Yossel Weinberg on the radio on motzoei Shabbos. My mother felt loved. To my mother, the Rebbe was both father and grandfather, as well as a wise advisor. His smile and kindness every Tishrei sustained her for the rest of the year.

All my life, I saw my mother *zol gezunt zein* waver between being a warrior and a worrier. She is a street fighter, a powerful force. But every so often, without even being aware of it, she goes back to being the hidden child, terrified of abandonment. When my father was five minutes late coming home from shul, she would become the little girl waiting for her parents in the little hidden room or for her

nanny to come back after work. As children, we knew we needed to be her children, but also her parents, brother, aunts, uncles, and cousins. We also knew that we could never be those people for her; we could never make up for her losses or calm her fears.

At simchas, my mother would feel her losses even more acutely. There was nobody to put at the head table! Hashem blessed her with a sharp wit and a keen sense of humor, which helped her get through the hard times.

My mother once told the Rebbe that the only time she felt secure was when she was in the car with all of us. She had us all right near her, under one small roof, and on the move. She told the Rebbe that she wanted us all to live near her when we grew up. The Rebbe just smiled. And we all felt obligated. Most of us live within a half hour's drive of our mother.

Determination

During her pregnancy with me, the sixth child of ten, she very nearly lost me. It was Yom Kippur and my father was in shul. She called the doctor, who came running to the house to save the pregnancy. He treated her and ordered her on complete bed rest. A week after she was told to stay in bed, a fire started in the sukkah. My father was in shul again. She called 911, called all the children and ordered them to stay around her bed, and began to knit to keep herself calm. The fireman arrived, put out the fire and told her, "Lady you're nuts." Her answer was that she wasn't going to risk the pregnancy. For four months, she stayed in bed in order to have me.

Time and time again, my mother has come charging to our rescue when we called for help or just let her see that we were in some kind of distress. She became so good at this that we dubbed her the fireman. She is at her finest during a crisis. In between crises, she still worries.

My mother had the story of Matushka written up in a book about Righteous Gentiles who saved Jews during the War. My mother wanted to bring Matushka out of Poland, but she could not get a visa. So until the end of Matushka's life, my mother would send her money, gifts, and items she couldn't get in Poland.

In 1993, my brother entered my mother's name and family information in the Yad Vashem database. Through that, we found a first cousin of my mother's, a few years older than she was, named Rosa Gerlin.

Rosa had married a Jew. She remembered many things that my mother didn't, because of the age difference. Although Rosa had been raised frum, she brought up her children non-religious. And my mother, who had been raised by non-frum parents, married a frum Jew and brought up ten frum children. My mother and her first cousin kept in touch by telephone for a few months and planned to meet, but Rosa became sick and passed away before they had the

opportunity.

For the 41 years she was married to my father, she lit her Shabbos candles and asked Hashem not to leave her alone again – let Him take her with my father or better yet, a moment before my father. But in the late 1980s, my father became ill. He recovered and was in remission for four years, before his illness returned. As my mother sat at his bedside in the hospital, she would tell me, “I hear the footsteps of the Nazis.”

On 13 Cheshvan, 1991, my father passed away and my mother was left alone once again. But my mother survived it with her characteristic feistiness, resilience and persistence, and even opened a store after his passing.

I am so proud of my mother and thank her often for having the wisdom at the age of 18 to choose to make a frum home, and to have a big family. In spite of all she went through, she brought us up with humor, in the sunshine and joy of Yiddishkeit, under the Rebbe’s guidance.

My mother showed us how to fiercely love, protect and fight for our spouse and family. She taught her children and grandchildren to believe in Hashem, to hold the Torah dear, and to love our Rebbe and trust in his words. Some of her children and grandchildren are proud Shluchim of the Rebbe, while others serve their communities in other ways, and this gives my mother nachas.

Now my mother is a retired warrior and active worrier. But every so often the warrior in her rises and she reminds us of her power and strength. She shows us that she still has



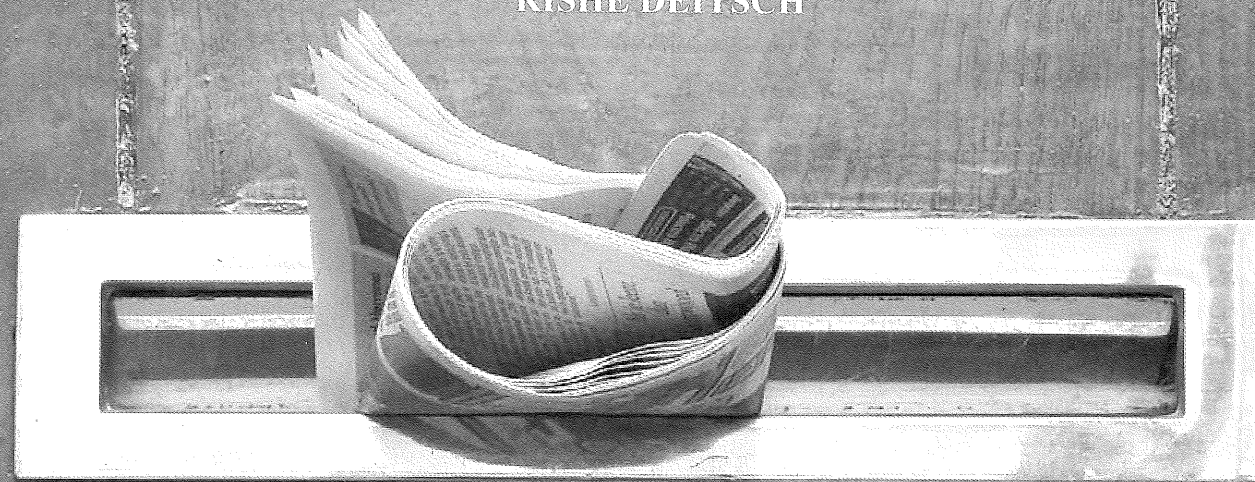
Mrs. Miriam Fellig under a grandchild’s chuppah.

some fight left in her, and gets us all dancing to her tune. May she be healthy and strong and may we all learn from the Rebbe’s advice and blessing to her, to be warriors and not worriers. ■



L-R: Goldie Tennenhaus, Itty Bastomski, Shulamis Lurie, Channa Silverman, Miriam Fellig. Itty is a niece; the others are daughters.

RISHE DEITSCH



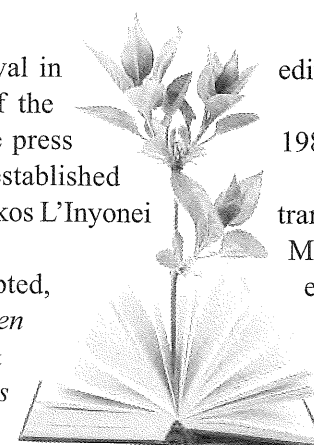
“Talks & Tales Is Here!”

Throughout the 1960s, when I was a little girl growing up in Worcester, Mass., the day the Talks & Tales came flying through our big brass mail slot was the day my sister Zeesy regretted teaching me how to read. She didn’t like having to compete with me for the new Talks & Tales. We loved the stories even though they sometimes made us stop breathing (temporarily). We read every word, even the halachos of Shavuos and the feeding habits of deer. And we took it for granted, as if it would always be there. But one day, after nearly a half-century, it stopped, making it probably the longest-running Jewish children’s magazine ever. Now this wonderfully well-written magazine, all 48 years of it, has been bound and published in 16 volumes by Merkos L’Inyonei Chinuch, the publisher of Talks & Tales. We all want to give our children Torah-true reading material, yet we sometimes struggle with the quality of the writing in the kosher material. These volumes provide the best of both worlds.

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Barely half a year after the Rebbe’s arrival in America (28 Sivan, 1941) the first issue of the monthly journal Talks & Tales rolled off the press (Chanukah 1942), published by the newly established organization of the Friediker Rebbe—the Merkos L’Inyonei Chinuch.

It continued to be published, uninterrupted, together with its Yiddish counterpart, Shmuessen Mit Kinder Un Yugend, for 48 years. Talks & Tales was also published in Hebrew (as Sichos L’Noar) as well as in French and Spanish



editions.

The final issue, number 586, appeared in Nissan 1989.

The magazines were edited by the noted author, translator and secretary to the Rebbe, Dr. Nissan Mindel. He remained with the magazine for the entire duration of its run, presided over its growth and basked in its popularity. The high literary quality of the Talks & Tales can be attributed to his skill and talent.

In the early years of Chabad-Lubavitch in