

THE AXE UNDER THE BED

FEAR & FAITH
AFTER THE
HOLOCAUST

ELIEZER SOBEL



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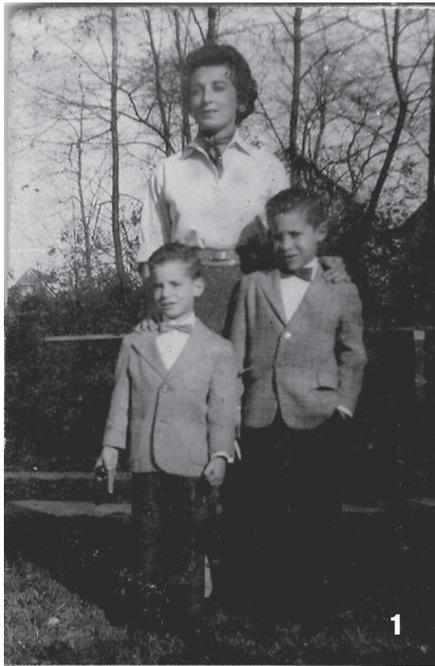
When my grandmother Fanny Lerner lay on her sick bed, near the end of her 94 years, she used to regularly utter these words:

“The Hitler, the Hitler!”

She had never recovered from the life-changing moment in 1939 when she and her three young children, one of whom was my mother Manya, received visas and tickets of passage on the *Bremen*, the last passenger ship that Hitler permitted to depart for America. At some point during the voyage, my mother said she thought the boat was turning around. Such a conclusion is virtually impossible to reach at sea, with no land to establish one’s bearings. But my grandmother trusted her little girl, and inquired with the captain when she saw him strolling on the deck. He looked utterly shocked and replied, “Who is this little girl? I want to meet her.”

For in fact, Hitler had changed his mind, and sent orders for the *Bremen* to return to Germany. Soon after, however, the captain made a life-and-death choice; he decided the ship was close enough to New York waters to risk disobeying Hitler and complete the journey.

That is how my mother’s family got here; therefore, that is also how I got here.



So that was the good news. The sad and tragic aspect to the story is that there had been no visa granted for my grandmother's mother, Elise Grumbacher, who had lived with them for years in their tiny village of Rheinbischopsheim, outside of Baden Baden. Naturally, the elderly woman insisted that her daughter get out with the children as soon as possible. It was hoped that my grandmother and the kids would join my grandfather, Bernard Lerner, who had departed a year earlier with only a single diamond in his pocket, which he somehow managed to turn into sufficient funds to make arrangements for the family to settle in Paterson, New Jersey. After working in the textile business in Germany, he would remain a private, "door-to-door" jewelry salesman in America for the remainder of his days.

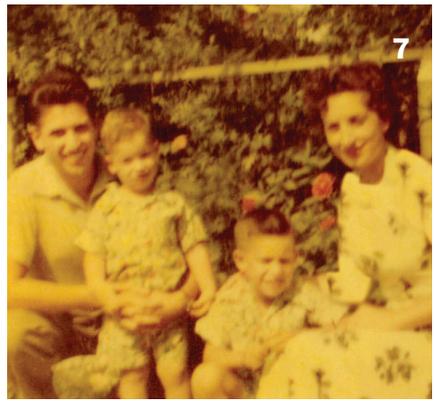
The family promised to send for Elise as soon as a visa could be obtained for her, and they devoted all of their energies toward making that happen; however, in less than a year, Elise was taken away in a cattle car to die in Gurs, a detention center near Pao, France.

Nobody gets over such a thing, and it haunted my grandmother's soul until the very end:

"The Hitler, the Hitler."

I was named after Elise, my great-grandmother.

Although the Holocaust was never discussed in my family when my brother and I were children, I noticed something peculiar: every once in a while as our family was gathered around the television, an old black-and-white newsreel would appear briefly on the screen, depicting images of goose-stepping men in



(1) Manya with her two sons, Eliezer (L) and Harry. (2) Fanny and Bernard Lerner, many years later, in the United States. (3) Bernard Lerner as a young man in Strasbourg, France. (4) Manya (the author's mother) as a child. (5) Fanny Lerner, still in Europe. (6) Eliezer's great-grandmother (Manya's grandmother, Fanny's mother): Elise Grumbacher, Hashem yikom damah, who insisted that her children and grandchildren get out of Europe at the first possibility despite the fact that there was no visa for her. (7) Sixty-two years ago: Max and Manya Sobel with their children, Eliezer (L) and Harry.

uniform, or skeletal ghosts standing behind barbed wire, and my mother would suddenly turn her face away in horror, and say very loudly and abruptly, "I DON'T WANT TO SEE THAT," and my father would quickly turn the channel.

Over time I figured it out.

My mother kept an axe under her bed whenever my father was away. I felt utterly unsafe in our house in Fair Lawn, New Jersey, as if we were in imminent danger of the Nazis breaking down our doors. It was a very terrifying way to live, and I developed a unique way to communicate my fear. When lying in bed at

night after being put to bed, I would at some point begin screaming one word in a frantic, clipped yelp:

"SCARED!"

I'd wait about 30 seconds, and shout again: "SCARED!"

I would continue this, infuriating my brother in the bed next to mine, until my mother would virtually sleepwalk into the room and get into bed with me, at which point she'd promptly turn to face the other way and fall back asleep. I would remain terrified with no further options.

And then I heard the story, decades later, from

What the Rebbe Said (and Didn't Say) About the Holocaust

By Yanki Tauber, based on the teachings of the Rebbe (reprinted with permission from Chabad.org)

...LIKE MILLIONS of his generation, the Lubavitcher Rebbe was personally touched by the Holocaust. His younger brother, DovBer, was shot to death and thrown into a mass grave, as were tens of thousands of other Jews in a series of massacres conducted by the Germans shortly after their occupation of Dnepropetrovsk in the fall of 1941. A beloved grandmother and other family members were also killed. The Rebbe's wife lost her younger sister Sheina, who perished in

Treblinka together with her husband and their adopted son.

In his writings and discussions on the subject, the Rebbe rejected all theological explanations for the Holocaust. What greater conceit—the Rebbe would say—and what greater heartlessness can there be than to give a “reason” for the death and torture of millions of innocent men, women and children? Can we presume to assume that an explanation small enough to fit inside the finite bounds of human reason can explain a horror of such magnitude? We can only concede that there are things that lie beyond the finite ken of the human mind. Echoing his father-in-law, the Rebbe would say: It is not my task to justify G-d on this. Only G-d Himself can answer for what He allowed to happen. And the only answer we will accept, said the Rebbe, is the immediate and complete Redemption that will forever banish evil from the face of the earth and

bring to light the intrinsic goodness and perfection of G-d's creation.

To those who argued that the Holocaust disproves the existence of G-d or His providence over our lives, the Rebbe said: On the contrary—the Holocaust has decisively disproven any possible faith in a human-based morality. In pre-war Europe, it was the German people who epitomized culture, scientific advance and philosophic morality. And these very same people perpetrated the vilest atrocities known to human history! If nothing else, the Holocaust has taught us that a moral and civilized existence is possible only through the belief in and the acceptance of the Divine authority.

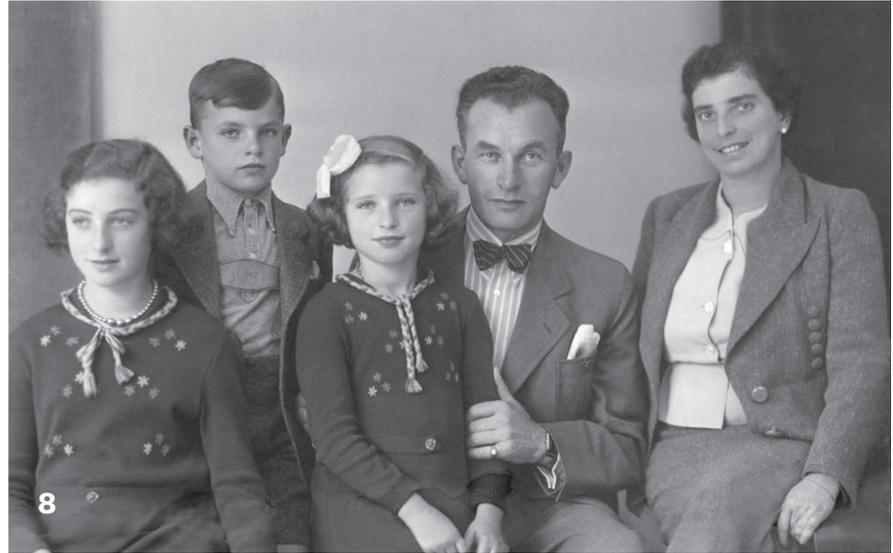
The Rebbe also said: Our outrage, our incessant challenge to G-d over what has occurred—this itself is a most powerful attestation to our belief in Him and our faith in His goodness. Because if we did not, underneath

it all, possess this faith, what is it that we are outraged at? The blind workings of fate? The random arrangement of quirks that make up the universe? It is only *because* we believe in G-d [being All-Powerful], *because* we are convinced that there is right and there is wrong and that right must, and ultimately will, triumph, that we cry out, as Moses did: “Why, my G-d, have you done evil to Your people?!”

But the most important thing about the Holocaust to the Rebbe was not how we do or do not understand it, nor, even, how we memorialize its victims, but what we *do* about it. If we allow the pain and despair to dishearten us from raising a new generation of Jews with a strong commitment to their Jewishness, then Hitler's “final solution” will be realized, G-d forbid. But if we rebuild, if we raise a generation proud of and committed to their Jewishness, we will have triumphed.

my Uncle Norbert, my mother's younger brother. I mentioned the axe to him and he said: “Oh, you know what that was about, don't you?” I didn't. On Kristallnacht (November 9 and 10, 1938), the “Night of Broken Glass,” the Nazis went on a rampage, setting fire to thousands of synagogues throughout the Reich (Germany,

Austria, Bohemia and Moravia), breaking and looting glass storefronts and homes owned by Jews, all with the full approval and support of the German government. On that night, 20,000-30,000 Jewish males were dragged off to concentration camps, and about 100 were murdered.



(8) The author's mother's family, the Lerners (L-R): Manya, Norbert, Gerda, Bernard, Fanny. (9) Grandma Fanny in rear with her three children (my mother the tallest one) embarking on the Bremen.

And on that night, a couple of them broke down the front door of my mother's house—with an *axe*—in their little pristine village. The axe fell at my grandmother's feet, and she picked it up and handed it back, saying, "I believe this belongs to you?"

Thank G-d, at that point a group of non-Jewish neighbors and friends appeared and chased the two jackbooted thugs away. My mother wasn't even home when this happened, but that axe nevertheless somehow traveled metaphorically through time and space and eventually landed under her bed in Fair Lawn.

The next day, my grandmother went into the burnt synagogue in the village to rescue the *sefer Torah*, which she brought to America with her, and donated to Temple Emanuel in Paterson, New Jersey. Sadly, many years later when that synagogue shut its doors, my family inquired about the *sefer Torah*, but it could no longer be located.

Before leaving Germany, my mother, one of only two Jews in her small one-room schoolhouse, was asked to stand in front of her classmates and read aloud from *Der Sturmer* magazine, which contained articles ridiculing

the Jews and depicting them as rats and vermin, provoking hilarity and laughter in the class. Her teacher was a Nazi who once asked my mother an arithmetic question and when she took just a moment too long to reply, smacked her hard across the face.

Being directly exposed to such terror and evil at such a young age was to forever damage my mother's trust in life and the world. Forever after, life would be a matter of being safe at all costs from "them," with "them" being virtually anyone outside of our immediate family and perhaps a few close friends. "Them" were primarily the Christians, all potential anti-Semites and Nazis, and they were everywhere. We lived in a Christian world and had to lay low. Even years later, merely the sight of a policeman in uniform would evoke in my mother the heart-stopping terror of the Gestapo, coming to take her away.

My brother and I fought her on this. We insisted that her worldview of "us vs. them" didn't apply to us as kids in America. I had only run into anti-Semitism twice growing up in New Jersey, so naturally my personal experience didn't match that of my mother's.

The first instance was learning that several

of my seventh grade classmates lived in communities where Jews were prohibited, through an unspoken agreement in the neighborhood.

The second had occurred when I was younger, playing down the block in the schoolyard. What I referred to as a “big kid” suddenly appeared out of nowhere and confronted me, demanding to know if I was Jewish, and I instinctively replied, “No, I’m Catholic,” and he said, “Good, because I beat up Jewish kids.” I ran home, terrified, and told my family the story—all the relatives were over—and everyone laughed and said I did the right thing. But I couldn’t help thinking that the right thing would have been to proudly say, “Yes, I am Jewish,” and then get beaten to a pulp.

But apart from those events, it appeared to me as if I lived in a world that was largely safe from those things that my mother was constantly protecting me from. It took me well into my 30s to truly understand the logic of her position toward life, and then at age 50, at times to share it.

For years I worked on my perpetual fear as if it was purely a *psychological* problem, a paranoia and neurosis that had been handed down. Yet now there is glaring evidence in the real world for it. I am terrified by news of neo-Nazis and the rise of anti-Semitism, and to try and wrap my mind around the idea that I apparently live in a world where people who don’t even know me

want me dead. When I sink into thoughts like that, even an axe under the bed cannot save me.

Nobody warned me that this was the world I was being born into, a world I perceived to be a terrifying and dangerous place filled with evil shadows lurking in dark corners. I inherited “fear of Nazis” like a gene. The very first breath I took in 1952 was of the same atmosphere that Hitler had poisoned. The world he destroyed for my great-grandmother and my grandmother and my mother remained ruined when I showed up, and I felt it in every cell of my body. In my novel, *Minyan*, the character that is loosely based on me states:

*I was the world’s first paranoid baby.
And I’ve been scared of everything ever since.*

In a sense, my entire life of seeking spiritual enlightenment and integration in therapies, of trying to find myself, has all been just this one thing: an attempt to cure myself of terror. Now, of course, we have every reason to be terrified. There are actually people whose very mission in life is to *keep* us terrified. They’re called *terror-ists*.

When I was in Israel I met a man, an Orthodox Jew with long *peyot* and a long beard, who lived in Mea Shearim, the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem. He told me that if we are sad, if we can’t be joyful, if we can’t sing,

(10) Eliezer Sobel with his wife Shari Cordon. (11) Recently: Max and Manya Sobel with their children, Eliezer (L) and Harry. Max passed away on the 10th of Cheshvan (2016). To read more about Max Sobel, see Eliezer Sobel’s “Farewell to My Father” at nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives.



then Hitler won. Conversely, he said, the way to prove Hitler has lost is to rejoice. And in fact, in *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* by Yaffa Eliach, there are stories of people miraculously able to rejoice and affirm their faith in G-d no matter how horrific and unspeakable the circumstances in which they found themselves. Somehow these exalted souls were in such a state of *deveikut* that nothing on this Earth could “un-leave” them from their joyful feelings of closeness with Hashem. Most of us wouldn’t and couldn’t rise to such a level, but if only one person can assert the Ever-Presence of the Holy One—*no matter what the situation*—is it not proof of what’s possible for all of us?

But who among us has that kind of faith? Who is that fundamentally unshakeable at the core? What about those of us “regular” human beings who remain riddled by fear and doubt, particularly when the daily news of the day continuously reminds us that our fears are far from groundless?

In *Toward A Meaningful Life* by Rabbi Simon Jacobson, the Rebbe reminds us that the only way to dispel intense experiences of fear and anxiety is through the active remembrance and acknowledgement of G-d’s Presence in our lives and permeating the world, along with the existence of a spiritual realm beyond our merely material existence. In the light of these spiritual assertions, he teaches that we will naturally begin to restore to ourselves a clarity about our higher purpose in being alive—that Divine mission for which we were created—and thus dissolve all fear and anxiety.

That is a tall order for a mostly secular Jew, which I am. How I managed to sneak onto the pages of the *N’shei Chabad Newsletter* is nothing short of a miracle or Hashem’s practical joke, and I suspect the last laugh will be on me. But to be perfectly blunt, Hitler literally ended my mother’s relationship with G-d, and her favorite theological declaration when I was growing up was, “When you’re dead, you’re dead.” So for me to become awake to both G-d’s Presence and the possibility of another, higher world where my soul is eternal and safe, was—is—to say the least, an uphill struggle. And my story is not unusual. There is actually a whole syndrome named after

it: the “Second Generation Survivor Syndrome.” I have all the classic symptoms, having inherited not only all the terror, but also the utter loss of faith that followed.

In *Faith After The Holocaust*, author Eliezer Berkovits presents the ultimate conundrum: for those of us who weren’t there to now arrogantly assert our faith from a position of affluence and comfort, declaring that “everything happens according to His Will,” while true in principle, sounds almost glib and is really an insult to those who *were* there and able to summon such a miraculous, unwavering faith in the face of inconceivable suffering and evil. There is simply no way to compare the two expressions of faith and to do so, Berkovits, says, verges on vulgar.

Likewise, for those of us who weren’t there to self-righteously rebel and reject G-d outright in light of the atrocities of the Holocaust becomes a meaningless, even obscene gesture, he says, in light of those who actually directly experienced the unspeakable inhuman realities of the camps and therefore had every reason for a truly earned rebellion and rejection of faith. Berkovits suggests that G-d Himself wouldn’t hold their loss of faith against them, after what they went through.

All of which leaves the rest of us in that most uncomfortable of positions, where having *no* answer to the question “Where was G-d at Auschwitz?” is a morally preferable stance to either affirming *or* denying one’s faith in response to the Shoah.

So I’m afraid that leaves me speechless.

Fortunately, even in the face of the unfathomable, we still have the Rebbe’s words to look to for solace:

“...if we rebuild, if we raise a generation proud of and committed to their Jewishness, we will have triumphed.” (See sidebar.) ■

Eliezer Sobel is the author of L’Chaim! Pictures to Evoke Memories of Jewish Life, the first book ever designed specifically for Jewish people with memory loss. He is also the author of five other books, including a prize-winning novel, Minyan: Ten Jewish Men in a World That is Heartbroken. All are available at eliezer-sobel.com or on AMAZON. Eliezer Sobel lives in Red Bank, New Jersey, with his wife, Shari Cordon.