KEEPING SECRETS

The day I decided to admit I was Jewish

Frannie Sheridan

I carried a secret with me for 35 years. A secret that my father told me when I was nine years old. A secret that made me live my life with an unbearable heaviness. Until I came out at age 35... as a Jew. That was my secret.

My full name is Frances Rose Mary Sheridan. Both my parents are Jewish Holocaust survivors but... they raised me Catholic.

My father, Bernie Sigal, was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1913. My father experienced anti-Semitism in Vienna from the time he was a schoolboy, and was regularly beaten by classmates and forced to crawl home through the gutter. One of the boys in his class, a gentile named Erich Haider, often tried to protect him.

The day after Hitler took Austria, in 1938, my father went home to his parents, Jocheved and Josef Sigal, but saw that there had been a break-in and his parents weren't anywhere to be found. He then walked the streets looking for them, and he bumped into Erich Haider, who had joined the SS to save his own life. Erich took my father into an alleyway and showed him his name on the death list. He warned him that he was listed to be taken away the next day, and to get out of Austria immediately. He also told my father that his parents had been taken away in a truck.

So that night, my father crawled across the bridge which connects Austria to Switzerland, as bullets whizzed by, inches from his head.

In Switzerland, he stayed with paternal cousins in Lens, then headed to France. At some point he was rescued by a French priest, Pere Goison, who hid him in his seminary. He tried to get him to convert, but my father responded, "I don't change my religion as easily as I change my shirt!" My father, who had studied medicine before the war, joined the French army as a medic. While fighting at the Battle of Dunkirk, they ran out of supplies. He couldn't help the wounded. The Nazis were coming down the beach wounding and killing, and the French army was retreating into the English Channel. As bullets were firing close to him and Nazis were slaughtering people within close range, my father decided he would rather take his own life than fall into the hands of the Nazis. He recited the Shema and tried to drown himself. He was rescued in an unconscious state by a British freighter. The sailors pulled him out of the ocean with an anchor. He didn't have any papers and spoke with a German accent, so they thought he was a Nazi. They called him "Fritz."

He was brought to England on the freighter and put in isolation. However, he was happy to be safe and have clean sheets.

He ended up on one of three

L-R: Bernie and Liesel Sigal; Frannie; the Sigal family.

boats which came to Canada in 1943. He landed in Montreal and was interned for three years in an internment camp together with other Jewish immigrants as well as Nazis. The immigration people couldn't discern who was who.

Without papers, he didn't have proof of his medical background so he interned and studied and achieved his MD for a second time.

My mother, Liesel Zwienicki, was born in Bremen, Germany, in 1921. My maternal grandmother, Selma Zwienicki, was murdered on Kristallnacht in her home in Bremen. The Nazis had come to obtain the key to the synagogue which my paternal grandfather, Josef Zwienicki, had. But he had fled over the rooftops with the keys moments before they'd burst into his home. Selma was shot and died in her room. Her eldest son, my uncle Rabbi Jacob (Gerd) Weiner, was forced to sign a paper declaring her death an accident before he was sent to concentration camp.

After my grandmother's murder, the family tried to obtain exit visas. Finally, sixth cousins in Saskatchewan, Canada, who owned a farm, sponsored them. They eventually got out in 1943 and ended up on the farm for a very short time, then made their way to Montreal.

A mutual friend introduced my parents to each other at a social event. They were married in a synagogue and lived as Orthodox Jews. My father's first medical practice was in Morse, Saskatchewan, a small redneck town similar to the American prairies. My parents were the only Orthodox Jews in a town inhabited mostly by Catholic Eastern European immigrants. There were not many options for Jewish doctors then.

In 1951, my father was attacked in his office and beaten unconscious by a German doctor and his wife, who were fined the paltry sum of $30. This brutal act of anti-Semitism would have far-reaching

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consequences for our family.

The beating triggered my father's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Terrified of losing yet another family, my father converted to Catholicism, anglicized our family name from Sigal to Sheridan, cut off ties with all extended family and relocated to Ottawa.

My mother always felt very connected to her mother, who had been murdered on Kristallnacht. Her observance of Judaism helped her express that connection. So she was very opposed to my father's decision for the family to live as Catholics. This created a huge rift between my parents. Her brother, Rabbi Gerd Weiner, who had become a prominent rabbi, also argued with my father over his decision to become Catholic.

My mother always wanted her brother to be included in our family, but my father was paranoid that if he visited, people would see that we were Jewish.

My father was married to the secret, paranoid that my mother would tell anyone – the nuns where one of my brothers took piano lessons, the priests, everyone and anyone. The war may have ended in Europe but it had never ended in our home. In real life my Dad recreated a literal war zone within the confines of our family, out of his fear and need to protect us.

I was born in 1961, ten years after my father had been assaulted in his office and left for dead in Saskatchewan. By then we were living in Ottawa, and by all accounts we were Catholic. We went to church every Sunday, my siblings and I attended Catholic grade school. I was baptized, given first communion, confirmed – the whole megillah!

I didn't have any inkling that we were Jewish until I was nine years old. Firstly, I didn't even know what Jewish was – we didn't have any references. My mother made matzo-ball soup on Fridays using the Manischevitz matzo meal in our cupboard, but I assumed it was some German food that was yummy! I thought the same of the potato pancakes she made, etc. I was not aware that we were not authentically Catholic. I did notice that my father became increasingly anxious in church.

When I was nine, my father started to tell me these Holocaust stories. He often came into my room in middle of the night, when his PTSD kept him awake, and shared them with me. He'd say (in his Viennese-Yiddish accent), "Jah, und zen a Nazi shouted, 'Halt! Who goes zere?' Well, Frannie, I'm not cuckoo I didn't stop crawling on za bridge und he starts shooting at me whiz whiz I can feel the Nazi bullets inches from my head! Okay Frannie that's enough for tonight. Sweet dreams! Night-night Frannie!"

Not a great way to send your child off to dreamland!

He kept what he believed to be a shameful, dangerous secret from the world, but chose to share it with his nine-year-old daughter, making sure I understood that *I had better not tell*. As a young girl, the terror that I'd been fed by my father – and the stress and anxiety of keeping his secret – made me feel pinched and tense. I began to anticipate that bad things were going to happen. Everything felt exaggerated – whenever somebody did something wrong to me it felt a thousand times worse than it was. In my mind, friends turned into enemies on a dime. My skin would crawl, my heart would beat so fast – I was a very scared and hurt child.

By the way, I do not in any way blame my father. I believe he truly did the very best he could.

I would hide in the bathroom at my Anglican boarding school for years, terrified that I was being judged adversely by my schoolmates. I entered university at age 15, majoring in theater, and my teachers praised my talent. Then I'd go into crippling anxiety. I was terrified of exposing my emotions and making myself vulnerable, because I did not believe the world was a safe place for me. I felt unlovable, afraid to let anyone get close to me, believing that I had to push my secret deep down.

I dropped out of college, auditioned for theater school, got in, dropped out again, studied to become a dancer, came up against terror again. I kept self-sabotaging.

But an inner voice kept saying, "Tell your story, tell your story." I had pushed my secret down so far I didn't clearly know what it was – so I thought maybe I should tell funny stories on stage. I started impersonating characters on stand-up stages. I was doing extremely well and people would always have high hopes for my success, until again my secret stunted me and I'd become crippled mid-act.

Then one day I got honest. A comedy club owner who had big dreams for me asked me about my past, and encouraged me to seek help. I ended up in therapy at the Holocaust center.

You know those people who love to complain? When one person says, "Oh, you have no idea what I'm going through! I make so little money and work 40 hours a week," they always answer something like, "Forty hours? Is that all!

I work two jobs, 80 hours a week, cook and clean for my family – and all with this non-stop migraine headache!" There really should be a reality show called "Who's the Biggest Victim?" But in my world the winner would always be my parents. Holocaust survivors have the trump card.

When I was a kid, no matter what happened to me it was never as terrible as what my Holocaust survivor parents had suffered. You can't compete with that, so when I was a little girl, I buried my issues. Locked them down tight. And our stories, our very identity as Jews, became a Fort- Knox-level secret.

And my Dad says, [accent] 'Liesel, did you tell her we were Jewish?' And my Mom answers, 'No, Bernie, of course not... I told her we were goyim!'"

In 1995, while in my 30's, I was touring as a stand-up comic and started to sprinkle in a small bit of shtick about how ridiculous it is pretending to be something we're so obviously not, and then did a bit about my parents. The critics liked it a lot, and that gave me courage to look deeper. It felt like finding light in the darkness. Then I was approached by a theater producer who needed a dramatic play. A good friend who had asked me about my act was fascinated by the little background I had shared, and encouraged me to write a play about my family.

I ran the idea of the play by my family and was threatened with legal action – not because they are malicious but because they were so stuck in their secret that they were terrified that revealing it would likely get us killed.

The truth was that my parents were very Jewish-looking and -sounding European Jews, yet we went to church every Sunday. Religiously. My parents looked about as Catholic as kreplach! So I used that as the basis of the humor in my play. For example, one joke was that my parents were so obviously Jewish, at church they complained all the way through communion. Yiddish accent: "I can't eat this cracker, it's too dry, needs a shmear of pickled herring or something – a little cream cheese! What is this?!"

Another bit of humor I worked into my play was, "My Dad would try to get my mother to fit in as a Catholic. He'd be like, 'Liesel, can't you bake a Christmas-y dessert like fruitcake or gingerbread men?' And she'd say 'Bernie, if you force me to make those goyisha cookies my gingerbread men would have to be circumcised!' And then my Dad would take a drink and say, 'Liesel, vat did you put in the eggnog? It tastes ekeldik!' And she go, 'Bernie, it's delicious! I spiked it... with Manischevitz!'"

I took the truth of their pain and wrote this bit between them: "It's hard pretending you're something or somebody you're not – it's a lot of stress! Like one day my mother said to my Dad, [accent] 'Bernie, all this pretending is just too much pressure! You know, today Sister Marie Therese who teaches Joey piano at the convent asked to have coffee with me. And, well, it wasn't just coffee – she wanted to know where I was from and what my religion was in Germany.' And my Dad says, [accent] 'Liesel, did you tell her we were Jewish?' And my Mom answers, 'No, Bernie, of course not... I told her we were goyim!'"

I performed my play, "The Waltonsteins," for the first time in 1995 in Vancouver. It was the first time that I had ever revealed publicly that I was Jewish. I was terrified that I would be killed – not to mention that I thought no one would want to hear the story as it was far too depressing. The spirit of my grandmother who had been murdered on Kristallnacht led me to the stage. I felt her presence and knew it was her. This made me realize I was doing this for a much larger purpose and the story was being told through me, as opposed to it belonging to me and being solely my story. The audience was small, only 100 people. Afterwards everyone just sat there, as they were so taken with the story.


Frannie Sheridan

A journalist in the audience wrote a piece for *The Jerusalem Report,* and the story received international attention. Extended relatives whom my father had cut off when he'd forced us to go underground as Catholics, who had been searching for us for over 45 years, read the article and began connecting with me from all over the world. My beloved Orthodox Jewish uncle, Rabbi Gerd Weiner, reconnected with me. He sent me many books he had written and came to see me perform in Baltimore. His daughter, my cousin Judy, and I have become close, and she attended my wedding to my husband Dani in 2008.

The success of the show and our reconnection with relatives lifted a lot of the shame and fear and guilt. My six siblings each went through various levels of healing and were very grateful to me, even when I was impersonating them in the play about us on stage. And let me tell you, there's nothing scarier than having your family watch you impersonate them seriously on stage. We had a very emotional reunion that was made into an award-winning radio documentary broadcast through National Public Radio. This greatly impacted my family.

After I performed "The Waltonsteins" in my hometown of Ottawa, in 1996, in front of a 900-seat crowd, many of the people who had been in our congregation at St Basil's church came to me and said, "We knew and we should have said something." But it was the 50's and 60's – women were being abused at home and people turned a blind eye. Secrets and lies were part of the social fabric.

I have performed "The Waltonsteins" about 150 times in Canada as well as in the United States. It was published by IRT/Blizzard in 1997. The press attracted legendary film director Arthur Hiller, who read a multicast screenplay which I'd written and then teamed up with me to direct. I had the great pleasure of working with Arthur for many years to bring the script to screen – but, sadly, macular degeneration interfered with his ability to direct.

"The Waltonsteins" was based on the true story of my life, almost like therapy on stage and massively healing. Each time I performed it, layers of grief were peeled off. I played all roles – myself and my six siblings, parents, Nazis, my grandmother, and myself as a little girl and adult as well as a zeitgeist character (my inner critic). As time went on I was able to rewrite the play, finding more humor, keeping the truth intact, but paring down the story and removing excess fat – in the same way that fairytales are very effective to make points.

The feather in my cap is that my 86-year-old father, who by then had retired and was living in his native Vienna as a Catholic, wrote me a letter of thanks for giving him the courage to return to his Jewish roots, which he did publicly in Vienna – and I read that letter in my play. He passed away in 1999 and is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Vienna as a Jew. His funeral was attended by the Viennese Chassidic community of which his beloved grandfather, a Rabbi, was a member. My mother passed away in 1988.

During my travels to perform my play, I have often had the truly heartwarming experience of being a Shabbos guest at the homes of many Jewish people and Rabbis throughout North America. I learned Jewish social rituals and was able to ask questions and derive information

Today my husband Dani and I live in West Palm Beach, Florida,

Bernie and Liesel Sigal

Food *for* Thought

QUESTIONS THAT CHILDREN OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS MAY WANT TO THINK ABOUT

By Frannie Sheridan with N'shei Chabad Newsletter staff

Is there an invisible brick wall around your emotions?

If the answer is yes, do you want to tear it down? If the answer is yes, how can you begin to accomplish that?

Do you sometimes run away (or close down) when people cry or otherwise express grief? If the answer is yes, what goes through your mind at that time?

Are you afraid of what would happen if you let yourself feel, fully and openly?

Are you only comfortable when we're joking around? What would happen if we spoke seriously and shared our true feelings? Or: Are you only comfortable when we're serious? What would happen if we joked around, yes, even about that madman Hitler (may his name be erased)?

Do you feel it is wrong to laugh and be happy when so many were murdered?

Do you feel that some survivors who had their families torn from them were afraid to love again?

How long did that fear last?

Were your parents able to show you love?

Did you feel they did love you wholeheartedly, but were just unable to show it?

Were they unable to love anyone fully?

Were they constantly afraid their loved ones would disappear?

If so, how did this fear affect you?

How does it affect the way you treat your children?

Did you see other non-survivor parents showing their children much more love and affection than you received?

Were their homes happier places? If yes, how did you explain that to yourself?

How did it affect your own parenting behaviors?

Are you better at showing love to your children than your parent/s was/were to you?

How do you know, or measure, that?
If you do not feel you are doing better than your parent(s) did, what do you see as the biggest obstacle?

How would you describe your parent-survivor's relationship with food?

How did/does that affect you? Your children?

Were you relieved to realize that as an adult you no longer had to follow your parent/survivor's rules?

Did you feel disloyal to your parent(s), or to the six million, when you broke those rules, for example, throwing away a perfectly good piece of bread -- just a tiny bit moldy – or going outside in the winter without a coat?

As a parent yourself, are you overly protective like your parent was, are you totally laissez-faire because you're on the rebound from your own childhood, or are you unaffected by your parent-survivor's parenting behavior?

As a child, did you feel you could go to your parent with your problems? If not, why not?

Did your young children feel they could come to you? If not, why not?

When you were a child, how did you view your parent-survivor as opposed to how you view him/her now?

When did the change occur, and how?

Have you shared with your children the way your view has changed?

Second Generation: Surviving and Thriving

Miriam Turk

"I always knew I was there to replace all my mother's brothers and sisters, her parents and grandparents, and her aunts and uncles who had been killed by Hitler. I had big shoes to fill..."

"Whereas my friends could toss off their jackets and play ball, I had to keep my jacket on at all times."

"I don't know if this is good or bad, but my friends' parents sort of took them for granted. My father never took us for granted. He would look into our eyes, ask us how we felt, try to solve our problems. He really, really appreciated the gift of children."

"We had to eat wilted lettuce and brown apples. There was no such thing as wasting a crumb of food."

"Not until I went to Surviving & Thriving at the age of 60 did I realize that my experiences and my feelings are normal for someone who was raised by a survivor."

Project Witness is an organization dedicated to ensuring that our history will be remembered and transmitted in a meaningful way. The critical lessons of the Holocaust still resonate with us today. It is our duty to make sure they do the same for our future generations.

With these vital goals in mind, Mrs. Ruth Lichtenstein, founder and director of Project Witness and the daughter of a survivor, has

L-R: Hindel Levitin, Rivka Levitin, Frannie Sheridan, Dani Michaeli, Rabbi Zalman Levitin.

where we continuously strive to strengthen our Jewish identity. We have attended classes taught by Chabad Rabbi Zalman Levitin and his wife Hindel as well as other classes.

I light candles before Shabbos and say the prayer before eating in honor of my eldest brother who is quite ill. I try to give back wherever possible and add light to the world.

I am now sharing my story as part of a motivational, educational and entertaining lecture on secrets, lies and stress called "Thriving, not Just Surviving Your Life!" It was heartwarming being the keynote speaker recently at the Chesterfield Hotel sponsored by the Palm Beach Torah Institute led by the Levitins. For more information, visit my website, http://franniesheridan.com. ■

created a new page in Holocaust education by developing interactive webinars exploring the effects of the Holocaust on the children and grandchildren of survivors.

To date, Project Witness's webinar programs have linked children of Holocaust survivors worldwide. Together, they can better understand the distinct challenges and emotions often felt by these adult children.

Our webinars have featured speakers from all over the globe and include world renowned trauma experts, as well as seasoned mental health professionals who are also children of Holocaust survivors. The repeated theme is that while this population has suffered greatly due to their parents' trauma, there remains an incredible resilience which should not be overlooked. Frannie Sheridan is a perfect example of that resilience and buoyancy!

The guest lecturers on Project Witness's webinars have created presentations dealing with the delicate issues permeating the post-Holocaust reality. These programs offer valuable information, are thought-provoking and are also sensitive in nature. All programs include time for questions and answers, essential following such emotionally powerful presentations.

The effects of the Holocaust are multi-layered, difficult to understand, and are often not easy to talk about. This applies to the survivors themselves, and very much affects their children as well. Without a doubt, the harrowing experiences of the Holocaust generation have had a profound impact on subsequent generations and cannot be overlooked. These experiences need a voice as well.

Project Witness steps in to fill this crucial need in giving voice to those often unnoticed.

In addition to the webinars, a physically-present interactive discussion group entitled Surviving & Thriving consists of a group of children of Holocaust survivors which meets a few times a year in Brooklyn, NY, to discuss challenges they face.

Irit Felsen, Ph.D., an eminent psychologist, noted lecturer and adjunct professor of psychology at Yeshiva University leads this group in discussion. Dr. Felsen's many unique talents are highlighted in the group dynamics as she helps second generation individuals to feel comfortable talking about the uncomfortable and discussing that which is rarely discussed. Surviving & Thriving provides an extremely meaningful opportunity for open discussion of shared experiences.

It can be extremely stressful to live with someone who has been traumatized, how much more so to be raised by someone who has been traumatized. There are, in fact, generations of victims of the Holocaust. While the children did not live through the hell, they are brought up by and live closely for many years with those who did. This is called secondary trauma and the fact that this has become an area of serious research and study has given some validation to those who have felt the mark in subsequent generations.

Project Witness has been able to tap into the wisdom, research and empathy of great thinkers and presenters. It provides an opportunity for deeper understanding of the pain as well as the resilience experienced in the world of second generation Holocaust survivors. The feedback has been a single voice of gratitude that Project Witness has been able to fill a void often not acknowledged.

For more information about Project Witness's programs or to be added to our email list, please call 718-305-5244, email us at info@projectwitness.org or see our website www.projectwitness.org. To read the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* spread on Holocaust education and Project Witness, go to nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives.