



Mrs. Miriam Weiss, a"h
**GRANDMOTHER
OF GOLD**

ROCHIE FARKASH



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M

y grandmother Mrs. Miriam Weiss née Wurtzberger was as lustrous and finely wrought as the intricate gold filigree necklace she used to wear. Just like gold, she adapted and molded herself to all of life's challenges while never losing her gleam and sparkle.

She was a gifted storyteller; the way she portrayed her family and town brought them to life so vibrantly that if her parents and grandparents were to walk into my home today I would recognize them instantly.

Miriam was born in 1925 to her beautiful mother, Sara Baila Wurtzberger, a talented *balabusta* who maintained her elegant home with ease. Her delicious cakes and pastries were in constant demand, especially for weddings and other *simchas*. She was *geshikt*, excelling in everything she put her hand to, especially her exquisite needlepoint.

My grandmother's successful and learned father Reb Alter Mordechai was so kind and nurturing, Miriam would do anything for him; she only wanted to live up to his expectations and pride in her.

Life in their small town in Borsia, Transylvania, was busy and bustling. Miriam, or Myku as she was called, loved to tend her own garden preferring a simple salad and piece of cheese to the rich Hungarian lunches that her family enjoyed. A natural activist who tried to help others whenever she could, she would go from door to door to collect flour, milk, and leftover bread to then distribute to the poor. One



Mrs. Miriam Weiss née Wurtzberger as a single girl, post-war.

grateful widow blessed her that she should never know hunger and despite the War she lived through, she never did.

Her knowledge and training of how a Jewish home and kitchen were to be run was thorough and complete, down to the cleaning and *kashering* of chickens. Yet her only formal Jewish education was from the Bais Yaakov girls who came to Borsia from Poland to teach during the summer. She learned to *daven* and *bentch* slowly and carefully, and kept that practice throughout her life. She particularly loved *Shabbos zemiros* and they seemed to transport her to a different time and place.

All in all, hers was a wonderful, happy childhood! One of the highlights that Miriam spoke about often was the wedding in 1938 of the Spinka Rebbe's son Reb Yaakov Yosef to the Borsia Rav's daughter Malka. It was a wedding bringing together the two Hungarian Chassidic courts Spinka with Vizhnitz. Miriam's family was fortunate to host the Spinka Rebbe for the wedding week and it left an indelible impression on her. The Spinka family remained close to my grandparents, always coming to visit whenever they were in Los Angeles.

By 1940, trouble was brewing. Hungary had joined the Axis powers and participated in the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Hungary also began implementing many of Germany's Nuremberg Laws. However, by 1944, when Miriam was 19, Hungary began armistice negotiations with the United States and Great Britain. When Hitler discovered this betrayal he invaded Hungary immediately.

With most of Europe at war, and conditions for Jews deteriorating daily, it was a very uncertain and unstable time. Etu, a cousin from Satmar, asked Sarah Baila if one of her girls could come help her recover from a difficult miscarriage. Since Miriam's older sister Chana was the one who usually went to help out the older cousins, Miriam begged her parents that this time it should be her and they said yes. The visit was only meant

to be for a few weeks but things began to get difficult back in Borsia as the Nazis began making preparations to move Jews into the local ghetto. Letters flew back and forth as to where Miriam should go, join her family in the ghetto or stay in Satmar. It was finally decided that she should stay, so she remained with Etu, her husband Lipa Gross and their five young children for Pesach. At the *seder* there were two young *bachurim* on the run from Poland hoping to go through the interior of Romania to Turkey and then to Eretz Yisroel. They pleaded with the young family to escape before it was too late.

One of them lit a match to illustrate his point.

"You see this fire? We are running from it. This same fire is coming here, and you too should run, escape while you can!"

But everyone at the table laughed, not believing that something like that could happen in Hungary. Sadly, as soon as Pesach ended, the Nazis began rounding up the Hungarian Jews.

Lipa hatched a daring plan. He organized a Red Cross ambulance to take the family to Kluj (also known as Klausenberg) in Transylvania (then part of Hungary) where they would meet a guide who would take them over the border to the Romanian city of Tourday where Lipa's brother lived. Frantic and secret preparations began, with everything going as planned until, at the last minute, a young pregnant woman with her son showed up and begged to go with them. There wasn't enough room and Miriam reluctantly agreed to give up her spot, though she was worried how Etu would cope without her. Lipa gave Miriam the papers of a former housekeeper of theirs named Margot and it was decided that with her youth, poise and auburn hair she could pass as Hungarian and travel by train. She returned to Etu's and Lipa's house to wait out the few days before she could leave to meet them in Kluj. Those were harrowing days and nights. She could barely sleep out of fear. At one point while she was in back burying valuables in the garden, the Gestapo banged on the front door looking for Lipa.



This picture graced the wall in Miriam's family room, giving us a glimpse into a bygone era. It was taken in the early 1930s at the wedding of Etu's sister Rivka. All the girls and boys are the Mema Leah's children (Leah was the sister of Miriam's mother, Sara Baila). Most of them perished in the Holocaust.

Miriam packed up everything that had been left in the house and sent it to her family in the ghetto, going to the post office through backroads and alleyways. In the last letter she had received from her father he wrote to her that she might be the only family member to survive and to never forget where and whom she came from. With these packages she sent long lists of detailed instructions, this sweater and tobacco are for Tattiku, these preserves are for Bentzion, the tins of *shmaltz* are fresh from Pesach. Don't eat everything too quickly, she wrote, spread it out. It gave her great comfort when in later years her two surviving sisters Chana (Helen) and Faigela confirmed that they had indeed received the packages she had so much *mesiras nefesh* to send.

It was finally time to go. Miriam put on a suit and a hat with a small veil and waited to board the train. She was so exhausted from the strain of the fear and lack of sleep that she leaned back and closed her eyes, only to awaken hours later to a deserted station with only the custodian sweeping the floors. Frantic, she asked him about the train to Kluj.

"Oh, lady, that train is long gone, you'll need

to wait until tomorrow for the next one."

There was nothing to do but go back to the house to wait for the next train.

By the time she made it to her contact in the Jewish neighborhood in Kluj a day and a half later they were already rounding up the Jews to send them to the ghetto. The contact told her, "Lipa left last night. He couldn't wait for you. Here is the address of the guide. Go quickly through those fields! The Gestapo will be here in five minutes."

Miriam walked and walked, asking for directions, going this way and that, until she finally made it to the right place. When she found the guide he said, "I took them safely over last night. I can take you with another group tonight but you'll need to pay me more money." She agreed, trying to ignore her sense of unease as to why the guide wouldn't look her in the eye. She remembered the headlines she had seen on the train of a large party, caught at the border the night before, and her unease grew. Her plan was to go back into town and buy some food and supplies and return later that night to the guide's home. He told her that it would be much faster for her if she took the

bus back to town instead of walking all that way. She would later describe that as she sat at the bus stop, she looked around, and it was the most beautiful day. The sun was shining, not a cloud in the sky. The grass was green and fresh and she thought to herself, *how is it possible that everything in nature can be so perfect while the world is upside-down, chaotic and frightening?* Right then and there she decided that she wasn't going anywhere. If Hashem meant for her to survive, she would survive right here, alone in Kluj. She had some type of papers, and a suitcase full of beautiful clothing that she could sell, keeping only what she absolutely needed.

She began hanging around a café, helping out, always leaving the tips for the other girls, winning their affection and respect. Before long she was hired and the café owner helped her find a room to rent.

The café was right across the street from the Gestapo offices, so she was serving Nazis daily. One officer said to her, "I can spot a Jew from a mile away—no Jew escapes me." Shaken, Miriam realized that she had to do more to fit in. The café owner was noticing that she was subsisting on just rolls and fruit, and he kept teasing her that he would report her since she didn't have any ration cards. She decided that she had to eat *treif* even if it was difficult, to save her life. She would practice in the cellar of the café.

It was a slow day. She took a piece of bread and a tin of liver paste and went below for her practice run, knowing that to save a life a Jew is permitted to eat non-kosher food. She spread the liver paste on the bread, working up the courage to lift it to her lips, holding her breath as she went in for a bite.

She couldn't do it. Instead, with all her might she flung the bread against the wall. Breathing heavily she looked up and had the fright of her life. There in the doorway stood a man who looked like a vagrant.

He said, "You're a Jew."

She stammered, "No, I'm Hungarian."

"You don't sound Hungarian. You're a Jew. Today is the second day of Rosh Hashanah."

A second later, he was gone. She ran upstairs,

asking, "Who was that old man in the cellar?"

One of the other waitresses said, "Don't pay any attention to him, he's homeless and often sleeps down there."

It was fall and the rainy season had started, and Miriam had been feeling sharp pangs as she realized the Yamim Tovim were approaching, but how would she know when it was Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? She had felt like the last Jew left on earth. Thrilled to her core to have received this vital information, Miriam started thinking about Yom Kippur.

She knew that Yom Kippur is ten days from Rosh Hashanah but, do you count ten days from the first day or second day? Not sure, Miriam decided to better to be safe and fasted for two whole days that year. We asked her, "Babby, wasn't it hard to fast for two whole days?"

"What hard? *Kinderlach*, it was Yom Kippur."

My mother, Mrs. Chanie Levitin, always felt that this man was Eliyahu Hanavi, coming to watch over her mother.

Right then and there she decided that she wasn't going anywhere. If Hashem meant for her to survive, she would survive right here.

Right: Reb Berel and Mrs. Miriam Weiss receiving one of many awards for their charitable work.
Left: Mrs. Miriam Weiss after marrying Reb Berel, in the mid-1960s.
Bottom left: Late 1960s. Berel and Miriam Weiss.
Bottom right: Berel and Miriam Weiss, in the mid-1980s.



The War ended, and Miriam began piecing her life back together. She joined a group of young survivors who would board trains calling out, “Amcha... Amcha...” attempting to identify and rescue Jews who were being put on trains to the Soviet Union. Miriam and her group helped to unite many of these survivors with their families and loved ones. She found her cousin Lipa. His wife Etu and all their children had perished in Auschwitz.

Miriam spent a second Pesach together with him, but how very utterly different from the first one only one year earlier. The Rachover Rav, his son and about 20 survivors, all men, joined them, and somehow Miriam was able to organize and cook all the *seudos* for them out of very limited supplies. One year, I spent Pesach with her and she prepared an egg and potato casserole for me and said it was just like the one she had made for the Rachover Rav.

Having found out from the Joint (a survivor aid society), that her mother and younger siblings had perished in Auschwitz, and that she had two sisters that had been sent to Sweden to recover, Miriam went back to Borsia, Romania, to see if she could find out anything about her father’s whereabouts and to see what was left of their family home. There was no information, and no home to go back to. She met a cousin there and they sat and cried for three days.

Miriam was reunited with her sisters nine years later in Los Angeles and held out hope for years that her father had somehow managed to survive and would find her. In 1962 she visited with a cousin of his who was with her father, Alter Mordechai, in Auschwitz. This cousin told her there was no way he could have survived.

After selling whatever was left of her family’s property in Romania, Miriam realized she had nothing and no-one to stay there for. She tried to head to Satmar, but on the way she was brutally robbed by Russians. Only about 20 years old at this time, yet alone in the world, the overwhelming loss, grief, and shock took its toll on her and she came down with a severe lung infection. A kind doctor,

seeing how sick and depleted she was, sent her to recover in a German Military Hospital in the American zone of Germany. She healed quickly in the fresh mountain air and before long was finding ways to help out. The nurses taught her basic nursing skills and she began to assist them with the TB patients coming in from the concentration camps in the East. One patient was a young Auschwitz survivor by the name of Berel (Yissachar Dov) Weiss. Miriam was very concerned about young Berel and did whatever she could to help bring him back to health. She had befriended the kitchen staff and they let her into the kitchen early in the morning before anyone else. They used to chuckle as she climbed up a ladder to skim the butterfat off the top of the huge vats of pasteurizing milk, then used this butterfat and her flour rations to bake cookies and *rugelach* to try to get Berel to eat and recover.

So perfect are the ways of Hashem that in the midst of so much heartbreak, upheaval and loss, these two very special and unique people found each other. They got married and together they found the strength to go on and begin a new chapter, one that would bring so much pride and meaning to their family, and build a new legacy.

Miriam Weiss was very *midakdek* about *taharas hamishpachah* at a time when many found it very challenging. Before getting married she and a cousin studied the subject from a booklet that the famous Klausenberger Rebbe put together for these young orphaned girls to help them prepare properly for marriage.

With relatives in America to sponsor them, Berel and Miriam Weiss moved to Los Angeles where they hoped the warm sun would be beneficial to Berel’s health. They found jobs in a tie factory. Miriam was determined, thrifty and motivated. One week’s salary would pay the rent on their small apartment and the rest would be used carefully for expenses and some savings. She made her own clothing, and before long all her daughter’s clothing too, and she cooked and baked everything herself.



Left: Four generations (R-L): Chanie Levitin, Rochie Farkash, Sarale Rivkin and (baby) Miriam Rivkin. Rochie Farkash says, "I was named after my grandmother's mother, the Babba Rochel Farkash—Farkash is a common Hungarian name—and when I married my husband Mordechai Farkash it was a very emotional moment for my grandmother since I now had the very same name as her grandmother Rochel Farkash!" Above: Mrs. Miriam Weiss receiving a dollar from the Rebbe, with her husband Reb Berel (Yissachar Dov) Weiss. JEM photo #60908. Below: Miriam and Berel's children, L-R: Reb Moshe Aaron Weiss, Mrs. Chanie Levitin, and Reb Yonah Mordechai (Marty) Weiss.





Hashem blessed her with the ability to recreate many of the delicious dishes from her mother's house, without having any recipes or anyone to call for details. She made her own noodles, farfel, pastries, and kugels. Her white fish and challah were legendary.

After working in the tie factory initially, in 1955 my grandfather Reb Berel Weiss purchased a dairy farm and started his own milk route, which brought the first *chalav Yisroel* to Los Angeles. Then in 1963 he and two friends purchased a small nursing home which his wife Miriam ran (utilizing her nursing skills), which eventually grew into the Golden State Health Centers. They had three children: my mother, Chanie, who married my father, Rabbi Sholom Ber Levitin; Marty (Yonah Mordechai) Weiss who married Hadassah Sheinberger; and Moshe Aaron Weiss who married Ruty Lapidus. Thank G-d they gave their parents a lot of grandchildren and a lot of *nachas*.

In 1993, about a year after I married Mordechai Farkash, we were in Yerushalayim and my husband overheard two men talking in shul about visiting Los Angeles. One exclaimed, "You must make sure to go to Reb Berel Weiss's house for *melaveh malkah*; his wife makes the best white fish and *chrein* you ever tasted."

Ziedy and Babby, as we called them, built a beautiful life together. As they became established and successful they did whatever they could to help build the Los Angeles Jewish community. They held parlor

Above right: Berel and Miriam Weiss at the wedding of Rochie and Mordechai Farkash, 1992.

Above left: At the wedding of Rochie and Mordechai Farkash, 1992. Miriam's two sisters Helen and Faigelah are sitting next to her.

meetings and teas to support Jewish education. They generously hosted many visitors and guests from abroad. Just like her parents before her, Babby hosted many Rebbes over the years, and the *tischen* were held in their home as well.

Ziedy helped many people start their own businesses, even in his own field of work (convalescent homes and nursing homes), saying, “No one is going to take away my portion that has already been decided for me.” Their doors were open for those in need and they supported many individuals and institutions with an open hand.

They became very close to the Rebbe’s *shliach* in Los Angeles, Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Raichik. Babby always said that he reminded her of her father, and he kept a very close paternal eye on them and their children. Rabbi Raichik brought Ziedy to the Rebbe for the first time on Hoshanah Rabbah 1961 and immediately Ziedy became a strong, devoted *chossid*, helping to establish and supporting the Rebbe’s *mosdos* in Los Angeles and all over the world. At the same time, the Rebbe showed Ziedy tremendous *kiruv*, through letters, private audiences, and at dollars, stories which perhaps we will publish in the *N’shei Chabad Newsletter* at a future time. [We are ready and waiting. –Ed.]

In Babby’s later years she struggled with her health and ultimately became disabled. This did not slow her down. As we made plans to remodel her house and kitchen to accommodate her new needs, she was busy making plans of her own. She didn’t allow us to remodel a thing. She simply brought an old metal table that she already owned into the middle of her kitchen and went on baking and cooking at the same pace as before, only now in her wheelchair at that table (since the counters were now too high). She continued to fill her freezers full of goodies for *einiklach* and friends to enjoy and take with them. No one knew how to pack a box for travel like Babby and we never went home without one stuffed to the brim with her delicious treats, especially

If I was really feeling overwhelmed, she would say in all seriousness that I should call upon my mothers Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah to come help me.

the ultimate commodity, soup starters, little baggies full of all kind of sautéed veggies, just add peas or barley and you had a soup bubbling in no time. She always wanted to know how I was “making out” for Shabbos and Yom Tov and was full of creative ideas on how to prepare a quick dish in a pinch. If I was really feeling overwhelmed, she would say in all seriousness that I should call upon my mothers Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah to come help me. Babby never fully comprehended how incredible she was. She could never understand how we all just wanted to be around her, to hear her stories, see her laugh and watch the magic happen in her kitchen. She was full of strength and, most importantly, courage, a courage that sprang from her deep *emunah* and *bitachon* in the *Heilige Bashefer*, as she called Him. I feel deeply fortunate, as do all of my siblings and cousins, to be her grandchild and to try to keep her legacy alive and growing with our children, grandchildren, and beyond.

Our beloved heroine, Mrs. Miriam Weiss, a”h, a woman who lost so much while so young yet held on to her courage, her compassion, and even her *simchas hachaim*, passed away ten years ago at the age of 86 on Rosh Chodesh Shvat, January 6, 2011. Her husband, our Ziedy Reb Berel Weiss whose life she helped save many decades before, passed away just three and a half months later. *Yehi zichram baruch!* ❧