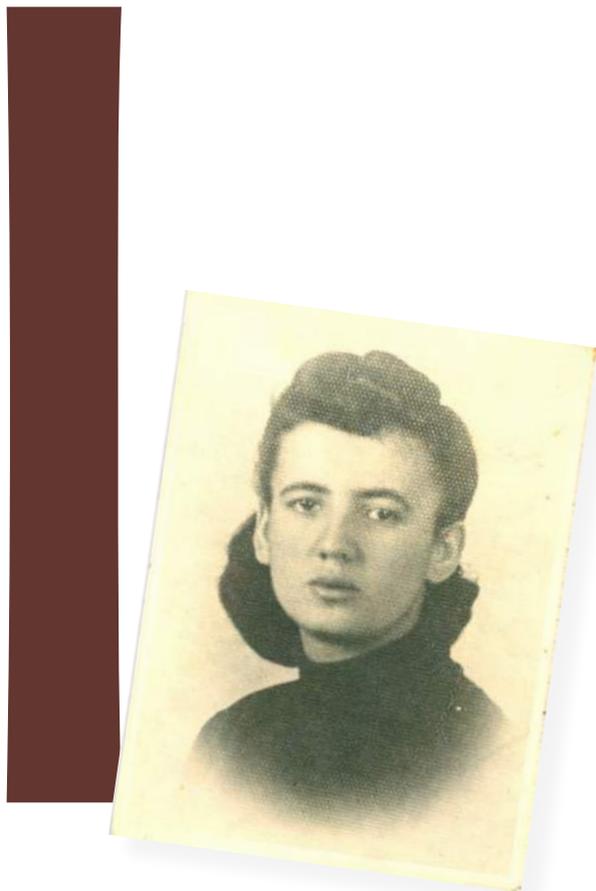




'Me Too ANNE FRANK'

**From the rags of Auschwitz to
wedding dresses in America**

RAIZEL SORA (SONIA) PERSHIN



I was watching *The Diary of Anne Frank*, trying to imagine what Jewish life was like during the Holocaust, when my mother popped into the room and took a peek at the film. In her European Yiddish accent, she blurted out: "Sonia, the same story you are watching is my story. I can also make a movie and become famous." As she left the room, she shrugged her shoulders and murmured to herself, "Me too Anne Frank!"

My mother,
Ruth (nee
Hendler) Schwarz.

I RETURNED TO MY MOVIE and my mother returned to her life-long friend—the sewing machine—as if nothing had happened. She never disclosed more of her story to me. But those echoing words, "Me too Anne Frank," are etched in my soul like the tattoo numbers on her arm, never to be forgotten.

I always wished that my parents, Abraham and Ruth (nee Hendler) Schwarz, would tell me more about their experiences in the concentration camps and how they survived. Like many survivors, they chose not to disclose the past to their children. Their motto was "*Ah Yid darfleben*—a Jew must live," which to them meant, "Just keep on doing what you have to do." My siblings and I only received rare glimpses into our family history.

As a young girl, I once sneaked into my parents' bedroom and found a newspaper article hidden in the back of a drawer. "Finally," I thought. "Another piece of the missing puzzle of their past." The clipping showed a picture of my mother holding a picket sign in front of downtown Cleveland City Hall. She was demonstrating to extend the time limit for restitution from the German government. The article briefly described her life story. This is when I discovered that I had once had an older sibling, a newborn whom the Nazis had taken from my mother and murdered.

After I finished reading the article, I quickly put it back in its spot so my mother wouldn't notice it had been touched. I never once questioned my parents about it or mentioned it to them. My siblings and I just accepted and respected their unspoken wish that these horrific experiences, the scars of their lives, should be kept to themselves.

It was Uncle David, my mother's only brother (she also had two surviving sisters, *baruch Hashem*),

who loved to tell us stories. At every family gathering, we would sit glued to our seats as Uncle David described those early years as if they were yesterday. He wanted to make sure that we, the children of Holocaust survivors, knew the family legacy so that we could pass it on to our children one day. “The children must know,” he would say.

Slowly, one carefully divulged story at a time, I began to put together the missing links in my family’s history. Like doing a jigsaw puzzle, one tiny piece at a time, the story began to take shape. It begins like this, in Uncle David’s animated voice:

“Our story begins in Poland in the early 1900s. Your parents were second cousins, raised in *frum, chassidische* homes in Bendin and Sosnovitz—two small neighboring cities. Your Zaide was a brilliant man, a big *talmid chacham*, who spoke six languages. He was an ardent follower of the famous Rav Kook, whose Zionist-Messianic ideology was that every Jew must return to Eretz Yisroel for Moshiach to come. This dream permeated Zaide’s home, and he ultimately attempted to fulfill that dream by going to Eretz Yisroel in 1926. His wife, your Bubbe, was pregnant with their fifth child and couldn’t travel with him. So Zaide went ahead to set up a home and establish a Sosnovitzer congregation in Yerushalayim. He never made it back. We assume he contracted malaria, a common disease in those years, and died.

“He was buried in Yerushalayim on Har Hazeisim, in a plot for *Gerrer chassidim* from Poland, because as a *Sosnovitzer chossid* he was very close to the Gerrer. For many years, our family couldn’t go to Har Hazeisim because it was under Arab control. After the 1967 war, when the Jews regained control of this portion of Yerushalayim, we immediately went and found the plot with the help of local Arabs. Finally, a proper *matzeivah* was put up for our Zaide.”

The next part of the story I have pieced together from offhand remarks and overheard conversations. During



The *tziun* of my grandfather in Har Hazeisim.

My mother jumped up and declared, “I am a professional seamstress.” In fact, she had never held a needle or used a sewing machine in her life.



family gatherings with my aunts and uncles, also survivors, my parents would briefly lapse into reminiscences about the old country, sometimes laughing, sometimes crying, and sometimes laughing and crying at the same time. Sometimes, as they watched documentaries on the television, they would nod their heads and murmur, “Yes, yes, that’s exactly what happened to us!”

Occasionally, a guest visiting our childhood home would see the numbers on their arms and ask about their experiences in the concentration camps. Quickly, as if we were strangers, we children would run to a nearby listening point, strain our ears to hear, and become privy to some more of our parents’ whispered secrets.

In the mid-to-late 1930s, as Hitler’s regime solidified its iron clasp on Germany, Jewish life in Poland began to change. As my mother described it, “Hitler at the beginning was a charming, charismatic speaker and he sounded very good for the people. But soon we found out differently.”

The Nazi presence gradually became stronger and more threatening until World War II erupted in the year 1939. The Nazis occupied Poland and started to deport Jews to concentration camps. My parents, who were second cousins, quickly married with the hope that the Nazis might hesitate to deport a married couple. Pretty soon, they were forced into hiding to escape the Gestapo. They crouched together in a hidden attic with some of their first and second cousins. Eventually, the Germans found their hiding place and my mother and father were sent to a concentration camp.

Men and women were separated as soon as they entered the camp. My mother stood in a line, waiting to be directed to



← The community of Jewish survivors who settled in Sweden. My mother is sitting in the bottom row, fifth from the right.

↓ At the Swedish orphanage where my mother was placed after the war. My mother is seated on the back bench, third from right.



← A Purim spiel in Sweden after the war. My mother is dressed as Queen Esther on the left. How remarkable that after surviving such horrors, they continued to celebrate their Yiddishkeit with joy and pride!

↓ My father (L) in 1945, just after the war.



→ My mother standing by my side at my wedding, in 1978. We are both wearing dresses she made by hand.

↓ My parents with Bill, Lily, and me (in the blue coat). My mother is wearing a dress she made by hand.



↑ My father cutting his grandson's hair at his upsherenish.

↖ My parents in their kitchen in Cleveland, 1990.

← My parents in Eretz Yisroel, 1973

My cousin once asked my father how he had managed to keep his hand steady and never make a mistake, despite knowing that the slightest nick of the razor might cause one of his “clients” to shoot him.



the right or to the left—towards life or towards death. A German officer called out, “Does anyone know how to sew?” My mother jumped up and declared, “I am a professional seamstress.” In fact, she had never held a needle or used a sewing machine in her life. She learned quickly. Little did she know that sewing would become her savior and lifelong passion.

On another line, in a different section of the camp, where the newly arrived men were being held, my father waited for his fate. A Nazi called out if there were any barbers in the crowd and my father immediately said he was one (he actually was). He spent the rest of the war keeping the Nazis clean-shaven. My cousin once asked my father how he had managed to keep his hand steady and never make a mistake, despite knowing that the slightest nick of the razor might cause one of his “clients” to shoot him. My father just pointed upward, as if to

say that everything is in Hashem’s Hands.

Thanks to Hashem’s protection, and their instincts for survival, my parents both escaped the gas chambers. I once overheard that my mother tried to sew bread into a garment and send it to my father, but I don’t know if it ever reached him. I also do not know at which point their firstborn, a baby, my eldest sibling, was murdered. But somehow they survived being separated, losing their baby, and the unimaginable horrors of the death camps—all without losing their faith. Quite unusually, ten of my aunts and uncles also escaped Hitler’s gas chambers.

My mother was transferred to different camps, including Bergen Belsen and Auschwitz, where she was eventually liberated in 1945. After the war, she was placed in a DP (Displaced Persons) camp. One day, she saw a Swedish Red Cross truck in the camp and jumped on, hoping it might be her chance at a new life. And it was. The Swedish Red Cross took her to

Malmö, Sweden, where she was placed in a Jewish orphanage. For the rest of her life, my mother felt grateful to the beautiful and welcoming country of Sweden, often saying, “If only I could have stayed there.” While in Sweden, my mother sent a letter to her hometown, hoping a relative or loved one might receive it, saying that she was alive and where she was.

As Divine Providence had it, my father survived the war and went back to his hometown to look for my mother. There the news reached him that my mother had survived and gone to Sweden. He traveled to Koping, Sweden, and the two were reunited.

My parents settled in Koping, a small town right outside Stockholm, and immediately began rebuilding their Jewish home and family. One might think they would have wanted to throw rocks at G-d and abandon their religious heritage, but my father’s mantra, “*Ich bin a Yid*—I am a Jew,” was so ingrained in him that it just couldn’t be otherwise.

For the next twelve years, my parents lived, worked and raised their young children in Koping. The town had a close-knit Jewish community made up of Holocaust survivors like themselves, and the relationships they formed then would last for the rest of their lives.

Soon after my parents had their third child (me), my father received a letter from his younger brother, Karl, who had just immigrated to America. Karl urged my parents to join him in the *Goldene Medinah*, where their children could grow up surrounded by Jews and eventually marry Jews. My parents were convinced. They packed their bags, waved goodbye to their friends, and boarded a ship to a foreign land. Their departure was bittersweet, full of fear of the unknown and hope for the future. Most of all, they were grateful

to be leaving the blood-drenched land of Europe behind for a place where they could live freely and proudly as Jews.

They got off the boat at the harbor in New York City in 1957. When my mother saw the towering buildings and cement pavements, her first instinct was to turn around and run back to the lush greenery and mountains of Sweden. But “*Ah Yid darf leben*,” so she bravely plowed on. With the help of the Jewish Federation and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (called “the Joint”), our family settled in Cleveland, Ohio, where there was a large Jewish immigrant population. My father resumed his profession as a barber and my mother as a seamstress.

For my mother, the sewing machine was a testament to her survival and a symbol of hope. The same sound that had echoed in the death camps as she sewed in terror for the Nazis now clattered in her own home—only now it was a sound of life, as she sewed with love and passion for her customers. People would come to “the seamstress Mrs. Schwarz” for alterations and repairs, knowing her magical hands could somehow transform their worn-out rags into beautiful outfits that made them feel like a million dollars.

During the day, she worked in Cleveland’s high-end dress shops. At night, she would create clothes for her own children, dressing us like princes and princesses.

My mother had a knack for making people look and feel beautiful; every stitch was a work of art. The hobby that she loved and enjoyed was creating, making, reshaping clothing. It was her way of expressing her creativity, and her way of helping others. The ultimate pleasure of my mother’s life was making her own daughter’s wedding gown and *sheva brachos* outfits. (I wasn’t even there for fittings, but everything came out beautifully!)

All these years later, the words “Me too Anne Frank” still linger in my mind. My mother did not leave behind a diary; I will never know her full story. All I have are strands and fragments, loose threads like the ones she would weave together into beautiful creations. What I do know is that my parents’ legacy is one of constant forward-motion. “*Ah Yid darf leben*,” we must always look to the future. Hitler tried to erase the Jews from the world; my parents undid his plans and brought an entire new generation of Jews into the world. From the rags of Auschwitz to wedding dresses in America, their *pintele Yid* just couldn’t be destroyed.

May we merit to see the coming of Moshiach in the immediate future, when the Third Temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt, we will be reunited with my Zaide who is patiently waiting on Har Hazeisim, and with all the *neshamos* who died *al kiddush Hashem!* ❁

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