



# THE GIRL WHO DIDN'T GET TO SAY GOOD-BYE TO HER MOTHER

Ruth Reiser shares stories from her life, growing up during the Holocaust, with Sheli Atara Man for the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*.

*Photo Credit: Meir Pliskin*







The first week she lit Shabbos candles, her son Paul was with her and she later told me that the two tea lights burned all night until sunrise.

Sheli Atara Man with Ruth Reiser. Photo Credit: Meir Pliskin

### A MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTER

I, Sheli Atara Man, first met Ruth in the winter of 2016, when I fell down the stairs outside the Gan Menachem Kiddie Korner preschool in Brooklyn Heights, where I serve as educational director. I had just started working in the preschool, run by *Shluchim* Rabbi Aaron L. and Mrs. Shternie Raskin. I often heard Rabbi Raskin asking people if they were Jewish. When I first started working there, I thought it was an odd question to ask, but I soon realized its importance. I learned in Chabad of Brooklyn Heights that you never know where a Jewish soul is waiting for you.

As I fell, an elderly woman immediately stopped and asked me if I was okay. I stood up and answered yes. I forgot about my fall and asked her for her name. She told me her name was Ruth. Out of habit which I had picked up at Chabad, I asked her, “Are you Jewish?” She answered yes.

I walked her down the block and asked her if I could

visit and bring her challah. She said, “I do not want to be Orthodox, but I’ll take the challah.” I laughed and said no problem. We exchanged numbers and from our short conversation I learned that she was a Holocaust survivor and that she was 91 years old. As part of the Chabad of Brooklyn Heights Stoop Soup program and Adopt-a-Bubby/Zaidy, we added Ruth to our delivery list. With her permission, we started sending gifts and challah with local community volunteers and Gan Menachem Kiddie Korner children and parents.

Ruth made a big impression on me during our first meeting and I felt a desire and a responsibility to visit her. Ruth shared with me stories of her life, her family, her childhood, and her loving husband who had passed away not long before we met. In return, I tried to bring Jewish traditions back into her life. There were some Jewish traditions that she struggled with, but Ruth was willing to accept some such as reading the *Megillah* on Purim, hearing *kiddush*, saying a *brachah* on food, lighting the Chanukah menorah, and joining us for Moshiach’s *seudah*. We set up Shabbos candles in her living room but it took two years before she started to light them. The first week she lit Shabbos candles, her son Paul was with her and she later told me that the two tea lights burned all night until sunrise. The Shabbos candles were waiting many years for Ruth, and once lit their light persisted far beyond their physical limitations. Ruth recognized this as extraordinary.

While Ruth experienced much loss, she also lived a full life and was able to accept what I had to offer her. It took time but eventually it became clear that underneath it all, Ruth longed to embrace the tradition she had grown up with.

## NOT HOME ANYMORE

Ruth was born in 1926, in Prague, Czechoslovakia. The Czech Republic was considered fairly democratic since 1918. Her parents, who considered themselves as much Czech as Jewish, lived in a nice apartment with only Ruth and a servant who lived with them. Her father was a clerk in a bank and her mother was a housewife. Ruth was an over-protected only child, treated like a princess by her parents. Although they were not very observant, they did go to the synagogue for holidays and Ruth went to a Jewish primary school from age six to 11.

*In 1939, the Germans occupied Prague. Jews were no longer allowed to attend schools and so Ruth's education stopped at age 13. Jews had to surrender many of their possessions and weren't allowed to visit parks or cinemas, walk down certain streets, or use buses and cars. Before the occupation Ruth lived in a well-kept home and had good relations with her German neighbors. However, as soon as the occupation started, the neighbors put the SS flag on their apartments. One morning, officers came to their house and told them they had to leave. After much searching, Ruth's parents found a woman who was willing to let them move into her apartment with her. Her son had died and she refused to remove his stuff from his room. The apartment was tiny and cluttered. After being an only child all her life, it was difficult for Ruth to share her space with other people. Every so often the Jews had to surrender another one of their possessions: First it was radios, then it was bicycles, all musical instruments, fur coats, pets. I had to give up my cat, my skis and ski boots. Warehouses were designated for collecting all the goods, and I remember working in one of them to sort and number the items. (Excerpted from Ruth Reiser's testimony in the book *Sisters in Sorrow* by Roger A. Ritvo and Diane M. Plotkin, p. 62)*

In 1943, Ruth's family was deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto, a transit camp where the Germans kept Jews before shipping them off to death camps elsewhere in Europe. Theresienstadt was used by the Germans for propaganda purposes, to prove to the world how "humane" they were. In order to help with this deception, a visit from the Red Cross was



Ruth and her parents.

Ruth as a teenager wearing the yellow star.





Ruth and Arnost Reiser at their wedding.

*I opened those sardines with scissors and ate the whole box. I think that saved me for a few days afterwards. ... I got off the train with a whole group of people. We were very quickly ushered onto the platform in groups, men on one side and women on the other side. The two of us, my mother and I, stood with a few young women who had come with us. We came in front of a big officer in a uniform. Around him were a lot of soldiers with rifles and dogs and sticks. He told me to go to one side and my mother to the other side. I went up to him and said, "No, I*

**"For years we couldn't think of anything but getting home, and then we got home, we were free, but it just wasn't home anymore."**

arranged. Before this visit, the Jewish prisoners were forced to "beautify" the ghetto, planting flowers and renovating the barracks. Fifty-five-thousand people were now packed into a space that had held 7,000 people before the occupation.

Ruth's family remained there from 1943 to 1944. In 1944, her father gave her a blessing and was taken away, never to be seen again. When telling me this story, Ruth paused and said, "The physical [suffering] is one aspect of the Holocaust and you can forget it like childbirth pain. But the mental [torture], no one can really understand." Ruth, who had dreamed of becoming a nurse, now found work in the ghetto hospital.

***The hospital was very overcrowded. There were very few things which a normal hospital would have. For example, there were no bathrooms. If you had night duty, you couldn't take a break even for a short time. In spite of this, everybody tried to do their best for the patients. (Sisters in Sorrow, p. 69)***

In late 1944 Ruth was deported east to Auschwitz. While they were being transported, no one knew where they were going. Upon arrival, while still on the train, a Jewish prisoner asked her how old she was. She answered that she was 17. He told her, "No, you are 21, AND DON'T FORGET IT!" He told her to quickly eat whatever food she had on her before getting off the train. As Ruth tells it:

*go with my mother. I want to go with my mother." He wouldn't let me go with her. He sent some soldiers who pushed me to the other side and they said, "Oh, you will see her soon enough. Don't worry." So I didn't even blink. I didn't say goodbye or anything to my mother. (Sisters in Sorrow, p. 74)*

Later, a friend of mine found me by chance and her advice was, "If you can ever get out, don't hesitate."

Ruth heard that people were being rounded up for a transport. People were scared and were running away trying to avoid being taken, but she decided to get on it and stood near the front of the column of 1,000 women. Then an SS officer ordered: "About face!" and she ended up at the back of the line. The transport left without her and she remained in Auschwitz, waiting to be gassed.

***They put us in something that can only be described as a kennel. It was right in front of the gas chamber. We could see the columns of people waiting for the gas chambers. We could see the smoke. We could see everything. There was a big commotion because a lot of***



*the people who were waiting for the gas chambers were praying and wailing... it was dreadful. I was in this kennel all night. I don't think we spoke much at all. The flames from the chimneys never stopped. (Excerpted from Ruth Reiser's testimony in the book Sisters in Sorrow, p. 79)*

Ruth doesn't remember exactly how long she spent in that kennel. But not long after, the Nazis needed another hundred people for a transport. Ruth was put on a train to Lenzing, a subcamp of the Mauthausen concentration camp, where she was put to work in a factory.



Ruth and her husband Arnost in the 1990s.

*One day two Frenchmen on bikes appeared near the fence and told us to remain calm. They promised to find the Americans and tell them about us. We could hear the shooting at the front. The Americans were approaching from the west and the Russians from the east. Nobody knew who would arrive first but we knew we would fare better if we were liberated by the Americans. In a short time, two trucks of Americans arrived. The commander was a Jew, and shortly afterwards came black soldiers. They were the first black people I had ever seen, the 83rd division of Patton's army. The soldiers were shocked at our condition. The American soldiers were friendly and gave us all their rations. They also provided us with medical facilities. (Excerpted from Ruth Reiser's testimony in the book Sisters in Sorrow, p. 89)*

## MARRIAGE

After liberation, Ruth returned to Prague and found out that she was the sole survivor of her family. She had nowhere to go and no one to claim her. "For years we couldn't think of anything but getting home, and then we got home, we were free, but it just wasn't home anymore," says Ruth.

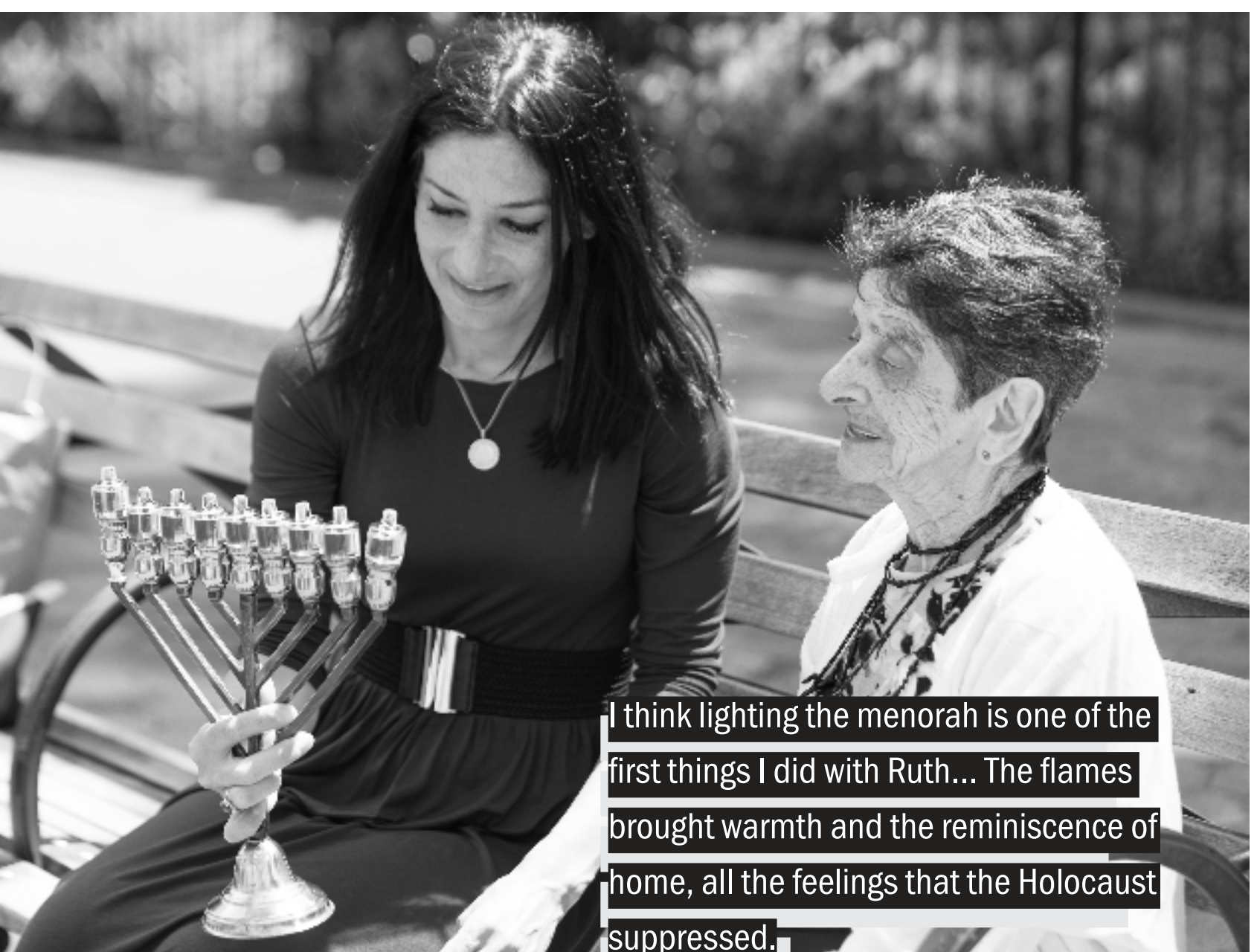
Ruth had always wanted to be a nurse, and after the war she found a job working in a hospital. In 1947, she married Arnost Reiser. She met him in Theresienstadt

when she worked in the hospital where he was a patient. They met again in Prague after the war. They were married for 68 years. "I couldn't think of being with someone who didn't go through the camps. We were extremely good friends and I miss him more and more because I have no one to talk to," says Ruth. Ruth and Arnost have two sons, Paul and Jan, and three grandchildren.

## CHANUKAH LIGHTS

When I met Ruth, Arnost had just passed away. I feel lucky to have met her. Throughout her life G-d watched over her. When I think of how we met, it was clearly orchestrated by Hashem. Ruth is 94 years old today and she doesn't cease to impress me when I watch her use her iPad, send emails, find photos from her past, send letters to old friends, and function as a loving mother to her two devoted sons and a grandmother to her three wonderful grandchildren. Ruth loves baking, reading, and staying in touch with the many people she has met over the course of her life. Both of her sons live outside of New York but they care for her deeply and make sure she has everything she needs.

Ruth still lives in Brooklyn Heights and is loved by many of her neighbors and family. I visit Ruth as often as I can when we are not quarantined. Despite the losses she has suffered, Ruth has proved herself to be



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Sheli Atara Man with Ruth Reiser. Photo Credit: Meir Pliskin

a heroine, a survivor who triumphed over her oppressors by living a full life and building a beautiful family with love, patience, and perseverance.

I think lighting the menorah is one of the first things I did with Ruth. The *mitzvah* of lighting Chanukah candles easily appealed to Ruth and seemed familiar. The flames brought warmth and the reminiscence of home for Ruth, all the feelings that the Holocaust suppressed. Her unique, friendly personality makes her lovable. Her willingness to listen and learn new things is remarkable. Just as the Chanukah lights shine forever, so too may Ruth's inner beauty and strength always grow stronger and more beautiful. ❁

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Ruth Reiser's story appears in *Sisters in Sorrow* by Roger A. Ritvo and Diane M. Plotkin. Interviews with Ruth Reiser have been documented by the USC Shoah Foundation as well as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The N'shei Chabad Newsletter thanks Sheli Atara Man for her generosity and commitment in producing this important article; she has written previously for the NCN and several more articles based on her work with Chabad of Brooklyn Heights are in the pipeline. The NCN also thanks Meir Pliskin for packing up his equipment and making a special trip to Brooklyn Heights to photograph Ruth and Sheli. Meir, your time and talent are precious and we greatly appreciate these gifts. -Ed.