The Survival of the Spektor Sisters:

A Testament to the Righteous

By Cantor Michael Zoosman, MSM BCC

Submitted: "The United States in World War II," Brandeis University, Dec. 8, 2000

Revised: Latest Revision Nov. 7, 2022

The Spektor Family (Poland, late 1930s)

Front Row (L-R): *Dovid*, (18 Dec., 1930-1942), *Moishe* (1938? – 25 May, 1942)

Middle Row: *Itzchak* (1894-, 18 Dec. 1942), *Rose* (b. 9 May, 1922)

Pesia (1904- 25 May, 1942) *Libbe* (1928 – 6 Sept., 1943)

Back Row: *Shmuel* (1918/1919 – 1942?), *Clara* (24 Dec., 1920 - Aug. 7, 2022),

Faiga (1915 – 14 Mar., 1970), *Eta* (1917-1972)

Dedication:

To Holocaust Survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) - a member of Congreation Beth El, New London, CT, where this author served as Cantor

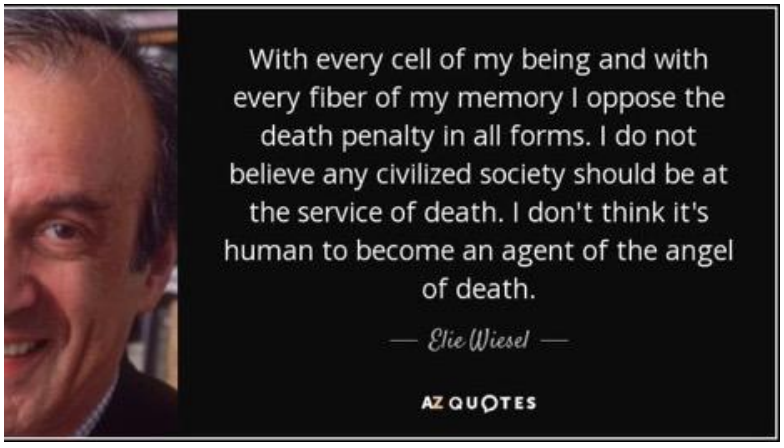
"In those times there was darkness everywhere. In heaven and on earth, all the gates of compassion seemed to have been closed. The killer killed and the Jews died and the outside world adopted an attitude either of complicity or of indifference. Only a few had the courage to care. These few men and women were vulnerable, afraid, helpless - what made them different from their fellow citizens?… Why were there so few?… Let us remember: What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressor but the silence of the bystander…. Let us not forget, after all, there is always a moment when moral choice is made…. And so we must know these good people who helped Jews during the Holocaust. We must learn from them, and in gratitude and hope, we must remember them."

- Elie Wiesel, in Carol Rittner, Sandra Meyers, Courage To Care - Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust, NYU Press, 1986. P. 2

“Death is not the answer.”

- Elie Wiesel speaking on the death penalty at a lecture at Wesleyan University, Middleton CT, October 26, 2010

  https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/news/new-voices-elie-wiesel-speaks-about-the-death-penalty



Disclaimer:

I present this as best I can what was told to me. I apologize to those who have died and cannot correct me now if I get wrong facts that may have morphed over the years. I am open to any and all corrections of the record.

Brandeis Motto: “Emet - Truth: Even unto its Innermost Parts.”

Presented with Gratitude to the 1200+ Members of
“L’chaim! Jews Against the Death Penalty”
Cantor Michael Zoosman (Founder)

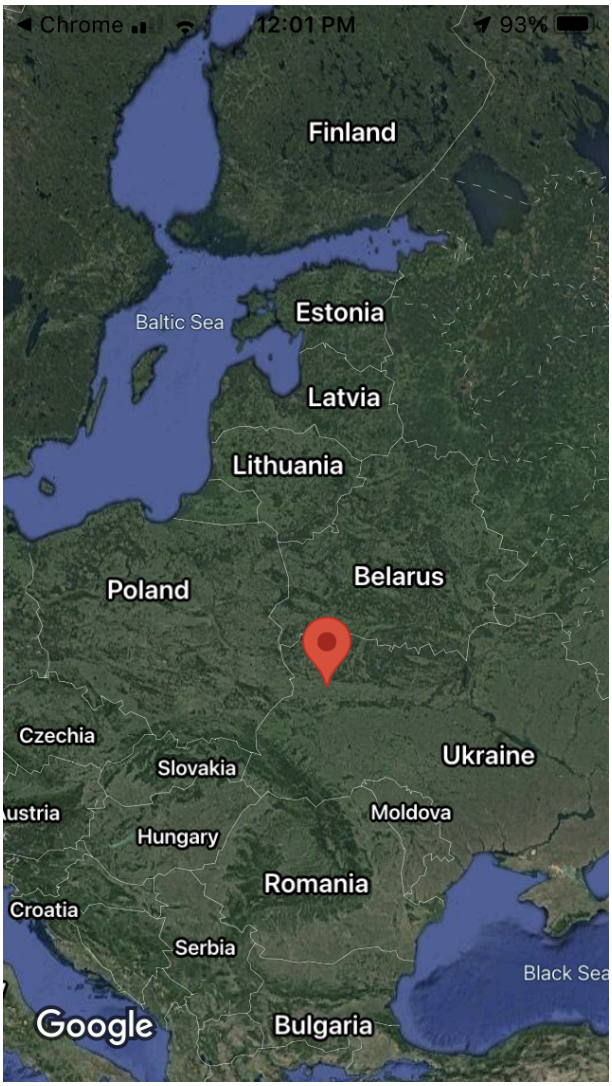
The Spektor Sisters and the "Righteous Gentiles"

Against the unprecedented onslaught of mass murder that erupted across Poland during World War II, four orphaned teenage Jewish farm girls from the Spektor clan of Zhabokric fled for their lives. These young sisters hid their Jewish identity as they roamed across a broad stretch of land throughout the region of Volyn, a then-northeastern district of Poland that is in present-day Ukraine. They sought shelter amidst a web of populations and cultures traditionally hostile to Jews or unconcerned at best. Yet, against all odds they encountered individuals who more often than not provided much-needed refuge that saved their lives for one more day, another week, maybe a month, or in some cases until the war's end. In birth order, there was Eta (b. 1917), her younger sisters Clara, Chaya in Yiddish, (b. 1920) Rose (Rivke Raizl, b. 1922), and Libbe (b. 1928), who at fourteen was the youngest girl in the family. They had endured the slayings of their mother Pesia and youngest brother Moishe, and – not long afterward – heard that their father Itzchak and two other brothers Shmuel and Dovid had also been murdered. They did not yet know the fate of their eldest sister Faiga, who lived farther away. Eta, Clara, Rose and Libbe had to face the heart-wrenching prospect of separating from each other in order to increase their chances of survival. Together and apart, they struggled to live by any means necessary in an environment where discovery of their Jewish identity almost always meant certain, immediate death.

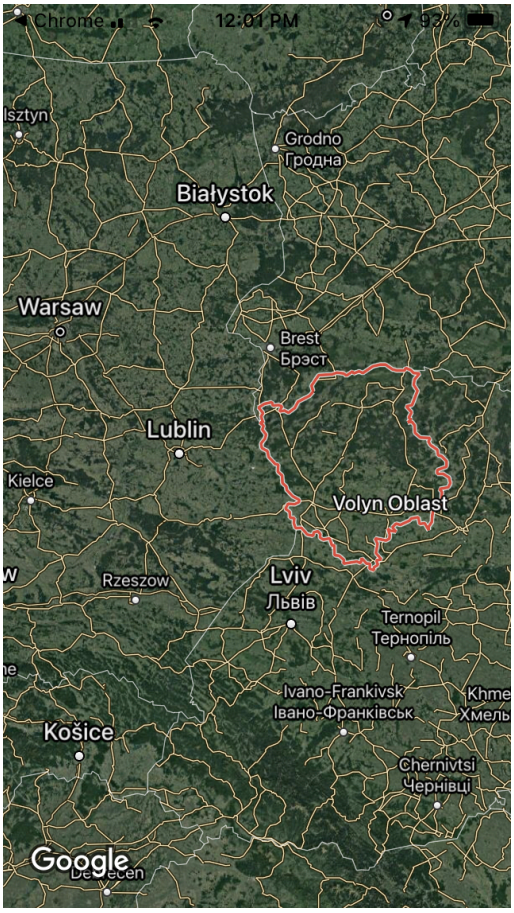
For nearly six decades, Clara and Rose, the longest surviving Spektor sisters, were reluctant to share their story with strangers or unfamiliar agencies - however well-meaning - who wished to document their saga. Instead, bits and pieces of their tale came out at Jewish holidays and family gatherings over the years. Only when a direct family member (this author) eventually offered to guide them through a recording session did they finally agree to offer a comprehensive retelling of their memories. On July 23, 2000, Clara and Rose sat down with me in front of my karaoke machine in Rose's longtime home on Osage Road in West Hartford, CT. For the first time, they recorded their terrifying memories in detail for posterity. This was done on cassette, transferred to CD, transcribed by Naomi Hoben (Clara's daughter) and turned into this term paper by

this author for a college course at Brandeis University.

Their harrowing story is one of survival, not merely by sheer luck, fortitude or intellect, though these factors surely played a part. The safety and lives of Clara, Rose, Eta and Libbe was left squarely in the hands of a select few people: a group of individuals known today as “Righteous Gentiles" – in Hebrew “*Hasidei Ummot ha-Olam"* ("Righteous Members of the Nations of the World”). These often-heroic figures constituted a minute portion of the general population; yet, some could be found in every country over which the Holocaust cast its shadow. The Righteous Gentiles were from all walks of life, various religions and cultures, and many socio-economic strata of society. They were local ordinary citizens who observed the Jewish tragedy unfolding, and who brought life-threatening risks upon their families and themselves by sheltering, sustaining, and reuniting Jews forced into hiding. Some were motivated by a combination of humanitarian concerns, religious beliefs, Jewish friendships, or family ties to rescuers. Others were compelled by less morally praiseworthy factors. The fate of the Spektor sisters and thousands of European Jews fleeing Nazi and European genocide during the *Shoah* (Holocaust) was contingent upon the kindness of these rare beacons of light that shined most brightly during one of humanity’s darkest hours. Their story illuminates another chapter in the saga of Holocaust memoirs – a voluminous collection that will likely never be long enough to record the lives of each of the millions of individuals lost in that conflagration, nor cover the scope of its impact on the millions more who survived, and their descendants.



(Broad view of the area of Volyn that was home to the Spektor family.)



(Closer view of the area of Volyn that was home to the Spektor family.)

The Spektor Family Before the Second World War

(A picture, as verified by Clara, of the land on which the Spektor home sat in Zhabokric.)

Before the outbreak of war, the Spektor family was like most other Jewish families in the small Jewish farm settlement called Zhabokric near the towns of Kozin, and Radzivilow, all located in Poland at that time, (present-day Ukraine). Until 1939, the Spektors lived a simple, happy life in their tiny farm, replete with its own storefront where they sold their produce. Though they were of poor financial means, the Spektors were self-sufficient and did not have to rely on the kindness of strangers, growing much of their own food in their garden and on their farmland, thatching their own roof (refitting it annually), and taking care of one another. As Rose said decades later, they lived a "very happy life" in a house that their "father built with his own hands." Their household included their father Itzchak, a farmer, trader and owner of the small family store, their mother Pesia and eight children (five girls and three boys), with all but one living at

home. That daughter was the eldest, Faiga, who lived many miles away in a town called Operand with her husband Hershel Lober and their young boy Bayrisch.

Elka Ridiker (~1849-1939), the aging maternal grandmother of the Spektors, also lived with the family. Clara recalled being particularly close with her grandmother. It was Elka who had accompanied her in their urgent gallop to the nearby city of Dubno when Clara came down with scarlet fever at the age of four in 1924. She remained with her granddaughter as Clara was treated with *baynkes*, the suction-cup and flame bleeding technique often used for various ailments at the time. As her grandmother aged, Clara often found herself in the position of acting as her primary caregiver. Clara recalls carrying Elka's laundry to wash in the nearby lake. When she brought back her grandmother's clean clothes, she would invariably offer her a blessing, hoping that Clara would live to be one hundred years old and to see *HaMashiach* (The Messiah). (Clara chuckled as she shared this reflection with her own grandson at the age of ninety-five.) Elka began suffering cognitive deficits from what may have been dementia, but ardently affirmed her desire to live out her remaining years in her home country of Poland. As the atmosphere in Europe became bleaker for the Jews in the 1930s, the family had an open offer from Itzchak's brother Dovid and father Israel in Philadelphia to emigrate to America. In deference to Elka's wishes, however, the Spektors decided to remain in Poland. Neither Elka nor anyone in the Spektor family could have envisioned the scale and impact of the tragedy that was to unfold in their homeland. [1]As Elka's great-great grandson, I certainly do not hold Elka nor any of my ancestors to blame for their understandable decision to honor her wishes in what was a noble act of filial piety.

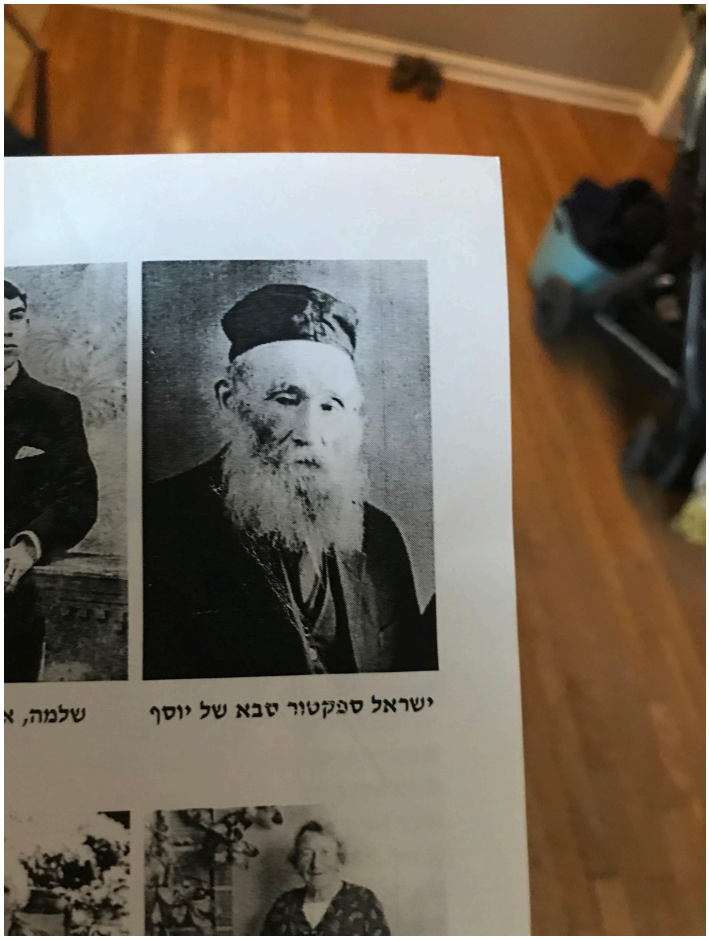
Meanwhile, there were many mouths to feed with eight children, but everyone contributed. The mother Pesia cooked, and leftover perishables were stored in an underground bunker and preserved with salt. Itzchak the patriarch worked on the farm, at market and in the store. The girls cleaned, washed, and helped with the family store, and the eldest boy Shmuel cared for the horse and farm animals. Like many of her siblings,

[1] One is reminded of Viktor Frankl, author of Man's Search for Meaning and other works, who famously told the story of why he stayed for similar reasons in order to care for his aging parents in Vienna, despite having an offer to leave before the war.
https://lentsblog.org/2018/10/13/viktor-frankls-choice-to-enter-the-concentration-camps-with-his-family/

Clara went to a non-Jewish school through the sixth grade. Courses were taught in Polish, with Ukrainian offered as a second language. Clara would walk to school with some of her classmates and take a shortcut through a frozen lake in the winters, always afraid she would fall through the thin ice, but never doing so. Clara and her classmates wore school uniforms that included kneesocks and eighty-five years later still remembered how cold her exposed knees would get in the winters.

To help ease the burden of such a large family, at the age of eighteen, Clara was able to venture off to her favorite city of Dubno roughly thirty miles away to work for room and board in a cafeteria. Things were far from easy for the Spektors financially, but then again they never knew of anything else. They were poor enough that when it came time to pay taxes to the Polish government, they were often unable to do so. Expecting Polish officials to come around to seize materials from their home as a punishment, the Spektors would hide their own bedding and other items when they anticipated their arrival. "We managed to make a living," Clara recalled, summing up their lifestyle.

Though not ultra-observant, the Spektors were quite traditional in their adherence to Jewish law. Theirs was one of ten Jewish families in their village - just enough to make a *minyan*, the traditional quorum of ten Jewish males over the age of thirteen necessary for communal prayers. The Spektors observed all Jewish holidays, including the weekly Sabbath, during which Itzchak was careful not to smoke until after making *Havdalah* – the Saturday night ceremony separating *Shabbat* (the Sabbath) from the secular week. Pesia wore a *shaitl*, the wig that a married woman traditionally wears, and prepared festive meals. Itzchak and presumably Shmuel and Dovid regularly attended services on Shabbat and holidays at a neighbor's home where the Jewish men congregated for prayer. The Spektor girls were tutored in Hebrew and Torah study at home by a wandering teacher, who often worked for room and board. Itzchak's father Israel Spektor was a *m'lamed*, a teacher of Jewish law, ritual and Hebrew in Europe and then in Philadelphia and would send his son and family $10.00 US every year before Passover. This was enough to purchase an entire animal, which would last the family throughout the eight-day holiday.



Yisrael (Israel) Spektor (paternal grandfather of the Spektor Sisters)

Anti-Semitism also was a regular fact of life for the Spektors. Every Christmas Eve (which also happened to be Clara's birthday), on the way back from the Midnight Mass, one teenage boy had taken to throwing rocks at the windows of the Spektor home. Itzchak came to expect this behavior, but of course he did not like it. One year, after the boy threw the rocks on cue, Itzchak chased him down and "beat him up." This immediate problem was resolved, but the scepter of anti-Semitism remained for Itzchak's family.

It was in this home and environment that grandmother Elka, the matriarch of the Spektor family, died at the age of ninety in 1939, surrounded by her daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren. Elka's passing marked the end of a generation of her clan, but symbolized much more. Occurring on the eve of the Second World War, it served as a harbinger of the impending comprehensive dismantling of the culture she left behind.

Soviet Occupation: 1939-1941

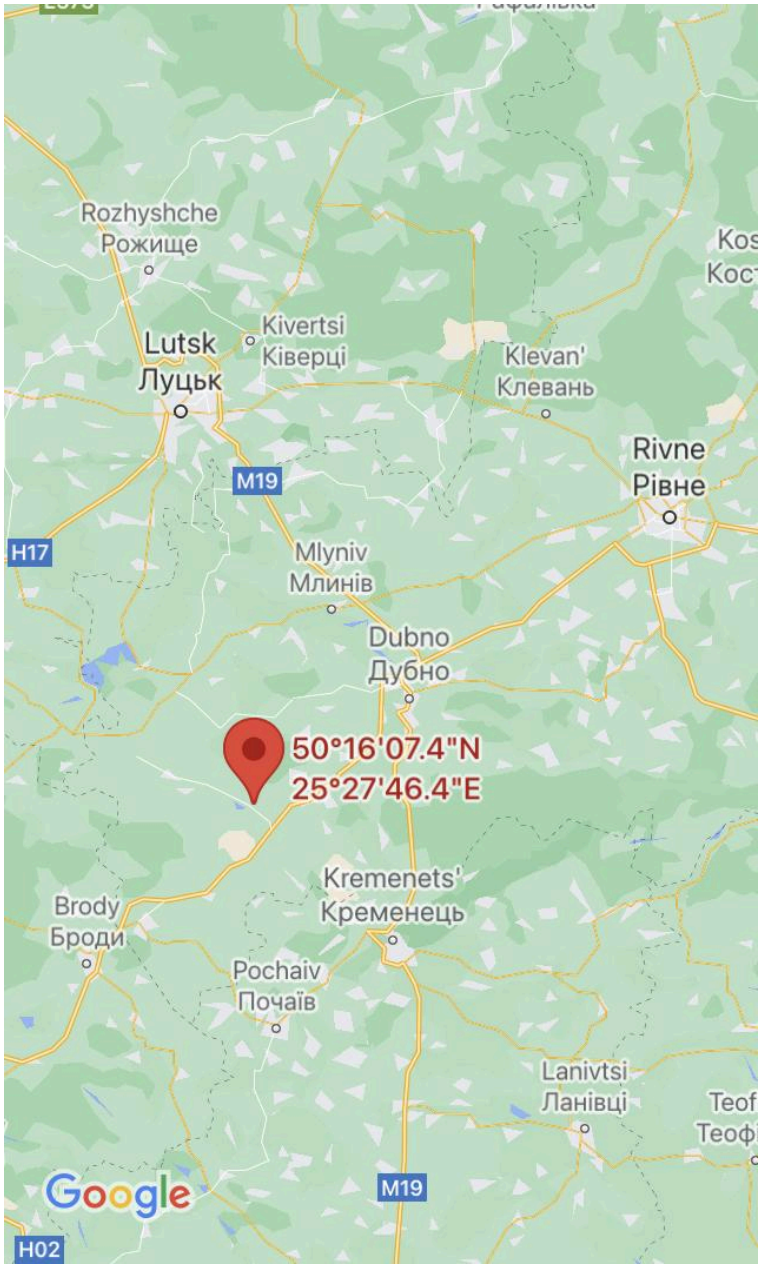
Everything was shattered with the outbreak of war on September 1, 1939. In six weeks, Hitler's *Wehrmacht* decimated Polish defenses, as the aggressive *Blitzkrieg* tactics of German panzers overran the country. Soon thereafter, Germany and Russia signed the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), in which they also divided Poland between themselves. Along these new borders, the eastern half of the country – including *Volyn* and Zhabokric - fell under Russian occupation. This certainly was a blessing considering the more immediate threat German rule posed for the Jews; yet, the perception for Rose and her family was that it was "not much better" than the alternative Nazi dominion. Renowned Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer concludes in A History of the Holocaust that while "Soviet occupation [up to 1941] was better than Nazi rule," the Russians still "restricted religious life, abolished all Jewish institutions, and confiscated property." (Bauer, 285)

The Spektors were allowed to remain in their home during the two years of Russian rule. Young Clara, at nineteen, was even able to apply for and obtain work in Russian governmental offices five miles away in Kozin, where among her tasks she was assigned to registering the young men of the mostly-Jewish local population who were eligible for the military draft. Later, she was able to sell buttons from her suitcase in the Kozin marketplace, though she had to do so out of the sight of Russian police officers. "When I saw them [the NKVD] coming," recalled Clara, "I closed the suitcase and ran away." The tolerant attitude and neutral treatment of the Spektors and local Jews lasted throughout the two years of Soviet occupation of Poland.

The Nazi Occupation and the Kozin Ghetto: 1941-1942

Once the Germans initiated Operation Barbarossa and invaded Russia in June, 1941, Soviet forces retreated in haste. Clara recalled how in her region the Russians left a full day before the Nazis arrived. As soon as the Germans retook an area, any privileges maintained by the Jews under Soviet rule came to an end, and the pattern held in

Zhabokric. “They stormed in with tanks and ammunition,” remembered Clara, “and everybody was frightened; scared to death…it was very loud.” The Spektors joined the majority of the other Jewish families of their town in the forced migration to the nearby *Kozin* ghetto. They had to leave behind their home, horse, cow, and other animals, as well as everything they owned other than what they could fit on the carriage that they carried to their new communal home.



(Location of Kozin Ghetto)

The Spektors lived for several months within the guarded ghetto without further violence, though amidst horrid conditions and forced labor. The Nazis came with trucks daily to the Jewish residences, took pre-selected individuals from their families (chosen through a locally-appointed Jewish authority called the *Judenraat*) and drove them to work in a field near a lake where the grass was particularly soggy. Occasionally, some of the Spektor children, including Clara, were asked to join them as they would dig into the heavy turf six hours a day. Meanwhile, the Germans put white bands with the Star of David on the arms of all Jews in order to identify them. As Clara reminisced, these were "very inconvenient circumstances: we didn't have enough water or food and there were a few families together in one apartment." In order to get food, someone would wait until the guards were not in place to run off to surrounding farms. Clara remembered that many of the local population felt bad for the Jews of the ghetto and tended to provide some food items, "as a courtesy."

In what would become known later as one of the first stages of the Final Solution to the 'Jewish Question', the Nazis began to liquidate ghettos such as Kozin in a series of *pogroms* (assaults) and mass executions by 1942. Hired mercenaries from local populations often joined specialized units of the SS called *einsatzgruppen* to carry out the genocide, along with Ukrainian civilian volunteers and officials. Liquidation came to the *Kozin* ghetto in two waves, the first of which occurred on May 25th of that year. The *Judenraat* found out ahead of time the exact day that the Germans were going to come to destroy the ghetto and warned the families. "People got terrified and panicky," said Clara. "We looked for a way out."

Pesia and Moishe

The family decided to leave the ghetto, but not until the night before the expected liquidation, since there was no other place for them to stay with some semblance of food and shelter for a long period before that date. By the day of the assault, Itzchak and Dovid were working outside the ghetto. It is unknown where Shmuel was on that day, but he was likely not in the ghetto and hiding in a stable, where he often worked. The four daughters Eta, Clara, Rose and Libbe asked their mother Pesia to take their youngest brother Moishe and join them in running into the fields to hide overnight. Pesia felt that

she would not be able to take Moishe, who was quite young (likely a toddler) at the time and understandably sobbing in terror over the developments. She did not want to jeopardize the hiding place of the rest of her family with little Moishe's crying and could not make herself to abandon him. The daughters said they would stay with their mother in that case, and that they always would remain by her side. Pesia insisted they leave, however, while she stayed behind hiding in a closet with young Moishe. "I'll come later," she said to the girls before they left. Pesia's final act of courage and selflessness by demanding that her daughters leave her side had without question saved their lives.

The Ukrainian police found Pesia and young Moshe in the closet; as she had foreseen, her young son's crying had given them away. The police took them both out to the mass graves that had already been dug by other Jews forcibly assigned the task. There, Nazi soldiers shot them to death. With some of the victims of this assault still alive with bullet wounds, the Nazis ordered that the graves be covered, burying alive many of the Jews. Like the countless others taken out and killed at that time, Pesia or Moishe have no individual graves. The liquidation of the Kozin Ghetto began with the first wave of killings that day: May 25th, 1942. https://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/index.asp?cid=1117 The massacre is marked by a monument behind the town of Kozin, erected over the final resting place of the hundreds of Jews murdered. The day after the killing, the daughters came back to the home to see if their family had survived. Their father Itzchak was on the stoop when they asked him where they could find their mother and youngest brother. Itzchak told them the tragic news. "When I heard it," Clara remembered in tears seventy years later, "I fainted."

Like so many other families, the Spektors knew there was another killing wave coming, and as before with nowhere else to go, they again felt compelled to take their chances in the same home in the ghetto. Immediately prior to the start of the second wave weeks later, the remaining members of the grieving family had advance word yet again. Judenraat "knew death was coming," remarked Rose. Rumors circulated that the Ukrainian police and Germans were liquidating nearby ghettos and would return to Kozin on a given day. On the night prior to the anticipated assault, sisters Eta, Clara, Rose, and

Libbe once again decided to flee together. They hoped they would go to the woods overnight and come back as they did in the wake of the first wave. When they heard that the attackers intended to destroy everyone and everything this time, they realized they had to go elsewhere this time. The sisters decided to take their chances on the outside, beyond the walls of the ghetto. They were "going to have to die," Rose explained, "so [why not] run?" Thus began their flight into the hands of the Righteous Gentiles.

Caption: "A memorial monument to the Jews of Kozin who perished in the Holocaust. The monument was erected in Kozin, which before the war was part of Poland and afterwards, Ukraine. The upper text, in Russian: 'Buried here are 1288 people, Soviet citizens, victims of the German Fascist occupier, who were shot by the Germans in 1943. [Signed]: the town of Kozin.' The Hebrew text, on the base of the monument: 'For an eternal remembrance, [dedicated] to the martyrs who were murdered and exterminated by the Nazi German criminals against humanity in the town of Kozin, Poland. The avenger will forever remember the vengeance of their holy blood that was spilled on the altar of the nation.'" Source: https://www.infocenters.co.il/gfh/notebook_ext.asp?book=86629&lang=eng

Righteous Gentiles and Collaborators

Before discussing the attitudes and roles of the "Righteous Gentiles" in determining the fate of the remaining members of the Spektor family, it is helpful to examine on a more widespread scale the various motivations behind the gentiles' 'righteousness'. Those who risked their lives to come to the aid of fleeing Jews fell into a variety of categories. Eva Fogelman delineated these groups in her graduate dissertation in psychology entitled The Rescuers: A Socio-psychological Study of Altruistic Behavior During the Nazi Era (City University of New York: 1987). The largest unit into which Fogelman divided the 'righteous' is "Moral Rescuers", which she then subdivided into "Ideological", "Religious", and "Emotional." Each of these types of rescuers shared some form of morality and humanitarian values as a main motivation. (107-108) The second most common reason for rescue was the result of "Non-Jewish/ Jewish relationships," which may have previously existed between the Jewish refugee and gentile rescuer, making them so-called "Relational Philo-Semitic Rescuers". (146) Fogelman also mentioned the less common occurrences of "Children as Rescuers" and "Concerned-Detached Professionals", whose "altruistic behavior was related to their jobs." (172; 181)

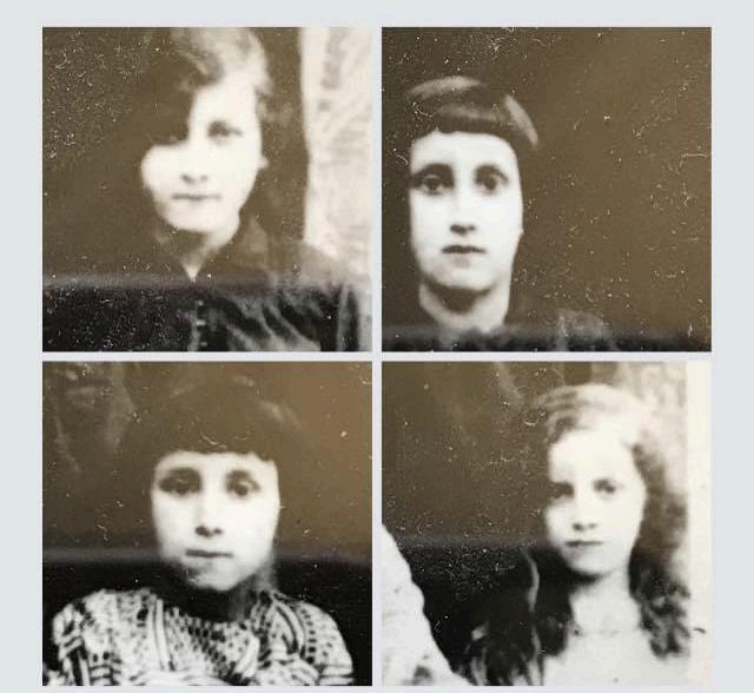
Professor Dovid P. Gushee, in his book The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust: A Christian Interpretation, also focused distinctly on Christian religious beliefs and practice as a motivation in and of itself, separate from Fogelman's "Religious-Moral rescuers." According to Gushee, "within the Christian faith there existed a powerful manifesto for compassion and rescue, a manifesto drawn not from the margins but from the living center of the faith." (147) Each of the "Righteous Gentiles" who came to the aid of the Spektor family fit into one or more of these categories.

Tragically, the vast majority of the civilian and local military populations not only refrained from assisting Jews, but rather actively collaborated with Nazi persecution and murder. Individuals of Ukrainian nationality, such as those civilians and officers involved with the liquidation of the Kozin ghetto, became notorious for their anti-Semitic attitude and behavior in eastern Poland. Ukrainian officers and civilians targeted both Jews and

Poles, though the latter less aggressively and uniformly. Hitler had promised the Ukrainians national sovereignty, which they had sought for centuries while fighting against Polish rule. Throughout the course of the centuries-old movement for Ukrainian independence, outbursts of anti-Semitic violence corresponded with acute times of national unrest. The Khmelnitsky Revolt of 1648 was the most widespread and celebrated early expression of Ukrainian nationalism, and it inspired *pogroms* that brought the killings of tens if not hundreds of thousands of area Jews.[2] The ingrained culture of virulent anti-Semitism, combined with peaking Ukrainian nationalistic aspirations by the start of the war and Nazi promises for national sovereignty, led to widespread Ukrainian collaboration in the destruction of European Jewry. Another effect of this geopolitical climate in which Poles were also vilified and victimized was that local Jews seeking to escape Nazi and Ukrainian persecution thought they might have a better chance of finding assistance with those of Polish nationality. Jewish families also similarly flocked to Czechoslovakian colonies for assistance with varying degrees of success.

[2] As recently as the 1990s, the highly-acclaimed Ukrainian film "Fire and Sword" vividly portrayed this revolt with no mention of such massacres. The only Jewish presence is two Jews, one blind and the other infirm, used as comic relief throughout the movie.

Running Together: 1942-1943



(Clockwise from upper left: Eta, Clara, Libbe and Rose)

It is not surprising, then, that the first people to come to the rescue of the four sisters on the run – Eta Clara, Rose, and Libbe – were of Polish background. The Spektors looked to take advantage of connections that they had with Poles through their father Itzchak. As Rose put it, her father had lent many Polish (and non-Polish) individuals such large sums of *zlota* – Polish currency – that they practically "had their properties made out of his money." Attempting to capitalize on this relationship, Rose and her sisters "thought they were our friends; some of them." Where it mattered most, the sisters were proven correct. While some of their father's former customers refused to associate with them, many did agree to help them and gave them bread. In one case, the four sisters were allowed to sleep "on top of a potato cellar," although they were told they could not stay long. The fact cannot be overstated that not one of the individuals they met turned them in to the SS or tried to kill them as they fled. Mordecai Paldiel, in Sheltering the Jews: Stories of Holocaust Survivors, defined such actions as "passive" assistance, or "not informing the authorities of a Jew – a conspiracy of silence." (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, 8) To use Fogelman's method of categorization, these individuals might have

best belonged with those 'Relational Philo-Semitic Rescuers' whose main motivation for assistance was based upon past relationships with Jews. (108)

Mr. Michał Cegielski

The first individual that the four sisters successfully approached was also the one who sacrificed the most to save their lives. He was an older Polish Catholic farmer who they knew only as Mr. Cegielski. We only discovered decades later that his full name was Michał Cegielski born Sept. 8, 1880, and that he was well-known in his town, having even served as mayor of Zagaje. Initially, he hid all four girls in a "stack of straw for some time" outside on his farm. Rose described a powerful example of Mr. Cegielski's willingness to put the lives of the four sisters before his own by hiding them despite the presence of nearby Ukrainian police who would have put him to death if they discovered them. As she told the story, one day a group of these soldiers came not to look for Jews, but rather to rob Mr. Cegielski of whatever items they could carry off, demanding in particular any animal hides he might have owned. Though he said he had none, the soldiers did not believe him and searched anyhow, and with their bayonets began "poking in the [mounds of] straw where [the girls] were sitting" in order to look for the hides. The sisters were "shaking like leaves," and Rose was twitching so much under the hay that "Libbe had to throw herself on top of [her]" to prevent her from giving them away. Seeing how the soldiers were extremely close to discovering the girls, Mr. Cegielski quickly directed the attention of the Ukrainians to the attic, where he had hidden the hides and gave them to the soldiers. By distracting and appeasing them in this way, Cegielski likely saved all of their lives.

When it got colder as fall turned to winter and the sisters "knew the straw wouldn't stay there forever", Mr. Cegielski permitted the Spektors to dig underground what Clara described as "a grave [or] a bunker" – roughly the size of a standard dining room table – in which the four young women remained all day every day for roughly eleven months, through the winter of 1942. The girls dug the bunker and placed sticks, roots and straw to disguise their hiding place. "To sit there," recalled Clara, "was no

pleasure…you only could sit, you couldn't stand up." There was no bathroom, and each had to wait until it was "good and dark" to relieve herself. In another of his works on the "Righteous Gentiles" entitled The Path of the Righteous, Paldiel addressed this issue of "difficult hiding conditions." He acknowledged that "one common form of hiding place was an underground shaft or other hastily prepared hollow spaces, and that "the suffering endured by the Jews [in such places]…in their struggle to survive was extraordinary." (187) It was still a shelter, however, and more than the sisters could have asked for at the time. Crucially, Mr. Cegielski provided them each with a potato and bottle of water every day.

As winter persisted, the snow came down so heavily at times that it served effectively to wipe away any tracks the girls might have left from the bunker to Mr. Cegielski's home. On these occasions, the farmer risked being seen making trips out to the bunker in order to give each of them each soup containing flour and water, "because he didn't have more [food items] on his own," as Rose recalled, "this was the way he used to live." He would even call upon Libbe at times to help him prepare food in the kitchen. If the girls were particularly hungry during the night, at times they would also venture out on their own to the nearby pigsty in the hope of finding a leftover potato.

Aside from Mr. Cegielski's pre-war acquaintance with the family, his religious/spiritual convictions likely also served as a motivator for his rescue of the Spektor sisters. Clara recalled seeing pictures of various saints on the walls of Mr. Cegielski's home, attesting perhaps to his level of Catholic observance. On quiet nights during which no dogs were around to bark, the sisters were allowed to sleep in his one-room house. On one such occasion, Rose witnessed him laying down on his bed and praying, "Dear God, I pray to you that you save the four souls that I am hiding…" Rose's voice cracked and she cried at this recollection of the kindness, piety and sincerity of her sisters' savior.

Paldiel writes that religious rescuers of the likes of Mr. Cegielski might have been motivated by any combination of a number of feelings. These include a deep "sense of special religious kinship with Jews," "the incompatibility of Nazism and Christian Faith,"

"Biblical comments on compassion and love," "Christian commitment and spirituality," and/or "the equality and preciousness of every human life."(117-148) One or more of these religious impulses might have applied to Mr. Cegielski. It is clear that alongside his relationship with the family in years past, Mr. Cegielski also likely was "compelled by faith" to come to the girls' rescue. (117)

In the end, Mr. Cegielski paid the ultimate price for his kindness to the four Spektor teenagers. After the German soldiers had left from searching his home, "Ukrainians came and said they wanted to take all he had left." The older Polish farmer gave the soldiers what they wanted, but they still were unsatisfied, demanding to know if he were harboring any Jews. Mr. Cegielski denied the accusation, but the Ukrainians refused to believe him. Instead, they "took [him] in the back yard and put a knife in his chest." They then released all the animals from his stable.

Mr. Cegielski 's martyrdom will always epitomize for the Spektor family and we, their descendants the role that "Righteous Gentiles" like he played in keeping Jews alive. We are blessed now these decades later to have learned the full identity of this great man and to be connected with his family. The survivors of the Spektor family and their descendants have officially applied for his formal recognition in the "Garden of the Righteous among the Nations" at *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust museum and memorial in Israel, and we eagerly await their reply. All in our family owe our lives to his sacrifice.

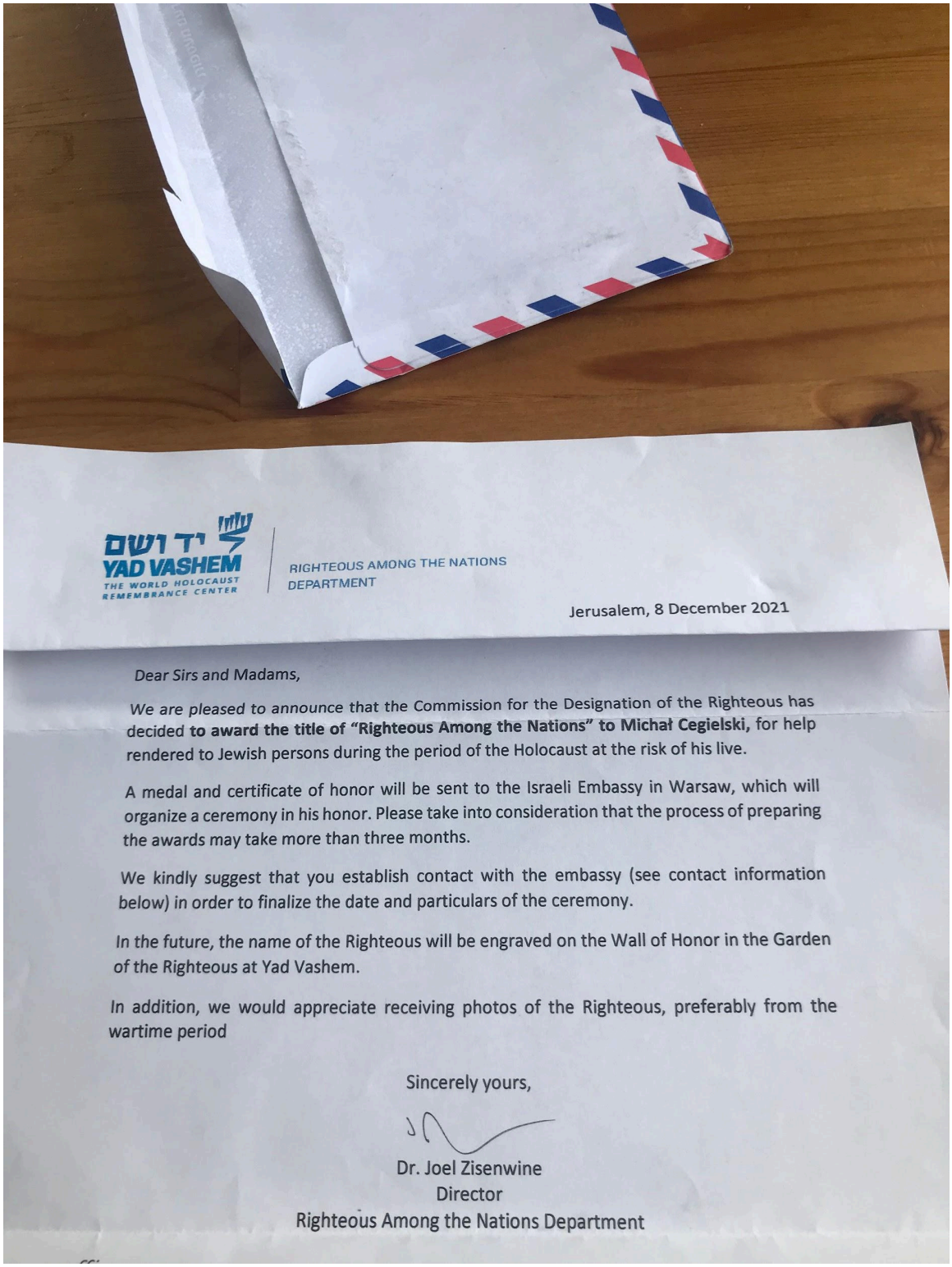
Mr. Cegielski 's sons continued their father's legacy in a way that Fogelman might have identified as "Children as Rescuers." (108) "The children of these rescuers," Fogelman found, "were in essence passive rescuers." (Fogelman, 173) Rather than retaliating against or blaming the girls, Cegielski 's older son (~30's) Janek, who lived next door, upon hearing of his father's death "came by and said they [he and his spouse] were leaving the next day." (Rose) Janek's wife Olimpka, upon subsequently seeing the sisters in a dangerous area they originally deemed safe, warned them, telling them to "Run, they are going to kill you!" (Rose)

Edek, Mr. Cegielski 's fourteen or fifteen-year-old son at the time, took an even more active role in the sisters' safety, in addition of course to maintaining life-saving

secrecy of their stay on his family farm. Not only did Wladek occasionally talk with them, but also he shared with them information he had heard about the fate of the Spektors' own father and brother. The ever-growing connection between Mr. Cegielski 's children and the Spektor sisters for whom their father gave up his life became clear in Edek's final words to the Spektor sisters. Realizing what the Ukrainians had done, Edek said "Girls, they just killed our father. Now, I don't know what we're going to do…" For Edek, it was as if the Spektor sisters had become his father's adopted daughters, and they - his sisters.

Pictured above on the far right: Mr. Michał Cegielski (born Sept. 8, 1880).

On Dec. 6, 2021, Yad Vashem accepted our family's application for Michał Cegielski to be included in the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations for his martyrdom on behalf of our family. Our families are now connected decades later and we are most grateful to be able to honor him in this way - though we never could do enough to repay him for his ultimate sacrifice for my kin. This letter below arrived at my house from Yad Vashem on Dec. 24, 2021, as we celebrated my grandmother Clara's 101st birthday that very same day:



יד ושם
YAD VASHEM
THE WORLD HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE CENTER

RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS
DEPARTMENT

Jerusalem, 8 December 2021

Dear Sirs and Madams,

We are pleased to announce that the Commission for the Designation of the Righteous has decided **to award the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" to Michał Cegielski,** for help rendered to Jewish persons during the period of the Holocaust at the risk of his live.

A medal and certificate of honor will be sent to the Israeli Embassy in Warsaw, which will organize a ceremony in his honor. Please take into consideration that the process of preparing the awards may take more than three months.

We kindly suggest that you establish contact with the embassy (see contact information below) in order to finalize the date and particulars of the ceremony.

In the future, the name of the Righteous will be engraved on the Wall of Honor in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem.

In addition, we would appreciate receiving photos of the Righteous, preferably from the wartime period

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Joel Zisenwine
Director
Righteous Among the Nations Department

Below:

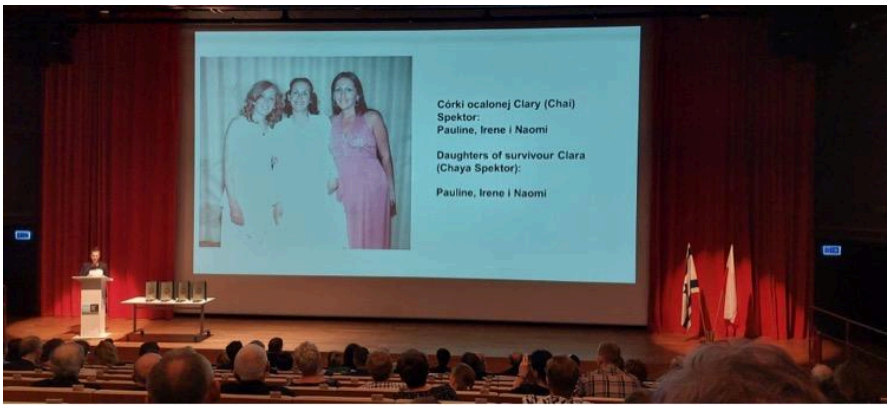
Mr. Michał Cegielski and wife Józefa

Cegielski Family:

And finally, on Oct. 27, 2022, Mr. Cegielski was entered into the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations at a ceremony in Warsaw attended by the Israeli Ambassador to Poland and family members of saviors and survivors of his family, and the families of four other inductees. Our family and the families of others saved

by Righteous Gentiles attended virtually from around the world. Here are pictures from that event:

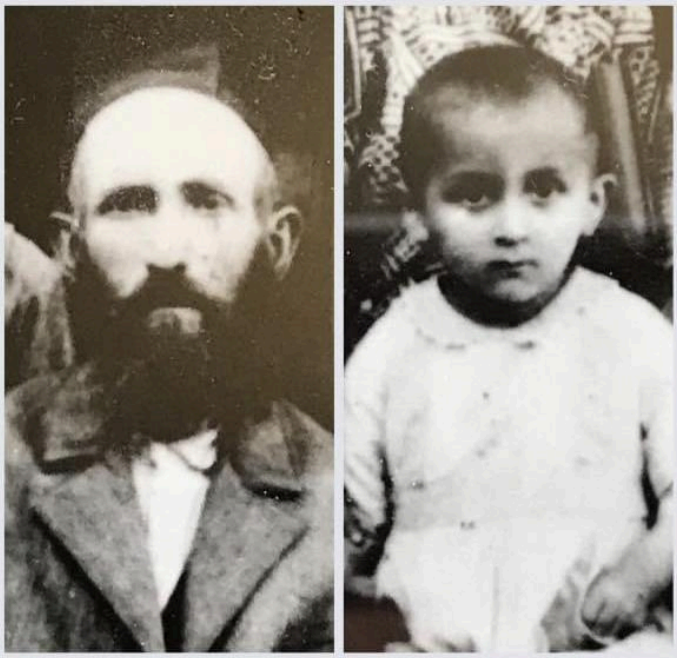

לאות תודה
מאת עם ישראל
MICHAŁ CEGIELSKI
LE PEUPLE JUIF
RECONNAISSANT
SAUVE UNE VIE SAUVE L'UNIVERS TOUT ENTIER


Córki ocalonej Clary (Chai)
Spektor:
Pauline, Irene i Naomi
Daughters of survivour Clara
(Chaya Spektor):
Pauline, Irene i Naomi


Sprawiedliwy
Śp. Michał
Cegielski
(1877-1943)


Righteous
Late Michał Cegielski (1877-194
with his family

Itzchak and Dovid



Unfortunately, most families were not nearly as humane toward Jews as the Cegielski's. This was the case for Itzchak Spektor, the forty-eighty-year-old patriarch of the family, and his youngest surviving son Dovid, then twelve-years-old. When the four sisters left the Kozin ghetto, they knew that their father and brother were on their way to a Czechoslovakian community in the Polish town of Stanislawy to see another "Ukrainian man" whom their father "supported very much." As Rose quipped: "he lent him money and he bought a lot of *lent* for it." Motivated by this connection, the man agreed to keep Itzchak and Dovid for a very short period. The Ukrainian individual proved a counterexample to the generalization that all Ukrainians were malevolent toward Jews during the war. Though members of this ethnic group were known for their willingness to collaborate with the murdering of Jews, there were some among their ranks who indeed did not share this attitude, instead trying to provide assistance however they could.

All of this occurred while the four Spektor sisters were hiding on Mr. Cegielski's farm, which happened to be located very close to the home where their father and brother

found this shelter. When the girls discovered that Itzchak and Dovid were so close by, they considered taking the risk of leaving their place of hiding to see them. Clara felt too frightened to make the trip, and all four sisters agreed it also would prove too dangerous and conspicuous for them to go together. Rose and Eta ultimately elected to take upon themselves the risk, while Clara and Libbe stayed behind. The two traveling sisters "hugged and cried," with their father. He looked quite sickly, telling Rose "I don't know if I'm ever going to see you again." Young Dovid's comments were similarly pleading and scared: "I don't know if I'm even going to make it…my feet hurt, I can't walk anymore and my shoes are torn." At the end, they said good-bye.[3]

From there, father and son went to another Ukrainian nearby that Itzchak had been "supporting a lot," but with whom "he didn't last…long enough." (Rose) As soon as Itzchak and Dovid arrived there on December 18th, 1942, (10 Tevet, 5703) the man's son, a Ukrainian policeman, shot and killed them. The Cegielski farm was situated close enough that the four girls could hear a gunshot from the area in which they knew their father and brother were attempting to hide. They assumed the worst, and their fears were confirmed when young Wladek Cegielski came out to their bunker to inform them that their father Itzchak had been murdered. Since Wladek made no mention of Dovid's death, and given that the girls only heard one shot, there has been disagreement between Clara and Rose as to whether or not their brother was murdered that day, or perhaps managed to escape. Despite multiple attempts at searching various survivor databases, however, neither Clara, Rose, nor their descendents have heard any word as of this writing from anyone claiming to be their brother Dovid Spektor. Our family observes his *yarhzeit* (annual memorial) on the same day as Itzchak's on the Jewish calendar.

[3] On Feb. 2, 2020, Rose added that it was around this time that she decided to consult a pack of cards that she had used from time to time. It pained her to see that the cards foresaw their passing. (Rose and Clara both have been quite intuitive in their lifetimes and Rose had learned how to read cards from a very young age, at which time she went with her mother to a psychic. I take much pride and hope in this meaningful psychic connection in the matriarchs of our family.)

Shmuel

The sisters' eldest brother Shmuel, then around twenty-four, had fled on his own from the Kozin ghetto. Tragically, he had even less of a chance than his father and brother. A longtime stable worker tending to horses, he found shelter in various open stables on nearby farms. While he was hiding in one of these, a group of Ukrainians "hunted him down in one street in a place called Bashaba." As Rose solemnly retold, it was there that "they killed him like a dog in the street." As with Pesia, Moshe, Itzchak and possibly Dovid, Shmuel has no grave. The date of Shmuel's murder still remains unknown.

Mr. Ketner

After fleeing Mr. Cegielski's farm, the sisters were lost. They decided to do the only sensible thing that came to mind and change their location by continually running in search of new sources of refuge. Their ensuing trek ended up lasting twelve hours, covering thirty miles. Clara distinctly recalled sleeping in a field, waking up in a puddle of rainwater and having to sit down in the grass to dry off. She was so exhausted that the rain did not awaken her. During this long trip, the sisters resigned themselves to the fact that "if somebody spots us, they're going to kill us," and so they decided to pose as Polish daughters of the late Mr. Cegielski. They assumed that since the Polish Catholic population also suffered persecution, other Poles might act compassionately toward them if they thought they were their countrymen. They first employed this tactic when they reached the city of Dubno, where they asked for help in a Polish church. Their plan was soon thwarted when someone in the church indicated that Mr. Cegielski only had sons, exposing their disguise. The girls once again were forced to run.

They next came upon a town called Maragosht (Ulbaroff?), a Czechoslovakian colony in Poland and a suburb of Dubno, and decided once again to pose as Poles on the run from Ukrainian persecution. Under this guise, they knocked on the door of a Pole by the name of Mr. Ketner. Unlike Mr. Cegielski, Mr. Ketner had no prior relationship of which they knew with their father Itzhak. It remains uncertain whether or not Mr. Ketner actually saw their false Polish Catholic identity. Regardless, he fortunately seemed receptive to the cause of the Jewish population and received the sisters with what they described as "nice hospitality." He kept the Spektors overnight, along with at least two other Jews on the run staying on his farm, one by the name of Shapoval. Clara recalled how Mr. Ketner gave the girls his own bed to sleep on that night. Before leaving them for the night, he motioned to the saints pictured on the wall of his bedroom and mentioned that they should pray to them before sleeping. To remain incognito, the Spektors promised Mr. Ketner they would later do as he suggested, though they knew they could not. Feeling dirty and full of lice, the Spektors ultimately were unable to take advantage of Mr. Ketner's clean bed and instead saw fit to sleep on the floor beside it that night.

The following day after breakfast Mr. Ketner sent them to a man that he thought might be able to provide them with false identification papers. Upon their arrival, this person said that while he could not give them the documents, he still "felt very sorry" for them and allowed them to "sleep in clean beds, giving them "much to eat and drink." Both Mr. Ketner and this individual (whose name also has been forgotten over the years) were examples of Fogelman's "Moral Rescuers." (107-108) The two men had pity on the plight of the girls and others like Shapoval and his friend. They put their own lives at risk by housing them, albeit briefly, and by not reporting them to the German or Ukrainian authorities, despite not knowing for certain if they were Jewish or not.

The sisters' good fortune with Mr. Ketner and his friend unfortunately was short-lived. When Eta, Clara, Rose and Libbe returned to him, he informed them of the impending arrival of "guys to work on the farm." He further indicated that if these new workers spotted the girls "they would kill him – the whole family – and [the sisters], no question about it." The Spektors had no choice but to leave.

Cemetery Pact:

The Spektors felt they had neither anywhere left to run, nor the strength to continue trying. Walking with no particular destination in mind and with despair taking its hold, they decided to rest in the safest place they could find in a nearby cemetery close to Dubno. They realized at this point that they no longer could take the risk of running together. The danger in fleeing in a conspicuous, more unwieldy group of four outweighed the security of remaining with one another, and the great comfort in knowing each other was safe. They decided to continue running in separate directions from then on, using their non-Jewish aliases in order to have a better chance of finding jobs on Czech farms in different areas. They made a pact to meet at the end of the war – if they survived – in the nearby city of Rovno about fifteen miles away.

As they took stock of their plight amidst the gravestones, drained and in an extended period of shock, one of the sisters (there is discrepancy as to which one, but indeed it might have been any in such impossible conditions) admitted to the others that

she could no longer bear the weight of all that she had experienced. She was going to give herself up. By this point in their flight for survival, each of the sisters was beyond emotional and physical exhaustion. Any one of them would – or perhaps already did – feel like this one sister did that day, prepared to surrender to the authorities. They all knew this was tantamount to a suicide threat. In response, the other sisters agreed that "if you go, we all go with you." Thereafter, each sister swore to follow in the footsteps of any sibling who would decide to turn themselves in to the police. This promise ensured that each sister would continue to struggle for survival, if not for her own sake, then for the welfare of the others. The pact that day at the cemetery helped endow the sisters with the strength to endure the rest of the war apart from one another.

Rose decided to consult her set of cards at the cemetery. Her goal was to see if she could determine if they would ultimately survive the horrors that had befallen them, and make it through the war. Clara and her sister remembered decades later what Rose said she saw in the cards: she foretold that one of the sisters would not survive, and that the one who would fall would be blond. The only Spektor sisters who fell under this category were Faiga, who was miles away and who had not been in contact with the sisters since before the outbreak of the war. The other blond in the family was young Libbe. The sisters assumed the worst for Faiga.

Faiga

None of the girls knew of the situation facing their eldest sister Faiga Lober, her husband Hershel Lober and their nine-year-old son Bayrish. All they knew is that the young family lived among a Ukrainian majority in the distant town of Operand until the outbreak of the war, at which point they lost contact. Faiga's sisters did not discover the fate of her family until after the end of the conflict.

At that time, the sisters learned that Hershel had continued working on railroads in northern Poland during the war, while Faiga attended to young Bayrish. One day, she

decided to go and look for a job herself and left her son with a Ukrainian woman she knew and trusted with the instructions to watch over him "for a couple of days." Upon Faiga's return, she found that the woman "took the boy and brought him into the [Jewish] ghetto" for unknown reasons. Clara's version of events was somewhat different from her sister Rose's recollection, but with the same result. She recalled Faiga saying that the Ukrainian woman gave Bayrish directly to the Nazis, rather than placing him with Jews in the ghetto. In this version, Clara remembered being told that the woman in question did not want to keep the child simply because she did not think that any Jews had survived. In both versions, the caretaker broke her promise to Faiga and gave up the child. This Ukrainian caretaker had either succumbed to the fear and pressure of a punishment of death for harboring a Jewish child, or she had no intention from the beginning of keeping Bayrisch safe.

Faiga learned that Bayrish was able to escape from this holding facility and to reach his father Hershel on the railroad. According to witnesses at the scene who later told Rose, Hershel embraced Bayrish at that time, saying that he would "try his best to save his boy." Tragically, this was not to be. Both Hershel and Bayrish were murdered in a Nazi raid on the railroad. Only one worker was spared and lived to tell Faiga of Hershel and Bayrisch's deaths.

Running Alone: 1943-1944

For the rest of the war, Faiga found work on her own on various farms and in fields in Poland and Czechoslovakia posing as a Pole. Her younger sister Eta – the eldest of the four Spektor sisters that hid together after leaving the Kozin Ghetto – did the same throughout Volyn. Both Faiga and Eta were able to successfully survive the war in this manner. Yet, neither openly discussed their experiences comprehensively before passing, each in their fifties, many years later. Their memoirs were unable to be recorded in time to learn of the details of how they managed to survive on their own during the war. This was not the case with the three other Spektor sisters: Clara, Rose and Libbe.

(Eta)

Clara (Chaike/“Anna”)

After Clara agreed to separate from her three other sisters at the cemetery, she found shelter in the home of a Czech farmer and a Polish woman who was his wife. Clara hid her Jewish identity, explaining in Polish to the household matriarch that she was a Pole named Anna. (Like many of her siblings, Clara was multilingual, functional in Yiddish, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian, in addition to Hebrew reading skills.) The name appeared on a fraudulent card, the source of which Clara did not recall years later. ‘Anna’ told them how she and her makeshift Polish family “ran away from Odessa because they were going to be mobilized for the army, and so [now she was] looking for work.” The alias and the story proved believable enough for the couple. Unlike at previous homes where she hid with her sisters, here Clara had to “do very hard work”, including feeding

cows, horses, gardening, washing bandages for her landlords, and toiling in the fields. In return for work, Clara's hosts gave her food and shelter. The woman of the household included her in her family's custom of eating immense slices of homemade bread baked with goose fat as a mid-afternoon snack.

Still, the situation was far from ideal. Clara had to deal with maltreatment at the hands of the husband. He was taken to "running after her with a whip" when she could not do certain arduous tasks, such as keeping up with the horses in the field. Fortunately, he never actually struck her. "I would run to his wife," she explained, where she found safety during these outbursts.

It seemed that the main motivation for the couples' acceptance of Clara was the need to acquire cheap labor to assist with tasks; yet, there may have been more to this family's rescue efforts. On one occasion, "Anna" and the Polish wife had an intense and intriguing exchange, beginning with a very implicating accusation. Clara remembered that the Polish woman said, 'You know: you must be Jewish because you look like Jesus' mother. Jesus' mother was Jewish. Aren't you Jewish?' I said 'No, I'm Polish.'" The woman added: "you should go to the church, because we are Christians." Clara joined them one day, but when they arrived at the building she remained outside for an hour or two while they went inside to pray. She also began walking back to their home early, well-ahead of the crowds. As she did so, a young non-Jewish boy of the same age followed her home and asked Clara if he could come in. "I'm sorry," she responded, "my parents are sleeping," thus averting possible trouble and exposure of her identity.

Not only did these conversations between Clara and the Polish rescuer suggest that the woman (perhaps along with her husband) realized Clara's Jewish identity, but it also revealed a certain level of religious sentiment on her part. Fogelman described what she called Religious-Moral Rescuers as "religiously motivated fundamentalist rescuers [who] believed in the "'chosenness' of the Jewish people and felt a spiritual connection with the Jews through the Bible and Jesus." (108) Could the woman have been keeping Clara around her home for this reason, or was her employment merely for labor? It seems most likely that her act of hiding Clara resulted from a combination of the two factors, if

not others. The interactions between the family and "Anna" also suggested that they were aware that Clara was not exactly who she pretended to be.

The couple was intent on keeping Anna – or whoever they felt she really was under that guise – safe from threat of danger. When they heard that Ukrainians would be coming to look for Poles one evening, they told Clara that they would have to sleep in the fields that night and come back to the house in the morning. They discovered when returning that the Ukrainians indeed had come by their home. In this preventative action, they most assuredly saved Clara's life. Despite this relative safety that she enjoyed with this couple for the few months she stayed with them, Clara was increasingly concerned about the husband's violent tendencies toward her, worrying they might escalate into something worse. It was for this reason that she made the difficult decision to leave.

Moving to various other Czech farms in her area, and always using her Anna alias, Clara encountered similar ambiguity as to whether the individuals she stayed with knew she was Jewish. The second family that came to her aid was of Czech origin. They accepted her identity and asked her to take care of their two young children, including bathing and feeding them. While they were working in the fields one day, Clara witnessed that the husband began beating his wife when she put something in the wrong place. Once again fearing violence against her own person, Clara elected to leave after only a few weeks.

The third family with whom she found shelter also was Czech, and she again worked as the Polish Catholic "Anna." Their home was located near a major highway where Clara could see the Germans passing back and forth. It happened that one day "someone knocked on the window looking for Jews," and the woman who owned the home told Clara to "go upstairs and hide in the attic in a bunch of *Poltava*" (straw that Clara described as "sticky, like needles"). Did the woman realize she was harboring a Jew? Regardless, the rescuer took extra precaution to keep her guest safe. Under the "Anna" alias, Clara elected to remain in this third household indefinitely. Unlike her previous two hideouts, here she perceived no threat of violence from her rescuers.

After some time in this new home, a Russian soldier came by and asked if there

were any German soldiers inside. The family members said there were none and let him inside, where they fed and allowed him to stay overnight. They gave the soldier something to eat in the morning and he left without incident. They correctly inferred from his presence and inquiry about a German presence that the Nazis were on the defensive and in the process of pulling back toward Germany. The family was worried that the retreating Nazis would destroy their property on the way, as was common practice. Clara, too, began to believe after this development that the war might be ending. Without exact information, though, it was a guessing game at best, and too dangerous for her to take any risks of leaving her shelter. Only when she saw Nazi soldiers retreating in a panic on the highway from her viewpoint at the house did she allow herself to believe the end of the war was near. She decided to stay another two weeks or so in order to make sure the same pattern of German retreat continued before keeping her promise to her sisters and going to Rovno in the hope she would find them.

When she felt certain it was safe, Clara walked to the rendezvous city that was a few miles away. After more than a year without any contact with any of her sisters, she did not know if any were still alive. When she reached the city, she asked where the Jewish people were located and was sent to a place where Jewish men were praying. She waited outside until the religious service was over before asking one of them his city of origin. She heard that he was from the same town of Operand where Faiga and Hershel Lober lived before the war, and asked him if he knew the name Lober. He indicated that the woman of this family had survived and was working at the local hospital in Rovno. Extremely excited at the possibility that Faiga was okay, Clara immediately walked to the hospital, but upon arriving was not permitted entry. She went back to the place where the praying men congregated, assuming Faiga would return there, since "Jewish people didn't have anywhere else to go." Surely enough, when the workday ended, Faiga came in through the door. "Faiga!" cried Clara, "where have you been?!" Ironically, Faiga was the only sister who did not make the cemetery pact to meet in Rovno, but had been brought there by the tide of work. Recalling the memory of her initial reunion with Faiga in the refugee building in the evening, Clara described how she "was very happy to see

her, and we were asking each other….” After nearly seventy years, her voice still broke as she recalled their meeting and the tears flowed from the powerful memory. But the questions remained: what about Rose, Eta, Shmuel (whose fate she did not yet know) and Libbe?

Rose (Raizl/ “Helen”)

The morning after the cemetery pacts for separation and solidarity, Rose awoke early to see if she could find another residence at which to stay using the Ukrainian she spoke and a *Matrika*, or false birth document she owned that identified her as Helen, a non-Jewish Pole. Taking the document, her first landing was in the home of “a Ukrainian mayor with Russian people working for him, [who were] that day sitting and cutting potatoes.” When she applied for a job there, the mayor’s wife said to her, “I don’t think you can stay here, because you look Jewish.” As others before her, the mayor’s wife did not report the Spektor girl to the authorities, despite suspecting her Jewish identity. Was she prevented from employing Rose as a result of fear of possible political fallout for her

husband, or was she genuinely uninterested and unwilling to do so? Either way, she made the conscious decision, it would seem, not to report Rose as a suspected Jew.

Rose left the home and "walked, and walked, and walked, and walked" until she reached a woman pulling weeds from a garden who allowed her to help with the task. Rose told her a story that was similar to that which Clara professed: she said that she was running away from the prospect of being mobilized along with other young Polish girls to work in Germany. She shrewdly added that she would rather work with the Ukrainian population. The ploy succeeded and the woman agreed.

Unlike any of her sisters who moved from home to home, Rose remained steadily at this same house for the majority of the nearly two years that elapsed between her separation from her sisters and their reunion in Rovno. Not only did she clean, cook, farm, and work for the family, but she eventually became a fixture within it. When accompanying them to church like Clara had done, she "had to walk by Jesus' statue, kiss his feet, and cross herself and splash holy water on her head, which was very ticklish, and it was very hard to hold back laughter." Fortunately, Rose was able to maintain her composure, avoiding dangerous suspicion of her newcomer status.

More than enough suspicion already was brewing among her neighbors about the question of her true identity. Once, one of the local residents – supposedly a friend of hers – reported her to the Ukrainian police. They removed Rose from her home one midnight and took her fake *Matrika* to a Catholic priest who had been captured by the Ukrainians and who was being used to determine the validity of her documents. Whether the priest turned a blind eye to what he recognized as a forgery in order to spare Rose's life, or whether he genuinely was convinced about the veracity of the *Matrika*, we do not know. In the end, he elected to approve the documents, and Rose was released. Since many Ukrainians in the village had seen many of these kinds of midnight calls, "they knew that when they take you out, you don't come back." When her rescuers saw her alive and walking home, they "hugged and kissed and cried like babies." The incident underscored the level of suspicion of the neighbors even when they lacked any definitive confirmation of Rose's Jewish identity. It also demonstrated both the degree of attachment of her

adopted family to their newest member, and the extremely difficult positions in which Christian clergy often found themselves at the time in terms of collaboration and rescue.

Just when she "felt like a citizen" and was "sure they weren't going to bother [her] again", Rose became the subject of further scrutiny. As she put it, other locals began "trying to check and dig to see what I was breathing with." In Path of the Righteous, Paldiel highlighted the excessive ethnocentrism and witch-hunting among neighbors and family members like the Ukrainian man's son who had shot Itzchak and Dovid:

> "Coercion came not only from strangers, but also from next-door neighbors and members of the rescuers' family, who were infuriated at the rescuer for risking the lives of his family, of neighbors, and the local community (who could suffer retribution at the hands of the Germans) all for the sake of the 'despised' Jews." (Paldiel, 185)

The second test of Rose's loyalty came when her suspicious neighbors asked her to retrieve weapons the Germans had left at the railroad tracks and to bring them back in a blanket for the Ukrainians to use. If she did this they would "know she's willing to die for Ukraine." Realizing this might be a setup to disprove her loyalty, Rose only agreed to carry out the mission if accompanied by a gentile friend, Nalya, who could report back to the other neighbors what she saw in Rose's actions. As she expected would occur, the two girls discovered that no ammunition was available for the taking at the railroad tracks. Rose knew "the Germans didn't leave anything behind," and that the scheme was most likely a way to accuse her of being a quisling. Fortunately, with Nalya as a witness, she remained safe. "With all this," she related, "they checked and tried and couldn't find anything wrong, especially with [her weekly] church-going."

Rose's position in the town became most solidly secure after she successfully used her Yiddish to feign German and convinced a "German general" stationed in their area to order his soldiers not to steal hay from their farms. The entire community was "very thankful," saying that she "helped save them" from economic ruin. She no longer had to worry about harassment from neighbors after that incident.

To be sure, not all neighbors were belligerent toward Rose, even if they recognized her as Jewish. The final "Righteous Gentile " who came to her assistance,

ultimately leading to her reunion with her sisters in Rovno, was the relative of one of her next-door neighbors. This woman tricked Rose into coming into her home by telling her she had red dye for Rose's white dress. When Rose arrived, the individual revealed the real reason she asked her to visit. Moving into a "corner," she said to Rose, "look, I've got something here and if concerns you, then you don't have to worry, we can do something about it, and if it doesn't then just forget about it." She removed from her pocket a "small piece of paper folded in four – a note." Rose immediately recognized her sister Faiga's handwriting on the note and once again found herself "shaking like a leaf." Overwhelmed with emotion, trying to tell the woman that she was unsure whether she knew anything about the note's author, she eventually was unable to hold back the tears any longer and wept. The woman comforted her and responded, as Rose recalled, by saying "Don't cry, don't cry, sha, sha, sha – if it was your sister, I met her and she asked me to look around" for anybody of a similar appearance. The woman realized that she had found a match in Rose. In about a month's time after their meeting, the same individual arranged for funds to be available for Rose to travel to Rovno and reunite with her sister Faiga, who was awaiting her. She also said she would provide Rose with whiskey to buy rides from Russian soldiers, food for the journey, and a dress. Rose immediately accepted this most generous offer. The family for whom Rose had worked found it extremely difficult to see her leave. They had even named their newborn daughter "Halya" – Ukrainian for Helen – after Rose's alias. Still, they understood it was time for her to move on and did not prevent her from doing so. In this way, "Righteous Gentiles" like this family and the neighbor and sponsor of Rose's trip to Rovno not only sustained Rose throughout the war, but they also helped facilitate her reunion with her sisters.

When Rose finally reached the refugee building in Rovno, she caught sight of Faiga straining with a heavy load. Sneaking up behind her, Rose said that "if your husband would awaken from his grave and see your suffering he would turn around…" Faiga, not recognizing her after being apart for so many years, said dryly that she did not need any pity. Rose responded, "Faiga, I'm your sister Raizl." The older sister "dropped

her bags and kissed and kissed…" Like her sister Clara, Rose's voice broke and her eyes watered at the thought of this blessed moment of reunion. Rose's reasons for joy multiplied as she quickly learned that Clara also survived and had already joined Faiga in Rovno two weeks before. Though it took two months, Eta, too, eventually arrived in Rovno to the astonishment and celebration of her sisters.

Libbe

There was one remaining sister that Rose knew even by that moment would never experience this reunion: Libbe, the family's blond baby girl who would have been about fourteen years of age. Rose related the story of Libbe's fate to Clara and Faiga and eventually to Eta when they reunited in Rovno. When Libbe separated after the pact with her sisters, she landed in what seemed to have been the ideal situation in a Czechoslovakian community near the Polish town of Olbarov. The woman she stayed

with, Rose explained, "loved her very much." When the same woman happened to catch a glimpse of Rose randomly at one point, she recognized that she looked like her ward and confirmed with Libbe that the two were sisters. Upon this realization, the woman arranged for a meeting between the sisters within two weeks. Each sister was overjoyed to see the other alive.

Though Rose, Libbe and the rescuer all arranged for a second meeting two Sundays later, it never came to pass. Staying with the same woman was a Jewish man in his forties and also on the run. He secretly also served as a partisan fighting with the Ukrainians. Once, when Libbe was "sitting and working" he approached her and "said to her to come and live with [him]." She said no, at which point he kissed her anyhow and she slapped him. Enraged, the man told his fellow Ukrainians that a "Jewish girl is in there." No sooner was it that they took her into the woods on September 6th, 1943 (6 Elul, 5703) and shot her, likely killing her. As soon as the woman who sheltered Libbe discovered her fate, she took to "sitting and crying" with "tears like a flood" coming from her eyes. As she later told Rose, Libbe "was such a beautiful child. I loved her so much like my own daughter…she was so talented, she could do anything." Rose's one meeting with her sister that final Sunday was, as she put it, "the end. I've never seen Libbe again. I don't know where her bones are…" The tears that fell from Rose's eyes seemed much heavier this time during our recording session. Her prediction at the cemetery had been correct: their blond sister Libbe - the youngest daughter of the family - was the one to fall…

From Rovno to the Americas

Faiga, Eta, Clara and Rose remained in Rovno for a few months. Faiga lived alone selling yeast, while the other sisters shared an apartment and began to work. Clara took to selling buttons once again on the black market, just as she had in Dubno years before, Rose found work as well, while Eta stayed home. Signs soon appeared in the city indicating that survivors had various options for future placement, including Israel, South America, the United States and Canada. The sisters decided to take a train from Rovno to

a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Bindermikhl, Austria. The trip took many days, stopping in several countries. The surviving Spektor sisters remained in Bindermikhl for a few years.

The next phase of their lives began to take shape as all four sisters soon met their future spouses – each a survivor of the Holocaust. No sooner after they were married, they quickly left Europe and its tragic memories, eager to begin their new lives in a new land. Faiga left first to the United States with her husband Shloime Katz, whom she married in six short weeks. Rose was the next to go to America soon after with her new spouse, Fred Belfer, while Eta and her husband Abraham Blitzstein traveled to Buenos Aires, Argentina. In each case, the newlyweds followed their husbands' connections to relatives in their new country of choice. They were on their way to a new home, with a new lease on life. They had done the impossible: they had survived.

In Clara's case, she met and married her husband Manny Grossman in the DP camp in Bindermikhl, where Faiga introduced the couple. Manny (Menachem) Grossman (formerly Gresores) hailed from Rovno and became a widower when his first wife Malke and son Gesele were murdered in the Nazi bombing of a train station during the war. To spare his nephew Gedale (Jerry) from forced conscription into the Russian army, Manny took his place, serving as an infantryman in various engagements against the Germans throughout the war when he was shot three times. Clara and Manny had their first child Naomi in a hospital in nearby Linz on der Donau, on Sept. 25th, 1947.

Thanks to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Clara, (then pregnant with her second child), Manny and infant Naomi joined thousands of other refugees and survivors on a ship that sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to their new homes. Their vessel was named the "General Bondi," (also Bundy") and embarked from Bremen, Germany on Nov. 8, 1948. It took eleven days to reach Boston Harbor on November 19th. The journey was not easy, including ocean storms that wreaked havoc on Clara, who was pregnant a second time. In addition to the stormy waters, another memory that stood out from the journey was that of a German man who was seen tugging on the beard of an Orthodox Jew on the ship. While this action would have gone unpunished in Europe, the

individual's behavior was not tolerated. Rose and Clara recalled how, in this case, the man was not allowed entry upon arrival in Boston and was sent back to Europe.

To avoid a similar fate to that of this man, each family required a sponsor for entry into the States. For the Grossmans, they were able to turn to Manny's brother Hyman, who resided in New York City. The Bronx witnessed the birth of Pauline and two years later of Clara's third daughter Irene Grossman, my mother, (z'l) of blessed memory. The family eventually relocated soon to Hartford, Connecticut, where Rose and her family had already moved, and settled there for the next few decades, with Manny passing away in 1970. Tragedy again struck with the untimely passing of her youngest daughter Irene in 1998. In 2003, Clara, a widow, moved to West Palm Beach, Florida, where she lives not far from her daughter Naomi and in the same state as Pauline. Yet, Clara has lived to see the birth of a grandson (this author), and my marriage to Molly Winston. She also has witnessed the arrival of her great-granddaughters Sunny (Hebrew name=Idit after Irene's Hebrew name) and Libby, named after her sister Libbe, who died so young, and so tragically. On December 24, 2020, Clara fulfilled the wishes of her grandmother Elka Ridiker that she should reach her hundredth year of life. She often could be heard offering the same wishes to her great-granddaughters every day when they speak over the phone.

Clara Grossman passed in peace on Aug. 7, 2022, which on the Jewish calendar was Tisha B'Av, the Ninth of Av, the consummate date of mourning in the Jewish tradition for all the national calamities that have befallen our people. She waited until both her surviving daughters could be with her in order to take leave of this world In one of her last interactions, when she was asked to identify her daughter Pauline, she said to the nurse: "That is my sister Libbe." She received a blessing at her deathbed offered remotely from Tomek Cegielski, the great-grandson of her savior. Upon hearing the news of her passing, Tomek wrote: "So, all the Spektor sisters finally reunite. We are all here thinking about them. Please send condolences to the whole her family. Sincerely, Tomek"

Clara Grossman on her 100th birthday: Dec. 24, 2020,West Palm Beach, FL

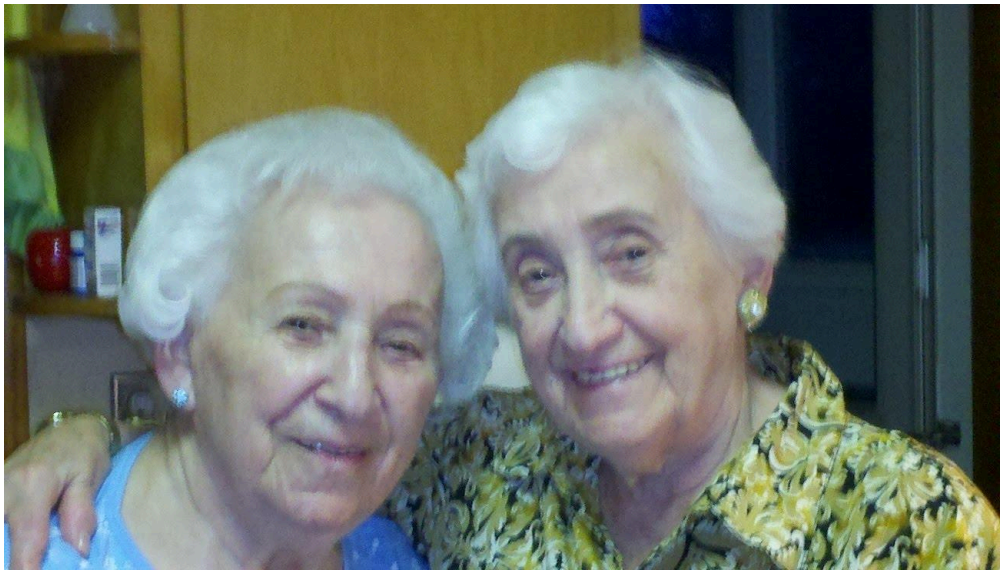
(Rose Belfer, of blessed memory: Rivke Rayzel bat Yitzchak v' Pesia - May 3, 1922 to July 22, 2020)

Rose had three married daughters in Cynthia, Wendy and Elka, four grandchildren in Eli, Shayna, Shoshana and Nina, and a great-granddaughter, Winifred ("Winnie").

Rose passed on peacefully on July 22, 2020 at the age of 98. On her deathbed, she learned that we would be giving our daughter - who was set to arrive soon - the name Libby, whose name she had been calling out in her final weeks. Rose's *levaya* (funeral) occurred two days later on July 24 in Hartford, CT, beside her beloved Fred. Given that this occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, many family members participated via video chat. I led memorial prayers virtually from a computer in the Consultation Room of the Spiritual Care Department where I work as a multifaith chaplain at the National Institutes of Health - Clinical Center in Bethesda, MD. Simultaneously in the adjacent chapel, my chaplain colleague Fr. Dominic Ashkar graciously agreed to my request to hold a Memorial Mass with the intention of Mr. Michał Cegielski, who saved Rose and my family matriarchs and who was a righteous martyr for our family - and for me. Prayers from the Catholic rite were ascending for him just as Rose received a traditional Jewish funeral. Indeed, few days pass in my work as a chaplain when I do not think of Mr. Michal Cegielski and the other non-Jews who helped save my family - it is no coincidence that I find myself working in a multifaith capacity in the hospital, and in my outreach to individuals facing imminent death on death rows throughout this country.

"We are the Survivors…"

Rose and Clara: Loving Sisters...



Clara concluded her recollections in our recording session on that fall afternoon in 2000 with these powerful few words - a simple phrase that evokes unimaginable hardship and implores all who hear it never to forget the tragedy that befell her family and her people. As Rose added: "we lost the biggest part of our life." The two sisters and their families remembered their father Itzchak, who perished at 48-years-old, their mother Pesia (38), brothers Shmuel (17), Dovid (12), and Moshe (~3), and their youngest sister Libbe (14) Amazingly, Clara and Rose concluded the interview with their expression of "hope for the future…that our children will have a better life."

How can individuals who have lost so much still retain such hope for humanity? One possible answer to this question could be the unlikely means by which the Spektor sisters survived. Clara stated that "we happen to be very lucky to be here; this must be a miracle that we survived all that, surviving the war and all the troubles that we had…it's a miracle that we are still living." Rose agreed, saying that she and her sister "live our lives like a dream at this point because we can't believe that we are here, that we are alive, and that we experience a life like the people in this country." Perhaps the miraculous nature of their survival helps to fuel the faith that both sisters seem to have retained.

The Spektor sisters' story is indeed tantamount to a miracle, though their agents of deliverance were regular people of this world. They were the Righteous Gentiles, from whose ranks thousands of others like the Spektors were kept alive during years of genocide. For my grandmother and her family, salvation came in the form of Mr. Cegielski, who made the ultimate sacrifice in order to save Eta, Clara, Rose and Libbe. Righteousness also appeared in the selfless acts of Mr. Ketner and dozens of other Ukrainians, Poles and others whose names may have been lost over the decades but whose actions will never be forgotten. We shall not forget the adopted Polish and Czech families that helped keep Clara ("Anna") stay alive through the war. We will forever be indebted to Rose's ("Helen's") adopted family and neighbor, whose guidance and initiative enabled her to survive and reunite with her family. These individuals put their

lives and those of their families at tremendous risk so that the Spektors might live. Not all would-be rescuers were righteous, and this held true for the Spektor family. The tragic fates of Itzchak, Dovid, Hershel, Bayrisch, and Libbe underscore the scarcity of sincerely motivated individuals who were ready and willing to come to the aid of their countrymen, former business associates, or even – in the case of Libbe – their own Jewish people.

We, the descendants of Faiga, Eta, Clara and Rose owe our lives to the Righteous Gentiles. Yet, what these individuals symbolize reaches far beyond the families of those people they saved. Paldiel powerfully captured this significance:

> "…In every country that felt the frightening stomp of the Nazi boot, the Righteous were to be found. This is a comforting sign that the search for the ultimate better society of human beings, which is the goal of all the world's major religions, is not an empty quest. The deeds of the Righteous are a reminder that this quest is still filled with much energy, drive, and hope." (Paldiel, 202)

The survival story of the Spektor family reminds us never to forget the Righteous Gentiles. It calls upon us to honor their memories in perpetuity. Like stars in the night sky, these Righteous Gentiles forever serve as reminders that even in one of humanity's darkest hours, beacons of hope still shined brightly. As our generation strives to move out from under the Holocaust's immense shadow, may we draw strength and inspiration from the memories of these heroes.

In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet implores the Jews to become a model for the world by becoming an "*Or Lagoyim"* – a "Light unto the Nations." (49: 6) May the memories of the Righteous Gentiles serve as our eternal source of light.

Zikhronam Livrakha – May their Memories be for a Blessing.

Rose’s great-granddaughter Winnie (2021)

Clara’s great-granddaughters Sunny and...Libby! (2021) Loving sisters!

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