

HIS4400 – The Holocaust

Biographical Essay

Prof. Elke Weesjes

By: Huvi Grossberg

Title: A father's legacy to his daughter- a story of strength and survival

Ruthy Bodner is the daughter of two holocaust survivors, Jacob (1904-1998), and Helen (Chaichu) (1916-2011) Rosenzweig. Chaichu was born in Transylvania, Romania (Hungary) and Jacob was born in Radom, Poland. She was one of thirteen, he was one of nine.

Jacob owned the grocery store in Radom until 1940 when he was forced to move to the Radom Ghetto. He was an active member of the Jewish Underground of Auschwitz. He was an instrumental part in bombing the crematorium in Auschwitz in October 1944 which slowed down the killing process and helped set up explosive mines around the SS headquarters. The Nazis caught wind of an underground group and many of the suspected men and women were then dispersed. Jacob ended up at a camp called Buchenwald until the end of the war in 1945. Jacob had been married but lost his wife and three children in the war. Chaichu had never married as she did not want to be a widow and so she waited until after the war where she met her husband in a DP camp in Innsbruck, Austria. Jacob had lost his entire family in the war and Chaichu, her father and sister. Her mother had died when she was thirteen of typhus, before the war.

After marrying in Innsbruck, they tried to make their way to Israel but when that didn't work out, they accepted a visa to Canada where they lived and raised their family. They loved the community, and had four children including Ruthy, fifteen grandchildren and currently over twenty-four great- grandchildren. They built a beautiful life on the remains of what was lost.

## **Emotional Inheritance**

Ruthy and I are cousins through marriage. When I first approached Ruthy about doing this interview, we spoke briefly about a book she was reading titled "*Emotional Inheritance*" by Galit Atlas which talks about the generational trauma we all carry with us. Growing up without grandparents was not unusual or out of the ordinary to Ruthy. She never truly knew what she was missing out on until she had kids of her own and she began to see the relationships they had, that she never did. Her parents were older when she was born, as she was the youngest of four. Although they were her best friends, there was so much from her childhood that was connected to European culture that she was unaware of until later in life. So many little things like the European way their linen was done and the lace curtains in her home growing up. She had related to much of the habits and culture without having any idea how much of her parent's identity it had been. The time she took her mother to see a film and a Hungarian song played and she sang along to it... a beautiful song she had left behind in Hungary before the war. How many other memories were lost, stories that were never passed on... they lived on in their hearts but were lost to the next generation.

Yet many others were passed on. The traditions of Pesach (Passover) night to call out to the poor is something Ruthy does loudly each year, just like her mother's father did. She teared up when fondly recalling the memory of her father. With everything that he went through, he had strength and trust in God, and that is something he instilled in his children and they, in turn, passed on to their own children. They lived in a community of Holocaust survivors and spoke Yiddish amongst each other. That was their comfort. In Detroit, Michigan where Ruthy's family and a few others sent their children for school, there was the "Rodomer Society" - an ode to their life in Poland and the life they lived there. There was a Radomer shul (synagogue) in Toronto which was a four-hour drive from their home in Windsor, Canada. Jacob lived his life with purpose. He was very independent and kept to himself, but he was a doer. He was a serious person but was full of life and that's something Ruthy embodies as well.

## **What's in a name?**

Ruthy, (in Hebrew Rivka), is named after her mother's sister who was murdered in Auschwitz. We spoke about what it means to be named after someone who died a terrible death and what you carry with you. In the context of generational trauma, "*Emotional Inheritance*" explores one such story of a woman who wanted to name a child a certain name and her father forbade her, but she never knew the reason. After his death, she asked family members and found out the name she had picked was the name of a loved one of his who had tragically passed away in the Holocaust and he couldn't bear to hear that name. Ruthy (Rivka) was the only sister who did not survive the Holocaust and although Ruthy does not know much about who she was or what she may carry in her namesake, if she was anything like her mother and sisters then she was very special. Every one of her mother's siblings have a (daughter) Rivka of their own in their families. She lives on in them.

One of the most powerful moments Ruthy recalls was at The March of the Living in 2005. The March of the Living is an educational program which brings students and adults from around the world to Poland. That year, 18,000 adults went back to Poland to commemorate and honor the lives lost on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation. Standing in Auschwitz on the very tracks that had taken over a million innocent people to their death, every member was given a wooden placard to write the names of loved ones they had lost. Rivka was written on hers. And as she stuck it into the ground, there was an "unbelievable power and sense of accomplishment" because she didn't have any other family to do that for her and there was so much beauty in that moment. This was her namesake who had come in here and never walked out and here was Ruthy, a proud Jewish woman, standing a free woman, living, and honoring her memory every day. That day she felt the power of her name and the strength in her that she carries.

## **Stories of a hero, never forgotten**

When her father had passed away, many people told their stories of how he helped them during the war. As a grocery store owner, when he heard that a Jew, a friend, a relative had been arrested, he would go

to the Gestapo headquarters and bribe them with salami and as much goods as he could get to have the person released. He did this until he too, was taken away in the summer of 1942.

His first wife's younger brother Avraham, who had lived in the same town as him, survived the war but was alone. When Jacob heard this, he travelled to Germany to pick him up and take him in. He legally adopted him under the family name Rosenzweig, and he lived like that for many years in Canada. When his children were all grown up, they said, "we want to take back our name- Streiman" and so they did. They were able to reclaim their name. When talking about her father and his brothers, Avraham and other Radomer friends had said everybody parted in the street and let them walk. They were tall and they commanded attention but in a very simple way. He would smuggle shoes and hats to give to children so that they were warm. When her father was honored at a dinner, someone was telling a story about a man who had come up to him in Auschwitz and put a hat on his head. He said "little boys should always wear a Kappel (head covering). When he saw him years later, he realized it was Jacob Rosenzweig. There were so many stories about her father she never knew and so much she wishes she could ask him. More stories about him can be found in the Rodomer book.

He was a simple man who went through unimaginable and unspeakable horrors. Jacob Rosenzweig was a hero to many people, he was a hard worker, he was a doer. In the words of Ruthy, "He tried to salvage, to find humanity in the hell they were in". But he was also a father, a husband, a brother who had lost his entire family. He started a new life after the war and raised a wonderful family but there was an unspoken part of him back there with them. The trauma does not go away we just learn how to live with it. And he did. He was a wonderful father to Ruthy, she describes her parents as her best friends. They loved to go to the movies, and her mother loved to bake. They were surrounded by aunts and uncles and a love for life.

## **Conclusion**

Although the horrors of the past will never be forgotten, Ruthy chooses to focus on the positive. At the end of the interview, she showed me beautiful photos of her parents after the war dressed and smiling

for the camera. She also sent me a photo of contrast - her father in Auschwitz defying the Nazi's orders and looking straight into the camera when they took his photo. She has beauty, she has strength and defiance all in her blood and that is something that nobody can take away. Memories were lost and families torn apart forever, that is something she'll never forget, but right alongside that is the strength she carries of her father, of her mother, of all the people they have lost, they live on through her and they shine bright. They were not traditional parents, but they were hers. They were great people, and they did the very best they could with the life they were given.

## Rozenzweig, Jankiel

(prisoner number: 50314)

born: 1904-08-12, place of birth: Radom,  
profession: worker



When using images for exhibition/article/essay it is obligatory to add the source of documents: **Archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.**



Works Cited:

ATLAS, GALIT. *Emotional Inheritance: The Legacy of Past Family Trauma and How to Break the Cycle*. SHORT BOOKS, 2022.

MOTLorg. "About the March." *International March of the Living*, <https://www.motl.org/about/>.

Www.auschwitz.org. "Auschwitz Prisoners." *Auschwitz Prisoners / Museum / Auschwitz-Birkenau*, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/auschwitz-prisoners/>.

Www.auschwitz.org. "Memory Books." *Memory Books / About the Available Data / Museum / Auschwitz-Birkenau*, <http://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/about-the-available-data/memory-books/>.