


# INQUIRER

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**M**y mother was, perhaps, more prepared for the possibility that we would spend this Mother's Day without her than my father, sister, or I. Only hours before going into the operating room she told me that if she died she wanted a simple, unpolished stone marker on her grave. She said it should read:

HALINA (ZIPPORAH WIND) PRESTON  
1922-1982

HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR



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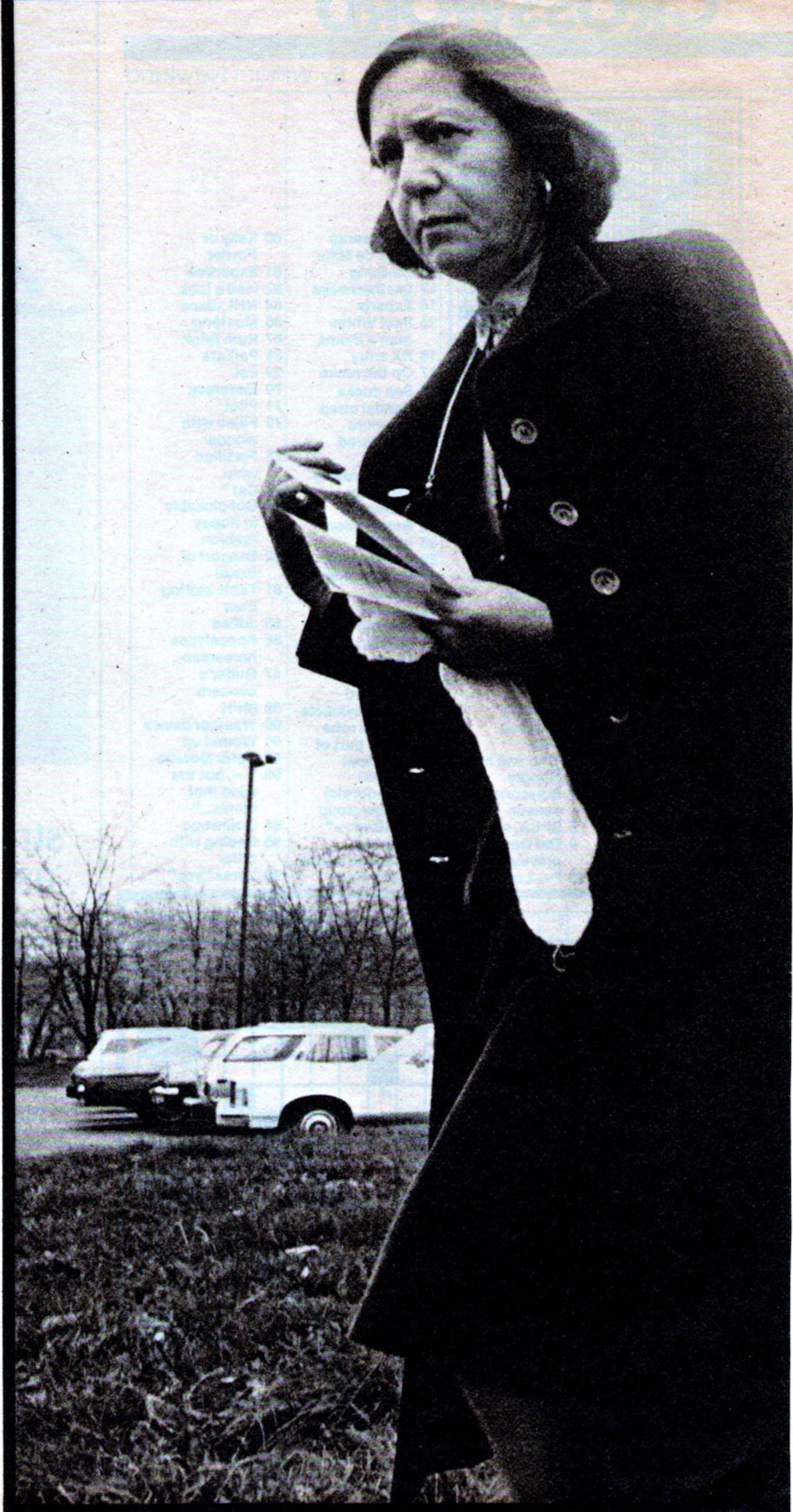
# A BIRD IN THE WIND

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By DAVID LEE PRESTON

In November of 1942 the last three Jewish families still alive in the Polish town of Turka decided that only one of them, a young woman, had any real chance to survive. They sent her off with a mission that proved even harder than they knew, and which perhaps no one can ever actually complete. On this Mother's Day, her son takes up the task by telling her story — and his.







Halina Wind Preston, the author's mother, walks away from a tree in the Garden of the Righteous outside the Jewish Community Center in Wilmington. The tree was planted in honor of Leopold Socha, above, the Christian sewer worker who saved her life by hiding her for 14 months in a Polish sewer. Thirty-five years earlier, Halina Wind stood with Socha's wife, Magdalena, at his grave in Gliwice, Poland.

**M**Y MOTHER AWAITED her bypass operation without complaint. "I have lived 40 years on borrowed time," she said. "I'm not afraid of open-heart surgery."

She had survived the longest odds of the 20th century, the Holocaust — a convenient word for the grisly murders of two-thirds of the Jews of Europe, as if all six million had perished in some giant fire. While her world crumbled above her, she lived side by side with rats in a sewer in Lvov, Poland, for 14 months until the Allies liberated the city on July 27, 1944.

From darkness, she came to light, to America, where she married, raised a son and daughter and taught two generations of students in Wilmington. But the years had taken their toll, and now, at 60, her arteries were blocked and her heart was pained.

My father and I watched as they wheeled her into a Philadelphia operating room in December. "I love you," she said. Smiling and serene, the survivor now entrusted her life to her family. Don't worry, said the doctors, the risk was only about 2 percent.

But she did not survive. Twelve hours after the operation, her heart stopped beating. On this, my first Mother's Day without my mother, I miss that warm heart.

HER LOVE — BATHED IN THE beautiful Jewish traditions she remembered from home — was something magical. One reason she willed herself to survive was to perpetuate those traditions: slowly waving her hands, then bringing them to her forehead as she silently blessed the Sabbath candles, or preparing the kitchen for Passover, or decorating the house for Hanukah. She did these things not out of religious fervor or superstition, but out of love — love of a distant but happy past and of a future that lay within the souls of her children. And Halina Wind Preston's children included not only the boy and girl who sprung from her body but also the thousands of young people she instructed, lectured, influenced and counseled during more than 30 years of teaching and public speaking.

"I had a mission," my mother told Yetta Chaiken, an interviewer for the University of Delaware Oral History Project. "I wasn't just saving my life. . . . We had a purpose and a call and a reason for living. . . . And when you have a purpose and when you have a cause, then you are able to endure everything. . . . I was living for my parents. I was living for my brother. I was living for my yet-unborn children. I was living for the past, and I was living for the future."

I had planned for years to write a book about how she survived. I interviewed her, her fellow survivors, friends, relatives. She expected to spend more time with me in Philadelphia to talk about her past. Now, I am left with the tapes, the speeches, the notes. Five months after her death, the future she lived for has fallen on my shoulders. She believed in fate. And maybe — to use the Yiddish word my mother applied to so many things — it was *ba-sheirt*, maybe it was destined.

*SHE WAS BORN FAYGA WIND, in a town called Turka. Fayga and her Hebrew name, Zipporah, both mean "bird," so that in Polish she literally was "a bird in the wind." Named for her mother's mother, she was the third of three children born to Joshua and Hannah Wind in the little town near the Stry River, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains in Galicia.*

*Young Fayga lived a happy life. She was a watchmaker's only daughter, the apple of his eye. She loved and admired him, consulted him on everything. He was a Chasid, a very Orthodox Jew, considered saintly by the townspeople who flocked to the Wind house for spirited discussions on the issues of the day. Joshua and his elegant wife had married*

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DAVID LEE PRESTON is an Inquirer staff writer.



for love, and the townspeople knew it. For good measure, he also had the best-groomed beard in town.

They lived in a storefront house near the center of town. Under a rug on the kitchen floor, a door led to the basement. The front doorpost, like the doorpost of every Jewish house, held a *mezuzah*, the simple wooden container with the parchment scroll bearing the Hebrew prayer, the *Sh'ma*, the Jewish creed, the proclamation of belief in one God: "Sh'ma Yisrael ..." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

They rented out an apartment upstairs, and the money went toward the children's education. Few Jews could afford to send their children to the Josef Pilsudski School, Turka's private high school. And most Orthodox Jews did not consider it proper for their children to attend a secular school. It took courage and foresight for the Winds to send their children there.

Fayga was the only Jewish girl in her class. She grew up with close Christian friends, sang in the school choir. But before her graduation, some of her best friends went to the school board and demanded that she not be permitted to graduate because she was a Jew. Fayga graduated just the same.

**W**HEN I WAS A LITTLE BOY, I went to bed with a transistor radio hidden under my pillow so I could hear the baseball or basketball games. But always before the lights went out and the radio went on, my mother was there with me, reciting and singing the prayers, some in Hebrew, some in English. Sometimes we would make up our own prayers. She was, after all, thankful to God for so much.

She remained in the room when I crawled out of bed and walked to the doorway, where I reached to touch the *mezuzah* there and brought my hand to my lips. The Hebrew word *mezuzah* means doorpost; through the centuries Jews have followed the Biblical commandment to place the words of the *Sh'ma* "on your doorposts and on your gates." The *mezuzah* in my bedroom doorway linked me to the 2,000-year history of a proud people.

Together, we would recite the *Sh'ma*. "Sh'ma Yisrael ..." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

And long after I grew past the age when mothers were supposed to do such things, she would return in the night to tuck me in. I never resented it. "Thank you, Mom," I said, and kissed her. I knew she would be back to tuck me in again before the night was through. In this bed of security, I lay awake thinking about God. And then I would fall asleep in the seventh inning.

IN 1933, FAYGA'S BROTHER LEON left Turka for the big city, Lvov, where he spent the next five years studying philosophy, math and science at the Jan Kazimierz University. Several times he was beaten there. His parents decided he should try to get into the Jewish Theological Seminary of America at 3080 Broadway in New York. Leon was accepted by the seminary and arrived in New York in December 1938. He was 24. Germany, under Adolf Hitler, already had annexed Austria and Czechoslovakia.

As soon as he reached New York, Leon wrote to Fayga, urging her to apply to the seminary's Teachers' Institute. She applied and was admitted. Her birth certificate, high school diploma and other documents went to 3080 Broadway, where they remained safely tucked away.

Excitement filled Fayga's summer of 1939. Preparing to come to America, she shopped for clothes and busily studied Hebrew and English. She had her passport and was set to leave in September. Then the war broke out.

**I**T WAS IN 1947, a few months after she arrived in the United States, that my mother entered the Teachers' Institute of the seminary. And she attended Hunter College, graduating from both in 1950. Almost from the time she arrived, she traveled the nation on behalf of the

seminary, speaking about her experiences. After a speech in Camden, she met a woman whose cousin was an engineer named George Preston, a survivor of three years in the death camps Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Later, they were introduced. They married in 1951 in my Uncle Leon's synagogue in Manchester, Conn.

A few years later, Mrs. Preston, the teacher, would bring her little boy into the Wilmington classroom, seat me near the teacher's desk in a too-big chair. There, I heard stories of Jewish history, lessons in the Hebrew language, tales about the holidays.

As I grew, my Jewish education continued at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, at Gratz College in Philadelphia and at Wilmington Gratz Hebrew High School — supple-



**The Winds, 1938: Standing behind their parents, Hannah and Joshua, are Heshe, Fayga and Leon. Only Leon and Fayga survived.**

menting 12 years of secular education at The Tatnall School, a private school in Wilmington.

Education was of paramount importance to my parents because their own educations had helped them survive. In the early years, I was one of the few Jews at Tatnall.

THE JEWS IN POLAND were accustomed to anti-Semitism. They had learned to live with it. They knew not only the anti-Semitism of the day but also Jewish history, and the 2,000-year history of anti-Semitism. Maybe Hitler will be only a passing problem, they hoped. Jews had had problems before. And then, one September day in 1939, they awoke to the sound of bombs.

The Winds looked out the window to the courthouse on the hill. The courthouse janitor, standing on the hill with a rifle, was shooting at an airplane. Townspeople mocked him with loud laughter. For Fayga, he would become symbolic of Poland's quick disintegration and surrender.

When the Germans entered Turka, they didn't bother creating a ghetto for the Jews; it was too small a town. They forced them to wear yellow armbands bearing the Star of David, and both men and women were told to shave their heads. Fayga and her mother were forced to work on the road, splitting rocks. The watchmaker continued to work in his trade. The Germans needed him.

Then the "actions" began, those dreaded government-authorized terror campaigns and killings of Jews. On certain days, at certain times, the German police and their



Ukrainian and Polish henchmen would run from the police station and grab Jews off the streets or from their homes. Depending on the order of the day, the Jews were either shot on the spot or transported in buses to a gathering place, where they were slain en masse. After Jews were taken from their homes, the townspeople could walk in and help themselves to the booty. An "action" could take place at any time, day or night.

One beautiful Sunday morning in July 1942, Fayga witnessed the beginning of what became known as the "Big Action" in Turka. Townsfolk were all dressed up, walking to the Roman Catholic church. Peering from her half-open door, Fayga saw a Jewish woman running down the street. On the hill stood a German policeman, a revolver in his hand. Fayga saw him shoot the fleeing woman, she saw the woman fall. Fayga closed the door, ran inside. "Let's go," she said. "Now, from the kitchen. It's an action."

They went to the basement and hid. They heard banging on the front door, banging on the back door, screams in the street. "I think I ought to go out," whispered the watchmaker. "If they find us here, they will be very angry and they'll kill us on the spot. Maybe the Germans just need me. Maybe all they want is a watch repaired. Let me go out. I'll fix their watch, and nothing will happen."

Fayga put one hand on her father's mouth and held his hand tightly with the other. "No," she said. "You're not going. Either we die right here in this basement, or we all live." The watchmaker began reciting the Psalms. Suddenly they heard Fayga's grandmother outside, at the back door. It was a miracle that she made it there from her house.

"Children, children," they heard her scream in Yiddish. "Where are you?"

"They must be hidden," they heard someone outside say. "They must be in the basement."

"Children!" she repeated. "Where are you?"

The watchmaker was ready to open the door for his mother. Then, gunfire. The Germans broke through the doors and entered the kitchen. The Winds could hear their steps overhead. The Germans opened every closet, found no one. They cursed as they left the house. But they were in too much of a hurry. There were other Jews to be murdered.

After it was over, the Winds discovered that the bodies from the street had been collected and tossed into a mass grave. Among them was Fayga's grandmother.

**M**Y MOTHER WRESTLED with the Holocaust when she could have tried to leave it somewhere in her past. She spoke about it before it became fashionable, before the charlatans began alleging it never happened, before the history books considered it worthy of mention, before it was tagged with that handy word, before TV noticed it, before most survivors were able to dredge up those awful memories — and certainly before most Americans wanted to hear about them. She did so, as she said, "not to blame, but to forewarn." If the dimensions of the tragedy were not told and retold, studied and internalized, she believed, genocide could happen again.

Sylvia Green, a social studies teacher and the wife of baseball's Dallas Green, remembers how her students near Wilmington reacted to a visit by my mother. "I just wanted you to know how deeply your mother touched our lives when she came to Christiana High School and shared her life and perceptions of the human experience..." Mrs. Green wrote from Chicago. "To me, she lit a light instead of cursing the darkness."

Willard A. Fletcher, professor of history at the University of Delaware, said at a memorial service that my mother was able "to place into perspective what had happened to her and the rest of the Jewish population of Europe.... She was factual, she was extremely objective, she was very well-organized and she was in absolute control of her emotion and memory.... The students sat there for three hours listening, not daring to interrupt, because they were hearing something the dimensions of which they could never have imagined."

BY THE FALL OF 1942, only three Jewish families were left in Turka. The Germans needed Zeeman the tailor, Brohner the shoemaker, Wind the watchmaker.

One evening the families decided that Fayga was the only remaining Jew who stood a chance of surviving. She spoke excellent Polish and knew the Catholic prayers because her friends from school were Catholic. Men couldn't be considered, because they had been circumcised and thus could be easily identified.

Fayga decided to assume the name Halina Naszkiewicz, a former classmate about whom she knew personal details. She knew that her father's name was John, her mother's name was Mary, her brother's name was Stephen. The real Halina no longer lived in Turka. So they made false identification for Fayga, and she became the last hope of the last Jews of Turka.

She was to leave at dawn, while it was still dark. She would wear a scarf over the yellow armband. Without a word, Hannah placed a Virgin Mary medallion from the watchmaker's shop on a chain around her daughter's neck.

"Remember," her father told her. "Your name is Halina Naszkiewicz. You must forget us, the home, your real name. You must remember only one thing: 3080 Broadway. That is where Leon is. It's only a number, and it's only a street, so it cannot betray you. And should you survive, if you will remember that address, you will be able to locate your brother and reclaim your identity. Should you survive, you will be able to tell the world what happened."

On Nov. 10, 1942, Fayga Wind walked out the front door as Halina Naszkiewicz. Nobody shed a tear. It was a cold day in the Carpathians. She was 19.

**M**Y MOTHER'S OWN survival was so incredible that she had no patience for fiction. She didn't read it, although she read voraciously; she didn't watch it on television. Her interests lay in the real world: politics, war, race, the economy, relations between the sexes, gay rights, abortion, capital punishment. "I just don't understand how someone can be bored," she would say.

For my mother, who really knew the preciousness of life and freedom, everything had significance: every word, every color, every article of clothing. This was how she molded me. She was amused when I came to her seeking approval for every 45-r.p.m. record in my early collection. But I was showing that I'd grasped the lesson: Life has meaning.

Although her bearing was stately and her speech tended to be formal and erudite, she identified with common folk because her life had been saved by two illiterate sewer workers. She mistrusted the highbrow purveyors of "Western civilization" because she felt the pain of what it had wrought, and she believed people should be more careful in using that term.

My sister and I grew up without grandparents. Sarah and Hannah, my grandmothers, became Shari Ann, my sister. David Leib, my father's father, became David Lee. We had few blood relatives. But my mother made it a point to have us address some of our close family friends as "aunt" and "uncle."

She liked being called a typical Jewish mother. Often she told visitors that the stereotype was a source of pride. "There is nothing wrong with overprotecting a child," she said. "It breeds security."

Now that she is gone, I am stronger for having been given that security.

AT THE TRAIN STATION, Halina flushed her armband down a toilet. She bought a ticket, boarded a train, began reading the newspaper ads for rooms. She picked an address in the Aryan section. Disembarking at Lvov, she walked to that address. It was a typical Catholic house in Poland, with pictures all around. It belonged to a Mrs. Szczepaniak, a poor widow with two working daughters Halina's age. She told the woman she was a Christian girl who was forced to leave Turka because she had a Jewish boyfriend.

Halina took the room. She said her prayers every



morning, kneeling in front of a holy picture and crucifix. Silently, she also said the Sh'ma.

It was excruciating for her to watch the Jews being led between their workplace in Lvov and their quarters in the Janowska concentration camp every morning and night, with whips and dogs and police along the Janowska Road. It was cold, and they were wrapped in rags. Some fell along the way. Sometimes in the evening, while Mrs. Szczepaniak played cards with her friends at the round table, Halina shuddered as she heard them speak of the Jews: "Oh my God, haven't they finished them all yet? There are still some left!"

When Christmas came to Lvov, Mrs. Szczepaniak held a Mass in the house. But when the Communion wafers were

on. Halina thought: He may have a daughter my age. What have I got to lose?

"I'll bet you are a father."

"Yes, I am," he said.

"I bet you have a daughter my age."

"Yes, I do."

"How do you have the heart to hit me?"

"She is Christian," he said. "And you are dirty Jew."

He continued to whip her. Her head was spinning. The man reached for a document and began filling it out. He shoved it in front of her. "Sign this paper," he barked.

She looked at the paper. "Todesurteil," it said. "Death sentence." He was asking her to sign her own death sentence.

If I don't sign it, Halina thought, he'll beat me until I do. And if I sign it, they will kill me anyway. Halina signed her death certificate. A Ukrainian policeman came in, kicked her. "Go forward," he ordered. Halina went forward, the Ukrainian policeman kicking her from behind. He led her to a cell and locked the door. It was late. Halina lay down on the cold stone floor. She wanted just to sleep. She slept, awoke, slept, awoke. Screams came from the other rooms. She was in pain. From a small window, dawn slowly crept in.

The man kicked the door open. "Get up and go," he ordered.

"Where?" Halina asked.

He didn't answer. He began to whip her. "Now keep going," he said, and he led her through the corridors. He opened a door. The courtyard was paved with gravestones from the Jewish cemetery. She crossed to the gate, and there stood a cattle truck loaded with people. Halina was pushed inside the truck. Well, she thought, this is it. Now they are taking us to the Janowska camp, and to the Sands, the horrible execution spot behind the camp.

"Where are we going?" she asked a young Jew in a police uniform.

"We are going to the ghetto," he said. "We are going to Weisenhof."

Instead of being executed on the spot, Halina was being taken with a truck full of other "false Aryans" to Weisenhof, a prison within the ghetto, a temporary place to stay before being sent to the Sands.

At Weisenhof, the stench was unbearable. The place was filthy, the people looked like shadows. Buckets served as toilets. The day after she arrived, a guard told her, "It's your turn to empty the buckets." Grabbing a bucket, she walked through the prison until she arrived at the main door. For some reason the door was open, and there were no guards. Halina walked into the prison courtyard, holding the bucket of excrement. It was a beautiful day. She knew that on Fridays the trucks came to take people to the Sands. Tomorrow would be Friday. Halina put the bucket on the ground, and began to walk until she reached the gate of the high prison wall. She walked out of the gate and stood still at the other side, against the wall.

The ghetto by then had become a Judenlager, or Julag — a camp for Jews. No Jew was allowed there during the day. They worked outside the ghetto and returned only to sleep. She could not stand there long, because they would come looking for her in a minute. She crossed the street, walked flush with the houses, flush with the buildings, and she walked on a little farther.

Suddenly, she heard Yiddish words: "Come in! Come in!" A man struggled with her. "You must be the one who just escaped from Weisenhof."

Halina was startled. "How do you know?"

"They're looking for you. Come in."

"I'm not going," she insisted.

Then she heard the calming voice of an older woman, a grandmother: "Come in, my child. Don't be afraid." And they pulled her in.

It was a dark cellar. She saw a hunchbacked man, a woman, a few other people. The grandmother's presence made things better, but Halina still was afraid.

"I want to go back," she said. "I want to go back to Weisenhof."

**"Remember," her father told her. "Your name is Halina Naszkiewicz. You must forget us, the home, your real name. . . Remember only one thing: 3080 Broadway. . . where Leon is. It's only a number, and it's only a street, so it cannot betray you. And should you survive, you will be able to locate your brother and reclaim your identity. You will be able to tell the world what happened."**

distributed, Halina, instead of receiving the wafer on her tongue, reached for it with her hand. Immediately, the others knew.

The landlady told Halina she would have to leave, and she recommended a place. Halina could go there to find a room, then return for her belongings. Halina took her advice. But Mrs. Szczepaniak had betrayed her.

When Halina walked into the place, she found Ukrainian police and several Jews who had been caught.

"What is your name?" the police asked.

"Halina Naszkiewicz," she said. "I am a Christian."

They began beating her.

"I am a Christian," she insisted. "My father's name is John. My mother's name is Mary."

But they continued beating her. "Now let's go," they said.

They took her to the police station, where she was led in front of a well-dressed man seated behind a desk. His boots shone. Behind him hung a portrait of Hitler. On the desk was a whip. Other people were in the room.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Halina Naszkiewicz," she replied.

He took the whip in his hand and whipped her.

"Halina Naszkiewicz," she said again.

He whipped her again.

She repeated the name, and again he whipped her. This went on for a while. Screams and cries could be heard from the other rooms, where similar interrogations were going



# HALINA

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"She must be hungry," the hunchback said. "Let's give her something to eat." And he brought her some food.

"My name is Jacob," the hunchback said. "Don't worry. You'll stay with us for a while. We'll make you legal here. We'll get you another ID. That's no problem, because every day someone either is shot or dies. We'll get you the ID of somebody who is legal here, who is working here."

Jacob brought her food once a day, and she stayed hidden until they brought her a new identification. Name: Halina Dienstag. Occupation: tailor, seamstress. Halina went to work with the others, employed as tailors in the Schwartz factories in Lvov. (The Germans called the city Lemberg.) The clothes of murdered Jews from the Janowska camp were brought to the Schwartz factories, where Halina and the others cleaned and deloused them. The clothes were then sent to Germany for German families, and German uniforms were mended to be sent to the front.

On May 16, 1943, the Warsaw ghetto uprising took place. Two weeks later, on the night of June 1, the Lvov ghetto was liquidated. It began as the Jewish workers returned from work. Ukrainian and German police grabbed them off the trucks, rounded them up, shot several.

People ran in every direction, falling everywhere. Some swallowed poison to kill themselves. The barracks where Halina lived in Lvov were located on Pelteva Street. Underneath was the sewer system, which flowed into the Peltev River. Jacob, the hunchback, rushed over to Halina.

"Come with us. We'll try to get into the sewer on Pelteva Street."

They went into the cellar, and through a door to a little pantry, where they came to a tiny opening.

"It's not too far," said Jacob. "We'll go through this opening, and through some pipes, and through some other pipes, and eventually we'll go down to the Peltev."

He pushed Halina into the pipe. She crawled through and was pulled out at the other end. She could hear water trickling. They went down some pipes, then entered another pipe where the water was coming down hard. More pipes. Finally they heard something that sounded like a river. Halina stepped out, looked around. A lot of people were there. Some held flashlights, some held candles.

The Peltev flowed through the middle, with paths just wide enough for a sewer worker on either side. It was dark, unpaved, dirty and smelly. Every now and then, she heard a splash when someone slipped into the water. Some people just jumped in, to drown. Others thought they could swim along with the river to the outskirts of the city and then run away.

Halina held onto the hunchback, and they walked carefully on the path alongside the wall. He pulled her into a tight tunnel. "Our sewer workers are here. Just come with me."

Inside, Halina saw several people. Two with high boots appeared to be sewer workers.

"They have agreed to save 20 people," someone said. "They will take us away from the Peltev into another spot within the sewer system, and they will bring us whatever is needed."

Halina looked around. Besides the two sewer workers, 20 people were there. She was the 21st.

**S**HE HAD PROMISED her father that if she survived, she would tell the world. Nothing could sway her from her task, not even a heart attack in 1979. A few weeks after she was hospitalized, she was asked to give a speech dedicating the Holocaust monument in downtown

Wilmington. We tried to dissuade her, but she persevered, and when the time came for the speech, she stood in sub-freezing weather and delivered one of her most memorable addresses to about 300 people.

It was Dec. 2. Three years later, on the same date, she would die.

The monument, she told the crowd, "stands here not only as a silent witness to a shameful and abhorrent past, but to alert new generations to be ever vigilant not to take the country's freedoms for granted, because governments can be overthrown and constitutions rewritten.

"... And as long as the voices of the martyrs beseech us to tell the world, we shall continue to erect Holocaust memorials of stone and iron, until we finish building the



The author and his father last month in Washington at the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors.

SHARON J. WOHLMUTH

**"We shall continue to erect Holocaust memorials of stone and iron," my mother vowed when she dedicated a Holocaust monument in Wilmington, "until we finish building the ultimate memorial: A just and peaceful world."**

ultimate memorial: A just and peaceful world."

My mother led the effort to bring Holocaust studies into Delaware schools. Two months after her death, a group of educators met at the University of Delaware to develop a comprehensive curriculum for Holocaust education in the public schools.

She started a Holocaust Education Fund at Wilmington's Jewish Community Center. Immediately after her death, the center's board voted to rename the fund in her name. I accepted an invitation to fill my mother's seat on the committee that administers the fund. Among our goals is a Holocaust resource center at the University of Delaware library.

**THE NIGHT OF THE LIQUIDATION**, Halina saw a woman who reminded her of her own mother. The woman's name was Pepa Chigier, and she stood with her children, Kristina, 7, and Pavel, 4. Her husband, Ignacy Chigier, had come up with the idea of knocking out an opening through the concrete that separated the basement of the barracks from the sewer pipe that led to the Peltev River so there

DAVID LEE PRESTON

May 8, 1983

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would be an escape route in case of an "action."

In the Lvov ghetto, Chigier had become acquainted with the hunchback, Jacob Berestycki, a poor young tailor from the city of Lodz. The Germans didn't need a tailor at the time; they needed a locksmith. So Jacob became a locksmith in the ghetto. Chigier discovered that he was a capable boy and it would be a good idea to know him.

Chigier made a deal with a sewer worker named Leopold Socha, who used to come down into the ghetto with his assistant, Stefan Wroblewski. Both men were Christians. Chigier would pay Socha a little bit each week, and Socha would save a group of Jews. Chigier told Socha and Wroblewski where the money was hidden. They could have grabbed it all. Instead, Socha said: "You just give us as we need it."

Chigier, Jacob and the sewer workers dug through the concrete. By the time Halina escaped from Weisenhof and they offered her shelter, the escape route was ready.

Socha came down into the sewer to look for Chigier and Jacob on the night of the liquidation. When he arrived, Jacob told him they wanted to save Halina too. "Follow me," Socha said. And he took them to a pipe farther away from the Peltev. It was cold and wet. But no one complained.

"We will return tomorrow," Socha said. "We'll bring you food, and some dry clothing. In the meantime, do not budge from here. Just trust us." They had no alternative. Their clothes sopping wet, and without food, they remained through the night, crawling on their hands and knees.

The next day, Socha and Wroblewski came back as promised, with food and dry clothes. "The ghetto is still burning," Socha said. "There are bodies all over the place. There were about 200 people in the sewers yesterday. Some of them drowned, some just walked out. Those who tried to run away were caught, shot by Ukrainians, by Poles, by Germans. There are a lot of bodies on the outskirts of the city, where the Peltev comes out. Now only you are left."

On the third day, Socha and Wroblewski returned with more food. They told the Jews where to find boards and stones so that they could build a platform across the width of the sewer and above the sudsy, stinking water that flowed through it. Although the boards were saturated, the Jews were able to dry them with the warmth of their bodies.

One day, soon after they had settled in, three girls in the group decided to leave. "This is not for us," one said. "We would rather die up there in the world as people, than live as rats in the sewer." So the three girls walked out. When

Socha and Wroblewski returned, they told the group that the girls' bodies had been found on the outskirts of town. Soon afterward, two men in the group decided to leave, saying they hungered for strawberries. They, too, were murdered.

Because they could not stand up, the sewer dwellers crawled on all fours. Delousing themselves and each other was a daily routine. They fed the lice to the rats. Cooking was done on a portable kerosene stove. The usual meal was a pot of soup. The stove also was used for heat. The food was kept in iron containers to protect it from the rats. But when the rats began gnawing through them, the containers were suspended from the top of the sewer.

The sewer workers came down every morning except Sunday. They made a circular motion with their flashlights to identify themselves. Their arrival was always welcome. They smelled of fresh air. But to the sewer dwellers, accustomed now to the constant stench, the sewer workers smelled awful.

Occasionally Socha brought an underground newspaper. They used the newspapers for writing. Chigier and Halina both wrote poetry in the sewer, mostly satirical poetry.

They also told stories, discussed politics, read, and competed for who was better educated, who remembered more poetry, who knew more Latin.

At Mrs. Chigier's request, Socha brought Sabbath candles for them to light on Friday nights. He also dug up a prayer book from the rubble of the burning ghetto. Socha was a deeply religious man. He was fondest of Jacob and Halina, because they were both so committed to their faith.

Socha remembered that Jews don't eat bread during Passover. So before the holiday he and Wroblewski shoveled a wagonload of potatoes through the sewer grate. Although rats got to many of the potatoes, the sewer dwellers were able to retrieve enough to feed themselves during Passover, without eating bread.

Each of the Jews had one change of clothing and one decent garment — a blouse or a shirt — that he or she would put on in the morning to greet the sewer workers. They always cleaned up before Socha and Wroblewski came, scraping off the boards, combing their hair. And every Friday, the sewer workers took out the soiled laundry, which they brought back washed and ironed the following Monday.

Halina had two blouses. When her spirits were low and she ran out of pleasant thoughts, she would design clothes in her mind, think about colors, fabrics, about what life would be like after liberation.

**S**HE HAD TIME for everyone. When the Jehovah's Witnesses came calling, she would talk to them for hours in the living room, explaining her joy in Judaism, her pride in being a Jew, and, yes, her view of the world. They always went away mouthing effusive thanks.

She spent hours on the telephone with people she hardly knew but who found in her a willing ear and a caring heart. And when the son of a friend had become a Moonie, my mother made it her personal task to counsel the family. She did this for many months until the day he returned home.

On holidays, she would talk to the Junior Congregation at our Wilmington synagogue. Her talks, interrupted by sobs, conveyed an overwhelming sense of sorrow. To children, she was something mysterious out of a foggy past — living history.

She talked often about "the beautiful concepts in Judaism," and she never thought of them as abstract. She remembered them as verbalized by her father, the watchmaker, for there was nothing

he didn't weigh on the basis of what Judaism teaches, she said.

One day a crew of sewer workers showed up on our block to work on the sewer line. I remember how amused they were when my mother came outside to talk with them, then brought them refreshments and related stories of her life in the sewer. She was excited to stand there and look down into that nether world where she had been saved.

I also remember Vietnam Moratorium Day, when I stood up at the appointed hour, interrupting the math class taught by our headmaster, and gave a short speech about the futility of war, and then from that classroom and out the front door, I walked home. I was prepared for a good scolding from my mother. To my astonishment, when I stepped into the house and told her what I'd done, she said she respected me for it. That night, when I marched with my friends through downtown Wilmington, my mother marched alongside us.

**FINALLY, THE MONEY RAN out.** Someone suggested that since it had been Chigier's money, he should stay in the sewer with his family, and the others should go. But Socha said: "Either you all survive, or nobody. As long as you are under my jurisdiction, and I am responsible for you, you are all equal. How do you know which one of you is destined to survive?"

Socha, a Christian, was uttering a Jewish concept, Halina thought: *Z'choot Avot, the Merit of the Fathers. When someone does evil, God remembers it until the third generation. But when someone is righteous, God remembers it until the umpteenth generation. So who could say which one of them was holding the Z'choot Avot which allowed them all to survive?*

By and large, they remained healthy, although they never saw the sky. They knew what the weather was like outside only when Socha and Wroblewski told them.

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The sewer was usually a safe place, except during a storm. On one occasion, the water level rose so high that the sewer dwellers thought they weren't going to make it. They lifted the children to the ceiling. "Pray, Jacob, pray," the little boy Pavel implored the hunchback. Fortunately, the water finally began to subside, and they were spared.

"We did not expect to find you alive," Socha said the next day. He and Wroblewski left the sewer and went to church. There, in gratitude for the safety of their sewer dwellers, the two Christian sewer workers lit candles.

Before one storm, two men who had gone for drinking water were pulled along by the current and never returned. The wife of one of the drowned men was pregnant. Her name was Mrs. Weinberg. When she learned that her husband had perished, she uttered not a word of complaint. Later she would cry quietly to herself and to Halina.

When Mrs. Weinberg had entered the sewer, no one knew she was pregnant. They had thought she was wearing a heavy coat. With her husband gone, it was decided that Chigier would be the one to deliver the baby. The sewer workers brought scissors. And one clean towel was set aside for the time of delivery.

Socha and Wroblewski had said there would be no way to care for an infant in the sewer. An infant could not be fed, Socha said, and they could not afford the luxury of an infant's cry. When her labor began, Mrs. Weinberg, a strong, refined woman, did not say a word. She did not cry. Chigier delivered a big, healthy baby boy, then took the scissors and cut the umbilical cord. They wrapped the baby in the towel.

Nothing was done with him after that. He was not destroyed, he was not thrown into the river. The only thing that was done was what was not done. He was not fed, and he died.

**E**VEN MY MOTHER'S closest friends knew only pieces of her story. But her humanity touched everyone. In published tributes, her life took on legendary proportions and her death left an unfillable void.

A stirring front-page article by Nisson A. Finkelstein in *The (Delaware) Jewish Voice* began: "The obituaries have been written and the eulogies have been said. But there is more to be written, more to be said. There will always be more. A great human being who walked among us walks among us no longer. And I am afraid, for there is no one to take her place."

Writing in the *Wilmington News-Journal*, columnist Bill Frank echoed those sentiments: "Death has robbed the nation of one of its outstanding women of valor. . . . But now with the death of Mrs. Preston, who takes up her cause?"

My mother knew she was loved. Former students at Wilmington Gratz Hebrew High School surprised her with an album of letters extolling her virtues.

But she valued no praise more highly than that expressed by a Christian nurse who cared for her after her heart attack in 1979. She presented my mother with a copy of Pearl S. Buck's *Once Upon a Christmas*, bearing this inscription: "In my life I had the privilege of meeting with a lovely Jewish lady who had only good to say about all races including the German race from which she received much suffering and sorrow. You really

impressed me yesterday when you spoke to me about the minorities and about having prejudices. I hope I can remember just part of what you said as they were beautiful words. May God grant you peace and happiness the rest of your life and may you never suffer again. Tonight when I thanked God for today, I said thanks for introducing you to me. God bless you. Your nurse, Beverly Ann Kelly."

THE WORST FEAR WAS the possibility of being discovered, and to avoid this, the sewer dwellers moved their hiding place several times. Once, while they were staying not far from the Queen

I cannot divorce myself from the Holocaust. At a concert, I see the musicians forced to play at Belzec.

Jadwiga Church, they heard noises. As the noises came nearer, it was clear it was not the same rhythm or the same splash of water created by the walk of their sewer workers. They held their breaths, and sat silently. After a while, the noises slowly faded away.

Socha and Wroblewski returned the next day and told them what had happened. The first snow had fallen. Above them, the snow had melted in the shape of an L. It was the shape of the pipe in which the Jews were staying. The Germans became suspicious and sent down some sewer workers. The sewer workers hadn't discovered the group, and they went back up and reported.

When Socha and Wroblewski were at the sewer works, they explained to their co-workers that there was no reason to worry. "There are no Jews," Socha told his colleagues. "The Jews drowned or were poisoned by the gases long ago. This L may be the heat from the nearby monasteries of the church and steam from their kitchens or connected with the catacombs."

Months passed. Soon, a year had gone by. They spent a long time under the St. Bernard Cathedral near the St. Bernardine Monastery and near a park. Often they were perplexed by a strange recurring noise above them. One day, they asked their sewer workers what it was. "Don't worry," Socha

said. "It's only children on roller skates."

Since they were the only ones in the sewers, they were convinced that they were the only Jews who would survive at all.

A grandmother in the group often told stories. But after her son left the sewer in desperation and was killed, she began to deteriorate. Then one day, when Halina was delousing her, she barely moved. She passed away quietly that night, and they let her body float away. Thus the youngest and the oldest died naturally in the sewer: the grandmother and the baby who was born there.

One day, after the Russians had entered Lvov, the Jews heard a knocking on the manhole cover. "This is Socha. You can come out now. You are free. Jacob will come out first, and Mr. Chigier will come out last. The captain of the ship goes last."

The date was July 27, 1944, a beautiful, sunny day. They came out slowly. When it was Pavel's turn, he began to cry. He was now a little more than 5 years old, and he had forgotten what the sun and sky looked like. "I'm afraid, I'm afraid," the boy said. "I want to go

back to the sewer." But with a push, Pavel came out through a manhole in the courtyard of a building that had belonged to a friend of Mrs. Chigier's parents. Socha and Wroblewski had gone into this building and occupied an apartment that German officers had deserted.

The Jews viewed each other in daylight for the first time. They looked strange to themselves. Everybody was yellow. Their hair had turned different colors. Their feet were swollen. Jacob couldn't even walk for a while.

And they were afraid. "Are you sure it's safe?" they asked Socha.

Socha indeed had waited until it was safe. He knew that in a nearby town, after the Germans had retreated and the Russians had come in and the Jews who had saved themselves in the forest or elsewhere came out of hiding, the Germans then beat back the Russians and killed the Jews. And in another town, the local population killed every Jew who came out of hiding.

The Jews from the sewer stayed in that building for several days, and the sewer workers guarded them. Soon, the sewer workers' wives and children came. It was the first time the Jews had met them. The sewer workers brought vodka and food, and they toasted each other and celebrated. Of more than 200 who had descended into Lvov sewers on the night of the liquidation, only 10 crawled

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out on that sunny summer day. Halina, 5 feet 5 inches tall, weighed 70 pounds.

**I** CANNOT DIVORCE MYSELF from the Holocaust. When I attend an orchestra concert, I see the semicircle of Jewish musicians forced to play at Belzec where my grandparents and 600,000 other Jews were slaughtered. On the train, I become my father with the other dead and living corpses on the boxcar to Auschwitz. In the shower at the gym, I am with my grandparents in the "shower" where they were gassed. When the mailman comes, he is the mailman who waited outside the house in Turka until they came for my mother's family, then he went inside and helped himself to the contents. Walking in the woods, I am with my father's parents and the other Jews of Rovno, herded to the forest and told to dig ditches before being machine-gunned into them.

Last month, my father and I went to Washington for the first American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. My mother would have wanted to be there, in fact had *hoped* to be there among the thousands of survivors and their children. But when my eyes welled up with tears at odd moments during the gathering, I was not weeping for my mother. She was a survivor. Those tears were the tears I reserve for the victims, the helpless, nameless victims, who would have become scientists, writers, doctors, teachers. And watchmakers.

But always my anger yields to joy. My mother saw to it that I appreciated a refreshing shower, a train ride, a walk in the woods, the sound of the birds in the morning, the sunrise on the beach. And in the hearts of so many of my friends, I find the presence of Leopold Socha, one of the precious few who risked their lives — and sometimes lost them — because their consciences compelled them to save Jews.

Today, I belong to the Second Generation. That is what they call us children of survivors. We are members of that group whether we like it or not. We are the legacy, and we are obliged to remember, lest the Six Million will have died in vain. We shall work for that "just and peaceful world." Because one day, *all* the survivors will be gone.

**SOCHA WAS RUN DOWN** by a truck in Gliwice, Poland, in 1946. Some townspeople said God had punished him for saving Jews. No one knows whether it was an accident. Halina, Jacob and the Chigiers marched through the streets in his funeral procession.

*Before leaving Europe, Halina went back to Turka.*

*No Jews remained.*

*"How come you're still alive?" former neighbors asked coldly.*

*Halina found out what had happened to her family. Her father, mother and brother were marched to the Belzec annihilation center in May 1943, on Lag B'Omer, the Jewish festival of spring. There they were gassed.*

*Her father's house was empty. The watchmaker's shop was looted, the rooms bare. In the basement, in a dusty corner on the floor, she found an old ledger in which the watchmaker had recorded some transactions. She scooped it up, put it in her pocket. She went back upstairs, stood in the center of the empty room, walked to the front entrance and kissed the mezuzah still fastened there on the doorpost. "Sh'ma Yisrael . . ." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One."*

*Carefully, she removed the contents. And then, holding the parchment in her hand, she walked away from her father's house forever.*

**O**NLY A FEW days before she died, we strolled together through a furniture store in Bala Cynwyd. A large print on the wall caught her attention, a rust-hued rendering of tall grass swept by a breeze. I went closer, examined the print. When I saw the title, I asked her to come look, too.

It was called "Wind."

We looked at each other, struck by our discovery. "I would like to have that," she said.

After she died, I returned to that store and bought the print. It now dominates the living room of my parents' house near Wilmington.

There's another print in that room. My mother saw it one day in a department store and bought it. A small boy with a baseball glove is looking down a sewer grate for his ball. "Lost Forever," is the title. She said it made her think of me, looking for her past.

One wall-hanging holds a prominent spot in the dining room of my parents' house, where it has hung for as long as I can remember. "Sh'ma Yisrael . . ." it says in Hebrew. It is the parchment my mother removed from the *mezuzah* in her parents' house in Turka. My father mounted it on burlap and framed it many years ago.

There are other memorials. Because of my mother's efforts, the Christian sewer worker who took the responsibility to save Jews from death is forever enshrined at Yad Vashem Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, the Jerusalem institution dedicated to remembering. On May 23, 1978, Leopold Socha and his wife Magdalena were accorded Yad Vashem's highest honor: Righteous Gentiles.

And, a year before she died, my mother saw to it that Socha and Wroblewski were among a handful of Christians honored in the Garden of the Righteous in front of Wilmington's Jewish Community Center. It is the only memorial outside Jerusalem to Christians who saved Jews.

ON MARCH 1, my mother's birthday, I drove with my father and sister through the rain and cold to the Jewish Community Cemetery near Wilmington. There, alone in a new section, in a roughly patched plot still without a gravestone, the survivor lies facing the generations of dead Jews of Wilmington, as if teaching that entire class.

Of the four of us, only she was prepared for us to spend her birthday that way, or to spend this Mother's Day without her. One day soon we will place a simple, unpolished stone there. Only hours before they wheeled her into the operating room, my mother told me what it should say:

*Halina (Zipporah Wind) Preston  
1922-1982  
Holocaust survivor*  
□

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