

# For Love

By David H. Fuks

## Introduction

My name is David Fuks. My parents survived the Holocaust. They were enslaved for five years. My father was in Buchenwald, a concentration camp in Germany, and my mother was in a slave labor camp called Oberalstadt, in what was then Czechoslovakia.

I grew up in a community of Holocaust survivors and their families. I considered them my extended family. My parents and their friends were unique in their past suffering and loss and imperfect in their struggles and passions.

Some children of Holocaust survivors speak about their parents with remarkable reverence. Of course, I do respect and revere the memory of my parents and the tremendous courage and struggle they faced. But, I also recognize their traumatization was directly linked to the trauma experienced by my sisters and me.

My father, Henry, lost his parents and three of his five brothers and sisters. My mother, Rachel lost her parents and six of her eight brothers and sisters. In addition to losing loved ones, they lost their homelands, their actual houses, most of their friends and the world of their youth.

My parents, Henry and Rachel, married in Prague after World War II and spent four years together in a displaced persons camp in Landsberg, Germany. My older sister, Libbie, was born in that camp. My younger sister, Myra, and I were born in Detroit, Michigan, where my parents were settled with the help of the Hebrew International Aid Society (HIAS) and the local Jewish Federation community.

## 1. First Awareness

There was a comic strip character in the 1950s that always appeared with a rain cloud over his head. For my sisters and me, that cloud was our parents' Holocaust experience. While we struggled to find a path to become American kids, we were impacted by the stories our parents told, by the tragedies they and their friends experienced and the paths their generation took to rebuild their lives. It was a form of secondhand smoke we could not avoid.

I remember seeing a picture of Adolf Hitler when I was five years old. While I knew that this was the man who my parents said was responsible for much suffering, I remember being shocked that he looked like a normal human being. I honestly expected to see a monster.

I had the same impression seeing Adolf Eichmann on trial in 1960. Eichmann was the implementer of the “final solution,” the Nazi plan to kill all the Jews. He escaped to Argentina after the war but the Israeli government had him captured and brought him to Israel for trial. When his trial was televised, my whole family watched. Eichmann sat quietly during the trial. I was learning, in looking at these two Adolfs, that evil is done by ordinary, mundane human beings to other human beings.

## 2. Henry Fox

My father, Henry, was born Nehemiah Alexander Fuks in Lodz, Poland in April 1916. His paternal grandmother, Ita Horowitz Fuks, called him *Sieskind*, which was Yiddish for “sweet child”. In 1929, when Henry was 12, there was a worldwide depression and food was scarce. Henry’s father, Rabbi Chaim Dovid Fuks (for whom I am named), spent all of his time studying, praying and teaching. Henry’s mother was forced to sell coal so she, her husband and six children could scrape by. You could say hunger robbed Henry of his sweetness. At age 12, his formal education ended, he moved away from his parents’ home and went to work among the gentiles (non-Jews). Henry never had a religious coming of age service, a bar mitzvah, which broke the centuries-old Hassidic dynasty in his family.

Henry went to work in the textile factories and became involved in organized labor. In the 1930s he joined the Jewish Socialist Bund, a political group dedicated to worker’s rights. Because of his toughness as a young adult, he was assigned to defend the demonstrating strikers if they were attacked. During a strike for better working conditions, Henry was arrested and imprisoned for a year and kept in a dark solitary cell for much of this time. He told us that he found daylight blinding when he was released.

In late September 1939, a few weeks after the Nazi invasion of Poland, Henry witnessed the death of his father on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Henry’s father, Rabbi Chaim Dovid Fuks, was walking home from a service on the eve of this most religious holiday. Nazi soldiers accosted him, beat him and forced him to carry rocks from one pile to another and back again until he was exhausted and bleeding internally.

When Ita saw the dire condition of her husband, she sent for her son. Henry observed that despite his wounds his father would not lie down, but stood and fasted and repented as he always did on Yom Kippur. He died in front of his family.

In 1940, Henry was sent to Buchenwald, a concentration camp in Germany, wearing a red triangle rather than a yellow star. Although he was Jewish, his activism in the labor movement caused him to be identified as a political prisoner. Although he was a socialist and not a communist, the red triangle saved him from immediate death.

My father told me a story once that clarified his capacity for tolerance: “We were gathered daily to stand at attention before the guards at Buchenwald. They played a game with us prisoners called Still-Stand. The rules were simple. We were required to remain at attention for long periods of time. If someone fell or even

stepped out of line, that person was killed. One night when they did this, I stood next to a religious fellow. At dusk, he recited the late afternoon prayer, Mincha. In the dark, he quietly said the nightly prayer, Mariv. In the morning, he recited the Morning Prayer, Shachrit. This was how he survived. How I survived was by my will alone. But, I couldn't begrudge this man his faith. It kept him alive."

Depending on the concentration camp or killing center, hundreds to tens of thousands of people died each day. It was a world of suffering and daily cruelty. Henry saw many aspects of his survival as arbitrary moments of luck. "A fellow prisoner suggested we swap jobs for the day. I had no objection. That day, the man doing my job was killed for no reason. It made no sense. But, I was still alive."

My father was an atheist. He couldn't understand how God and Auschwitz, the largest concentration camp and killing center, could be in the same universe. However after the war, he married my mother who was an Orthodox traditional Jew.

### **3. Rachel Newman Fox**

Rachel Najman, my mother, was born in the small town of Czestochowa, Poland in 1923. Shortly after her birth, the family moved to a thriving Jewish community in a small neighboring city, Bedzin. Her father, Isaac Meir Najman, had a small leather shop. Her mother, Liba, was occupied by parenting responsibilities and the duties of an orthodox wife.

At age 16, Rachel and two of her friends opened a small learning center. In 1939, after the Nazis invaded Poland, every Jew was required to wear a white armband that displayed a Jewish Star of David. Rachel and her colleagues posed for a photograph that winter. The girls stood close together. Aside from the armbands, it was a typical photograph of that era.

Returning home after work one day in December of 1939, Rachel was surprised to find two SS Nazi soldiers in her parents' home. "We need one of the children for a work camp," one of the soldiers said. This strategy of asking parents to choose which child shall go into a concentration camp was part of the cruel psychology of the Third Reich. By forcing families to choose, the responsibility and guilt that occurred increased the complacency of those left behind. Rachel's mother and father were unable to make such a choice.

"We'll take this one," the other SS soldier declared as he grabbed Sarah, Rachel's sister and the youngest child, by the wrist. Sarah reacted as any 12-year-old would. She wept and wailed in fear. The family stood frozen. Then, Rachel stepped forward. "My sister is too young and skinny to be a good worker. I will go instead," she said. "Very well," the Nazi soldier replied.

Rachel's act of courage saved her life. She was taken to a slave labor camp called Oberalstadt near Prague, Czechoslovakia. During her five years there, Rachel's parents and six of her eight siblings (including Sarah) were murdered at Auschwitz. Rachel's world had been destroyed. Most of her family and friends, even the five year olds in her classroom, perished. Her world had become chaos.

## 4. Getting Married and Extended Family

After the liberation, Henry returned to Poland briefly and met up with a friend. Henry shared, "People were surprised to see any of us come back. 'You're alive?' they asked, but not with pleasure. There were pogroms—riots where returning Jews were beaten and threatened with death. My friend said to me, 'I met these two girls in Prague. One is for me. You should meet the other one.' So, we went to Prague."

In Prague, Henry met Rachel. And both couples married on Rachel's birthday, July 15, 1945. Between the two couples, they had only one suit coat and one good dress. So they took turns. Henry and Rachel were married and had a photo taken. Then they gave their clothes to their friends who did the same thing.

Henry and Rachel's wedding picture looks like many wedding pictures of that era. One might never guess what they had lost and what suffering they had seen. It is a photograph filled with hope and the desire to make a new life together.

## 5. Coming to the USA

Henry's first job in the United States was at a Detroit car factory. His response to the job was, "I came to America and knew no English, and so they made me a General Sweeper for Ford. What a wonderful country, I thought. I was a refugee...and now I am a General!"

In 1955, my parents and my older sister, Libbie, became American citizens. At the advice of the clerk making out the naturalization papers, they changed their last names from Fuks to Fox. (Fuks was the Polish spelling for Fox. The clerk thought having an American/English name might be a good idea.) My younger sister, Myra, was given Fox as a last name at birth. My parents neglected to legally change my name.

Henry and Rachel thrived. My father started a small retail business that evolved into a furniture store. His hard work provided for all of our family.

## 6. Secondhand Smoke

Our family life was not always easy. My father struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. (At times, he was angry ...other times, loving.) Henry's greatest struggle after the war was learning to manage his rage. My mother had an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Rachel needed order in her home because the world was chaotic and dangerous. It was the volatility of my father and the worrisome manipulation by my mother that presented my sisters and me with our childhood difficulties. And I was a considerably less-than-perfect child.

The greatest threat my mother could make was, "Wait until your father gets home."

Rachel knew exactly what buttons to push to get my father upset. He would respond to our offenses, often in a context where we had forgotten the infraction, with a belt in his hand.

My mother's concern that everything should be kept in order was a challenge. As a college freshman, when I was home for a weekend, I had taken a hot bath and sat in the kitchen afterwards eating cookies and milk. My mother walked into the room, upset.

"You haven't washed the bathtub," she declared.

"I will in a minute," I replied.

"You need to wash the bathtub, now," she demanded.

"I'm almost done with my snack," I said.

My mother went straight to guilt inducement.

"First, my parents died. Then I was in a concentration camp. Then I was a displaced person. And now, I've got you!" she complained.

I gave her a standing ovation. Then I washed the bathtub.

Still, the fact is, my sisters and I loved our parents.

Regardless of the traumas, I must add that my father was an exemplar of love and loyalty in his marriage to my mother. His values of decency and honesty were powerful. I could prefer a beating to a look of disappointment from him. My mother taught us how to love and introduced us to the exemplary manner of a sincere Jewish spiritual life.

We were grateful for their love and wisdom and for the sacrifices they made for us. But we had to become adults to understand them at all.

## 6. Emotional Toll

My parents shared a good deal with all three of us siblings when we were young. They also attempted to withhold stories of grief and loss. These stories were often revealed as a result of a triggering event. The suppression and unintended revelation would make the stories or remarks more powerful and traumatic.

My sister Myra's complaint about soup being served resulted in a lecture about deprivation and starvation in the camps. "What some women would do just for a crust of bread," my mother said. "You don't know what it is to be hungry. How dare you complain?"

In my parents' house, running into the room too fast as a noisy over-excited child could result in a startling back-of-the-hand blow from my father that sent me flying against the wall. He walked angrily (and perhaps ashamedly) out the door.

“He didn’t mean it. It’s because of the War,” my mother explained as she tried to comfort me.

“What did I do?” I asked as I wept.

Hospitals were not to be trusted. My father had a mini-stroke and had to be hospitalized. Upon seeing a bruise on my father’s arm, my mother screamed, “Oh my God. They’re experimenting on him.” In her world, doctors had been monstrous. No one was worthy of trust.

My sisters and I wondered why Mrs. Gold, my mother’s friend, always seemed so sad. My mother explained, “When she and her family hid from the Nazis in a cellar, her baby started to cry. Mrs. Gold held the baby so close that she smothered him. So be quiet and don’t criticize.” We learned that survivors often carried memories and grief throughout their lives.

## 7. A Revelation

When I was 35, my wife and I brought our first child for a visit and celebration with my parents and their friends at their condo in Florida. Many of my parents’ friends from the Detroit Holocaust survivor community had moved to the same part of Florida. Both of my sisters were present, as well.

After the guests had left, my father became morose. Something was on his mind. “You can’t understand what it’s like to lose a family,” he said.

My father then told my sisters and me of his first wife and daughter who were murdered in Auschwitz. “I had a wife before your mother,” he blurted out. “Her name was Alta Rosensweig. We had a little girl. Her name was Bluma.” (*Bluma is Yiddish for flower.*)

“My wife and baby were taken to Auschwitz from the Lodz Ghetto and I was not there to protect them,” Henry lamented. “They wanted to take our baby from Alta. But she wouldn’t allow it. Alta carried Bluma into the gas chamber. They died together.”

My father wept. His grief was as present as though the murder happened just days before. He could only tell me this now because I had what he had lost...a wife and a child.

To my sister, Libbie, he said, “So, you see you were not my first.” Her pain at this remark still follows her to this day.

My sister, Myra, came across a photograph of our father and Alta in Poland. They are in a park. Alta is seated on a bicycle; Henry is standing with his hands on the handlebars. They were young and in love. Henry’s face was relaxed and comfortable. I had never seen him look so at ease. There was always darkness in his eyes in pictures taken after liberation.

## 8. Henry's Decline

My father was receiving hospice care at the end of his life. It was late April 2002.

Henry suggested to Rachel that she climb into his hospital bed and join him on his final journey. "Absolutely not!" my mother responded. She loved him but she was a survivor to the very end.

During one of his last days of cognizance, I asked Henry if I could bless him. He allowed me to do so. I put my hands on the head of my atheist father. "May God bless and keep you," I said. "Hear oh Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," I added. He smiled at my effort to comfort him. I had met the sweet child Henry's mother knew. I had met *Sieskind*.

My father died on the morning of April 29, 2002. My mother's first words at the moment of my father's death after 61 years of marriage were, "It was too short."

## 9. Rachel's Decline

The woman who taught me how to love as a child taught me to be patient as an adult son. Dementia requires that the extended family live in the moment.

On one occasion, my mother turned to me and asked, "What happened to our parents?"

I replied, "Rachel, I am your son, David." She smiled. "What do you remember about Europe?" I asked her.

"I'm from Europe?" she asked.

Given her strong accent, this was amusing. Just as well, I thought. "Let me tell you a story about yourself." She listened intently.

I continued. "You were born and raised in Poland. Your parents really loved you. You were one of nine children. You were a bright and beautiful girl." My mother was enjoying the moment. "You are the last of your generation. But, you met Henry, who really loved you. You came to America. Together, you had three children. My mother and I smiled at each other. "You always liked me the most and you promised to buy me a sailboat," I teased.

My mother got the joke. She looked at me and smiled, then shook her head.

Near the end, my mother's breathing was a series of short puffs and then a moment of apnea when no breath was taken. One of the Hebrew names for soul is "*nefesh*." It means "breath." We counted the seconds between breaths until no breaths occurred. It was January 1, 2009 at 12:15 a.m.



# What can looking at the history of the Holocaust teach us?

My life and personal connection to the Holocaust has made me reflect on the following questions. I've included my thoughts, and encourage you to think as well.

## 1. What happens to a nation that has great power and no ethics?

Germany, under Nazi rule, adopted a racist and hateful agenda that started a war in which they and other fascist allies (Italy and Japan) were responsible for the deaths of 50 million people. The use of power without an ethical base and the desire for racial and ethnic dominance led to destruction and evil at a level that was unprecedented. As citizens, we must always seek to clarify, understand and protect core values of freedom and human rights.

## 2. What happens to a people who have ethics but no power?

Many of the Jews of Europe were forced to live for centuries as "others" that were libeled and discriminated against. Prior to World War II, Jewish children were taught that if a gentile (non-Jew) hits you or insults you, be patient and wait for it to stop. This learned helplessness is the fruit of the seeds of hatred and systemic discrimination. A new kind of Jew emerged after the Holocaust. Jews are taught to fight for their own freedom and rights and to work in partnership with others who are facing systemic discrimination and oppression.

## 3. How can a nation that has done wrong make amends and heal?

Germany has taken remarkable steps to repair itself and to make amends for wrongdoing. Holocaust memorials and a museum have been constructed. Concentration camps have been preserved in order to preserve the memory of what was done. Stumble-stones are found throughout the country to commemorate individual Jewish citizens who were murdered. Financial reparations were made to Jewish survivors and to the State of Israel. Holocaust education is required in the curriculums of German schools. There are lessons here in the USA we can look to as we examine our own history of racism, discrimination and genocide. Oregon now requires a curriculum that includes genocide education.

## 4. How can people who have been traumatized and harmed find a path to healing and resilience?

As a young man, I asked my father, Henry, how he was able to start over and make a new life and family after his enormous losses. His response was simple and profound: "For love. When I discovered that I had two sisters who survived and that they could love me and that I could love them...and when I then met your mother and I could love her, it healed me. I could live then. I could make a life." ■