

# AFTER THE GIRLS CLUB



HOW TEENAGED  
HOLOCAUST  
SURVIVORS  
BUILT NEW LIVES  
IN AMERICA

CAROLE BELL FORD

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How Teenaged Holocaust  
Survivors Built New Lives  
in America

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For the women of the Girls Club,

and for the other children who survived . . . and thrived.



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A Meeting with Holocaust Survivors—1951 [at the Girls Club]

*Cynthia Kohut Himmelfarb*

We sat, fidgeting, waiting,  
Casting glances at each other  
But not wanting our eyes to meet.  
Some laughed, forcing jocularly into their tone.  
An aura of expectation, dread and uncertainty  
Hovered over the room.

Three holocaust survivors had  
Agreed to tell their stories.  
Three girls in their early 20's  
Just like us, their audience,  
Were letting us glimpse the horrors  
They had lived not so long ago.

How should we respond?  
Should we gasp, cry out, sit silently?  
Shall we ask questions?  
Should we weep?  
How does one listen to horror  
Told as a tale worthy of Poe  
Knowing that Poe could never dream of such terrors?

“After I escaped from the slave labor camp” said one, “I ran for the farmer’s field nearby. I lay down deep inside the piles of animal manure, where I knew the guards would not want to look for me. I still think cow shit is the best perfume,” she said, with a bitter laugh.

All the stories had the same quality  
Leaving us, the protected safe audience with a  
Fascination to know more and yet  
Hear nothing further.

Many years later the stories have faded.  
But the image of a young woman  
Digging what could either be a crib, or a grave  
In the piles of animal dung  
Remains with me.  
Always a beacon of faith, hope,  
And survival

# Preface and Acknowledgments

Until recently our common sense, confirmed by early Holocaust literature, told us that child survivors were injured beyond repair. But as a dear mentor once cautioned me, “common sense tells us the world is flat.” In fact, as we have learned more about the lives of young survivors we’ve come to realize that the most adverse experiences, even the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust, do not inevitably lead to permanent personality damage. The small group of teenaged survivors whose stories are told here, young women whose lives intersected after World War II at a place called the Girls Club of Brooklyn, are living proof.

I learned about the Girls Club and the women who lived there, between 1946 and 1951, from a friend of theirs who asked if I might be interested in writing their personal histories. It has been my privilege to do so; this is their book. I simply tried to render a faithful account of how they were able to recover from massive loss and trauma, and to reconstruct their lives: to marry and build new families, to nurture their children, to pursue careers outside the home, to find creative outlets—and to pass the wisdom they acquired on to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Even now, as they are approaching or are in their eighties, the women continue to be positive about life. They are still future oriented, able to be optimistic, to be grateful, to forgive, to be empathetic. They are able to engage with friends, to trust, to allow new people—such as me—into their lives.

In order to reconstruct their life histories, I interviewed the women over a period of more than five years. Without their participation there would be no book. They are: Betty (Bronka Silvering) Berman; Betty (Basia Pasternak) Ratchik; Doris (Dorka Izbicka) Wasserman; Fran (Frania Dajcz) Berlin; Irma (Stermer) Sangiamo; Lucy (Lusia Bergman) Pasternak; and Renee (Renia Felber) Milchberg. We spoke many times, in person or by phone, and we communicated via post and e-mail.

I would also like to thank others who filled in important missing pieces of the story: Cynthia Kohut Himmelfarb, Shirley Troutman Pouget, Ruth Schwab Georgiou, Sylvia Hoffman, and Larry Ginensky. In addition, I couldn't have reconstructed Sonia (Labiner) Zeigler's story without Philip Zeigler's help.

There is no way to say adequately how much I appreciate the encouragement I received, very early on, from two noted Holocaust scholars, Myrna Goldenberg and Nechama Tec, whom I'd met at a conference in Poland. I was a newcomer to Holocaust studies and was learning what others who came to the subject before me had learned. The life history of a Holocaust survivor is intricate, complex, and full of contradictions. It challenges your convictions about the value of oral history and, at the same time, confirms its value. And it is inevitably transformative as it makes you come to terms with sometimes long-held beliefs about how we define normalcy, about how tragedy is ennobling, about human nature itself.

There were others who offered their ideas and support throughout this project: my good friend Robert Polito; my first readers, Karen Solomon, Myra Sorin, and Martha Tait-Watkins; and Sally MacGillivray, a friend of more than forty years. Sally edited, helpfully suggested changes to the manuscript, and found countless errors that I never would have seen.

Finally, I want to express my profound gratitude to my husband, Steve Ford. He encouraged me to continue with the project when I had my most serious reservations and doubts. When I felt that hearing and retelling the women's Holocaust experiences was just too difficult, he admonished me: "If they lived through it," he said, "can you say it's too hard for you to write about it?"

# Introduction

## *The Women and the Girls Club*

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I found people with my background, my interests, like myself. I made friendships for life.

—*Fran (Frania Dajcz) Berlin*

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Betty Berman and I are sitting in the living room of her home in Minneapolis, close to the west bank of the Mississippi River. The room is smartly furnished: full of artwork—sculpture, pottery, paintings—yet very comfortable. Betty’s eyes sparkle. She has a mischievous, youthful energy that belies her age of almost eighty years. But at this moment she is somber, remembering something so incongruous in this relaxed setting it seemed surreal. Betty—in Poland her name was Bronka—had arrived in Auschwitz. It was August 1944. She was fifteen, bewildered, disoriented. “I couldn’t understand why I was in hell. How had this happened? Why had it happened?”

It is possible, of course, to trace the roots and expression of viral anti-Semitism through the centuries and it is possible to reconstruct the execution of Nazi policy in much of its horrifying detail. Many historians have traced the evolution of the Holocaust: Hitler’s war against the Jews, or what came to be known as the “Final Solution to the Jewish question.”<sup>1</sup> Still, the haunting questions Betty asks are confounding on the deepest human level and have remained unresolved, despite the accumulated wisdom of a massive scholarship,

for more than sixty-five years. Nor does this small volume presume to answer Betty's questions.

This book is not an analysis of the Holocaust. Its purpose is to tell the life histories of a small group of young women who survived, as all survivors did, against almost insuperable odds: women whose life choices were subsequently informed, if not defined, by the common macabre backdrop of the Holocaust. At the same time, this book presents more than a collective, personal history. Because these women exemplify the broad range of experiences that Jews suffered, during and after the Holocaust, their stories—elaborated with relevant information about places, people, events, and issues—are also the stories of tens of thousands of child survivors. Collectively, the women experienced life in the ghettos, in slave labor and concentration camps, in hiding, with the partisans, in exile in the outermost reaches of the Soviet Union (Siberia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), and in refugee camps after the war ended. Yet the Holocaust is just the beginning. As the women's life histories continue in America they become stories of recovery and of renewal.

Like Betty, the women, mostly from Poland, are among the relatively small number of child survivors of the Holocaust. They were children—eight, nine, or ten years old when the war began—and teenagers when it ended. And, as the result of a coincidence of history and geography, they share another uncommon bond. For a few brief years, far from the devastation that was Europe after World War II, these orphaned teens, bereaved and bewildered, had the good fortune to find a safe haven in a place with an unassuming name, the Girls Club of Brooklyn—not actually a club at all but, rather, a residence for young Jewish women. The Girls Club was where the young women's devastating physical and psychological wounds began to heal and where their new lives began.

I learned about the Girls Club as a result of a chance meeting with a woman, a Holocaust survivor, who had spent most of the war in Siberia. She met Sonia, one of the residents, at Thomas Jefferson High School in Brownsville, Brooklyn, where they were enrolled in a program in English language and culture that was offered for recently-arrived immigrant teenagers; subsequently, she became friends with Sonia and with some of the other girls. She offered to help me contact them if I was interested in telling their stories.

I was very interested. At the very least, telling the women's stories would be an opportunity to add to the literature of witness testimony. The record is still

incomplete, and time is running out; the very youngest Holocaust survivors are now in their late sixties. But there were other issues that interested me as well. These women were children in 1939 when the war began, teenagers when it ended. At an especially vulnerable stage in their development they had to cope with extreme and long-lasting trauma. Now they are approaching or are in their eighties. In old age the women are, once again, going through one of the most challenging periods in their lives, a time that can be exceptionally and uniquely difficult for Holocaust survivors. Consequently, while exploring the full scope of the women's life stories is worthwhile in itself, their early and late years warrant particular scrutiny. For instance, what was the link between their early experiences and their decisions as young, and later mature, adults? Could they see and articulate a connection? Now that they are elderly, how are they coping with the stresses of old age? Do their experiences confirm what the literature on aging—and aging women, aging survivors, and especially aging child survivors—tells us? I wanted to examine these and many other issues.

When the women came to America, some brought the few mementos they had managed to hold onto through their perilous journey; above all, they brought their precious memories of life before the carnage. They also brought a substantial emotional and psychological *pekl*, the Yiddish term that Lucy, one of the women, uses to conjure the image of a heavy weight. It was at the Girls Club that they began to unburden themselves and their wounded psyches began to mend. There they regained their physical strength; they began to glue the bits of their fragmented lives back together. Once the healing began they moved on to construct new and successful lives, as success is defined for women of their generation and social class. Today, in contrast with what much of the earlier literature predicted about how survivors would cope—particularly child survivors—the women continue to make the best of the lives they rebuilt for themselves, even into old age.

In a newspaper article, writer Daniel Mendelsohn describes an incident that occurred when he was interviewing a Holocaust survivor for his book *The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million*. “What an amazing story,” Mendelsohn remarked when a woman told him how she and her son had survived the war. “Amazing story,” she responded dismissively. “If you didn’t have an amazing story, you didn’t survive” (2008, n.p.). So it is with this history; each

woman's account of her experiences is amazing, is compelling, and wants to be told. Each story is unique while at the same time a variation on a theme—a grotesque theme, a shared nightmare.

Immediately before they came to America, still in their teens, these young women were classified as displaced persons, DPs—the abbreviation that has become so familiar that we need to remind ourselves that it means dislodged, disordered, disrupted, dislocated. Four were survivors of the ghettos and camps. Two had been in hiding, one had found refuge in the woods with partisans, and another had been sent to the farthest reaches, the *stans* of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> They were orphans, traumatized and exceptionally needy, looking for a home. They were, as other survivors have been described, “desolate—lonely, not merely in the way people are who are new to a country but in the deeper way of those who have suddenly had withdrawn from them some elemental connection in life” (Rabinowitz, 1976, p. 105).

As children, the women “suffered the unique trauma of being condemned to total extermination” (Sternberg & Rosenbloom, 2000, p. 6). Although exact numbers are not known there may have been as few as 100,000 Jewish child survivors in all; it is estimated that only about 11 percent survived the war (Dwork, 1991, p. xi). Out of approximately 1.6 million Jewish children who were alive in countries under Nazi control in 1939, 1.5 million were killed. In Poland, the women were among only 5,000 who survived out of 1 million Jewish children who were alive at the beginning of the war (Plight, 2009, paras. 1 and 8). Whether in the camps or in hiding, as children and young teenagers the women were subjected to fear, humiliation, extreme privation, and illness. They lost their parents and grandparents; most lost their siblings, some lost their entire extended families as well. The “lucky” ones found a family member alive after the war—a brother or sister, an aunt or cousin. Most of the women languished in DP camps for several years until they were relocated to America by HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), UNRRA (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration),<sup>3</sup> or other organizations that had been set up for that purpose after the war. When they arrived, the teenagers lived with relatives with whom they had come to America, or with aunts or uncles who had emigrated before the war. For various reasons each girl could not, or chose not, to remain with her relative. That was when she was placed, usually by her social worker, at the Girls Club.

The history of the Girls Club can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when the Brooklyn Hebrew Orphan Asylum (BHOA) was granted a state charter. BHOA “invested \$500” in a house large enough for sixteen children in what is now the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of what was still the city of Brooklyn, soon to become a borough of New York City (Bernard, 1972, p. 15). It wasn’t until 1915 that the organization, actually the “wives of BHOA trustees,” founded the Girls Club (Bernard, 1972, p. 89). By the late 1940s, when the young women in this history settled into their rooms at the Girls Club, it was housed in a different area (today known as Prospect Heights) in a five-story building much like hundreds of others that were built earlier in the century. The building was in a great location. At 174 Prospect Place, it was close to Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, the Brooklyn Museum, and the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza. It was a short walk to the subway stations with connections to Manhattan and the other boroughs of New York City. In 1949, after a brief period of overcrowding, the Girls Club was home to about thirty Jewish “girls,” young women in their late teens and early twenties (Bernard, 1972, p. 134).

Only a small number of the Girls Club residents were *greener*, as they called themselves. It was a term used by Yiddish speakers and derived from “greenhorn,” a self-mocking reference to newly-arrived immigrants. Most of the residents were native-born Americans who came to New York from all over the country to work or to go to school. Some came because they lived in small towns where there were few Jewish boys they could marry. A few American girls, such as sisters Shirley and Audrey Troutman, found shelter from troubled or abusive homes. Others, like the Europeans, were orphans. When Cynthia Kohut’s mother died, her father couldn’t care for her or her brother. She came to the Girls Club from an orphanage in Brooklyn where she’d lived for six years, and at least one other American resident at that time had lived in orphanages all of her life.<sup>4</sup>

All but one of the European girls was from Poland, which meant that this subgroup could reconstitute a tiny community. The members, Lucy says, “understood each other”—not simply because they had a common language but because, as they correctly believed, those who had not experienced the Holocaust could not comprehend what they’d endured no matter how empathetic they might have been. The girls also provided each other with

much-needed continuity with their lost world since, like other Holocaust survivors, they were “not only without a place in the world and without possessions but also had no past life; the roots and ties to that life . . . had been erased entirely” (Rabinowitz, 1976, p. 107). The girls became each other’s one link with the past. Of course, they couldn’t replace lost parents, grandparents, siblings—they were, after all, only teenagers—but they were a bridge. They knew the old world and were part of the new.

Who were these young women, the *greener*, who lived at the Girls Club?

*Betty (Basia) Pasternak* was the youngest, only seven years old when the war began. In 1949, she was also one of the last of the group to come to America after the war, and to the Girls Club. In the earliest days of the war, Betty and her family were sent to the ghetto in her home town of Tarnopol in Galicia, a region near Poland’s eastern border with the Soviet Union. Her parents and her older brother arranged for her to be hidden, and she remained there until the town was “liberated” by the Soviet army. Betty’s parents didn’t survive the war; she was brought to America by her older brother and sister.

*Lucy (Lusia) Bergman* is one of three women in the group who grew up in Lodz and lived in the ghetto there during most of the war, from 1939 to 1944. When it was “liquidated” (the term commonly used to describe such an event) the members of her family who had not succumbed to the ghetto’s brutality were sent to Auschwitz. Only Lucy, her mother, and her mother’s youngest sister survived. The three women were sent from Auschwitz to a slave-labor mining camp in Germany and, from there, they were force-marched to Bergen-Belsen where they spent the remainder of the war. Ultimately, Lucy’s mother did not survive.

*Betty (Bronka) Silvering* was born in Germany but grew up in Lodz. Betty and Lucy didn’t know each other although they were the same age, had spent most of the war in the Lodz ghetto, and were then sent to Auschwitz. At that point their paths diverged. Betty’s mother was killed in Auschwitz, but her mother’s sister survived. From Auschwitz, Betty and her aunt were sent to a work camp near Dresden. They were still in Dresden at the time of the notorious fire bombing in 1945. Betty and Lucy finally met at the Girls Club.

*Doris (Dorka) Izbicka* also grew up in Lodz. In a coincidence that seems so contrived it would be ridiculed if it were fiction, Doris and Lucy, schoolmates and childhood friends in Lodz, were reunited at the Girls Club. They hadn’t seen each other since their families were sent to the ghetto. From the ghetto,

Doris was sent to Auschwitz, then to a labor camp, and from there to Mauthausen, a notorious concentration camp. Orphaned, Doris came to America with a surviving brother and sister.

*Fran (Frania) Dajcz* grew up in Pabianice, a small town near Lodz. She had been living in a series of rented rooms before she came to the Girls Club. When Lucy saw her, she experienced another coincidence, almost as astonishing as her reunion with Doris. Fran and Lucy hadn't met in the Lodz ghetto, to which Fran's family had been sent from her hometown. But the girls did meet when they followed the same torturous route from Lodz to Auschwitz, to the same mining camp and from there, via a forced march, to Bergen-Belsen. Fran lost all of her immediate and most of her extended family in the war.

*Sonia Labiner* lived in a small village in Galicia, Premyslhany, until her family was removed to a nearby ghetto. When her mother learned that the ghetto was going to be liquidated she sent Sonia—then twelve years old—to hide in the forest. Her parents and siblings were subsequently killed. But Sonia eventually met up with Jewish partisans and spent the remainder of the war with them (Kleinberg, 1980, p. 98).<sup>5</sup> She was a central and charismatic figure at the Girls Club.

*Renee (Renia) Felber*, who was from Sanok, another town in Galicia, spent most of the war in Siberia and Uzbekistan. Renee was caught up in one of the lesser known chapters of the Holocaust story. Because the Soviet Union and Germany had agreed upon a division of Poland in their prewar pact, Renee ended up on the "Russian side" in the care of an aunt and uncle. Like many Jewish and non-Jewish Poles who found themselves under Soviet control early in the war, they were deported to a work camp in Siberia.

*Irma Stermer's* experiences were different from the other girls'. She was born in a small town in Austria. After that country was annexed by Germany, Irma's mother arranged for her to be taken away from the Vienna ghetto, where the family had been relocated, to the relative safety of a children's home in France. Two years later, when Jewish children in France had to flee from the Nazis, Irma was sent to America. When she graduated from high school, Irma moved from her foster home to the Girls Club. She was one of the first of the Europeans refugees to live there after the war.

There were a number of other Holocaust survivors living at the Girls Club during the same period as these women. A few of the women I contacted