

# Making their Memory a Blessing

by Rabbi Danny Nevins

A 16-year-old boy named Yitzhak crouches on his snowy rooftop at dawn, looking at the town below. The year is 1919, and the place is Felshtin, a small shtetl in the Ukraine (about 120 miles east of Lvov). Yitzhak is the third of five children born to Moshe and Pesia Brover. His father died of meningitis two years earlier, leaving this large family behind in Felshtin. The oldest son, Anshel, is already married, with a two-year old baby named Dovid. Yitzhak has another older brother named Mendel, and two young sisters, Hanna and Etka. Theirs is a large and relatively prosperous family of brewers. So, what is Yitzhak doing on his freezing rooftop?

Unfortunately, Felshtin is situated in territory contested by three armies in the wake of WWI and the Russian Revolution: the Bolsheviks, who seek to capture the empire until recently held by the Czars; the White Army, attempting to restore the Czarist regime, and a separatist Ukrainian Nationalist force led by Simon Petlura. All three forces have scapegoated and terrorized the Jews; on this day, February 18, Petlura's Cossacks will outdo them all.

The pogrom is vicious beyond imagination. Murder, rape and pillage consume the terrified town. One third of the Jewish population (of 1,800) is slaughtered. Coming just three days after a massacre in the neighboring city Proskurov, these events begin a dismal period of escalating violence against the Jews. The *New York Times* reported (on April 7, 1919) that, according to cable dispatches, "a systematic effort is being made to annihilate the Jewish population of the Ukraine, and that in the city of Felshtin alone, soldiers killed 800 Jews and wounded 400, while the killed and wounded in Proskurov numbered more than 4,000. The surviving Jews in both these cities, according to the dispatches, have been pillaged and robbed of all they possess, and their plight is pitiable."

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months of 1919, there were at least 55 pogroms in the region Podolia alone, with an estimated 15,000 people killed by bands loyal to Petlura. Indeed, Felshtin suffered a second pogrom on June 6. There were other massacres by the White Army, who blamed the Jews for supporting Bolshevism.)

The Red Cross estimated that in 1919, 120,000 Jews were murdered in the Ukraine during countless pogroms, with 600,000 others suffering material losses. This is what Yitzhak observed from his rooftop vantage: at 6 a.m. Cossacks entered town, waving flags and blowing horns. For hours they rampaged. Infants were impaled, including his nephew Dovid; and neighbors were fed to the dogs.

Then, as in a terrible dream, he and his family melted into whatever desperate refuges they could find. Mendel and Anshel survived, but Anshel's wife and baby son were murdered. Mother Pesia had already fled with her daughters but, according to a Red Cross report, she was caught on the road and nearly shot, before managing to pay off her assailants with a ransom. Many cousins and friends were bayoneted or shot by the Cossacks, their bodies left in the snow.

Yitzhak and his brothers spent the following days burying them in the frozen ground of Felshtin. The surviving Brovers gradually straggled to the Polish city Lvov, where they

regrouped. Now what became of this family? Anshel remarried and had two more children, Masha and Miriam. A survivor of the Felshtin pogrom, Anshel and his second family were victims of the Holocaust, killed after the Germans invaded the Ukraine in June of 1941.

Mendel also remained in the Ukraine in order to marry his Felshtin beloved. Mendel named his only son for his father Moshe -- this was Mikael or Misha. Mendel served in the Red Army and was killed fighting during World War II. His family remained in the Soviet Union. The two girls, Hannah and Etká, grew up in Poland with their mother Pesia. This was the era of the Third Aliyah, the great emigration of Polish Jewry to Palestine that was responsible for the growth of industrial cities along the coast. Hanna came in 1933 and established a family in Haifa. Etká (who barely escaped before the Germans took Poland in 1939) also married, and she named her first-born son Moshe, or Mosik, again after their late father. Somehow, they also spirited mother Pesia out of Poland to safety in Palestine.

As for young Yitzhak, he grew into manhood in Lvov; but he chose neither to stay in Europe, nor to make aliyah; rather, he accepted his uncle's invitation, and set sail for America in 1923. There Yitzhak became Irving, a determined man who would become a shopkeeper -- a seller of curtains and linens in Hackensack, NJ. Irving married an American-born girl named Rose -- college educated, a pianist with smiling eyes; their first child, Phyllis, was born just after his mother Pesia died in Palestine. This daughter was given her grandmother's Jewish name; and her brother Michael was the third boy named for Yitzhak's father Moshe.

And so, Mendel's family survived in the Soviet Union; Hanna and Etká's families flourished in Israel, and Yitzhak became Irving, a man of the New World; a businessman, a father, and eventually, my Grandpa Irv. I remember him -- my only European-born grandparent -- for his

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refined manners and strict discipline. I recall how immaculately he dressed; how he accompanied guests not only to the door, but down the hall or into the street; how he ate, deliberately and slowly. I remember his thick accent, eventually slurred by two strokes; and his great love for my Grandma Rose. Not pious, Grandpa Irv nonetheless identified strongly as a Jew; he helped found a synagogue in Teaneck, and supported Jewish causes, especially Zionist ones, from UJA, Israel Bonds, and Hadassah, to HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Starting in 1949, he made annual trips to visit the new Jewish State; these were all expressions of his proud Jewish identity. These things and more I remember of my Grandpa Irv, gone now for nearly twelve years.

One family, scattered across three continents by a vicious pogrom and war. Three cousins named for Moshe Brover--Misha in the Ukraine, Mosik in Haifa, and my Uncle Mike in New Jersey -- their lives lived in radically different settings. This story is a microcosm of our collective history, reflecting the great upheavals of our century. And now, eighty years after the pogrom that uprooted them, this Jewish family remarkably remains, though all five of the Brover children have now died.

Their story has been on my mind, because my parents are organizing a commemoration of the Felshtin pogrom this winter, and are helping translate the Yiddish memorial book which was assembled by its survivors. Moreover, there is a joyous epilogue to the painful epic of the Brovers of Felshtin:

You see, we too live in historic times, and it turns out that Misha, his son and grandson all recently

moved to Israel, where their home in Eilat is reminiscent of the Crimean seaside. And so, this past June, in Modiin, Israel, Misha, and Mosik and Michael, and my mother Phyllis and many other members of their extended family gathered to dance at my cousin Eyal's wedding.

Communication between the Americans, Israelis and Russian olim was not simple; in fact, the most effective medium was music, as they joined in tumbalalaika and other folk songs. But the very fact of their gathering projects an extraordinary message: Despite pogrom, and shoah, and communism and war and assimilation, and distance -- despite all of this and more, the Jewish people lives on. And Israel is the force that unites us -- this, despite our constant internal disagreements.

We survive -- ornery and often estranged, but united still by our common past and our emerging future.

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As many of you know, I spent much of this summer traveling with our teenagers in Israel. I have already reported to the congregation about this fantastic experience. But I must emphasize how transformative the Teen Mission was for the Jewish identities of both our Adat Shalom Teens and their Israeli counterparts. Almost from first contact, these young people recognized the awesome fact of their belonging to something greater than they had ever imagined. They began to see themselves as part of Jewish history, and they will never again take that ancient identity lightly. This is why we need to visit and revisit Israel often, with as many of our youth as possible. Only then can our freedom, our prosperity and our opportunities here be put to use to redeem this tragic century.

Three days ago, I gathered with one of our member families to unveil a headstone for their

beloved patriarch, who was a survivor of the Holocaust. His grandson Eric had traveled with me to Israel this summer, fulfilling his grandfather's great dream. And before our teary eyes, Eric took out a stone he had brought back from Israel, and buried it beside his zayde. Both the darkness of our century, and the great light of redemption were contained in that profound gesture -- and I dare feel hopeful for our future!

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Today is Yom Kippur, so we must confront the difficult questions: if you can think of your life as a chapter of Jewish history--to be remembered--perhaps even researched 80 years from now by your descendants--what will they write about the impact that you made? It is very hard, impossible perhaps, to live one's daily life with the sense of history. But this perspective is essential if we are to understand the importance of our own lives. So let us scrutinize the past year, and ask ourselves:

- Was my life a break in the chain, or did I strengthen Judaism for the next generation?
- Were the values I lived by consistent with the best of our heritage, or did they simply mimic the whimsical trends of our times?
- Did I identify in deeds with the positive forces of my times -- the State of Israel, the Torah, and the unifying cause of social justice?
- Did I reach out to the younger generation, explaining to them my own part in the Jewish story, and my pride in belonging to this ancient people?

In a sense, I am preaching to the converted. You are all supporters of this synagogue, Adat Shalom, which consistently realizes these ideals in its programs. Are we supporters of Israel? If

the Israel Bond appeal didn't show it, how about three Adat Shalom trips to Israel within 12 months--the just completed Teen Mission, the Third Adult Miracle Mission in April, and our first Family Mission next June? Are we students of Torah at Adat Shalom? Our educational program from pre-school through Adult Ed is astonishing in its breadth and depth. There is truly something here for everyone. What of social action? Just look to our homeless shelter, our blood drive and outreach to many needy communities from Adat Shalom -- the programs are there, and we can be proud of our activism on all three fronts.

Yet, too often, it is the same people running and participating in all of these important activities. This year, then, make a difference: add yourself to that activist crowd -- your impact will be greater than you can ever realize. You may in fact become a hero of Jewish history.

If we think of our lives historically, perhaps we can begin to appreciate how the Torah, which has been our heirloom for thousands of years, is also our collective record. It is a hardy heritage - - as our many would-be destroyers have learned. Yet it is also subject to the vagaries of our lives. If we treat this legacy casually and carelessly, then Judaism will become a lifeless relic, unable to preserve our identity through the chaos and disruptions of history. If we take this shul and all

of its offerings for granted, then weakness and stasis will set in. But if we get fully involved, living Judaism personally and communally, then there is no limit to what we can accomplish.

Think of specifics today -- this year, I will try to learn Hebrew better; this year, I will build a sukkah, or start to keep Kosher; this year, I will give my children an oral history of my Jewish background; this year, I will visit Israel; this year I will strive for the ideal of a life of mitzvot and ma'asim tovim, commandments and acts of lovingkindness.

As we prepare to read the Yizkor prayers, let us imagine ahead to our own descendants -- will they say Yizkor for us? Not just the children, but our grandchildren and beyond -- will our lives matter to them? Will our *neshama* -- our spirit -- breathe through them? Will they even know how to pray? Will our Jewishness endure as a precious and meaningful legacy worth preserving? Will our memory be a blessing for them? Those are the ultimate questions that we face on this Yom Kippur.

May our own deeds reflect the best of those who have gone before us; may we create this year a Jewish heritage that is powerful, insightful and inspiring; sacred and proud -- so that it will be said of us, and of our generation: *their memory is a blessing.*