I want to tell you a little of my mother’s life story because today is Yom HaShoah – Holocaust Remembrance Day – and because, with the passing of my mother on March 15 of this year, I now feel that the responsibility of bearing witness passes directly to me.

My mother, Ruth Ballabon, neé Distenfeld, ob”m, was born in Lwów, Poland (now Lviv, Ukraine) in 1940 to a family of [Chortkover Chasidim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chortkov_(Hasidic_dynasty)) – not an auspicious time and place to be born Jewish. When she was still an infant, just a few months old, her parents desperately sought to save her life by giving her to a Catholic family to hide.

**Almost all of my mother’s extended family were murdered in the Holocaust.** Miraculously, however, after surviving the infamous Janowska camp (if you aren’t familiar with Janowska, please take a moment to look at one of [these](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janowska_concentration_camp) [links](https://www.fold3.com/page/286021450/janowska-concentration-camp/stories) or you can’t possibly imagine) escaping to the woods, and being hidden by Ukrainian partisans (who delighted in massacring Jews – yet protected my grandparents because my grandfather was a doctor and the partisans in constant need of medical attention) they finally made their way to Czernowitz, Romania in 1944. There, they had their first son, my uncle Paul.

My grandfather then ventured back to his hometown to see what might be left. At the time, the Russians had taken control, but there were still pockets of German soldiers and ongoing skirmishes raged throughout the area. Not only did he retrieve a handful of family heirlooms hidden with neighbors, he indeed brought back my four-and-a-half-year-old mother. This too, however, came at a grievous price: my grandfather’s sister, who with blond hair and blue eyes was able to pass as gentile, had survived the war. She was, nonetheless, discovered and killed by a German soldier while bringing my mother to my grandfather. One of my mother’s earliest memories was of a blond woman being shot by a soldier in front of her eyes.

Another early memory was her encounter with these utter strangers claiming to be her parents. She remembers being brought to the house in Czernowitz and frantically running from room to room desperately seeking a cross or statue of Mary in front of which to pray. Instead, my grandfather patiently, lovingly, taught her how to say the [*Shema*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shema_Yisrael). This too, she remembered.

**Many survivors chose silence.** Not so my grandmother. The stories of their experiences which could easily fill a harrowing – and inspirational – book, were shared by my grandmother every Shabbat and every Holiday. She was the most marvelous storyteller and I would listen riveted for hours. She told of a happy, privileged life before the war, of life under the 1939 Soviet occupation, confiscations, and oppression, and of the subsequent Nazi invasion, brutality, ghetto, and camp. She told of their escape from the Nazis and being hidden and tormented by Ukrainians, of close calls in the tiny bunker she and my grandfather hid in for months (which she nicknamed “The Grave”), of exposure, vermin, disease, starvation, and thirst and of their daring underground travels to Romania. She spoke about life in Vienna after the war (1945-47) and of arriving in America (October 1947) and living in grinding poverty in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, all while my grandfather recertified as a doctor in his third country and third language. The one thing she never spoke of was the birth of her twin sons Fred and Jackie in 1948, because she could not bear to mention the loss of Jackie in 1951. After all she had endured, this was too much. And so, my grandfather moved the family away - Forest Hills – a neighborhood in Queens, New York – and opened his medical practice.

In 1965, my grandfather, [Dr. Menachem Distenfeld](https://gedenkbuch.univie.ac.at/index.php?id=435&no_cache=1&L=2&person_single_id=10446), died of a heart attack. He was just 52. Most of all, my grandmother [Amalia (Esther)](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1999-08-05/html/CREC-1999-08-05-pt2-PgE1781.htm) – and my mother – spoke of him: his irrepressible faith in G-d, his remarkable fidelity to practicing Jewish law under inconceivably harsh circumstances, his ardent passion for both Chasidut (Hasidism) and Zion, his Torah scholarship, his love of humanity, and his generosity.

My mother’s view of her father as saintly was shared by many. His picture adorned virtually every room in our house. Even decades after his death, when someone who knew him finds out I am his grandson, they insist on recounting how utterly remarkable he was. I’ve seen numerous people from their community weep anew over his loss 40 and 50 years later when his name comes up. For my mother it was simple: “I came of age in the 60s surrounded by people saying they had to ‘find themselves,’” she used to tell me. “But I always knew who I was. I was Menachem Distenfeld’s daughter.”

**It was not until 2000, when she was 60, that my mother discovered the truth.** Her father long gone, her brothers living out of New York, she became her mother’s primary caretaker. Her mother was suffering at that point from dementia. In searching through some documents my mother suddenly came across the shattering evidence of her own adoption.

I remember well her first call to me, struggling to come to grips with the revelation. She asked me whether she should ask her mother to explain but my advice – and ultimately her own decision – was not to do that. Partially because my grandmother’s memory and clarity were so compromised by then, but mostly because my grandparents’ decision to treat her entirely as their own was such a remarkable act of love and sacrifice that it might be cruel to reveal that she had learned the secret.

Instead, we discussed it with the couple of cousins who had survived the war. Of course, they knew. And they knew who her birth parents had been and what became of them. In fact, my grandparents – the ones I knew, the ones who raised my mother – were her aunt and uncle. Her birth mother was my grandmother’s older sister. My mother’s birth parents: [Yehoshua](https://yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&itemId=1531398&ind=1) and [Miriam](https://yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&itemId=1343753&ind=1) Baumoël (or Baumohl), did indeed hide her with a gentile family, but they were then killed in 1942 in the [Sambor ghetto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sambor_Ghetto). Yad Vashem testimony given by relatives in Israel in 1956 – relatives we haven’t been able to track down – corroborates what we learned.

**There is much more to my mother’s life** – her decades-long career as an educator and administrator for schools serving special needs kids and her even longer marriage with my father – Dr. Moshe Ballabon, one that remained as every bit as mutually adoring and admiring throughout the decades as it was in the first blush of romance. Until her very last day, if they were in the same room together, they were holding hands. And, for more than 55 years - until his knees made climbing the stairs the extra time too painful - my father delighted in bringing her breakfast in bed every single morning.

Despite her family history, it was impossible for my mother to imagine anyone as being evil. And she was oblivious to all those externalities people obsess over in our culture; she simply loved people and people loved her. Her immediate instinct was to help everyone, and we keep hearing of so many acts of extraordinary kindness that my mother managed to do for so many people of all ages and backgrounds, personally and professionally. At one point in the [*shiva*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiva_(Judaism)) house we realized there were the products of multiple [*shidduchim*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shidduch) she had made. A surprised observer remarked “I didn’t know your mother was a *[shadchan](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/160984/jewish/What-Is-a-Shadchan.htm)*.” She wasn’t. She just instinctively helped everyone she could in the way it was most needed – and sometimes that was a *shidduch*. And she was utterly dedicated to the continuity of her people and her faith. It was never in competition with anyone else’s people or faith; she simply saw her most cherished role as a link in an eternal chain and passed that on to her children.

My mother spoke to us often of “*nitzchiyus*” a term that suggests continuity but actually means eternity - eternal life. Although she passed suddenly, still vigorous and working and fully functioning until mid-January of this year, my mother lived to see her most precious dreams fulfilled. She leaves behind generations – children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren - of dedicated, believing, proud Jews. This was the eternal life to which she committed herself. She was granted it by G-d’s miracles and through the agency and enormous sacrifice of two sets of parents – the ones she knew and the ones she didn’t know.

At the Passover Seder, we read in the Haggadah the famous lines that in each generation “they” try to eradicate us, but G-d saves us…and that it is an obligation for all Jews in every generation, every individual, to see ourselves as though we personally were saved – “He did not save only our ancestors,” teaches the Haggadah – He saved us.

We know that in my family. It is easy to see. My mother was a “brand plucked from the flames” (Zechariah 3:2) and so, therefore am I and all her descendants.

My mother wept copious tears every Seder; tears of pure joy and gratitude to G-d at witnessing the *nitzchiyus* she created. She always insisted that we rise and dance together around the seder table singing “*LeShanah Haba’ah B’Yerushalayim*” – Next Year in Jerusalem - over and over, an affirmation of the eternity she possessed and passed on to us. We did it again this year, with tears in our eyes.

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*Yehi zichra baruch* - May her memory be a blessing.

Jeff