



Photographs by Lloyd Wolf | Essays by Lisa Newman | Special thanks to Elizabeth Black

# Great Love Stories from the Holocaust

*Inspiring Tales of Courage, Grace and Spirit*

It is easy to find love in a beautiful place. But to find love in the shadow of death is most remarkable. And remarkable were the young Jews who, caught in the Holocaust, held onto life in ghettos, forests, transit camps, slave labor camps and death camps. Once liberation came, those who survived found themselves completely alone. With families, homes and communities gone, love, reborn, swept throughout the ruins of the war.

It would have been all too understandable if these young people had given up on human relationships. Their ability to love is yet another example of the zest for life that allowed them to emerge from the war with their values and humanity intact. Combining love with mourning, they began to rebuild their lives. Love was a gateway to the future: new lives, new lands, new homes and children.

Not all romances blossomed into marriages, nor should they have. Some of the unions that came forth from the Holocaust were an escape from pain and nightmares. Most couples, however, formed powerful bonds that would last for decades.

I am the child of such a romance. My parents, both widowed at Auschwitz, met in the Displaced Persons Camp of Bergen-Belsen immediately after liberation. My father was a political leader of the camp; my mother, who had lost a son, was a doctor there. They married in the summer of 1946 and remained devoted to each other for the rest of their lives. Their love has inspired me, as will the stories that *Moment* has collected inspire and move all who read them.

Why tell these stories now? Sixty years after liberation, the generation of those who found love in the Holocaust and its aftermath are no longer young. In some cases one or both, including my parents, have passed away. Yet each love story—mysterious, deep and forged in pain—has something to teach us. In an era when marriage is so hard to hold onto, we have much to learn from the wisdom found in these long lasting relationships.

—Menachem Rosensaft



## HERSCHEL AND EDJYA BLACK

Herschel Lipa was a teenager in 1939 when the Nazis ordered the Jews from his village of Bransk, Poland into a ghetto. He was forced to work in a nearby labor camp until November 10, 1942—the day he and his fellow inmates learned they were being moved. The news troubled Herschel. “I had heard terrible stories, I knew things,” he recalls.

While the Germans loaded the inmates onto horse-drawn wagons, Herschel tore off his yellow star (an act punishable by instant execution), grabbed a whip from a wagon and pretended to be one of the drivers. Amid the chaos, he slipped into the bushes and disappeared before the wagons hauled the workers to the railroad station—where they were packed into boxcars destined for the Treblinka extermination camp. “The next day, the entire ghetto of Bransk was emptied and shipped off to Treblinka as well,” recalls Herschel, who eventually joined the Jewish brigade of the Russian partisan forest fighters. “I lost everybody. No one in my family survived but me.”

Edjya Katz, the daughter of a prominent rabbi in Bialystok, would soon be hiding in the same forests in northeastern Poland. In 1943, after witnessing the Nazis torture and murder her father, she and her mother were shipped to Treblinka. En route, her mother and other prisoners lifted her up and shoved her through the vent at the top of the boxcar. She was slim enough to squeeze through the small opening. Guards shot at her as she leapt from the moving train and ran into the woods.

One winter night, while she huddled in a barn with other escaped Jews, Polish militiamen burst in, machine-gunning the whole group and piling the bodies together in an uncovered mass grave. The Jewish brigade got word of the massacre and sent Herschel and another teenager to properly bury the bodies. “It was February the second,” recalls Herschel, now 81. “I will never forget that night: It was very cold and there was a full moon.” In the mass

grave, partially covered by snow, Herschel noticed a leg moving amongst the dead bodies. He pulled out a badly wounded, frightened girl. Her leg was mangled and covered with gangrene. He was not sure she would live, but he carried her to a nearby farm where he knew a kind Polish woman with some medical skills. He begged the woman to help and offered to bring fresh meat, a rare commodity in wartime. Herschel held Edjya down while the woman cut the gangrene out of her leg with a sharp knife. He then went off to steal a pig.

Years later, Edjya recalled how frightened she was when first rescued by Herschel. “When I saw his blond hair and blue eyes, I was afraid I was being kidnapped by a German soldier,” she said. “Herschel assured me in Yiddish that he was indeed Jewish and that he would take care of me.”

Back in the forest, the young man cleaned her wounds and changed the bandages daily, using rags and alcohol. “I remember the arteries in the back of her knee were sticking out, exposed.” The two teenagers kept to themselves, hiding in caves they dug with their hands and living on roots and plants along with the food Herschel sometimes managed to steal. Only when the Russians liberated Poland and established a de facto government did the two emerge from the forest—in search of a marriage license.

But their trauma was not over. “We were just asking for a place to sleep when the Russians grabbed me off the street,” remembers Herschel. “They just grabbed me, and shipped me off to the Russian army.” Before he left, he promised Edjya, who was pregnant, that he would find her, wherever she was.

While Herschel fought at the front, Edjya worked at a military hospital in Russian-occupied Poland and gave birth to their son Milton. True to his word, Herschel surreptitiously arranged for Edjya and the baby to come to the front. “My officers were furious when they discovered my wife had come, and gave me



Herschel and Edjya in the Foehrenwald Displaced Persons Camp, circa 1945



Irene and Azriel after the war, circa 1945



Azriel and Irene Awret

two horses and a wagon to drive her to the railway station and put her on a train.”

Herschel did indeed drive his family to the station, but he hopped on the train with them. There followed a dangerous journey for the AWOL Russian soldier, who could have been shot on sight with his young wife and three-month-old baby, as they illegally crossed border after border trying to reach American lines. In 1950, after five years in a displaced person's camp near Munich, they arrived in Boston Harbor. As they went through customs, Herschel saw a giant billboard advertising Black & White Scotch Whiskey and adopted the first word on the sign as their new American last name. Herschel and Edjya, now Harry and Ethel Black, settled in Chicago, raising two sons and a daughter.

Theirs was a marriage of total devotion. “They were each other's protection,” says daughter Leikhah. Aware that they should have by all rights been dead, they treated each day as a gift and displayed nearly infinite patience with one another. “Marriage is a two-way street,” Herschel points out. “You never try to win. You can get anything you want, but not all at once.”

Herschel never stopped taking care of Edjya. Shortly after they retired to West Palm Beach in the late 1990s, she suffered a series of strokes, leaving her partially paralyzed and bedridden. He lovingly nursed her around the clock at home until she slipped away from him at age 79 on February 7, 2005. —Elizabeth Black

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#### IRENE AND AZRIEL AWRET

They met on a plain wooden bench. “It was a small room, and two men were there when I came in,” recalls Irene Awret. “I sat down on the same bench as Azriel.”

He was a sculptor, she a painter—both fortunate enough to be interned in the so-called “painters' workshop” in Caserne Dossin, the Gestapo camp from which 25,000 Jews living in Belgium were transported to Auschwitz.

Irene Spicker, originally from Germany, had escaped to Nazi-occupied Brussels where she attended art school with false identity papers. Caught by the Gestapo, she was jailed in a tiny cell, where she awaited transport to Auschwitz. To pass the time, Irene drew in her little sketchbook, which was confiscated by a Gestapo captain. Leafing through the book, he noticed a fine pencil drawing that Irene had sketched of her hand and arranged for her to be sent to the painters' workshop, thus saving her life since workshop artists were not usually transferred to Auschwitz.

Irene quickly learned that the “artisans” assigned to the workshop created the linen armbands that all prisoners wore to identify their jobs in the slave labor camp. “Azriel showed me how to do the numbers on the armbands,” she explains.

Irene was 23 and Azriel, ten years older, became her confidant. “We could talk,” says Irene with a trace of a smile. The two reserved artists found that they had plenty to say to one another as they passed long days painting the German words for “porter,” “kitchen worker” or “courtyard worker” on armbands.

Still there was no heat and little food. “I admired how Irene ate,” Azriel, now 94, says softly from his chair in the suburban Washington, DC home and artists' studio where he and Irene have lived for almost 30 years. “There was never enough to eat. When I got my bread, in two minutes I was finished. But she ate little by little. She made little sandwiches. If we got a little jam, she made it last.”

Belgium's Queen Mother—a fellow sculptor—intervened on Azriel's behalf, and he was set free one day without warning. But he could do nothing to free Irene, who could have been sent on to Auschwitz at any time, especially near the war's end.

After liberation, Irene and Azriel found each other in Brussels, married and raised two children. For many years after the war they lived in Tsfat, Israel. Today, each is a renowned artist: Irene's paintings and

Azriel's sculptures can be found throughout Israel and the United States. Their artwork fills their home, which, some 60 years after they met, is the place where they continue to sit together and work and talk.

They are matter-of-fact about the longevity of their marriage. “In the camps, you saw the person for who they really were,” says Irene, whose book *They'll Have to Catch Me First: An Artist's Coming of Age in the Third Reich* was published last year. “No one could hide their personality. The couples who met there stayed together for life.” —Lisa Newman

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#### SAM AND REGINA SPIEGEL

Many years after the war, when their three girls were dressed and seated hungrily around the Seder table, the platters laden, guests chatting, Regina bent over to light the holiday candles and caught that familiar look in Sam's eye.

They were no longer being forced to work for the Germans in Poland, no longer refugees, no longer hoping for siblings or parents to emerge from the ashes. But festive occasions stirred memories of the homes and loved ones they had lost. “When we have a *simcha*, around the holidays, I still feel something is missing,” says Regina, now 79. “Sometimes we just look at each other and we're both thinking, ‘If only our parents could see us now. If only they could see what kind of people we grew up to be.’”

Sam and Regina met in Pionki, a small Polish town with a munitions factory where Jews were forced to keep the Third Reich supplied with arms. “We fell in love in a slave labor camp,” recounts Regina, managing a smile.

It was 1942 when Sam, then 20, noticed a 16-year-old girl in a stunning green coat with a sable collar, clearly a remnant from her past life. Weeks went by before Sam spotted the girl again, this time without her coat. “I know you, do you know me?”





Sam and Regina Spiegel

## PHILIP AND RUTH LAZOWSKI

he asked, approaching her eagerly. “I saw you walking in the street.”

Regina was skeptical. “If you know me, what kind of coat was I wearing?” Sam described it perfectly and that, they say, was the genesis of their youthful romance. “These were trying times,” says Regina. “You had to have someone to talk to.”

Sam and Regina survived through a combination of wits and chance. Near the war’s end, they were loaded onto a cattle car bound for Auschwitz, crushed against dozens of other Gestapo prisoners, barely able to breathe. When the doors opened, they peered over the bodies of those who had perished alongside them and saw that men were being separated from women. As Sam was pushed out the door, he shouted to Regina: “If we live through this, meet me in my hometown [Kozienice]!” “Why not my hometown [Radom]?” she yelled back, but he was gone.

In January of 1945, in the dead of winter, Sam escaped from a death march. Regina, having been loaded onto a train headed for the Dachau Concentration Camp in southern Germany, fled into the forest when the train was bombed by Soviet troops. In keeping with her promise, she began the long journey—by foot—back to Kozienice in Poland, following the bombed-out train tracks. She walked even faster after she encountered a man she recognized from Pionki, who shouted, “Your boyfriend is alive!”

Sam was waiting for her, but the couple was unable to marry: No local rabbis had survived the Germans. Eventually, they made their way to the Fohrenwald Displaced Persons Camp, where they learned that Regina’s brother Max had also survived. They decided to wait to wed until he could arrive to bear witness. “Look, we waited so long, we could wait a little longer,” says Sam.

They have been married more than 58 years. “We understand each other,” Sam explains. “We have a little bit more tolerance than young kids these days.”

—Lisa Newman

Philip was 11 when the Germans occupied Bielitz, Lithuania in 1941. As the eldest son, he closed the door to the 7-by-8-foot bunker under the house where his parents and siblings were hiding and left for the marketplace, where the Nazi “selection” was to begin.

It didn’t take long for Philip to understand the meaning of “selection.” To the left went nurses, doctors, shoemakers, furniture makers—Jews who were healthy and strong. To the right went the elderly and the young children.

“In our part of the world, they did not send people to camps, but to graves,” says Philip, now 74 and rabbi emeritus of Congregation Beth Hillel in Connecticut.

Philip knew his chances of going to the left weren’t good. He approached a woman who was holding papers certifying that she was a nurse. Two little girls, ages seven and five, clung to her side. Philip asked the woman if she would pretend that he was her son. She agreed and he held onto her skirt along with the girls. The Gestapo waved them to the left.

Having survived the first selection, Philip ran home without learning the woman’s name. He was relieved to find that, unlike his neighbors whom the Germans had discovered in their bunker and killed, his family had remained undetected.

For a brief time, life went back to normal. One day the woman who saved Philip’s life passed by his home and his mother ran out to bless her. They exchanged names. “Miriam Rabinowitz,” he would remember.

Two months later came the *Judenrein*, the cleansing of the Jews. Philip, his mother, three of his little brothers and his sister were imprisoned on the third floor of a moviehouse. His mother, realizing that they were all about to be killed, begged Philip to jump from a window. He survived the fall and ran off into the forest. For the next



Regina and Sam are married under a canopy of Fohrenwald DP Camp, circa 1946



Philip and Ruth on their wedding day

two-and-a-half years, he lived a precarious life of narrow escapes, eventually finding his father and his next younger brother, Robert. Together they hid among the trees, surviving two harsh Lithuanian winters. By the time liberation came in 1944, "we couldn't have survived another year," says Philip.

In 1947, Philip arrived in New York where he attended Yeshiva University in the morning, loaded trucks in the afternoon and studied at Brooklyn College at night.

One weekend he went to a wedding, but "never having had a youth," Philip didn't know how to dance, so he sat down on a bench beside a young woman. They fell to talking and when she learned where Philip was from, she exclaimed, "My best friend from the internment camp in Italy was from Bielitz. Her mother told me she once saved a boy from the town, when he hid in her skirt pretending to be her son."

"I am that boy," said Philip, trembling.

The next day Philip visited Miriam Rabinowitz who, along with her husband and their two little girls, had also survived in the woods. Philip was delighted to see that the children who had clung to their mother were now two lovely young women: Ruth, 18, and her sister Toby, 16.

Philip and Ruth were soon to fall in love. "We have so much in common," says Ruth, now 69. "When I was first with him, I felt very much at ease."

Married in 1955, they will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary this year with their three sons and seven grandchildren. "We have no secrets," says Philip. "We're able to communicate easily. We believe in each other."

Like other survivors, "we appreciate life a lot," says Ruth, whose mother, Miriam, died in 1981. "Every family has problems, of course," she acknowledges. "But a lot of things don't bother me. I think, 'If we could've survived that, we'll survive this, too.' My God, I know it can be worse." —Lisa Newman

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## MORRY AND STEFA MARKUSE

Friends since childhood, Morry and Stefa were reunited at the slave labor camp outside their Polish town of Czestochowa. Each found comfort in having the other close by. There, in the munitions factory where they both worked, they fell in love. Their courtship consisted of a few borrowed moments during the workday when Morry snuck in food and quickly buried it in Stefa's hands. Food was life, and Morry was determined that Stefa would live.

Stefa and her two sisters were perpetually hungry, and Morry often risked his life to feed them scraps of bread. "I was in a place where I had food," explains Morry in a voice slowed by a stroke. He struggles with his words but his memories are vivid. "I hid the food. Then I fed her and her two sisters."

"We always said we wished we had a loaf of bread on the table and a knife and could eat as much as we wanted, but still we should have leftovers on the table," recalls Stefa, now 80. "We thought we were never going to have enough to eat."

Each day brought new hazards, and Morry tried to keep abreast of them. "They were sending Jews away to death camp," Morry, now 85, says of one particular day. "I grabbed Stefa and her sisters. I took them over to a toilet place. I closed the door. I put up a sign that it's not useable. And I keep them there for 24 hours. I put some water under the door until the next day, when they sent the Jews away. Then I opened the door, and I let them out." In the interim the train had come to ship hundreds of inmates to their deaths.

Morry and Stefa managed to survive until the liberation of Czestochowa on January 16, 1945. They were married a week later.

"We wanted a family. I was *desperate* for a family," says Stefa. "I wanted somebody around me." Their daughter was born a year and a half later. They also had a son,

who died in a car crash at age 20. After 34 years, Stefa remains at a loss for words. "You have to go on with life," she says quickly and returns to her talk of the war.

"We weren't different than other people," says Stefa. "It's just luck that you stay alive, and luck you come out alive."

They celebrated their 60th anniversary in January at a pizza restaurant where their daughter, grandchildren and great-grandchildren surprised them with a party.

"Well, we did it, good or bad," Stefa says about their marriage. "You give a little, you take a little. You just do what you have to do. We had fights. We had arguments. Just like any normal people. But you survive that. You survive that."

—Lisa Newman

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## REBECCA AND JOSEPH BAU

One cloudy winter day, Joseph Bau, a Jewish artist assigned to work in the construction office of the Plaszow Labor Camp, was ordered outside to make a "sun print" of some drawings using light-sensitive paper. "Either a print or a bullet in the head," the German officer retorted when Bau explained that there was no sun that day. Hopeless, Joseph went outside and turned the paper to the sky. That's when Rebecca Tannenbaum, the young Jew who worked as a manicurist for the notoriously sadistic camp commandant Amon Goeth, came out and asked him what he was doing. "I am waiting for the reluctant sun to come out. Could you, perhaps, take her place?" replied Joseph aiming the frame at her. Rebecca blushed and fled.

Later, Joseph was shocked to discover that the print had indeed come out. Relieved that he wouldn't be shot, he was certain that the beautiful Rebecca was his "sun." He courted her as best he could, stealing a few moments of her time on the soup line, and finally kissing her behind a latrine beneath a full moon. Remarkably, their courtship lasted through several selections during which they narrowly



avoided death. The survival rate for Jews at Plaszow, on the outskirts of Krakow, Poland, was said to be less than four weeks.

"You know what, let's get married!" Joseph declared to Rebecca one day.

Startled, Rebecca said, "You must be crazy, to get married here inside the camp!" But Joseph was persuasive. "Who knows how long we will live?"

On the chosen night, Joseph exchanged his work cap for a white kerchief and placed it on his head, wearing it the way the women did. He slipped on line between his mother and his bride and marched into the women's barracks. Joseph and Rebecca married beside his mother's bunk, without a rabbi, guests or food. Joseph spoke the traditional *Harei at mekudesbet li...*[you are betrothed to me] and his mother gave her blessing. A camp bunk became their wedding bed, then Joseph climbed over an electrified wire fence in order to return to the men's barracks.

Toward the end of the war, the Nazis began closing the labor camps. The 25,000 Jews in Plaszow were among the last to be sent to Auschwitz. It was here in Plaszow, however, that Oskar Schindler, the German credited with saving hundreds of lives, drew up his now-famous list of Jews who would instead be shipped to work at his new factory in Czechoslovakia.

Rebecca had saved the life of the mother of one of Schindler's men, and in return he placed her name on the list. But she substituted Joseph's name for hers and Rebecca was sent to Auschwitz. Her husband didn't discover what his wife had done until the movie *Schindler's List* came out in 1993. "I had faith in my own survival," Rebecca later explained. "My husband was more important to me than I was, and I wasn't afraid."

While Joseph worked at Schindler's factory, Rebecca, at Auschwitz, managed to talk her way out of being sent to death three times, at one point convincing the infamous Joseph Mengele to let her move to the line of the living.

Joseph and Rebecca reunited at war's end and legally married on February 13, 1946, two years to the day after their unofficial camp wedding. They made their life in Israel, where Joseph became a successful artist, animator and author. His memoir of their time in Plaszow, *Dear God, Have You Ever Gone Hungry?*, was published in 1978.

Rebecca succumbed to pneumonia in 1997 at age 78. After her death, Joseph's spirit was never the same. He died in 2002 at 81, says their daughter Clila. "My parents were like one," says Clila, who along with her older sister, Hadasa, continues to exhibit their father's artwork. "My parents could not have found someone more perfect. They encouraged each other. There was always laughter and humor in our home. Love and humor helped them survive."

—*The Bau family with Lisa Newman*



Joseph and Rebecca Bau on their second wedding day

## LEON AND BELLA SIMON

Clearly, it was foolish, even life-threatening, to do what Leon Simon did for love.

Leon had been among the first to arrive at Westerbork, a Dutch internment camp near Amsterdam, where thousands of the camp's Jews were rounded up and transported to Theresienstadt. Leon's parents were among them. "From Theresienstadt, they went to Auschwitz, like everybody else," he says quietly.

But Leon, strong and fit, was a good worker and the Germans kept him in the camp. Having been at Westerbork from its earliest days, he knew people, even guards.

Leon met Bella in Westerbork in 1943. To Leon, Bella was the most lively girl in the camp while Bella found Leon to be gentle and kind. They only had a few minutes to say hello each workday. "We fell in love," says Bella.

But Leon knew that it was only a matter of time before Bella would be shipped to Theresienstadt, and eventually,



Stefa and Morry Markuse



to Auschwitz. He decided that if Bella were to be sent to her death, he would go too. That was when he made his bold move.

"I didn't know what he had in mind to do," recalls Bella. "Nobody approaches the commandant like that. That was very dangerous, because the S.S. could have shot him on the spot."

"Lucky! I was just lucky," Leon interjects. Feeling he had no choice, Leon approached a Gestapo officer who was outside smoking a cigarette. "I have a fiancé," he told him, "and we would like to get married, so when you send her on transport, we should go together."

"I figured I didn't have anything to lose," recalls Leon. The gamble paid off: The Nazi commander told one of the Jewish leaders to "take care of Leon" and saw to it that Bella stayed.

Leon and Bella were given permission to marry. They found a *tallit* in the camp, and some of their fellow prisoners helped make a *chuppah*. The couple had their pick of rabbis. "Listen," says Bella, "every rabbi from Holland was in that camp. At any given moment, you had rabbis, you had cantors. All the Jews were there!"

They were married in the kitchen where about 100 women prisoners peeled potatoes. Close friends of Bella's parents—an older couple about to be deported—were witnesses. Leon's sister, her husband and her parents-in-law—soon to be deported—were present as well. Bella's wedding gown was simple and understated: overalls. Afterwards, the newlyweds continued to sleep in separate barracks.

When Westerbork was liberated in April 1945, the Simons headed for Palestine, finding passage on an illegal boat. Five men from the Haganah were in charge, and they confiscated the passengers' passports, papers and even precious family photos, issuing false papers. They were told they could pick up everything once they disembarked.

Months later, the Simons learned the documents had been thrown overboard.

To this day, Bella's voice rises in anger over that loss. Her prized makeshift *ketubah* and the only photos she had left of her family—all thrown to the sea. "Had I known what they were going to do, I wouldn't have given them anything. What else did I have left? They threw it off the ship. They didn't want that we get caught by the British!"

But caught they were, locked up in the Atlit Internment Camp near Haifa. "We were separated, we were back in the barracks, and we were sick," recalls Bella. Upon their release, Leon was drafted to fight in Israel's War of Independence. A baby was born, and another. Ten years after marrying, they left for New York to create a new life.

It helped, they say, to befriend other survivors. "We looked for closeness," says Bella. "We used to sit and reminisce: 'Where did we get the courage?' We never had a youth. We were never young. We did not need psychiatrists. We somehow made peace."

This year will mark the 62nd anniversary of the day Leon and Bella exchanged vows in Westerbork. "How can you survive 62 years if you don't respect each other, or you don't trust each other?" asks Bella. "We are like a good cake. You put all the good stuff in, and out comes a good cake!"

"We were going to survive together," Bella continues. "He did not want to survive without me, and I could not have survived without him."

Bella talks of Leon's recent health troubles and looks at him adoringly. "I would die for him. When my husband gets sick and goes in the hospital, I don't leave his bedside, 24 hours a day. He knows that. He keeps asking me, 'Will I leave the hospital room?' And I say, 'Of course. We'll leave together.'" —Lisa Newman



The Simon family in Israel

*Moment* is collecting stories of Jewish couples who met during the Holocaust and its aftermath. If you have stories you'd like to share, email them to [editor@momentmag.com](mailto:editor@momentmag.com) or mail them to

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**Bella and Leon Simon**