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Abstract

Chana Wiesenfeld survived a concentration camp in Rumania and a forced march to the Ukraine. With a group of other inmates, Chana hopped a train and settled into a cattle car. After going through Greece they went on a small boat across the Aegean Sea to Turkey where a barge awaited them. With only sardines to eat on the 3-week voyage, they reached Palestine. Chana joined the Jewish Brigade and later the IDF. After the War of Independence, she married an American, settled in South Bronx, worked at menial jobs, and raised two boys.

His Majesty's Jewish Brigade of the British army was formally established in September of 1944 after Prime Minister Winston Churchill personally overrode the War Office and the Colonial Office objections and allowed its formation. Fighting under the Zionist flag which often irritated their commanding officers, the Brigade had 5,500 Jewish volunteers from Palestine and was organized into three infantry battalions and several supporting units. After an extremely brief training period in Egypt, the Brigade was sent to Italy in October for more intensive preparations, after which it moved north into the front lines as part of the Britain’s Eighth Army.

The British army recruitment office in Tel Aviv: An official pins the symbol of the volunteer Jewish Brigade onto the shirt of a new recruit. Tel Aviv, Palestine.
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The three-inch-mortar crew of the British army's Jewish Brigade Group composed of volunteers from Palestine, fires on German positions during the final Allied offensive in Italy, March 30, 1945.

Among the Brigade’s soldiers were young men and women who had escaped from the horrors of the Holocaust. Making their way to Palestine, many of these survivors enlisted in the Brigade. Like millions of others, Chana Wiesenfeld had been caught up in the Nazi war machine. Born in Stanestii-de-Jos-pe-Ceremus, Rumania in 1932, Chana was sent to a concentration camp when the Nazis gained control of Rumania. She was part of a forced march to Mogilev-Podolsk in the Ukraine but ended up in Ediniti, Rumania, in an open camp where people were able to move around although still guarded. With the Star of David on the front and back of the remnants that had once been her clothes and her feet were bound with rags because her shoes had worn out years earlier. Like everyone else, she was crawling with lice. Years later, in a tearful interview she described the situation:

*Our only entertainment was to sit and with two fingers kill lice. This went on for four years. In 1944, the Russians took over the camp from the Germans. Finally, the Russian army came in. No words to describe it. It was the happiest day of my life.*

*[After the war]We were sent back home to Rumania. There were now 4 children and I knew I had to leave so I could better myself.*

One night with a group of other inmates Chana left hopping a train and settling into a cattle car. After going through Greece they went on a small boat across the Aegean Sea to Turkey where a barge awaited them. Presumably that was in Izmir, a normal departure point for refugees arriving in Palestine from Greece or the Greek islands. With only sardines to eat on the three-week voyage, they reached Palestine.

*Awful conditions! We were given bunk beds. Over 600 children. Then we arrived in Jaffé and we were told to sing the Hatikva. As we were about to disembark, we were stopped by the British. They would not allow us to land and sent us away to Cyprus. There I was put in a refugee camp. Food was poor. We were*
there for 8-9 months until Golda Meir\textsuperscript{vi} came and asked the authorities to let us go free. She said these children have been through so much. Let them go.

A few of us were let out at a time. I see some people walking in Cyprus and found out they were from the Haganah. I begged them to let me become one of them. For me it would be ideal. I would have a place to eat and sleep. My time to leave Cyprus came and we were put in a small motor boat. The Haganah snuck in and hid among the children.

When we got to Palestine, we were put in bunkers and went on to various schools. I went to Agriculture school. Fights were going on with the Arabs so we were in and out of bunkers. We carried guns and we guarded the orchards at night. When they (Arabs) left us alone, we would sing and dance and have fun. During this time, the state of Israel was declared. Arabs attacked within 24 hours.

After two years in the school I was old enough to leave. I had nowhere to go. I decided to become a nurse. When I went for the first day, I saw blood and fainted.\textsuperscript{vii}

Without skills and with an uncertain future, eighteen-year-old Chana enlisted in the Jewish Brigade. As she explained, with three meals a day and a place to sleep, she happily served for two years. Besides, she liked the way she looked in her uniform.

While she was in the army and living in Kiryat Ata, her parents who also survived the Shoah, arrived in Israel and were placed in a camp that had been erected for the huge influx of refugees.

After leaving the military Chana took a job in a tax office in order to help support the family; but when the Independence War began, Chana, like many people, was called to duty. Back at the office after the war, a coworker introduced Chana to his cousin who was visiting from America. That visiting American, Polish Holocaust survivor Max Wiesenfeld, became her husband.\textsuperscript{ix}
Max returned to America with Chana settling in the South Bronx where she assumed the role of homemaker, taking English courses and befriending other young women who, like her, were making a new life and had no family.

During the war, Max had been interned in a Polish Labor camp in Siberia where he contracted a bacterial infection that lay dormant, affecting his heart in later years. Though he had a heart valve replacement, his health and activity level declined. To support the family Chana worked at several jobs, mostly menial labor. She was a school aide in a yeshiva, and sold items at a flea market. Their sons, Jeffrey and Howard, also helped out with odd jobs like cleaning windows and having paper routes so that the family would not have to rely on welfare. Chana’s favorite expression was “pride would pull us through” and it did. Both her sons received excellent educations and distinguished themselves in their chosen fields.

Howard became a corporate lawyer and portfolio manager for DKR Ibex, of Stamford, CT, a merger-arbitrage fund.5

“Jeffrey attended P.S. 28 on Anthony Avenue, followed by Wade Junior High School. “I was beaten constantly,” he recalled matter-of-factly. “If I didn’t fight, I wouldn’t have survived.” Fortunately, he was admitted to Bronx High School of Science in 1975, which “literally saved my life.” It was at Queens College that Jeff developed an interest in political science and public administration, but after graduating, he met an FBI recruiter and took a test “on a lark,” working briefly as a counterintelligence agent. “The FBI gave me an opportunity to start a life,” he reflected. What followed next was an amazing 21-year stint in New York’s political arena, during which he served under NYC Mayor Ed Koch, U.S. Senator Alfonse D’Amato, and NY Governor George Pataki. In 1999, Governor Pataki appointed Jeffrey to the CUNY Board of Trustees.”

In 2002, Jeffrey joined the Board of the National Yiddish Theatre/Folksbiene. Eventually he became Chairman of that Board.12 “One senses that Jeffrey Wiesenfeld will never run out of battles to wage or ethical causes to support. Among his mentors, he lists his father, who survived the Holocaust, and his grandparents, who lived in Israel until their nineties. “They made a whole new life for themselves. They were very happy that they owned a piece of the Jewish enterprise,” says Wiesenfeld philosophically. It’s not surprising that Wiesenfeld has devoted much of his life to helping his fellow New Yorkers own a piece of their enterprise as well.”

Chana’s spirit and determination to survive and succeed was obviously instilled into her two sons whose lives define the American Dream tradition and are a tribute to their parents.

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1 Israel Defence Forces
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This article is based on Reisman, A. SHOAH: Turkey, The US and the UK (2009) and on My Enemy's Enemy (2010) (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Publishing.)

Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives

iv Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md

v USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony number #15665

vi Born Golda Mabovitch Myerson (Ukrainian: Голда Мабович) in Kiev, (1898–1978) an American former schoolteacher in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, one of the founders of the State of Israel and the most prominent woman politician of her era. She served as Prime Minister of the State of Israel between 1969 and 1974.

vii USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony number #15665

viii Photo courtesy the USC Shoah Foundation Institute

ix She married him after the war and soon followed him back to America.

x http://www.meforum.org/77/murder-on-the-brooklyn-bridge


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