



My Volunteer Work for the Holocaust Survivors

On one Holocaust Remembrance Day, in the morning hours, I was travelling to Tel-Aviv with my wife Zahava, listening to Network B's morning programme on the radio, as I always do. One of the topics which they discussed was the lack of volunteers willing to assist Holocaust survivors and to help them exercise their rights. I immediately rang the telephone number given on the programme and asked to join the team of volunteers.

Before long, I was called in for ten hours of training over two days - five hours each day. In the first session, general topics were discussed, how to approach the Holocaust survivors and how to hold a conversation with them. In the second session, we studied the Holocaust survivors' rights and how to verify their entitlement.

The main goal of the volunteers' training was to aid those Holocaust survivors whose situation was difficult - primarily in a financial sense. Be that as it may, it was my opinion that their psychological situation - despite the passing of the years - was even more difficult, and that any aid one gave them, be it material or by talking about their past, would at least make things a little easier for them.

Over one year, I worked as a volunteer. This was a very hard year, over the course of which I met with about a hundred Holocaust survivors. I helped them set their rights in order and I advised them on how to obtain the aid that they required. Through this, I hoped and believed that, in this manner, I would be able to become close with them and to obtain first-hand information about their experiences and suffering during the course of the Second World War - about the struggle to survive, about having stayed in labour camps and concentration camps, about the living conditions, about the railway journeys and about the arduous marches in the harsh weather conditions and along the impenetrable tracks.

I hoped - but I was wrong. They, too, had chosen Silence as their own. There were some who wrote short books and, instead of speaking to me, they gave me a copy and asked me to read what they had written about the tribulations of the past, about how they had been mistreated and about the Liberation and immigration to Israel.

"Why is it that you remained silent?" I asked. The replies which I received varied. Some said, "One who wasn't there, cannot imagine what excruciating suffering is". Yet one answer does not let go of me - "But you did not want to listen! And in the first years after the War, you said that we had gone like cattle to the slaughter..." And, indeed, I recalled hearing, in my youth, blunt statements of this type.

"I'm glad that that kind of thing hasn't been said for many years", said one of the survivors, and she added, "I'm not looking to proclaim heroic deeds. On the other hand, I don't want them to pity us either. We should be given the rights we've been granted, and they should not expect us to fight for them".

It pained me to hear her argument and we decided to go on to the issue for which the meeting had been called - and here a surprise awaited me. She announced that she had received all that was due

to her and that she had no further claims. She had only one request - could she be granted a one-time loan of 500 shekels?

Her granddaughter was to be wed in two days and she had no money for a present.

Gazing at her, I felt, together with her, the same humiliation in which she was enveloped. As I did not wish to embarrass her further, we parted company. But that survivor's reply, as to the reason for her silence, echoed in my head for a long time and invigorated my will to set forth and acquaint myself with my relatives who had perished.

I finished my year of volunteering. Over the course of that year, I tried to draw out details regarding the small towns in which my parents had been born - but to no avail. No one, amongst those whom I had met, had heard of them.

The Meeting with Leah Levin

The first time we gathered, we, the volunteers, were asked, before commencing our work, to introduce ourselves, to tell about our connection to the Holocaust and about our capabilities in bonding with the survivors, who were still carrying a very heavy burden on their backs. Great skills were required of us in order to connect with them, and to develop a relationship of closeness and trust, for us to be able to assist them in attaining their rights.

When my turn came to introduce myself, I turned to the lady who was sitting in front of me, whose name is Leah Levin. I told her that she seemed familiar to me and that I would like to speak with her during the break. It turned out that she was my mother's neighbour, in Ramat-Aviv. She had worked in the civil service as a supervisor in the international call service which the Ministry of Communications operated at the time.

Following her retirement, Leah engaged in communal activity. Together with other residents, she tends a vegetable garden. The plot is divided amongst the residents-neighbours and each one grows vegetables for their own consumption. From time to time, Leah puts out information on meetings to be held, in which the local residents take part. Leah invited me to join one of these gatherings, which was held on a Saturday morning. I accepted the invitation and I came to the meeting together with my wife Zahava. Everyone very much enjoyed the vegetables which they grow in their garden. They gave each other advice on how to improve the produce, and they recommended which crops it is better to plant in order to maximise the yield.

During those meetings, which took place at the end of 2013 and the start of 2014, I found out that Leah is engaged in another project - a very important one. She collects photographs of the Holocaust survivors and their families who were concentrated in the DP camps in Germany prior to immigrating to the Land of Israel, with the purpose of building a site¹ to commemorate the survivors and to educate the next generations.

I spoke with Leah about this. I expressed my appreciation of the initiative and told her about my attempts to follow the traces of the fate of my family before the War and after it. Although my parents had not stayed in a DP camp, I promised that I would give her some photos of my family members, who had begun to be rehabilitated in Germany - and she promised to add the pictures to the important site which she built.

¹ [TN: See here: <https://www.facebook.com/mah.akurim>]

When I returned home, I ferreted about among the few documents remaining in my possession and I came upon my father's *Teudat Oleh* [Israeli immigrant's benefits booklet]. This certificate revealed quite a few details. Among other things, it gave the name of the ship on which we had come to Israel – the *Marathon*. I tried to find information on this ship, but in vain. I turned to all the information sources - to museums, to the Navy's archives - but it was all to no avail.



[My father's] *Teudat Oleh*

I therefore made use of the Internet. To the query I posted on one of the sites, I received a reply from a lady in Jerusalem. She informed me that the ship's full name had been the *Marathon London*. Her father, who was in his eighties, had also arrived in Israel on that ship but, due to his illness, he was unable to provide details regarding the port of departure, how they had reached it, where it had anchored in Israel, who the passengers had been and so on.

When I brought Leah my father's *Teudat Oleh*, she stared at me and said, "I was one of the passengers on that ship! She set sail from Marseilles. I was very young and I remember no details. I only remember that we reached Marseilles on trucks and trains from the DP camps, which had been set up near Munich". "Yes", I said to Leah, "it could be that we sailed together on the same ship".

As already mentioned, my mother and father arrived in Munich, where I was born. But unlike the majority of the survivors, they were not in the DP camps, because my father decided to take lodgings for us in a private house in the town of Moosburg, near Munich. They lived there for two years - from 1946 to 1948.

I was about two at the time, and I remember nothing besides the name of the port - "Marseilles". My mother used to say that Marseilles is a filthy city. Her words puzzled me, because I couldn't recall her ever having visited Marseilles.



*In Moosburg; my mother Miriam (on the left)
with me in her arms*



*Me, in the yard at the house in
Moosburg*

When it was made possible to send the Surviving Remnant to Israel or to other countries which they requested, my little family also joined the convoy transporting the emigrants to Marseilles.

Many survivors chose to travel to the Land of Israel and they began their long journey on trucks and in trains to the ports of Italy and France, holding their *Teudat Oleh*. They did not know what lay ahead of them, but they trusted the agents and officials who looked after their affairs.

From Marseilles, France, we set sail on the ship *Marathon London* to Israel. It was in November 1948 that my parents left blood-soaked Europe and set out to their new homeland, which would help them to rehabilitate and would grant them liberty, security and equality. And thus ended the unbearable quest of the Surviving Remnant.

I shall subsequently speak, in detail, regarding the hardships of immigration and integration and the desire to build a new, good and happy life. But the death of my father, Majer Chaskelwicz, just four years after our arrival in Israel, when he was only forty-six, marred the optimistic plans.

