

Eulogy for Bronka Krygier z"1 (1925-2010)

“To see the [death camps on the March of the Living], to touch them, reminds me of the tragedy of my people and the Six Million who should not have died, who should not have been murdered. Those we must remember. Every Jewish person, especially the children, must be witness to the truth of this past. The tragic lessons and legacy must be passed on to the children so they can be watchful, so they can be certain the world does not forget.” Bronka Krygier, after the 2004 March of the Living

Bronka Krygier was born as Bronka Chudy in 1925 in Warsaw. Her parents were Mordechai and Tobcha, and she had a sister Dora, who was younger than her by 4 years. Mordechai and Tobcha ran a small shoe manufacturing business, fashioning uppers for shoes. The household was not religious, but somewhat traditional, and Bronka's early years of family life were quite happy.

Her father was very active in Poland's Socialist party, and was a follower of Trotsky. Bronka remembered many important political figures visiting her parents' home in Warsaw, including Leon Trotsky himself.

However, Bronka's early years were also marred by Anti-Semitism. One story she told concerned the Catholic school her parents sent her too, which accounted for her perfect Polish, which was to save her life many times later during the war years.

Bronka attended a (public) Catholic school in Warsaw located at 911 Dzika Street for 7 years. In the fifth grade, a new homeroom teacher- Bronislawa Urbanska - appeared before the class.

In her own words, Bronka described a very unfortunate encounter with this teacher.

One particular day, I was slower than usual in packing up my books and some of the girls were waiting for me so we could leave. From the doorway, the girls called to me: "Bronia are you coming?" I replied that I was.

The teacher, Bronislawa Urbanska, picked her head up and shouted.

"Who is Bronia?" I, of course, replied: "I am Bronia."

She came toward me in a rage all the while yelling, "No, I am Bronia, you are Bruchela!" (Bruchela is a traditional Jewish name for a girl; Bronia is a common Polish name.)

She grabbed all my scribblers and reading my name on the covers tore pages out of all my books and scribblers all the while yelling, "You are Bruchela! You are Bruchela!"

This was extremely upsetting and disturbing. My father came to the school the next day to talk to the School Director and was told, "Your daughter should use her Hebrew name."

After that incident, Jewish students at the school were required to use their Hebrew names and not their Polish ones. This occurred in early 1938.

On a personal level, I was so shaken and distraught by this incident, that I could not attend school for a few weeks, so great was my fear for her. When I finally returned to school, the children would tease me, chanting "Bruchela, go to Palestine! Bruchela, go to Palestine!"

Nazi Germany attacked Poland in Sep. 1, 1939, which marked the outbreak of WWII. Like millions of others throughout Europe, Bronka's life would be changed forever by the brutality of Nazi Germany's actions all across the continent.

Almost immediately after the occupation of Warsaw, the Nazis established the Warsaw Ghetto, forcing Warsaw's Jews into an area of about 1.3 square miles, with an average of 7 Jews per room.

Bronka was able to smuggle herself in and out on several occasions, her perfect Polish allowing her to pass as a non-Jew.

During the first years of the war, starvation was rampant. Warsaw, which was home to the largest Jewish community in Europe, and the second largest in the world, had approx. 400,000 Jews, comprised of residents and recent immigrants from other parts of Poland, forcibly confined by the Nazis into the ghetto under intolerable condition. The situation for the children was especially grim, and children starving to death on the streets was all too common a site.

Bronka's father went looking for two little boys, Bronka's cousins, and found them in an apartment alone. Their parents had already disappeared, and the small boys were surrounded by rats. He took them to the orphanage of Janusz Korczak who took care of the children, until they were deported with Korczak and the rest of the orphans to Treblinka in August of 1942.

Bronka and her family managed to escape for a short while to a small village near Warsaw called Wohyn, where her Uncle lived. Eventually, Bronka's parents and sister returned to Warsaw, but Bronka stayed - only to see her Uncle and Aunt and their two children shot before her eyes, having been betrayed by some of the locals.

Bronka somehow managed to escape and ended up joining various groups of Jewish refugees, Russian POWs, and partisans in the forests for the remaining years of the war.

It is not possible to describe all the hardships and challenges that Bronka faced during these times. The cruelty she witnessed, the terrible deprivation, the impossible choices she was faced with, and the several times she came within a hair of losing her life.

But I will share a few stories, I heard from her, and her children, that will perhaps give a sense of the larger picture of her life during those years.

1) One day, in mid-winter, the partisans she was with, happened upon a teenaged girl who was carrying her little sister on her back. Her little sister was paralyzed from the waist down, as her legs had frozen. The Russian doctor examined her and declared that nothing could be done for the little girl. With the Nazis closing in, the group had to move, but the little girl could not be taken. Fearing what the Nazis would do to the poor child, a heartbreaking decision was made. Just before they broke camp, the little girl was given a small party, they danced, sang and played harmonica in front of her, then, after lots were drawn, one of them crept up behind her and shot her so that the Nazis could not torture her when she was found. When Bronka told this story to the students on the March of the Living - there was a hush in the room, as everyone wondered how someone could go on living everyday with such a terrifying memory.

2) Bronka was caught several times by the Nazis. On one occasion, she was lined up in front of a firing squad, but was freed by a group of partisans at the last moment. On another occasion, she was accused by a Polish boy of being a Jew. But Bronka kept arguing she was Polish, and the Nazis themselves were not certain. At one point in the interrogation, which was conducted in German, then translated into Polish, the Nazi officer said, "Nu Chana retz neisht kayn Yiddish" So Chana do you not speak any Yiddish at all?

Bronka almost fell for the trap, but at the last moment, she held herself back and said in Polish, Dolmetscher, which means, please translate (interpret)

At that point one of the Nazis said, "She might not be Jewish, but just look at her nose..."

Bronka looked back, and then pointed to the Nazi officer's nose, which apparently was just as big, and said, "And him? (What about his nose?")

Bronka's quick retort may have saved her life, but not some of her teeth.

The enraged officer took his gun and smacked Bronka across the face, knocking out several of her teeth, but Bronka was able to live another day.

These are just some of the stories of Bronka's war years, and we have barely scratched the surface.

By the time July of 1944 came around, allied forces were making progress against the Germans on all fronts. But Bronka was wounded, having been shot during one her encounters with the enemy, and was walking around with a bullet lodged in her leg, which toward the end of the war had actually turned gangrenous.

Bronka was at the time in the Podlesei district of Poland working as a prisoner at the Gestapo headquarters in Biala - the courtyard vegetable gardens.

Here is a short excerpt of from Bronka's own testimony (which you can find on Judy Weissenberg Cohen's website):

Two Ukrainian collaborators guarded us and some of the other forced labourers and prisoners..

At the Gestapo, the Polish cook, who received the garden produce from us, was kind. Occasionally she would give us small items; some lipstick, a scarf or newspapers. Knowing that at some point we would need to escape, we saved these in order to look presentable on the Polish streets.

After D-Day and the invasion of Normandy we could hear increased nightly bombardment from allied planes. The air smelled of invasion. We overheard German soldiers and Gestapo talking in low tones and we sensed something was happening.

On one particular day, the cook warned the two of us of the impending execution of all inmates – as the Germans were about to retreat from the advancing Red Army.

That afternoon she distracted the Ukrainian guards and gave us time to slip through the gate. Within minutes we had to be out of sight and so we headed through the town to the forest toward a nearby village. It was dangerous to be on streets full of retreating German soldiers.

A Polish woman, living nearby, gave us shelter in a bunker under a silo on her farm. The bunker was a crawl space about three feet deep so we had to crouch or lie down day and night. The woman brought us some bread and water and so we remained undetected, even when German soldiers slept in the barn above us. We were in the middle of the front with Russian tanks pursuing fleeing Germans.

One morning, everything was quiet; no Germans, no noise. Coming out of the bunker we walked down the road and saw Russian tanks approaching. We stopped a Russian tank and screamed, “We are Jewish!” The soldiers took us in and to the army hospital.

Bronka eventually made her way to Moscow, where she took her first shower in years, and had the bullet removed from her gangrenous leg. In Moscow she was warned by Benny Mark, a Polish Jew who represented the Jewish repatriates in Moscow, not to use her last name, since her late father had been associated with the anti-Stalinist Trotskyites. As he said, in the USSR, “children informed on their parents, or they hanged for them.”

Bronka understood that Russia was not a place of refuge and with the help of Benny Mark and the JDC eventually made her way back to Poland where she was to discover the tragic fate of her parents and her sister and over 40 members of her extended family – all murdered, most of them in Treblinka.

Bronka eventually made her way to Paris, where in 1948 she met a man by the name of Natan Naydelhoff who had worked with her parents in Warsaw, making shoe uppers. He was the last person to see her parents and sister alive.

According to Natan, her father, being a tradesman, could have stayed to make boots for the Germans, but he would not let his younger daughter or wife go alone to Treblinka. He told Natan that he knew his “Bronchella (his pet name for Bronka) would survive.”

In Paris, Bronka received a message from Wladyslaw Gomulka, the first Deputy Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of Poland asking her to return to Warsaw, but Bronka refused. Instead, she joined an ORT school and trained as a furrier and was employed at Pearlman’s furrier plant. It was in Paris that she met her husband to be, Hersz (Herschel) Krygier. Herschel came from a family of tailors who were originally from the Lodz area. He had survived the war by fleeing toward Russia with his entire family – including all 7 siblings – and eventually settling in Uzbekistan.

Bronka fell in love with Herschel for a number of reasons, his children told me yesterday. “He was so handsome, and he was one of the few tall Jewish men in Paris at the time. He was a hard worker – and he was a man’s man.” Also Bronka was so alone, and now Bronka could become part of a large family. “She was missing love – and now she found love. She was not alone anymore.”

And Herschel could not help but fall in love with Bronka.

“She was tall and beautiful, ambitious and driven and he was drawn to her strength and vitality.”

The couple was married in 1949, and had 3 of their 4 children in Paris, before they emigrated to Calgary (where they had relatives) and where their youngest daughter was born.

The children remember the early years in Calgary – how times were tough, and how hard their mother worked.

“No matter what, she always loved us – she would have given her life for us.”

Madeleine remembers her teeth needing fixing at a young age, and her mother taking a job at a hotel cleaning rooms for 5 dollars a week to pay for her daughter’s braces.

“No matter what, she was there for us”, I was told.

The children also fondly remember their mother’s beautiful voice and how she and their father used to sing together the Russian “Katyusha” song on their family car trips to the Rocky Mountains. Their mother had a wide repertoire of songs from Yiddish Folk Songs to Edith Piaf, but her favourite song was the Partisan Song, Zog Nit Kein Mol. Bronka always insisted that people had to stand when the Partisan Song was sung, out of respect for the people who so bravely resisted the Nazi enemy.

Another memory the children recalled was a phone call in 1961. A man was speaking on the phone in Yiddish asking for Bronka and crying at the same time - She picked up the phone and promptly fainted. It turned out it was an uncle - Uncle Lazier, the eldest brother of Bronka's father - who had survived the war- and had just tracked down the family in Calgary. That summer Bronka packed all the children into a train, and they made their way across Canada to Montreal, then to Boston where this newly re-discovered relative lived. The children said the trip alone was worth it just to hear the political discussion between the two of them. Bronka's uncle would say, "You're raising the children to be capitalists!! To which Bronka would reply, "Better than raising them to be Communists!!"

I also had a chance to listen to two of Bronka's grandchildren - Veronica and Adam - tell me about their feelings for their grandmother...

Grandson Adam told me that, while other people might have found Bronka to be tough at times, she was never like that with him... Every time she saw me, she couldn't stop touching, kissing me, and hugging me, he said. Adam also recalls the frequent calls from his grandmother on her cell phone a technology she often used but never quite mastered...

"My grandmother would sometimes call me to tell me how much she had just won at the casino, but more often than not, she would accidentally push the speed dial on her phone, and all I would hear was static, or the sound of whatever Bubby was doing at the time. " One time Adam even remembers picking up a voice mail from his Bubby - and all he could hear was her fighting with another woman over a slot machine in a casino. Adam and his bride Jaycee were very proud that his Bubby was able to attend their wedding this past May in Montreal. It was something she wanted to do no matter what.

Her granddaughter Veronica remembers her grandmother's feisty, independent spirit. When Veronica found her first job with BBYO in Montreal, an article appeared in a Toronto Jewish newspaper about this important news. Never mind that the paper was only read in Toronto, and Veronica worked in Montreal – Bronka still managed to convince the editor to do a full story on this important milestone in Canada's history.

During one summer, Bronka visited Montreal and took part in the CBB seniors' camp that Veronica was involved in..

"All my friends loved her....even though she broke all the rules..." There was a swimming area for seniors, but when she saw me in the children's swimming area, she just made a beeline straight for me, and that's where she spent her time. But she didn't actually swim, she would just put her feet in the water, and exclaim, "Ah a Mechaye" and that was enough. Veronica remembers all the seniors going to sleep early – but not Bronka. She also remembers her grandmother joining her Montreal's March to Jerusalem each year.

"She was a firecracker," was the way Veronica summed up her grandmother.

One of Veronica's earliest memories was of the time her grandparents took her to Israel for her first time when she was only 6 years of age. Most of the memories were happy ones - Seeing the length and breadth of the country, Tel Aviv, Masada, Eilat, the Dead Sea, Jerusalem, buying Pizza in the Old City (and her almost being sold for 200 camels!), and many other memories. But she also remembers their visit to Yad Vashem, and how her grandparents cried when in the Valley of the Lost Communities they saw their hometowns etched on the stone walls.

Veronica would later travel to Israel many times, but her most meaningful experience was when she was with her grandmother on the March of the Living in 2004.

For many years, Bronka never wanted to return to Poland, so painful were her memories. But Veronica convinced her. "You will go with all these kids....they are going to love you and hug you.... You will never be alone.... You will always be taken care of..."

So in 2004, Bronka joined the Toronto March of the Living delegation, and despite the fact that Veronica was with the Montreal delegation, they made sure to see each other almost every day..

Veronica called the 2004 March of the Living the "best experience of her life"Being with her grandmother on the March, knowing she was sharing her story with so many students, and hugging her every time they met up, are precious memories that will always stay with Veronica.

"I was so proud of her each time I saw her in Poland and Israel," Veronica shared with me, barely holding back her tears when she recalled the trip.

Veronica was not alone in being profoundly impacted by Bronka's participation in the March. The almost 700 Toronto students and chaperones that traveled with Bronka on the March of the Living were also privileged to learn from Bronka's remarkable spirit and courage.

One of the chaperones who grew very close to her was Moishe Posner, the music leader for the Toronto contingent. He remembers the time when they were in the Warsaw cemetery, when Bronka found the tombstone for Adam Chierniakow, the head of the Warsaw Judenrat who took his own life, rather than continue co-operating with the Nazis. He remembers her sighing and putting her hand on the stone monument.

She never cried the whole trip, until we arrived at Treblinka, he recalled. There amid the 17,000 silent stones – each representing a different Jewish community destroyed in the Holocaust - and where Bronka’s entire family was murdered, there in Treblinka, was the only time he saw Bronka break down and cry.

Bronka’s spirit on the March of the Living is almost impossible to describe. She was almost always outspoken and upbeat, with a twinkle in her eye and a point of view to express. “She knew every song,” Moishe remembered, from the Partisan Song to the Rebbe Elimelech Nigun, which she enthusiastically sang (and danced to!) with our Israel guide Danny in Lejansk.

Rabbi Lori Cohen, who took part in the 2004 March of the Living, and shared a room with Bronka, emailed me a short piece that she would like me to read before I conclude..

“Bronka Krygier - As remembered by Rabbi Lori Cohen

I first had the opportunity to meet Bronka on the March of the Living in 2004. But she was not just a participant on the trip but my roommate in Poland and in Israel. She offered me a unique perspective on our experiences whether it was in Warsaw, the forests of Poland, or at the camps, as she described her own life as a survivor of the Shoah.

At the end of the day, after our emotional visits to various sites, I was able to sit with Bronka in the quiet of our room and to be with her as she remembered. For Bronka it was a heart-wrenching but a life-affirming experience. She lived to go back and to tell the story - her story and the stories of her family. She lost so much and yet she was able to give so much to others.

Bronka remembered the suffering and death. And the day when we were at Treblinka, where her parents were murdered, was probably the most difficult of all and yet she stood there, tall and proud, as she talked about them. Defying the monsters who had done such a horrific deed.

But Bronka was about life. I shared a wonderful experience with her one evening in Krakow. We were staying at a hotel very close to the main square of Krakow, one of the most beautiful places in Europe, and yet it was not on our itinerary. But like two school girls, Bronka and I decided to play hooky and we “escaped” late one night to walk over to the square. Bronka was full of zest and vigour. In my diary of that day I titled it, “Escape! Independence! Chill out!” Bronka and I walked around the night lit square and then sat at a café where we indulged in two different kinds of cakes – a hot apple with whipped cream and ice cream and a chocolate liqueur cake. We sipped cappuccinos and talked about whether we should feel guilty indulging in delicacies in a place where so much suffering occurred. But Bronka’s attitude was “we are alive!” Alive to appreciate the goodness and the beauty.

Bronka was a strong woman – strong in her suffering and strong in her conviction to live. That trip in many ways transformed my life, but much of it was because I was able to share it with Bronka.”

Before I conclude, please allow me to add one more observation. The family told me yesterday that a student asked Bronka who she would choose to be, if there was another life. Bronka replied without hesitation, a woman, a Jewish woman. Despite all the persecution and suffering that she had undergone, Bronka would still choose to be Jewish woman. That is who she was, and who she always wanted to be.

At age 83, Bronka was diagnosed with Cancer – “It’s the big C,” she told the doctor when he came to give her the news.

Like everything else, she battled her cancer fiercely for 2 years. And for most of that time, she was her feisty energetic self. As she told me and many others, I want to have a “lebedikin toite”, which loosely translated means: I want to live to the last of my days, with all my strength, energy and passion.

And only a few months ago, Bronka made the superhuman effort to come to Moishe’s daughter’s wedding in Toronto. I remember seeing her – she looked worn, thin and frail, but she was there...

Ultimately, Bronka’s battle with cancer was one she could not win. But in many ways, Bronka did win the most important battles in life. She survived the Holocaust, she raised a family in Canada, and she taught the lessons of the Holocaust, through the March of the Living and through her role as a speaker at the Toronto Holocaust centre, to thousands of people, young and old alike.

And her bright memory and her many stories will continue to live on in the hearts of all of us who were touched by Bronka, who had the privilege to come to know her exceptional spirit.

Allow me then to conclude then, by singing a few lines from the famous resistance song, Zog Nit Keyn Mol - The Partisan Song, which was one of Bronka’s favourites, and for which she would also want us all to stand for.

For what was Bronka’s life about, if not resistance?

Please Rise:

*Zog nit keyn mol az du geyst dem letstn veg,
Khotsh himeln blayene farshtein bloye teg.
Kumen vet nokh undzer oysgebenkte sho -
S'vet a poyk ton undzer trot - mir zaynen do!
Kumen vet nokh undzer oysgebenkte sho -
S'vet a poyk ton undzer trot - mir zaynen do!*

*Never say this is the final road for you
Though leaden skies may cover days of blue
As the hour that we long for is near,
our steps beat out the message we are here!
As the hour that we long for is near,
our steps beat out the message - we are here!*

Bronka Chudy Krygier has indeed passed away. But the memory of her spirit, her courage and her bravery, they are all still here, still very much present... and will always be cherished by her family members, and will continue to inspire so many others, whose lives she so profoundly touched.

Yihey Zichrona Livracha..

May her memory always be a blessing.

[Delivered by Eli Rubenstein, Monday, October 11, 2010]