

My Family Legacy

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Guta Blass Weintraub, my great-grandmother, was born in 1924 in Lodz, Poland, a booming textile city in the heart of the country. Her father owned a clothing factory that made uniforms for the army. She was about my age when the German army flooded the streets she loved so much, completely uprooting her sheltered childhood and forcing her to grow up too fast. She and her family were moved all over the map, from the ghetto in Wierzbnik to Auschwitz and Ravensbrueck. She lost her parents and brother in this time. Between this and her liberation with the Swedish Red Cross in 1945, Guta performed an act of bravery and heroism that not only saved the lives of 300 people, but also serves as an act of inspiration for our family today.

At a labor camp in Majowka, Guta and the other prisoners were handed shovels and commanded to dig their own graves. The words spoken by the camp guard would stay with her for the rest of her life. "You have one minute to say your prayers. Then you will be shot." But, a minute was all Guta needed to decide her story would not end there. At that moment she must have seen her future, the generations of family she would come to have urging her to fight for her life. She jumped on the guard's back and tried to choke him, sinking her nails into his neck as he cried out in pain. This act would get her shot in the head and brutally beaten. But, through the combined efforts of her being hidden under the barracks and a Soviet bombing raid, she survived against all odds. Her suffering did not end there but neither did her courage, following her on a boat to America with the love of her life, Leon Weintraub.

After a cold winter in Chicago with some of Leon's family, Guta decided she wanted to head south. Their destination was Charleston, South Carolina, a rapidly modernizing city on the beautiful Atlantic coast. A few months later they started a family and had my grandmother, who would end up being the oldest of six. Guta would tell her that having such a big family was a way of honoring the ones she lost. Staying true to her roots, she opened an alterations shop while learning English and adapting to American culture. She is credited as being one of the first Holocaust survivors in Charleston to actively speak about her experiences in many schools and interviews. She eventually retired to Maryland and died peacefully in 2008.

It took a lot of strength to do what she did, leaving the only home she ever knew for a completely new life full of uncertainty. Even today being Jewish can make one feel alienated in their own country, especially concerning the new wave of anti-semitism taking over the nation. Neo-Nazi's parading around the streets, gunmen ambushing worshippers during a Shabbat morning service, and even the group of kids at school who salute Hitler just to get a laugh from their friends. It all ties back to ignorance, the unstoppable seed that inevitably grows into hate.

The news coverage will show unity after any given tragedy, but for us, it is already there. In any synagogue across the country, strangers are already connected without knowing each other. All because of a difference people try to shame us for. Last January, I worked with my synagogue's youth group to hold a service with the gun safety organization Arm-in-Arm. I wrote and shared readings to the entire congregation comparing Jewish values from prayers to activism concerning gun safety. This organization especially works to close the "Charleston Loophole," a faulty background check which allowed Dylan Roof to obtain a gun and kill nine people in a tragic church shooting. Through this collaboration, I learned that being Jewish means not only do

I have an obligation to help those like me, but also anyone in need in my community. Standing on the bimah in front of my congregation was an awarding experience in itself, watching the audience light up with engagement and understanding about the subject. After observing the service, an anonymous donor pledged five hundred dollars towards gun safety because of our inspiring words.

I was born in Pennsylvania and moved to Charleston when I was ten. While the south was a very big change, going to synagogue was the one thing that stayed constant. I held my bat mitzvah at the same temple I now work at every Sunday, teaching second and third graders the basics of the Hebrew alphabet. Every time I catch one of them doodling in their workbooks or incorrectly pronouncing their “ch’s,” I am amazed I was ever in their shoes. I tell them the realization I came to during my first aliyah: *it is all worth it in the end*. I can remember my bat mitzvah day perfectly, the stained glass windows lighting up the faces of my closest friends and family. Some people who have never set foot in a synagogue were sitting next to others who drove for hours just to see me. I was convinced they could hear my heart beating through the microphone. But soon it did not matter, all of my anxiety evaporating into the clouds as my voice filled the room. It was this experience that gave me the confidence to be a public speaker, from continued participation in services at synagogue to sharing my writing at an assembly in front of my entire school.

We moved here to be closer to my grandparents and soon the rest of my family followed, coming from Maryland and Washington, D.C. with others still in the process of moving. Passover seders and Shabbat dinners take a catering company and three extra tables to feed us all. While our reasons for moving all vary, they all have one thing in common: a shared pride for our story.

The same pride I get when finding my great-grandparent's names on the South Carolina survivors list on my school's Holocaust remembrance display. The pride in my religion I feel when listening to emboldening stories told by other survivors, such as Joe Engel and Diny Adkins. It is this pride that inspires me to speak out against injustice and never forget the history that allowed me to do so in the first place.