

**Members of the Colby community share memories of their families and loved ones who experienced the Holocaust. May their memories remain in our hearts and never be forgotten.**

**יזכור**

**Ali Nislick, class of 2021**

I'd like to share this photograph of my late grandfather Peter Zimmermann, who passed away just a few days ago at the age of 93. He grew up in Berlin, Germany with his parents and older brother. He was 12 years old when Hitler's Third Reich took over and life started to rapidly change for my grandfather, as he was not allowed to attend his public school anymore, or attend any public events such as theater or concerts. He and his family managed to escape Nazi Germany and hop on a boat to New York, where he lived the majority of his life. Life was very difficult for my grandfather and his family for their first year in America, as they knew no English and my grandfather was often discriminated against for being "different." Eventually he began to adjust to life here, while never forgetting where he came from. He was always so thankful for the opportunity to start a new life in a free country, calling it "a god given gift which is appreciated every day".



## **Sarah Rockford, Program Coordinator for the Center for Small Town Jewish Life**

My Zeyde, my maternal grandfather, David Bram was born in Rusiec, a small town in southwest Poland. He was the eldest of six children and lived in a two-room house with his parents Mendel and Leah Bram; grandparents Rifka and Abraham Friedman; brothers, Baruch, Yitzhak, Moishe, and Mordechai; and his sister, Figa. The family was very poor, but my grandfather used to tell stories about his mother collecting white sand from a nearby river to spread over the floor before Shabbat each week. They made do.

In 1940, the Nazis herded my grandfather, who was then 13, and his family to the town of Zelow where the men were rounded up for work. He volunteered to work in the place of his father, leaving him behind to provide for the family. My grandfather never saw anyone in his family again after he volunteered to take his father's place.

For two years, my grandfather worked in labor camps in Poznan, Breslau, and Gross-Rosen. In 1943, he was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Zeyde told a story about arriving at the camps where SS guards ordered anyone not able to walk to step to the left and all able-bodied people to the right. They said there was a three-mile hike to the barracks. My grandfather stepped to the left because he was tired. The people unable to walk were being loaded into trucks. He didn't know it, but they were being taken to the gas chambers. One SS man got hold of my grandfather, threw him to the other side, saving his life. He had lots of stories of near misses like these.

Two years after his arrival at Auschwitz, on May 5, 1945, the Soviet Army liberated the camp. My grandfather weighed 80 pounds when he was liberated. In 1947, with the help of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) my grandfather immigrated to the United States. Fast forward through the years: my Zeyde met my grandmother, had four children, who had seven grandchildren. He built a successful business as a real estate developer and attained a quality of life he never could have imagined as a child. My grandfather passed away at the age of 88 in 2016.

I will always remember my Zeyde as a gregarious man constantly getting in, and then out of, mischief. He was often pulled over for speeding, but I don't ever remember him getting a ticket. His charm was so disarming that he could talk his way out of most messes he wound up in. He would tell people he met that it was his birthday and then slyly add that every day was his birthday. I guess this had some truth to it because he didn't know his real birthday.

My grandmother, Bubbe, came from a devout, Catholic family in Omaha, Nebraska. She grew up on a farm during the Great Depression and also experienced enormous adversity as a young person. When she married my grandfather and converted to Judaism, her family stopped speaking to her. I wish I knew more about her childhood, her story. Where my grandfather's story was written about, published, and celebrated, Bubbe carried her past very quietly. I think this must have been very hard.

I grew up keenly aware of my grandfather's story and of the Holocaust. In 1997, my mother wrote a book called [The Triumphant Spirit](#), which chronicles the stories and lives of 92 holocaust survivors. I pulled some of the details of my grandfather's story from her book.





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### **Sonia Lachter, class of 2022**

Many members of my family were able to leave Europe before the Holocaust, so luckily I don't have much to report on. On my mom's side, my great-grandmother Sarah Verson's grandfather Moshe Neidorf was killed in the Holocaust. Sarah's mother Pearl Mindel Neidorf, nee Greenblat, had two sisters, Sara and Leba Rivka. Leba had two husbands and we think that the second one's last name was Katz. Her daughter Chan Esther was able to leave for Argentina with her husband, but Leba chose to stay behind with her son Kopple. They were both killed there. Pearl, Sara, Leba, and their parents were from Sokolow Podlaski, Poland.

On my dad's side, all of my grandpa Lou Lachter's grandparents were killed. His grandfather's name was Herschel and he was from Ukraine. My grandma said that members of her family who stayed behind were killed. It is a shame not to know more.

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### **Dr. Marta E. Ameri, Assistant Professor of Art**

**The following is a translation (from Italian) of a story that my mother wrote for the archives of the Jewish community in Genova, the city where she grew up and from which she and her family were forced to flee during the war. While my mom's family was mostly spared the tragedy that befell many others at the time, their story provides an important record of the hardship, uncertainty,**

**fear, separation, and perseverance that characterize the experiences of many ordinary families in times of struggle.**

“In Genoa in the 1930s, my parents lived well. They were surrounded by a large group of friends and by my mother’s close and affectionate family. My father’s business- he had a successful commerce in fish products and had purchased a tuna cannery near Chioggia- was going well.

In 1938, after the enactment of the Racial Laws,<sup>[1]</sup> my father had decided to have my mother and my older sisters, Anna, Paola, and Sandra (6, 5 and 3 years old), leave for Switzerland. They were cared for in Lausanne by a family of friends, who my father had supplied with the financial resources necessary for their survival and any future needs. At the same time or maybe shortly thereafter, my father also registered his company in the name of his oldest and most loyal employee, Natale Buzzetti.

After several months, reassured by statements made by Mussolini, who did not appear to want war, my father had my mother and sisters return to Genova, but he left the money in Switzerland as insurance in case the situation deteriorated. Because of the ban on Jews hiring Christian employees, my mother had found an unpaid Swiss au pair who would come back to Italy with her to take care of my sisters.

Afterwards, of course, the war began. Like all the other people of Genova, my parents were frightened of the Allied bombings and began to search for a house outside of the city where they would feel safer. At first they saw several apartments in the seaside town of Recco— all of which would be destroyed by Allied bombs by the end of the war— but in the end they picked the town of Camogli, which was slightly further out on the coast and had a more family oriented environment. There, my sisters could study with a private tutor in spite of the racial laws. My grandmother Nina had moved with them and life proceeded relatively calmly in spite of the war. My father went to Genova to work and in his free time, I think he enjoyed spending time in a small boat that he had bought for himself. My mother and grandmother took care of my sisters. My own birth, completely unexpected given the times, came in 1942. My father hoped I would be the son he had long desired but was disappointed by the arrival of a fourth daughter.

Needless to say, my family’s relatively calm life changed after the events of 1943.

My parents had managed to obtain illegal documents, probably through DELASEM,<sup>[2]</sup> which stated that our family name was Prosperi and that we had been born somewhere in the already liberated south of Italy. Immediately afterwards, the seamstress, “Scia”<sup>[3]</sup> Adele, who had helped my mother at home, hid my sisters in Crocefieschi, a small city in the hills outside of Genova, where her sister was the Mother Superior of a convent. At the convent school, where they clearly had to pretend to be Catholic, my sisters had learned to recite the Ave Maria. And every time the Germans came, the Mother Superior would hide them in the furniture storeroom.

At the same time, my parents, with me, my grandmother, my mom’s brother, Angelo Pavia, his wife Lida, and their son Piero, who was two, had hidden in a small town in the province of Parma, called Tarsogno.

Officially, they were there to escape the bombings, but in the meantime, they had begun to plan their escape to Switzerland with the help of DELASEM and Massimo Teglio.<sup>[4]</sup>

At one point the Germans had come to the town and affectionately played with my cousin Piero, while my aunt hid her terror.

Many years later, my mother met a woman from Tarsogno by chance. As they began to chat, the woman commented on the “tragic times” they had shared. My mother replied, “yes, and it was worse for us, because even though no one knew, we were Jews,” only to be told, “oh, in town we all knew.” Of course, no one had said anything to the German invaders.

Finally, at the beginning of 1944, my family organized its escape. The brave and generous “Scia” Adele went to get my sisters from the convent in Crocefieschi and brought them to Genova on foot. At first, we took the train to Chiasso. My parents traveled in the same compartment, but out of excessive prudence, they pretended not to know each other. Unfortunately, they had with them a small child named Gianna (me) who kept saying “Daddy!” “Daddy!” My mother explained to the other people in the carriage that the “poor child” was missing her father who was in the army and called all the tall men she saw “Daddy.”

The smugglers, who had been warned, took us to a hiding place to wait for darkness. When the time came, we began the climb to reach the border. My grandmother Eleonora, all of my uncle Angelo’s family, and my uncle Eduardo were also with us. Only my mother’s fourth brother, Nino, who had managed to emigrate to New York in 1939, was missing from this family group.

The smugglers asked us to give them all our valuables and jewels. My aunt Lida did so, but my mother, who was suspicious, had sewn everything into the rag dolls that my sisters held in their hands.

When we reached the border, we had to jump over the ditch that separated Italy from Switzerland. Later, when I would whine at an inopportune moment, my parents often recalled how at the moment of the jump, I began to cry, putting us all at risk.

After passing the border, the smugglers returned my aunt’s package of jewels to her- it was full of rocks. The platinum chain that my father showed the border agents to prove that we could support ourselves came to a similar end. The border agents kept it... for security. Nonetheless, they let us pass and we were safe.

When the family finally arrived in Lugano, certainly exhausted by the strain and the stress, we were in for another ugly surprise. The money that my father had left with the family of our Swiss friends had been transferred to the US when the war broke out to keep it safe and was no longer accessible. My father was able to retrieve it after the end of the war, but by that point it was worthless.

Thus, we had no choice but to stay in the refugee camp where the Swiss hosted those who were not able to support themselves. According to my mother, we first stayed in the *Majestic* in Lugano, an old hotel

that had been refurbished for the purpose and which still exists today. Later, I believe, my parents moved to another refugee camp in Lausanne. Naturally they had to work to repay the Swiss for their hospitality. My father, who was certainly not very gifted for manual labor, was assigned to maintain the fire in the boiler, while my mother, who has always had a household staff of her own, was employed as the maid of the camp director's wife. My sisters were accepted into the school of the convent of Sant'Anna in Lugano thanks to the recommendation of the Mother superior from the convent in Crocefieschi. There, they were fairly discontent and were often reprimanded by the nuns for their Jewish faith.

As for me, I was very happy, because mademoiselle Besancon, who in the meantime had married a butcher and was still very attached to my mother, had kindly taken me into her home in Lausanne and was raising me with great affection. I repaid that affection by often sitting on the trays of freshly prepared meats in her husband's shop. I unfortunately lost touch with the family, but I remember that they often came to visit us in Genova after the war and that "mademoiselle" Besancon came to my wedding with her daughters shortly before she passed.

When the nightmare was finally over, we returned to Genova, unfortunately without my uncle Edoardo who had died of encephalitis in Switzerland.

The return was not easy. We no longer had a house. Our furniture, which had been hidden, had been stolen after a distant Catholic cousin had denounced us. My grandmother, who was devastated by the death of her son, was never the same.

After a while, with patience and courage, things began to slowly fall back into place. After a few months in Camogli, we found two connecting apartments in Carignano (in Genova), one for us and one for grandma and her sister-in-law Rosa, whose son Enrico was in America. I remember them as two dark, sad apartments, but I went every night to have dinner with my grandmother and aunt Rosa, who were probably cheered by my childishness. My sisters, in the meantime, were happy to return to public school.

Natale Buzzetti, for his part, returned the keys to my father's factory, which had remained intact, if empty. My father, without a penny in his pocket, went to the bank, I think the Banco di Sicilia, where he found, behind the desk, the same bank director who had been there before the war. "Welcome back Mr. Pontecorboli," the bank director said, "how much do you need to start again?" Natale Buzzetti remained at my father's side for the rest of his life, always ready to remind him of the practical things that he never had the patience to deal with.

The following years were, for everyone, years of difficult rebuilding. My father worked a lot. My mother took care of us and of the house, but I also remember that they were always surrounded by friends, that they hosted large parties, and that they were often out. I think that above all they wanted to enjoy themselves to forget.

My sisters, for their part, suffered for years and in many different ways the damage of their traumatic childhood, but in that moment, they seem to have rediscovered their adolescent harmony.

“Scia” Adele, who had gone to live in an apartment in Borgo Incrociati, a nearby neighborhood, that my mother had arranged for her, continued to come to our house. I still remember her- tiny and always dressed in black- sitting at the sewing machine fixing the dresses worn by me and my sisters.

As for me, I was certainly the luckiest. I was affectionately taken care of and remembered nothing of the jump over the ditch. I was a spoiled child who enjoyed speaking in what had been my first language, French, and had little memory of the trauma of the war and its aftermath.”

**-Gianna Pontecorboli**

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[1] Italy started passing a series of laws that limited Jewish citizens’ ability to work in certain sectors, own businesses, and attend public schools, in 1938. As in Germany, the laws became progressively more draconian.

[2] Delegation for the Assistance of Jewish Emigrants (Delegazione per l’Assistenza degli Emigranti Ebrei) or DELASEM, was an [Italian](#) and [Jewish resistance](#) organization that worked in [Italy](#) between 1939 and 1947 to help Jews in Italy with maintenance, housing, and in many cases the illegal emigration to Switzerland.

[3] “Scia” is the Genoese term for “Signora” or lady, a term of respect used to refer to older women.

[4] Massimo Teglio was a well-known Italian resistance operative and pilot who worked with the archbishop of Genoa to save many Genoese Jews during the war.



Dr. Marta E. Ameri’s grandparents in the 1950’s in a seaside village they fled to after the war.

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## **Bronya Lechtman, class of 2020**

My dad's parents were both in the Soviet Union during the Holocaust and both of their lives were immensely impacted.

Ilya Lechtman, or "Grandpa Eli" to me, grew up in Vinkovtski, a shtetl in Ukraine. He did not grow up practicing Judaism for the most part because his father, David, was a dedicated Bolshevik. However, Grandpa Eli's grandfather, Yakov, was very religious and would often sneak my Grandpa Eli to Yeshiva until David would find out and angrily retrieve his son.

As a teenager during the war, my grandfather lived through the battle of Stalingrad and then volunteered at the age of 17 into the Russian air force and became a pilot. He ended the war in Berlin with his air force regiment. His father David joined the Russian army during the first days of the war, survived many battles and ended the war in Vienna. Yaakov and his wife Golda, however, remained in Vinkovtski and were among the first Soviet Jews to be killed by the Nazis. My grandpa's mother, Zissel Roitman and younger brother, Vladimir or "Zeev" disappeared without a trace at the beginning of the war in German occupied Ukraine and were presumed dead. My Grandpa Eli spent years trying to locate them following the war and decades later when he moved to Israel he searched for records of them there. My father, Vladimir, carries his uncle's name.



Yakov "Yenkel" Lechtman



Vladimir "Zeev" Lechtman and Zisl Roitman



Ilya Lechtman as a pilot in WWII

My grandmother, Bronya, who I am named for, grew up in Stryaplitsy, a small village near Nevel, Belarus, with three sisters and two brothers. Before the war broke out, her and her siblings had all moved to Leningrad to work (now St. Petersburg). In the summer of 1939, my bubbe's sisters Zina and Raya both sent their young children Rima and Misha to Stryaplitsy to stay with their parents Lazar and Pesia for the summer. The war broke out before Misha and Rima were able to return home. They hid in the woods with their grandparents for two years until a local villager betrayed them to the Nazis. Lazar, Pesia, Misha, Rima, and all Jews hiding with them were captured and shot by the Nazis and thrown into a mass unmarked grave. Rima was seven and Misha was around the same age.



My great-grandmother, Pesia Sheykman



My Bubbe, Bronya, in Leningrad during the War



Rima with her parents

Meanwhile, my bubbe and her sisters were in Leningrad during the siege, which lasted for 300 days. During the siege, more than a million city residents perished through starvation, shelling and bombing. Remarkably, all four sisters stuck together and managed to survive. Neither Raya or Zina ever had any other children.

Even after the Holocaust up until my father and my grandparents left the Soviet Union in 1981, they were unable to be freely Jewish. I am the first generation since the Holocaust on my dad's side of the family to grow up with the freedom to be openly Jewish.



My Grandpa Eli and I while I was visiting him in Israel



Plaque dedicated to Lazar, Pesia, Zissel, and Vladimir "Zeev" at Yad Vashem.