Green & Hoffer Families

(Told by 2nd generation family members)

In the summer of 2013, my husband, Walter Elias and I, Ruth Elias, nee' Hoffer, went to Poland to experience the places where my mother and father and their families had lived. They were both Holocaust survivors from Czestochowa. Neither of them ever wanted to return to Poland, and it was after they died that we decided to make this emotional trip. What happened on this trip has had effects that ripple in our lives to this day.

First, I was able to flesh out the fragments of stories my parents told and understand what happened to them and my family. I'll start from the beginning. My mother, Sala Hoffer, nee' Green, was born on April 17, 1924. She was 15 years old when the war broke out in 1939. She was a normal teenager who grew up in a traditional Jewish family. A middle child, she had a brother, Daniel, two years older, and a sister, Mania, two years younger. Her life revolved around family, school, and friends. She loved school, clothes, and boys. She had her parents, still in their forties, three out of her four grandparents (Feiga Green and Szlama and Esther Frajda Schacher), and numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins.

As my mother would tell my brother, David, and me, life was good but not perfect. Her older brother was spoiled. A first-born boy was very special. Her sister was the baby of the family. So, when it came to helping out in the family business, my mother was it. Still, she said that she had a happy childhood. She had an especially close relationship with her father, Abraham. The family business was a specialty grocery store with teas and coffees and other commodities which was located beneath their spacious second-floor apartment. Her mother and father both worked in the business, so they had a housekeeper live in the house with them.

Before the war, my family had a good business and worked well with their Jewish and non-Jewish customers, but between 1939 and 1941, my family experienced their world closing in on them. They had their store for a while, but their non-Jewish customers had to come in secret or not at all. And the Nazis would come and take merchandise without paying. Eventually, the store was taken from them because Jews were not allowed to own businesses anymore or work with non-Jews in any way.

The terror started right away in September of 1939. Two days after the Nazis took over Poland, they dragged any man indiscriminately from the streets, and threw them into parks, fields, and churches where they beat and terrorized everyone. My mother's father and brother were among them. My mother's father was badly beaten, but returned home at that time.

My mother's brother was still missing, so my mother, my grandmother, and aunt went frantically looking for him. My mom, describing herself as still naïve, showed a picture of her brother to a young German soldier and asked if he had seen him. He took her to a pile of dead horses and people and made her look to see if her brother was there. He wasn't.

Later, when Daniel came home, and the family was together, my mother said they were "happy" because, being alive and together as a family was what happiness was in those times. Between each catastrophe, my mom said that the family found a "new normal."

Under the Nazis, everyone had to register and get identity cards and workers' permits. These were necessary to get food and any kind of work. They were led to believe that a worker's permit gave them security. People assumed that if they were necessary for the war effort, they had a chance of surviving.

While Jewish children were not allowed to go to school, my mother went for private lessons to a teacher who taught in secret. Curfew was 5 p.m., and it was very dangerous to be out on the streets after that time. If they were out at a friend's house later, they slept over. So they did socialize. My mom would tease that this was when she started her lifelong habit of smoking cigarettes and playing cards.

When ghettos were formed and people had to leave their homes that weren't in the designated area, my mother's family could stay in their apartment because it was within the boundaries set by the Nazis. But they took in a displaced family and gave them a bedroom, and then they took in another couple who lived in the kitchen. My mom said that it was crowded, but they "managed."

A few months later, in August of 1941, the overcrowded Jewish ghetto with 56,000 Jewish people was sealed off from the rest of Czestochowa. It was 1942, the day after Yom Kippur, when the first "selection" took place. My mother's father and brother were selected. Sala, my mom, never saw her father again. He was transported to Treblinka, the camp where Jewish people in their area were sent in 1942 and 1943. My mother didn't know at the time what happened or whether she would ever see her father and brother again.

My grandmother, Bluma, didn't trust the next "selection" to be about going to work, and was determined to hide with her daughters. They went to an attic in one of the buildings in their courtyard. They thought that they would be the only ones, but a man with his two sons and a young couple were already there. There was a ladder, but no one to take it away. When some Nazis came searching for people in hiding, this ladder actually saved their lives. My mom said she heard a Nazi say that if anyone was up there, they wouldn't have left a ladder.

They had no food. At night, someone went down to forage the gardens for what was left of potatoes and carrots. More people came to hide with them. They were in the attic for five weeks. They lived with a corpse among them. Then they heard that people were being moved out of the ghetto into another, a poorer area, which became known as the "small ghetto." The women in my family, starving, came out of hiding and placed their destiny with the others being marched to the small ghetto. This was during the autumn of 1942.

Those who didn't come out of hiding were forced out by deliberately set fires, taken to the Jewish Cemetery, shot, and buried in a mass grave. There were more than 500 people. Among them were my mother's extended family. My father's parents, David Hoffer and Rochma, nee' Schacher, his younger sister, Gitla Basia Hoffman, nee' Hoffer, her husband, Binem Beniek and their daughter, Tauba, and other extended family, aunts, uncles, and cousins were also among them.

My mom still had her mother and sister, but she didn't yet know about her father or brother. After the Nazis destroyed the ghetto, of the 56,000 people, only 5,200 were left.

The small ghetto was surrounded by a high barbed wire fence. The area around it was totally evacuated and was constantly guarded by heavily armed soldiers patrolling day and night. My mother and her sister tried to escape once, paying to be hidden on a farm, but they were turned back by the Polish peasant, whom they paid to hide them, threatening to turn them in. With no place to go, they made it back to the small ghetto.

From the small ghetto, groups were taken to work in a munitions factory on the outskirts of Czestochowa, called Hasag Pelcery, a slave labour camp. In the evenings, they were brought back to sleep in their "homes." My grandmother, mother, her sister and brother, who had somehow found his way back to the family were still alive and living together. Each of them worked the day shift, except my grandmother, Bluma, who worked at night.

There were constant selections for deportations to Treblinka. On June 26, 1943, the Nazis started to liquidate the small ghetto. My mother, aunt, and uncle were imprisoned in the forced labour camp where they worked their day shift, unable to reach their mother. Left in the small ghetto, my grandmother, Bluma, was murdered.

My mother and the 5,000 others in Hasag worked 12-hour shifts, night or day, seven days a week. They were given 600 calories a day. Many starved to death while others died of

disease or were deported to death camps. My mother's job was to make bullet casings. A Polish worker who went home at night sometimes managed to smuggle in some flour which my mother, at the risk of her life, used to bake bread on the hot machinery. That small extra amount of bread made the difference between life and death.

In the middle of January, 1945, the Germans were preparing to retreat from the Russians who were advancing victoriously from the East. Still, unbelievably, on January 15 and 16, two days before the Russians would liberate the camp, a long train of cattle cars was prepared to deport prisoners to Buchenwald.

Sala's brother was selected. This time, my mother never saw her brother, Daniel, again. The man who would become Sala's husband, my father, Israel Hoffer, born November 24, 1909, was also deported.

My mother, 20 years old now, and my aunt, Mania, now 18, were liberated by the Russians. They just had each other when they walked out of the camp. The Poles who had their apartment, business, and possessions were not happy to see that they survived.
They returned nothing and provided no help. One kind Polish man offered them a place to sleep for one night. My mother and aunt worked for the Russians until my mother was smuggled out of Poland to the American Zone in Germany, where she lived in a displaced persons camp, Feldafing, and married my father on October 16, 1946. They lived in the DP camp until they could immigrate to the United States in November, 1947.

My mother said that what kept her alive was random luck, but also the hope to live and raise a family, a Jewish family. She also said that she hoped to be a witness to tell the world what happened and what should never happen to anyone again. That is a mission I accept as passed down to me.

I know so much less of my father's story, for he was not able to testify for Spielberg's Shoah Foundation. My father was 36 when he was liberated. What I do know is that he grew up in a Chasidic family, went to Cheder until the 8th grade, and then independently became a Talmudic scholar out of his love for study while working in his family's grocery business. He was married to Pola Shillet when the war broke out, and she died in Bergen-Belsen. He lost his entire family in the ghettos and Treblinka except for a sister, Sarah Weiss, nee' Hoffer, who had emigrated to Israel in the 1930s. Like my mother, my father also spent the entire war in the ghettos and the Hasag until he was deported just days before liberation. He survived typhus, Buchenwald, Dora, Dachau and a death march. He survived to raise a Jewish family, but throughout his life he was plagued with bouts of depression. A poem he wrote in the small ghetto in 1943 survives to describe the anger he felt that later turned inward. Nevertheless, he passed on to me a strong love for Judaism and a strong commitment to our people.

So there I was in the country of my family's and our people's devastation. Saying Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, was honoring their memory in our people's tradition.

In Treblinka, we said Kaddish for my family members who were murdered there. Then later it dawned on me that I was in the Czestochowa Jewish cemetery on June 26, 2013—exactly

70 years to the day after the mass murder of the Jews when the small ghetto was liquidated. This was the same day that my grandmother, Bluma, was killed. Words cannot describe my feelings saying the Kaddish on that day.

I realized that saying Kaddish and being able to put my family's story together from the fragments I knew would have been enough. However, fast forward to late June in 2013 and another story was unfolding. And it continues.
We also went to see the Hasag where my parents were enslaved between 1942 and 1945. There we were guided by a Polish father and son. One a lawyer, the younger a law student. The father didn't speak much English, but his son did, so we were able to communicate.

As we were walking around the camp, the Polish student, Witold Straus, walked to the outer pylons of the camp and broke off strands of the brittle more than 70-year-old barbed wire and handed it to me.

He said that I should have it. Confused and alarmed, I said that I don't take things from memorial places! However, he informed me that the camp was being demolished and replaced with a new factory. Nothing but a plaque would remain to remind people of the evil that transpired there. I should have it, he added. Feeling his best intentions, I took the barbed wire not knowing what we would do with it. Perhaps we could find a way, I remember thinking, to memorialize my parents and the 6 million Jews who perished in the Shoah and the survivors who carried this legacy and burden for the rest of their lives while establishing new life.

That's the new story. What will we do with the barbed wire from the Hasag in Czestochowa? What do the wires mean? And what do we do with them? Why did we go to Poland, if not to honor the memory of all our people who perished? What began as a trip to say Kaddish became also a call to create a better future. The wire is a call to remember, but how shall we remember without drowning in grief? After all, the Holocaust is not the only thing that defines us as Jewish people. We found a beautiful and spiritual answer.

There are many people involved in this ongoing story. To start, with the help of the director of Rimon, the Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, we brainstormed many ideas, but nothing clicked until, at a Rimon fundraiser, we saw Claude Riedel's presentation of his Nerot Tamid, eternal lights, that he creates from blown glass and metal. These beautiful Nerot Tamid now illuminate Jewish synagogues around the world.

Hearing about the wire and the idea of incorporating it into an Eternal Light, Claude immediately resonated with the idea and invited us and Rimon director, David Harris, to his studio. The synergy between us was palpable. As we shared our experiences, thoughts and creative ideas, the Ner Tamid began to take shape in our minds. Then Claude turned them into reality.

Yes, a Ner Tamid! But why weld barbed wire from a forced labour camp into the chain of a Ner Tamid? For Claude, as for each of us, the wire gives voice to the call to always "Remember – Zachor." The barbed wire meant to hold Jewish people captive until sending

them to their death is here transformed. The Ner Tamid is eternal as is our memory of those who suffered and perished in the Holocaust, the Shoah. The beauty of this lamp reflects the Jewish life that was lost. In its light, our memories will never be extinguished. However, in it we also see the strength and resilience of our people, the Jewish people, the “tikva,” the hope and light out of darkness.

We see that the barbed wire of the Hasag camp is part, but not the essence of the chain of our Jewish continuity, just as the Holocaust is part of our Jewish experience, but not its essence. Now the Ner Tamid is ready to go into a place of honor where it can illuminate its lessons. The next part of its story is about where the Ner Tamid will shine in all its beauty and significance for generations to come.