

From Holocaust to Rebirth

Last month, I flew to France where I spent two weeks as the houseguest of my cousin Denise. We made a brief stop in Aix-en-Provence, which brought back a flood of memories of my life as a hidden child during the Nazi occupation. This is where I encountered Madame Levy who made such an impact on my identity as a Jew.

Therese Levy was my mother's friend. The two ladies met daily on a park bench in Aix-en-Provence, where my father, my mother, my sister and I had fled from Paris in April 1942. Madame Levy was a petite brunette in her thirties. She was a war widow; her husband has been killed defending France against the Nazi invaders. In Spring 1944, the French police came in the night and took her away. She left behind two little girls about my age; I was eleven years old. I used to feel guilty because the girls had lost their mother and I still had mine.

By the seventies, I was safe in America, leading a comfortable life with my husband and four children in Lafayette, California. Madame Levy appeared to me in a dream. She was naked in the snow, standing behind barbed wires. The snow was white, the sky was black, and she looked at me with pleading intensity. And the vision kept recurring. I felt frustrated. I would wake up at dawn and tell her: "it's too late, you're gone, I can't do anything about it, what do you want from me?"

In 1981, I was invited to attend the first International Gathering of Holocaust survivors in Israel. Five thousand survivors flew in from 23 different countries. The highlight was a multi-media presentation "From Holocaust to Rebirth" at Yad Vashem. We were greeted by the President of Israel, Yitzhak Navon. We were joined by another five thousand survivors already living in Israel. The Chief Rabbi of Netyana led us in the Kaddish. Ten thousand survivors stood up. It was night, and a cold wind was blowing. I was praying and crying when Madame Levy appeared over my right shoulder. She said gently: "Now, I am at peace, I can rest, and I won't be back."

However, she had gifted me with a new sense of purpose.

During my early childhood, I did not have much of a Jewish identity. We did not practice Judaism in the home. But my father had been raised in a very observant household, and we were invited by my paternal grandparents for the Passover Seder. I noticed that my grandfather, Dr. Passy, was always wearing a Kippah and reading the Torah. I resolved to be a Jewish sage just like him when I grew up. I am still working on it.

In Aix-en-Provence, my father, a construction engineer with a fake ID, was assigned to work for a Nazi Colonel. He spied on him, did sabotage and stole information for the French Resistance (he used me as his courier on one occasion). And every night, he would tuck me into bed and recite the Shema with me.

My father, my mother, my sister and I all survived the Occupation. But we did lose some relatives. My father's youngest brother, Solomon, also a Resistance fighter, died from a bullet in the chest leading his men in a military engagement against Waffen SS troops in the French Alps.

We were liberated in August 1944 and returned to Paris. My parents never mentioned the Holocaust, it was a closed chapter. I never received any religious training.

However, after the birth of my four American children, I resolved to join Temple Isaiah in Lafayette and make sure my son and my three daughters acquire a Jewish education. During the war, I had been brainwashed by Nazi propaganda into thinking that I was lice, filth and subhuman. I wanted my own children to take pride in their heritage. My father was my hero, and his courage inspired me to come out of the shadows and declare myself as a Jew. And Madame Levy's tragic end led me to recount her story.

Today, I speak to honor the dead. I also speak to educate the younger generations. I tell them what I learned from my war experiences: that you should never lose hope, even in the darkest days; that you should always fight for your rights, and that you should never mock or bully anyone because he or she is different from you. Racism and other forms of discrimination start with words, then, violence sets in.

One day, after addressing a school in the San Francisco Mission District, I received a letter from a young boy. It said: "I am fifteen years old. I thought my life was over, I did not want to go on any more. But after listening to you, I changed my mind. Thank you." That makes it all worthwhile.

What do the High Holidays mean to me? I watch that sea of Jewish faces surrounding me and I can't believe I actually survived, and I am free to worship openly with my community.

I am eternally grateful to God, and forever intent on my mission to keep alive the memory of our Six Million.