

Membership Shabbat – November 13, 2021

Speeches given by grandchildren of Survivors of the Shoah.

Noah Houck

Hi everyone, my name is Noah Houck, many of you know my grandmother, Mitzi Fleischer, who was a member of this shul until she passed in 2018, and my mother, Linda Houck, who is here today. I could go on for hours about my grandmother, Mitzi, who, to me was my grandmother, and a friend to all. In speaking here today, I will occasionally refer to her as Omi because that is natural for me.

Omi was born in 1917 and grew up in Vienna, Austria, in a mostly happy childhood. Her father was a tailor who owned a tailor shop, and her family lived in an upstairs apartment right there in Vienna above the shop. It was a mostly happy childhood and upbringing until the Nazis came to power, and unfortunately, Omi was there in Vienna for the Anschluss and Krystallnacht, until she was able to immigrate to America, along with her brother, my great uncle Eddie in February 1939.

I have learned many lessons from Omi in reference to the Holocaust. For instance, I will tell you all, two brief, as abridged as I can stories. Omi's father, Jochenen, actually himself immigrated as a young man from Poland to what was then peaceful Vienna around the year 1900 or so due to the pogroms and antisemitism of the time facing Jewish people in Eastern Europe. As a young father in the mid 1920's, with the rise of the Nazi Party, Jochenen submitted for an affidavit for him and his family to immigrate to America, where he had a sister living here in New York. My great grandfather was hoping to never to have to use that affidavit to come here to America, but, sadly, he did have to use that affidavit in 1939. My lesson from this story is that we should always be careful of the warning signs of antisemitism and never take these signs lightly. Also, I am very well aware that Omi's experience was the exception and not the rule. Omi and her family were lucky ones. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Europe's Jews did not have the same fate as her.

Also, when Omi was a child, there was a young man who lived in her apartment complex named Walter. Walter was a gentile that was slow and mentally challenged. All of the other children in the apartment complex would tease Walter mercilessly. However, my great grandmother did not tolerate for this sort of behavior from Omi nor her siblings, and told them to leave Walter alone. Omi and her siblings never bothered nor teased Walter. Over the years, Walter respected and was friends with Omi and her family. Sure enough, when the Nazis came to power in Austria in 1938, Walter was one of the first people to put on a Nazi uniform and join the Nazi party. However, because of Walter's relationship with Omi and family, every time the Nazis would come to harass, embarrass, or to round up Jews, Walter would give Omi and her family a warning that the Nazis were coming, and to warn them to hide. This was all because he saw Omi's family as friends and as people, not just as Jews which the Nazis would have wanted you to believe were all bad.

The Shoah and my grandmother's experiences are very much things that are often on my mind. It is frightening to think that in the present day, antisemitism against Jewish people has been on a dramatic rise in recent years. As we all know, antisemitism is the oldest form of hatred that goes back thousands of years. Make no mistake- anti-Semites always have an ulterior motive and an agenda. If the Shoah has taught us anything, it is that we must clearly take anti-Semites, and their actions seriously, and to deal with them directly and swiftly.

My grandmother was a major advocate of Holocaust education. On her headstone are inscribed the words, "Never Forget". To me, never forget means to never forget! For young people, this should not be just not a saying, or a trending hashtag on Twitter. We all must act to make sure the world never forgets. I take this very seriously. I not only say this as a Jew, not only as an American, but as a human being. I believe that a world without antisemitism is a better world, and an America without antisemitism is a better America. My grandmother told her story and spread her message not only to fellow Jewish people, but, to all people. Since she is no longer here, it is my job, and all of our jobs, to make sure the world never forgets.

I am now 32 years old, and the reason I tell you all my age, is that I am sorry to say that people my age are one of the last generations to hear Holocaust survivors speak in school. The unfortunate truth is that for school children

nowadays, they will not be able to hear survivors speak to their classes, and going forward, the only education they will receive about the holocaust is in textbooks, documentaries, and other methods of learning other than hearing directly from a survivor. As I previously mentioned, my grandmother was a major advocate of Holocaust education and spoke to people of all ages about her experiences. She would always say that while the topic of the Holocaust is never pleasant, it is so important to educate all on what happened, so that never forget and never again truly means never forget and never again.

We must all never forget the Holocaust. In my opinion, another way we never forget is to never be afraid to be Jewish. Whether it is worshipping openly, wearing a kippah in public, or even something as simple as wearing a star of David necklace, these are all things that ought to be normalized in society.

A fond memory of mine is about 25 years ago, when I was in the first grade at the Denton Avenue Elementary School, just up the road from here, my grandmother Mitzi and my mother Linda came to the classroom and taught all of the children all about Hanukkah, and, as an added bonus, showed the class how to make latkes. This was a public school classroom in New Hyde Park, where my classmates were Irish, Italian, Asian, Indian, et cetera. While I am sure that a bunch of young children loved those latkes, these sorts of experiences show that it is important to normalize being Jewish, and Jewishness in our society.

As Rabbi Cohen has spoken about over the years, the number 6 million is almost incomprehensible. Personally, I will never forget my experience at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem in 2015 on a Birthright trip. For those of you who have been to Yad Vashem, at the very end, there is an almost endless gallery of photographs of those murdered during the Holocaust. Sad is not strong enough of a word to explain that gallery, but in that gallery, there are pictures of young Jews and old Jews, frum Jews and not so frum Jews, and every sort of Jewish person you can imagine. Each of those pictures represents a human life that were unfairly and evilly cut short because of antisemitism leading to mass murder. The Nazis did not see us as individuals, they did not even see us as people, they saw us all as something that they wished to eradicate. We must never forget their lives and their stories of these victims. We must never forget this hatred that caused a genocide of our people.

As Jews, we always choose life. We love life. There is a reason that during simchas and celebrations, we often toast with, "L'Chaim". I am happy to say that my grandmother Mitzi Fleischer lived to 101 years old. She lived in a free country and lived the American dream, seeing many a Simcha, grandchildren, greatgrandchildren, and a life full of experiences. It is my wish that for all future generations, that there will never be another Holocaust, and that we will all live freely in a world without antisemitism or any forms of hatred.

May we never forget the victims of the Shoah. Thank you all for inviting me to come and speak here today.

Michael Pensak

My mother always used to say that I'd never understand what it was like to love a child until I had my own. I've been a father for 4 years now and I am blessed to have two healthy, smart, caring and loving children- my daughter Jordan and my son Max. They light up my life and bring endless joy to our home. Together with my incredible wife, Nicole we truly have been blessed as a family.

But with all the joys and blessings of being a husband and father also come great responsibilities, fears, anxieties, worries and concern. I worry about existential threats a lot. I worry a lot about the future world I will be leaving behind for my children. I worry about an uninhabitable planet where people fight for resources, I worry about a failed political system in the greatest country on Earth where fellow citizens are constantly at each other's throats and can no longer agree on even the most basic information. I worry about powerful technologies that distort fact from fiction and can warp young, impressionable children's minds. I worry about global pandemics worse than Covid-19 with no cures or treatments. I don't fear that another Holocaust is imminent but am wise enough to know that history often repeats itself, and that our understanding the Holocaust might contribute to understanding other genocidal events and human rights violations.

I also worry about the day my children become old enough and cognizant enough to look at the world's problems and turn to my wife and me and ask, "Why would you want to bring us into a world filled with all these problems." What can I possibly say to justify the state of affairs in our country and on our planet? How will I respond?

I will tell them of my grandparents, William and Paula Meyer, of blessed memory, who survived and bore witness to the unconscionable atrocities of the Holocaust. I will remind them of how they lost their entire families to cold-blooded murder by the Nazis and were forced into slave labor in various concentrations camps, surviving on starvation rations and a death march. I will remind them of how against immeasurable odds they survived and outlasted the forces of evil and managed to move forward with their lives. They persevered in a foreign country, working at several jobs while learning English in night school so they could assimilate and give their growing family the opportunities in life which were so cruelly stolen from them. They bought a small business and a home, sent their children to college, watched them succeed as parents and professionals. They were blessed with four healthy grandchildren and one great grandchild prior to passing; the best reminder that Hitler and the Axis powers failed in their attempt to eradicate the world of Jews. While never explicitly stated I know deep down my grandparents wished for their descendants the following: To love their family with unwavering devotion and selflessness; to never give up in the face of adversity or whatever obstacle life may throw at you; to value your education and commit to lifelong learning, to make something of oneself and have a positive impact on the world during your short time on Earth; and to never forget your Jewish identity and family history.

On these last two points, it is extremely important for me to make sure that the stories my grandparents shared with me and the world through endeavors like the Shoah Foundation don't fade into history but instead become immortalized in the minds of my children and their children and so forth. It is critical that they travel to their roots of origin in Poland as I did and visit the death camps in Poland/Germany/Czechoslovakia where our families perished. They will visit Israel and Yad Vashem and tour the country and marvel at the oasis a once decimated people built as they attempted to put their past behind them and build towards the future. As a third generation survivor I'm one of the last living descendants in my family to have had direct contact with my grandparents. It is imperative that their story is accurately told, factually correct and passed down through generations with vitality. We must assume our grandparents' and parents' roles as principal guardians of Holocaust memory and remembrance. We must make sure that the schools and communities we live in continue to teach and talk about the Holocaust and oppose any acts of Holocaust denial and trivialization. By doing

this, we can all hope to ensure that when there are no more first generation Holocaust survivors left, there can be no doubt as to their legacy. Thank you.

Ari Zelman

It is impossible to tell you about my grandfather and his impact on my life without mentioning the Holocaust. While I will never fully comprehend what he and the Jewish people went through in the Shoah, so much of what he took away from the experience shaped me into the person I am today.

I think the best way to explain the impact of Gramps' survival and experience in the Holocaust, is to highlight the 5 tenets that best reflect the core principles and beliefs bestowed upon me and my siblings.

Education: Gramps' education came to an abrupt stop when the war began. But you would have never guessed that by speaking with him. He loved talking to us about school and was genuinely interested in hearing about our favorite subjects. He would often remind us how incredibly lucky we were to learn new things and stressed that education should not be limited to the classroom. In fact, he constantly looked forward to the opportunity to attend weekly torah study sessions here at SRJC. Losing the opportunity to attend school at a young age led Gramps to teach us about the value of continued education.

Work: Like so many other refugees and survivors, Gramps came to the US without a dollar to his name. He eventually learned how to make jewelry, and even started and ran a successful jewelry manufacturing business for over 50 years. Some of my earliest memories involve going to work with Gramps and my Dad at Zelman & Friedman. I was struck by his genuine passion for the job and tremendous work ethic, even at an old age. He taught us that in order to be successful, we must work hard and choose careers that provided a sense of fulfillment. I believe that Gramps' determination to survive during the Holocaust taught him, and therefore us, that anything was possible if you work hard and put your mind to it.

Kindness: Growing up, whenever we would introduce friends to Gramps, his first question would be: "Is Ari treating you well?" It was his classic opener, always received with a laugh, and now perfectly clear that it was his reminder to always be kind. Despite the horrors he had seen in his lifetime, Gramps believed that

people were inherently good. Gramps was an eternal pacifist, which he developed from his first-hand experience of war. He believed that there was always a peaceful solution to any problem, whether the Middle East or a sibling rivalry, and treated people accordingly. Throughout life, I have tried my best to adopt this mindset in the face of conflict.

Judaism: Judaism was central to Gramps' identity from a very young age, long before the Holocaust even began. And for Gramps, like many others, the Shoah ignited in him a desire to be proud of and steadfast in his Jewish identity. Gramps instilled this value in us by celebrating what it meant to be Jewish. From a very young age, I remember, as I'm sure many of you do as well, visiting him in the pews over there, and listening to him chant throughout services. Gramps' commitment to Judaism also manifested itself in a deep love for the state of Israel. For Gramps, Israel represented so much more than a Jewish nation -- he believed its very existence secured the safety and longevity of the Jewish people around the world and because of that, its right to exist should never be questioned.

Family: Gramps taught us that there is nothing more important in life than our families. This is no surprise considering his experience during the war, and because of this, he was a mainstay at all family events, and always prioritized spending time with family. As adults, when we would call him to say hello, one of the first things Gramps would ask was how are your siblings. He had a unique relationship with each of us, and this was his way of reminding us that his grandchildren are a team, and to take care of one another.

These are obviously all very important life lessons taught to me by my grandfather. But perhaps the most critical and important lesson of all has been the realization that it is my responsibility to carry the torch, never stop telling his story, preserving his memory, and sharing the values he taught us with the generations to come.