

# Eulogy of Ziporah Eva Vardi – May 19, 2019

My 90-year-old mother, Ziporah Eva Vardi, passed away on May 17, 2019, an outcome of a fall that she sustained a week earlier. She died two hours before my plane landed in Israel.

I'd like to open by quoting from a short story my mother, Imma, in Hebrew, wrote some years ago, about her love for books since she was a young child. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade she wanted to be a writer. In Hebrew, the sentences "I am a writer" and "I am counting" are homonyms ("Ani Soferet" in the feminine voice).

*"What would you like to be when you grow up?" asked the teacher, "a writer", I answered with utter confidence. "Good luck to you," he chuckled. And since then I am a writer and I am counting. I count how many we were, my parents and my siblings, and how many survived. I count how many aunts, uncles, and cousins, I had, and how many survived. I count how many of my friends were killed in wars, and how many of their children were killed. I keep counting. In the last few years I count how many white hairs I have, and now I count how many black hairs I have left, as it is easier. I keep counting. After all, even in 5<sup>th</sup> grade I knew that I will be a writer.*

Let me now follow up with a story about Imma, which, I think, captures her essence. About 15 years ago, while I was visiting Israel, my mother complained about acute back pain. I called a physician from a home-visit service. The doctor gave her a shot of diclofenac (a pain killer) for the pain. It turned out that Imma was allergic to diclofenac (the doctor did not ask), and a few minutes after the doctor left, she went into an allergic shock. I called in an ambulance, which had a hard time finding the house, because at the time there were no street names in Kfar Haroeh, the Moshav (village in Hebrew) where she lived in. Eventually, I found the ambulance and brought it home. My mother was barely conscious, and I was terrified that we were losing her. When the paramedics approached her and tried to assess her condition, she cracked a joke. I knew then that she will survive one more close call.

We are here to mourn and eulogize my mother, but not only her. She was one of the last holdouts of Israel's "Greatest Generation"—the generation that survived the Holocaust, and then went on to found and build the State of Israel. We owe my mother, my father (who passed away in 2014), and their generation an incalculable debt of gratitude for their amazing accomplishments.

Imma was born in the late 1920s to a Chasidic family in Hungary. Her parents were Rivka Matl and Naftali Zvi Mandel. She was the youngest daughter, with two brothers and three sisters.

“Das Kind”, she was called by everyone in the family. Her stories about her childhood were of a happy childhood, until the breakout of World War II.

The Hungarian Holocaust started in Hungary in 1944. Imma and her sisters were transported to Auschwitz. (The two brothers were recruited earlier to forced labor by the Hungarian military.) On the train my mother befriended a group of young Jews, who planned an escape from the train, even though they did not know about Auschwitz. My mother wanted to join, but her loyalty to her family kept her on the train.

Imma survived Auschwitz by sheer will to live, lots of resourcefulness, and a few miracles. When they arrived at Auschwitz, they had to jump off the train, helped by other prisoners. The prisoner who helped my mother, held her in the air, looked at her small size (she was then 150cm tall), and ask her: “How old are you?” “16,” she answered. “Say 18,” said the prisoner and put her down. She was utterly confused by this, but when she arrived at the selection line, the Nazi Officer asked her, “How old are you?” “18,” she answered, and was sent to the work camp. Unknown to them, those who were too old or too young to work were sent directly to the gas chambers. A video of Imma’s testimony about her arrival to Auschwitz can be found [here](#).

In Auschwitz, she used her knowledge of Polish songs, which she had learned from her sister who visited the Polish branch of the family, to gain favor with the Polish barrack kapo (a prisoner functioning as barrack leader). As the kapo was the one who ladled out soup to the prisoners at the barrack, that gained Imma thick soup from the bottom of the pot, rather than thin soup from the top of the pot, which let her keep her strength a bit longer. (Normally, due to their very poor diet, Auschwitz prisoners could survive only three months.)

In January 1945, with the Soviet Red Army’s approaching, the Germans abandoned Auschwitz, taking all healthy prisoners with them on the “Death March” towards Germany. Imma survived the march until that one morning where the surviving prisoners realized that the German guards have escaped and left them free. Somehow she made her way back to her home town in Hungary. “There,” she told us, “only the neighbor’s dog recognized me”.

Eventually, she met there her brother, Binyamin Eliezer. They were the only two who survived Auschwitz. Her brother lost his wife and his daughter. Together, my mother and her brother left the town and went to a displaced-persons camp in Germany. There Imma met Abba, my father. On their first “date”, Abba gave her a Talmudic lecture. “How did you like the date,” I asked her. “I realized that he was very learned”, she said, “I liked it”. Her brother also approved of Abba. Her brother decided to go to the US, hoping there he can rebuild his life. My mother, however, was an ardent Zionist, in spite of her Chasidic upbringing, and she was determined that she and

my father should immigrate to Eretz Israel. (She did not see her brother until 1974, when she could finally afford to visit him in the US.)

Imma came to what was then Palestine in late 1947 as what was known as Aliya Dalet, using forged documents. Abba joined a couple of months later, in early 1948. They were part of the Achdut (“unity, in Hebrew) Group, which had formed at the displaced-persons camp. They were then drafted to the Israeli Defense Forces. They were sent to hold Be’erot Itzhak, a kibbutz near the Gaza Strip, after a fierce battle in which the kibbutz managed to repel an onslaught by the Egyptian Army. While the big battle of Be’erot Itzhak was over by the time they got there, they had to endure ongoing artillery shelling from Gaza. In Purim 1949, a month after the Armistice Agreement, my parents wed in a triple wedding. (By 2019, all three men have passed away. My mother is the first of the three women to pass away.)

In 1950, the Achdut Group founded Nir Etzion, a religious kibbutz 15km south of Haifa. The small band of 50 couples, almost all Holocaust survivors, was determined not only to build a kibbutz but also to have families. They had three children during the 1950s: my sister, Rivka, me, and then my brother, Naftali. Rivka, was the first child to be born in the kibbutz. Imma learned Hebrew quickly, and she and Abba spoke to the children, Rivka, me, and Naftali, only in Hebrew. To improve her Hebrew, Imma started doing crossword puzzles in Hebrew, a life-long habit that she kept until almost the very end.

In spite the paucity of formal education (mandatory education in Hungary before WWII required only six years of schooling), Imma was an avid reader since her childhood. (Her older sisters used to decide what she was then allowed to read.) Books and crossword puzzles, coupled with a dictionary, were her sources of education. In Nir Etzion she also learned English, which helped her when she traveled to the US in 1974. This also helped when I first brought home my fiancée, Pamela, in 1985. They became close friends. “I am a bad mother-in-law”, Imma used to say. “I love my daughter-in-law!” Whenever I’d come to visit, she’d ask immediately, “Where is Pam?”

Imma learned homemaking from her mother, who was a great homemaker (“balebuste” in Yiddish). I was a fussy eater as a child, but I cherished her cakes and pastries. In Nir Etzion, she ran the dining room of the Guest House. We moved to Moshav Kfar Haroeh in 1967 (Moshav is a Israeli village). I remember her crying when we rode the truck to Kfar Haroeh. In Kfar Haroeh, she was in charge of the dining room and the dorms at the Yeshiva High School.

But Imma did not forget her love for books. She took a course in librarianship at Bar Ilan University, and she turned her passion for books into a job. She worked as a librarian at the Ben Yakir School in Kfar Haroeh. Ben Yakir was a school for children from disadvantage families. Imma endeared herself and her books to these children, and the library became of a favorite

hangout for Ben Yakir students. She also volunteered as a librarian in the Kfar Haroeh Public Library, which was open only for a couple of hours weekly. This was her way of maintaining many friendships with readers, who came to chat with her as much as they came borrow books.

While Abba was a great scholar, who was widely respected, Imma's skills were social and she was widely beloved. Kfar Haroeh and the Bet Hazon Neighborhood became her new home, and she established many deep friendships. Her stories and jokes charmed adults and children, young and old. To her misfortune, two of her best friends, Nechama Remen and Nechama Disson, passed away years before her. (Ironically, "Nechama" in Hebrew means consolation.) In 1990, Imma and Abba "adopted" Michael and Tanya Shulman, who immigrated from the ex-USSR. They, their children, and then their grandchildren became an integral part of our family. They all went on to remember well Imma's "kindness of youth" also during the past several difficult years (see below).

I learned about the Holocaust from Imma, most likely when I asked her as a young child about the number tattooed on her arm. Unlike Abba, who had difficulty talking about the Holocaust, Imma was a legendary story teller. After she retired from work, she devoted a significant part of her time volunteering as a "Holocaust Storyteller", appearing in many schools and also on TV. She even had stories about Holocaust storytelling!

In the last 20 years, Imma's "candle" went out little by little, year after year, with physical and cognitive decline. Towards the end, she could no longer read books or solve crossword puzzles. The only pleasure left for her was taking walks and visiting neighbors. The good people of the Moshav, the Neighborhood, and cul-de-sac where she lived continued to support her, even those that never knew her when she was vital, especially after Abba's death five years ago, in 2014. She was also blessed with my younger brother, Naftali, who faithfully maintained the Shabbat tradition in Kfar Haroeh, week after week. She was also blessed with two good souls, Imelda and Jocelyn from the Philippines, who took utmost care of her for the past few years. I cannot thank enough all those that supported Imma during these difficult years. At the end, Imma remembered little of her dramatic life. She remembered only her happy young childhood, and kept telling childhood stories.

One of Imma's favorite books was *The Story of San Michele*, by Axel Munthe. The story ends with the sentence, "Rest in peace, old general". Rest in peace, Imma, rest in peace. The amazing story of your life is over. You can stop counting now.

