

SUFFERING STRENGTH PRIDE

# DYSIA SONENREICH



L-r: sister Rachel, youngest brother Yonah, mother Faiga, Dysia and husband Moishe Sonenreich, ca. 1947.

## T . H . E   V . O . I . C . E of a Survivor

By ANDREA JACOBS

# Having survived the Holocaust, she feels she can ride out the pandemic

**D**ysia Sonenreich, 89, recounts her years in the Holocaust with equanimity. Bitter loss never dissolves in tears. A few terse words unleash simmering anger. She is proud, wry, unbowed.

At least that's how I imagine Dysia.

**D**For the first time in 30 years, COVID-19 prevents me from interviewing a Holocaust survivor in person. I don't sit next to Dysia, studying her face as the recorder tapes her story.

I'm unable to observe intricate expressions — a happy memory, or pain darkening her eyes. The conversation flows back and forth on the phone in mutual isolation. Her voice is my compass.

The Beker family escaped to the USSR,  
where Jews were regarded as enemies of the state.



'In Russia, horses were more important than people'

**D**ysia was born March 10, 1931, in Chelm, Poland, to Yisruel Leib Beker and Faiga Beker. She had two brothers, Shmuel and Yonah, and a sister, Rachel. "My family was upper middle class," she says. "We were very comfortable."

In 1939, about 15,000 Jews lived in Chelm and comprised almost 50% of the town's population.

Jewish life in Chelm was remarkably diverse prior to WW II.

There were three Jewish-owned banks, several newspapers, a Jewish community center, culture house, trade union and a number of chapterhouses belonging to various Jewish parties. It also was the home of the Belz *chasidim*.

For Dysia, then a pug-nosed, blonde-haired girl, Chelm signified family, love and belonging — with some notable exceptions.

"One day I went to school with a Russian girl. We were standing on the front steps when a boy comes up to us. He asked my friend, 'What are you? Are you Jewish?' She said, 'no, I'm Russian' and he let her go.

"Then it's my turn. I had blond hair. So he lets me go too."

"Chelm was very anti-Semitic," she says. "The Poles called us 'dirty Jews.' But there were good people too."

Dysia was eight when the Nazis occupied Chelm on Oct. 9, 1939. The Nazis wasted no time conducting mass executions in the forest and preparing Sobibor to annihilate the Jewish people. "Yes, I'm sure my parents were very afraid," she says.

In December, 1939, hundreds of Chelm Jews were taken in trucks to Hrubieszow, where the Nazis forced them on a death march to the Soviet border with a thousand Jews from surrounding areas

The Nazis murdered an estimated 1,400 Jews during the forced march — but almost 400 escaped and fled for Russia.

Soon, Dysia would begin her Holocaust journey in the Soviet Union, where she says Jews were regarded as enemies of the state.

"In Russia, horses were more important than people."

**D**ysia's father Yisruel was successful in business and blessed with exceptional instincts. Once he realized that staying in Poland signed his family's death warrant, he plotted an escape.

"In 1939, my father escaped to the Soviet border

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**Dysia and Moishe Sonenreich on their wedding day, May, 1948, in a German DP camp.**

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with a group of men from Chelm,” Dysia says. “One of them got word to the women in Chelm to join their husbands at the border the next day.”

Dysia, her mother Faiga, brothers, sister and their cousin Nachuma packed whatever fit into their satchels and rode by horse and buggy to the River Bug, the border crossing.

The family arrived safely at the crossing — but they were not allowed to enter Russia.

“They wouldn’t let us in the country,” Dysia says. “I don’t know why. My father saw us from the other side. He was crying because he was afraid the Germans would kill us. A man standing with us said, ‘They’ll kill us!’ but another man said we’d be all right.”

The Bekers spent the night with a Christian family in Dubienka, a village near Lublin that was close to the border. Twenty-four hours later, they crossed into Russia and Yisruel’s arms.

After the brief reunion, a cattle train carried the family and other Jews to Libevne (now Liuboml and in Ukraine), “but

we didn’t stay long,” Dysia says. “We were taken on another train to a tiny village. I don’t know what it was called but it had eight houses. People were crammed in one room.

“My father worked in a stable, and one of my brothers, who was 13, carried water. The water was so cold that when it spilled on his coat, it was ice. We saw how bad it is there and went back to Libevne.”

Geography blurred as the family wandered behind what was to become known as the Iron Curtain, a place as foreign as Finland or China. Unhallowed ground recorded their footsteps, and their fate.

One day in 1942, in a village near the larger city of Kubashov, a regional center for the Communist party, a manager ordered Yisruel to bring wood from the forest and build sleds for the government.

But Yisruel was arrested for following orders issued by the manager, who dared not defend a Jew in the Stalinist-controlled regime.

“They took my father away,” Dysia says. “My mother got only one letter from him. We were told he was in jail and they sent him to Siberia or some place like that. We never heard from him again.



Dysia and Moishe, who died in 1988, had four children, and now there are three grandchildren. 'But three is not enough,' Dysia says. 'We need more children to take back what the Germans took from us!'

"People talk," she says of the grapevine circulating throughout the Holocaust that whispered both rumors and facts about the missing. "We heard that my father was killed in jail," she says. This was confirmed after the war.

"Russia was safer than Europe for Jews but the Russians killed Jews, too," Dysia says. "They just did it quietly."

**F**aiga, who was pregnant with Yisruel's child, gave birth to a baby daughter in 1943 and named her Manya. Amid this barren, frozen wasteland, she felt like a warm blanket of hope.

"I remember holding my little sister in my arms on a stove," Dysia says in a steady voice. "She was nine months old. A girl who was older than me sat on the other side. It was winter and the stove was warm.

"My mother went to get water from a well. The girl looked at Manya and said, 'Your sister is not breathing.' I said she's asleep. But the girl's words got into my head and I started thinking about it.

"I felt my sister's wrist and opened her eyes. They were glass."

Dysia and her family were deported to a forced labor camp in the Ural Mountains, where they endured bitter conditions for the remaining 14 months of their captivity.

"Jews who were able worked in the winter, and they worked very hard," she says. "We never knew what day it was.

"The Russians gave us a portion of bread every day. We had carts with numbers. When the Russians brought the bread, they took off a number from the cart."

After her husband's arrest, Faiga Beker took complete charge of the family. Although nothing prepared her for this, she unhesitatingly accepted the mantle. "She is the reason we survived," Dysia says.

"We had to sell the few things we brought from home to get papers to leave the camp. My mother sold my father's coat, which was hard for her. We had potatoes to eat."

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As Dysia recalls the hardships — three consecutive summers battling malaria, near starvation, unbearable winters — raw emotion pierces her composure.

“We suffered so much. We had hunger, sickness and cold. Unbelievable. *Unbelievable.*”

Liberation arrived in May, 1945. Dysia and her family, along with countless Polish Jews, began the long journey on foot or in crowded cattle cars to the place they once called home.

“But the train did not take us to our real homes,” Dysia says. “We were dropped in the middle of nowhere. The Poles shot at the trains as we passed and yelled, ‘The Jewish people are coming out like mice.’”

The Bekers roamed through decimated Jewish villages and towns searching for relatives. At least 50 family members, including grandparents, died at Sobibor or were executed in the forests.

Around 1947, a Jewish leader of one of several communal Zionist villages springing up throughout Poland invited the Bekers to live in the community, known as a *kibbutz*.

and after the Holocaust, Jews talked about conditions in the fledgling Jewish state — primitive, no apartments, living in tents, food shortages, the constant threat of Arab attacks.

Fortunately, Shmuel had an apartment, as well as a new wife. “Come with me to Israel!” he begged his family. Faiga, Rachel and Yonah said yes.

Moishe Sonenreich said no. “America is where we should go,” he told Dysia.

In 1949, her mother, brother and sister immigrated to Israel, where Rachel and Yonah live today — but Moishe and Dysia had other plans.

Dysia and Moishe alighted in Denver in 1951, assisted by Jewish Family Service. “Denver is a nice city, in the best country in the world,” she says. “People accomplish things here.”

Those initial years as refugees were a struggle, “but we made it.”

Moishe, who was successful in real estate and developed several financial projects, discussed everything with his wife before making a decision.

Dysia and Moishe, who died in 1988, had four children: Molly, Srul “Izzy,” Frieda and Marvin.

And how many grandchildren?

## When the Bekers and other Jews returned to Poland after liberation, the Poles shot at their trains and yelled: ‘The Jewish people are coming back like mice!’

Dysia, now a teenager, and her brothers joined the Zionist youth movement.

A question about how she met her future husband elicits a sly laugh. “We were walking somewhere in Poland and I was carrying a big satchel of food and bread on my back,” Dysia says.

“Moishe Sonenreich was walking in back of me, with my brother. I didn’t know him and he didn’t know me. Moishe asked, ‘Who is that little girl with such a big pack?’ My brother said, ‘She’s my sister.’”

Back at the Zionist collective, “we got better acquainted,” she says.

Dysia and Moishe were married in May, 1948. Their first daughter was born in a DP camp in Germany — one of several camps Dysia occupied after the war.

Her eldest brother Shmuel, who had immigrated to Palestine and fought in Israel’s War of Independence, returned to Poland and searched for his family. “He talked to people who knew us, and he finally found us, in a German DP camp,” says Dysia.

Just as people shared sightings of absent relatives during

“Three,” she says. “But three is not enough. Not enough! “We need lots of children to take back what the Germans took from us — six million Jews.”

Dysia, who lives independently, says her Holocaust ordeal probably prepared her COVID-19. “Yes. The Holocaust was much worse, but now the whole world is in this situation. I stay at home as much as I can, and take evening walks with a friend in front of my building.”

Raised in an Orthodox home, Dysia remains faithful to her roots despite the Holocaust. “I keep kosher, but I drive on Shabbos because I live far away. I have a *mezuzah* on my door.

“Of course I believe in G-d,” she answers. “People are always asking, where is G-d?”

Dysia smiles unseen, because she knows what’s coming next.

“We have a saying: G-d loves you with one hand and beats you with the other, but He’s not going to let us die.”

Laughter erupts on the other end of the phone, which delights her.

“We are going to live forever!”