

## FRIEDA AND ME

By Ira J. Rothenberg

A woman named Frieda Zimmerspitz Wurmfeld died on Saturday, October 14, 1995 (one day after Friday the 13th!) from a massive heart attack at the age of 85. What is it about her that warrants a place in this story? Probably nothing more than the fact Frieda was our family friend for many years—59 years altogether. The last time I saw her was on Thanksgiving of 1994. I thought I would see her again on the following Thanksgiving, but she passed away before then. After receiving the news of her death, I was stunned, and could not believe that she was gone. She was a link to my family history. With her passing, I feel that a part of my past is gone, too.

Frieda, the last of seven children, was born on July 22, 1910, in Slovakia, to Salamon Pinkus and Cecilia Schindel Zimmerspitz. *(To help the readers, who may not aware, Czechoslovakia no longer exists. Slovakia achieved its independence in 1992 from the mutual split with the Czech Republic. Bratislava is now the capital of Slovakia and Prague continues as the government seat of the Czech Republic).*

Frieda was a good friend of my deaf grandparents, Julius and Henrietta Benedikt Gross, in Bratislava. For a while, Frieda's former husband, Ludovik (Lou) Wurmfeld, went to the Jewish school for the Deaf with my grandmother in Vienna, Austria, which was about 40 miles from Bratislava. Frieda went to another Jewish school for the Deaf in Budapest, Hungary as the Viennese school was already full. This explains why my grandparents and Frieda didn't really become friends until adulthood. Bratislava was also where my hearing aunt, Renée Gross Hartman, and my deaf mother, Hertha Gross Rothenberg

Myers were born, respectively. In spite of their deafness, they all were multi-lingual. In addition to spoken languages (German, Hungarian, Slovak and some Hebrew), they also used a mixture of German and Hungarian sign languages. Frieda knew all of my grandmother's immediate family. Furthermore, to demonstrate Frieda's connection to my family, she told me that my great-grandfather, Eugene Benedikt (who was also deaf) conducted a ceremony to formally witness Lou and Frieda's engagement.

Everything ended sadly when the Nazis took over Czechoslovakia and made life miserable for many Jewish people. The Nazis forced them to relocate to a ghetto. They wanted to contain them to make it easier to deport them. Of course, most Jews didn't fully grasp the situation until much later. Often, they were ordered to squeeze into apartments already occupied by other Jewish families. When Frieda and Lou received a summons from the Nazis to relocate, Frieda rushed over to my grandparent's, as she preferred to live with them. They became co-tenants with my mother's household by necessity and by choice. They had two daughters, however, the younger one did not survive infancy. The surviving daughter's name is Cecilia (or Cece for short).

My grandparents felt it was safer for my aunt and mother to live in a Christian home in order to protect the identity of our religion and culture. My grandfather knew a Deaf, Christian couple (oddly, they had a Jewish name of Weiss) who had a farm outside the city of Bratislava. He moved my aunt and mother there. Although they had shared the apartment with my grandparents, Frieda, Lou and Cece decided to hide out elsewhere for awhile. According to Frieda, my grandfather complained about the hardships of having to hide out (he was 22 years older than my grandmother). He decided to go back to the

apartment with my grandmother in tow. It was a fateful decision that he made, because upon their arrival, they were arrested and deported to the concentration camps (I don't know where my grandfather was sent, but I was told that my grandmother was last seen standing in line outside of the gas chambers in Auschwitz). When Frieda found out about what had happened to my grandparents, her first thoughts were of my aunt and mother. Frieda's attempts to hide them under the cover of two different Christian households (one at a farm, and another at a Deaf shoemaker's shop) fizzled due to Aunt Renée's lack of cooperation. Whenever Aunt Renée made things difficult, Frieda was sent for with the hopes that she would succeed at convincing her to cooperate. Aunt Renée was a willful child (and truthfully, she had a mouth to match). She was given to talking back, which didn't help the situation.

Because Aunt Renée was stubborn, she decided to search for my grandparents. My mother had to follow her because she was the younger sibling and had no choice. They found themselves in Sered, which was a kind of ghetto or transition area, and they became trapped there. To make a long story short, they rode in cattle rail cars to Bergen-Belsen, a concentration camp, near Hannover, Germany. Eventually, Frieda and her family were also deported to a camp. She later told me she felt that someone had betrayed them to the Nazis. My mother and my aunt didn't see Frieda and her family again for a long time.

After nine months of imprisonment, the British soldiers liberated my mother and aunt in the spring of 1945. It is ironic to note that Anne Frank had died at the same camp only six weeks before. My mother and Aunt Renée went to Sweden first to recover, and then to reside. For three years, they lived in a series of orphanages in Bergsjö, Torekull and Billesholm. My mother went to a

school for the deaf in Stockholm called Manilaskolan, and Aunt Renée remained in Billesholm. My mother's teacher at Manilaskolan had a special fondness for her. He was the nationally renowned Nils Bergström. Mr. Bergström was well known among the educational and older deaf communities in Sweden. Mr. Bergström tried in vain to adopt my mother, but she successfully resisted his plans, for she had always wanted to move to the USA. Had she been adopted, she might have never left Sweden, wouldn't have married my father in the USA, would not have given birth to me, and I would not be here to tell this story.

Also, the Wurmfelds returned to Bratislava after the liberation. Lou set up his own tailor shop with a few employees. From Sweden, Aunt Renée decided to send a letter to my grandparents. She did not know that they had already perished in the camps. A neighbor found the letter and gave it to Frieda and the Wurmfelds, who were then living in my grandparents' old apartment. She read the letter but she was puzzled by the fact my aunt had used the Bratislava address as the return address on the envelope. She took it to the Hebrew Immigration Assistance Society (HIAS) and asked them if they could track down the source. HIAS investigated further and told Frieda what they found, that my aunt's letter had come from Sweden. Frieda responded to Aunt Renée. They wrote to each other from time to time from that point on.

Meanwhile, again through HIAS, our American relatives discovered that my aunt and mother were still alive, and living in Sweden. They contacted my mother and aunt. From there, Aunt Renée asked our cousin, Goldie Pollak Kohn of New York City to send a package of donated goods to Frieda and her family because she wanted to express her gratitude toward the Wurmfelds. Being a deeply religious woman, Cousin Goldie felt it

was a *mitzvah* (a commandment or duty) to carry out Aunt Renée's request and help other Jews who were experiencing hardship. She did mail out the package. Frieda appreciated the gesture. After three years of living in Sweden, my aunt and mother immigrated to the United States on a propeller-led airplane in 1948. They landed in New York City.

Esther (Frieda's oldest sister, who had hidden out for three years during the Holocaust and then settled in Paris after the war) found that Frieda and her family were alive. How Esther discovered Frieda is another story, which still amazes me, because it happened through a favor by a small group of soldiers whose nationality remains unknown. After their reunion, Esther became the impetus for the Wurmfelds to move to Paris. They had another and more pressing reason for wanting to leave Bratislava: the encroachment of the Communist Party. Upon arrival in Paris, they surrendered their Czechoslovak passports and remained there for three years.

Meanwhile, Cousin Goldie shipped out a few more packages to Frieda and her family. Frieda wrote back, saying that she was grateful for her kindness, but felt she didn't need any more assistance. However, she asked Cousin Goldie for a favor, to see if she could find Frieda's uncle, who was a baker in the States. Cousin Goldie placed a notice in the bakers' union newsletter with Frieda's uncle's name and her own telephone number. In such a big city, Frieda's uncle was amazed and intrigued to see his name in the notice. He called her up and asked for the reason behind the notice. Cousin Goldie explained that his niece, Frieda, was trying to track him down. From there, Frieda succeeded in making contact with her uncle. Eventually, the Wurmfelds immigrated to the USA. My mother said during that period although they were

physically apart from Frieda and her family, their lives were still interconnected, particularly through Cousin Goldie's generous efforts.

After they all had settled down at Uncle Zimmerspitz's home in New Jersey, it was time to enroll Cece in a school. Frieda and Cece went to the Lexington School for the Deaf, in New York City with their cousin Ruth, who acted as their translator. After having met Mrs. Seitock, the admission coordinator, and completing the necessary enrollment papers, Frieda asked if my mother was a student there. Mrs. Seitock's curiosity was piqued, and Frieda explained her association with my mother's family in Europe. So, Mrs. Seitock picked up the telephone and was talking into it, but never said yes or no directly to Frieda's query. Most Deaf people can read other people's facial expressions for visual cues or responses, Mrs. Seitock remained straight-faced, which perplexed Frieda. But then, Mrs. Seitock's eyes went to the door as if she heard something behind it. Frieda followed Mrs. Seitock's gaze, and saw the door opening slowly, then to be flung wide open. There stood my mother! She was so surprised. She signed to Frieda, "You're here!"

Although they knew they were still alive after the Holocaust, my mother never dreamed that the Wurmfelds would come to the United States. That occurred in 1952. It had taken eight years and many miles across the Atlantic Ocean to find each other again. Upon their reunion, Mrs. Seitock and Cousin Ruth were so overcome with emotion that they burst into tears. From that moment on, my mother's and the Wurmfelds' lives were tied together.

Frieda had seen my mother dating young men that were drawn to her attractive looks and personality. My mother used to go out with Morton Steinberg (who now lives in Los Angeles). Morton's mother, Helen, was really

fond of my mother, and hoped that her son would someday wed her. When my mother started seeing my father, Herbert, Helen tried to prevent them from continuing to date by telling Frieda that my father was a gambler (which in those days carried a stigma). Because I knew Helen, and because she had always treated me graciously, I don't want to give the impression that Helen did that out of meanness. Rather, she thought she could influence the situation in Morton's favor. In any case, it was true that my father enjoyed playing cards and betting at the horse track. Frieda believed Helen's story. And being a true *yenta* (Yiddish for busybody), Frieda tried to discourage any thoughts of marriage. Fortunately for my mother, she had the ability to make her own decisions and chose my father anyway. Frieda, Lou, and Cece were at my parents' wedding. My parents lived in the same apartment building as the Wurmfelds (one story below theirs) in Brooklyn, New York, for four years. Incidentally, whether or not you call this coincidence, I was born on Morton Steinberg's birthday.

When my parents returned to their new apartment after their honeymoon, Frieda immediately went up to my mother and insisted that she meet Frieda's guest from England. Having just arrived home, my mother did not feel up to it. True to form, Frieda wouldn't take no for an answer. Eventually, my mother gave in and went up to Frieda's apartment to meet the guest, named Eileen. It was a decisive encounter, for Eileen and my mother became great friends ever since.

Eileen and her friend, Gloria, wanted to visit Paris from their home in England and asked another friend (who immigrated to England from Hungary) for a recommendation on someone who would provide hospitality in Paris. That friend, who knew Frieda during her school days, asked Frieda if she would be willing to

accommodate the two young English ladies. Possessing a generous nature, Frieda agreed to put them up. This was how Eileen got to meet Frieda, Lou and Cece. When the Wurmfelds moved to America, Frieda wrote Eileen and told her that she was welcome to visit them again in the "States". Eileen later accepted this offer.

Eileen eventually met a deaf American man, Fred Katz, and married him. Later on, with their sons, they became my family's neighbors. The Katz family are Orthodox Jews and my family members are Reform Jews. The difference is the degree of observance of religious laws, traditions and customs. Orthodox Jews really observe these practices to the "T," such as keeping the Sabbath and a kosher kitchen. On the other hand, the Reform Jews are more assimilated than the Orthodox Jews, thus the observance is looser. Yet, that never stopped the Katz from being friends with my family. They never judged us. They've invited my mother as well as the Wurmfelds to all of their four sons' weddings and always included us in their Passover *Seders* (feast). They were also guests of my youngest sister, Sara's, wedding. This is an honorable testimony of endearing friendship between Eileen and my mother, whose beginnings were brought on by Frieda.

Eileen had a piano that belonged to a friend of hers. She was supposed to be holding it for him until he was back on his feet and had a place to put the piano. Unfortunately, he was killed in an auto accident. The piano stood in the Katz' apartment for many years. Frieda, who was not the type to keep her opinions to herself, often asked Eileen why the piano was in the apartment, taking up space, and "when are you going to get rid of the piano?" Eileen possessed a very sweet nature and would simply

tolerate Frieda's unsolicited comments. Ironically, the day Eileen finally found a way to give away the piano, was the day that she learned of Frieda's death.

My mother has a story about Frieda that is either humorous or not, depending on how you look at it. One day, coming home from Brighton Beach (which is located next to the better-known Coney Island Beach in Brooklyn), Frieda was suffering from a bad case of windburn. My mother, who was then in her late teens, suggested a remedy, which Frieda tried. She liberally applied cooking oil and sprinkled an abundant amount of salt on Frieda's body. Frieda thought it would alleviate the windburn, but she soon realized it was like a searing fire on top of it. To this day, my mother still thinks it was funny. I asked her why she did such a naughty thing. She retorted that it was Frieda's own fault for believing in everything that my mother suggested!

One of the times that we were invited to Frieda's for the Passover Seder, I discovered that Frieda knew and could say all the Hebrew words for the 10 plagues. It was amazing for me to see the extent of her Jewish education, because in many ways she seemed more American than Jewish.

She was a skilled cardplayer, and often played cards with my mother and other folks, mostly at the Brooklyn Association of the Deaf (now renamed as Brooklyn Society of the Deaf) clubhouse. She was a chain smoker, and we could visualize her at a poker table with a cigarette dangling from her mouth. In spite of this seemingly sedentary pastime, she could be really spry and mobile. She also went out to many social functions. She traveled throughout Europe and the Middle East a few times. She liked to spend money on outings, as she felt that it was important to enjoy life.

I am not trying to portray her as a saint. She did many things that infuriated a lot of people. She could be a pest, and aggravating, obnoxious, dogmatic, uncouth, easily misunderstood, inquisitive, opinionated, and bold. Despite all this, she was never dull. Although people often felt frustrated, no one in our community could hate her. They loved her in their own ways, and were deeply touched when they learned of her death. You could say her faults and antics made her memorable!

Because Frieda had a burial plot in New York, her body was brought to the East Coast. It was at the Katz' home that Cece had the *shiva* (a traditional Jewish sitting only when a death in the family occurs) so that a central place was available to accept visitors, especially long-time friends in New York. To me, it was like a full cycle of coming home. It began for Eileen as Frieda's guest in Paris and New York. And then the roles were reversed, where it was Eileen's home in Brooklyn that Frieda fittingly became a final memory, as manifested in the *shiva*.

In some ways, I felt that Frieda was a surrogate grandmother to me, somehow taking the place of my real grandparents, who did not survive the Holocaust. In addition, she had known five generations of my family (she knew my grandmother's parents and their siblings; I'm in the fourth; and my nephew, Justin, is presently the fifth). Frieda had seen my mother go through her pregnancy with me as well as with my younger sisters. She had been around for our births. She had watched us grow up. She came to our birthday parties, holiday dinners, my Bar Mitzvah, and my father and stepfather's funerals. When we wept, she wept with us. We even went to the same spot at Brighton Beach, where many deaf people congregate during the summers.

Although she moved to Las Vegas, Nevada in 1994 (I moved to California in September 1983), I still feel that our connection is based in Brooklyn, New York, which was our hometown for many years. During the time I grew up, the deaf community in New York City was comprised of mostly first-generation Americans. Many of them carried on the values and ethics of the Old World (Europe). The values and ethics that they believed in were education, responsibility, good and honest work, family, and helping others in need. They felt that these qualities are essential to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" in America. In many ways I was exposed to, and absorbed these same values and ethics. These are not only part of my upbringing, but a part of my psyche and my memories of Brooklyn. I feel that Frieda represented the continuity of the work ethic and the successes of the immigrants and first-generation Americans. Above all, I feel that she represented where I came from.

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