

Zippora-Nehama-Safira:

A Family Odyssey

By Yvette Nahmia-Messinas

“Several years ago, one Friday morning, Safira, the oldest daughter of Nehama and Avraham Kaufmann, entered her parents’ apartment in Jerusalem, took a seat in their kitchen, and started recording her mother’s Holocaust odyssey. Beginning that Friday morning, Nehama’s story unfolded little by little in her Jerusalem kitchen in the midst of chicken soup, Lithuanian style gefilte fish, and other Shabbat delicacies that she prepared especially to please her permanent guests of honor — Elad, the soldier, and Ariel, the boy-scout leader, her two grandsons.

Nehama was born in Lithuania, the center of Jewish scholarship and learning, to Rabbi Yizhaq Barouhson, who was the 13th generation of a family of rabbis, and Zippora Hayat, the daughter of a wealthy family that owned a cotton factory in Panevezys. Nehama’s father was the spiritual leader of Or Israel Yeshiva, while her mother was the homemaker for their children, Leah, Shlomo, and Nehama. (Rachel, their youngest



From left to right: Ariel, Safira, Elad and Nehama

sister, died in early childhood from an illness.)

The Barouhson family lived in a wooden house on 9 Paneriu Street in Slobodka, Kovno, in a neighborhood that was solely inhabited by Jewish families and where Yiddish was spoken in its streets. At Yavne, the Jewish gymnasium for girls, Nehama learned Hebrew and was a member of *Batia*, the Jewish youth movement. Nehama recalls the day when she and a friend skipped school to get to the airport and greet Jabotinsky upon his visit to Lithuania.

In June 1940, when Nehama’s father was in the US fundraising for the Yeshiva, the Red Army occupied Lithuania, and within a couple of weeks Lithuania was officially annexed to the Soviet Union. A year later — her father still in the US — the German army invaded the Soviet Union and occupied Lithuania. From that time on, the Holocaust odyssey of Zippora and her children began.

The family managed to arrive on foot to

Dvinsk, the eastern border with the Soviet Union, but, like other Jewish families, was refused entry. Having nowhere else to go, they returned home to Slobodka, where terror and violence reigned. “I remember that two or three nights after we had returned home, Lithuanian ‘partisans’ went from house to house and simply shot the inhabitants,” relates Nehama. “We hid in the attic of the neighboring family on Paneriu 15. We were lucky that the mother of one of these ‘partisans’ had been working for the family for a long time, and prevented him and his friends from killing us.” These pogroms, initiated and conducted by Lithuanians, during which Jews were murdered and raped, marked the beginning of what was to follow.

From August 1941 the family lived in the Kovno Ghetto. Their house in Paneriu Street was situated in the area of the small ghetto and another two Jewish families moved in with them. Nehama, Leah and Shlomo worked from sunrise to sunset. Nehama performed very demanding, manual work at the airport in Aleksotas, paving the runway for the The fear, hunger, and exhaustion of these days are engraved in Nehama’s memory. However, Nehama also vividly recalls her clandestine participation in *Irgun Brith Zion*, the underground Zionist organization that sharpened her mind

taken, along with others from the ghetto, to Sancai where they lived in concentration camp conditions. Zippora, their mother, took care of small children while their mothers were away at work. When Nehama returned to the camp 27 March 1944, the children and Zippora were no longer there. A woman hidden in the camp told Nehama that the Nazis had come at eight in the freezing morning to take the children. Zippora was not commanded to go along, but she insisted that she could not let the children go all by themselves. She was last seen in her pink robe and slippers, getting on the truck. All that night Nehama cried with the crying and screaming mothers in the ghetto.

Zippora’s legacy and love of children is affirmed every day by her granddaughter Safira. Safira Rapoport, Director of the Pedagogic and Resource Center in Yad Vashem works with children and youth helping them find material for their school projects. Safira also accompanies groups to Poland, in their search of family history. Safira has traced her family’s past locating all the places they were taken, from the family house in Paneriu Street in Slobodka where Zippora grew up, to Stutthof, Rehberg, Stobey, Brosen, Niederwoben, Hoheneck, Hecht and Strasburg, the camps where her mother was incarcerated



From left to right: Nehama with her mother, Zippora Feige Hayat-Barouhson. Kovno

and gave her hope. “We spoke Hebrew and held study sessions and lectures focusing on Zionism, Jewish thought, poetry and geography, with the hope that one day we would settle in Eretz Israel,” says Nehama. In the Kovno Ghetto, Nehama secretly read the writings of Herzl for the first time and lectured on Jewish history in her capacity as commander of a *Maa-pilim* battalion.

In the fall of 1943, Nehama’s family was

after Sancai. But Safira still does not know where Zippora and the children are buried.

In Nehama’s eyes, her grandchildren Elad and Ariel represent her victory over Hitler. Although Safira often worries about her son Elad, who is in a combat unit and drives the Patton tank, she is overcome with joy when she imagines how proud and appreciative Zippora would feel about her two great grandsons.