After the Survivors
How will the Holocaust be remembered in a world without witnesses?

By Dave Schechter
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"As long as you can talk about someone, they are not dead." — Yankl of Chelm in the play "Yankl on the Moon"

Norbert Friedman sits in a small soundproof booth at Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasters’ Midtown studio. As he has almost weekly for several months, the 92-year-old reads aloud from his memoir, “Sun Rays at Midnight: One Man’s Quest for the Meaning of Life, Before, During and After the Holocaust.”

Friedman is re-recording Chapters 10 to 14 to improve the clarity of his voice. He speaks with the accent of his native Poland. His memoir is written with the honesty and attention to detail of the journalist he had hoped to become rather than the Machinist he became.

Pausing between chapters, Friedman drinks water from a Thermos. He clasps his right index and middle fingers on a wet tissue to help turn the pages of the notebook positioned on a lectern. He reads for more than an hour, revisiting life as a resourceful 18- and 19-year-old engaged in buying, smuggling and selling produce and other food items.

This was the period before the Nazis came to his grandparents’ village in June 1942. Before the 20-year-old Friedman, his father and two uncles stepped forward when the Nazis promised to spare the Jewish population if able-bodied men volunteered to work in a labor camp. Before the Nazis killed his mother, younger brother and 50 family members one month later in the gas chambers at the Belzec extermination camp. Before he survived three years in 11 camps. Before he was liberated by the U.S. Army in 1945 as an emaciated, 80-pound man found in a barn. Before he served the Army as a translator for 80 pounds.

A visitor in the recording booth can only admire Friedman’s stamina and be awed by his story.

We know Friedman and other Holocaust survivors by their stories, tales that horrify yet fall short of fully conveying the horror. We know the survivors by their stories, which they can uniquely tell in the first-person singular, we will be able to preserve the history and teach about the Holocaust," said Holocaust scholar and Emory University professor Deborah Lipstadt. “It is inevitable with every event that the eyewitnesses eventually pass on. It changes the tenor of the conversation, but the conversation continues if it is a worthy one. And that is certainly the case in this regard.”

Howard Margol, 90, of Sandy Springs, a soldier in the U.S. Army unit that liberated Dachau, is pessimistic. “Unfortunately, most of the world has ignored or forgotten the lessons learned from the Holocaust. I expect the Holocaust to be even more of a distant memory after all survivors and liberators are no longer living. Recently, I have met some young, intelligent individuals who did not even know what the Holocaust was.”

The creation of the word “genocide” in 1944 provided a label to classify what happened in the 20th century in Armenia, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. The word “holocaust,” with a lowercase “h,” reaches back to a Greek word meaning “burnt whole.”

Sally Levine, the executive director of the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust, visits with Fanny Aizenberg, a survivor who volunteers at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

It was the Nazis’ genocide against the Jews that set a modern standard for inhumanity and gave “Holocaust” its capital “H.” Shoah is a Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe.”

Words are inadequate to describe the sights, sounds and smells. Numbers obscure the lost lives of individuals, families and towns. Still, the most accurate numbers leave their own impression:

- Between 1933 and 1945, the Nazis killed 9.5 million to 11 million people.
- The Jewish dead numbered 5.65 million to 6 million, including 1.5 million children — two-thirds of European Jewry.
- An estimated 25 million died in gas chambers. Hundreds of thousands died in “shooting operations.” Hundreds of thousands were killed by “gas wagons.” At least 800,000 perished in the ghettos.
- The deadliest camps for Jews were the Auschwitz complex, where approximately 1 million died; Treblinka, 925,000; and Belzec, 434,508.
- Poland experienced the greatest loss of Jewish lives, an estimated 2.7 million to 3 million, followed by an estimated 1.3 to 1.4 million in the Soviet Union.
- When the war was over, more than 3 million Jews had survived.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum defines survivors as “any persons, Jewish or non-Jewish, who were displaced, persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, social, and political policies of the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. In addition to former inmates of concentration camps, ghettos, and prisons, this definition includes,
among others, people who were refugees or were in hiding.”

There is no authoritative count of living Jewish survivors. Three years ago, the Conference of Jewish Material Claims Against Germany put the number at about 500,000. That figure is still cited, but the number today certainly is lower.

As of last year, Israel was home to 193,000 survivors, down from 233,700 in 2008. In 2012, it was said that one survivor in Israel died every hour. Last year, that was amended to one every 45 minutes.

The number of Jewish survivors in the United States is estimated at 130,000. Nearly two-thirds are women. Approximately one-quarter live below the official U.S. government poverty line. Slightly more than half are believed to be in the New York City area. The number in the Atlanta area is uncertain.

Jewish Family & Career Services knows of 200 survivors, and 50 to 100 more may live in Georgia, said Amy Neuman, the program manager of Holocaust survivor services. The JF&CS list includes 33 Russians. In the quarter-century since the Soviet Union broke apart, its Jewish survivors have received wider recognition.

Hemshech (a Hebrew word that means “continuation”), an Atlanta organization of survivors formed in 1964, has more than 140 names in its database, President Karen Lansky Edlin said.

Institutions from the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Midtown to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem are aware of the challenge when those survivors are gone.

“A number of years ago, I brought a group of Atlantans to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for a behind-the-scenes tour and a presentation by a Holocaust survivor. I had the honor of introducing her to our group. After she spoke, as she came down from the stage, she embraced me and said, ‘When I can no longer speak, you will have to be my voice.’ What an overwhelming responsibility that is,” said Sally Levine, the executive director of the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust.

“Holocaust survivors are human beings like everyone else, despite what they’ve survived. We all know about the lifecycle. You can’t stop something that is inevitable that comes with being human. The question is, what can we do while they are with us to prepare for when they are no longer with us?” said Liliane Kshensky Baxter, the director of the Weinberg Center for Holocaust Education at the Breman.

Baxter has considered this question for several years. “We have to face the fact that we are losing our survivors, and we owe them their stories.”

The Breman enlisted students from the Atlanta campus of the Savannah College of Art & Design to interview survivors who volunteer at the Memorial to the Six Million at Greenwood Cemetery, 1173 Cascade Ave., Atlanta. The ceremony will mark the 50th anniversary of the memorial, which was designed by survivor Ben Hirsch and built by survivor Abe Besser and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Marcus Jewish Community Center is playing host to keynote speaker Irving Roth, a survivor and recipient of the Spirit of Anne Frank Award, at 3:30 p.m. April 12 at the Besser Holocaust Memorial Garden at Zaban Park, 5342 Tilly Mill Road, Dunwoody. Read an interview with Roth at wp.me/p1GAXA-35E.

The program will include a performance by a cappella group Shir HaShoah observance April 19.

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Eternal-Life Hemshech, the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum are sponsoring a two-part Yom HaShoah observance April 19.

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Eizenstat also will speak at 2:30 p.m. at the Breman Museum, 1440 Spring St., Midtown, during a ceremony that will include the Atlanta Boy Choir’s performance of “I Never Saw Another Butterfly.”

All of the events are free and open to the public and will be held rain or shine.

To learn more about the Memorial to the Six Million, see the April 17 issue of the Atlanta Jewish Times. •

Yom HaShoah Events

Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, falls on April 15, and the Atlanta Jewish community is holding major commemorations on consecutive Sundays.

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the museum and produce 15-to-20-minute videos that include historical and family photographs.

“We can still teach. We can still personalize the Holocaust, because that’s very important, and, at the same time, honor the people who were members of our speakers bureau, who taught here for so many years,” Baxter said.

“We already are using them,” Baxter said of the videos. “We had not thought that we would, but when survivors saw these films, they were so happy with them, and it takes away the burden of telling the story, the emotional pain that they go through when they talk.”

Some 14,000 students annually tour the Breman’s permanent Holocaust exhibit, “Absence of Humanity: The Holocaust Years, 1933-1945.” Many are fifth-graders because Georgia requires the inclusion of the Holocaust in their social studies curriculum. They come from the Atlanta area, throughout Georgia and nearby states. “We do have to accept that when students who are fifth-graders — that means 10 years old — come here to learn about the Holocaust, there is a certain loss of innocence. They become aware that the world can be a very mean place and terrible things can happen to good people,” Baxter said. “The students can get overwhelmed, even when they are prepared well by their teachers.”

The Breman follows a plan for student groups. “We will first show the film, and, you know, this is really something. The students watch the film with greater attention than they do when they hear a survivor live,” Baxter said. “When the survivor stands up to answer questions, they are more thrilled to meet the star of the movie.”

A recent trip to the Breman by 120 fifth-graders from River Eves Elementary School in Roswell carried added significance for Tina Ratonyi, one of their teachers. The survivor who spoke to them was Tina’s father, 77-year-old Robert Ratonyi.

Robert was 6 years old when the Nazis rounded up Jews in Budapest on Oct. 10, 1944. He became separated from his mother in the courtyard of their home. A family friend took him to his grandparents. He lived with them and later with an aunt. Robert’s mother survived an Austrian concentration camp. His father did not survive a different Austrian camp. Robert left Hungary in 1956, when Soviet Union troops crushed a revolt against Communist rule.

Tina Ratonyi’s class read the book “Hana’s Suitcase” and watched a documentary on the true story of how the coordinator of a Japanese Holocaust education center visited Auschwitz and asked to borrow objects belonging to children at the camp.

Among the items lent to Fumiko Ishioka was a suitcase belonging to a 13-year-old Czechoslovakian girl, Hana Brady, who died in the gas chambers in October 1944. The Japanese woman tracked Hana’s path back to Theresienstadt, where Hana had been one of the children secretly producing artwork. Ishioka discovered that Hana’s brother had survived Theresienstadt and lived in Canada. The attention given Ishio-ka’s visit with George Brady led to the book.

One of Ratonyi’s students, 11-year-old Sydney St. Fleur, was inspired by “Hana’s Suitcase” to write a poem from the perspective of a young girl taken from her parents and transported in a cattle car to Auschwitz. She read her poem aloud at the Breman in front of Robert Ratonyi and her classmates. The closing words of Sydney’s poem, “Memories”:

Gunshot,
Woman crying, Guards laughing
And I’m dying
I lay on the floor heartless
Just like guards who took my life
I have a heart it’s not beating
Hitler doesn’t have that part.
It’s gathering dust
Like my body that has been left on the floor
To rot.
I never said goodbye

Goodbye
To all the Jews who never got to say good-bye.

Lili Baxter’s mother, Bertha, survived Auschwitz because Bertha’s mother told a guard on the train platform, “This one is young. She can work.” Bertha was pulled into the line of people put to work. Bertha’s mother and younger brother were put in the line of people to be killed.

Baxter’s father, Markus, made his way to Sweden after being liberated from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. After her liberation from Auschwitz, Bertha returned to Krakow. After learning that Markus was alive, she made an arduous trek to Sweden and was reunited with her husband in a displaced persons camp, where Baxter was born.

Baxter is determined that Holocaust education focus not only on its darkest aspects, but also on acts of bravery and heroism by Jews — not only the Warsaw ghetto uprising, but smaller deeds by individuals in the midst of oppression. “We teach by telling how the survivors survived ... how
much they lived. ... To tell it in a way that doesn't turn them into victims.”

Baxter distributes a sheet that outlines the “Four R’s” that characterized survivors: resourcefulness, resistance, rescue and resilience.

In addition to students, ranging from elementary school to college, the Breman hosts a summer institute that draws several dozen educators from around the state for lessons in how to teach the Holocaust.

The Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University also is preparing for the future.

“We work very collaboratively with our sister institutions in the state, throughout the nation and internationally (such as Yad Vashem). We have been working on a Legacy Film Series to capture the stories of Atlanta-area survivors. This is one small step to help preserve the history we have of this important historical moment,” said Catherine Lewis, the director of the KSU museum.

The museum, founded in 2003, annually serves 120,000 people at its campus site and through public programs, sending traveling trunks of Holocaust resource materials to more than 50 locations statewide.

“This is always a difficult transition for scholars and historians because you lose eyewitnesses to the historical event. History is not a static event; each generation asks new questions of the past. New archives are opened. New facts and stories emerge. So when you lose the eyewitness voice, you lose an opportunity to ask new questions of the only people who have firsthand knowledge,” Lewis said.

In the months ahead, the Georgia Commission on the Holocaust will bring survivors and educators to speak in Thomasville, Macon, Augusta and Bainbridge. The commission also plans more help for teachers. “Over the next two years we will be conducting workshops on teaching about the Holocaust to middle and high school teachers throughout the state,” Levine said. “We will share information about the history, pedagogy and resources available to teach this complex subject now and when we no longer have the survivor’s voice.”

The commission will update its “Anne Frank in the World: 1929-1945” exhibit in Sandy Springs. Levine said, “We will be making our exhibition more interactive, providing opportunities for visitors to also listen to the testimony of Holocaust survivors.”

All of those interviewed for this article agreed that as the survivors die, their children — witnesses to the witnesses — become more important in Holocaust remembrance.

Hemshech’s Edlin is the daughter of two survivors. Her father, Rubin, was the lone survivor in his family. Though many survivors did not discuss their wartime experiences, Edlin said her mother “talked about it like the weather.” Lola Lansky told her daughter how she stepped out of a cattle car at Auschwitz in the presence of Dr. Joseph Mengele, the Nazi doctor known for separating newcomers by those who would live and those condemned to the gas chambers. Lola stood as tall as she could and inflated her age. Mengele sent her to the line of the living.

Edlin has seen a change in conversation about the Holocaust. She recalled her mother speaking in schools back in the 1970s, when there was less interest in hearing from survivors. “I remember when it was not so cool to talk about it.”

The children “are very critical, and they will become more critical when we lose our survivors. They are the ones who heard the stories firsthand and saw the effects of trauma, of victimization,” Baxter said.

Tina Ratonyi worked for 15 years as a paralegal before becoming a teacher because “I wanted to have an impact on people’s lives.” She has discussed the responsibility of the next generation with her father. “I am finding that it’s much more important that I carry on his legacy. ... As the child of a survivor, it’s my responsibility to teach and carry the message forward.”

On a Sunday afternoon in March, every seat in the Breman’s auditorium was filled and people stood along the back wall for a session of the museum’s Bearing Witness series. Despite unseasonably warm weather outside, 250 to 300 people came to hear three sisters tell the story of their parents’ survival.

Sitting on stools on stage were Goldie Bertone and Betty Sunshine, who live in Atlanta, and Rosalie Wolfe, who lives in New Orleans. They are the daughters of Bella Urbach Solnick and Pinkas Solnick, Polish Jews who separately survived harrowing circumstances, met and fell in love in a displaced persons camp in Bavaria, married, and settled in Atlanta. For an hour, the women held an audience spellbound, passing a microphone back and forth as they told stories from notebooks each held.

While a photograph of Bella and Pinkas with their daughters appeared on a large screen, Sunshine’s voice cracked as she said, “You save a life, you save a community.”

When it was time for questions, one woman spoke for her daughter, who was too shy to come to the microphone. What can you offer that my daughter can take back to her classroom?

“She never taught her children to hate,” Sunshine said of her mother. In...
The national museum expects more than 1.6 million visitors this year. "We hear from visitors, educators and others that meeting a survivor is the most memorable part of their visit or classroom experience," Saltzman said. "We do know, however, that one day, it will be the museum — our collections of archives, artifacts, photos, film and recorded testimonies, as well as our exhibitions and educational programs — that will teach the world about the Holocaust."

A global survey on anti-Semitism released last year by the Anti-Defamation League confirms a need for such education. Interviews were conducted with 53,100 adults in 101 countries and the Palestinian territories. Slightly more than one-third said they had never heard of the Holocaust. Only one-third were aware of the Holocaust and felt it had been described accurately by history. Fewer than half of those under age 35 were aware of the Holocaust.

As the number of survivors declines, so do the ranks of American troops who liberated many of the concentration camps. World War II veterans are dying at a rate of about 500 per day. A year from now, fewer than 1 million could be left.

Howard Margol and his twin, Hilbert Margol, were part of the U.S. Army 42nd Infantry Division, which liberated Dachau on April 29, 1945. Film shot as Allied units entered the camps preserved evidence of Nazi depravity in a way that memories cannot.

Hilbert is no more optimistic than his brother about Holocaust awareness in the future. "In another 10 to 15 years, the most important stories and lessons of the Holocaust will be forgotten. To prolong this time frame, the various organizations around the country must greatly increase their Holocaust programs in high schools and universities in every possible way, throughout the USA and, where possible, some foreign countries," Hilbert Margol said.

"I hope and pray that offspring of survivors and liberators will repeat stories that they heard from their relatives, both Jewish and non-Jewish, for future generations. The Nazi regime killed millions of non-Jews. Where is the publicity about those poor souls? At the same time, I hope and pray that the offspring of the Holocaust deniers will either learn and admit the truth or cease to exist."

The aging men and women who worked in the Nazi camps continue to be sought by investigators from the United States, Israel and other nations. The Justice Department's Nazi-hunting Office of Special Investigations, established in 1979, was merged in March 2010 into the new Human Rights and Special Prosecution Section, whose stated focus is "human rights violators and other international criminals."

The OSI/HRSP has won cases against 108 Nazis.

"The Criminal Division no longer provides a specific number of open investigations. However, we have a number of suspects under investigation in connection with World War II Nazi-sponsored acts of persecution," said Peter Carr of the Justice Department.

Even though it happened more than 70 years ago in Europe, the Holocaust remains central to the identity of American Jews. A 2013 Pew Research poll, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," asked: "What's essential to being Jewish?"

Topping the list was "remembering the Holocaust," mentioned by 73 percent of respondents, followed by "leading an ethical and moral life" (69 percent), "caring about Israel" (43 percent) and "observing Jewish law" (19 percent).

In other words, most American Jews, living in an incredibly tolerant, open and accepting society in which they are free to practice their faith, still identify with something that did not happen to them nor did it happen in the country in which they live (and in many cases, did not happen to any members of their family)." Shaul Magid, a professor of modern Judaism at Indiana University in Bloomington and author of the 2013 book "American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postsecular Society," wrote for the online magazine Tablet.

Magid cited the work of Jacob Neusner, a scholar of American Judaism. "Neusner's concern is that the
centrality of the Holocaust as a source of identity for American Jews arrests Judaism’s development in America. For him normalizing the Holocaust means marginalizing it. This can be done by concentrating on memorializing its victims as Judaism memorializes the many other victims of Jewish tragedies throughout history.”

Jake Krakovsky is the grandson of a survivor. The 23-year-old Emory University graduate is the author and lone actor of “Yankl on the Moon,” in which he plays the roles of mythical residents in the village of Chelm.

“Yankl on the Moon” doesn’t deal explicitly with the historical facts of my grandfather’s experience in the Holocaust,” he said. “Rather, it’s a play that explores my own relationship with the Holocaust as a 21st-century Jew and the grandson of a survivor. The Shoah is in my bones and my blood, yet at the same time it could not feel more distant. I have never experienced anything like what my grandfather lived through. ‘Yankl’ is an attempt to grapple with a legacy of historical trauma which has shaped part of my identity but that I feel a great distance from.”

As to the centrality of the Holocaust to American Jews, Krakovsky said: “The idea that ‘remembering the Holocaust’ is the most important aspect of contemporary Jewish identity gives me significant pause. I would never suggest that enough time has passed or we should stop talking about it. But rather I feel very uncomfortable with the idea that the events of 1933 to 1945 can or should be the end-all be-all of postwar Jewish identity. I agree with Neusner’s central point, that American Jews must develop an identity that is less Holocaust-centric. We should never forget the Holocaust, but we cannot let it define us.”

He said “Yankl on the Moon” intentionally does not end with the Holocaust, but “with a charge, with forward momentum. Moving forward, developing and shaping Jewish identity on our own terms, is crucial for the future of our people. I would like to see my generation and future generations of Jews using Holocaust remembrance as a starting point through which to combat not only anti-Semitism, but the wealth of contemporary discrimination, oppression and genocide with which we as a human race are faced across the world.”

Lili Baxter prepares for that day no longer beyond the horizon. “I think there will always be the teaching of the Holocaust; no question it will change in some way. But it was such an overwhelming event that I think that the Jewish people have never completely recovered.”

Norbert Friedman packs up his notebook at the end of another recording session. “The narrators are disappearing. The narrative changes,” he said. Those who have known survivors or heard them speak become the witnesses of witnesses. There is much for the world to learn. “The lessons of the Holocaust are eternal.”

Krakovsky’s character Yankl says it best: “As long as you can talk about someone, they are not dead.”

Education and Assets
Eizenstat to speak at 50th anniversary

By Michael Jacobs
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A new emphasis on Holocaust education is vital 70 years after the liberation of the final Nazi death camps, Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat says.

Only eight states require Holocaust education even as it has become mandatory elsewhere in the world, in part through Eizenstat’s efforts since he was deputy Treasury secretary under President Bill Clinton.

“It’s a real shame,” said the Atlanta native and longtime Ahavath Achim Synagogue member.

Eizenstat, now based in Washington, will be back in Atlanta as the keynote speaker at the community Yom HaShoah observances sponsored by the Bremen Museum, Eternal-Life Hemshech and the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta on April 19.

Eizenstat has spent much of his professional life the past 35 years, since his time in the Carter administration, pursuing the claims of Holocaust survivors and the families of the Nazis’ victims. His work has included winning $8 billion in restitution from Swiss and French banks for Holocaust victims’ assets they held, $300 million in unpaid life insurance for tens of thousands of policyholders, the return of hundreds of looted works of art, a $50 million agreement with the government of Lithuania in 2011, and a $60 million agreement reached with France in December to pay non-French citizens who were deported on the French railway during World War II.

In a phone interview, Eizenstat said the pursuit of assets is a crucial but imperfect form of justice for Holocaust victims, and education takes on increasing, enduring importance.

“Education is absolutely essential to deal with two levels,” Eizenstat said: the Holocaust deniers on the fringe and the general ignorance of people. He said education has to look forward and address the lessons that can be applied, such as what can happen anywhere when good people fail to speak against evil, and not only look back at what happened in Europe 70 years ago.

Eizenstat cited some encouraging examples. He said Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York is making Holocaust education mandatory in Catholic schools within his archdiocese, and the Defiant Requiem Foundation, whose board Eizenstat chairs, is sending DVDs to the schools as teaching aids.

He recently talked to Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant about setting up a special Holocaust program to build on one school district’s penny program. Much as the Paper Clip Project brought home the reality of the slaughter of 1.5 million Jewish children in the Holocaust, so the penny project has each child bring in a penny to represent a child victim of the Nazis.

“The key is getting young people and teachers and principals to make this part of their curriculum,” Eizenstat said. “Now in most schools you may get a day or so on World War II, if that much, and maybe an hour if you’re lucky on the Holocaust.”

The Defiant Requiem Foundation, dedicated to the legacy of the Terezin prisoners who found hope in Verdi’s “Requiem,” contributes to the educational effort through live concerts, a documentary, a summer institute for educators and lesson plans on its website (www.defiantrequiem.org).

Eizenstat will do his part during the Yom HaShoah observance April 19. He will speak during the 11 a.m. ceremony at the Memorial to the Six Million, which was unveiled for Yom HaShoah on April 25, 1965. “When I was told about this being the 50th anniversary,” Eizenstat said, “it was an irresistible invitation.”