

Her brilliant life: surviving and thriving



Rachelle and her mum Mira share a happy moment.

Shule board member Rachelle Unreich's research for her upcoming book about her late mother uncovered surprising information.

When my mother Mira was alive, I called her every morning after I'd dropped my kids off to school. I could always anticipate the sing-song-y way she would say "hello" with the same delighted excitement, even though we spoke twice daily. I would imagine her sitting at the kitchen table, a cup topped with its silver coffee dripper filter before her. I only needed to picture my mother to smell the thick layer of Nivea cream on her cheeks, or to hear her lilting voice. I could mimic her Czech-accented English, which I always played for laughs.

I thought I knew everything about my mother.

Some of it, I had picked up by osmosis. Case in point: there wasn't a moment that I found out she had survived the Holocaust. There was no somber announcement; it was something I always knew. The reason I didn't have any grandparents was because they had all been killed during the war. The reason my mother had a series of blue numbers on her arm was because she had been in "camp". I had the vocabulary of the Holocaust — camp, SS, Gestapo, 'taken away' — from a young age. I didn't ask for details because somehow I didn't have to. They were imprinted on me like DNA.

But how much did I really know about my mother, or of that time? As I grew older, some details revealed themselves. Mira would recite particular stories, weaving them into conversation. They were somber tales, but she found a way to make them sound uplifting. Her mother Genya was killed when the two of them were taken to concentration camp Plaszow, but it wasn't those details she recounted: it was how a German guard intervened to save her life at the same time that he sent my grandmother to her death. I came to think of my mother's survival in this kind of framework, so that each scene took on a strange, wondrous quality, amid the horror. It was like mixing a recipe: the terror and the miracle, side by side.

By the time Mira was nearing the end of her life, at 89, her experiences had become a matter of record: she had given three testimonies about the Holocaust, totaling eight hours of videotape in all. I had watched all of them and I had asked her questions. And yet, I did not know everything. And so, in the last months of her life, I began to interview her. I wanted to sift through her words, her stories. I wanted to find out not just what had happened to her, but to uncover what I thought of as the true mystery of her life. She was not just someone who had survived the Holocaust, but someone who had thrived afterwards. How was that even possible?

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My mind always returned to one scene: when Mira was giving a testimony to the Melbourne Holocaust Museum, she spent several hours reciting a litany of horrors. She had lost so many people she loved; she had seen such terrible things. At the end of this exhausting recitation, the interviewer asked her what had saved her. "The goodness of people," she replied immediately. It was what she had told me again and again: the Holocaust had taught her about the goodness of people. Instead of concentrating on the cruelty of those who tried to end her life, she focused on those who tried to save her.

As I prodded my mother with more questions, I came to understand how she saw the world. When I pieced together the grace of her childhood — and learned that she was raised in a home where *Zemirots* (songs) were sung with so much fervor every Friday night that Mira said "the walls were trembling with our song" — her ability to find beauty in every corner, even the dark ones, made so much more sense to me. I realised that one doesn't just get to know a person by hearing what happened to them, by cataloguing the steps of their path. It's a matter of not only learning what they did, but who they are, and what made them that way.

When my mother died, I thought so much had ended with her. It was the end of her life; the end of my knowledge of her. But I didn't know there was more to come: that I would embark on years of research that would uncover a flurry of information about her, some of which even she didn't know. I discovered, for example, that when she had arrived at Auschwitz, it was Dr Mengele who chose her in a selection and she was allowed to live another day. She had never mentioned it; I don't think she realised what had taken place, or the identity of the man in charge.

It was strange, holding fragments of her life that had been in the shadows during her lifetime. And it served to further our connection, making me see that death does not end everything. It does not sever the bond I feel with her, that I still feel today. It has not stopped me from talking to her at night, remembering the way her spritzed hair smelled with its coat of hairspray or knowing exactly what she would say to me at any given time. And so I remember her, daily: through conversations I play in my head, through the lessons she taught me that I try to continue, through repeating those things she so loved to do: greeting people with cheer, reading a wonderful book, going to shule and hearing *Adon Olam*.

She is gone from this physical realm; our love for one another remains.

My book A Brilliant Life: My Mother's Inspiring Story of Surviving The Holocaust will be out November 1 in Australia/ NZ (through Hachette) and in the US/ Canada (Harper Collins). Available now for pre-order.