

## **WHEN RACHEL MET CHAIM**

**by Leona Wreschner**

Chaim Weiser and Rachel Fastman were such a well-matched pair that sometimes it's impossible to think of them having ever been separate people. As Holocaust survivors it's a miracle that they each lived to adulthood – never mind find each other, marry, raise two Jewish daughters and leave behind seven grandchildren.

### Rachel

My mother, Rachel, was born in 1926 in Drohobycz, Poland. She was raised in Lenz, Austria with her three older brothers and a younger sister. Rachel was only 12 or 13 when her parents were shot in front of her and thrown in a mass grave. Rachel was separated from her younger sister whom she never saw again and was taken to Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Her three older brothers lived underground.

And yet, in the midst all of this evil and horror, there were miracles. There was a female Jewish doctor in the camp who took a liking to Rachel and became her protector. First, she saved Rachel from Josef Mengele by putting a large jacket on her and then hanging the jacket with her in it on a coat hook on the back of a door. Rachel weighed so little, no one realized there was anything other than the jacket on the door.

This doctor then saved Rachel's life a second time. In the barracks, Rachel had her head shaved, she was beaten, and got extremely ill. The doctor saw her lying on a piece of wood that was used as a bed. She was at the end of the room. When the doctor saw her lying there, she told Rachel to stay put and to be quiet, and sent her medicine.

Rachel still fought, no matter what. As young as she was, she learned how to shoot and joined the ghetto uprising. She never gave up, determined not to give in. Rachel eventually left the camp in a wheelchair and with many other medical issues that plagued her for the rest of her life. Fortunately, after leaving the camp, her life was about to change.

Although Rachel never spoke of her time in the camps, she instilled in her daughters and grandchildren an inner strength and the self-reliance that one needs to be able to be totally self-sufficient.

### Chaim

My father, Chaim was born in 1916 in Tarnoff, Poland. He was raised in Germany with his older sister, two younger sisters and one younger brother. He was athletic and popular as a child and received more education than most Jews did at that time.

He landed in a concentration camp by the hands of a neighbor. He and his brother were waiting in line for bread and saw a woman waiting with her baby in front of them. An SS (Schutzstaffel)

officer pulled the woman off the line and his brother knocked out the officer. Chaim and his brother had to run away to escape. A member of the community turned them in. They were in the camps together the whole time. His brother was beaten to death three weeks before liberation.

When the American soldiers were coming through the camps Chaim was beaten and left to die just like all the other camp inhabitants. Chaim mumbled something in Yiddish. One of the American soldiers must have understood a little Yiddish, because he realized he wasn't dead and took him to the paramedics. When he left the hospital a month later, he was treated like a pariah. He was just sitting on the corner of the street – no one would come near him.

Finally, a Danish man brought Chaim a suit of clothing, so he could get out of the striped uniform. It was a terrible situation. After the war he hitchhiked and went from one town to another looking for his family and friends. He maintained a journal where he wrote the names of all the Jews he located in each town while he looked for his family. Although he did manage to reunite some people, only one of his 150 family members had survived. His whole family was dead, except for his older sister.

He got involved in the black market – dealing diamonds – and made enough money to go back to Germany. In Germany, he slowly built himself up in the textile business with his own company – that's how he got started. He was a smart businessman before the war, and he was a smart businessman after the war in the U.S.

## Chaim And Rachel

Chaim and Rachel met after World War II in Germany. Chaim saw Rachel from across a train station, walking with a mutual friend. He was intrigued and had to meet this beautiful woman.

Chaim wanted to move to Venezuela and live in the rain forest with the animals – to escape from humanity because of the evil he had seen and experienced. He didn't intend to stay in Germany, but that changed when he met Rachel. They were similar people, both with a strong moral fiber, both having survived a horrific experience when the chances of survival were extremely slim.

What was marvelous, was that they married out of true love - not because they were lonely or because of their shared history. Even after all that they had been through, they maintained the ability to love again, to start a family, and make a life together.

What was so remarkable about my parents was their attitude.

They were grateful for everything regardless of illness, finances, whatever.

Their response was always, "Thank G-d for this, could be worse!"

They always found a reason to smile.

I was a very lucky daughter.



Chaim and Rachel (Fastman) Weiss



Leona Wreschner