

**“Hello. Let’s Get Married.”
Marta Zwecher and Mayer Zelcer, My Parents**

by Rochelle Zelcer Lieb

MARTA (מאטל) ZWECHER ZELCER, MY MOM

Born: January 27, 1928 Rachov, Czechoslovakia (now Rachiv, Ukraine)

Died: March 20, 2020 Los Angeles, California, USA

MAYER LEIB (מיר ליב) ZELCER, MY DAD

Born: April 9, 1923 Yassina (or Jasiňa), Czechoslovakia (now Yasinia (or Yasinya) , Ukraine)

Died: June 6, 1976 Los Angeles, California, USA

In 1928 when my mother, Marta was born, my maternal grandfather, Ytzhak Zwecher, had an established dry goods store in Rachov, Czechoslovakia. Now in the Ukraine, Rachov was a town of about 10,000 residents, about half the population being Jewish.

Ytzhak’s family from a second marriage to my maternal grandmother (Rivka Shimshovits) lived in a house right off the main town square with a garden, animals in the backyard, and a synagogue on the property that my grandfather built.

Marta was the second of five children and the oldest daughter. She readily admitted to being spoiled by her father and kept in line by her mother. She attended a Jewish school and in her mid-teens was learning how to be a seamstress while meeting prospective husbands introduced by the matchmaker.

The holiday of Passover celebrates the emancipation of the Jewish people, enslaved in Egypt. How ironic that to both my parents, that time of the year also symbolized their incarceration by the

Nazi invaders from Germany. In the spring of 1944, Jewish families from all over Czechoslovakia were denied their livelihoods, removed from their homes, and sent to ghettos. The ghetto inhabitants were soon sent by cattle car trains to concentration camps to work and/or to die. Both my parents were sent to Auschwitz (in Poland), though they did not meet until after the war was over.

Marta was 16 when she lost everyone from her household in Rachov. She credits her survival in the camps to her cousin, Goldie. They shared everything, but most importantly they shared their will to live. Goldie survived and eventually ran the blockade to settle in Israel.

After many months in Auschwitz, Marta was one of thousands of prisoners who were marched by force from camps towards Germany as the Germans fled the Allies. Mom ended up in Gelsenkirchen at the Gelsenberg Lager. This was a subcamp of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. In September 1944, there was heavy bombing attacks by the Allies. She was one of many who were tasked with clearing the rubble and was severely wounded as a result. By some miracle, she found herself in the basement of a Catholic hospital. She talked about that experience like a dream sequence. She didn't think she would survive. She remembers screaming in agonizing pain. Finally they moved her to the front of the line of the wounded. She was then hidden and cared for by nuns under the direction of Dr. Rudolf Bertram. Dr. Bertram's name is listed among the righteous at Yad Vashem in Israel.

Liberation came before Mom was fully healed, but she managed to make her way back to Rachov searching for her family. Instead she found other people living in her family home and the synagogue built by her father occupied by horses. She also was dismayed by the emotional detachment of people who knew her family. According to Mom, they were worried that she would demand the money they owed to her father's dry goods business.

Did they really believe that ledger had survived when everyone else in the Zwecher family perished?

My dad, Mayer died young. He could easily have died many times over during the time he was persecuted by the Nazis during WWII. The details of his story of survival are a splintered tale. He shared very little without prodding and died of heart failure at age 53 at a time when his children didn't know what to ask or even what they wanted to hear.

My dad, Mayer Leib Zelcer had a religious upbringing. He was the oldest of five brothers born to Blumeh and Moyshe in the town of Yassina, a corner of Czechoslovakia that included the Carpathian Mountains. Yassina is now in the Ukraine.

The family was neither wealthy nor poor. They were in the lumber business. One of the few pictures from Europe that we had in our house in Los Angeles was of Dad's parents. They appeared stern, but loving. My grandfather sported a Chaplinesque moustache.

At some point Mayer was apprenticed to learn carpentry. This bit of training was instrumental in getting a sponsor and job in the United States; allowing him to leave Germany in 1949 with wife, child (me) and a younger brother. My Uncle Martin was the only other survivor of his immediate family from Yassina.

The Jewish population of Czechoslovakia was targeted by the Nazis late in WWII. Dad's family did flee Yassina and went into hiding somewhere to the East. But my grandmother was pregnant and wanted to give birth in Yassina, so they all returned and were eventually rounded up and transported to labor camps and Auschwitz.

After liberation in 1945, my father and uncle found themselves alone in Germany at the Gabersee Displaced Persons Camp. Among the 11 million displaced persons from WWII, my parents met at a party of Czech refugees in late 1945. They married

within a few months. I have heard many stories of these very quickly formed/decided marriages and have come to understand that there was a basic need to create family and to recreate what had been destroyed. I was born nine months after they married.

Dad wanted to go to Israel, but Mom was still recuperating from shrapnel wounds. They decided to wait for permission to resettle in America. This new family (including my father's younger brother), created from the ashes of war, arrived in New Orleans on July 4, 1949 aboard the SS General M. L. Hersey from Bremerhaven, Germany.

We were immediately put on a train to Los Angeles where Dad had a sponsor and a job waiting for him as a cabinet maker. He was 26 years old. Mom was 21 years old. Mayer and Marta raised two daughters and a son with love, compassion, and an incredibly positive spirit. Her story in her own words, recorded in 1993, is accessible on the USC Shoah Foundation website (<https://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=876&returnIndex=0>).

I remember my father for his tenderness. If he was talking to you within touching range, he would make some sort of physical contact. Maybe he would stroke your cheek or your arm or put his arm around your shoulder. He had blue eyes that twinkled when he was happy. He was a hard worker and after he opened his own shop, his only day home was Sunday. He rarely took vacations and was often too tired in the evenings to do more than eat supper and fall asleep. He didn't squander his hard-earned money and insisted that his wife not work outside the home, no matter the financial need. Mom was a recipient of reparation payments from Germany which often enabled necessary, but out-of-budget purchases, including the establishment of Mayer's business. He took care of his family and loved us all without exception and irrespective of disagreement. He and I had many arguments, but I never questioned his love.

My father was proud of his family and what he had accomplished. His three children all graduated from college and have successful careers and growing families. He was able to leave his wife and family a meaningful legacy, both financially and morally. He was moved beyond belief to play with his first grandchild, my son Ben, before his death at age 53 in 1976.

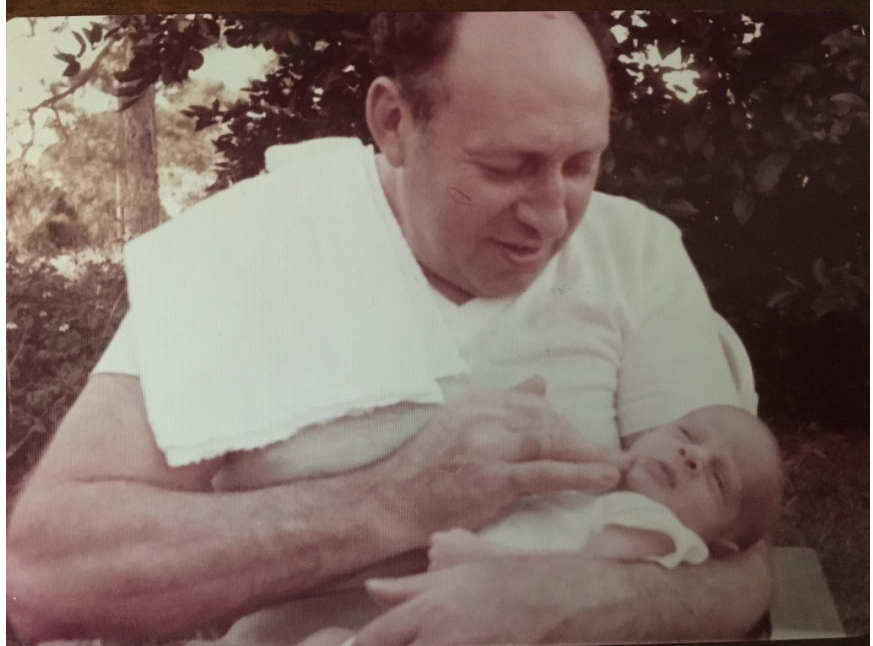
Five years after my father died, my mother Marta found a new love with her second husband, Harry Kleinman. Marta passed away in 2020 at age 92. During the last few years, her memory drifted in and out and she often talked about her life and family back in Rachov. She is survived by her three children, six grandchildren, and nine great grandchildren (so far). They carry the memories of Marta and Mayer for future generations. A blessing.



1948
Germany

The Zelcer Family just prior to immigrating to the USA
Front: (l—>r). Marta, Ruszena (now Rochelle), Mayer
Back: Martin (Mayer's younger brother)

1973
Immokalee,
Florida



Mayer Zelcer (age 50) with his first grandson, Benjamin Lieb

2019
Los Angeles, California



Marta Zwecher Zelcer Kleinman (age 91)
Rochelle Zelcer Lieb (age 72)