

Four generations beyond the Holocaust

Sylvia Berro is a resident at the Maurice Zeffert Home. On 15 August Sylvia celebrated her 95th birthday with her daughter Lucille, as well as her family from South Africa – her daughter Vivienne Gritzman and her three children, Vivienne's son-in-law Dean Sher and Sylvia's first great-grandchild, 7-month old, Naftali Sher, who she met for the first time.

Loaded with symbolism and significance, this photo was taken on the date coinciding with the 28th day of Av, the day in 1944 when Sylvia turned 24 and arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau after an arduous journey from the islands of Rhodes and Kos in the Aegean Sea. (The journey from Rhodes to Auschwitz was through the former Yugoslavia and is known as the longest journey to Auschwitz).

The approximately 1,700 Jews who comprised this transport were part of a 2,000-year-old Jewish community, many of who were descendants of the Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492. The Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos were decimated. They were a pious, religious Ladino-speaking community who kept their Spanish roots alive until the day they were deported on 23 July 1944.

The Rhodes and Kos transport arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau at about midday. By early evening Sylvia could smell what seemed to her like a barbecue. She asked women who had been in the barracks for a longer time than Sylvia what the flames were that she could see roaring in the distance. They replied that the flames were her loved ones burning.

Of these Jews who arrived in Auschwitz that fateful day, most were cremated that very night. Only 101 survived the Holocaust. Sylvia, one of nine siblings, was one of them, and the only one of her entire family, some 60-70 souls, to have survived. Her family members ranged in age from her 1-year-old nephew through to those in their 80s.

Sylvia was in one of the gas chambers of Crematorium 5 on 7 October 1944. She and two of her sisters were waiting for the pellets to drop. They could see the ovens being stoked to incinerate their bodies after gassing. Her sister Boulie remarked that at least they were being kept warm as they stood naked in what must have been minus degree temperatures in the Polish winter.



Four generations beyond the Holocaust, from great grandmother to great grandson: Sylvia Berro, Vivienne Gritzman, Tamara Sher and Naftali Sher



Vivienne Gritzman, Sylvia Berro and Lucille Stein.



*"My mum emerged from the war as the sole survivor of her entire family from Rhodes and Kos. We treasure this photo, in particular, for every reason."
Sylvia's daughter, Lucille Stein (nee Berro)*

Sylvia has described in detail the undressing room, the gas chamber, the rows of fake showerheads, the ovens being stoked just opposite, and knowing her time was up.

Suddenly they were chased out of the gas chamber. Sylvia always thought it was because "the gas didn't work." What she didn't know was that the *Sonderkommando* (the Jewish men who worked in the gas chambers) had staged an uprising and had destroyed Crematorium 4, shoving three Nazi guards into the ovens in Crematorium 2. However, because Sylvia was hermetically sealed in the gas chamber, she failed to hear the pandemonium outside.

She and her sisters were released. The one sister was gassed two weeks later, the other was shot dead during the evacuation march from Auschwitz in January 1945. In the interim, Sylvia had been transferred to a slave labour ammunition factory near Dresden. By 1 May 1945, she had been transferred to Theresienstadt where she was due to be gassed a fortnight later, only to be rescued and liberated by the Russians on 8 May 1945.

Happy 95th Birthday, Sylvia!

Shana Tova umetukah

We wish you good health and happiness