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Holocaust Houdinis (Condensed Remembrance Version April 2018)

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The Jewish Lawyers Guild and the Gender Fairness Committee of the Civil Branch of the Supreme Court, New York County and the New York County Clerk’s Office annually sponsor a Holocaust Remembrance Program. Why? Because, it is so vitally important to ensure that the horrors of the Holocaust becomes part of the collective DNA of humanity. It is also our sacred duty to ensure the Holocaust continues to be a living memory as we mourn the loss of millions who perished, cherish the survivors and hear their stories, the latter which should inspire all of us to create a safer, fairer world of peace and tolerance. Sadly, there is also a need for such programs to fight the bigoted haters who deny such atrocities ever happened.

Every year, we publicly read the stories of six Holocaust survivors, and after each story is read, the survivor or the survivor’s children and grandchildren lights a candle to honor the memory of loved ones. These six candles also lit to honor the memory of the six million souls who perished. Finally, our annual program serves as a constant reminder of our collective responsibility to protect the civil and human rights of all people in our society and across the world.

This special Just Us edition enables other members with our court system and in the legal community to read the six stories we heard, and the keynote address of renowned Professor Menachem Z. Rosensaft, General Counsel, World Jewish Congress and Editor of God, Faith & Identity from the Ashes: Reflections of Children and Grandchildren of Holocaust Survivors. Readers will also see photographs of the Amud Aish Memorial Museum’s moving exhibit specially created and displayed in our courthouse Rotunda highlighting the work of a Jewish family and non-Jewish Swiss official who enabled thousands of Jews to flee over the Swiss border, escaping persecution and death.
[This remembrance, written by Justice Gerald Lebovits, is a highly condensed version of his forthcoming book, Holocaust Houdinis. It will be published in 2019.]

It wasn’t mere bigotry. Or prejudice. Or anti-Semitism or racism.

It was genocide.

More dedicated were the Nazis and their collaborators to exterminating Europe’s nine million Jews than they were to winning WWII. Given their effort to rob from, enslave, and annihilate the Jewish people, less surprising is it that six million Jews died than that three million Jews lived. Every survivor suffered unspeakable horrors from 1933 through 1945. No survivor fully recovered. The survivors must be honored for who they were, for their will to live, for what they went through, for how bravely they endured.

This is the story — much of it a secret, untold until now — of two Central European Holocaust survivors and their family members who lived and died. The first survivor, Irene Lebovits (b. Sept. 12, 1925), is nicknamed Maca, like the unleavened bread. Born Irene Mermelstein, she lives in Florida. The second is her husband, Eugene Lebovits (b. Aug. 7, 1921), who died on December 1, 1994.

Only the luckiest survived the Holocaust. But it helped to be smart. Eugene and Irene were lucky and smart. Eugene spoke 12 languages, drew like an architect, and computed college-level math in his head. He was a charismatic man and a tough Jew. Irene spoke five languages and was beautiful: blond and blue eyed, a blessed child whose father owed vineyards, a distillery, a dairy farm, and a general store. Irene and her two sisters and four brothers — all of whom had their own servants — were proud ethnic Hungarians. So were Eugene and his family.

Irene and Eugene were born five miles from each other in a province then called Subcarpathian Ruthenia. Irene was born in Komlos (Chmil’nyk). Eugene was born in Komyat....
(Velikiye Komyaty). Eugene’s paternal ancestors, beginning with patriarch Mark Leibovitz, had lived in Komyat since at least 1728; on his mother’s side, some came from Nitra, now in the western part of the Slovak Republic.

Subcarpathia was Austro-Hungarian through WWI. Then it was in the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia. Hungary retook the province in 1939. After WWII, it became part of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Now it’s in independent southwestern Ukraine, in a province called Zakarpattia.

Irene and Eugene’s fathers were Austro-Hungarian soldiers in WWI. 50,000 Jews died in WWI fighting for Germany and Austro-Hungary. Irene’s father, Ludwig, lost his hearing in an ear. Zoltan, Eugene’s father, almost drowned in the June 1918 Second Battle of the Piave River fighting the British, French, and Italians. 20,000 Austro-Hungarians died in that bloodbath. Nobel Laureate Ernest Hemingway wrote about that battle in A Farewell to Arms, his 1929 masterpiece.

Some of Irene and Eugene’s relatives left Europe between WWI and WWII. Eugene’s cousin Hannah Senesh, a Palestine Mandate poet and spy originally from Budapest, parachuted behind German lines to help save the Hungarian Jews. The Hungarians captured, tortured, and shot her dead at age 23. Reinterred in 1950 in Mt. Herzl’s military cemetery in Jerusalem, hundreds of thousands lined the streets for her funeral procession.

Four of Irene and Eugene’s uncles moved to America and had children. Had they remained in Europe, they probably would’ve been murdered because of their faith.

Steve Lawrence, Eugene’s first cousin, was born Sidney Liebowitz in 1935 in Brooklyn, U.S.A. Steve married Eydie Gormé. Together they were American singing sensations. Regulars on the Ed Sullivan Show, Steve and Eydie performed with the likes of Frank Sinatra, who always credited Steve as the greatest singer he’d ever heard. A younger generation of fans might recall Steve as Maury Sline from the 1980 Blues Brothers movie or as Morty Fine, Fran’s father’s voice from TV’s The Nanny.

Eugene’s first-cousin Sheldon Mermelstein, married to Fran Greher, was born in Brooklyn in 1944. A long-time Manhattan Lower East Sider, Sheldon retired as the Director of Investigations at America’s largest social-services agency, the New York City Human Resources/Department of Social Services Administration. Fran retired as the Preschool Director of the Rosenbaum Yeshiva of North Jersey.

Irene’s first cousin Milton Mermelstein, from Newark, New Jersey, was an intelligence officer on a U.S. warship that landed with the first wave at Utah Beach on D-Day. An esteemed New York City lawyer, he became chairman of board of the Alexander’s Department Stores. Though Jewish, his passion was Catholic charities. He received an honorary doctorate from New York City’s St. John’s University, a Vincentian institution that teaches how to
find God and oneself in public service. A leader of the Knights of Malta, Milton was knighted by the Pope.

Seymour (Cy) Mermelstein, another of Irene’s first cousins from Newark, New Jersey, fought in WWII with the Devil’s Brigade. This 1800-man unit, 463 of whom died in combat, killed some 12,000 German soldiers and captured another 7000. The Devil’s Brigade was featured in books, TV, and movies (Devil’s Brigade (1968); Monuments Men (2014)). In 2013, the Devil’s Brigade received the Congressional Gold Medal. The Speaker of the House called Cy and his comrades-at-arms “the finest of the finest.” Cy also helped liberate Germany’s Buchenwald Concentration Camp, where the Nazis crucified priests upside down.

550,000 American Jews fought in WWII. 38,338 died. 52,000, including Milton and Cy, earned military honors. For these GI Jews, fighting the Germans was a personal affair. So was defending America, their home.

Unlike the handful who escaped to America, most of Irene and Eugene’s relatives remained in Europe. The Holocaust destroyed their world.

In 1922, Eugene’s family moved from Komyat in the newly formed Czechoslovakia to Satmar (Satu Mare) in Northern Transylvania, Romania, because Benjamin Lebovits, Eugene’s grandfather, was murdered by two Ukrainian brothers who owed him money. Everyone knew who did it. The authorities did nothing.

The Hungarians retook Satmar from the Romanians in 1940 in a deal Hitler imposed on Romania. Eugene was drafted into the Hungarian Labor Battalions in October 1942. It was slave labor enforced by military discipline. He heard that his Battalion was going to the Eastern Front. No Jew who went was ever heard from again. Eugene escaped in September 1943. He was lucky. The German and Hungarian armies used the Jewish Battalion slaves as human mine sweepers. Two of Irene’s brothers, Dr. Arnold Mermelstein, a lawyer, and Dr. Ernest Mermelstein, a dentist, both Battalion slaves, lived through the mines but perished on the Eastern Front when the Nazi SS or the Hungarians locked them inside a barn and burned it down. Arnold and Ernest were married. Their spouses, Ettu and Rachel, survived the camps and moved respectively to Israel and Canada after the war.

Eugene eluded the fate of Irene’s brothers by hiding in Budapest in September 1943. The Hungarians put a price on his head for de-
sertion. His face was on wanted posters. And Budapest was unsafe. The Hungarian Arrow Cross fascist militiamen — the Nyilas — spent their days lynching Jews from lampposts and shooting 20,000 of them into the Danube.

One day, Eugene wore a monogrammed shirt with his real initials on it. Another Jew caught him and demanded hush money. Eugene refused, saying, “You’re a Jew. You’ll never turn me in.” But he did, and Hungarian counterintelligence arrested Eugene. Eugene was imprisoned and tortured in the Buda Castle, the Gestapo headquarters, and then turned over to the Hungarians for a court-martial show trial. He was tried in Kolosvar (Cluj) for desertion before Hungarian military judges, who sentenced him to death by firing squad. By day during the trial, the firing squad was practicing in the courthouse yard. By night, Jews, including Eugene’s family, held candlelight vigils outside his prison.

Three months before the near-total annihilation of the Northern Transylvanian Jews, the rabbis and the governing Jewish Council placed a tax on every relatively rich Jewish family in three cities to bribe Hungarian Col.-General Lajos Veress de Dálnok, the Deputy Regent of Hungary, to commute Eugene’s sentence. Redeeming Jewish captives is a religious commandment called pidyon shvuyim. Izrael Lieb Berko, later martyred in Auschwitz, collected the bribe to save Eugene. (Izrael’s grandson is a Legal Aid Society lawyer in New York City.) The court resented Eugene to 10 years’ hard labor.

Eugene didn’t complete his sentence. He escaped from hard labor after a few months and hid for a few months on the estate of Count János Esterházy, a rightous gentile. By then the Soviets had liberated the area. But the Soviets captured and jailed Eugene in Debrecen, Hungary, pending his deportation to Siberia as a stateless person. Eugene talked his way out of jail after two months by befriending the prison’s Soviet commanding officer, a Jewess.

He then returned to Satmar in late 1944 and joined the Siguranța Statului, King Michael I’s Romanian secret police. (King Michael had led the August 1944 coup that caused Romania to switch sides and join the Soviets against Germany and Hungary.) Part time Eugene co-owned a textile store in Satmar and made a fortune smuggling people and things. He quickly went from slavery, prison, and destitution to having a beautiful apartment, a car, and a Harley Davidson motorcycle. His best friend was Satu Mare County Siguranța Chief Lt.-Col. Ludovic Weiss, a survivor whose wife was murdered. After Romania’s Soviet occupiers demanded that secret-police commanders have a college degree, Eugene forged for Weiss an entire academic record, including a doctorate-of-laws diploma.

Eugene’s return to Satmar was punctuated with the knowledge that most people he knew were now dead. Eugene’s mother Toba, father Zoltan, and sister Katie were deported to Auschwitz in May 1944 and murdered. Eugene’s brother, Carol, went to Melk, a Mauthausen Concentration Satellite camp, to dig tunnels in an extermination-through-work program. Carol complained about a kapo’s cruelty to Jews. To avenge that slight, the kapo, a Jew from Satmar named Spitz, beat Carol to death in front of other inmates. A memorial with Carol’s name on it is all that’s left of him. Eugene was the only mem-

Irene and Lili’s train transport from Auschwitz II-Birkenau to Lorenz on September 12, 1944, Irene’s 19th birthday
ber of his immediate family who survived the Nazis and their collaborators.

As badly as Eugene suffered, Irene suffered more.

In 1941, the Hungarian police arrested 20,000 Subcarpathian Jews — Irene and Eugene’s neighbors — on the pretext that they were aliens. They were handed over to the Ukrainian Auxiliary Police and the Einsatzgruppen, the German mobile killing units, who shot them into pits in Kaminets-Podolsk over three August days. It was the Holocaust’s first industrial-scale murder.

Irene attended a Ukrainian-Hungarian gymnasium, a high school that prepares students for university. She had to quit school at age 14. Hungarian law forbade Jews to attend school.

But things got worse. In April 1944, Irene and her family were arrested and herded into two of Subcarpathia’s 17 Jewish ghettos. A month later, Irene and her entire immediate family, together with 90,000 other Jews, were deported to Auschwitz II–Birkenau from an obscenely teeming and filthy brick factory in Munkachevo that served as a ghetto. (Among those in that factory awaiting deportation was Israeli actor Gal Godot’s grandfather, Abraham Weiss, who survived Auschwitz.) Irene’s sister Lili met a young dentist, Dr. Harry Katz, on the three-night train ride to Auschwitz. They fell in love in their cattle-car.

Gassed and cremated the day they arrived in Auschwitz were Irene’s mother Rose; father Ludwig; and one-year-old Leah, Edmund and his wife Matilda’s baby. (The Zyklon B (hydrogen cyanide) gas that killed them was made by the same company that made Bayer Children’s Aspirin.) The story of Leah’s murder is told in Matilda’s sister Gaby Kramer’s book, Andor Kept His Promise from the Grave (2006).

The SS transferred Edmund and Harry to Gross Rosen and from there to other camps. Edmund escaped during a death march by rolling down a mountain and was liberated in April 1945 by American troops in Plauen, Germany.

Inside Auschwitz, Irene was marching one day with Lili and Elizabeth, her two sisters, when the SS told her to take a path away from her sisters. Dr. Joseph Mengele, the angel of death, stood guard at this selection. He beat with his riding crop anyone voicing discontent. But he granted Irene’s plea to go with her sisters. Irene says it was because she was blond with
blue eyes and thus to Mengele not a Jew. That’s how the three sisters went to Birkenau, taking the path now traversed in the annual March of the Living at Auschwitz as Israeli fighter jets scream overhead.

In Birkenau the sisters lived outside, in the mud. After a month, Mengele selected Irene and Lili, because of their perfect eyesight and good hands, for slave labor at a German Sudetenland munitions factory in Ober-Hohenelbe at a Gross Rosen subcamp. The train to the factory arrived on September 12, 1944, Irene’s 19th birthday. The factory, operated by a company called C. Lorenz AG and owned today by Nokia, built V-1 rockets that rained over London. Lorenz, which used 24,000 slaves during WWII, also invented and built the Lorenz Cipher, known as the Enigma Machine. The V-I rockets from Irene’s factory were duds. Two German Jewish sisters, both kapos, sabotaged every rocket, with the help of Irene, Lili, and the other Jewish women inmates.

Irene and Lili weren’t the only German captives in slave labor during WWII. Germany profited during the war from its 12 million slave laborers, including children. As to the Jews, the same companies that fired their paid Jewish employees because they were Jews later rehired them as slaves and then often worked them to death. More than 2000 German companies made fortunes exploiting the slaves assigned to them, including Krupp, IG Farben, Bosch, Henschel, Deutsche Bank, Siemens, Daimler-Benz, BMW, Ford, Opel, and Volkswagen. German pharmaceutical companies made double profits: free slaves — and an unlimited number of non-consenting victims on whom they experimented with their drugs and vaccines and on whom they performed unsanitary, murderous surgery without anesthesia.

As the Soviets got closer to Lorenz, the Germans left. Irene and Lili went home. Their sister, Elizabeth, remained in Auschwitz almost until Soviet liberation. One time during a roll call Mengele kicked Elizabeth in her emaciated stomach with his jackboots while calling her “Jude!” (meaning Jew). He then sent her to the gas chamber. But it was full, and she returned to her bunk.

Elizabeth’s first husband, Dr. Eugene Klein, a lawyer, was deported to Auschwitz and never heard from again. In Satmar after the war she remarried blond and blue-eyed Joseph Zelig, whose first wife and two sons were murdered. Joe, hiding in Budapest during the war, lived in the Swiss embassy and worked with Swiss Vice-Counsel Carl Lutz, who saved 62,000 Jews.
Eugene courted Irene. On September 11, 1945, they married in Satmar. Irene would turn 20 the next day; Eugene had turned 24 five weeks earlier. They had a daughter, Agi, named after Irene’s best friend, who never returned from the camps. Lili married Harry upon their liberation.

Many Jewish survivors after the war tried to go Mandate Palestine to break the British blockade, in place until Israel’s independence in 1948. As a Siguranța agent and smuggler, Eugene was in charge of a few hundred displaced Jews who traveled from Hungary through Romania on their way to sail to Palestine as part of the Aliyah Bet movement.

He also saved the remnants of Irene’s family, including Lili, Harry, Matilda, and Edmund, by leading an armed rescue mission across the Iron Curtain from Romania into Tisza-Újlak (Vylock) in Soviet Subcarpathia (now Zakarpattia, Ukraine) and back.

(After Irene’s sister-in-law Matilda passed away at age 38 in Montreal, Edmund married Polly Baron from Radom, Masovian Voivodeship, Poland. Polly had witnessed the murder of her parents Israel and Blima Baran and brother Shaiyeh Yossle Baran, three among the 3.2 million Jewish Poles murdered in the Holocaust. Polly went to Auschwitz at age 13. She, brother Albert, and sisters Manya, Shayva Rosner, and Chava Ita survived the Holocaust.)

After paying a fortune in bribes and for his service to the Kingdom of Romania, Eugene in late 1947 secured valid passports and exit visas in Bucharest, Romania’s capital, to escape from Communist Europe. (In August 1948, eight months after Irene and Eugene left Romania, the Siguranța became the Departamentul Securității Statului, the vicious and Soviet NKVD-controlled Securitate protecting Communist Party Secretary Nicolae Ceaușescu with hundreds of thousands of informants.) From Romania, Irene and Eugene went to Belgium, where Eugene forged residence and work permits to be in Antwerp. Irene graduated from an ORT fashion school, summa cum laude. Canada accepted them in 1950 because of the WWII service to the British Crown of Irene’s elder brother, Alex Mermelstein.

Alex had fought for the Free Czech forces, stationed in Warwickshire, England, where in 1940 he married his wife Sofie Barr, a Jewish orphan from Germany. In May 1942, a team of Alex’s Czech co-soldiers from Warwickshire assassinated, in a Prague suburb, SS General Reinhard Heydrich, head of the German Security Service. Heydrich was the architect of the January 1942 Wannsee Conference plans for the final solution to the Jewish question — the extermination of Europe’s nine million Jews. Adolf Eichmann, later hanged in Israel as a war criminal, prepared the Conference minutes. Among Heydrich’s other jobs, he commanded the Einsatzgruppen, which, trailing the German armed forces, murdered 1.3 million Jews by mass shooting and gassing. The Heydrich assassination, documented in the movie thriller Anthropoid (2016), was the only time the Allies killed a top Nazi.

From Canada, Irene and Eugene moved in 1979 to Hallandale Beach, Florida, where Irene lives happily and is planning no more great escapes. Of the seven Mermelstein siblings, only Irene, the youngest, still lives.

Most of Irene and Eugene’s uncles, aunts, and cousins were murdered in the Holocaust. [Their lives and deaths will be told in the forthcoming book, Holocaust Houdinis.] But some survived. Here are a few of their stories:

Eugene’s first cousin Naftali (Tuli) Deutsch, deported at 12½ years old, survived Auschwitz and four other camps. After the war he served in the Israel Defense Forces before moving to California. In 2008 he published A Holocaust Survivor in the Footsteps of His Past. His parents and two of his brothers were murdered. His four sisters and a brother survived.

One sister, Eugene’s first cousin Irene Deutsch, endured Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Married to the late Sam Kreitenberg, another Subcarpathian Holocaust survivor, she died in 2016 in Beverly Hills. In April 2018, during the West Point Club’s 2018 Holocaust...
Days of Remembrance, 1st Lt. Zoe Kreitenberg, a 2016 West Point alumna and Irene and Sam’s granddaughter, spoke with honor, love, and pride about her grandparents’ Holocaust experiences. With her was Lt.-Gen. Robert L. Caslen, West Point’s superintendent.


Isser Mermelstein, Eugene’s first cousin, hid in the forests of Subcarpathia. Isser’s brother was shot by Jew hunters who were tracking them down; three other brothers, one sister, and his parents were also murdered. But Isser and a sister survived. With Eugene and two other partners, Isser made a fortune after the war smuggling people and goods between Romania and Hungary.

Eugene’s first-cousin-once-removed Jack Steinmetz was deported from Subcarpathia directly into Birkenau in May-June 1944. His parents (Eugene’s first cousins) and siblings were murdered in the camps. Jack was 15. He was in a bunk for youths when, during a roll call, Dr. Mengele stuck out his riding crop. The boys’ heads had to reach it while walking below it. Jack wasn’t tall enough to reach the riding crop. So Mengele sent him to the gas chamber. He was in the chamber’s ante-room, watching SS officers stuff Jews into the gas chamber, when a German officer saved him: The officer came into the ante-room and took Jack and 13 other Jewish boys away for work details, in a story told years later in the Canadian Jewish News. (Eugene saved Jack by smuggling him to and from Romania and Hungary after the war and paid for him to be smuggled into Germany.)

A cousin common to Irene and Eugene is Aranka (Meyer) Siegel, later married to Gilbert Siegal, a Harvard Law School graduate, New York City lawyer, and World War II United States Airforce officer. Aranka was deported at age 13 from Subcarpathia to Auschwitz, to Christianstadt and, following a five-week winter death march, to Bergen-Belsen. All of Aranka’s siblings but one were murdered at Auschwitz. Aranka wrote a children’s book about Feige Rosner, her grandmother from Komyat: *Memories of Babi* (2008). She also wrote two other books about the Holocaust: *Upon the Head of the Goat: A Childhood in Hungary 1939-1944* (1981), and *Grace in the Wilderness: After the Liberation 1945-1948* (1985).

Despite the evil they witnessed, Irene and Eugene always looked for the good in people. They were defiant toward their German and Hungarian fascist tormentors. Otherwise, they were optimistic and resilient. In their hearts was love, never hate. They were filled with character and courage. And heroism. More than luck and smarts, that’s how they survived the Holocaust and the years that followed.

Here to light a candle are Irene Lebovits; her son and daughter-in-law Justices Gerald Lebovits and Margaret Chan; and her grandchildren Natalie and Kenneth Lebovits and Or Zaidenberg.

Sabbath candlesticks owed by Eugene Lebovits’s family, the family’s only possession that survived the war