

Wica Landesmann



A War Biography

Based on H. Azar's documentation, collated by A (full name temporarily withdrawn)

Prologue

My name is A. Wica is my maternal grandmother, and Hava Azar is my mother's cousin and Wica's niece. I started future-proofing a biography of Wica's in March 2019. Spellings of names and places are uncertain due to both language differences and inadequate documentation. Where possible I have added photographs of the individuals mentioned in the text.

H. Azar's lengthy interview with Wica constituted a part of her university History Studies. My own personal notes will appear in brackets [] inside H. Azar's text and in the concluding discussion. The following sections are my best attempt at translating H. Azar's interview which was conducted in Hebrew in the 1980's.

H. Azar 2012



Left: A; right: H. Azar 2012



Introduction

My aunt Chava Rotholz [Wica's name following her marriage in Israel], is a gentle and gracious fair lady, who has remained silent for all these years.

Only recently did she concede to sharing with us, her close family, her personal recollection of the horrors of the war [WWII].

Her story is the testimony of a Jewish girl from Romania who survived the holocaust, both as a refugee in Budapest, Hungary, and as a prisoner in the hands of the brutal Nazi troops. It is also a testimony of how her hardship and personal tragedy continued after the end of the war. As a war survivor she also had to contend with the difficulties of illegal immigration into Israel.

Although decades have elapsed Wica prefers to keep the worse of her memories to herself. She only describes the horrors that are essential in laying out her own survival story. However, between her words readers can clearly hear the screaming of her agony. Throughout her personal testimony one particular motif becomes apparent - the lack of food and malnutrition run like a thread connecting the chapters of her story. For her, food and drink meant and continue to mean 'life'.

My aunt's testimony is a modest addition to thousands of other testimonies by holocaust survivors. Her story exemplifies the catastrophe of what was to become the European Jewish WWII story.

Wica (top of table) in her late years with her daughter Pnina



At the family home in Masiv, Romania

I was born in 12/12/1921 in the town of Masiv, Transylvania, Romania. Myself and my brother Anchel were twins. All together there were six children (three boys and three girls) at home. Jacob Leib the big brother was a married father of six, and that entire side of the family was wiped out. My big sister Manzo stayed at home with our parents throughout the war until the three of them were murdered by the Nazis. Another brother of mine was called Eiber and my young sister was Lea. Lea was born when mum was 40 years old. It was also evening when big brother Jacob Leib got engaged. I remember being woken in the morning by Manzo heralding, "we have another sister".

We were very religious, belonging to the Beit Jacob movement [my maternal grandmother was the most Jewish and religious of my family]. In the evening I learned to read and write roughly to about elementary school level. Up until the war our economic situation was quite reasonable, and dad was a land trader. Mother undertook all domestic and childcare duties. At around 16-17 years old I contributed to the family income preparing grocery bags. My big sister was the main assistant.

Early 1941, Transylvania was taken over by the Hungarians, and the general situation worsened. We were taken away - Jews and Christian Romanian girls - to do rubble clearing following the bombardments. The Jews suffered in particular. The local community expressed increased antisemitism and our food supply had become restricted.

My girlfriend, who had come back to visit Masiv, said that the situation in Budapest [Hungary] was much better. Myself and a few friends (Sara, Rivka and others) were persuaded to go to Budapest in search of a better life.

April 1941, I have left home. We set off early in the morning. I have said goodbye to dad who remained at home. It was the only time I have ever seen him crying. Mum and sister Lea have come to see me off at the train station. I remember mum was crying as if it was going to be the last time she saw me. I was never to see dad nor mum again.

[Following are photos I presume were taken some-place in Europe in the 1930's-40's.]

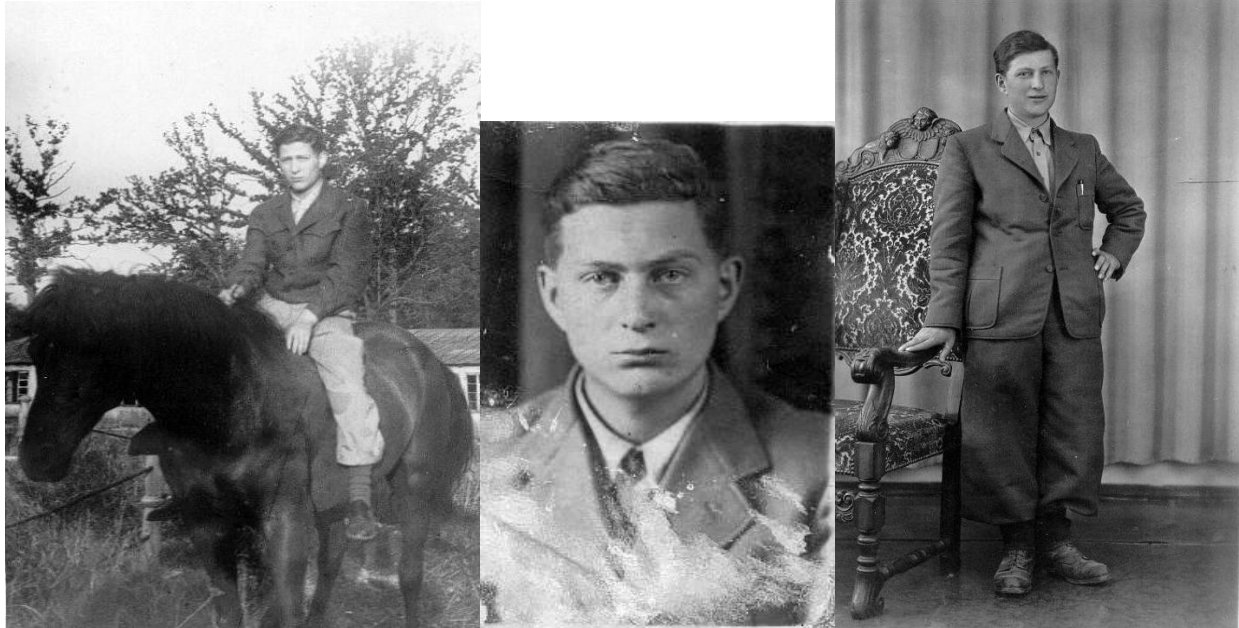
Left to right: Wica, Hanna (Anchel's wife), Anchel, Lea.



Right: Wica, left: Hanna



Three photos of Eiber



Life in Budapest prior to Nazi occupation

The journey to Budapest took 24 hours. Our friend that invited us to the city had met us at the Joint Organisation branch in Budapest. They were expecting us and provided us with essential assistance. I was allocated a job manufacturing rubber boots. I wasn't earning much, and the majority I have earned I'd send back home.

I rented a room in Pest. In it was a table, bed and a small cabinet. I stayed there until I was taken to the camps. Contact with my parents took the form of posted letters. A year later, sister Lea (14yo) joined me. She lodged elsewhere in Pest then moved in with a Jewish family. She was working too and very quickly had picked up the Hungarian language. We met up almost daily. There were many Jews in Budapest who had fled their homes in Poland. The local Budapest Jews were generously hospitable towards us. Up until Liberation – I was totally unaware of the horrors taking place in Poland, Germany and other European countries.

At war

In March 1944 the Nazis invaded Hungary. They bombarded Budapest and hit the main bridge connecting Buda and Pest. The nightmare for the Jews commenced shortly after. First the small Jewish-owned workshops were closed, followed by the large factories. Living was hard again. Fortunately for me, my hosting Jewish family treated me well and allowed me to stay and eat with them even when I no longer had money. Jews were now concentrated in a special area even before the establishment of the city ghetto was announced. We were allowed out one or two hours per day.

An order came out in 1944 over the radio and wall posters: all 16-42 year old Jews were to report at Nyugati station. My host family had provided me with shoes and food. This was an Actzia [Nazi Aktion, a mandatory selection and forceful continual displacement of human subjects]. Some were taken directly to Bergen Belsen.

The following morning a friend told me that my sister Lea was also here. I tried to join her but an anti-Semitic Hungarian ('Nilosh'- as they were called by Hungarian Jews) had come between us, and I was not to see her again for the duration of the war.

On 23/10/1944 I was taken, along with a large Jewish group, by Hungarians and Germans on a foot westwards to the Austrian border that lasted into December. Very seldomly we were given a slice of bread. We had to find water to drink along the track verges. At the border we were put to work, digging anti-tank trenches. We walked day and night. Should anyone collapse along the way we weren't allowed to help them. I remember those very tough months. I recall one dark night we were ushered onto a ship [river crossing vessel?]. To reach the ship we relied on a piece of wood, clinging to one another. Soaking wet of course [Austrian / Hungarian river winter at night!], still the march had go on. All along I have clung to my backpack and and my water canteen. Some have taken out suitcases with them but very soon they have had to leave all that behind. I wouldn't let go of my canteen with which I was able to save a few persons. I have laced my shoes up with strings taken out of my backpack. I don't know how I survived the march.

As we were walking, exhausted, we were unaware that we have crossed into Austria. We arrived at a place called Sopron. I recall sleeping on the grass banks of the Danube, I had high temperature set on by my angina, my mouth oozed puss and blood. I had run out of water to drink. One night we spent in a cowshed with cows and horses. [relative luxury?] We were very keen on staying just there, but were ushered at 03:30 in the morning to move on. They [marshals?] wanted to leave me behind as I was small and sick, but my Budapest friends (Ilinku and Irin) supported me and saw to that I continue the journey with them. Then we were made to wait a whole day in the freezing cold. Irin was large and robust, and she had sold her engagement ring for a slice of bread for me to eat. I owe her so so much.

From Sopron we were taken on a train to Lichtendorf camp in Austria. We were waiting outside. Each had been given some hay to lie on. The camp was in a large factory hangar. It was extremely cold, the water was frozen in the pipework, so we couldn't use it. There was nothing to cover up to keep a little warm, so we got cold to the bone. The Nazis had no idea what to do with us. In the morning we were given black coffee and a bread loaf to go around 20 people. One of our girls had a ruler by which she had divided the bread between us, she got less than her fair share. For lunch we received soup and 3-4 potatoes in their skin. Only for the three days over Christmas we were given a little more: a round 1 kg bread loaf. Some devoured theirs instantly. We felt pity for them the following day and had gave them a share of our own. I saved mine until a new one was handed out (that is if mine wasn't stolen). Some stashed their loafs under their heads as they were sleeping, and some perished just in that position. I was hit with dysentery. A physician lady that had checked me and other patients said that we are not transportable and that we were 'goners' anyway.

Three days later, on 02/04/1945, the camp was liberated by Russian soldiers, and we were set free. The Nazis scattered and fled, some of them changing into civilian clothes to avoid being found and "dealt" with. We, the liberated captives, scurried away from the camp just like mice.

Outside the local Austrians were celebrating Osterziet, and they offered us cacao and more, but we couldn't enjoy their generosity as we were too unwell.

Now that I was liberated

As my girlfriends and I got out of the camp, we climbed a high mountain. Due to my illness, prolonged inactivity at the camp, and general poor health since the war's onset I was rather physically infirm. I was lagging far behind the rest. We walked like this for some days until we arrived at a summerhouse belonging to an Austrian family who brought us into their kitchen. They treated us well. We were given goulash, potato and bread. At night someone knocked at the door. Some Russians walked in and asked for the owners. We were so scared. The Russians noticed the poor state we were in and one of them had taken our temperatures. We all registered high fever which was noted down on the wall. The Russians took us to a camp called Lidnat [Linz?].

Lidnat was a camp populated with French survivors who had work and were better off. They were exchanging letters with home and received food from the French. A large river running with melt water was flowing near the mountain. We were ordered to wait by a temporary bridge. Two French survivor sisters wouldn't wait and entered the river. One drowned immediately, and the other probably met a similar fate. The Russians did try to rescue the sisters, but were unsuccessful.

We then travelled from one place to the next on filthy trains. Triumph-intoxicated Russians molested us, beguiled by the sight of the girls. They attempted rape. One high ranking officer had his eye on Irin. He searched for her at night with a torchlight in the storage where he stayed and had her hidden. When he found me he was disappointed, slapped me, moved on to Ilinka whom he raped.

I made my way back to the Joint office in Budapest (now a liberated city) in April 1945 where like the other survivors I was given 100 pengo. By unlikely coincident, down the office stairs came the mother of the groom of the family I had stayed with previously. She rushed with the news to the family who had me back with affection and delight despite the lice and my poor condition. They've washed me, tucked me into bed and fed me, notwithstanding their own now hard-up situation. I stayed with them until October 1945. In May my twin Anchel arrived followed by sister Lea.

Anchel didn't linger. He immediately set off homeward. Lea and I followed later on horses and carts, hoping that some family would be there after all. The post was problematic, so we couldn't have known anything. In Masiv the situation was terrible. The floor was destroyed (someone was looking for money) and the furniture had been taken away. We realised that none of the family were left alive. One of the Christian neighbours, a physician, kept hold of a few family items: a few towels and a table cloth. He handed the items back to us, I could not cry. We decided there was no point staying in Masiv and got back on the carts to Budapest. I returned to my 'adoptive' family.

One day I was approached by a gentleman (my mother's cousin's son) who handed me a letter and said: *Have you realised your sister Manzo had survived?* I had no idea. She [Wica's sister] was very spoilt She had given him the letter when he said he will be travelling to Romania via Budapest. I could not identify her address that was written down as the writing had rubbed off.

Shortly after my brother Anchel had written to us from Romania announcing his marriage to Hanna. He wrote further that mum had an uncle in the USA who had sent us "papers" for us to go over to him in the USA. Instead we stayed in Budapest until October 1945 [possible dates or narrative confusion].

We had a frugal living from the 100 pengo. The long queues meant getting out of bed in midnight for a meagre piece of bread. Anchel and Hanna arrived in Budapest, and we contemplated going via Germany to the USA. The four of us: Lea, Anchel, Hanna and myself. We did not make the illegal crossing into Germany. We thus travelled to Italy via Yugoslavia. We joined other Jewish survivors bound for Palestine. Hanna had an uncle in Palestine, and she hoped that thanks to him we'll all be fine.

Held up in Italy [1946]

The journey from Hungary to Italy was by train. We've arrived at Mestre (near Venice) to reach our next destination: Chiringago. There, a local Kibbutz [communal gathering] that was run by UNRA had gathered individuals from various Zionist movements. This is where we and others were awaiting Aliya [migrating to Palestine, pre-1948 Israel]. Anchel was visiting Manzo in Germany. Groups of people were leaving Italy and made Aliya. The Zionist Agency managed the relocation process at a leisurely pace. Occasionally we signed as individuals who had already departed so that we could have their food rations. Meanwhile UNRA had sent us by trains to various places of beauty in northern Italy like Venice and Milan. I recall how the locals had sussed us out as Jewish refugees and kindly let us have their seats. As a rule we had no money, only once we were given a few liras. We were held up at Chiringago for a total of nine months. We had no work. My role was to receive the milk early in the morning from the Italian supplier and to dish it out with bread-rolls to the sick and the women according to a list handed to me by the doctor. He had chosen me for this role. It was hard to start so early whilst the rest were still all asleep.

Chirignago is where I met Mayer, my husband to-be [my granddad, I knew him as Meir]. He arrived on the second of May. Fortune had it that a group of us sat around a table outside talking. Along with him was a Jewish girl from Poland whom he had become acquainted with on his way here. Her name was Galika. Galika was my room-mate, she had a widower friend with her, and she was a matchmaker. She told Mayer that in the evening she will be introducing a pretty maid to him. I was dating another gentleman (Srul), also from Poland. Galika praised Mayer and his qualities to me, urging me to meet him. I found myself courted by two gentlemen. I was agonised with choice, and couldn't decide whom to go with. Mayer was most dismayed when he had heard I was taking the train with Srul to the opera in Milan. The truth was that we had not actually gone out to the opera due to the cost and the foul weather. Thanks to Galika alone the contact between Mayer and myself was renewed. I then decided to make Mayer my final choice of man.

The prolonged wait in Chiringago caused tensions amongst the people, sometimes reaching the point of feuds and fighting.

I met Hadasa, Mayer's sister [mother of H. Azar] there. We stayed there for half a year then moved on to Terara [Ferrara?].

The group in Venice (Wica central, third down from the top)



Mayer Rotholtz in his Red Army uniform



Hadasa Rotholts



At the refugee camp in Cyprus

We've arrived at the British internment Camp 60 in Cyprus in September 1946. We were placed by the coastline, fenced-in and guarded by the British. We were the sixth immigrant ship to reach the island. At the camp entrance we were sprayed DDT for sanitation, dispensed with a mess tin, blankets and tents. Each morning we were given hot food and 200 grams of bread. Water was rationed with special cards, one bottle per person per day. As the weather warmed up, sufficient drinking water had become an issue.

To take a shower we had to improvise one. We warmed up some water in a tin in the sun, then poured it to another tin which Mayer had found and perforated its bottom.

I "lived" in a single tent shared with my sister, and Galika, and her boyfriend, and a married couple. There was one in each 10-12 persons group who would do the cooking. Winter was cold despite the fact that we had blankets. Some blankets were used as a mattress, I shared them with Lea. Heavy rains have brought the tents down on the beds. I remember the roar of the sea and its crashing waves. One girl said that the sea is being poured out. Mayer shared a tent with Hadasa elsewhere nearby. We had continued to meet up, but unlike a number of couples, we were in no rush to get married.

As detainees in an internment camp we didn't wish to become idle. We passed the time mainly by engaging in hand crafts. Raw materials were unconventionally acquired. Each tent that was "relieved" from its residences (those who had made Aliya) was grabbed. We used to undo the woven fabric and used the threads to knit table coasters using a single needle. I have stitched up for myself a robe so that I can change clothes. In addition we had woven towels decorated with blue thread "borrowed" from the blankets. The Brits supplied us khaki-coloured wool so that we pass our time knitting.

We weren't allowed out except for visiting the sick. I was allowed to go to the hospital in Nicosia to visit Mayer who had been hit by malaria on-board the ship.

Despite the restrictions and the discomfort life in Cyprus was safe. We were no longer possessed by fear for our very lives. Nonetheless, we were anticipating our release. People were released from Cyprus according to the order of their arrival. Each month saw a group being released. Our turn was for February 1947. Hadasa's husband Mayer [H. Azar's father, same name as Hadasa's bother] had already reached Palestine. We communicated that to the Zionist Agency who had arranged for Hadasa to leave Cyprus one month earlier. We stayed in Cyprus from 09/1946 until 02/1947.

Making Aliya

When the day arrived, we have boarded the immigrant ship called "ARBA HKERUIYOT" using outboards and rope ladders in a stormy sea. We were forbidden from taking anything with us except a small pack below a certain low weight level. Mine was a towel and underwear. Onboard we were given paper bags, we soon realised these were sick-bags. Conditions were greatly over-crowded and women were segregated from men, our bunks were hammocks. Stacked up on top one another, many were vomiting. I was sick too. One of the guides handed us some lemon to relieve the discomfort and help with the eating of the almost inedible food. I remember being offered extremely salty sausages and crackers – we couldn't have eaten that either. Water canteens were shared between three persons. Only young people onboard, no children, no old people. We were together: Mayer, Hadasa, Lea, Anchel, myself and Hannah who was gravid.

There was nothing we could have done for the duration of the crossing. Overcrowding caused restlessness and there were onboard feuds for all manner of reasons. It's taken us twelve days to approach Haifa where a British plane had spotted us, scrambled the British warships that used water canons to deter us from landing. We've given as good as we got even-though we were exhausted. We hurtled bottles and other objects back at the boats. Only the Greek amongst us took shelter. Eventually the Brits have invaded ARBA KHERUYIOT and took over the ship. We were transferred onto a very large British ship - just like a floating prison. They have offered us bread and cacao but we have set our minds on a hungers-trike. A short while later we have realised that the strike was in vain and it was promptly broken. We have drunk and eaten anything we were offered. The treatment we have received was repeated on other immigrant vessels attempting Alia who were caught by the Brits. A few hours later we've found ourselves returned to Cyprus at the internment camp. My sister in-law Hannah was allowed into Atlit [refugee camp in what was Palestine now Israel] as she was gravid. Brother Anchel tried to join her but he was taken back onto the ship. In the commotion Hannah had taken Anchel's bag with his shaving paraphernalia and he had her bag...

Aliya and naturalization in Palestine-Israel

The crossing from Cyprus to Haifa on a British ship took a few hours. Upon arrival, the feeling of relief was tangible. We were hoping life would be easier now onwards. Jubilations of freedom accompanied with hopes for a land of milk and honey were soon dashed. We were held up for a month in Atlit where we stayed in a large hut segregating men from women. The wolf-like hauls of the jackals outside terrorised us at night, keeping us awake. The occasional delegation would arrive for a visit and food was no longer a problem.

From Atlit we were relocated to Kiryat Shmuel near Haifa where we lived in rooms for a month, celebrated passover feast: gefilte fish, chicken and olives. From there we were transferred by buses to an immigrant house on HaAlia Street in Tel-Aviv. There too the food was good but even there we weren't given privacy as each room took many people. There was my first encounter with Jews from Egypt, Syria and others. Frequently as I would hang my washing out to dry - items were later never to be found.

Mayer and I stayed at the immigration house for two months. That's where we started talking about a wedding once we find ourselves a flat. He started working, earning about a lira per day. I was working in a sweets factory (Shikun Mizrakhi Bet) in the south of Tel-Aviv, earning half a lira per day. We were allocated a one bedroom flat (I share with Mayer and sister Lea) with a tiny kitchen and communal wash-rooms – that's when we decided to get married.

The ceremony was scheduled for 22/08/1947 at the community council in Tel-Aviv. I used the rented wedding dress my sister Lea used a fortnight earlier for her own wedding. I had adorned the dress at Mayer and Hadasa's shack on Dizingoff Street. On-route to the wedding we bought a quarter of a kilo tomatoes, a bottle of wine and a glass. It was very sad as there weren't even enough of us left to make up a quorum. All our guests were: Hadasa and her husband Mayer, Lea and her husband Alberto, Hannah and Anchel, and our friend Haim Scheinberg. To make up a quorum, we borrowed guests from another wedding that had taken place in parallel with ours. They had also given us their flowers and their money raised by their own wedding guests. We refused the money but they insisted. This money turned out to be most useful to buy two cooking pots, plates and our first furniture. This was the start of our new life as a young couple in Palestine [to become Israel some months later].

[H. Azar had received an excellent score for this essay. The assessor added:
Important well presented work, every testimony is recorded, it has historical value.]

Wica's & Mayer's wedding photos:

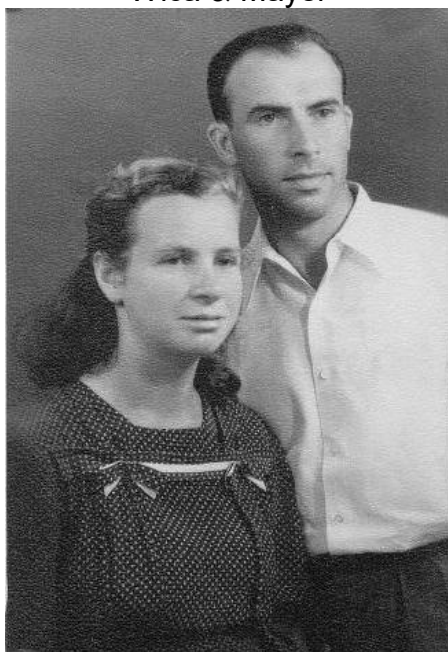


Photos of the Landesmann's in Israel circa 1949:

Top left: Wica, top right: Lea, bottom right: Anchel & family



Wica & Mayer



Photos of Wica and the young Rotholtz family:



Parents with the girls, left to right: Wica, Pnina, Michaela, Mayer.



Photos of Wica's later life:

Wica and her beloved brother Anchel



Wica & Mayer



Wica & Mayer



Wica with Mayer and daughter Michaela

Wica with Mayer and daughter Pnina



Wica & Mayer with grandson Dolev (son of Michaela)



Wica & Mayer with daughter Pnina and her sons: Yaniv (left), and A (always right!)



Wica with daughter Pnina and grandson A

Discussion

My grandmother's memoir dates back to her younger years. It's a private reflection of a youngster and how she perceived events in her world. The main text could thus seem disjointed in places. Grandma was also struggling with Hebrew as a second language, and spoke Yiddish most of her life.

I remember her and granddad Mayer when I was a child. I recall them coming to visit us on the Kibbutz, carrying old-fashioned suitcase and wearing respectable but heavy clothing. I remember the smells. I remember Wica in her kitchen apron. I have known her as grandma Hava (the name Wica was rarely used and seemed to be out of place, out of time). They seemed somewhat removed from the modern life in the Middle-east. To me they were my beloved relics from a distance cold continent, overburdened with a past so horrific that I could never comprehend. Try as they have, shutting the past away came at a price. Moments of happiness were marred by a hint of bitterness from bygone years and unresolved wartime flashbacks. Eventually they have opened up just enough to allow us a keyhole view into what made them the grandparents I knew. My mother never had been given a chance to get to see her own grandparents.

In her story Wica had seen both the hospitable and inhospitable aspects of the Russian soldiers, and of the British colonialists. From her point of view, the Russians were the brutal saviours and the British were a hindering guardians in her life's journey.

They fled their homes and forcibly became illegal immigrants by definition – but they were genuine war refugees. Although they could have gone to America where life would have been far easier - they chose to adhere to their ideology and opted for the Aliya struggle in a harsh new land. Global Jewish NGOs such as The Joint and The Zionist Agency were lifesavers, with funds originating from private donations, not public money. Respectable conduct, no doubt, had given them access to generous help amongst groups in which they had found themselves and from kind individuals along the way. They had taken their part in making the Zionist dream come true, for which they underwent great personal hardships, both material and emotional.

By shutting the past behind, they granted themselves another chance at contentment. Wica had left both her first name and surname behind. I don't know of anyone using our Landesmann surname these days. Incidentally, the family name Rotholtz has also reached a dead-end. Granddad Meir passed away in 2007, in Jerusalem, aged 91. The war survivors of Landesmann, Rotholtz, Poliwoda *et al* clung to one another in their later lives in Israel. Their enduring friendships had seen them through a challenging new life in Israel. I take the liberty to say that they have done well for themselves. If not from the text itself, the photos make it abundantly clear how much happier Wica and her co-survivors have been in their later lives in Israel. In this respect, the state of Israel had been a miraculous haven for them, and thanks to that I am here writing this now.

Grandma Hava passed away in 2011, Jerusalem, age 89.



The End