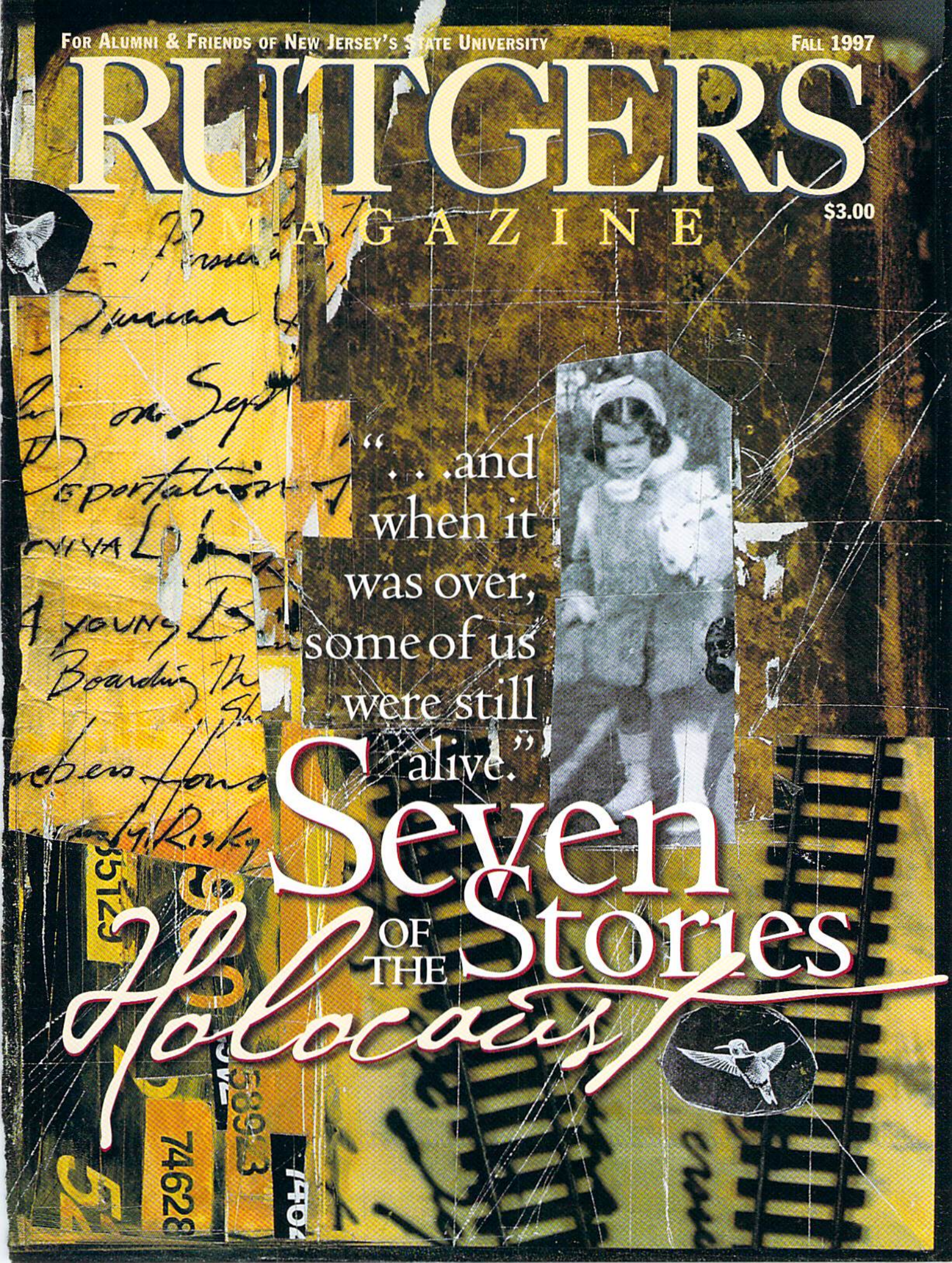
For Alumni & Friends of New Jersey's State University

Fall 1997

RUTGERS MAGAZINE

$3.00



"...and when it was over, some of us were still alive."

Seven Stories of the Holocaust

For Remembrance

When I was liberated, I wept for the first time in my life. No family, no friends. I had no one anymore. So there I stood liberated. And I said to myself: "For whom and with whom should I live?" ~*Simon Wiesenthal.* ■ Not until years later did the seven children of the Holocaust realize just how fortunate they were to have survived. Three were hidden, moving one step ahead of the German army. Two bore the scars of the concentration camps. Two escaped on the ship *St. Louis,* only to be turned away by Cuba and the United States and returned to the battleground that was Europe. ■ Some lost their parents and siblings; all lost huge portions of their extended families. Those who found their way out of Europe saw their parents beaten down, either by the war's aftermath or the difficult adjustment to a new culture in a new country. All still carry the Holocaust somewhere deep inside, where it has become a driving force in their personal and professional lives. ■ The seven—Hans Fisher, Joel Lebowitz, Ruth Mandel, Philip Orenstein, Lillian Robbins, Gabor Vermes, and Neha Weinstein—are all Rutgers professors. Education, each says, has helped them understand and overcome the past. On the way to building lives that count, they have inspired thousands of students and colleagues. Their achievements, their dedication to teaching and serving others, and the lives of their children and grandchildren honor the 6 million who weren't so fortunate. ■ No words can ever fully capture the enormity of the worst genocide in history, but these seven survivors have agreed to share their memories and childhood photographs, incorporated in the illustration at right. Stories like theirs must be told, for, if nothing else, remembrance.

By Bill Glovin ■ Photographs by Bill Ballenberg ■ Illustration by Anastasia Vasilakis

For Remembrance

Joel Lebowitz

The question about the cattle car that took him and his family to Auschwitz-Birkenau is unavoidable, but Joel Lebowitz, on the phone from Paris, falls silent. After an awkward pause, he suggests that the caller read Elie Wiesel's memoirs. "Wiesel lived only 20 miles from where I grew up," he says. "We were about the same age when we were sent to Auschwitz and had many common experiences."

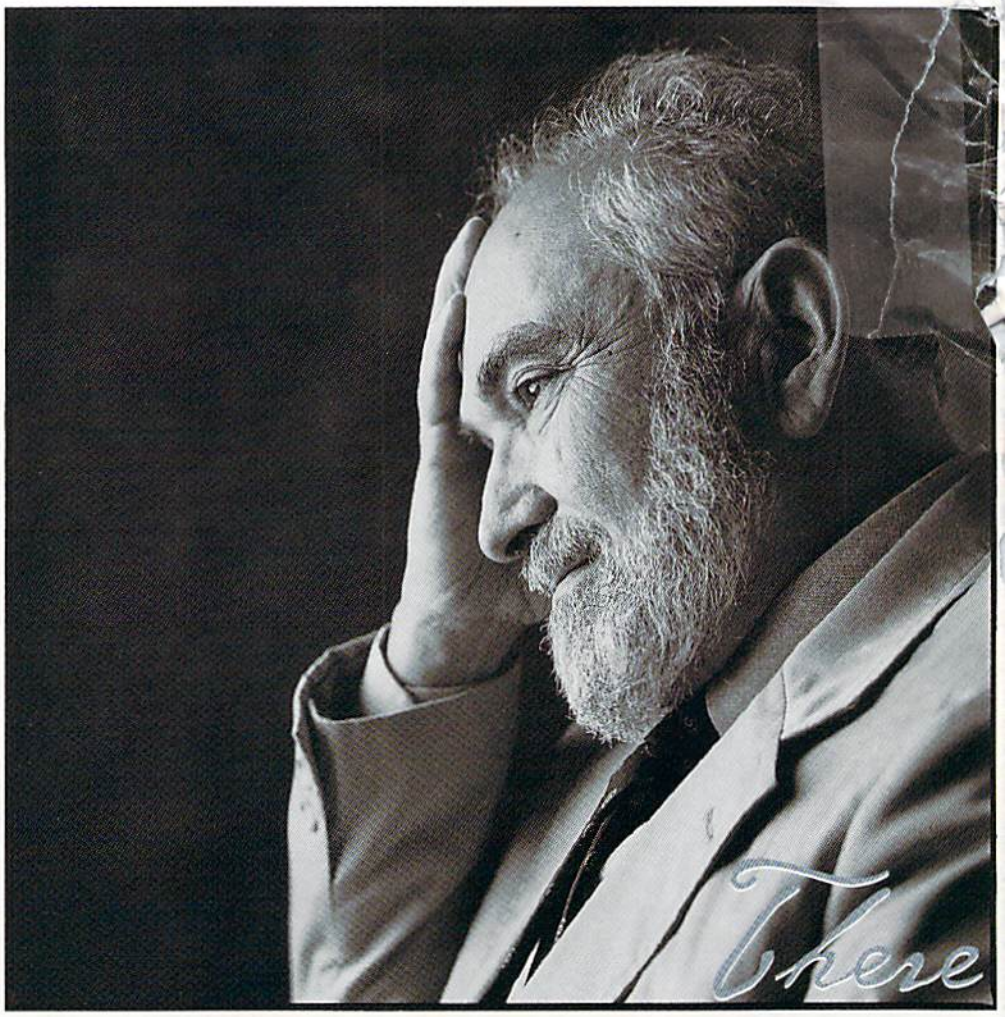
It remains unreal, writes Wiesel in *All Rivers Run to the Sea* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). It's only a dream, I told myself as I walked, hanging on my father's arm. It's a nightmare that they have torn me from those I love, that they are beating people to death, that Birkenau exists and that it harbors a gigantic altar where demons of fire devour our people. It's in God's nightmare that human beings are hurling Jewish children into the flames.

Lebowitz, the George William Hill Professor of Mathematics and Physics at Rutgers–New Brunswick, was raised in Taceva, a small Czechoslovakian village of 10,000 that is now part of Ukraine and sits on the border of Romania. By the time the local militia helped transport the hundreds of thousands of Jews in the region to death camps in 1944, the world already knew that Germany would lose the war. But before the final battle was fought, Germany and other anti-Semitic forces throughout Europe were determined to slaughter as many Jews as possible.

Lebowitz's world had begun to unravel in 1939 as the rights of Jews started to erode and local attitudes shifted. After his family was forced to close their small textile store in 1943, the months leading up to Auschwitz were particularly harsh. His family was forced to wear the yellow star and was relocated twice within the shrinking Jewish ghetto of Taceva.

In May 1944, when Lebowitz was 14, his family was ordered to forfeit their property and report to the train station for deportation. In the crowded, filthy cattle car, his younger sister, Freidi, hardly stopped crying during the terrible week they spent traveling through the Carpathian Mountains and into Poland.

And if I bear within me a nameless grief and disillusionment, a bottomless despair, it is because that night I saw good and thoughtful Jewish children, bearers of mute words and dreams, walking into darkness before being consumed by the flames.



When they arrived at Auschwitz, where 1.3 million people and those who played with were murdered, family members were separated by gender and age. His mother, Ida, and Freidi were sent to the gas chambers. His father was assigned to slave labor in a small camp a few miles from Auschwitz. Joel lied about his age, saying that he was older, so that he could accompany

his father. "We worked cutting wheat and loading hay 12 hours a day, six days a week, with a half-hour break for lunch," he recalls. "On Sunday we worked half a day fixing wagons inside the camp. We were always hungry. On a 'good day,' we received some diluted substitute coffee and about one-third of a pound of very coarse black bread. Sometimes they provided soup with some pieces of potato and meat."

In the early fall, Joel and his father, Herman, were transferred to the main camp at Auschwitz. Herman, who was Orthodox, feigned illness to avoid working during the High Holy Days. "When they selected people for the gas chambers, they commonly went to the infirmary," says Lebowitz. "That's where my father was when they took him away."

In January 1945, the Germans evacuated Auschwitz as the Russian army advanced. Lebowitz and the other emaciated prisoners were force-marched for two days through the snow and freezing temperatures to Gleiwitz, another camp. He was moved again in an open cattle car to Mittelbau Dora and Bergen-Belsen before being liberated by British troops in April 1945. He estimates that at least one-third of those who marched from Auschwitz perished on the way to other camps. Others died when the liberators—horrified to find adults weighing under 80 pounds—unknowingly distributed food that proved fatal to their starved digestive systems. "I weighed only 60 pounds; there was no flesh left and it was painful to sit," says Lebowitz. "I don't know why I didn't get sick, and I don't know how I survived. I would have to say it was mostly luck."

I see them now, and I still curse the killers, their accomplices, the indifferent spectators who knew and kept silent, and Creation itself, Creation and those who perverted and distorted it. I feel like screaming, howling like a madman so that the world, the world of murderers, might know it will never be forgiven.

Following his release from a British infirmary, Lebowitz searched for family members, first in Budapest and then back in his village. His mother, father, and sister had perished; only one aunt and one uncle of 11 living in Europe had survived. He went to Romania for six months to study at a Talmudic school. He then made plans to go to Belgium, where he would train to become a diamond cutter and emigrate to Palestine. As he attempted to enter Belgium, he was stopped at the border for not having proper documents and was sent to a camp for displaced refugees in American-occupied Germany. The United States seemed out of reach, but he obtained a visa with the help of an organization for orphans that was chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. He left the camp for New York in August 1946.

Lebowitz lived for two weeks in a children's home in the Bronx and then moved for two years to a dormitory at Yeshiva Academy in Brooklyn. His work as a waiter at a restaurant on the Lower East Side helped put him through Brooklyn College, where he graduated summa cum laude. He went on to receive his doctoral degree in physics from Syracuse University in 1956. Lebowitz had already become known for his work in statistical mechanics at Yeshiva University in New York when he joined the Rutgers faculty as a tenured professor in 1977.

A few months after his call from Paris, in his office on the Busch campus, Lebowitz discusses how the upheaval of his childhood shaped his life. Face to face, he seems more comfortable than he had been on the phone from Paris. As founder and former chair of the Human Rights Committee of the New York Academy of Sciences, he has achieved international recognition for his defense of persecuted scientists throughout the world. His determination to help scientists who suffer under tyranny and oppression is fueled, he says, by his Holocaust experiences.

The walls of his office are decorated with paintings created by his late wife, Estelle, and two posters of one of his heroes, Albert Einstein. "They say there are two kinds of scientists," he says with a gentle smile. "There are those who, as children, played with radios and those who played with chemistry sets. I played with neither. If the Holocaust had never occurred, it is not likely that I would be a scientist. I probably would have become a rabbi or a storekeeper. Who will ever know?"

are scientists who, as children, played with radios, chemistry sets. *I played with neither.*

How to evoke a childhood buried in ashes? How to speak of masters whose eyes are veiled forever and yet whose glance still burns into ours? What to make of the silence wrenched from the blackness that covered heaven and earth in those days?

The Gates of Hell

Located 37 miles west of Cracow, Poland, Auschwitz was actually a complex of three camps. Birkenau, the most heavily populated camp, was the site of the gas chambers and crematoria, where an estimated 1.3 million people were murdered. They had entered the camp by passing under a gate emblazoned with the slogan "Arbeit Macht Frei"—Work Leads to Freedom.

For Remembrance

Gabor Vermes

The fighting was so fierce that the little boy would hold his beat-up winter coat over his head, trying to block out the sound of artillery. It was the winter of 1945 in Budapest, and the Germans and Russians were tearing the city apart. In Buda, Gabor Vermes, 11, was among a group of Hungarian-Jewish children that Gabor Sztehlo, a Lutheran pastor, hid in a children's home under the guise that they were Christian refugees. The boy prayed that the German officers who came to hear the children sing Bavarian songs wouldn't learn his true identity.

On the Pest side of the city, his father, a prosperous and well-educated economist, was hidden by a Christian neighbor who would later receive a medal from Israel's Yad Vashem for her selfless deed. His mother survived by posing as a gentile. "If the Germans suspected that you were Jewish, they would pull your pants down to see if you were circumcised," says Vermes, now an associate professor of history at Rutgers–Newark. "That's why my father and I hid and my mother didn't."

Following Germany's occupation of Budapest in March 1944, thousands of Hungarian Jews began converting to Christianity. The rumor among Jews was that the Nazis surely wouldn't persecute those who had denounced their religion. Vermes's father, who was more devoted to the arts than to Judaism, had the family convert. "But one Sunday, it was time to go to church, and my father looked up from his newspaper and declared that we were not going anymore," Vermes recalls. "He would no longer submit to the humiliating farce, even if it meant the loss of our lives."

The Vermes family were required to wear a yellow Star of David on their clothing and were restricted from working and leaving their home. The atmosphere grew desperate in October when Miklos Horthy, the Hungarian head of state, attempted to abandon the country's delicate alliance with the Third Reich and the fascist Arrow Cross Party came to power. Thousands of Hungarian Jews, including those who had converted to Christianity, were either deported to the death camps or brought down to the banks of the Danube, tied together, and shot into the river. "It was a death sentence to remain in a Jewish house, so we dispersed," says Vermes. The janitor of the bank in which his father worked hid Gabor and his father temporarily in a cold and dank warehouse, where an ill-timed sneeze or cough during a search could have cost them their lives.

His father's cousin, the daughter of a mixed Christian-Jewish marriage, learned of the children's home run by Sztehlo and took young Gabor across the Danube to the sympathetic pastor in Buda. The day after Christmas, the Russians launched a ferocious attack on the city, and the children's home was suddenly thrust onto the frontline. Gabor and the other children crawled out of the house on their bellies, bullets whizzing by their ears. For two miles, they fled in darkness through the hills to the villa of a Jewish publisher who had escaped, leaving his home in the care of Sztehlo's family.

With the city under siege, all food supplies were cut, and the children, hiding in the basement of the villa for a month, were slowly starving. Then, suddenly, it was over.

It's foolish

experience. The Holocaust will remain

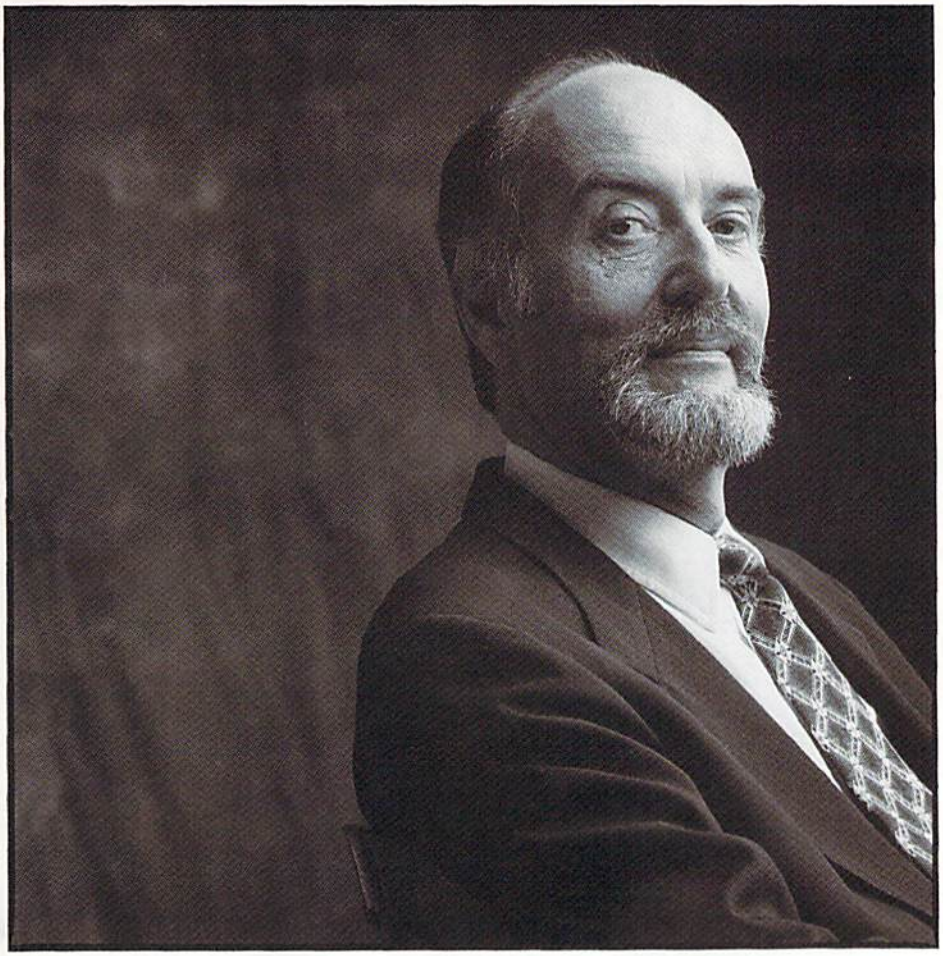
"I still remember the round face of the first Russian soldier, motioning to us from the top of the narrow staircase to come up to the main floor," he says. "At the windows, soldiers were shooting at neighboring houses that were still in German hands."

With all the bridges connecting Pest and Buda destroyed, Vermes's mother crossed the frozen Danube on foot three times before finding her son and bringing him home. "I was 11 years old but I might as well have been 30," says Vermes. "From a very normal, upbeat kid who loved to play soccer, I became a hermit, afraid of the world. I would drag out homework that should have lasted an hour for six or seven hours so that I could hide in my cocoon. But after what we had gone through, my mother was just happy to have me at home."

Following the war, the Communists ruled with an iron hand and the once-prosperous family continued living under

"Righteous Gentiles"

"Righteous Ones Among the Nations" is the title bestowed on Christians who, like the neighbor who hid Gabor Vermes's father, risked their lives to protect Jews from the Nazis. Since 1962, Israel's Yad Vashem has honored 13,000 of these heroes with a medal, certificate, and a tree or plaque in the Garden of the Righteous. It has been estimated that 100,000 Christians saved 250,000 Jews.



to think we can put aside this terrible with me *until the day I die.*

oppression. His father died young, a defeated and broken man. In Vermes's junior year of high school, the school authorities demanded that students decide on a career. "I loved words and was terrible with numbers, but we knew not to choose anything having to do with humanities. There was no freedom in liberal-arts pursuits, and I would have been subjected to years of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Because it sounded adventurous, I chose to study geology."

Soon after the violent and unsuccessful Hungarian Revolution in 1956, Vermes and a friend, with false papers in hand, found their way across the border into Austria. With a geology degree from the University of Budapest, but penniless and with limited language skills, he eventually landed in New York. A Jewish refugee organization used his geology degree to find him work for an oil company that moved him around Texas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. "One day, I was walking down the street in Lafayette, Louisiana, when out of the blue, it hit me," he says. "I wasn't unhappy, but something suddenly told me that I needed to do something else with my life."

Back in Houston, Vermes went to Rice University and asked a secretary if he could talk for a few moments with a history professor. The professor became a mentor and encouraged him to return to school. In 1966, he received a doctoral degree in history from Stanford University. He taught at San Francisco State College and UCLA before accepting a position at Rutgers–Newark in 1972.

Even now, almost 50 years removed from that villa basement, Vermes still feels compelled to talk and write about his Holocaust experiences. He meets once a month with Hungarian Hidden Children, a six-year-old self-help group for Holocaust survivors. This past May he gave a personal account of his Holocaust experiences during a conference at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. One former student, Eric Hausker (NCAS'77), remembers that his professor's stories were so compelling that he often visited Vermes during office hours to hear more: "Gabor has a fairly pronounced Eastern-European accent, but it hardly got in the way because we would be hanging on every word."

While in Houston, Vermes became close to a Jewish family. The wife, a survivor of Auschwitz and a Hungarian native, married a successful Texas businessman, bore two children, and became a patron of the arts. "She was 16 when she left Auschwitz. She started over in the United States and completely lost her Hungarian accent," he says. "Only once did I hear her mention the Holocaust; she treated it as if it had never happened. She was in her 40s when the effects of her repression hit her all at once like an exploding time bomb. She was institutionalized for a considerable period and never fully recovered. It's foolish to think that we can put aside this terrible experience. The Holocaust will remain with me until the day I die."

For Remembrance

Neha Weinstein

A small woman with wise and knowing eyes, Neha Weinstein is troubled by making parts of her story public. Many of her experiences as a young girl in a concentration camp in Ukraine are incommunicable encounters that lie beyond human understanding. But Weinstein bravely plods on, talking not only of the misery, hopelessness, and misplaced trust that defined her four years in the camp, but also of her recent efforts to overcome the rage, guilt, and loss of faith caused by the nightmare that, after more than half a century, is impossible to erase.

"I do not really know how I was able to survive," says Weinstein, an associate professor of library science at Rutgers–New Brunswick. "We lived one day at a time, and when it was over, some of us were still alive." She pulls out a paper she recently completed while on sabbatical. Under the title, "The Romanian Jews During WWII," is this qualifying statement: "This is a first draft of an article intended for publication. However, I need some psychological distance from the subject for a period of time before I show the manuscript to scholars and prepare the final draft." The 44-page paper, she explains, is the story of the slaughter of 500,000 Romanian Jews.

From the perspective of 50 years, it seems to Weinstein that her family had always been on the run. In the early 1920s, her parents and their siblings fled the pogroms and anti-Semitism in Ukraine, looking for a better life in the city of Iasi in Romania. But in 1940 the atmosphere of anti-Semitism in Iasi had become so great that her family relocated to Soroca, a small Bessarabian village on the Dniester River.

Her family lived peacefully until a beautiful June morning in 1941 when the Germans began shelling her village as they began their assault on Russia. "Everyone was surprised by the suddenness of the bombs," Weinstein recalls. "We thought that the Russians would fight to keep the Germans out of their territory and that, if we were able to cross the Dniester and move further into Ukraine, we would be protected."

The bombs brought panic. Although there was no bridge across the Dniester, hundreds of people flocked to the river. A few Russian barges ferried livestock and prisoners safely across, but ignored the Jews who begged for their lives. Many of those who attempted to swim across drowned in the river's mighty current. In a desperate attempt to save their daughter, Weinstein's parents squeezed her onto a neighbor's make-shift vessel. Miraculously, the small craft, its passengers, and a few suitcases crossed to safety, but Neha would never see her mother again.

We

and when it was

On the Ukrainian side of the Dniester, a stranger with a truck offered to take Weinstein and a group of Jews who had survived the crossing east to safer territory. Stopping in a field to rest, they awoke to find that the stranger and

his truck had vanished along with all their belongings. Weinstein and a small contingent walked further east for several weeks. They had little food, some water, and the clothes on their backs. They spent restless nights in fields, bombs falling around them.

As instructed by her parents, Neha finally made it to Miastkovka, a village in Transnistria, the region in Ukraine where her mother had been born and where an aunt and uncle still lived. A few weeks later her father appeared and broke the news to Neha: In the panic by the river, husband and wife had lost one another when the crowd surged, pushing him onto a barge. For weeks, he had lingered on the other side of the Dniester, waiting in vain for her to come.

In Miastkovka, Weinstein and her father prayed that her mother would join them, but that hope was soon lost. The German and Romanian armies overran the village, enclosing it in barbed wire and turning it into a concentration camp. Within the month, camp guards stripped and viciously beat her father, leaving him to die in the snow.

"We were treated worse than animals; we worked all day in the fields and slept with cows and pigs," she says. "I had no stockings to help me through the terrible winters. We lived in filthy conditions with lice. When I was sick with typhoid fever, they isolated me with other sick people. They did not waste food and water on the sick."

Survival, says Weinstein, often depended on one's ability to trade with the Ukrainians—valuables for food. "To keep me alive through my illness, my aunt traded my father's coat for some bread and potatoes. On the way to bring me my slice of bread each day, my uncle would eat it. I only survived because a woman with a sick baby shared her food with me."

After the Russians liberated the camp in the spring of 1945, Weinstein became obsessed with finding her mother. Her search over several years proved futile; the Germans and Romanians had done an effective job covering up their atrocities. Any information she found, she documented; some was used in her paper. "My mother was probably murdered in a camp in Bessarabia," she speculates.

Weinstein, by then a teenager, moved to Bucharest an orphan, found a menial job, scrounged for food, and moved in with an older woman seeking companionship. Determined to make something of her life despite the oppression of the Communists and constant long work hours, she went back to school, eventually receiving graduate degrees in chemical engineering and Russian language and literature. She worked as an interpreter in a chemical institute headed by Madame Elena Ceausescu, the wife of the man who would later become one of the most notorious dictators in modern history.

Working at the institute, Weinstein realized the future was bleak and secretly made plans to leave the country. After two years, she received official permission to visit a friend in Switzerland; once there, she headed for a Jewish relief organization in Geneva. They sent her to Rome for six months to wait for a visa to the United States. In 1970 she arrived penniless in New York and moved to Highland Park, where an uncle and some cousins lived.

"When I left Romania, it was too risky to take my diplomas or any official documents so I had no credentials," she says. "Three weeks after I arrived I managed to get an hourly job at Rutgers' Center for Alcohol Studies, where, over three years, I worked my way up to co-editing *The Journal of Alcohol Studies* and co-authoring an international bibliography." She soon decided to apply to Rutgers College and, in 1973, received a master's degree in library science from SCILS and became a faculty member in Rutgers' library system.

Despite more than 25 years at Rutgers, very few colleagues know her history. "I never talked about the past; it was too painful," says Weinstein. "When I was in Rome, I would visit these beautiful cathedrals and envy people who were believers. I would say to myself, 'Life would be so much easier if I, too, could believe.' "

Finally, after years of alienation and depression, she found a determined young psychiatrist who helped her. The progress she made in therapy led to her paper about the Romanian Jews and the Holocaust, which has been a catharsis of sorts. But Weinstein says she still hasn't been able to watch a video of herself that was made for Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, a project to record the memories of Holocaust survivors. "America is a wonderful place; institutions are accountable and important balances are built into the system," she says. "These are things I never take for granted."

> "We lived one day at a time, but over, some of us were still alive."

Danger Zone

Transnistria—an artificial geographic term created during WWII—was part of Ukraine before it was conquered by German and Romanian forces in 1941. Weinstein fled there seeking safety, but many of the area's 300,000 Jews were slaughtered by Germany's mobile killing unit D. Of the 150,000 Jews deported to Transnistria from Bessarabia, Bukovina, and northern Moldavia, 90,000 perished.

For Remembrance

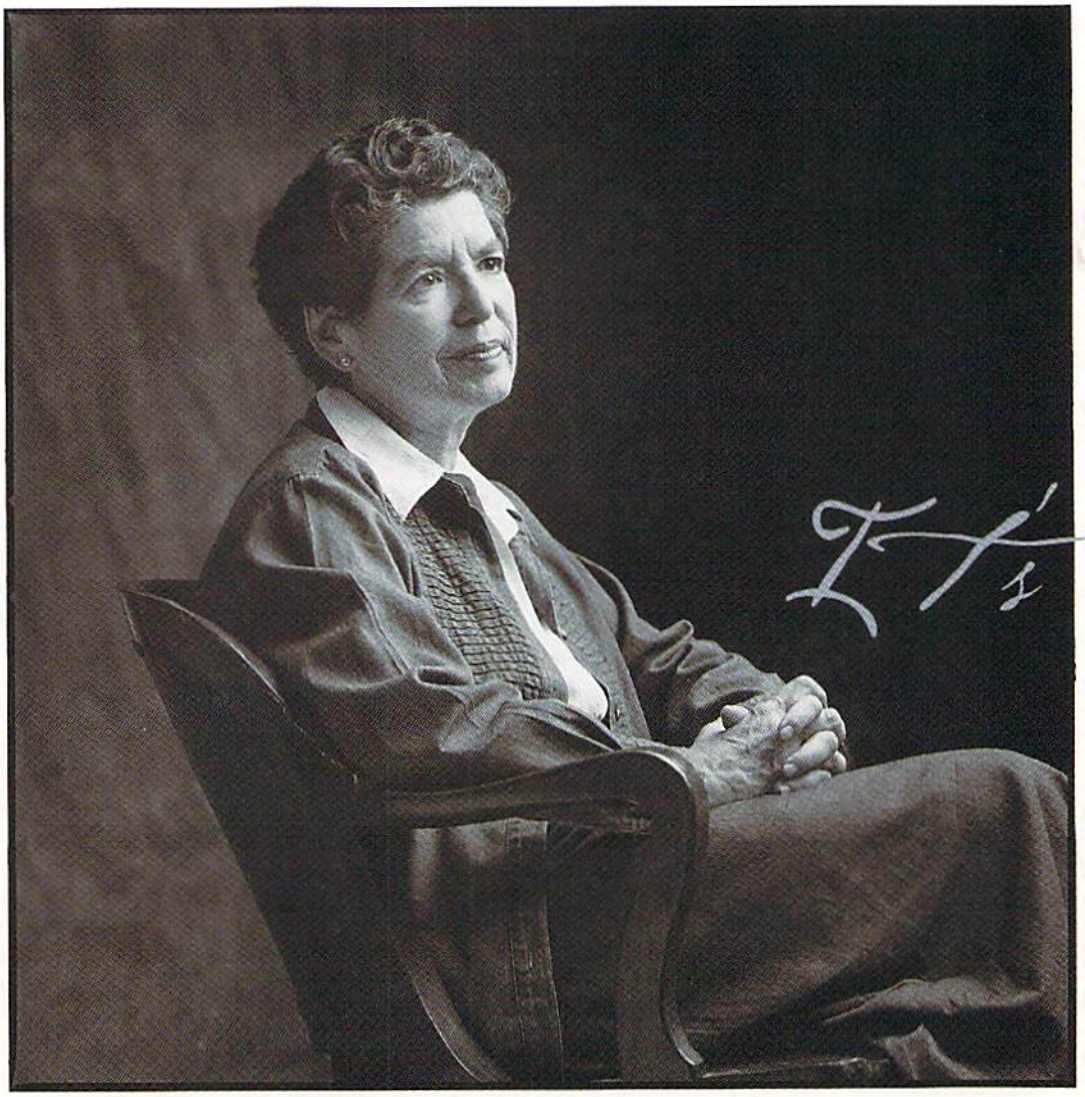
Lillian Robbins

Last February, Lillian Robbins opened *The New York Times* to a story about an exhibition of photographs of French children who had been deported to concentration camps during the Holocaust. Accompanying the story was a portrait of a well-dressed woman, Fanny Cukier, and her two little girls. "When I looked at the caption and saw the name Cukier, my mouth dropped," says Robbins. "I had spent part of my childhood in France, and Cukier was my maiden name."

Although the family in the photograph was not related to her, seeing it made Robbins rethink the impact of the Holocaust on her own childhood. "As the danger mounted for my family in 1939, we moved quite a bit before finally settling in a small town in the part of France that wasn't occupied by the Germans," she says. "Many of the children who were deported were living in the unoccupied zone in 1942, as was I. The photos of the French children had an uncanny resemblance to photos in our family albums. For the first time I realized that I could just as easily have met the same fate. It was just sheer luck that no one turned us in."

Robbins, a professor of psychology at Rutgers–Newark, was the oldest of three daughters in a family of two working parents. Her father, Bernard, was an electrical engineer, and her mother, Cecile, was an attorney. The family lived in the Alsace-Lorraine region of northern France, close to the German border and the first part of France to fall. With her father in the French army and the Germans about to overrun the region in September 1939, her pregnant mother buried the family's fine china and silver in a neighbor's garden, packed a few belongings, and moved southwest to Poitiers and then north to Lille.

Soon after Robbins's sister Danielle was born, her father was demobilized and sent by the Army to work in a steel mill near Vichy, the capital of unoccupied France. The family and some 15 relatives settled in nearby Montluçon. Her grandmother, who came on a separate train, was taken off by Nazis who had discovered that the family's gold had been made into the buttons on her dress. Although the dress was confiscated, Robbins's aunt was able to obtain the grandmother's release. "We were fortunate that it was a time when negotiation with the Germans was still possible," says Robbins.



It wasn't long before French Jews, like those of every other European country in Hitler's grasp, were forbidden to work in professional occupations. With no incomes, members of Robbins's family traveled to nearby villages to exchange soap and stockings for food and necessities. "One great-uncle went to Lyons one day and never returned," says Robbins. "My father carried poison; he said that the Germans would never capture us alive." Robbins, six years old when the war started, remembers attending first grade in three separate schools.

As the Nazi threat heightened and anti-Semitism grew, her parents decided to try to leave France. Her father contacted the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency, and offered to give them privileged information on the steel mills, which were being used to help the German war effort, in exchange for American visas. The OSS agreed to the exchange, but as the Germans threatened to occupy all of France, Lillian's father realized that it was too dangerous to wait for the visas any longer. The family left by train for Spain on October 31, 1942. Just 11 days after they fled, the Germans overran the unoccupied zone and many of Robbins's relatives who had remained in Montluçon were forced into hiding.

Robbins, who was nine, and her younger sister both survived scarlet fever while on the run in Spain and Portugal. Before boarding a ship that would take them to Philadelphia, all of the family's savings—about $2,000 in cash—was sewn into the lining of Lillian's coat. "There was an awful lot at stake if we were caught; I was very proud to be given the responsibility," she remembers. The family finally settled in New York in January 1943, but her parents were never able to find work in their professions again. They understood the value of an education, however, and passed it on to their children. Robbins received her bachelor's degree at City College and her doctoral degree in social psychology from New York University.

She joined the Rutgers faculty in 1971; and, for 17 years, she was the director of the honors program at Rutgers–Newark. This fall she began her new role as co-director of the Faculty Alliance for Education.

The Holocaust, says Robbins, gave her a sense of "keeping what really matters in front of you." For her, what really matters is family. When she was a young mother, remembers Robbins, her husband, a physician, worked long hours in a Manhattan hospital. The couple considered moving out of the city, but they decided against it. "I wanted my kids to see their father as often as they could, and I knew that if we moved to the suburbs, he would have been home a lot less. Keeping the family close was more important than having a lot of space."

Fifty years after being dispersed by war, Robbins's extended family is reconnecting. This past summer, several generations, including her 89-year-old mother, Cecile, and her mother's sister and two brothers—all in their 80s—attended a wedding in the south of France. At the reception, Robbins was seated at a table with her aunt and a woman who had saved her aunt's life by hiding her during the war. "They've been very close friends for more than 50 years, even though they no longer live in the same town," says Robbins, who has close to 40 relatives still living in France. "Many people like my aunt were saved because of the kindness of others."

Monuments on Paper

The photograph that Robbins saw came from the book "French Children of the Holocaust" (New York Universty Press, 1996), a 1,902-page memorial to the Jewish children sacrificed to the Nazis by the collaborative French government. Author Serge Klarsfeld, himself a child of the Nazi occupation, calls the 2,500 photographs "the children's collective gravestones."

Because Robbins's family lived communally with her aunt and uncles when Robbins was a little girl, they have always had a special bond. She was delighted to observe new ones being formed between her son, daughter, and grandchildren and many of their cousins whom they had never met before. "I found that perhaps because many in the older generation are now very old, their children—cousins who didn't pay much attention to the family before—seemed to be more interested in getting to know us."

Robbins, who has been battling cancer since 1980, believes that having survived the persecution of the Nazis, she can survive almost anything. "I think I'm a more resilient person than I probably would have been. And despite having rarely attended synagogue as a kid, it was important to me to instill in my children a sense of Jewish culture and education. It's up to us as survivors to preserve the culture and tell the story of those who weren't as lucky."

"up to us as survivors to preserve the culture and tell the story of those who weren't so lucky."

For Remembrance

Hans Fisher

Throughout his videotaped interview for Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation project, Hans Fisher (Ag'50) has remained composed. For more than an hour, he has calmly recounted story after harrowing story: Gestapo agents escorting his father to the Buchenwald concentration camp, Hitler Youth chasing and beating him and his friends, his ill-fated odyssey aboard the German passenger ship *St. Louis*, and the months he spent away from his family in a French camp for Jewish refugee children. But when he tells how his mother, prone to seasickness, suffered a debilitating bout of illness on the family's second Atlantic crossing—the one that finally brought them to safety—the tears well in his eyes.

Fisher, a professor of nutritional biochemistry at Rutgers since 1954, is one of the few living survivors of the 1939 journey of the *St. Louis*, in which 917 Jewish refugees who had escaped from the Nazis were turned away by several countries and forced to return to Europe. The saga of the *St. Louis* is the focus of one of the best-read books on the Holocaust, *Voyage of the Damned*. Fisher was interviewed for that book, as well as for Spielberg's project, which is attempting to interview all remaining Holocaust survivors.

On the videotape, Spielberg's interviewer asks for spellings of street and family names, details about the apartment in Breslau, Germany—now Wroclaw, Poland—in which the Fishers lived, and information on how the family celebrated various Jewish holidays. In one particularly chilling recollection, Fisher describes looking out his apartment window as a 10-year-old boy in 1938 and watching Adolf Hitler pass in a motorcade. "People were sieg heiling away," he says.

Fisher's father was an attorney who, upon marrying, went into his father-in-law's boot-manufacturing business. Fisher and his younger sister, Ruth, were raised in a traditional Jewish home; they followed kosher dietary laws and enjoyed their studies at a Jewish school. But even as a young boy, Fisher couldn't help but notice the growing atmosphere of hatred: the harassment by neighbors; the expulsion from Germany of Polish-Jewish classmates; and Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, with its riotous attacks on Jews on November 9 and 10, 1938. He remembers discussing the worsening conditions with school chums, "most of whom felt that the British and President Roosevelt wouldn't let things get out of hand."

The growing anti-Semitism led his parents to make plans to emigrate to Palestine; they ordered modular furniture for a tiny apartment there and applied for permission to leave Germany. His maternal German-Jewish grandfather, who had lost four sons in World War I, resisted the flight from his homeland. Recalls Fisher: "He said, 'What are they going to do to an old man who gave four of his sons to Germany?' "

The morning after Kristallnacht, Gestapo agents came to the Fisher apartment and took Hans's father to Buchenwald. A few hours later, two agents returned and ransacked the premises. "Those in camps at the time were still allowed to leave the country if they could get visas," says Fisher. After two months in the Buchenwald concentration camp, which Fisher calls "a relatively mild precursor of what was soon to follow," his father obtained a Cuban visa with the help of a lawyer friend and was soon on a ship that sailed for New York before heading on to Cuba.

> to do to an old man

Several months later, the rest of the Fisher family boarded the *St. Louis* in Hamburg and set sail to join the father in Cuba. In Havana, the *St. Louis* was so near to shore that Hans heard his father call out to him from a small boat in the water below. Little did Hans realize that Cuba would deny the refugees entry, as would the United States. Forced to recross the Atlantic, the ship carried its unwanted human cargo to the four European countries—France, Great Britain, Belgium, and the Netherlands—that had agreed to accept them.

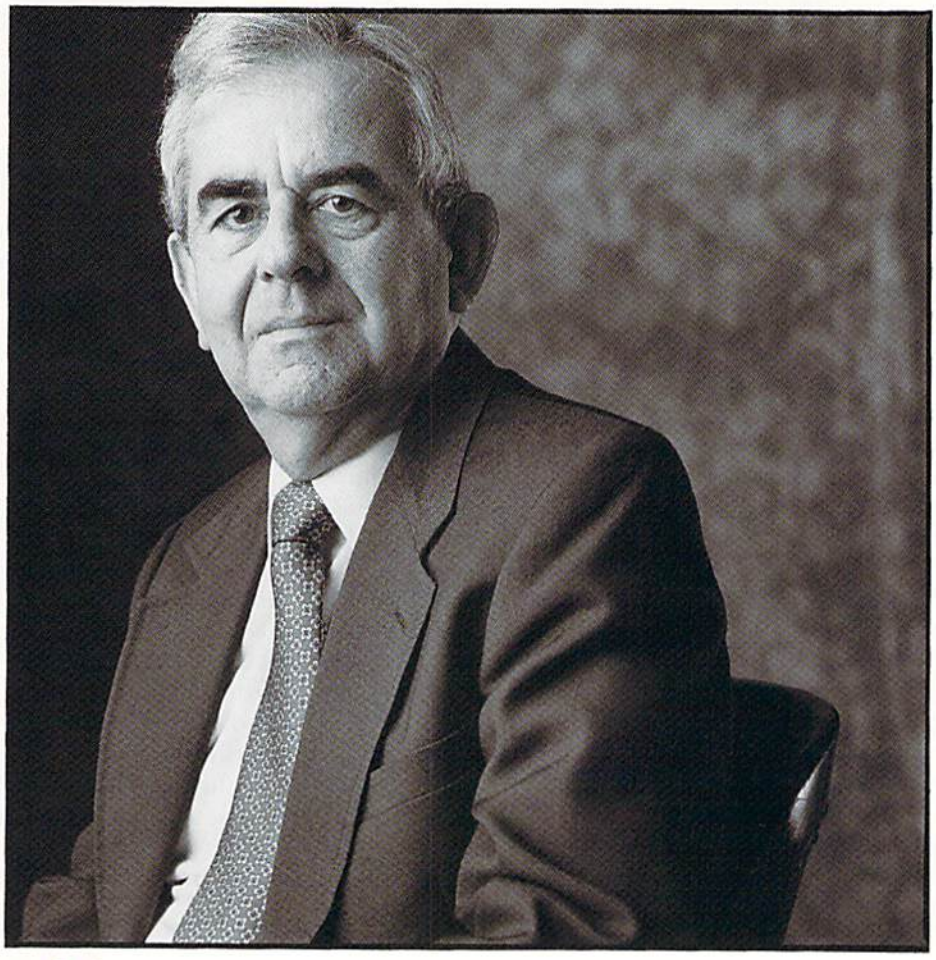
The Fishers were assigned to France, and Hans was sent to a friendly children's camp on the outskirts of Paris. After war broke out on September 1, 1939, the Nazis soon began dropping bombs on the French countryside, the camp closed, and Hans was reunited with his mother and sister in Laval in central France. The Joint Distribution Committee, an organization that helped Jewish refugees,

Abandoned Ship

Turned away by Cuba and the United States, the "St. Louis" returned its 917 passengers to Europe, where four countries—France, Britain, Belgium, and the Netherlands—finally agreed to accept them. Those sent to Britain were safe; the others once again faced the Nazi threat. No one knows for sure how many returnees perished; one estimate holds that only 240 survived.

was able to obtain visas and train and boat tickets for the Fishers. He recalls that as his family detrained in Le Havre, a bomb hit the engine and passengers were thrown to the ground in an ear-shattering explosion of steam. It was a miracle, he says, that no one was killed by flying shrapnel.

The Fishers then boarded an antiquated ship, passengered mostly with loyalists of the Spanish civil war, and set out across the Atlantic once again. The ship, accompanied by a military convoy looking for German U-boats and hampered by stormy seas that made his mother gravely ill, landed safely in New York, where they were taken to Ellis Island. A few days later the Fishers boarded another boat, this one headed for a reunion with Hans's father in Cuba. The family lived there for a year before coming back to New York in February 1941.



"grandfather said, "What are they going who gave four of his sons to Germany?"

With the United States still in a depression, Hans's father had trouble finding a job in New York, so the family moved to a small farm in Vineland to raise chickens. Fisher graduated as valedictorian of his high school class, earned an undergraduate degree at Rutgers, and received his doctoral degree in 1954 from the University of Illinois. After the war, the Fishers found no survivors among their many relatives who had remained in Germany.

Fisher, who considers himself fortunate to have survived, has worked hard to make the most of his life. His long and distinguished career at Rutgers includes collaborating on ground-breaking research on cholesterol, trauma, and alcoholism. He founded the Department of Nutritional Sciences at Cook College, and, in 1996, received one of the University's highest faculty honors, the Daniel Gorenstein Award, which recognizes outstanding scholarly achievement and exceptional service to Rutgers. In 1989, Fisher was invited back to Wroclaw to lecture at the University of Wroclaw. He found that the apartment house in which his family once lived was gone, but his grandparents' homes were still intact.

The interviewer for Speilberg's video project asks Fisher about the Holocaust's effect on the way he raised his three children; a clinical psychologist, an oncologist, and a cardiologist. He hesitates for a moment before answering: "I tried to instill in them a sense that education is vital and that they should live life to the fullest," he says. As his children appear in photographs on screen, Fisher proudly identifies each one, their wives, and each of his eight grandchildren. The words inscribed on the bottom of the video case are: "So Generations Never Forget What So Few Lived To Tell."

For Remembrance

Philip Orenstein

Philip Orenstein, with his hair sticking straight up and paint chips sprinkling his dark wool sweater, seems dwarfed by the unfinished 20-foot-long canvas that stretches across his Livingston campus studio. After a debilitating stroke in 1994 that left him with a pronounced limp and an inability to paint with his strong hand, he's back at work, more determined than ever to complete the final two of a series of seven billboard-sized murals that trace France's involvement in World War II. The ambitious project has dominated his life for most of the decade. "My wife, Joyce, believes I'm obsessed with the Holocaust," says Orenstein (RC'61,GSNB'74), an associate professor of art at Rutgers' Mason Gross School of the Arts. "Besides the fact that it changed world history, it had incredible personal implications on my life. There came a point in the late 1980s when I realized that if I truly wanted to make a contribution as an artist, I had to deal with my Holocaust experiences."

Orenstein's obsession stems from his childhood in France, a childhood spent under the shadow of war. His father, who, as a 12-year-old, had set off by himself from Poland to Paris in 1921, joined the French Foreign Legion in 1939 as a way to get citizenship papers. After the German army captured Paris and France and Germany signed an armistice in 1940, his father was captured and sent to a POW camp in Salzburg, Austria, for five years. Under the rules of the Geneva Convention, he was compensated for his labor and sent his family, who were living in the 11th *arrondissement* in Paris, a regular stipend.

By 1942, however, the 11th *arrondissement* had become the scene of many roundups and deportations of Jews. One day that July, while young Philip's aunt and uncle were at work, his three-year-old cousin, Henri Herzorn, was taken away by the French police and never heard from again. Philip and Henri were the same age, and, 55 years later, the memory of the Vel d'Hiv Roundup continues to haunt him. "It really wasn't the Germans who wanted Jewish kids at that time," Orenstein says. "It was the French police, who were looking to impress the Germans. The tragedy is that they eventually deported more than 4,000 French-Jewish children under the age of 16."

With life growing increasingly risky in Paris, his mother, with the help of the Red Cross, sent him and his brother into hiding with a Christian family in Houdan, a small town about 60 miles west of Paris. The town was occupied by Germany, but a local priest who was active in the French Resistance threatened to excommunicate anyone who betrayed the Jewish children there. "Philippe Pétain, who was the puppet head of the Vichy regime, made a bargain that, in the first wave of deportations, only Jewish refugees, as opposed to French-Jewish citizens, would be taken," explains Orenstein. "Sometimes Jews were better off if they didn't live in the Free Zone. French citizens who lived in occupied territory hated the Germans and were less cooperative in giving up the Jews."

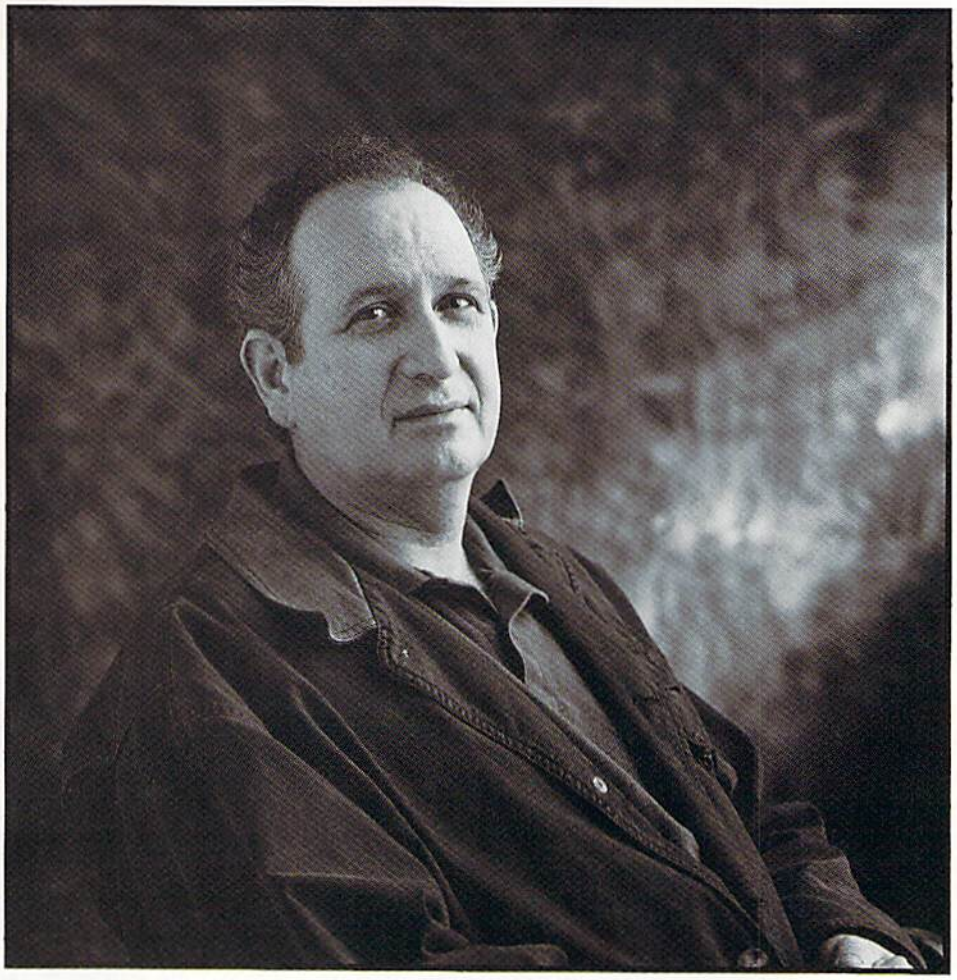
Houdan became a rear staging area for German soldiers fighting in nearby Normandy, which brought the war very close to young Philip. He clearly remembers August 18, 1944, the day that Gen. George S. Patton's Third Army liberated Houdan and American GIs threw candy and chewing gum to the children from their tanks. Five years old at the time, Philip dealt with the war by sketching images on the wallpaper next to his bed. Drawing seemed to come to him with ease.

I realized an artist, I had to deal with

With post-war Europe in turmoil and many family members moving to the United States, the Orensteins emigrated to Brooklyn in December 1949. Philip, who was 11, experienced culture shock. He missed soccer, short pants, and taking the Metro to art museums by himself. Eventually, the family moved to Lakewood to farm chickens. After attending New York University for a year, he transferred to Rutgers, where he spent as much time painting abstract art as he did pursuing his physics and philosophy studies. Around this time, he returned to Paris for the first time in 10 years and realized that he had become an American.

"Le Grande Rafle"

In July 1942, Orenstein's cousin was one of 8,000 French Jews—half of them children—taken to the Véldrome d'Hiver bicycle stadium to await deportation. With little food or water and no room to lie down, said one witness, "all these wretched people lived five horrifying days among the screams and cries of those who had gone mad or the injured who had tried to kill themselves."



that if I truly wanted to make a contribution as my *Holocaust experiences.*

Allan Kaprow, an art teacher at Rutgers and one of the key artists in what was then known as the Happenings movement, visited his studio one day, took a look around, and convinced Orenstein that his true calling was art. He spent the next 10 years building a reputation in New York's Pop Art movement. In 1971, with a family to support, Orenstein started teaching courses at Rutgers and working towards his master's degree. In 1974, he joined the faculty. His earlier math experience came in handy when, a year later, he opened one of the country's first computer-art centers at MGSA.

Many of Orenstein's works have militaristic themes based on the scenes he saw as a young boy. It is fitting then that he now paints from what used to be the officer's mess at Camp Kilmer, a World World II barracks on the Livingston campus. Some of the officers who were fed from that kitchen may have been among the American troops that liberated his village in France. The murals, which are meant to be part of a single work, are nearly finished after almost 10 years. They start with *The Fall of Paris* and end with *The Liberation of Paris*; in between are *The Battle of Britain*, *Pétain and DeGaulle*, *The Vel d'Hiv Roundup*, *The Battle of Stalingrad*, and *D-Day*. Each of the first several murals took about six months to complete, but his stroke has slowed him down. It now takes him a year to finish each one.

"In the D-Day mural, I'm using the idea of a wall as a metaphor for time," he explains. "Students are helping me with the graffiti, which serves as the base. Over the graffiti I'm placing images that deal with the war and the invasion. Across the top, I'm going to pay tribute to women who played a role in the period by providing portraits of female Holocaust victims, female Russian soldiers, my mother, wives of American soldiers, and Marlene Dietrich."

Orenstein, who has four grown children, had hoped to show his murals at the 11th *arrondissement*'s city hall in Paris in 1994 to mark the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the city. He ran into all kinds of pitfalls, caused, he believes, by the perception of some that the murals are anti-French and controversial. Instead, he showed earlier works relating to his growing up in France at the city hall in Houdan. "There is a problem with showing my murals," says Orenstein. "They need a huge space and don't fit into any particular category of art, so art museums are not interested in showing them. And Holocaust museums are more interested in documentation than art—besides, they don't have art curators. One day, when they look back on the 20th century, I'm confident that my murals will be very relevant."

For Remembrance

Ruth Mandel

At a conference on Genocide, Religion, and Modernity this past spring at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., Ruth B. Mandel congratulated her daughter, Maud, as she left the stage following a presentation on the impact of the genocides of World Wars I and II on Armenian and Jewish religious practices in France. Ruth, director of Rutgers' Eagleton Institute of Politics and vice chair of the museum's U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, was clearly pleased by her daughter's presentation in front of some of the world's preeminent Holocaust scholars. "It's nerve-wracking to give this kind of talk, especially when your mother is in the audience," quipped Maud, who joined the faculty of Brown University this fall as a specialist in modern Jewish history.

The fact that Maud's work focuses on Holocaust survivors is especially poignant: Her mother spent years avoiding her own Holocaust history. "Every time I told the family's story my teeth would start to chatter," says Ruth. "I didn't read about the Holocaust. I didn't watch movies about it. In 1979, when Maud was 12, we took a trip to Vienna. As we approached the door to my parents' former apartment, I had a hysterical, emotionally paralyzing reaction."

Ruth was finally ready to come to grips with her family history in 1989 after reading an article about plans for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The article mentioned that the museum would house an exhibit about the *St. Louis*, the passenger ship of 917 Jewish refugees that was turned back by Cuba and the United States in 1939. Mandel's parents had given her a photograph of her father holding her as an infant on the ship, with a life preserver bearing the name *St. Louis* in the background. She contacted the museum, which welcomed the photo and sent her its newsletter. "I made some inquiries about ways I might be able to contribute to the museum. I didn't have a million dollars to give, but I had conviction and commitment to offer," says Mandel.

In 1991, Mandel, who was then director of the Center for the American Woman and Politics at Rutgers, was appointed by President Bush to serve on the 65-member U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council. The council sets policy and oversees the operation of the museum, its research institute, and special programs, such as the Days of Remembrance held each spring. In 1993—the year the museum opened—President Clinton named her the council's vice chair.

"I consider myself an escapee, rather than a survivor, of the Holocaust," says Mandel. "But the fact that we ended up in the United States—that I was educated here, established a career here, have my own family here—all of it derives from events linked to the Holocaust."

Mandel's Polish father, Michael Blumenstock, moved to Vienna at age 18, established several successful clothing shops by the time he reached his mid-30s, and married her mother, who was a young bride in her early 20s. "My mother came from a prosperous family, and she envisioned a life as a dignified Viennese hausfrau," says Mandel. "My parents' newly decorated apartment was featured in an architectural magazine; they were anticipating a growing family and a lovely life together."

When Kristallnacht, the Nazi attack on Jewish people throughout the German Reich, came in November

1938, her father was sent to the concentration camp at Dachau. Mandel's 24-year-old mother, working frantically over several months, won his release, secured a boat ticket to Shanghai, and encouraged him to flee. "My father refused to leave for China without us; instead, he tried to escape to Belgium, with plans for us to follow him there," she says. Soon after he left, however, he was caught at the border and sent back to Austria. Meanwhile, her mother was working another angle: the *St. Louis*. "If we hadn't left on the ship, the plan would have been to return to my father's family in Novy Tag, Poland. There, we would surely have perished, as my father's parents and siblings and their children did later on," she says.

The *St. Louis* was turned away by Cuba and the United States and the passengers eventually were divided among four countries in Europe. The Blumenstocks were accepted by England. Mandel's father was drafted into the British army during the war. She and her mother spent many hours in air-raid shelters, living first in Spalding and then in Wigston Fields, a suburb of Leicester.

In 1947, the family emigrated to Borough Park, Brooklyn, where her maternal grandparents had settled after fleeing Austria. Her father worked as a shipping clerk in a small factory until he scraped up enough money to rent a clothing shop in a Coney Island basement. Although the family rarely attended religious services, they instilled in their only daughter a Jewish identity.

Mandel, who earned her bachelor's degree from Brooklyn College and her master's degree and doctoral degree in American literature from the University of Connecticut, firmly believes that her personal history is part of the reason she became a student of American democracy and a founder of Rutgers' Center for the American Woman and Politics. "All my life I've been aware that the people who hold political power have a tremendous impact on individual lives," says Mandel. "The Holocaust teaches us that the power of the state can be used for unspeakably evil purposes. Our individual and collective responsibility as citizens is to participate in the larger community and to exercise whatever power we hold for the common good."

Mandel says that the U.S. Holocaust museum is primarily "about remembrance in the service of education. It's important to remember the past and to know what happened during the Holocaust; but it's even more important to live better in the present and future, both individually and as part of a human community." In light of that mandate, a Committee on Conscience was formed and met for the first time in June 1996 with Mandel as its founding chair.

"We are walking a delicate line," says Mandel. "Some believe that the museum should educate by simply telling the historical story; others argue that there's little point unless we make connections with contemporary situations." She describes the committee as "people of moral stature who are highly informed and will speak out about existing and potential genocides." At a retreat this past January, the committee spent more than a day discussing Bosnia and the role of the United Nations War Crimes Tribunal with its chief prosecutor Richard Goldstone, a supreme court judge in South Africa.

Ruth and her daughter have often discussed the Holocaust in terms of lessons learned. Says Ruth: "Whether human beings have learned lessons from the Holocaust is rather unclear and controversial. The events that took place between 1933 and 1945 represented a state-sponsored and state-implemented effort explicitly aimed at eradicating an entire people. Since that time, we have witnessed other grotesque slaughterhouses—Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia. Large-scale annihilation continues to appear on the human landscape. Until the day comes when that's no longer the case, there is much educating to do." ❑

A Tribute in Stone

As vice chair of the council that oversees the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Ruth Mandel is dedicated to its mission: to remind and to educate. Mandated by a unanimous act of Congress and built entirely through private donations, the Washington, D.C. museum, with its exhibits, programming, library, and archive, serves more than 1 million scholars and citizens each year.

important to remember the past; it's even more important to live better in the future.