

Helping Holocaust Survivors Now, Because Tomorrow May Be Too Late

By Rachel Chasin

Anita Winter, growing up in Switzerland as the daughter and granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, heard horrifying stories of the Shoah.

Her mother, Margit Strauss (née Fern), was about 5 years old when Nazis forcibly deported her, her mother Rosa and her baby brother Arno on a train from their hometown of Nuremberg, Germany. Margit's father, Jakob Fern, was sent to a concentration camp in Poland. Not long after the train left the station, it made an unexpected stop, and Rosa, holding Arno in her arms, and Margit jumped off and hid in a nearby forest. To survive, the family ate plants and nuts from trees, and ultimately fled to Paris. In 1940, the Nazis invaded France and occupied Paris. The family of three traveled south, to the French village of Saint-Pancrace.

The village mayor was often intoxicated, and Rosa snuck into his office and forged new identity cards for herself, her children, and for other Jewish refugees. Rosa's new name was Renée Fontaine, Margit was now Marguerite Fontaine and Arno's new identity was André Fontaine. In order to justify their German accents, the "Fontaines" were now from Alsace-Lorraine, France—a region once governed by Germany. They lived out the rest of War World II with false



Courtesy of Anita Winter

Anita Winter's parents escaped Germany, eventually moving to Switzerland. Years later, she started the Gamaraal Foundation, taking care of less fortunate Swiss survivors.

identities, hiding in different places.

After the war, they moved to Lyon, France, and resumed using their real names. In 1946, after seven years of being apart, not knowing who was dead or alive, the family was reunited in Katowice, Poland.

"When I was a child, my mother said it was very impor-

tant for her to always have our shoes, coat and passport near the bed, so we could run away if necessary," Winter said.

Before the war, in 1935, in the city of Heilbronn, Germany, Winter's father, Walter Strauss, was barred from attending public school because he was Jewish. His parents sent him at 13 to

an institute in Bex, Switzerland. Walter's parents, brother and sister fled to the tiny central European principality of Liechtenstein. In 1938, at 16, Walter finished his education but couldn't get a work permit in Switzerland or Liechtenstein. So, Walter moved to Berlin to live with his Aunt Gerda, and apprenticed with a Jewish tailor.

Soon after, Nazis rampaged throughout Germany, Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia, attacking Jewish residents and vandalizing Jewish businesses and synagogues. It was Nov. 9, 1938, Kristallnacht, "the Night of Broken Glass." Walter's aunt told him to hide in a cupboard. The next morning, Walter went to work and discovered that several Jewish employees had left Berlin. Eventually, he decided to leave as well, and escaped to Liechtenstein, where he crossed the border to join other family members in adjoining neutral Switzerland.

In 1961, Margit and Walter met on a holiday in Lugano, Switzerland. They married that same year and raised their four children in Baden, Switzerland.

When Winter learned, a few years ago, that thousands of the world's remaining Holocaust survivors live in poverty, she decided to establish the Gamaraal Foundation in 2014. The nonprofit organization

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helps survivors in Switzerland. According to the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, or Claims Conference (B'nai B'rith International sits on the conference's Board of Directors), a non-governmental organization that negotiates restitution for Holocaust victims and their families, there are an estimated 480 survivors currently living in Switzerland, and as of December 2014 there are approximately 480,000 survivors worldwide. The Claims Conference also actively helps survivors in Switzerland. The Zurich-based Gamaraal Foundation has provided assistance to more than 80 poverty-stricken survivors. The foundation is named after her four children, Gadi, Manuel, Rafael and Alisa. The first two letters of each name create the word Gamaraal.

Prior to creating the foundation, Winter worked in the fashion industry and founded her own marketing company, Anita S. AG, in 1989. She was an exclusive agent in Switzerland for the Walt Disney Co., Calvin Klein and Delta Galil Industries. She also developed her own fashion line; Anita S. Swiss Designer Fashion. Winter received her degree in economics from the University of Zurich in 1984, and, from 2014 to 2016, she studied advanced management and leadership at the University of St. Gallen.

Winter is currently a special



Courtesy of Anita Winter

President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz with Gamaraal Foundation founder and President Anita Winter at a Holocaust memorial event at the parliament building.

advisor to the Swiss government for Holocaust education and prevention. She is also the vice president of Yad Vashem Switzerland, and for the last three years, she has represented B'nai B'rith International at the United Nations Office in Geneva. In March, she spoke to the United Nations Human Rights Council on behalf of B'nai B'rith about anti-Semitism and the importance of tolerance. Her husband, Herbert Winter, is the president of the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities.

The Gamaraal Foundation uses a list, generated by the Claims Conference and provided by Switzerland's social welfare agency, to send money to survivors.

Affluent Holocaust survivors supported the foundation initially. Additional donations have come from other foundations, banks, companies, private contributors and even children of Nazis.

Donations are distributed three times a year, at Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah and Passover. The money is used to pay for medical expenses, including visits to the dentist and hearing aids.

Volunteers write down the survivors' stories so they aren't forgotten, and Winter hopes to make these personal histories available to the public. Winter has a collection of letters from the survivors expressing gratitude for the organization's help.

"They are so thankful. It's not only about the money, they know they aren't alone, and they feel like they are now getting the recognition they deserve," Winter said.

Holocaust education is also a big part of her mission. Winter speaks to students, diplomats and associations about her family's story. She also arranges for Holocaust education at local schools and asks survivors if they're willing to share their stories with a new generation.

Her grandfather, Jakob Fern, "didn't speak about the concentration camp, or his traumatic experiences in the Shoah, because he wanted to protect me," Winter says. "He told me when I was a child something I will never forget. He said: 'Listen, my darling, my sweetheart, in the war, the Nazis, they took everything from me, they killed in one day my parents, all of my brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, they took my fortune, my dignity, even my name—you can lose in life everything, [but there is] only one thing nobody can take from you in life—your education.'"

Switzerland's youngest Holocaust survivor is 74, and time is running out. "I urge the world to take action, because I think Holocaust survivors really should live their end of life in dignity and respect. It is in my heart to work towards that. [It is] now or never," Winter said. 🇮🇱