

## David Shentow Eulogy

Dear family and friends, we are gathered to honour the memory of:

David Shentow, beloved husband of Rose for 67 years, devoted and loving father to Renee and Lorie, grandfather to Michael, and to Rachel & Chaim, and great-grandfather to Rachel and Chaim's children: Ester, Miriam and Moshe Meir.

Before I deliver my remarks, I would just like to say that I have known David and his family for over a decade, since David joined me on the March of the Living in the 2000s. So much of what you will hear in my remarks, is gleaned both from my conversations with the family and from my time listening to David tell his story to the students on the March of the Living, as well as from some of the students own recollections of David on the March of the Living.

David Shentow was born April 29th, 1925 in Warsaw, Poland. His parents were Rivka and Moisha Avraham who had moved to Warsaw from the town of Bialobrzeg (pronounced: Byalobzegey), Poland, south of Warsaw. David was the eldest of 3 children – he had two younger sisters, Pearl, and Esther who was a ballet dancer. A short time after David was born, he and his parents left for Antwerp, Belgium, where David's father found work as a master tailor, opening an atelier, while his mother opened a small grocery store.

The family lived in a nice Jewish neighbourhood near a pool and a park, and David went to the local Tachkemoni school. Initially, the family had planned to stay in Antwerp just long enough to save up the money until they could travel to Montreal or to New York City, where David's two uncles, both master bakers, had found work.

When World War Two broke out in September 1939, David's father tried flee to France with his family, but the border was closed so they had to return to Antwerp.

The situation for the Jewish community in Belgium gradually began to worsen, until eventually, in 1941, the Jews had to turn in to the Gestapo office their radios and bicycles, and new decrees forbade Jewish children to go to school, to the cinema, to the theater, to the Opera House, or to sit on the benches in the park – and of course all Jews were forced to wear the yellow Star of David on their clothing.

When David was 17 years old, all able-bodied men, and boys aged 16 or older, were forced to report to the railway station in Antwerp. At the base of the marble staircase leading to the railway platforms, David said goodbye to his mother and two sisters. "I would never set eyes on them again," he would later recall.

David and his father were sent to a number of different camps, until his father was allowed to return to Antwerp because of severe abdominal pains. His father was reluctant to leave David behind, but David encouraged him to leave the camp, saying that he was sure that he could take care of himself.

David would never see his father again.

In late 1942, David was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Here is how David described his arrival:

*"Finally the train slowed down and came to a complete halt. It was 4:00 a.m. The sign in the train station read Auschwitz. Alongside of the station platform I could see men dressed in what appeared to me to be striped pajamas and striped caps. I noticed that they were wearing wooden clogs on their bare feet. They all seemed tired and frightened and they all had their heads shaved. Suddenly we were surrounded by S.S. guards holding on to vicious guard dogs, German Shepherds, trained to rip out a prisoner's throat instantaneously upon command. Megaphones, used at full power, ordered us to vacate the train immediately. We had less than ten seconds to obey that first command. Next we heard that all valises had to remain on the train. Any passenger who offered the least sign of resistance was shot on the spot."*

Two stories I personally remember David telling happened during the time of his arrival: The fellow next to him asked the Nazi if he could just keep a family photo. The Nazi immediately sicced a dog on the poor man, and he was lying dead within moments of the attack. David also saw a Nazi grab a crying baby and slam its tiny body against the side of the boxcar instantly killing it.

"I knew I was in hell" David later would say.

"My number, 72585, with the little triangle below the "5" identified me as a Jew. Nothing else of my life from before 4:00 a.m. that morning remained," David later went on to say.

There is so much more that happened to David during his Holocaust years, they could fill a book, but allow me to share with you 4 moments from these exceptionally harsh years.

(Below is an excerpt from a March of the Living interview with David Shentow. I will summarize during my remarks. ER)

**1) One day, during the autumn of 1943, David was transferred with a group of two thousand prisoners to the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw. Their job was to level the remains of buildings shattered during the Jewish Uprising..**

**One morning as I was piling the large building bricks into neat stacks, I saw the earth move. I thought at first it was an earthquake or a moment of dizziness resulting from hunger.**

**Suddenly a manhole cover lifted up, revealing a ghostly figure emerging from the sewer opening. This gaunt, half-naked figure, with sunken eyes, skin as white as chalk, and whose half-opened mouth revealed a toothless expression of surprise and terror, spoke to me.**

**"Bist a yid?" (Are you a Jew?), he asked in a trembling voice. "Yes", I replied. It was his next question which broke my heart.**

**"Is the war over?" he asked. "No", I replied. "Actually, we are prisoners of the Nazis and we are being forced to clean up these ruins. "Who are you?" I asked.**

**"My name is Katzenelenboigen," he said. "I was part of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. When the Uprising was over, my fellow prisoners and I hid in the sewers below the spot where you are standing."**

**He led me down the ladder to the sewer where I saw some fifteen other ghost-like, almost naked men, lying exhausted on the ground. Each fellow resembled Katzenelenboigen with their sunken eyes and gaunt, toothless faces.**

**"You see," said Katzenelenboigen, "for a few months we survived here in the sewers by trading our valuables for food. Then we traded our clothes and footwear with the Poles for food. Finally we pulled out our gold fillings to get something to eat from them. When we had nothing left to barter, the Poles never came back to help us. We are all starving. Can you help us?"**

**"I am just as helpless as you are," I said. "We are also starving. I wish I could help you."**

Although I knew that he was making an impossible request, I promised that I would try to get them something to eat and said that I would try to return to them as quickly as possible.

When I was finally able to return to the sewer opening, I tapped on the manhole cover, expecting to see Katzenelenboigen's face as he raised the cover in response to my signal. When no response came, I used all my strength to lift the cover and expose the sewer opening below.

As I climbed down the ladder, my eyes slowly adjusting to the dark interior, I saw the men lying about on the ground, scattered in irregular patterns like awkward puppets

Katzenelenboigen was sitting on a chair, his head cupped in his hands, and his elbows propped up on the table in front of him. As he appeared to be asleep, I put my hand on his shoulder to awaken him. Very slowly, he turned and fell on the ground. His bulging eyes, staring up at me, told me that during the night he had starved to death.

2) One day, during the winter of 1943, a neighbor of our family, a Mr. Lipshitz, recognized me, despite my much-altered appearance. I was equally shocked by the dramatic changes I saw in him. He told me that he had seen my father. He said, "Your father is with a group of prisoners being out on a truck to go to work. If you want to see him, hurry along to the gates right now. If you go fast enough, you might catch a glimpse of him!"

I ran towards the camp gates, all the while yelling at the top of my lungs, "Tateh, Tateh!" (Dad! Dad!)

All the prisoners turned around to look at me. They all had shaven heads. Their faces were all gaunt. Their bodies were all emaciated. I could not recognize my father. The men stared at me. Were they wondering whether I might be a son whom they had lost? As I watched the truck speed away with its wretched cargo, I wondered whether my father had truly been able to recognize me.

3) During the winter of 1944, I was part of a work detachment sent to Landsberg, a small town close to Dachau. Our job included laying steel rails and cleaning ice and snow off the railroad.

I happened to see a German hausfrau walking home from market. In her grocery basket I spied a loaf of bread sticking up from her other purchases. Noting that the S.S. guard was not on duty in his usual spot, I decided to dash

over to her to ask her for something to eat. I knew that I was risking my life, but I was so hungry that I decided to chance it.

"Could I have something to eat, please?" I begged politely. "Why?" she asked. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving to death!" I replied.

The woman tore off a piece of bread and handed it to me. Then she said that she might be able to give me something more to eat the next day. As she hurried home, I took careful note of her address.

The next day, I told the S.S. guard that I had to relieve myself. When he gave me permission, I hurried off to the house which I had seen her enter the previous day. I knocked at her door. When she opened the door of her house, I was stunned. Over her shoulder I caught a glimpse of a table, chairs, a couch, flowers, photographs, and a carpet on the floor! In short, I saw all the simple traces of the domestic life from which I had been alienated for three full years.

As she handed me some potatoes and a piece of bread, I noticed a man, probably her husband, sitting at the table having his breakfast. He stared at me intently, never uttering a single word.

Stuffing this priceless gift of food inside my uniform, I ran back to work at top speed, hoping and praying that the S.S. guard had not noticed how long I had been gone.

I do not recall precisely when it was that I learned that my visit had been to the house of the mayor of Landsberg, and that the man whom I saw having breakfast was the mayor himself. After the war I wrote a letter to thank him and his wife for their kindness.

4) Some time during the last week of April 1945, I was lying in my bunk, all alone in the barracks. Suddenly I was seized with the desire to have a look at my legs. I rolled up my pant legs. I was horrified. I saw two sticks! I was a "mussulman", a prisoner useless for work, ready to be taken away to the gas chamber and the crematorium.

"This is it!", I thought. "I'm finished!"

Just then an S.S. officer entered the barracks. He screamed at me.

"Get up, you filthy Jew! Get up!"

**I wanted to obey his command, but I could not move my legs. They were numb and useless.**

**Enraged, the Nazi clubbed me on the back of my head. I fell to the ground, unconscious. I thought that I had died. Hours later, I felt myself coming back to life. My eyes began to focus, and I regained a faint sense of hearing. This savage beating destroyed the nerve in my left ear and is responsible for the gradual and permanent loss of hearing in my right ear.**

**Some hours later I dragged myself out of the barracks and looked around. The camp gates were opened wide. The sentry boxes were all empty. There were no S.S. guards and officers anywhere to be seen. Prisoners were lying about, listless, waiting to die.**

**Suddenly, a large armoured vehicle rumbled towards me. The turret of the tank opened up, revealing to me the smiling face of a young, helmeted African-American soldier. He looked at me. "Hi, young fella! How are you doing?" He threw a stick of gum at me.**

**This was the moment of my liberation! The date was April 29, 1945. The day of my birthday! I could not have asked for a better birthday present. I had just turned 20 years old.**

After the war, David received medical treatment and eventually found a place to live with two uncles who had survived as boot-makers in France during the war, and who had returned to Antwerp in 1945. David's best friend at the time was a little dog. The little dog, whose name was Tarzan, decided that he liked David and kept following him everywhere. David had a buddy, another Jewish boy, and when David got permission from his uncle Favela/Philip in Canada, to bring him to Canada, he couldn't bring the dog. So, he gave the dog to his buddy and the friend said he would look after the dog: "When you get your papers, you'll come back and you'll get your dog." This was very important to David, as this dog, in a sense, was his closest family member. Unfortunately, as soon as David left for Canada, the dog disappeared. David was bitterly disappointed because he actually planned on going back to get the dog, and he grieved his little dog for some time. Tarzan was not the only creature that developed an attachment to David - there was also a cat in Ottawa named Yasha (named after Yasha Heifetz) who also adored David, but that's a story for another time.

So David arrived in Halifax in 1949, preparing for a short train ride to Toronto, unaware of the vast distances in Canada. He asked the fellow working in the train: When does the train arrive in Toronto? And the man said it was 3 and half days later. And David asked: How slowly does the train go? Having no idea the vast size of our country.

So, David's uncle Fievela/Phillip put David up in a room in Toronto and David worked hard, going to night school to learn English, and working on Spadina Avenue for a ladies coat company.

But his Polish roots – specifically his Bialobrzeg roots - would end up determining the course of the rest of his life.

Like many Jews who came to Canada, David's uncle kept in touch with other fellow Jews who had immigrated to Canada from Bialobrzeg. One of them was Meir Feldberg who had moved to Ottawa before the war. Meir had a beautiful 18 year old daughter by the name of Rose, and both sides thought the two should meet. So one day, Uncle Phillip picked up the telephone, called Rose's father and said: Guess what? The "plemenek" (Yiddish for nephew) has come and I want you to come and bring your daughter.

And so, some time in December of 1949, on one of Roses' visits to Toronto, the meeting was arranged. It was love at first sight, and within 6 weeks the couple were married.

This is how Rose tells the story: "And then there's a noise on the 2nd floor and the lady who owns the house, where uncle Fievela was renting, said: "Ah! The plemenek is here!"

So, I went out in the hall and I'm looking up the stairs and there's David Shentovsky, six feet tall, a movie star, wearing a double breasted, pinstripe, navy suit. You could tell it was beautifully custom made. And that's it. I fell in love right there!"

And Rose was soon to fall in love with many other qualities that she would learn David possessed, as Rose told me the other day. Among the qualities Rose mentioned were: His humanity. His sensitivity. His wonderful sense of humor. His respect for women.

"He was a gentleman. He never thought of himself. He always thought of other people first," Rose shared with me.

And David of course, fell equally in love with this vivacious, beautiful and funny young Rose.

David moved to Ottawa where he found a job working for Rose's grandfather - Morris Feldberg - as a tailor and a salesman in his men's wear shop. Eventually, David began working for Freemans - a huge department store in Ottawa - as an international buyer where his fluent French came in very handy. When Freemans sold out to the Bay, David stayed on as a buyer, traveling to Europe and China and Taiwan.

Toward the end of his career, David retired early and went into his own mortgage business. I should add that soon after David and Rose were married, David insisted that Rose go to school to earn her degree in French, while he (with the help of a nanny) would look after the children, something which was not that usual in the 1950s...

In the early years of their marriage the couple had two children, Renee and Lori. The children remember their Sunday afternoon drives -

"You should always go on a Sunday drive...You shouldn't be at home on a Sunday", their parents felt. Their father would come downstairs and say: "Ok, Rose, I'm ready to go." And their mother would say: "Dave, you're not leaving the house looking like that." And it happened every single Sunday, Renee remembered, "And my dad would go back upstairs and change his clothes. And the thing is, it happened every single Sunday, our father would come down wearing God knows what, and every single Sunday, my mother would say: Dave, we're not leaving the house looking like that. And then there'd be a little back and forth, and then my father would trudge back upstairs and put on something nicer and come back down. So every Sunday outing was always an hour late!"

The children also remember their first long family trip to Mexico in a tourquoise Volkswagen way back in 1961. Our mother drugged us with Dramamine, Renee recalled, so that we would be quiet in the back seat.

The family drove all the way down to Laredo, Texas, and then took a train to Mexico City. When they arrived in Mexico, David warned the family not to drink the water and gave them Pepsi to brush their teeth with. But David was the one who eventually became very ill - either it was a salad, or the water, or the high altitude.

Eventually David said to Rose: "Have you had enough of Mexico?" And Rose said, "Yeah, it's time to go home." So, the family packed their bags, and took the train to the border, on their way out of San Antonio. Rose remembers Renee saying: "Can we stop for ice-cream?"

"That was the first thing that she wanted." Rose recalled, "So, we stopped for ice-cream and then I realized that, after all the ups and downs and challenges in Mexico, we were a Canadian family again. And, I think, three days later we were back home."

Only years after, did they realize that one of the places they had stopped in Texas was where President Kennedy would later be assassinated.

There were many other family trips – short one day trips, and longer trips to Quebec City, Niagara Falls, Washington, a Holland America cruise to British Columbia, and in their later years, David and Rose went on a cruise every winter, as well as trips to Australia, NZ, Hawaii and other locations.

Renee remembers convincing her parents to stay home for their 50th wedding anniversary in 2000. "And, so they did, and they were staying at my place." Renee recalled. "And we were heading out to Centro's. And my parents had a little squabble-ette - I don't even remember what it was about - and David waggled his finger and said something like: You know, Rose, if we keep arguing, the next 50 years, it's not going to be so easy."

I too remember David and Rose's sense of humor on the March, even during some of the most serious moments:

1) I believe it was the 2006 March of the Living, when I asked David to lead the Mourner's Kaddish at the end of the International March of the Living ceremony in Auschwitz-Birkenau on Yom Hashoah. David came off the stage, to me and Rose, and said, "You don't know what a mitzvah you did for me. After all these years to be able to say Kaddish for my family, it's like a heavy burden has been lifted off my shoulders – I feel 20 years younger!" And then without skipping a beat, with a twinkle in his eye and a grin on his face, he looked at his beloved Rose and said, " Now that feel 20 years younger - You better watch out tonight!!" And of course, Rose – as she always did – laughed.

2) My second story takes place during on of early Marches David took part in. We checked into the hotel with the Coast to Coast delegation and suddenly David was no-where to be found. After a quick and frantic search, we found David in the hotel lobby speaking to a group of Belgian students – also from the Tachkemoni school - who had joined the March of the Living. David looked at us and said, "I'll just be 5 minutes..." An hour later, he was still telling his story to the students, everyone one of them transfixed by David's presentation,

hanging on to every word he said. You could have heard a pin drop in that crowded lobby space.

David's ability to connect with the students on the March - as evidenced in the above story - and their deep love and respect for him, was apparent on every trip we took together..

Which leads me to one last story, which also appears in the book Witness published a few years ago, in which David, in his own words, describes his first visit to Auschwitz with students on the March of the Living.

*"Well, when we went to Auschwitz...it shook me up. Especially when I saw the big sign [Arbeit Mach Frei]. It brought back such painful memories. I just stood at the gate. I was mesmerized. [Then] one student came up to me, 'David, David...we will walk in together, and we will walk out together.'*

*"They were holding on to me or I was holding on to them. I don't remember anymore - the sympathy, the hugging...there are no words to describe it. It will be with me forever."*

The last few stories remind me how dedicated David was to Holocaust education. According to the family, it was the rise of Holocaust denial in the 1980s that caused David to begin telling his story. Once when visiting Renee in Cabbagetown, he actually saw Ernst Zundel, Canada's most notorious Holocaust denier, in person.

I remember David telling me that when he first learned there were people today denying the Holocaust - denying all the suffering he went through - "I said there and then, I would crawl on my hands and knees all the way to Auschwitz-Birkenau, or anywhere else, to tell my story to anyone who was willing to listen. This is why I march and why I still speak."

I asked Rose, what was David's ultimate goal in telling his story?

*"He wanted to end racism. It wasn't just the Jews. In any places where there was hatred - because you were of a certain tribe, or this religion, or this colour - he wanted that to end. He was just against hate."*

Interestingly, while David was always so polite, and gracious, the only time he would get slightly irritated was if people clapped after he spoke. David took his mission to educate about the Holocaust very seriously.

*"I'm not an entertainer," he would admonish. "I am a witness."*

A few days ago, sitting with the family, I asked them to sum up, as best as they could, some of David's qualities. Here is what they shared with me.

Rose: He was a true gentleman, complimentary, tender, supportive, fascinating and charismatic. And of course, generous - generous to a fault.

Renee and Lori: He was loving and sentimental. He always wanted us to get along and to be close. He was extremely family oriented. He was interested in our schooling. He was affectionate and, sometimes, very strict because he had high expectations. He was caring. He had great sense of humour. He was honest and had integrity. He was an honorable man and kept his promises. He never promised more than he could give. He always put other people first. Their concerns were his concerns.

He was generous and reliable. He was a gentleman. There wasn't a fake or phoney bone in his body. There was no hypocrisy. He wasn't ostentatious. He was a very practical person. And extremely modest.

Before I close, I would just like to say a few words about David and Rose's love and devotion to each other. As both Renee and Lori said to me, they were really not two separate individuals. They were one unit: Rose-and-Dave.

The children recalled how when they were younger, their mother would walk in the house and she'd take off her boots, and she'd walk a few feet and she'd take off her coat, she'd walk a few feet and take off her hat, walk a few feet and throw down her gloves, and her purse, etc. And David would be behind her picking up her boots, and picking up her coat, and... The next morning when they would be leaving the house, and Rose would be saying: "Dave, where's my coat?" "Dave, where's my boots?" "Dave, where's my purse?" And David would say: "Here Rose." "Here Rose." And this went on for years!

And, as much as David doted on Rose, she doted in equal measure on David - taking care of all of his nutritional needs, his exercise regimen, all his doctors appointments, and doing literally a million small acts of love for David every day.

Anyone who was in the presence of David and Rose for more than a few minutes, felt uplifted, as we witnessed, the exceptional respect, love, affection, and devotion that the couple shared with each other.

The last time I saw David was over the weekend. I came to visit him, but it seemed as if he was not up to seeing me. So, instead, I visited with Rose in the comfortable lobby in the Bradgate Arms.

Meanwhile upstairs, David was talking to Renee. "Should I go down?" David asked Renee, and Renee said: "Daddy, it's entirely up to you." He said: "Give me five minutes." And he waited a few minutes and said: "I think I should go." And Renee said: "Are you sure you want to go?" And David, said it is the right thing to do. And so we wheeled David down there."

And so we spent maybe 10 minutes together, on a bright Shabbat afternoon, sitting outside – David motioning me to sit to his right, as that was the only ear that still had a little bit of hearing left in it. And he said two things to me: "My number's up."

And then he said, "You know I wasn't feeling well, but I insisted on coming down. Because my conscience was bothering me."

Later, Renee told me, "And that's the thing, you know, my father always tried to do the right thing. He always strove to do the right thing."

She continued: "I mean, there are lots of daughters who say about their fathers: Oh, he was this and as wonderful and he was everything else. I can't speak for all those other daughters, but there are no words, really, to capture how great my dad was."

And that basically sums it up – there are no words, really, to sum up the magnificent human being David was.

And I think I speak for everyone when I say that David was one of the most eloquent, kindest, gentlest, individuals I have ever met – truly a gentle man, and a gentleman – and even these words do not do justice to the exceptional human being that he was and the remarkable life that he led.

They say that death may end a life but not a relationship. Death may end a life but not a relationship.

And it is in our memory of so many wonderful qualities that David possessed and shared with all of us, that we hope the family finds comfort in the days ahead.

May his memory always be for a blessing.

*[Delivered by Eli Rubenstein, June 14, 2017]*