

As published in the [New York Daily News](#)

How an Auschwitz Survivor Overcame Anti-Semitism

By Allan Chernoff

When Soviet General Vasily Petrenko and his Red Army troops entered the gates of Auschwitz 75 years ago today, Rena Margulies, an emaciated 11-year old girl suffering from tuberculosis, barely felt emotion upon seeing her liberators. Rather than celebrating, she was singularly focused on staying alive.

“I felt numb,” my mom told me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I was surrounded by death.”

Her 9-year old brother Romek had been gassed and cremated; her father was missing and presumed dead; corpses were scattered throughout the massive camp the Nazis had evacuated days earlier; and the stench of burning flesh still filled the air. When the battle-worn liberators entered Rena’s barrack they wept at the ghastly sight of emaciated survivors, known as *Muselmann*, who were barely clinging to life.

In the face of these traumatic experiences, Rena adopted an attitude of stoicism and determination to overcome, an approach that had helped her survive Auschwitz. In large part, she did so out of necessity. Under the Nazi regime of terror, one could not display emotion, not during the long hours of *appell*, the counting of prisoners that required inmates to stand at attention for hours, no matter how extreme the heat or cold; not during the beatings and other punishments that often accompanied *appell*; and not during the work assignments designed to wear them down. Displays of emotion could lead to instant death since Nazi guards often shot those who cried.

A stolid, steadfast mindset helped Rena set aside her emotional trauma and focus on her will to survive and her deep desire to succeed. She quickly learned English after the War, traveled hours on the subway to high school once she emigrated to the United States and settled in New York, earned her bachelor’s degree from Brooklyn College and master’s from New York University, established a career as a dedicated mathematics teacher, married, raised a family and lived a fulfilling life. Many thousands of other survivors also emerged from the ashes of the Holocaust to

thrive in America and contribute their talents to society. They would not be cowed by anti-Semitism, which remained prevalent even after the Holocaust.

The recent spike in anti-Semitism and acts of violence against Jews in Monsey, Brooklyn, and Jersey City are disheartening, even frightening for Jews, and distressing for any member of a minority group that has been subjected to ethnic, racial or religious discrimination. But today, as we commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day on this 75th anniversary of the Auschwitz liberation, we can draw inspiration from the generation of Holocaust survivors, most of whom are no longer with us. We should remember the strength and resilience of the survivors who did not allow their traumatic experiences to prevent them from striving to regain their right to live in freedom and pursue their dreams. Their resiliency, their toughness in the face of pure evil, and their ability to move forward and rebuild their lives is a testament to perseverance.

“The human spirit is indefatigable,” my mom said when our family made the difficult trek to Auschwitz many years ago.

Anniversaries like today’s can be occasions for reflection. But remembering the lessons of the Holocaust should not be an annual event reserved for International Holocaust Remembrance Day or Yom HaShoah, the Jewish Holocaust memorial day. The worst systematic mass murder in the history of mankind should serve as a constant reminder that responsible citizens of the world must always stand against bigotry and for mutual respect.

As we pledge “Never Again!” may the spirit of the Holocaust survivors inspire us to heal the world, to strive to eradicate hate, and to make the United States a safer, more hospitable place for people of all backgrounds and religions.

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