

MALVINA STRAS



When Malvina Stras – Malka in Yiddish – remembers *Shabbat* in Szatmarnemeti, Hungary, her eyes sparkle like the candles her mother and grandmother lit to usher in the holy day.

Her mother, Roszika Neiman, lit 12 candles, her grandmother 19. Her father, Samuel Neiman, returned from synagogue, placed a handkerchief and his hands gently on the head of each child and blessed them. The family sang *zmirot* – songs welcoming the Sabbath such as *Shalom Aleichem* – “louder than loud,” Malvina recalls. “It was so beautiful.”

Her father made *kiddush* and *hamotzei*, blessings for the wine and the bread. Her mother baked a dozen braided challahs, enough to place a few extras with some groceries on the doorsteps of needy families. On Shabbat afternoon the next day, her mother read to the children from the *Tzena-Urena*, a book of special prayers and devotions used by religious women.

The Neimans lived upstairs from their grocery and liquor store. The maid slept in the study. Seven children slept two-to-a-bed in two bedrooms. Samuel Neiman was a follower of the Szatmar Rebbe, a Hasidic dynasty. He wore *peyes*, sidelocks, and Roszika Neiman wore a *sheytl*, a wig covering her hair. Modesty was also observed by the children, who did not swim or go to the movies and were expected to show utmost respect to the grandmother who lived with them.

When a child spoke Hungarian or Romanian at home, Samuel slapped the table and said, “Sha! Yiddish!”

Malvina and her siblings all had chores. Their mother believed no one should be helpless because “you never know what will happen in life.” Remembering these words of her mother helped Malvina survive the concentration camps.

Malvina was 18 when she and her sisters were dragged from their home. The Neimans walked all day to the cattle train that deported them to Auschwitz. All but three sisters died.

Malvina was delirious with typhus and blind in one eye from beatings when she was liberated from Bergen-Belsen. Her sister returned to Szatmarnemeti under Communist rule and barely escaped being jailed.

Malvina met Walter Stras, a soccer player, in a displaced persons camp in Germany. They married on February 14, 1947, outdoors under a *chuppah*, the bridal canopy, surrounded by snow.

They planned to go to Israel until Walter discovered an uncle in New Jersey. A connection to Hyman Brand brought them to Kansas City. Walter contracted multiple sclerosis at a young age from beatings in the camps. He spent his last years in Shalom Geriatric Center, teaching students the lessons of the Holocaust from his wheelchair. Malvina and Walter have two sons, Simon and Steve.

Malvina attributes bouts of depression to low self-esteem from the loss of opportunity to go to school. “When I am always kicked and called ‘damn Jew,’” she says, “I feel like a no-good person.”

Scenes from Kosovo were almost more than Malvina could bear.

“I cried and cried,” she says.



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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