



Suly Chenkin

Suly Chenkin is a Holocaust survivor. Several times a week, she speaks to children of all ages as an integral part of the Levine JCC Butterfly Project. Her story of survival puts a human face on an unimaginable time in Jewish history. The following is an excerpt of her experience.

Suly Chenkin was born in Kovno, Lithuania. Her story begins and ends with a prophecy uttered by her grandmother at the moment she was born. "This child" she said, "because she was born on the first day of the Jewish New Year, will be lucky her entire life." Six months later the Nazis invaded Lithuania and the word "luck" disappeared for Jewish people living in that country. When she was 10 months old, she and her family were made prisoners in the hard labor/concentration camp known as the Kovno Ghetto.

In the two years that followed, people in the Ghetto suffered from disease, famine, hard labor, lack of firewood and the constant terror of not knowing what was going to happen. With each passing day Suly's parents grew more desperate and as the chances of their own survival became nil, they made a decision no parent should ever have to make: They gave her away. On May 11, 1944, her parents told her they loved her, that if they could they would come back for her, but that she could never ask for them, for if she did, the bad guys would kill them and her. She was given a sleeping potion and, when it took effect, she was put into a potato sack. Suly's parents managed to get her over the barbed wire encircling the ghetto to people waiting on the other side. Her fate had been entrusted to someone her parents had never met. Miriam Shulman was Jewish herself, from a prestigious rabbinical family. She had gone undercover, placing her own and other people's children with the few Lithuanians who were willing to take them in.

Her parents had sent Suly out in the nick of time. Within eight weeks, the fewer than 6,000 remaining inmates of the ghetto were marched through the city to the train depot. There they were loaded onto the cattle cars and sent to concentration camps: the men to Dachau in Germany, the women to Stutthof in Poland. A few month later the Soviet Army liberated Kovno, but because the ghetto had been liquidated, dynamited and burned to the ground, she presumed her parents were gone and dead. Luckily for Suly, after the Russians took over from the Nazis, instead of placing her in an orphanage, Miriam took Suly in, and when she decided to



Sandra and Leon Levine
Jewish Community Center
5007 Providence Road
Charlotte, NC 28226
charlottejcc.com





leave Kovno, she took Suly with her and her own children, and eventually made it to Israel. Although Suly had never asked for her parents, she had never forgotten them. She cried all the way to Jerusalem as she faced the fact that she was an orphan and she started calling Miriam IMA, Hebrew for mother.

Half a year later, when Suly had adapted to her new situation, Ima showed her a photograph that had come in the mail. “Do you know who these people are?” Suly responded, “this was my Mamma and this was my Papa.” Miriam hugged Suly and with tears in her eyes she told Suly that her parents were alive and that her mother was coming to get her!

Suly’s parents had been brought to Cuba by her father’s brothers who had immigrated to Cuba before the war. A month before her sixth birthday, Suly came running around the bend of her new home in Jerusalem and ran smack into her mother’s arms. Five months later, her papers, allowing her to enter Cuba, came in and she returned to Cuba with her mother and reunited with her father. Three years had gone by. Twenty-seven of Suly’s close family members had perished. Out of the 40,000 Jews in Kovno, about 2,000 survived. Suly’s grandmother Minda did not make it. But her prophecy did, for Suly survived – living proof that evil can be defeated by the actions, small or large, of a few good people.

