



Onni Milne's story of
Channa



My mother, Channa Veller Milner, died of a heart attack in 1981. She was in her 70s. It wasn't until after her death that I learned she was more than what I had experienced with her. My father had shared stories about his family with me but my mother never spoke of her childhood or family experiences.

My mother and father were both Jewish Lithuanians. They grew up in Kovna, Lithuania. They knew each other as children. My mother's mother and father's mother had been friends for years. They both had stalls in the local market. My mother's mother sold milk products, my father's mother had a grocery shop. My mother's father was an esteemed carpenter who used his skill to decorate the interior of synagogues.

My father fell in love with my mother when he was nine years old. They were married in their 20s. My father was a plumber, a highly paid job in the time when plumbing was just being installed in dwellings and buildings. This was a time of change from outhouses and urine pots to indoor toilets. My mother was an exotically beautiful young woman interested in fashion who became a couturier. According to comments from a relative who knew them in Europe, "All the grandest ladies from the town came to see her at her salon." They were a sophisticated, trendy couple of the times. She was a successful businesswoman with several women working under her. All that changed when Hitler invaded Lithuania in 1941.

Several years before the war started, my father had left Kovna to look for his brother in the Soviet gulag area. When he had been gone for a year, my mother told him that she would file for a divorce if he didn't return. He returned because he did not want to lose her and their son, Abraham.

Just before the Germans invaded Kovna, my mother had given birth to a daughter, Leja. This baby saved their lives because a Nazi officer who had noticed and admired Leja sent my parents to the line of those who would live. Unfortunately, Leja died of pneumonia soon after. Their son, Abraham, had been murdered during a Children's Action when all children in the ghetto were rounded up and sent to the Ninth Fort to be shot and thrown into a mass grave.

During her time in the Stutthof Concentration Camp, my mother befriended another woman even though she risked instant death. She supported this woman by speaking back to the camp capo, a violent guard who supervised them. Another time, she gave her precious food to a woman who was very ill. She volunteered for night duty to keep the fire burning in the barracks. In this way, she melted snow to keep herself clean and free from the typhus surrounding her.

My father survived the Dachau Concentration Camp and ended up in Berlin after the war. When he learned that my mother had survived and was alive in a Baltic fishing village, he travelled there to find her. They were able to escape from the fishing village with the aid of a Jewish Russian officer and ended up in the Eschwege Displaced Persons Camp. My twin sister and I were born there in 1946. The opportunity for the family to emigrate to Canada in 1948 came when my mother's relative in Canada offered to sponsor us.

I learned my mother's story after she had died when my father and I translated her Yiddish handwritten memoir to typed form. I deeply regret that I only knew the woman affected by her experiences, someone seemingly lacking creativity and independence. I deeply regret that I did not understand the depth of my mother's grief and pain. I deeply regret that I never recognized the beautiful and courageous woman who was able to offer compassion and generosity in a time when hate and evil ruled.