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Maintaining strength

By ARIEL COHEN
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Betty Bausch is open and energetic about telling her story of survival from the Holocaust – but how are the rest of survivors faring?

As she opens the door to her home in Kfar Saba, Betty Bausch smiles, then leaps across the kitchen to offer us a piece of cheesecake and a cup of tea. She is calm, cool and collected, even though she's leaving for a two-month book tour in Europe the next day.

Not to mention, she's 96 years old.

Bausch, a Holocaust survivor, has the kind of can-do attitude that convinces you anything is possible. Her memoir of World War II, *Broken Silence*, has been published in four languages since she co-wrote it with her younger sister, Liesje.

Before the war began, she lived in the Netherlands.

In 1939, she married Philip de Leeuw, who enlisted in the army just before the Germans occupied the Netherlands in 1940. The pair attempted to flee for England, but failed. In the following years, as it became impossible to live as Jews in their country, the couple went underground and began living secret lives.

She and her husband had to move around, using fake identities and papers, in order to stay safe during the war. Sometimes they hid together, sometimes apart.

Bausch found work as a leader for a group of orphaned Catholics, and as a maid in the homes of famous musicians.

She also milked cows and worked with the mentally ill, among many other jobs. A new job meant a new identity, which meant another day of survival.

Then, in 1943, the couple had to go completely underground.

With false papers, they began their life in hiding separately. If they were ever in the same place, they had to pretend to be strangers.

"When we would pass each other on the streets, we would pretend not to know each other. It was something we had to try," she says. "Only when we were somewhere private could we talk."

In the summer of 1944, they were finally reunited, living in an old chicken coop at a Dutch farmhouse – not exactly ideal living conditions, but they were happy to be back together. Soon, though, they learned that the couple who owned the farm were not to be trusted. Bausch and her husband fled by night, but were soon separated again. Although they could no longer live in the same place, they weren't far apart, and they would take walks in the woods together every chance they had.

That fall, de Leeuw became active in the anti-German Holland resistance as a commander of a squad battalion. His cell was tasked with bombing a German train carrying V1 and V2 bombs, but before the attack could take place, they were stormed by a German patrol squad. He, his wife and all the people who lived in the house with them were taken into custody in Utrecht, where the Germans tortured de Leeuw and relentlessly questioned Bausch.

The two were held in the same prison, on the same floor, but were not able to see each other. They kept in contact with the help of a kind female prison guard.

Upon her release, Bausch learned that her husband had been executed in prison.

In the remaining years of the war, she spent time in Holland, working with forged papers. After the war, she remarried and eventually immigrated to Israel.

Once settled in the Jewish state, she was reunited with her sister, who had come to Israel years earlier. Liesje was in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp until 1944, when she was selected as one of 220 Jewish prisoners exchanged for German Templers who were living in what was then Palestine.

In Israel, Bausch worked for various government publications, all the while telling her story of surviving the Holocaust. At first, she says, she had great difficulty talking about that part of her life. But now that she has begun, she gains strength from sharing her experiences.

She first told her story on a German radio show. At the time, she was uncomfortable relating it to the public, but the radio segment became popular, and soon she became more comfortable speaking about her past.

“You need to be more open for other people,” she says. “You can’t only think about your own sorrow – but there are always people who have it much more difficult.”

Today she travels throughout Europe telling her story to young children. She regularly goes to Germany, the Netherlands and France, among other places. Even at 96, she will spend hours on her feet speaking to large crowds.

“Again and again, there are schools [where I’m coming to speak] now for the sixth year,” Bausch said. “I am so happy to do it, it gives me so much energy. Especially now that they buy the book.”

But she refuses to take money for speaking about the Holocaust. Rather, she sees these tours as a public service and a recounting of history. To fund her travels, she uses the benefits she receives from the Israeli government – for which all Holocaust survivors in the country are eligible, but of which nearly half are unaware.

“These schools don’t have much money to [spend], and I don’t want to earn money when I talk about the Shoah – I don’t want them to pay me. I only ask them in Germany to take care of the hotel,” she says. “But now I don’t hesitate to do it, because I have a little bit extra, and this is so important.”

She is currently working to receive compensation from the German government for having worked in a ghetto, which Amsterdam was considered during WWII. She gets a disability pension from the Israeli government, and she now receives a payment once a month.

WHETHER OR not a survivor receives government benefits depends on their situation during the war, says Omri Gal of Aviv Lenitzolei Hashoah, an organization that helps Holocaust survivors receive their pensions from both the Israeli and German governments.

“It depends and varies. Basically, if you were in a ghetto or war camp or you had lived in hiding or [in] a concentration camp or run away, then most likely you are eligible for some recognition,” he tells the Magazine.

“Now there are lot of categories.”

There are approximately 180,000 Holocaust survivors in Israel. According to Gal, about a quarter of those live in poverty.

“A lot of elderly people in Israel live in poverty,” he says. “A lot of times they need more money because of medical help and other things, but they get less money. While this is a general senior citizens’ problem, many Holocaust survivors often have a disability that has made it hard for them to work. Sometimes it’s [trauma from the] hard stories [of their past], sometimes it’s physical disability.”

Of the survivors alive today in Israel, 50% don’t know they have rights, and receive no aid from the

government. Some of the remaining 50% get all their rights, but many do not.

Many survivors don't realize they qualify for government benefits. People who were in their mothers' wombs during the Holocaust – for instance, if the mothers were in ghettos while pregnant – are considered survivors today.

“A lot of Holocaust survivors don't know what they are entitled to,” says Gal. “Most are 80 years old and up; you can't expect them to understand the laws and who is entitled to what. Under the new law, you get some things automatically, but some things you still need to know. It can be as easy as signing a form; other times, you have to bring proof – medical bills from 30 years ago, for example.”

Additionally not all survivors receive the same compensation.

Some of it is dependent on where they were born and what year they made aliya. Any Holocaust survivor who came to Israel before 1953 was already calculated as part of compensation agreements, while those who arrived after that year do not receive money from the Israeli government.

Those who were mainly born in Eastern Europe and made aliya after 1953, known as “Holocaust refugees,” have the biggest issues getting money from the government.

These people may have survived the Holocaust in ghettos, but because they weren't in concentration camps, they don't get government payments.

Gal estimates that this group comprises about 40,000 to 50,000 people.

A law passed last year enables survivors in Israel to receive a minimum of NIS 3,600 per year, as well as free medication. Many survivors are eligible to receive more.

The paperwork required for such pensions includes medical records and proof of being a Holocaust survivor.

Conjuring up such documents can be difficult, especially for survivors who weren't in concentration camps. Those who spent the war in a ghetto or in hiding have greater difficulty proving their survivor status.

“A lot of survivors have already given up,” Gal says.

“Doctors think that they aren't telling the truth about their medical records, and it's a trauma. But the money exists – it's there, and survivors need to claim it and get 100% of what is legally theirs.”



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