

A Very Private Reflection on my Father, William Bernheim,
a Holocaust Survivor

by Gail Bernheim Schechter

My father, William Bernheim, a Holocaust survivor, made it to age 98 with elegance and grace ... always dapper, topped off with a hat and ascot. I thought he would live forever – the man who had proven to have more than nine lives – but alas, he did not. “Daddy”, as I affectionately called him throughout our lives, would be turning 100 on December 13, 2022, and we had hoped to celebrate this major milestone with him.

On September 8, 1942, his mother was taken from the Lodz Ghetto on a Nazi truck and sent to her death at the Chelmno extermination camp outside of Lodz, Poland. In a last act of love, she pressed her ring into my father’s hand and told him to "save himself." That was the last time he ever saw his mother, Gittel. He lived through the Lodz Ghetto and barely survived Buchenwald Concentration Camp during World War II. On the last days of his imprisonment, weighing barely 62 pounds, he took off his prisoner’s jacket and hid almost naked under a pile of dead bodies before he was miraculously liberated by American soldiers on April 11, 1945, which he considered his second birthday.

Daddy came to the United States a few years later, the only member of his immediate family to survive World War II. He eventually met my Mother, Lucille, also a Holocaust survivor, and together they embarked on an extraordinary 70-plus year journey, made an incredible life together, first raising a family in Brooklyn, New York and thereafter running a successful jewelry designing business in New York City.

My Father’s unique and original jewelry designs have been and continue to be worn by Hollywood celebrities, movie and TV stars, politicians, financial icons, artists, musicians, opera singers and foreign dignitaries. His reputation, gentility, refinement, artistic expression and warmth have endeared him to all.

But to me, he was simply “Daddy.” Not only did I resemble him, but I was definitely his “Daddy’s Girl” who was creative, imaginative, shrewd, stubborn, yet kind just like him—and he knew it!

<<Daddy's Girl>>



Growing up, he taught me how to play chess, which not surprisingly, we both played extremely well. Whenever we challenged each other to a game, if he lost, he would always come up with a lame excuse, claiming he was tired or not focused. Occasionally, he would acknowledge my win by proudly noting that he taught me well, and that it really was a win for both of us! But no matter who won, he would always say that “It’s all in the family,” that the family always wins, and then he would give me a very rare, but genuine smile.

Daddy always wanted to see me dressed to the “nines” and he insisted on being the one who took me shopping to Saks Fifth Avenue for my Sweet-16 dress and even years later for the suit I would wear for my son Harrison’s Bar Mitzvah. He regularly said that I was most certainly a reflection of him, and he truly enjoyed being my fashion stylist with his very artistic eye.

<<Harrison's Bar Mitzvah Photo>>



My Father was extremely humble in public but secretly amazed as to how much he accomplished without any formal education and as a Holocaust survivor in a new country. To him, success meant making a difference for someone every day, whether it be a stranger, friend or family member; it is clear in retrospect that he achieved this goal each day of his life because that was his nature—that was who he was—an extremely charitable and generous man.

Throughout the years, my Father rarely shared even fragments of his Holocaust experiences with my brother and me. But when his grandchildren began asking their grandfather numerous questions about his youth, he felt compelled and was moved to put those memories on canvas for all to see and spoke passionately for all to hear – through the eyes, mouth and from the hands of one who witnessed first-hand, lived through and survived those atrocities!

"I am a survivor of – and eyewitness to – the brutal horrors committed against the Jews in the Lodz Ghetto, German Munitions Slave Labor Factories and the infamous Buchenwald Concentration Camp.

"Though I originally hoped to write a book about my life, I realized that an ocean of ink cannot describe the impact of the brutality, torture and dehumanization I and others suffered at the hands of the Nazis. For that reason, I have been driven to put my life experiences on canvas in an effort to minimize the hatred and prejudice that abounds today, and to share with future generations what must never be forgotten."

– William Bernheim

Over the last 30 years, my Father was not only driven to paint the images of the Holocaust that he personally witnessed, but he also felt an obligation to speak up about his horrific experiences during WWII, to remind the world of what happened and that it could definitely happen again if we are not careful!

Daddy spoke at colleges and universities around the country, at synagogues and organizations that wanted to hear directly from an eyewitness to the horrors of the Holocaust, especially since there were so few survivors still alive. At each presentation, he would showcase his paintings via PowerPoint (he even knew how to use an iPad), demonstrating the atrocities he personally experienced and shared with those who believed – and some who denied – that these horrendous acts against mankind could have actually taken place.

<<Kiddush Hashem: His Signature Painting>>

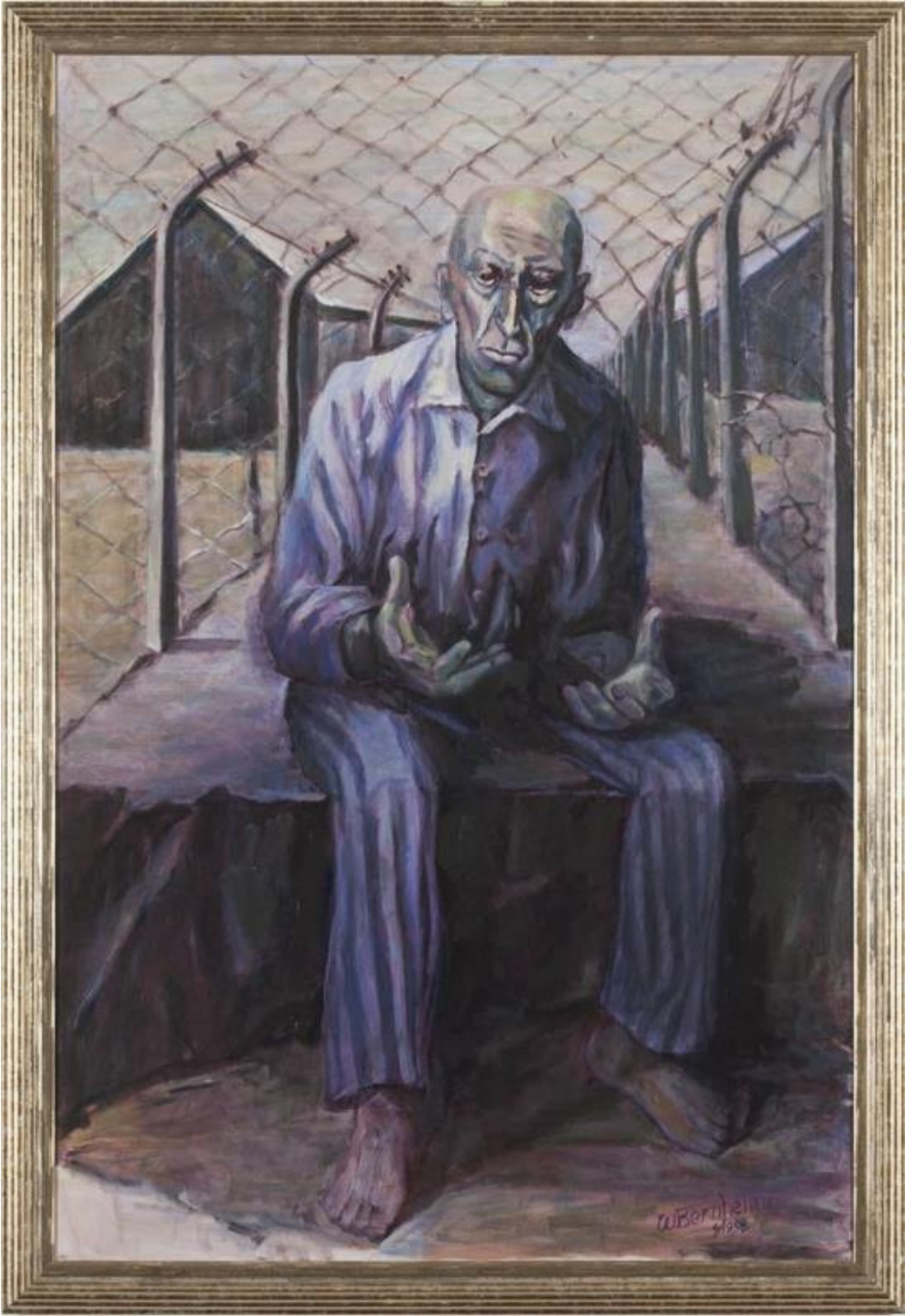


<<Despair>>



He was even asked many years ago by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, to donate his painting “The Holocaust Survivor” which actually depicts my Father, sitting on the grounds of Buchenwald the day of his liberation, with his hands outstretched and asking, “What do I do now?” My parents, joined my husband Cliff and me on a trip to Israel in 2008, and Daddy was able to see his original oil painting hanging in Yad Vashem, where it remains to this day.

<The Holocaust Survivor>>



In 2008, during my son Harrison's junior year at Syracuse University, he arranged to have my Father speak at the Hillel House on campus, in commemorating *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Though 100 people RSVP'd to hear him that evening (full capacity), over 300 students, faculty and staff crammed into the small auditorium where my 85-year-old, 5 ft. tall Father presented for over 45 minutes. In fact, fire department personnel stopped by because of concerns of overcrowding, but when they realized why everyone was there, they joined the crowd and were keenly listening to every word of Daddy's presentation. And afterwards, they, too, stood patiently in line with the hundreds of students, faculty advisors and fellow community members who wanted to personally greet and shake the hand of this incredible survivor!

As the years passed, my Father was asked to write a book about his art and his life. ***"My Story: From Hell to Rebirth"*** by William Bernheim, was published, and became available on his website, www.WilliamBernheim.com, along with the stories and images of his amazing collection of Holocaust paintings.

My Father was interviewed by many television stations, publications, internet sites and organizations, prior to the Covid-19 breakout in March 2020. People young and old would reach out to him through his website e-mail, letting him know what an impact his story and his paintings had on them and how his positive attitude inspired them. Six months later, in August 2020, I received an email from a gentleman named Wim Leydes from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His note blew me away...

"Let me first start by introducing myself. My name is Wim Leydes, and I am a researcher and author for about 10 years now. I authored 3 books and am currently working on a 4th. All my books (in English) deal with the Holocaust, it's survivors, it's fighters (Partisan's/ghetto fighters/Jewish Brigade etc.).

"I have lectured, taught a few classes, and was able to add information to the archives of the USHMM in DC, Yad Vashem, and the Palmach Museum in Israel. Furthermore I collect artifacts related to all this and set up several exhibits for the local (Jewish community) and lend items from my collection to several museum exhibits.

"Anyway, I am writing all this, to slowly prepare you for the following:

I have begun research on my 4th book and I found out, that both my Grandfathers were in the Dutch Army, fighting the Germans, before capitulation, and that 2 uncles of mine, both brothers, happened to be resistance-fighters. A lot of this is new information to me and my family, so I have been researching in many archives, databases and international libraries.

"As I was following the timeline of one of those brothers, I found out he was in Buchenwald, from 1941 to 1945. Again, new information to me which was very shocking. I found this incredible German archive online (Arolsen Archives), where I was able to find about 20 (!) documents of my family-member's Buchenwald documentation.

"In case you are wondering, how any of this relates to you or your father, here it comes; As I mentioned I collect artifacts, documents, photographs etc. Amongst my collection is a patch, a prisoner's number patch from Buchenwald, which I already own for many years. I always saved it safe in a glass case or have had it on display in several exhibits. Anyway, I never knew anything about it, other than it must have been used in Buchenwald. And I only conclude this because I have seen several of these patches online, stating the same thing.

"I suddenly had to think about the Arolsen Archive and how I was able to find all the information about my family. I was thinking; Maybe I can take this prisoner number and search, just by number in this archive? And perhaps find out more about this? So I did.....I punched in the number; 12510.

"On my screen pops up about 8 - 10 documents they have in their archive;

*Berenhaim (Berenheim), Zenek, 13 - 12 - 21.....(also lists 22?)
Buchenwald, Prisoner Number 12510, born Litzmannstadt/ Lodz*

"So, now I am blown away. Is this patch that I have sitting here for the last years, could this be from this person? Zenek Berenheim? The number matches, it is in Buchenwald, like I thought. Could it be? I continue my search via Google, but now with this name.

"I keep coming back to the name William Bernheim. Upon further searching and also on my own knowledge that a lot of survivors from countries like Poland, Germany etc., would 'Americanize' their names and sometimes make small changes, I come to the conclusion that Zenek Berenheim must be William Bernheim.

"So now I am reading about your father and the amazing art he has made and I want to know more about his story. This is why I ordered the book recently. As I was looking through the book the other day, my research proved to be correct. Right on the dustjacket as soon as one opens the book it says; William "Zenek" Bernheim.

"I found the person matching these documents, but what about the patch? Then I see on page 34 in your father's book a picture of his pants he was forced to wear in Buchenwald. I thought that next I was maybe going to see a jacket as well, with the prisoner number, showing me I might be wrong all along about the patch, but what do I see written with it? "...jacket (later lost)".

"Lost? That means you, your father, your family does not have this?.....So again, does that mean that the patch I have was your father's? I don't recall exactly when I bought this patch or where. It must have been at least 6 or 7 years ago, and it might have been via Ebay, before they banned the selling of Holocaust patches, or one of the very few online auction sites, selling these kind of items.

"Anyway IF, indeed, I have traced this patch back to your father, and it is his original patch that he had on his prisoner clothing in Buchenwald, then I have no other wish than to donate it back to your dad, you or your family. That's where it belongs. I feel odd sometimes having any of such items in my collection, but it's my historical, deep rooted interest that made me buy things like this in the first place. I do cherish all my items and treat them with the utmost respect. However, if this is indeed what was once from your father, please allow me to return it. It would be my honor. "

I was stunned!

At this point in the fall of 2020, I had not seen my parents in 10 months because of the Covid epidemic. My husband and I live in Las Vegas and my parents had been isolating in North Miami since the pandemic began. They had not left their apartment since March of that year (nor were we or anyone else for that matter, allowed to visit), and we arranged for all groceries and supplies to be delivered to their front door; and even though I would speak with them on the phone several times daily, the day I got that e-mail from Wim, I picked up the phone immediately and called to tell my Father what I had just read.

Life is sometimes crazier than fiction – could things have really come full-circle and was it really possible that the patch from the jacket my Father had worn throughout his imprisonment in Buchenwald (until he discarded it the day before he was liberated) – to make its way back to him 75 years later?

At this point, Daddy was almost 98 years old, but still very alert and mobile. Being homebound for 10 months during the pandemic not surprisingly took its toll on my parents, however, they were still very cognizant of everything going on in the world and played chess at their kitchen table for hours each day to keep their minds stimulated. Still, I wondered whether they were ready for the story I was going to tell them. My gut told me they would be fascinated by what they were about to hear.

At first, they could not comprehend what I was saying. How could this stranger, Wim Leydes, a Dutchman who wasn't Jewish, yet had a passion to learn about the Holocaust, be in possession of a patch from the jacket my Father discarded over 75 years ago in an effort to "blend in" with a pile of dead inmates who were all merely

skin and bones? My Father survived and always kept the pants he was wearing when he was liberated, but what happened to the jacket he wore up until the day before liberation?

How could this be? Was this in fact the actual patch from my Father's concentration camp jacket? It was almost incomprehensible that after so much time – and especially during Covid – there could be a small glimmer of interest that gave my elderly parents something to look forward to receiving during this miserable time. They had not left their apartment in Florida for almost a year and wouldn't let me—or any relative or friend-- visit them, no matter how many precautions would be taken. But this amazing story got their attention.

Of course, I reached out to Wim and we had a long and incredible conversation. I told him that my Father could not believe this turn of events but my Mother asked me to research everything Wim said and it all checked out. But who "saved" that jacket that was tossed on the grounds of Buchenwald 75 years prior and removed and kept the patch as a Holocaust memento? It was truly unfathomable!

Daddy had an amazing selective memory for certain things – but we truly believe that the reason he could not remember certain day to day horrific occurrences as a concentration camp prisoner was just a way for him to survive – how did he survive sicknesses? How did they survive the intense cold of winter? Where did inmates go to the bathroom? Though he was at Buchenwald for years, these memories did not come to him. But he remembered being known only as prisoner number 12510, not a person, and the realization of the patch making its way back to him shook him to his core.

My parents wanted to see a photo of the patch, so I asked Wim to kindly e-mail one to me, and he did so immediately. Thereafter, I FaceTimed my Parents in order to see their reaction when I showed them the photo of the patch. I was so thankful that Daddy was proficient in using his cell phone and iPad, but in all the years I have known my Father, I had never seen him speechless – until that day.

There was no other explanation-- the patch found its way back to my Father, but now he was no longer "just a number" – instead, he was an accomplished artist, businessman and the Patriarch of our family. My Father took from his closet the

pants he wore while imprisoned in Buchenwald over 75 years ago, compared them to the material of the patch and the memories came flooding back.

<<PHOTO OF PATCH>>



<<PHOTO OF PANTS>>



I took Wim up on his offer and asked him to please send me the patch (insured, of course) at his earliest convenience, and he did so most graciously. The wait was palpable, but once I received it, I knew I was holding an artifact from my Father's previous life and thanked Wim profusely for honoring our family with this priceless gift. Wim Leydes was a real “Mensch” for reaching out to us with the intention of

returning the patch to its rightful “owner” and I once again reiterated what an honorable act of kindness this was on his part.

Now, how was I going to show my Father the patch in person? It was September 2020 and my parents were insistent that we shouldn’t plan a visit because they were adamant that they didn’t want anyone else in the apartment until the pandemic was over.

What could I do? We had plans (just like every year) to visit my parents in Florida on a monthly basis, especially around my Father’s birthday, December 13th. The last time we were all together as a family was the prior year when Daddy turned 97.

<<PHOTOS OF DADDY’S 97TH BIRTHDAY>>





We bought airline tickets to fly down to visit in December, but again, my parents said “No.”

A couple of months later, my father turned 98 without the usual fanfare we normally showered upon him in person.

And then sadly, my husband and I had to go to California for Cliff’s former mother-in-law’s funeral, and the following week, we both came down with the dreaded Covid-19 virus.

This was before the vaccines were developed and approved. Cliff and I both got very sick, but his case was much worse than mine. We both had high fevers and spent New Year’s 2021 trying to heal up from this horrible virus.

We spared my parents the news that we came down with Covid and put on a “happy face” when we spoke to them on the phone over the next couple of weeks. They had no idea that Cliff had to be hospitalized and placed on oxygen for six days while I

recuperated at home. And we continued to have symptoms and test positive for the Covid 19 virus for days to come.

Of course, timing is everything. Cliff came home from the hospital on my birthday, Friday, January 15th. The very next day, my Mother called to inform me that Daddy fell in the bathroom and though she finally called a family friend for help to lift up my Father (they both continued to insist that no stranger should be allowed into the apartment because of Covid), my Father was no longer steady on his feet and was bedridden. It was time to call in medical help and my Mom wanted Cliff and me to immediately come to Florida.

She had no idea that we were recuperating from Covid and now was not the time to tell her. Since we lived in Nevada, I told my Mother that we needed two negative Covid tests to fly to Florida and so we scheduled daily tests at CVS Pharmacy in order to make sure we would not expose my parents to the virus we just endured! My brother, Paul, flew down from New York to be with my parents as did my son Harrison from Arizona – who gladly and eagerly volunteered to be there in my stead – assisting them with anything they would need. So, a team was in place in North Miami, but my Father kept asking, “Where is Gail?” He was having real difficulty breathing and had to be taken to the hospital.

I finally received one negative test result on Thursday, January 21, 2021. I took another test the next day but the pharmacy said I wouldn’t get the results until the following Monday, so Cliff and I booked a flight for Tuesday, January 26th and prayed we would get news of another negative result by then.

Instead, on Sunday at about noon, we received the test results we were hoping for and immediately arranged to take a “red-eye” that night to Newark, NJ, switch planes early Monday morning and finally touching down at the Ft. Lauderdale Airport in Florida at noon on Monday, January 25th, arriving a day earlier than planned.

We went straight to the hospital, and I was the only visitor allowed to be by my Father’s side that day, because of Covid protocol. When I walked into his room and whispered “Daddy, Daddy,” he opened his eyes, grabbed my wrist, and for the first time since he was hospitalized on Saturday, he miraculously spoke.

“This is my daughter, Gail,” he said to his nurse. He was fine! Just like his old self. He asked to be propped up into a more comfortable position and wanted to know ‘Where was his lunch?’ He was actually hungry!

I went out to the nurses’ station to voice my Father’s requests. He was alert and demanding – and I was relieved.

But a few minutes later, when I returned to his hospital room, his eyes were again closed and he was breathing irregularly.

I didn’t know it then, but I was witnessing his “death rally” – he appeared to be getting better, only to quickly revert back to dying. I had no idea about any of this on that day, but I spent hours sitting next to him and even put my cell phone to his ear so that he could hear all his loved ones’ voices as I called every family member. His extremities were so very cold and I knew that Daddy hated having cold feet so I immediately put a pair of hospital socks on him and gently lovingly rubbed his feet to make them a little warmer.

I even said to him that he should find comfort in knowing that he came into this world with his mother, Gittel (my namesake) being right there with him, and now his own little Gittel (me) was by his side, being right there with him, and that I loved him dearly.

I never wanted to leave any visit with my Father, let alone that afternoon, but after spending five hours at his bedside after his “rally” (while Cliff waited for me in the hospital parking lot the entire time I was upstairs with Daddy), even my Mother said it was time to come to her apartment to eat and rest. And so, we did. I kissed my Father’s head, left the hospital and we drove to my parents’ apartment. We sat around the kitchen table, dissecting every moment of my Father’s amazing short-term lucidity that afternoon, praying for its return.

But it wasn’t meant to be.

Sadly, the phone rang at 11:00 pm to let us know my Father passed peacefully that evening – the way they say a *Tzadik* (“righteous one”) dies. But unfortunately, he never had the opportunity to be “reunited” with his patch.

My father lived an incredibly horrendous, yet amazingly beautiful life and spent each and every day of his journey sharing his message with the world, through his art and his words. There was nothing left to squeeze out of his 98 years. His job on this Earth was done.

On this December 13, 2022, which would be his 100th birthday, remember my Father, William Bernheim, who lived a life to be proud of.

Thank you for allowing me to be your daughter, Daddy. I will make sure your message and legacy continue through future generations.