

## PERSONAL STORIES: OUR COMMUNITY

Micaela Ben Abraham:

## A Romanian immigrant's tale

By MICHAELA BEN ABRAHAM  
Special to the Review

It was 1959 in Bucharest, Romania. That fall one small Jewish family of three was ecstatic that exit papers from the Romanian government and landing visas from the Canadian government had finally been approved. My father, of blessed memory, Philip Obreanu, 40, my mother Gabrielle Obreanu, 42 and I were about to leave for Montreal, Canada to rejoin my father's family. He had waited 12 long years for such government approval so that he would be reunited with his entire family: parents, two sisters and their husbands with their children, his cousin and a beloved aunt and uncle. It had been a very close-knit family. For my mother who had never met my father's family it meant the possibility that she would be free to travel eventually to Israel and visit her mother, stepfather and 95-year-old grandmother whom she also had not seen for 12 years.

Being a very small child and preschooler, I had a more ambivalent attitude. I would miss my playmates who lived in our apartment building and I would not be able to become a Young Pioneer, which meant I would never be able to wear the Young Pioneer scarf around my neck. This had been one of my most cherished goals. Just a few months earlier I had tried to "run away" from home and join the Young Pioneers (the Communist Youth movement). I had taken my father's briefcase and tied one of my



Micaela Ben Abraham

mother's red silk scarves around my neck and taken the elevator down to the lobby to leave the building to find a place where I could attend a Young Pioneer meeting, just as my older school-age friends did. Luckily the vigilant concierge/superintendent saw me and took me back to my parents and thwarted my meticulous planning.

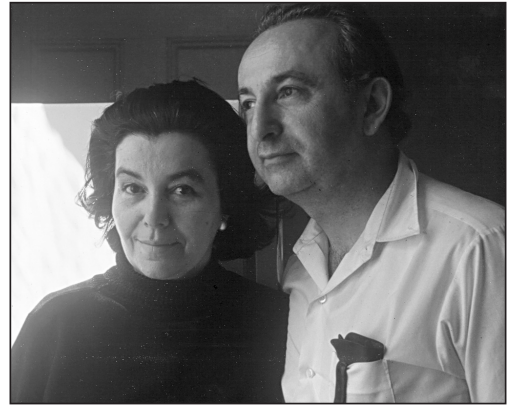
While I was trying to accomplish that goal, my horrified very anti-Communist parents kept trying to impress upon me at all times, the necessity of keeping "our little secret" (that we were about to leave Romania for good) very secret. They could not express to me their disapproval of my desire to be inducted into the Young Pioneers in case I would accidentally repeat their words to someone. They had to keep our departure plans secret until just a few days before we boarded the Sabena Airlines plane for Brussels en route to Montreal



Professor Philip Obreanu at his wedding to his first wife Nadia in 1945.

for fear of being jailed or worse.

My father's greatest fear was that our exit papers would be revoked by the Romanian government at the last minute and he would remain "imprisoned" in a Communist system forever. His fear was very well-founded. In 1947 he and all his other family members previously mentioned, had received the required documents to emigrate to Israel together. Just one day before their departure, the government revoked my father's visa and the next day he had to tearfully watch as his entire family left for Israel leaving him behind. He was uncertain if he would ever see them again. That moment had been far more difficult for him emotionally than the 2 years of hard labor



Philip and Gabrielle Obreanu, Micaela's parents

he had endured as an unpaid ditch digger in Bucharest in a daily Axis (Nazi ally) forced labor day camp in Bucharest during World War II.

The reason for the government revoking his exit visa at the last minute was that someone in the government had realized who he was. He was at that time one of the top 2 or 3 research mathematicians (also theoretical physicist) and an esteemed member of the Academy of Science (to which elite the top university professors belonged). This was at a time when the Cold War was really heating up and a mathematician like him was in huge demand on both sides of the political world divide.

What made our departure even more complicated was the fact that my parents could not be themselves even in the privacy of their own apartment. We did not live alone. In our two bedroom, two bathroom apartment which had been a luxury apartment in the epicentre of downtown Bucharest and had belonged to my mother before the Iron Curtain descended, we lived with another family of three people. Just two years before the government had simply told my mother one day that it was letting a young couple (both of whom were official Secret Police or Securitate agents) and their baby live with us. It is to my parents' credit that they managed

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Maurice Sands:

## Jewish War Veterans collection

By CHANA REVELL KOTZIN,  
Ph.D.  
Director of Jewish Buffalo  
Archives Project

Personal collections are fascinating compilations of an individual's interests and activities. As a special project of the Bureau of Jewish Education supported through the Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies, the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project has made it a goal to collect individual and family records because they hold a diverse source of information and each has a unique character. Often these personal collections are a mix of several areas of an individual's life and incorporate family history, records of volunteer activity and lay leadership, and even commercial activities such as a personal or family owned business. There is no "set" list of documents in these organic collections, with each having a different mix of inclusions. Some collections include an array of materials while others focus on a particular activity of a person. As part of a series of longer articles on our collections, I am going to outline several collections and their contents, so that readers can learn about the range of archives held by the Jewish community as well as the areas in which we still seek materials.

Maurice Sands' collection (Ms 200.21) focuses on Mr. Sands' work in the Jewish War Veterans at two different "posts" in both NYC and here in Buffalo. Maurice Sands is a retired vice president and military sales administrator for Kayser-Roth Apparel, and a former commander and active member of the Jewish War Veterans, Buffalo Post #25. Prior to Buffalo, he



The Jewish War Veterans: Maurice Sands is 3rd from left. (Ms200.21) (Left to right) [unidentified], Ted Shapiro, Maurice Sands, Ben Friedman, Sid Josephson, Marvin Jacobs, and David Sadoff, 1998.

was also an active member of Jackson Heights - Elmhurst Post 209 in New York City. Mr. Sands first joined the Jewish War Veterans (JWV) in 1987 following his retirement. He quickly became involved in researching the history of American Jewish military service and the organizational history of the JWV. In the early 1990s, Maurice Sands worked for the Queens County Council which was an oversight body for all the Posts in Queens County, New York City. Once in Buffalo, he joined JWV Buffalo Frontier Post #25. He eventually served as the Commander of the Buffalo Post from 2000 to 2006. He also organized the local observation of the Jewish War Veterans National 100th Anniversary in 1996 and two years later in 1998, compiled an 80th Anniversary booklet on Buffalo Frontier Post 25. He has continued to write articles for national

and local newspapers and journals including *The Beacon* and the *Buffalo Jewish Review*.

Indeed, many of you may be familiar with his articles in the *Buffalo Jewish Review* over the years about the activities of Jewish War Veterans Buffalo Frontier Post 25 and JWV generally. In a recent conversation with Mr. Sands he reflected that, "A good part of this [Jewish War Veterans] archive would not exist without Rita Weiss and the publication of JWV articles in the *BJR*." While writing articles for the paper, Mr. Sands collected a significant cache of documents relating to the Post, some of which he donated to the Buffalo History Museum in 1999 (then known as Buffalo Erie County Historical Society). In the collection he donated to the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project more recently, we have a further six

<p>TEMPLE ISRAEL</p> <p>Longwood Avenue and Plymouth Street Boston, Massachusetts 02215 Telephone 617-566-3960</p> <p>RABBI EMERITUS Roland B. Gittelsohn</p> <p>31 May 1985</p> <p>Mr. Maurice Sands 35.27 81 Street Jackson Heights, N.Y. 11372</p> <p>Dear Mr. Sands:</p> <p>I respond at once to your letter of 25 May 1985.</p> <p>The account you read in <i>The Jewish News</i> was accurate. I gave the details when interviewed by James Rice, the correspondent who spoke to me about my Iwo Jima sermon.</p> <p>I have met and know Bill Ross and join you in your high praise of his book on Iwo Jima. Actually, there was no way for Mr. Ross to be aware of the circumstances attending my Iwo sermon, since there is nothing in official military records describing what actually occurred.</p> <p>Paradoxically, my sermon would most probably not have attained the notoriety it later received had it not been for the prejudice which prevented me from delivering it as originally intended.</p> <p>I appreciate your interest and reciprocate your good wishes.</p> <p>Sincerely, <i>Roland B. Gittelsohn</i> Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn</p> <p>RBG/mfw</p> <p>c.c. Mr. Bill D. Ross</p>	<p>Letter to Maurice Sands from Rabbi Ronald B. Gittelsohn, 31 May 1985 (Ms 200.21)</p> <p>boxes of varied JWV materials that can be viewed at the University at Buffalo, University Archives from Monday to Friday without appointment. (If you call ahead however, Bill Offhaus</p> <p>(Continued on page 14)</p>
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# A Romanian immigrant's tale

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to live so harmoniously for those years with this family and I never remember any arguments between the two families. I realize how hard it must have been to live like that.

So now getting back to 1959, the political scene had changed a lot since 1947 and after 12 years of Communism (and the Soviets taking a lot from Romania), the economy was in bad shape and in desperate need of hard currency, namely U.S. dollars. So it concocted a scheme to kill two birds with one stone — get rid of Jews and obtain more money for itself. This was to be done by allowing Jews to leave Romania freely — provided they paid a head tax of \$3,000.00 U.S. for each man, woman and child.

It was only many years later in my late adolescence, that I realized the burden my father bore in coming to Canada. Not only did he leave the country with a wife, child, only one

suitcase and \$25 cash (that was all we were allowed—nothing could be shipped out of the country and my mother was forced to sell all her jewelry and silver and Persian rugs to the government consignment store for a pittance), but he had a \$9,000.00 U.S. debt to repay to his father in Canada. That would probably be like \$75,000.00 today at least.

My grandfather had left Israel after emigrating in 1957 and was living in Montreal when we arrived in December 1959. He was ill and in his late sixties and my grandmother was paralyzed with Parkinson's disease and confined to a wheelchair. There were no old age security payments for an immigrant like him and he eked out a meager living doing what he had all his life: owning a fabric (textile) store. In Romania from 1915 on, it had made him a millionaire by 1919. He had a mansion, maids, a German governess for the children, a late model Dusen-

berg and chauffeur, a gardener, a cook and travelled to Paris each year to buy for the store. He had come far from his youth as an 11 year old in the slums of Bucharest, the eldest of 10 children. He had been forced to go to work at 11 to support his family when his father had died young. When Communism came he had everything taken away from him — except the love of his family

*My father's  
greatest fear  
was that he  
would remain  
"imprisoned"  
in a Communist  
system forever.*

and his sterling reputation amongst his fellow merchants, some of whom had also emigrated to Montreal. So by borrowing from the bank and these merchants he was able to raise the money needed to bring us to Canada.

I remember a few things about our Sabena Airlines flight to Canada. It was my first exposure to chewing gum, drinking straws and Coca-Cola. I was so horribly airsick (the planes were

turbo-prop and not so well-pressurized back then). So on December 26, 1959 (a day my father would celebrate every single year as his day of freedom) we landed at the airport in Dorval, Quebec which was then still a wartime military style airport in the middle of nowhere—a white sea of frigid snow. The reunion with the paternal side of my family was amazing and for the next 6 months my parents slept on a pull out sofa-bed in my grandparents' living room and I slept very uncomfortably on 3 dining room chairs put together side by side.

Luckily, even though he did not speak any English, my father (who had embarked on a university lecture tour of a couple of weeks in Ontario soon after his arrival) received a few good job offers in the spring of 1960 and accepted the one at the very prestigious Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. It was a quaint and lovely, very historic university town of 50,000 people. It was perched on the shore of Lake Ontario in the heart of Loyalist country and it had a Jewish community of about 100 families with an almost-new lovely synagogue. Within 3 years by being very frugal, my father had paid back his father in full and even managed to send my mother and me to Israel for a month to see her family in Haifa. At age 40 he had to learn English by immersion and teaching in it, writing it and reading voraciously. Within a few years his

oral and written English was accented but flawless. Twenty-five years later he retired and was made a Professor Emeritus of Mathematics. Kingston became our true home that we loved. Even when he was offered the chance to become the founding Chair of the Department of Mathematics at York University in Toronto, he refused to leave his cherished Kingston. We never saw Romania again.



**HOFFMAN, Janet** (née Cohen) — Feb. 28, 2014. Beloved wife of the late Meyer "Mike" Hoffman; devoted mother of Dr. David Hoffman, Jill Jacobs, Barbara Freda and Bonnie (Michael) Morrissey; loving grandmother of Michael (Evan) Jacobs, Russell and Matthew Freda, Jeffrey and Emily Morrissey; and great-grandmother of Jonah, Eli and Samantha; dear sister of Elaine (Fred) Bock and the late Shirley (Brownie) Bronstein; also survived by three nieces. Private funeral services. Donations may be made in her memory to Hospice Foundation of WNY. Arrangements by the AMHERST MEMORIAL CHAPEL, INC. Family guestbook at [amherstmorialchapel.com](http://amherstmorialchapel.com).



**MESCHES, Harry** — March 4, 2014. Husband of Georgia (Kolber) Mesches; father of Susan Mesches (Daniel Bissonnet), Cheryl Mesches and Steven (Pamela) Mesches; brother of Arthur (Marcia) and the late Hyman, Jacob and Sylvia Mesches; grandmother of Shaina (Mauricio) Bielaz, Rachel and Sami Bissonnet, Gabrielle and Hannah Mesches; great-grandfather of Oren Bielaz. Funeral services will be held Friday at 12:30 p.m. at MESNEKOFF FUNERAL HOME. Memorials may be made to the Blue Rose Foundation, P.O. Box 54, Williamsville, N.Y. 14231 or the Jewish National Fund, 42 E. 69th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.



**WEINTRAUB, Deborah Joy** — Born as Deborah Joy Walton. Suddenly March 2, 2014. Devoted daughter of Ellen and Mort Weintraub and Dr. Ralph G. Walton; dear companion of Steve Bowler; loving sister of Rachel (Chuck) Messina; devoted aunt of Allison and Emma Messina; also survived by many aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. Funeral service was held at Temple Beth Zion. Donations in Debbie's memory may be made to Temple Beth Zion. Arrangements by AMHERST MEMORIAL CHAPEL, INC. Family guest book available at [www.amherstmorialchapel.com](http://www.amherstmorialchapel.com).

## Documentary on oldest Shoah survivor wins Oscar a week after her death

(JTA) — A documentary about the world's oldest Holocaust survivor won an Oscar one week after she died.

Alice Herz-Sommer, who died in London on Feb. 23 at the age of 110, was the subject of "The Lady in Number 6: Music Saved My Life," which won the Academy Award for documentary short on Sunday night.

The Prague-born Herz-Sommer, a concert pianist, was a prisoner in Theresienstadt.

In accepting the Oscar, the film's director, Malcolm Clarke, said he was struck by Herz-Sommer's "extraordinary capacity for joy" and "amazing capacity for forgiveness."

## Jewish War Veterans collection

(Continued from page 2)  
will be able to organize the boxes for your visit, to make your trip more efficient: 716-645-2916).

The Buffalo Frontier Post #25 was founded in 1927, by Sol Feldman, and was initially called JWV Louis Marshall Post. As this name was already in use by another group, National JWV finally issued a charter in the name of Buffalo Frontier Post #25 in 1929. In 1935, the Post, with the assistance of Erie County, acquired its own cemetery plot in a section of Temple Beth El Cemetery located on Pine Hill, in Cheektowaga, New York. The plaque was dedicated on May 30, 1935 for the Jewish War Veterans of Erie County who served their country through seven wars. In 1941, the 46th National Encampment of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States, met in Buffalo. A photograph of this encampment in Buffalo, is reproduced in Jewish Community of Greater Buffalo, published in 2013 (and available through the BJE at 716-204-5380). Buffalo native Benjamin Kaufman, a Congressional Medal of Honor and Croix de Guerre recipient, was a national commander of the organization during the encampment. He presented a check for \$50,000 to Bell Aircraft, for the purchase of P-39 fighter plane for the war effort.

During the 1930s to early 1940s, the JWV maintained an office at Herkimer and Grant, but moved a number of times during the 1940s and 1950s, renting space at 277 Linwood Avenue, 576 Taunton Place and Temple Sinai at 50 Alberta Drive in Amherst. In 1961, however, the Buffalo Post purchased 1460 Hertel Avenue and continued to meet at this building for the next twenty years. From 1998, the Post met at the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) 416 building on Spring Street in Williamsville and from the 2000s, the Post met at the former Temple Beth Am - now Congregation Shir Shalom - on Sheridan Drive in Williamsville.

The papers of Maurice Sands consist of his personal materials, and include awards, flyers, newsletters and articles - all written or produced by Mr. Sands through research he conducted. There are also many small photographs of the numerous events sponsored or observed by JWV Buffalo Frontier Post 25, including Memorial Day observances, Kristallnacht and Holocaust

commemorations. At various times, the Post sponsored writing contests and images of the winners are included with the many photograph envelopes. Other photographs document the various activities relating to the VA hospital where Buffalo Post members amassed thousands of volunteer hours. There are also photographs of fallen soldiers graves.

One specific area of research conducted by Maurice Sands includes materials of national significance and relates to the controversy surrounding a now historic speech, "The Purest Democracy", that was to be delivered at the dedication of the 5th Marine Division Cemetery at Iwo Jima, in the Pacific, in 1945. However, Catholic and some Protestant chaplains threatened to boycott the ceremony were the eulogy to be given by a Jewish chaplain. On hearing of the proposed boycott, Rabbi Gittelsohn proceeded with the sermon, but to avoid an incident, read it to Jewish marines only. Two Protestant chaplains attended Rabbi Gittelsohn's speech in protest at the actions of their colleagues, and obtained a copy of his speech, which they copied and distributed it to all marine servicemen. Many marines sent copies home and the sermon subsequently became one of the most famous Marine battlefield eulogies of WWII. The speech spread as it was read on the radio and television by announcers, yet for many years, the background to his speech was unknown as there was no record of the controversy in the military record. In correspondence, Maurice Sands wrote to Rabbi Ronald Gittelsohn in 1985, to ascertain the context of his speech. Rabbi Gittelsohn in his reply to Maurice Sands concludes, "Paradoxically, my sermon would most probably not have attained the notoriety it later received had it not been for the prejudice which prevented me from delivering it as originally intended."

The contents of Maurice Sands personal collection contains both local and nationally significant materials and demonstrates the importance of saving materials about individual activities, as well as making them available for researchers and community members alike to learn and further understand the depth and breadth of Jewish life in Buffalo, NY. Each and every archives donor, both organizational and individual, have our deep appreciation and our thanks.



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