

PERSONAL STORIES: OUR COMMUNITY

Micaela Ben Abraham:

A Romanian immigrant's tale

By MICAELA 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

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RABBI EMERITUS Roland B. Gittelsohn

31 May 1985

Mr. Maurice Sands
35.27 81 Street
Jackson Heights, N.Y. 11372

Dear Mr. Sands:

I respond at once to your letter of 25 May 1985.

The account you read in *The Jewish News* was accurate. I gave the details when interviewed by James Rice, the correspondent who spoke to me about my Iwo Jima sermon.

I have met and know Bill Rosh 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.

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.

I appreciate your interest and reciprocate your good wishes.

Sincerely,
Roland B. Gittelsohn
Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn

RBG/mfw

c.c. Mr. Bill D. Ross

Letter to Maurice Sands from Rabbi Ronald B. Gittelsohn, 31 May 1985 (Ms 200.21)

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)

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