



Chai Vekayam

The Neve Shalom Synagogue Chai Members Newsletter

Special Edition

January 2020

Dear Chai members;

January 27th, 2020 is the United Nations designated International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. A ceremony to commemorate the 104 Surinamese Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust will be held in front of the Memorial Monument at the Neve Shalom Synagogue in Paramaribo, Suriname.



This special edition tells the remarkable story of one of the oldest Jewish Surinamese families, the Fernandes family, during the Holocaust in Holland as told by *Evelyn Stroobach* with rare family photos that takes us four generations back.

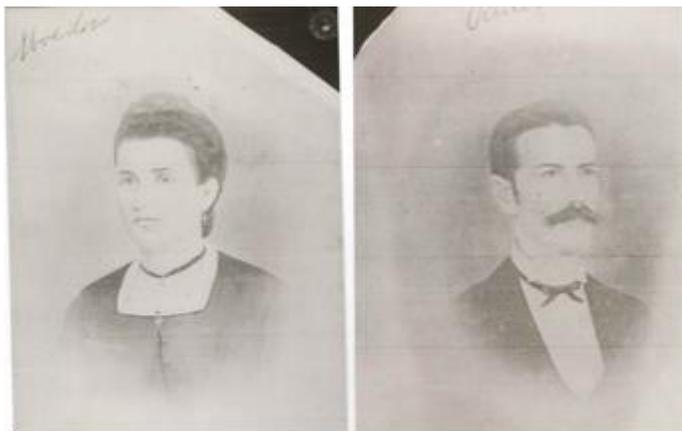
Jacob Steinberg has kindly asked me to write an article about my family for this edition of the *Chai Newsletter*. The reason Jacob has asked me to contribute an article is because I am a descendant of Surinamese Jews. I was initially hesitant to write about my family, but after some thought, I agreed. Like millions of other innocent people, my family too was affected by the Holocaust. Hitler said about the Final Solution, 'No one will remember'. We have proven Hitler wrong. We remember. We need to continue to talk and write about the Shoah. We must never forget.

My name is Evelyn Stroobach and I live and work in Ottawa, Canada.

Blending what I know about my ancestors with what I know about Jewish history, my best guess is that my Jewish ancestors were probably among those who were expelled from Israel in about 70 C.E. My ancestors probably lived in southern Europe for centuries until the time of the Spanish Inquisition in the late 15th century where they found themselves living in Portugal during tumultuous times. Holland, was seen as a liberal and tolerant country, allowing freedom of religion because of its own northern Protestant and southern Catholic populations. The country was seen by the Sephardic Portuguese Jews as a safer place to live. A place where they could enjoy the freedom of practicing their own religion. So they moved to Holland: Amsterdam mainly.

In the 1660s, Holland traded its colony of New Amsterdam (now New York City) with the British for the colony they subsequently called Dutch Guiana. A number of Portuguese Dutch Jews moved to Holland's newly acquired South American colony. My Jewish ancestors were among those who immigrated to Dutch Guiana.

I suspect my ancestors had been in Dutch Guiana (now Suriname) since the 1600s. There they lived until 1934. When my mother was four years old, her family along with a number of relatives, decided to immigrate back to the Netherlands. Of course, no one had a crystal ball telling them what the future had in store for them. No one knew that only six years after immigrating to the Netherlands, that Holland would succumb to Nazi occupation on May 15, 1940.



My great-great-grandparents, David Juda Fernandes (1826-1878) and Cornelia Anna Collaso del Monte (1835- unknown) taken in Paramaribo, Suriname.

My mother told me a story that her mother, shortly after Holland fell under Nazi occupation, went to the market as she usually did to do her grocery shopping. On her way to the market, she heard gun shots. To her utter shock, she saw Nazis shooting people at the market. Horrified, she hurried back home never to go to that market again.

My mother did not like to talk about what happened to her and her family during the war, especially when I was young – understandably so. She wanted her children to have a happy childhood and not to fill our heads with the unspeakable horrors that she experienced during the war. She did however talk about her uncle Bram (Abraham Samuel Fernandes).



Uncle Bram (Abraham Samuel Fernandes)

Uncle Bram was my maternal grandmother's (Rebecca Fernandes) brother. Uncle Bram was a resistance fighter during the war and a member of the *Geuzen* underground group. For his activities in the resistance, he was arrested by the Germans and he was beaten and tortured to death at the *Oranjehotel* (the Orange Hotel in Dutch), a German prison in Scheveningen in March 1941. He was only 34 years old.



was her tortured and brutally beaten dead husband lying on the cell floor. She was hysterical and she turned to beat the soldier that had escorted her. As the story goes, it took a few other Nazi soldiers who grabbed her to control her.

After the murder of her husband, my mother's aunt fled to Amsterdam with her two young daughters: Henrietta who was only a baby and Paula who was just two years old. She then stayed under the radar, obviously fearing for her life and that of her children. She feared being found and picked-up by the Nazis. Uncle Bram's wife and their two small children did survive the war.



Uncle's Bram grave and the Resistance Cross he was awarded from the Queen of Holland

My mother also told me that sometime after her uncle Bram's 'arrest' and imprisonment in the *Oranjehotel*, his wife received a phone call from someone at the hotel. The man who called her told her that she could come to the hotel to pick up her husband. So Uncle Bram's wife excitedly scurried off to the *Oranjehotel*.

Once she arrived at the *Oranjehotel*, a German soldier escorted her to her husband's prison cell and opened the cell door for her. To her absolute shock and horror, what she saw



Uncle Bram's parents' wedding photo taken in Paramaribo, Abraham Samuel Fernandes (1869 – 1929) and Celina Jaquelina Morpurgo.

(For more information about Abraham Samuel Fernandes please refer to Jacob Steinberg's article in the December 2014 – Special Edition of the *Chai Newsletter*) *



My grandmother, Rebecca Fernandes (1900 – 1947) when she was about 4 years old taken in Paramaribo where she was born.

After my grandmother's experience in the market and the murder of her brother on March 4, 1941, my mother's family had no trust in the German occupiers and they were not cooperative. They never registered as Jews. My mother's family did not wear the yellow Star of David that Jews were required to wear. Fortunately for them, in 1943, the resistance bombed the Amsterdam civil registry office in order to prevent the Nazis from finding Jews. This certainly saved many Jewish lives, and perhaps that of my family.



My grandmother's family taken in Paramaribo. Left to Right: Abraham Samuel Fernandes (1906 – 1941) his father Abraham Samuel Fernandes, Solomon David (1902 – 1970) Eddy (little boy 1924), my Grandmother Rebecca and great-grandmother Celine Morpurgo

My mother's family lived in Zaandam during WWII, which is just outside of Amsterdam. My mother is the second oldest of five sisters. Three of her sisters went to Friesland in north Holland during the war and stayed with two different Dutch families who kindly took in the children. We know of a Dutch farming family that took in Jewish children and unfortunately this family was discovered by the Nazis. As an act of reprisal, the Germans burned their house down killing both the Jewish and the Dutch farming family's children. This story is a reminder of how courageous these families were to hide my three aunts. They were literally risking their own lives and that of their children.

Despite her parents' preference, my mother did not want to leave her mother and so she stayed in Zaandam with her parents and baby sister who was born at home on the evening of May 14, 1940, the day before Holland succumbed to the occupation. My mother was not able to go to school during the war years. Her family did not want to draw attention to themselves. They had little food and almost no heat. In my mother's words, during the last years of the war, they were literally starving.

This is also known as the ‘Dutch hunger winter’ of 1944 – 1945.



This is the only photo ever taken of my mother's entire family. It was taken during the war in 1942 in Zaandam, Holland. My mother is the girl on the right with the long braided hair. My Aunt Celine is holding a ball, she is only two years old and she is sitting on my grandmother's (Rebecca Fernandes') lap. My grandmother wanted to have a family photo taken before my Aunt Bep, front left, Aunt Carla, back left standing beside her father and Aunt Nita sitting to the left of my mother, departed to go to Friesland in north Holland for the remainder of the war. At the time of this writing my mother and her four sisters are still living.

My mother had lice and my father suffered from intestinal worms during the war. Neither afflictions were uncommon during these terribly harsh conditions. In addition to the horrible physical suffering, they also lived

in constant fear because they knew they were being hunted.

My father, who also lived in Zaandam, told us that as a boy he saw the Nazis line up several men and then just shot them all. At the time, he was only 8 years old. Both of my parents were profoundly affected by what they experienced as children during the war.

My maternal grandmother was sick during the war and needed medical attention. Sadly, Grandmother received absolutely no medical treatment, never saw a doctor, never received any medicine, and as a result died shortly after the end of the war in 1947. Many people died shortly after WWII as a direct result of suffering endured during the war.

I think my grandmother must have been absolutely heart-broken having lost family members and friends during the Holocaust. It was only after WWII that the population at large learned details of the concentration camps. After the war, people learned that the Dutch Jews were routinely sent by train to Auschwitz and murdered there in the gas chambers. My mother tells a story about my grandmother's friend who lived in Amsterdam. Her friend had many children. The entire family was picked up by the Nazis and sent to the camps. None were to return. I can only imagine my grandmother's physical and mental state at that time. She died when she was only 47 years old. My mother and her four sisters were left without a mother.



Uncle Bram with his brothers and mother. We think the young man on the left is David. He studied to become a medical doctor and moved to San Francisco where he practiced medicine. Standing beside David is Uncle Bram, my great-grandmother is sitting and standing to her right is Eddie.

My mother told me that after the war, at the young age of 16, she went to work in a tailor's shop in the Jewish section of Amsterdam (that is, what was left of it) where they made raincoats. Before WWII there were approximately 140,000 Jews living in Holland – most lived in Amsterdam. Seventy-five percent of Dutch Jews were murdered during the Shoah, over 100,000 people.

The owners of the shop were Jewish. My mother told me that during the war a number of Jewish girls, about her age: 15-16 years old, worked in this tailor's shop. One day heavily armed Nazis showed up and 'arrested' all of the girls. My mother said they were all put on trucks and either just shot or sent to camps, she doesn't know which. But what everyone in the post-war tailor's shop knew was that they were never coming back. So the Jewish owners of the tailor's shop hung up the pictures of all the girls that were murdered during the Shoah. This was their way of honoring and remembering them. Everyday when my mother arrived at her work, she would see the photos of the murdered Jewish girls.



From left to right, a photo of Aunt Celine, Aunt Carla, and Uncle Bram's two daughters, Henrietta and Paula taken in 1952. When this photo was taken Aunt Carla, Aunt Celine and my mother lost their mother and Uncle Bram's two daughters lost their father because of the war.

Between September 1944 to April 1945, the Canadian Army played a major role in liberating the Dutch people who had suffered terrible hunger and hardships from its German occupiers. By defeating the Nazis, the Canadian Army most likely saved the lives of what was left of my family and the other Dutch Jews who had survived the war thus far.

Through incredible odds, my parents survived WWII. Things could have turned out very differently. I am grateful for my life and think life is a special gift. I do not take my life for granted.

Presently, I am a PhD candidate in Music Composition. My dissertation proposal, which has been approved, is to compose a large-scale, multi-movement work for orchestra and soprano as a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust entitled *In Memoriam – Holocaust*. It is through music, the most abstract of all the arts, that I wish to explore the unspeakable depravity and ghastly horror of the largest scale genocide that the world has ever known. It is through music that I would like to share the hope that discrimination of any kind will

end: the hope that we will become more tolerant. I wish for the piece *In Memoriam – Holocaust* to weep, wail, cry, whisper and scream at the top of its lungs so that we never forget the six million children, women and men who were so senselessly rounded up like cattle and murdered: never again.

I would like to dedicate this work to my great-uncle, Abraham Samuel Fernandes, as well as to the other six million Jews who were murdered in the Shoah.

I wanted to visit the land where my ancestors came from and have been very fortunate to have travelled to Israel. While visiting this amazing country, I saw many sights that literally left me awestruck, and at times overwhelmed and speechless. I visited Jerusalem, and saw the Old City, the Wailing Wall, the marketplace and an Orthodox Synagogue. I travelled north, visiting the Golan Heights. I travelled south, visiting the Negev Desert. I travelled east to see the Dead Sea (the lowest place on earth), Qumran Mountains where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found and Masada, an ancient fortress in Israel's Judean Desert. I travelled west, where I visited the modern bustling city of Tel Aviv and the Mediterranean Sea. As awe-inspiring as all of these places were, nothing affected me as profoundly as my visit to the Yad Vashem. During my visit to the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, I felt emotionally overwhelmed and literally could not speak. I later searched for my great-uncle, Abraham Samuel Fernandes, who I knew had been murdered during the Holocaust and was moved to find his name listed in the Hall of Names at the Yad Vashem.

When I looked at the page of testimony on my great-uncle, I saw that it had been filled out by Jacob Steinberg. I was surprised and thought to myself, who is this Jacob Steinberg? I

decided to try to contact him and ask him how he knew about my great-uncle. I could see from the testimonial that he too lived in Canada. Much to my relief, Jacob did not mind being contacted by Abraham Samuel Fernandes' great-niece and in fact he has kindly shared with me what he knows about my family from his thorough research that he has conducted about the Surinamese Jews.

The image shows a 'Page of Testimony' form from Yad Vashem, filled out for Abraham Samuel Fernandes. The form is bilingual, with Hebrew text on the left and English text on the right. The fields are filled with handwritten information:

- Page of Testimony** (דף עדות)
- Victim's family name:** Fernandes
- Victim's first name (or nickname):** Abraham (Bram) Samuel
- Place of birth (town, region, country):** Paramaribo, Suriname
- First name of victim's father:** Abraham
- First name of victim's mother:** Selina
- Permanent residence (town, region, country):** Vlaardingen, Holland
- Victim's profession:** Operator of thermal cracking plant

[Bram Fernandes Page of Testimony in Yad Vashem, Jerusalem](#)

My family and I would like to send a sincere, heart-felt thank you to Jacob Steinberg, Dr. Alexander Avram, the Director of the Hall of Names at the Yad Vashem and all the other kind and generous people who gave their time and money to create the Holocaust Memorial Monument at the Neve Shalom Synagogue in Paramaribo, Suriname. This stone monument was created "In Loving Memory of Those who Perished in the Holocaust", including my great-uncle Abraham Samuel Fernandes, other family members as well as all 104 Surinamese Jews who lost their lives. All 104 Surinamese Jewish Holocaust victims have their names inscribed on this precious monument. This Holocaust Memorial Monument stands at the

synagogue as a reminder of these terrible times.

Further recommended reading follows:

(<https://www.timesofisrael.com/70-years-after-the-holocaust-a-surinamese-memorial-for-caribbean-victims/>)

<https://www.tracesofwar.nl/awards/303/Verzetsherdenkingskruis-VHK.htm?sort=name&show=list&abc=F#abc>)

Recommended Dutch Film: *The Resistance Banker* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Resistance_Banker)

Israel Air Force Ceremony – F-15 Jets over Auschwitz:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1FHvsuMzAc>

* Abraham Samuel Fernandes posthumously received the Resistance Cross (Verzetsherdenkingskrois) in 2009 for his activities with the *Geuzen*



The author of this article, Evelyn Stroobach, is a PhD candidate in Music Composition