

# Jewish Journal

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## Holocaust survivor Sam Ron shares his 'Jewish Journey'



**By Linda Chase**  
Editor

The memory of every Torah in Poland being destroyed during the Holocaust devastated survivor Sam Ron. Recently Sam and his wife, Bilha donated a Torah to the Toby & Leon Cooperman Sinai Residences in Boca Raton. While attending the ceremony, I decided I wanted to interview this couple.

I was invited to the couple's home and Sam reflected on his life, detailed in his memoir "A Jewish Journey: Surviving and Thriving in Poland, Israel and the United States" (can be purchased on Amazon).

(Bilha has her own unique story that she shares inside this week's newspaper)

"I was born in 1924 with the name Shmuel Rakowski in Kazimierza Wielka, Poland (near Krakow). My father's name was Jozef (Joseph). He had a successful lumber business. My mother, Sofia (Zelda), was a homemaker who came from a religious family. My family was well to do, but not rich. Life was nice in those years prior to the war. I attended a Polish public school for seven years and excelled in my studies. I had good relations with fellow students and neighbors. It helped that I spoke perfect Polish in school. The other Jewish children in the school spoke Yiddish as a first language. I attended Hebrew school at the same time. Antisemitism was rampant but the town's Jew-haters left me and my family alone. We were respected as business owners who lived in the town for generations. My parents instilled pride in me and my younger brother,

# Ron

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Yulik. From a young age, I knew my family was among the most respected Jewish families in town. My father was a Zionist who believed that the Jewish people deserved to have their own country in Eretz Yisrael."

Sam explained how life suddenly changed in September, 1939.

"It was Friday, September 1, German planes began flying over the town. A day that would normally be spent preparing for Shabbat had people in a state of panic. Daily existence was now under the mercy of the Germans. A curfew was enforced and Jews were forced to wear white armbands with a blue star. In 1942, deportations to concentration camps began after The Wannsee Conference (January 20) was held by Nazi officials implementing the Final Solution. This sent my family into hiding. We hid in a barn owned by Polish gentiles that were friends and business associates of my father's. We hid there until September 1942."

"After coming out of hiding, we smuggled ourselves into the Krakow ghetto. We thought we were smart. The Germans didn't care if you came in as they wouldn't let you out. In the ghetto my family and I worked in a metal factory. The ghetto was liquidated on March 13, 1943 and I was sent to the Plaszow concentration camp separated from my family. I stayed there for seven months. In October 1943, I was among the inmates sent to Camp Pionki to work in an ammunition factory."

Speaking of Camp Pionki, Sam shared details of a recent reunion with a fellow inmate.

"This past March, I was the honorary chair of the U.S. Holocaust Museum's South Florida dinner in Boca Raton. When I spoke during the program I mentioned Pionki. After I went back to my seat, Jack Waksal ran over to me and said 'You are my brother. We were together in Pionki.' We recognized each other and embraced. I had not seen my friend in nearly 80 years. The reunion made national news and a movie is in the works."

"In July of 1944, I was among the Jews who left Pionki and was picked to rebuild the ammunition factory in Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany. I was then sent to Glowen, a subcamp, where we worked and lived in the most inhuman conditions. The worst kind of hunger (you can't imagine.) They gave us coffee, or something that looked like coffee. We would go to work and later in the day receive a bowl of soup. On Sunday, we were given two slices of bread. Many people died. It was not unusual to wake up and have a dead body lying next to you. In early 1945, I was handed some fresh bread. This was the last food I would see for weeks. It turned into a death march with many dying from either starvation or being shot. We were led into a forest clearing and given no food. We were eating tree bark. On May 2, 1945, all the guards disappeared in the middle of the night. We were

free, liberated. I was with a friend and we watched out for each other, because if you slept, someone would try to steal your shoes. We found an abandoned German tank with sugar and cognac inside. Then we entered the city of Schwerin, Germany, and entered the Red Cross office where they gave us a package of goodies. A woman asked me if I spoke English. I finally understood that she was trying to find out if I had any family in America. I replied that I had an uncle named Benjamin Rakowski and he lived in Lima, Ohio. However, I did not go to America at that time. I returned to Krakow to search for family members who might have survived. A Jewish committee in the city was helping survivors. In the office I flipped through pages of a book on the table and found my mother's name in there, wow, with an address. I went to the house and knocked on the door, but no one answered. The janitor said she was in the hospital. Her sister was sick, it turned out. I waited at the house for my mother and we had a tearful reunion; I had not seen her in two years. I learned that my brother had died in Mauthausen just prior to the camp's liberation. My father survived but was hospitalized in Austria for nearly a year to bring him back to health."

Sam shared the next period in his life following the reunion with his parents.

"In 1946 with a friend's encouragement, I joined Bericha, an organization that facilitated the transfer of survivors to Israel. This was the best job I had in my life. I smuggled people into the DP camps in Germany and from there to what was then called Palestine. Survivors called it Eretz Yisrael. Later in 1946, I accompanied orphaned children to Israel and devoted my life to that country. I served in the Haganah (precursor to the Israel Defense Forces) and fought in the War of Independence. I met Bilha, a Sabra (native Israeli) in 1947. In 1949, I changed my last name to Ron and we were married. I have three children (two daughters and a son)."

Sam shared how he subsequently moved to the U.S.

"My parents immigrated to America in 1947, reuniting with my father's brother who lived in Canton, Ohio. I visited the U.S. for the first time in 1951. Eventually I moved my family to Canton in 1956. I was a successful land developer in Canton and Akron. I was very active in the Jewish Federation and was president of the synagogue. Over 20 years ago we moved to Boca Raton."

Sam spoke about his involvement in the March of the Living and Holocaust education.

"I started talking in schools. It was a logical first step since Bilha was active in education. The more I spoke, the better I felt. I have gone on 11 March of the Living trips, taking students and adults to Poland and Israel to see the many places where I survived and thrived. I participated twice while living in Ohio and nine more times from Florida. The last one I attended was in 2019."

In conclusion, Sam expressed what keeps him going.

"Hope and believing in yourself"

# Bilha Ron reflects on a life dedicated to family and teaching

By Linda Chase  
Editor

Bilha Ron has been married to Holocaust survivor Sam Ron for 73 years. I visited the couple recently in their Boca Raton home where Bilha reflected on a life dedicated to Sam, her children, Israel and educating others.

“I was born Bilha Zehori and from a young age appreciated the importance of family. My parents were natives of Ukraine who settled in Eretz Yisrael (Land of Israel) in the early 1920s. Antisemitism was on the rise in Europe and my mother and father knew it was time to leave. My life began in the city of Ra’anana, consisting of a large population of European immigrants. My father was an expert in citrus planting and helped build roads and orange groves in the community. When I was two years old, my parents moved to Yarkona, a moshav north of Tel Aviv (named after the nearby Yarkon River located in Central Israel) founded with approximately 30 other families. The land was donated by the Jewish National Fund. Everyone worked together draining swamps and planting trees to help grow the community. We lived an ideal life. I was raised as a farm girl, where our main source of food was grown in the garden.”

Bilha shared how her love for learning inspired a career in teaching.

“I attended the regional school of Kefar-Malal. Influenced by my teachers, I knew from an early age that I was destined to be an educator. My teachers would say, ‘Bilha was born to be a teacher.’ I drew inspiration from my instructor Moshe Shlanger. Moshe had emigrated from Warsaw, Poland. He was a writer and poet who became my teacher for six years. He would talk about the Holocaust and share memories of a life that once existed in



Bilha Ron PHOTO BY LINDA CHASE

Europe. Ariel Sharon, the future Israeli general and politician who would later serve as Prime Minister of Israel, was two years older than me and a student in the same school. Following elementary school, I enrolled in Levinsky Teachers College for my high school and college education. When I was 16 or 17, I joined the Haganah where I prepared to be an assistant nurse in the army. Along with five other girls from the teaching academy, I was trained in both defense and first aid. My commander was none other than Ariel Sharon.”

During this time in her life, Bilha shared how she met Sam.

“I first met Sam in 1946. He was among a group of Holocaust survivors living in a kibbutz near Yarkona. Sam worked as a guard watching over the small vineyard that my family and I tended to. I went to teach Hebrew at the kibbutz where Sam was living. Sam was then instructed to help create a new moshav called Nevatim located in the Negev desert in October 1946. Sam was wounded when Arabs attacked Nevatim the following year. In 1949, Sam changed his last name from

Rakowski to Ron (which means song or melody) and we were married. He was 25 and I was 19. I was teaching a class of immigrant children who recently arrived in Israel from five different countries. The children didn’t understand Hebrew. I remember thinking, how can I teach students who didn’t know my language? My degree from the teacher’s college did not prepare me, a young instructor, for this challenge.”

Bilha reflected on becoming a mother and visiting America for the first time.

“Our eldest daughter, Tamar, was born in 1950.

Tamar was named after my best friend who was killed two months before I gave birth. Today, Tamar is a professor who chairs the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Tamar has devoted her life’s work to helping people as a result of her younger sister Daphnae’s special needs. My son, David, our middle child, is a successful businessman in California. Daphnae, our youngest, was our only child born in the United States. The same year Tamar was born, we visited the U.S. for the first time. Sam’s parents

had immigrated to Ohio to be near relatives and were encouraging him to move there. I wasn’t ready for such a move. I was rooted in Israel and the pain of possibly leaving that country was beyond words. In 1956, we moved to Canton, Ohio. After moving back to Israel a couple of times, I realized I couldn’t fight it anymore and we moved to America permanently in 1976.”

“I had been asked over the years to accept a principalship in Canton. I said I’m Israeli, my homeland is in my heart. I cannot be a principal of a school in America. When we returned in 1976, I was ready to take on that role. I became very active in the community. I was a pioneer for Holocaust education in Ohio, publishing a curriculum for the state. That curriculum is still used statewide today. The governor appointed me to be a founding member of the Ohio Council on Holocaust Education. I trained educators to teach about the Holocaust and every year we initiated a seminar with the university. Wanting to further my knowledge, I went back to college and studied English and world literature, graduating magna cum laude from Walsh University. Years later, I was awarded Outstanding Alumna of the Year. I also served as Education Director of Temple Israel’s Religious School in Canton. Over the years I have written stories recalling my teaching experiences with the children.”

Bilha expressed her thoughts on Israel today.

“Israel will always be in my heart. I’m concerned, because like this country (America), people in Israel are divided. Israelis are strong and have to rely on themselves. In spite of persecution against the great nation of Israel, it continues to be the most creative country in the world. Israel is turning 75 next year and it’s a great miracle.”