

As she shared with us her life story, Sima would insert Yiddish songs she learned when she was a child and while living in the Ghetto in Vilna. It was a very emotional visit for us and before we parted Sima gave us a gift, her book written in English called 'Sima's Songs.' In it is her biography relating her life in Europe during the Nazi occupation and the songs that impacted her life.

Another program provided by Ner Yaakov is assisting Holocaust survivors outside of the Jerusalem area. We went to Ashdod with Inge to visit two ladies. First we visited the house of Raisa Rotman, from Moldavia, who is in fragile health. She lives with her family and has their support. Then we visited Rivka Chwoles from Vilna, Lithuania. She is still full of life. Rivka is an accomplished painter/artist and her flat is like an art-gallery. She comes from a family of artists. Her brother Rafael, now deceased, was also a famous Jewish painter.

In general, most people cared for by Ner Yaakov are over 80 years old and they require constant health care follow-ups. While we were in Jerusalem we witnessed the volunteer work Chana performed - taking the survivors to medical appointments and to the lab for their many health tests. On several occasions she would spend the whole day at the hospital helping Tova, a lady who is recovering from a stroke.

Afterwards we were invited to attend an event being held at the Ner Yaakov home and center. It was a meeting between Holocaust survivors and a visiting group of 10 young German Evangelical Christians and their two leaders. This time the home looked like a different place, with lots of people and activity going on, - quite different from our first evening visit to Ner Yaakov. Besides the residents and helpers, also 4 other survivors came and they all gathered to tell their painful life stories to the visiting tour group. The visitors listened with great interest to the painful stories being shared recounting their fate at the hands of the Nazis at the concentration camps in Europe. We noticed that these survivors are not bitter or resentful toward the young Germans like other survivors. The last participant to speak was Mr. Avi Jakobovitz, much younger than his counterparts and a son of two Auschwitz survivors. Avi was born in Germany and raised in Israel. His presentation was quite different from the previous ones. While his life has been easier, his words were harsher. According to his point of view, the survival of the Jewish People depends on the strength of the IDF-Israel Defense Force. He believes anti-Semitism is alive and well and told us of an episode he faced while visiting in Germany.

This event clearly confirmed, that the mission of Ner Yaakov goes well beyond just caring for Holocaust Survivors. Maybe in the future the important message from this ministry will reside in educating the new generations and admonishing them to respect people's diversity. It is not an easy task showing the youth, who are living in relative peaceful times, the extreme scenarios and how acts of intolerance can cause human devastation.

Ner Yaakov gave us the privilege to sojourn among them and learn a lot from the Holocaust survivors. Of all the encounters we had, the most important experience for us was of course to meet Bella, a survivor of Auschwitz and my father's first cousin, - our family! From her grandfather and my great-grandfather, Yaakov Thalenberg, comes the name that inspired Inge to create this remarkable Ministry / Institution in Israel.

As Jews living in the Diaspora we are used to receiving help from our own Jewish people. But on this trip we met people connected with Ner Yaakov and outsiders that convinced us that, We are not alone! There are people out there - and not just a few of them - from another faith, who are offering unconditional help in practical needs, not only to the People, but also to the State of Israel.

Even if I try, I cannot possibly describe what I have witnessed during our journey to Israel. I am not talking about an institution that comprises professional social workers like many others; the tender care these volunteers are giving, the emotional support, the loving dedication they offer to those old needy human beings, the tireless assistance they give at all hours, day or night without complaining, are but a few of the services and labor of love that makes Ner Yaakov a very special place. The best way to describe it would be like a group of mothers caring for their aged children. I am well too aware that they don't like to be labeled 'angels', but I just cannot find another fitting word to describe them.

We had spent several weeks in close contact with the victims of the worse atrocities perpetrated against human beings. At the same time, we witnessed up close the remarkable work from generous human beings who are dedicating their whole life to helping others, and expecting nothing in return. By placing these two opposite life situations side by side, I choose to believe that there are no limits to human generosity.



Sarita and Arnon