

*When Jozio Zwonarz gave the gift of life to a Jewish couple desperate to escape the Nazis, he never dreamed that his own grandson would find meaning, shelter, and a sense of identity among the Jewish People. **Mishpacha** joins a moving reunion between Jafa Wallach, a Holocaust survivor, and Meir Berger, grandson of her savior, who has joined the Jewish People*



Barbara Bensoussan

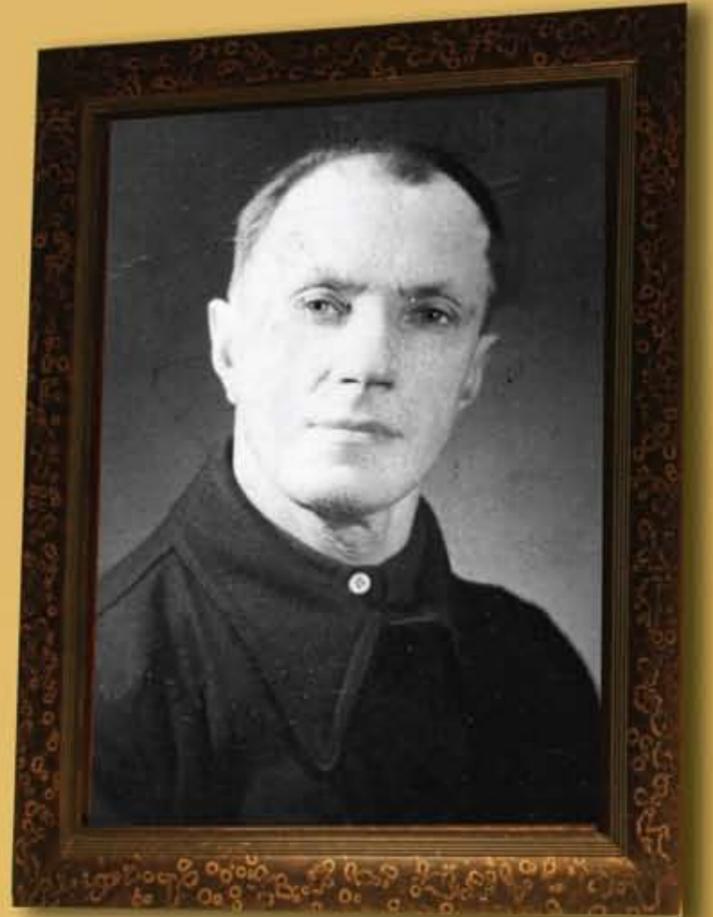
Jafa Wallach's room on the third floor of a Jewish assisted-living facility in Flatbush is comfortable, with a matching blue and white bedspread and drapes, an easy chair, and a tiny kitchenette with sink and microwave. Photos and lovingly executed oil portraits of family personalize the room, relieving the hotel-room feel.

But today the room has been trans-formed into a production studio. Jafa, frail and elderly, is seated in the easy chair with a projection screen behind her and a photographer's bulb beaming onto her face. Two cameramen and a photographer are filming as her daughter, Rena Bernstein, prods her mother to share memories of her life's darkest hours with Meir Elazar Berger, a *yungerman* and father of five from Bnei Brak.

Those hours happened close to seventy years ago, in a Polish town called Lesko (its Yiddish name is Linsk). For twenty-two months, between December 1942 and September 1944, Jafa, along with her husband and two brothers, hid in a cramped, humid pit under a garage to escape the Nazis. The non-Jewish friend who hid them, at staggering risk to himself and his family, was Meir Elazar's grandfather, Josef (Jozio) Zwonarz.

Jafa Wallach decided to write a memoir of her war experiences over fifty years ago, in 1959, as a record for her children. She titled it *Bitter Freedom* after a line in a Polish poem by Juliusz Slowacki: "O bitter freedom and moment of flight, I am already accustomed to the dark sight." Jafa never meant to publish it, but when the staff of Ateret Avot, her assisted living-facility, heard about its existence, they teamed up with her daughter Rena to help publish the memoir. It is a simply told but unforgettable account of wartime suffering and bravery. The book came out in 2006, probably setting a record for first-time published authors: Jafa was ninety-five years old.

Now Jafa, *shetichyeh*, has just celebrated her one-hundredth birthday, a historic enough event in



Photos: Menachem Kozlovsky

Coming full circle. Meir Elazar Berger reflects on the lifesaving deeds of his grandfather, Jozio Zwonarz. Surely Jozio is taking pride in the dramatic choice his grandson has made

THE SAVIOR'S GRANDSON

itself. In honor of the occasion, Meir has come all the way from Israel, accompanied by a film crew sent by his yeshivah, Yeshivat Netivot Olam. Inspired by two compelling and connected stories, the yeshivah has undertaken to produce a documentary about the extraordinary events that led both to the rescue of the Wallachs from the Nazis, and the journey of Meir Elazar from Polish university student to Bnei Brak *yungerman*.

Reuniting Two Families Jafa doesn't hear so well anymore; her daughter has to practically shout the questions at her.

"Where did you hide during the war, Mom?" Rena asks.

Jafa doesn't seem to understand; perhaps all the cameras and lights are confusing her. Rena repeats the question, showing her mother a photo of the pit where she was hidden. Now she nods her head. Rena attempts to bring her further into the moment.

"Do you know who is sitting here in front of you, Mom?" she says loudly. Meir, sitting in a chair facing her, is smiling kindly; he has all the patience in the world. "You are telling this to *Jozio's* grandson," Rena practically shouts. "Can you tell us about Jozio?"

Jafa takes a moment to answer. "He was a good friend," she says finally. "He gave us every scrap of food he had."

Rena probes deeper. "What was the worst time you remember?" she asks.

Jafa thinks some more. "The worst time — it was when we had no food," she says. "But Jozio always gave us. He didn't eat himself, but he would give us food. Every scrap he had."

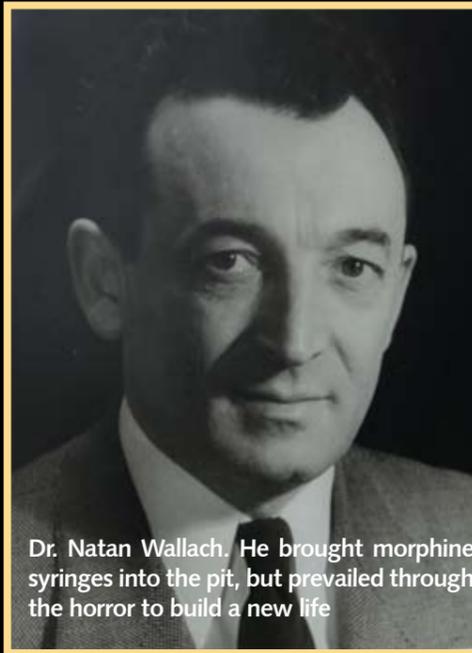
Now Rena asks, "Mom, what do you think about Meir's conversion?"

"Already?" Jafa asks, confused.

"Yes, Mom, look at him!" Rena says. Meir, in his late thirties, has a short, graying beard, a black yarmulke, and at least four inches' worth of *peyos*. From his kind, scholarly-looking face, one might easily assume he was born Jewish. "Meir converted to Judaism!"

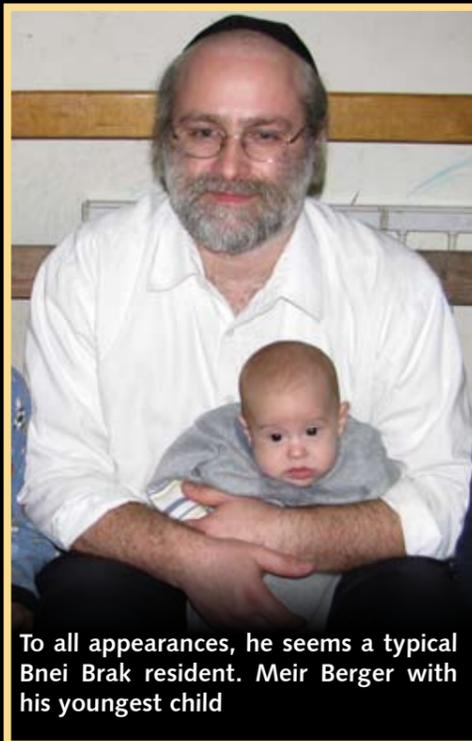
"I am very proud," Jafa pronounces. "It is not something easy to be done."

"What do you think Jozio would think?"



Dr. Natan Wallach. He brought morphine syringes into the pit, but prevailed through the horror to build a new life

**"... Jozio tried to do good during a very dangerous time, but it came out good. It will be worth it."
— Jafa Wallach**



To all appearances, he seems a typical Bnei Brak resident. Meir Berger with his youngest child



"I came to make her happy." Berger visiting Jafa Wallach in honor of her 100th birthday

Inspired by two compelling and connected stories, the yeshivah has undertaken to produce a documentary about the extraordinary events that led both to the rescue of the Wallachs from the Nazis, and the journey of Meir Elazar

"Jozio is not alive."
"No, Mom, but what would he think if he was alive?"

"He would be proud," Jafa says. "What he did was very good ... Jozio tried to do good during a very dangerous time, but it came out good. It will be worth it."

"Are you happy Meir came to see you, Mom?" Rena asks.

"I certainly am," she answers emphatically. She tells Meir, "I wish you luck. You should be successful in everything." At Rena's prompting, she adds: "I would like to thank you and your friends very much for coming."

Meir smiles. "I thank you more," he says sincerely.

Rewinding the Film To put things into context, we have to rewind the film, to go back over seventy years. The Germans invaded Poland in 1939, which led Dr. Natan Wallach, his wife Sabina (Jafa), and their baby daughter, Rena, to flee from their village near Sanok to nearby Lesko. Sanok was in German-occupied Poland, while Lesko was controlled by the Soviets.

Some of the area's Jews were deported by the Russians to Siberia in cattle cars, but the Wallachs and their families managed to evade the deportations. As the Germans approached their area in 1941, local Polish toughs persecuted Jews and instigated small-scale pogroms. Then the Germans arrived, forcing the Jews to register and wear armbands, and confiscating all their money, possessions, and food. Many began dying of hunger; the Wallachs slept in different places each night for protection. Fortunately, Dr. Wallach

was sometimes able to exchange his medical services for food.

The Wallachs, along with the remaining local Jews, were then drafted to work in a labor camp. They decided to send their four-year-old daughter, Rena, into hiding, to protect her, and she was dragged away kicking and screaming by a kindly Polish couple, Magda and Janek, who lived in the forest far from German eyes. As the Gestapo began random shootings of Jews and deportations to concentration camps, the Wallachs took shelter with a friend, Jozio Zwonarz, a Hungarian-born mechanic whom Dr. Wallach had once treated for a severe burn. Jafa Wallach's two brothers joined them, and, desperate for a hiding place, the men began digging a pit under the garage, hoping more friends and family might join them. But then the terrible news arrived: every Jew in the village had been deported to concentration camps.

Fearing for their lives, Jafa, her husband, and two brothers descended into their pit under the garage in December 1942. Jozio was optimistic that the war could not last much longer. Obviously, he was sorely mistaken. His charges would remain underground for twenty-two months, until the liberation of Poland in 1944.

Life in the pit was torturous. Its inhabitants slept by day, while Jozio and his mechanics serviced Nazi vehicles. Often they heard the pounding of German soldiers' boots on the floor literally above their heads. (Jozio worked secretly with the Polish underground, and sabotaged many of the vehicles he presumably "repaired.") Insects, mice, and rats crawled around the space with them. Jozio smuggled what little food and water he could manage to his charges at night, which they would cook on a small hot plate that was connected to electric lines from the street outside. Trying to protect his wife Franka, Jozio told her nothing about what he was doing. But as time went by, and she noticed their scarce food continually disappearing from their pantry, she became suspicious and accused him of stealing it for another woman. Jozio was forced to tell her the

Jozio, the hero who deserved to be showered with honors, found himself shunned by many of his neighbors for his role in saving Jews. He wrote to the Wallachs: “Neighbors have boycotted my workshop, and the few who come do not pay”

truth, and to her credit, she became his accomplice.

At night, the occupants of the pit would waken and read to the light of a single bulb, or listen to a little radio, their moods fluctuating wildly depending on what news they heard. They made a chess set out of a potato. They were horribly, incessantly uncomfortable and malnourished. Dr. Wallach had brought syringes of morphine with him in case of dire necessity, and more than once they were tempted to put an end to their misery. Jafa, however, always prevailed on the men to desist. She was determined to be reunited with her daughter one day.

In August 1944, the Russians finally took back Lesko, following days of terrifying bombings that damaged the pit. The Wallachs left their hole, their legs so bloated and their muscles so atrophied they could barely walk. Jafa writes that her husband said “it was miraculous that we hadn’t been blinded or crippled after so many months in the hole,” but it nevertheless took months for their eyes to adapt to normal light and their legs to regain their former strength. After several weeks, Jafa Wallach managed to find Janek, and went with him to his home in the forest, unsure if her now six-year-old daughter would recognize her after two years of separation. But little Rena immediately cried out, “My mother, my mother!” and came running straight into her arms.

After the war, the Wallachs made their way to America, setting up house in Arverne, Queens, in 1947. Later, in 1963, they fulfilled their dream of moving to Israel (they returned to the US twenty-eight years later). They continued to keep in touch with Jozio and Franka by letter. Jozio, the hero who deserved to be showered with honors, found himself shunned by many of his neighbors for his



“Only the thought of my daughter kept us alive.” The pit where the Wallachs hid during the war years. This photo was taken by their daughter Rina, shortly before the area was razed



Bringing a second generation into the Jewish fold. Meir at the bris of his youngest child

role in saving Jews. He wrote to the Wallachs: “Neighbors have boycotted my workshop, and the few who come do not pay. Despite this, I am proud to have accomplished what I began. I apologize for the difficult time you had in the place where I hid you ... I meant to do good ... I hope we will one day find one another again. I kiss your hands.”

The new Communist regime accused him of being a capitalist, and his wife was arrested and interned for months for having listened to holiday carols on the radio. Jozio was finally recognized by the Israelis and decorated with a medal from Yad Vashem in 1980, although Poland, at the time, had no diplomatic relations with Israel and he had to travel to Brussels to receive it. (The Wallachs wanted to travel to Brussels to join him, but Dr. Wallach had been terribly wounded in an accident and was unable to make the trip.) As time passed, Jozio retreated into himself, becoming taciturn and bitter. He died of cancer at age eighty in 1984.

Skipping a Generation Fast-forward the film now to 1991. As the former USSR began to disband, the Polish people began to taste new freedoms, among them the possibility of traveling to countries outside the Soviet orbit. Miloslaw Zwonarz, the grandson of Jozio and then a university student, was seized by a sense of wanderlust.

“Lots of students at the time were getting visas to see the world,” he told **Mishpacha**. As he contemplated where to go one afternoon, he found himself in front of the synagogue in Lesko. “Then and there, I decided I wanted to go see Israel,” he says. “I wanted to be different, not just go to the US or Western Europe like many of the others. For me, Israel sounded like an exotic place, the way someone else might think of going to China.”

Miloslaw had known that his grandfather had been honored by Israel for helping a Jewish family during the war, and that this family was living in Haifa. “My father and grandfather didn’t speak about it much,” he says. “My grandfather died when I was nine, shortly after receiving the medal. He’d done an extraordinary thing, but he wasn’t appreciated for it, and he became very secluded and pessimistic. I remember how he used to hoard things, but he always kept some candy on hand to give to me.

“At the end of his life, he stopped taking good care of himself; he neglected his clothing, looking like a street person. It was even hard to imagine that this was a person who had saved people.”

Miloslaw Zwonarz decided that if he went to Israel, he could begin by visiting the family his grandfather had saved during the war. He arrived at the Wallachs’ home in Haifa and spent Shabbat

enjoying their hospitality. Intrigued by this new land populated by Jews, he decided to stick around for awhile.

“I was curious about Jews,” he recounts. He seems modest and unassuming by nature, and we draw out his story little by little. “At that point, of course, I had no thoughts of ever becoming Jewish — it was too strange an idea. But I wondered why the whole world seemed to dislike them so much, and as I met Jewish people more and more, I saw they were very different from the caricatured stereotypes I had been exposed to. They were interesting people; I enjoyed being around them.” Having been raised a Catholic, he says, he went to church a few times in those early years, “but then I just stopped going. Suddenly, I forgot about it.”

Miloslaw began to take on odd jobs here and there. “I was a foreign worker,” he grins. He had no papers, no insurance, no family; he worked at falafel stands and cleaned rooms to keep body and soul together. While he had no particular connection to Judaism, he connected to Jewish warmth and *chesed*.

“I found the Israeli people very friendly, very helpful,” he says. “When I moved into a *dirah* in Tel Aviv, the people in the building saw there was a new guy moving in. They didn’t know me, or anything about me, but nevertheless they brought me food, and asked if I needed help with anything.” Never having encountered this sort of gratuitous helpfulness, he began to ask himself what produced it: “I needed to know the source of this kindness.”

After close to eight years of rootlessness, he says, he began feeling stirrings of a longing for something higher. “I was getting tired of the *chiloni* lifestyle,” he says, “although at the time, I

didn’t see much difference between Jews who were religious and Jews who weren’t. You know, a non-Jew is more attuned to the commonalities between Jews than their differences. He sees that despite their outward differences, they share a perspective that is different from his.”

He found a book about Judaism in a Polish library and began reading up on it. Already possessed of a thoughtful disposition, he was intrigued by what he read. “I was always looking for something,” he says. “I used to think about things, and write my thoughts into a notebook. Then a simple Jew would say something that somehow summed up all my deep thoughts and said it ten times better, and it would blow me away.”

Feeling that he needed time to think over the new ideas percolating in his mind, he decided to take a trip up into the Galil, to hike in the hills with a tent and give himself the chance to meditate, amid the silence of nature, about the direction his life was taking. He hadn’t mentioned to anyone the thoughts he had been having: “I was very closed,” he admits. “I didn’t speak to anyone about what I was feeling, even as I was feeling a stronger and stronger *kesher*.”

A few weeks prior to his trip, he was washing cars on a *moshav* when a religious Jew came in with his vehicle. “He looked at me, and I looked at him, and for some strange reason we felt a connection,” Meir says. “He said to me, ‘Somehow I think we’re going to meet again,’ and he left me with a phone number.” When Meir came north, he decided to call the man, a Moroccan who lived in Tzfas. “He invited me for Shabbos,” Meir says. “He has a big family, something like ten kids. I came in with my long hair, and everyone assumed I was a *chiloni* Jew. But that Shabbos impressed me deeply.”

In fact, that Shabbos was when everything clicked into place in his mind. “After that, I decided without any doubt that I wanted to be Jewish,” he says. Today, if you ask him why he became Jewish, his answer is unequivocal: “*Bayit Yehudi* — the Jewish home,” he says. “The homes of *bnei Torah*.”

He adds that he noticed that Jews do their *chesed* with an extra measure of kindness, always going the proverbial extra mile for others. “Look at the way we do *hachnassas orchim*,” he points out. “After receiving the guest, you have to escort him out. It seems like a small thing. But it reflects a very big difference in mentality.”

After that Shabbos, he says, he went out and cut off his long hair. He realized he had to “fess up” to his new friend, who never dreamed his Shabbos guest was anything other than a non-observant Jew. “I told him, ‘I have to tell you something — you know, the way you first met me ... actually, it’s much worse than you think!’”

Meir decided to stay in Tzfas, casting around for something to do, some way to be involved with the Jewish community. There was an

old building that was being restored, and he volunteered to help with the project, doing construction and painting. "It was Elul, and I was the one who used to wake the Jews up for Selichos," he says. "Sometimes I woke up early; sometimes I couldn't sleep and was still up at that time."

In the meantime, he took himself off to the *beis din* of Tzfas, and expressed his desire to convert. The rabbis wanted to know: why? "Because it's true," Meir told them. He didn't mention that he was the grandson of a man who had risked everything to save four Jews. So, as protocol demands, the *beis din* sent him away.

But Meir continued to learn whatever he could on his own, asking various people for help. "Sometimes I feel I can identify with Yisro," Meir says. "He was a non-Jew who tried out all the other religions, all the other philosophies, until he found Judaism. Then he realized he'd found the truth. Once I decided that Torah was true, I was trying to do anything I could to be connected to Judaism."

He remembers going to shul on Yom Kippur and sitting in a corner: "I wanted so much to participate, but I didn't know how ... it was very hard. Then as my Hebrew improved, I tried to daven, although I didn't really know what I was doing. One morning I spent three hours trying to read through Pesukei D'Zimra!"

He decided to go back to the *beis din*. This time, he didn't say, "I want to convert." He said, "I need to convert!" But to his disappointment, they declined to give him an answer. He returned home, crestfallen yet again. Then the phone rang. "They called and said they had agreed to convert me," he says. "I was thrilled!"

There were hurdles to scale: in addition to the usual course of study, Meir had to undergo *bris milah*. But finally the big day came when he was able to immerse in the *mikveh*: Miloslaw Zwonarz went in, and Meir Elazar Berger came out.

"Berger?" we ask. "Why did you choose to take on the name Berger?"

Meir smiles. "It was the suggestion of a friend," he says. "It sounds like a typical Jewish name, but it's also a play on words with 'bar-ger,' to imply I'm the product of a conversion."

He says everything that brought him closer to becoming a Jew made him happy. "The day I finished my conversion and came out of the *mikveh*, I was crazy with joy! I was literally running and dancing through the streets of Tzfas, like a bomb that had been set off! I was so delirious I can barely even remember it now!"

While he had developed ties in Tzfas, he felt that he needed to pursue Gemara study in greater depth, and so he took himself off to Bnei Brak, where he enrolled in Yeshivat Netivot Olam under Rav Yosef Bruck (Rabbi Bruck's yeshiva is known to absorb many *baalei teshuvah* and *geirim*). Once Meir got into the learning, he was hooked: "Once you taste Gemara," he says lovingly, "it's so sweet, you don't want to stop."



Bitter freedom meets a sweet return. Meir peruses Jafa's biography, *Bitter Freedom*



New York State legislative resolution honoring Jafa Wallach on the publication of her book at age 95

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After two years, Meir and his *rebbeim* decided that he was ready to undertake *shidduchim*. A friend in Tzfas proposed Roni, a *frum*-from-birth Sabra of Turkish-Persian descent. Now married over eight years, the couple just celebrated the birth of their fifth child. Meir shows off some photos: his smiling, dark-skinned wife in a head scarf, next to a stroller holding a baby; Meir the fair, blue-eyed, bespectacled husband, with a couple of kids in Purim costumes; giggling kids in feet pajamas huddled on a couch — all in all, very typical-looking pictures of a Bnei Brak family. Roni works as a cook in a local *gan*, and the older children attend the Cheder Merkazi of the Talmud Torah Rabbi Akiva.

We can't help but ask how Meir's Polish family reacted to his conversion. Meir shrugs. "I think my father likes me more since I became Jewish," he says, "but he really doesn't know why."

He speaks to his family from time to time, and has sent them pictures of his family. They have never visited him in Israel.

"They never wanted to," he says simply, with no obvious sign of regret. "It's difficult for them. They don't have money to travel, and where they come from, it's not in people's mentality to leave their city to travel." (Bear in mind that until twenty years ago, Polish citizens were politically limited from traveling outside the Soviet orbit.)

His father, who was actually born after the Holocaust, still lives in Lesko, although not in the same house that Meir's grandfather occupied. (Rena Bernstein, Jafa Wallach's daughter, visited Lesko in 1993. She saw the workshop where Jozio Zwonarz

hid her parents, but Meir says it has since been demolished to put up apartment buildings. It's a good thing Rena took photos!) Meir also has a brother living in Poland; he says they've spoken "a few times," but it doesn't seem that important to him. "They're not really my family any more," he says frankly.

He has not yet informed his own children, of whom the oldest is only seven, about his background, based on *daas Torah*: "I spoke to a rabbi from my yeshiva about it, to ask how and when to tell them about it," he says. "I was advised to wait until they're older."

Being unaware of their origins also means that they are unaware that they are the great-grandchildren of a man honored as a Holocaust hero. But perhaps one day Meir and his wife will take them to see the plaque at Yad Vashem that was put up in Jozio Zwonarz's honor. "Yad Vashem planted trees in honor of many people," Meir recounts, "but no one ever did it for my grandfather, because it was always done by family members, and at the time, there was no family in Israel to do it for him. When I presented myself, they said there was no more room to plant, and so they put up a plaque instead."

He reflects a moment, then says, "There's a saying from Chazal that whoever saves one person, it's as if he saved an entire world. I think of that often, whenever my grandfather comes to mind." Yet he says it was not his grandfather, or even the Wallachs, who led him to convert to Judaism. "It was because of them that I went to Israel," he says. "But it was Israel, and Jews, who made me become Jewish."

Closing the Circle By now we have left Jafa's room and descended to take a seat in the spacious lobby of the Ateret Avot facility, crowded this Sunday afternoon with residents and their visiting families. Jafa is brought in her wheelchair to a table in a quieter corner, and one of the photographers asks Meir to sing her a song. He obliges with a smile, breaking into "*Shalom Aleichem*" in a pleasant tenor; Jafa hums along softly. This segues into "*Yedid Nefesh*" and, in honor of Pesach, "*Vehi She'amdah*." Listening to Meir, one would never guess he hasn't been a religious Jew all his life. "You are like my grandmother," he tells Jafa.

Meir is flying back to Israel later in the afternoon; it has been a visit of only five days. It was his first trip to America, and his friends gave him the obligatory drive around to see Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty, but he doesn't seem wowed by the experience; on the contrary, he looks like he just wants to get back to his family and his Gemara. But he has accomplished his mission; his rabbi told him to come visit Jafa, and do his best to make her happy. "He said that's the most important thing," Meir says.

Seeing her just after her one-hundredth birthday brings a kind of closure to the whole chain of events that began with Jozio Zwonarz's bravery and kindness and the Wallachs' will to survive, and ended with the continuation of Jozio's family in the form of a *frum* Jewish family in Bnei Brak — perhaps the most fitting reward for his deeds. "It's pure *siyata d'Shmaya*," Meir says. "The whole thing was just a miracle." ■

Postscript: As this article was going to press, we received word from Rena Bernstein that Josef Zwonarz and his wife, Franciska, have just been posthumously awarded one of the Polish government's highest awards, The Knight's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta (Order of Poland Reborn.) "It is the highest decoration awarded by the Polish government," Rena says, "although it comes in five ranks and theirs is the lowest."

Jafa Wallach's account of her war experiences, *Bitter Freedom*, has now been translated into Hebrew.