

Feb 19, 2002

Eulogy for Rebecca Warhaft

Becks, Becky, Betty, Bubba, the Bubster. Rebecca Warhaft was called affectionately by all of these names, by the many people who knew and loved her.

Becky was born in Tribune, SK, the eldest of 10 children, born to Max and Molly Frohlich. Life was difficult on the farm, and as a young girl, her parents decided to give her more opportunities than they were able to provide, so she came to live in Edmonton with the Glassman family, her aunt and uncle, along with her cousin Miriam (later Lutsky), who in turn became her adored and lifelong friend.

Becky attended Oliver School, and then did her high school at Garneau. She sometimes reminisced about walking across the High Level Bridge to school on many freezing cold winter mornings. It was at Garneau that she first became friends with Verna Glover – she and Verna had been looking forward to celebrating their 70th anniversary of their friendship this coming September. Becky always maintained that good friendships were like gold, to be valued and treasured.

After high school, Becky went to work as a secretary for the provincial government. In 1938 she was introduced to Leon Warhaft, and they quickly became inseparable. Becky was by Leon's side in 1939 when his own mother Jenny passed away and she stepped in to take care of Leon's little brothers, Harry and Benny. Leon and Becky were married on Aug. 18, 1940 at the Sonnenfeld Colony in SK. The young couple made their first home in the 95th St. area of Edmonton. Three daughters, Sheila, Joyce, and Bonnie were born to them. In 1948 the young family moved to Camrose. Becky worked tirelessly at her husband's side in Brody's Department store, while beautifully maintaining their home, and raising their family, which, with the birth of Penny, had now grown to 4 girls. Although they were only one of a handful of Jewish families in Camrose, Becky kept a Jewish home. Her daughters fondly remember the many trips to the Camrose bus station, to pick up their kosher meat deliveries. A sense of pride in their Jewishness was instilled in them early on, although they were practically the only Jewish children in Camrose. Becky and Leon also maintained close relationships with their family in Edmonton, so that the girls grew up as part of a large, extended family of many aunts, uncles and cousins.

Becky instilled in her daughters a lifelong appreciation for the arts. The family never missed a cultural performance of music, dance or opera. That love has been passed on from generation to generation, and Becky had the joy of watching her granddaughter Elena perform at the Citadel in the production of Cabaret, as well a many other productions. She also found joy in watching another of her granddaughters, Cindy, in every dance recital.

Becky was very active in the Camrose community, in the IODE and other organizations. Nevertheless, in 1964, Becky and Leon made the decision to move back to Edmonton. By then, the three older girls were grown and on their own, but Becky and Leon wanted to provide Penny with a Jewish day school education. They also joined the Edmonton Beth Shalom Congregation at this time, and have been devoted members since.

Becky chose to return to the work force, and eventually returned to work with the provincial government. Because of her extensive work experience, she was employed as a secretary to various Progressive Conservative members of the Legislature. Becky was always very passionate about her politics. She was never a strong PC supporter, but she never allowed her personal feelings to interfere with her professional duties. She had great respect for the individual MLA's for whom she worked, she enjoyed her work, and took great pride in it. Her penmanship and shorthand was first rate, and she served as an indispensable member of various politicians' teams for many years.

In 1981, Becky retired from the government. Retirement for her only meant the beginning of so many new avenues for her energy and vitality. Becky and Leon had enjoyed many summer family car trips with their girls to Banff, Montana and Idaho and always spoke fondly of those trips. Now they had time to do more traveling. They began to spend a few weeks each winter in San Diego, which they loved. And in 1994, Becky and Leon enjoyed a most memorable JNF tour to Israel. Together they fulfilled a dream, exploring a country that they had supported financially and spiritually throughout their lives. One of the highlights of their trip was a visit to the Hadassah-WIZO Edmonton Day Care. Becky was a proud member of Edmonton Hadassah-WIZO for over 50 years, and worked tirelessly with the ladies of Sybil Dlin Chapter, to raise funds for Israel. She served as both president and co-president of her chapter a number of times. She was inordinately proud of her association with this organization. Another highlight of her Israel trip was her opportunity to visit with her

granddaughter, Jenni, Jenni's husband Nir, and her first two greatgrandchildren, Benzion and Tzofia.

Becky never sat still. One of her great loves was cooking and baking. She made the most delicious roasts, chicken, soups, kugel, and cookies of all kinds. She always had wonderful treats on hand for her family, and never came to visit a daughter or friend without bringing some home baking. She also loved to work outside in her yard. She grew beautiful flowers, especially peonies, and tomatoes and raspberries and she made the most wonderful crabapple jelly. Her daughter Joyce noted that even today there are African violet cuttings growing in the kitchen, as Becky anticipated the growth and renewal of the spring to come.

She gave tirelessly of herself in so many ways. Becky worked for many volunteer organizations. She canvassed many years for the Canadian Cancer Society, and for Heart and Stroke. She was a fixture at the IGA each year as she stood at the door selling Daffodils for Cancer. She made hospital visits to assist women who had been newly diagnosed with breast cancer. She worked for the Society for the Retired and Semi-Retired. She served at the local polling station during elections. And the list goes on and on. She visited the ill in hospitals, or nursing homes, or their own homes, bringing her poppyseed cookies and her boiled raisin cakes to all. She also loved to play cards. She looked forward each Tuesday to her bridge games at the Jewish Seniors Drop-In Centre. She played cards with friends, neighbors and with her grandchildren every chance she got.

She was a strong woman of deep convictions. She expressed her opinions openly and proudly. She had a keen interest in politics at every level. She enjoyed listening to the local talk shows, and was known to call in on occasion and give the host a piece of her mind.

Becky loved people – her interest in them was strong and true. Her vitality and love for life, for her family and friends, her synagogue, Israel, was an example to all. She was a woman of valor and we are grateful to have had her in our lives.

On Tuesday morning I emerged from the Fulton Street subway station in lower Manhattan in to the crowds of people who gather daily to pay tribute to the thousands who lost their lives in the destruction of the World Trade Center. The area surrounding the ruins of the buildings is surrounded with makeshift memorials to the dead and patriotic displays extolling the virtues of the freedom we enjoy in North America. A church located just one block from the centre of Ground Zero has been transformed in to the headquarters for the hundreds of volunteers who have come to give comfort to not only the families of the victims, but also to the police, the firefighters and to the demolition workers who are clearing the site while at the same time respecting those whose remains may never be found.

As I walked up the ramp to the area where visitors can view the site and pay their respect to the dead I noticed that there were numerous messages waiting for me on my cel phone and it was there that I phoned home to find out the news that our beloved Becky had passed away. So as I began making the phone calls to see what I could do to help a grieving family I was reminded that even though I stood where thousands had died just six months earlier, that even when one member of the House of Israel dies, there is a loss of glory in God's kingdom and his grandeur is diminished.

I thought of Becky too as I remembered the volunteers who were so valuable in the renewal of the spirit that was crushed in the first days after September 11. If Becky had lived in New York, she together with Leon would have been at Ground Zero as quickly as possible to do what they could do as well or better than anyone I know – offer help and show compassion to those who need it. As we heard Becky was a tireless volunteer. At Beth Shalom she was always ready to help in the office but even more so her presence will be missed not only on Shabbat but at the other services she would attend such as our Friday evening service for the Jewish seniors at Canterbury Court. She was also a regular at Saturday afternoon mincha where after prayers she would participate in out Torah or Talmud study and join in the singing of the joyous songs of Shabbat. I will miss Becky for the wonderful support she offered me personally during this period where I am leading the ritual services for our congregation.

It is appropriate to examine a few words from the torah portion we have just finished reading in synagogue and how they relate to Becky's life. Near the beginning of parsha Terumah we read “ V'asu li mikdash 'shochamti b'tocham.” –Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.”

As we also read this dwelling place for God is to be built with gifts from every Israelite whose heart is moved to offer them. They are then directed to build a cover for the holy ark on which there will be two golden cherubs, angel like figures, facing each other with wings spread upward. God says I will speak to you from between the two cherubs that are on the Ark of Testimony. God's presence dwells in a place where we see an example of figures face to face, where hearts meet and like the wings are open to each other. This is the kind of a relationship Becky had with her husband, her family and her community. She opened her heart to us and gave everything she could to make our lives so much more meaningful.

She is an inspiration to each of us to build our own personal sanctuary within us where we can welcome the presence of God in to our hearts and through our actions hasten the day when all people will respect each other and tragedy and heartbreak will be no more.