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From: News and Views | City Beat |
Sunday, March 24, 2002

Comfort for Jewish Seniors

Volunteers befriend Holocaust survivors

By **JOYCE SHELBY**
Daily News Staff Writer

Blanche Sprung of Midwood is looking forward to celebrating Passover with friends at a senior center, but she's not exactly enthusiastic.

"It won't be the same as when I was growing up," said Sprung, who was born in Poland before World War II. **"This will be a lunchtime Seder. They cannot do it in the evening because the seniors cannot travel then. These are crazy times with crazy people."**



Anderson NEWS

Program director
Elisheva Frank
poses with
survivor Blanche
Sprung and
volunteer Batsheva
Moses (r.)

Passover, which begins at sundown Wednesday, celebrates the exodus of Jewish slaves from Egypt during the reign of the Pharaoh Ramses II. The celebration includes Passover meals, or Seders, on the first and second nights of the eight-day holiday commemorating the struggle and journey to freedom.

"When I was growing up, my father would start them around 6, and they would take most of the night," Sprung said.

"For a real Seder, you need family, you need friends. I lost six of my sisters and my brother during the war. Only one sister survived, and she isn't well. This has all had a very bad effect on me."

Sprung's painful family losses and her experiences in a slave

labor camp bring her quickly to tears, but in the last several months, she has made friends who offer comfort.

Supportive Vols

They are volunteers from Connect 2, a program sponsored by the Shorefront Jewish Community Council and the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island.

Connect 2 reaches out to homebound Holocaust survivors through volunteers who visit, read mail and run errands. The program was made possible by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

Chanie Jacobowitz, at Shorefront, said, "The claims conference has traditionally sold unclaimed Jewish property in Germany and used the proceeds to support programming for Holocaust survivors.

"The conference has tried to identify certain unmet needs of the survivors. One related to social isolation. Many people lost most or all of their family during the war or they have a spouse who recently passed away.

"They may not be connected to their surrounding community because they cannot go out. Connect 2 was designed to identify and care for the survivors living in Coney Island, Brighton Beach, Manhattan Beach and Sheepshead Bay."

The seniors' social services and in-home help needs are handled by caseworkers in other programs of the two community councils. The visiting volunteers, who range in age from their teens to their retirement years, provide the companionship.

Sprung's weekly visitor is Batsheva Mozes, a 20-year-old junior at Brooklyn College. A few days ago, she and Elisheva Frank, coordinator of Connect 2, paid a visit to Sprung, bringing a package of Passover foods.

Sprung especially appreciated the matzoh, which she would use throughout the holiday, when products containing yeast are to be removed from the home.

Sprung said she and Mozes make a wonderful pair.

"We go out walking. We go shopping. We went to the post office, where she got me a chair and stood in line for me," said Sprung.

**"She brings her friends over, which is very stimulating."
Mozes said she also enjoyed the visits.**

"People who have lived longer are wiser, but so many older people live alone and have no one to share their wisdom with. She gives me advice when I tell her my problems," said Mozes, whose grandparents also survived the Holocaust.

Sprung said she heard of the Connect 2 program through her senior center and decided, "If not I, who?"

With Mozes, Sprung can share fond memories, such as the account of meeting her husband, Norbert:

"We met on Brighton Beach. I was passing by and at first I wanted to kick sand on him because I thought he was German. It was my turn. They lost. I was free.

"But he wasn't, he was from Austria. I don't remember if he talked to me first or I talked to him, but we became friends, and we were wed in 1967.

"He passed away a year and a half ago, and I am devastated," she said. "I cannot imagine how to settle down without him."

Painful Memories

A retired New York City employee, Sprung said that earlier in her life, she never talked about her wartime experiences.

"I had to look ahead," she said. "I had to finish school. I needed to find a way to the future. That was best."

Now, she wants to talk, even though it is painful. Particularly in a season when freedom is being celebrated, younger generations need to know.

"A lot has been told about the death camps, but forced labor was not much better," Sprung said. "The death camps offered no hope. The slave camps, only a little."

Rabbi Moshe Wiener, executive director of the Shorefront Community Council and the Jewish Community Council of Greater Coney Island, said, "It is well documented that an individual's physiological health is tied to his or her psychological attitude. By relieving the isolation and thereby the depression of the homebound survivors, we give them hope and a much more positive attitude toward the future."

And Frank said the visiting volunteers gain at least as much as

the survivors. She told Sprung, "Just to see people who survived gives the rest of us all the strength in the world. Every problem we have becomes totally nothing. The faith, the strength you had to keep going is inspiring, awesome."

Connect 2 welcomes volunteers, who will be trained and then matched with seniors, as well as Holocaust survivors living in south Brooklyn. For information, contact Elisheva Frank at (718) 449-5000, ext. 216.