

# A Living Memorial in their own words

## Family of Zenia Lewinson-Bart

**Zenia Lewinson-Bart** was born on June 05, 1922 in Vilna (Wilno), Poland—now Vilnius, Lithuania. Zenia’s mother Rose Balcwinik married Boruch Lewinson. Boruch died of sun stroke when Zenia was a young girl. Rose later remarried Hillel Botwinik. Zenia was raised in a multi-use apartment building owned by her grandmother Bluma where she lived with her mother, step father, and younger brother Michael. Her aunt Lizzie also lived in the same building with her husband Wolf and their three sons. Zenia’s other aunt, Sonia, lived nearby with her husband Avraham and their two daughters. Her grandmother Bluma owned and operated a hay and grain business and managed a stable for horses in the rear of her property. Bluma was a shrewd and successful businesswoman who had sold supplies to the Russian cavalry as far back as Tsarist Russia. Zenia had three uncles—Barney, Aaron, and Norman—who left Vilna for America before Zenia was born and settled in Springfield Massachusetts. All of Zenia’s family had lived in the Vilna - Eishyshok regions for generations.

On June 22, 1941 the Germans attacked the Soviet Union. When the Germans began bombing Vilna, Zenia had just returned home from delivering a package to a close family friend. Shortly after Zenia left the apartment building she was visiting, it was flattened by a bomb and everyone inside was killed. Zenia said this was the first of many times she could have been killed during the war. After the Germans occupied Vilna, local Lithuanians who were collaborating with the Germans began to round up Jewish men for forced labor. Zenia’s stepfather Hillel was taken away on July 13, 1941 for one day’s labor, supposedly, but never returned. On September 6, 1941, Zenia along with her mother, grandmother and younger brother were marched into a sealed ghetto, forced to live in one small bedroom with 20 others. Their apartment was occupied by 100 people and included only one bathroom and one kitchen.

Zenia met Leizer Bart in the ghetto while attending a Zionist meeting. Zenia and Leizer became friends, fell in love, and were married by one of the last remaining rabbis on Lag BaOmer, May 23, 1943, ninety days before the ghetto was liquidated. In the last days of the Vilna ghetto, Zenia was caught during a roundup and taken to the ghetto prison. She pleaded with one of the German soldiers, saying, “I can work, I can work.” The soldier hit the back of her head with his rifle butt and she fell down hitting an iron gate, then the cobblestone pavement, which knocked her unconscious. When she awoke the others in her group were shot dead lying around her.

Eight days before the ghetto was liquidated, Zenia and Leizer escaped with a group of fourteen members of the underground to the Rudnicki forest about 25 miles from Vilna. There, they joined the Partisan of Vilna Avengers group commanded by Abba Kovner. Zenia was a camp cook and a supply courier between partisan camps.

While in the forest, Zenia heard that her mother Rose and brother Michael were still alive among 500 other prisoners at the HKP labor camp in Vilna. Once Vilna was liberated on July 13, 1944 the partisans arrived at HKP labor camp to find that the Germans had shot all the remaining prisoners shortly before abandoning the camp. Zenia found her mother and brother still lying sprawled out in the courtyard shot dead by the Germans before they fled the city. This shock of horror caused Zenia to suffer depression for years.

Several months later, Zenia send a postcard from Vilna to her Uncle Aaron in Springfield telling him that she was the last one in her immediate family to survive. Zenia had addressed the postcard to “America, Springfield.” Seven months later, her uncle Aaron received the postcard with the sad news. Zenia received a letter in Rome from her uncle Aaron offering her and Leizer sponsorship in America.

Zenia and Leizer sailed to New York on January 3, 1948 on the SS Marine Perch, a U.S. troop ship. They arrived in New York on January 16th and were met by Zenia’s uncle Aaron. Zenia and Leizer settled in Springfield where they went to night school to learn English, and in 1953 became United States citizens. Their sons Bruce and Michael were born in Springfield in 1949 and 1953. Zenia and Leizer loved Springfield where they were surrounded by family and were very proud of their membership in Club Hatikvah. In 1966, the Bart family needed to relocate to a warmer climate due to Leizer’s health and moved to San Diego.

*Zenia Lewinson  
circa 1925*



*Michael Lewinson (Zenia’s brother), Rose Balcwinik-Lewinson-Botwinik (Zenia’s mother), and Zenia Lewinson. Michael & Rose were killed in the Holocaust.*

## Family of Zenia Lewinson-Bart continued



*Balcwinik Family – From Left to right: Aaron Balcwinik (Zenia’s uncle), Rose Balcwinik (Zenia’s Mother), Bluma Rosaler-Balcwinik (Zenia’s Grandmother), Norman Balcwinik (Zenia’s uncle), Lizzie Balcwinik (Zenia’s Aunt), Shmuel Balcwinik (Zenia’s Grandfather), and Sonia Balcwinik (Zenia’s Aunt). Aaron & Norman moved to Springfield. Rose, Bluma, Lizzie, & Sonia were killed in the Holocaust.*



*Zenia sent this postcard to her Uncle Aaron in Springfield telling him that she was the last one in her immediate family to survive. Zenia had addressed the postcard to “America, Springfield.” Seven months later, her uncle Aaron received the postcard.*



*Botwinik family – Michael Lewinson (Zenia’s brother), Rose Balcwinik-Lewinson-Botwinik (Zenia’s mother), Hillel Botwinik (Zenia’s stepfather), & Zenia Lewinson. Michael, Rose, and Hillel were all killed in the Holocaust.*

Leizer and Zenia’s son Michael wrote his parents’ biography in 2008 called “Until our Last Breath”. It received a Christopher award and is available in the Hatikvah library.

For more information about the Bart’s story please visit <http://www.untilourlastbreath.com/>