A funeral for a survivor no one knew

Zale Newman

On Jan. 30, I faced the very real possibility of burying a Holocaust survivor alone.

After being hospitalized a number of years ago, I joined Bikur Cholim of Toronto, which consists of almost 500 volunteers who visit and provide services for sick people in the Jewish community. I am part of the Sunnybrook Hospital team and visit Jewish patients before every Shabbat and Jewish holiday.

Seven months ago, I began visiting Eddie (Efraim) Ford, an 84-year-old hero of the Holocaust from Budapest. He was six years old when the war broke out and he survived by hiding with a Christian family.

The war took its toll in many ways, but eventually, Ford made it to Canada, where he began a new life for himself. He married and divorced and never had children. Aside from a nephew, we knew of no other living family members.

When I met Ford, he was in the hospital fighting cancer, which had spread to almost all of his body. De-
tal to this, he had quite the personality.

He had written poetry and fondly remembered his time as a young member of the choir of the great shul of Budapest. He could only remember the tunes to the Shema and the Aleinu prayer.

Every Friday in the hospital, he would put on his huge red kippah and we would sing Sholom Aleichem, Adon Olam and, of course, Shema Yisra'el and Aleinu. He cherished Shabbat candles, which he lit every week, and put on tefillin. When I visited him on his last Friday, he was barely conscious. Never-theless, I sang his favourite songs.

The following Monday, Bikur Cholim received a call that he had died. We had his body taken to Steeles Memorial Chapel for a proper Jewish burial. The staff there offered to provide their services and a plot at Pardes Chaim cemetery at no cost, as he left the world with no money or assets. It took quite some time to get all of the legal matters in order and the burial was set for noon on Wednesday. But who would attend a funeral for someone they didn’t know that was taking place in the middle of the day in northern Toronto, in -27 temperatures? I feared it would just be Eddie, myself and our Father Above.

So I sent out a late night Facebook post. Three people responded, saying they would join me. I was hoping for at least 10 in total.

When I arrived at the cemetery just before noon, I couldn’t get in because of the long line of cars. I assumed there would be another funeral taking place at the same time and I wondered how we would find Ford’s designated resting place.

I stopped people who were walking and they all said they were going to Ford’s funeral. I had to park far away and walk in the freezing wind to join almost 200 people in a huge, warm circle of love, as we gave Ford a traditional, sweet, proper and moving sendoff. We made a pathway to comfort his long-lost brother from Pefferlaw, Ont., whose relative told him about the funeral after hearing about it online.

I am in tears just thinking about how humbling and awesome it is to be among the people who, on very short notice, dropped everything, left whatever they were planning on doing and drove a long distance to stand outside in an open field on a super freezing, windy day, to escort a sweet little Jew from Budapest, who was unknown to almost all of them, on his final journey.

When I returned home after the funeral, quite stunned and overwhelmed, I posted my feeling on Facebook. By the following evening, I had received 576 responses from Jews in Israel, Mexico, the United States and around the world, who were touched by this pure mitzvah and act of kindness and self-sacrifice by so many. We are one family indeed.

And so, tell me, as the verse asks rhetorically, “Who is like you, O Nation of Israel”?

God clearly chose His people wisely.

Zale Newman is a volunteer at the Village Shul and Bikur Cholim Toronto.

Almost 200 people came to the funeral of Eddie (Efraim) Ford. RAFI YABLONSKY PHOTO

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Na’amat Canada

Expresses its sincerest condolences to the family of the late

Pearl Mekler z”l

Past President of Na’amat Canada

Her vision, guidance, dedication and wisdom will be missed.

May the family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

Doris Wexler-Charow
National President

Vivian Reisler
Executive Vice President