

# Morris Hollender, 88; survived Auschwitz, kept traditions, melodies alive

By **Emma Stickgold** Globe Correspondent, February 2, 2015, 12:00 a.m.





Morris Hollender and his wife, Edith, when they were at the sanatorium where they met after World War II.

Standing in line outside a cattle car bound for Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944, Morris Hollender followed orders and surrendered all his possessions.

When the Nazi guards turned their backs for a few seconds, though, he grabbed his tefillin — small black boxes with parchment inscribed with words from the Torah — which he hid under his loose overcoat. Had the guards noticed, he would have been killed, but on the long ride to the concentration camps, a rabbi put the tefillin to use leading the prisoners in prayer.

Upon his arrival, guards confiscated the tefillin and tattooed A-10103 on his left arm. He still began and ended his 12-hour days of hard labor with prayers, though, and recalled later that the ritual helped sustain him.

Years later, he chronicled his experiences in a hand-written letter to friends, giving copies to all who asked how he survived.

In one vivid account, he wrote of being forced to use human remains to fertilize the grounds: “From time to time I found pieces of human bones that were not completely consumed by the heat and fire. I was holding those bones in my hands and couldn’t stop crying while thinking that these may be the bones of my parents.”


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Mr. Hollender, who for years read each week's Torah portion at Temple Beth Israel in Waltham and [recorded hundreds of melodies](#) from his youth, died Dec. 30 in Evans Park senior living in Newton, his home since last year. He was 88 and had lived in Waltham and Watertown.

In a [2001 oral history](#) video interview, he recalled that Czechoslovakian Jews had nearly an idyllic life during his boyhood in the small village of Vysni Remety. "I was very lucky that I was born in a free country, which gave so much freedom to all the minorities," he said.

His father was a sixth-generation farmer and ran a variety shop. Mr. Hollender's brother was studying to be a cantor and brought home dozens of melodies. "So, really, my boyhood until the age of 12 was a perfect one, the family was together, and everything was just fine, and we were very hopeful that nothing would happen to us," he said in the oral history.

Then in 1944, his family was among those rounded up and sent to Auschwitz.

“Nobody suspected what Auschwitz really is,” he wrote in his letter. “We noticed a few barracks where entire families were outside in the sun and parents were playing with their children.” That scene, he added, “was all camouflage in order to prevent suspicion or resistance among us.”

As he and his parents parted at the concentration camp, his father offered blessings and said: “I hope you will survive because you are able to work hard.” Mr. Hollender’s father was then taken to the gas chambers, and his mother died the same day.

For months Mr. Hollender dug canals to drain swampy areas, cut grass and pressed it into big blocks, and harvested seeds. Four months into the hard labor, he felt feverish and was sent to the hospital. He was nearly ordered to the gas chambers, but two doctors declared he was healthy enough to work.

In January 1945, anticipating the Soviet army’s approach, the Nazis sent most prisoners on a long march, with many dying from exhaustion or extreme cold. The prisoners marched to a concentration camp in Ebensee, Austria. The Kapos — prisoners the Nazis tapped to supervise other prisoners — saw Mr. Hollender’s shoes and beat him for trying to keep shoelaces his father had made.

“To them it was entertainment whenever they used their sadism to inflict on us painful beatings,” he wrote in the letter.

A few months later, US soldiers arrived and “it is hard to describe the emotions, which were running high among the soldiers and prisoners,” he wrote.

He was taken to a Budapest hospital to recover from tuberculosis and then to a sanitarium run by nuns in the Tatra Mountains. While there, he met Edith Grossman.

“Gradually we became interested in each other by telling about all our sad experiences,” he wrote. “At that time when our prognosis of recovering was uncertain, our mind was not occupied with possible marriage.”

They married in 1950, and regaining their health, moved to Liberec, Czechoslovakia, where his sister Serena lived. She was the only other survivor from his immediate family. Along with his parents, two brothers and two other sisters died in the Holocaust.

Serena moved to the United States, leaving them her furnished apartment. Mr. Hollender began running a tobacco shop and expanded it to sell stationery, stamps, newspapers, and magazines.

In 1967, the couple moved to New York City and then settled in Boston, where the Jewish community connected them with services for immigrants, including a furnished apartment in Dorchester. They moved to Waltham, learned English, and he worked as a calibration technician.

The Hollenders became very active at Temple Beth Israel in Waltham, and after moving to Watertown about a decade ago, he rode the bus to Waltham each day at 6:30 a.m. to open the temple's doors. As his eyes began to fail with age, he memorized entire Hebrew texts from the Torah to chant Saturday mornings.

Hankus Netsky, who chairs contemporary improvisation studies at New England Conservatory, said that when he first heard Mr. Hollender "it caught my ear right away that this man was singing in a manner that was older in a way, that sounded like it just was handed down."

Netsky, who began recording the songs, said Mr. Hollender "was a gem, a national treasure who was right here in Waltham. And the other thing that was beautiful was that this congregation empowered him. They put him on a pedestal."

Ellen Band, a prayer leader at the temple, said Mr. Hollender "was a fount of never-ending little melodies that were related to stories and traditions. And it seemed like there was no end to it, and that was so beautiful."

For their 50th wedding anniversary in 2000, the Hollenders traveled to Auschwitz and brought back dirt that they placed in Temple Beth Israel's cemetery in remembrance of

relatives who died in the Holocaust.

A service has been held for Mr. Hollender, who leaves his wife and sister, of North Miami Beach, Fla. Burial was in Temple Beth Israel's cemetery. A memorial tribute concert featuring music from melodies he preserved will be held at 2 p.m. March 29 in Temple Beth Israel in Waltham.

Though Mr. Hollender and his wife had no children, "he was the Jewish parent or grandparent whom people either had or wish they had," said Mark Frydenberg, a temple member.

Joseph Weintraub, who also attends services at the temple, said Mr. Hollender often began by saying: " 'Here's how my father used to sing,' and sometimes it would be these melodies that would feel like the heavens were opening up."

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