Shalom and welcome to “Creating Memory,” the Yad Vashem podcast. I am Irit Dagan from the International School for Holocaust Education at Yad Vashem.

Until COVID appeared in our lives, Sara Leicht would come to Yad Vashem twice a week. Sara is a petite woman with short white hair and sad, blue eyes. She would speak to students, soldiers, policemen…to anyone who wanted to hear her.

Sara (Lili) Leicht, nee Weinstein, was born in 1929 in the large city of Oradea in Transylvania and grew up in the small village of Tileagd. Her parents belonged to the Vizhnitz Hassidic sect. Her father was a bearded man, a scholar, teacher, and merchant. Her mother, who wore a wig identifying her as a religious woman, raised geese and ducks, and planted garden vegetables and fruit trees in the yard. Sara, in white stockings and modest clothing, attended the local public school and studied Jewish subjects three times a week with the village rabbi. The family spoke Hungarian at home, at school they taught in Romanian, and when her parents didn’t want Sara to understand, they spoke Yiddish. In 1940, the region was annexed to Hungary, an ally of Nazi Germany.

In April 1944, a few weeks after the German occupation, Sara’s family was deported to the ghetto and from there to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Saved from the gas chambers, she was sent to Fallersleben, where she worked at a weapons factory. With the advance of the Red Army, Sara was transferred to a labor camp in the city of Salzwedel, where she was liberated by the American army. Sara first returned to her birthplace and in May 1946, immigrated to pre-state Israel on the illegal immigrant ship, “Max Nordau.” With the outbreak of Israel’s War of Independence, Sara joined the Palmach unit of the then-underground army, fighting with the 6th Battalion of the Harel Brigade in Jerusalem. In May 1949, she married Alexander Leicht, and the couple went on to have two children. Sara studied at the WIZO school of nursing and worked as a certified nurse in the pediatric surgery ward and the maternity ward at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem.

In the summer of 2019, I met with Sara at her home in Jerusalem for an intimate conversation about her experiences during the Holocaust and how the Holocaust affected her and her life after liberation.

**Irit**: What do you miss the most from your life before the war?

**Sara**: As you can imagine, I miss my parents’ home in the small village. I especially miss my big brother. My brother’s name was Sender Sheni, and he…he taught me so much. He and I were also good friends. I really, really miss him. He was confined to a wheelchair because he had polio as a child and was paralyzed, so he couldn’t walk. He always had time for me and he would listen to me. He taught me things and told wonderful stories. He would even fix my socks. I was very, very close with him. I told him all my secrets.

**Irit**: Can you share one of those secrets?

**Sara**: Once I forgot it was Shabbat and when I went to the bathroom, I tore the toilet paper. I was sure that I would be punished. This was a very, very difficult burden for me. I went to Sheni and said, “You know, I tore the toilet paper this morning. What will happen? What will happen now? How, how, will God punish me?” And he reassured me saying “Surale, you didn’t do it on purpose or to make God angry or anything like that. Don’t be afraid, you won’t be punished. You have nothing to worry about.” He taught me how to calm down.

**Irit**: What happened to him in the end?

**Sara**: He arrived in Auschwitz, in Birkenau, with the rest of us. The orders of the Sonderkommando were to leave him on the train. When we came down for the initial selection, he was left behind in the cattle car. They threw him from the train straight onto some boards in a wagon. It was quite a fall. It haunts me always. I see him being thrown from the train and every time I say to myself “he must be injured, he must be injured.” We talk about Holocaust survivors being damaged. I am damaged. One part of the damage is my brother’s story.

**Irit**: Try to describe as best you can the moment when the train arrived in Birkenau. What did you see? How did you feel? What were your thoughts? What happened to you from the moment you arrived on the platform?

**Sara**: My first feeling when we got to Birkenau was that we had finally arrived somewhere. For three days and three nights we didn’t…it wasn’t easy. Especially since everything was dirty, disgusting. We were all a little bit wet from…what spilled out of the buckets. We were thirsty, hungry, cold and dead tired. The doors open and we finally arrived. Of course, we had no idea where we were. The doors opened and we had to climb down, it was nighttime, but there were electric lights and spotlights that lit up the fences and the watchtowers, and there were many SS men around. What caught my eye as a child were the strangely dressed men wearing stripes, stripes, stripes, who were called the Sonderkommando. They were Jews. I see them and I hear them shouting orders to us in Yiddish. Strange beings, wearing pajamas outside. These were their uniforms.

I was young and thin and I couldn’t jump down. So my father and my mother held me by my hands so that I could jump, but it was very hard for me. It was a long way down. I didn’t see anyone from my family any longer. But the first thing that I felt was that I had no air to breathe. The smoke from the chimneys…the smoke was very thick. The smoke sunk down and you breathed in air that smelled like nothing else in the world. The smell of burnt flesh, with dirt, with blood. Of course, I had no idea what this smell was, where it came from, why it was here. But the smell was terrible. It was awful. First of all, the smell. There was no air. No air to breathe. It was all very strange to me. What is going on? It is night. But where are we? What will be in another five minutes? Suddenly, hundreds of people, none of whom I recognized, are all standing in rows. And it is terribly cold and we are all so tired and there is no air to breathe. And lights. And spotlights focused on you. And barking dogs. Dogs that barked all night. That was my welcome the night that I arrived.

**Irit**: How long did you stay together with your parents?

**Sara**: I was in the middle, between my parents. They held my hands. The Sonderkommando shouted at us in Yiddish to walk, to move forward. We started walking. It was just me with my father and my mother. I didn’t see my sister with her baby or my brother-in-law with their two girls. My other brother with his wife – I didn’t see them either. I didn’t see any of them. And we walked forward, following the Yiddish commands. I suddenly noticed that the men were going to the left and I said to my father, “Abba (father), the men are going left. You have to join the rows of men.” And my father said to me, “Surale, I don’t want to go. I want to go with you.” So I said to my father, “You can’t come with us. See how on the right there are only women and girls, women with their children? The men are already standing in rows of five on the other side.” And I gave him a little push. That was my parting from my father – that I pushed him toward the rows of men. I stayed with my mother.

**Irit**: How old were you?

**Sara**: I was 15. I walked ahead with my mother. We arrived in front of the SS men who separated us – my mother to the left and me to the right. I went right and my mother went left. I could see my mother moving away from me and I had to go, but I stood still. I began to walk, and walk, but then suddenly she turned around and asked me to follow her, to go with her – behind the backs of the SS men who had separated us. I knew that I could do it, since thousands of people had gotten off the trains and it was a madhouse. I told my mother that I wouldn’t go, and she got angry at me. She signaled me to go back. I understood her and I went back. Again, she held my hand. My mother was wearing a large shawl because she was bald. At home she always wore a wig. She was young, only about 45, and she was thin, tall, attractive. But she was wearing this big shawl. Again she held my hand, but they separated us. And then she asked me to do it again. She stood still and asked me to follow her. I could have done it. Do you know how many times I have asked myself why didn’t I go with her? How could it be that I didn’t run after my mother? Sometimes I think… wow… how much I could have been spared. But sometimes I think…wow…it’s so good that I didn’t go. I gained so much. But this is the way it is. This is one of the battles I face.

**Irit**: Do you have feelings of guilt?

**Sara**: No. Actually, I don’t. Because I think to myself, let’s say that my mother is looking down at me from heaven, what would she say? “It’s good you that didn’t come with me. What do you have now? You have children. You married well. You have many good reasons to have lived. You have the Land of Israel. You have a Jewish State. You have a house – a nice house. A wonderful family. All in all, you are healthy. You have grown to a ripe old ageold well.” So, I am alright with myself regarding this. I imagine that she sees me the way I described it. Sometimes, when I feel like it, I go to the Kotel (the Western Wall). Not to pray, but just to be there. And then I say: “Father, see where I am! You prayed to be here, but you didn’t succeed. But I am here.”

**Irit**: When you look back at all the experiences that you went through in the course of the Holocaust, is there one moment, one story, that was a defining moment for you? A story that deeply affected you?

**Sara**: (Sighs) That is a very difficult question. If you will allow me, I’d like a drink of water before answering. I usually don’t share this with anyone, since it’s so painful. There were two events that were very, very hard for me. The first happened in Auschwitz, when we would get our bread. After the morning roll call when we went into our blocks, they would throw our 250-gram bread ration at us. The brick-like loaves weighed a kilo and were cut into four pieces by weight. The end pieces of the loaf were a little bit longer, but it was an optical illusion to think that they were bigger portions, since all the pieces weighed the same. The middle pieces were a bit thinner, since the middle of the loaf bulged out a bit. We would walk into the block and they would throw the bread to us, which we would have to catch. Sometimes I would get an end piece, which appeared larger, and my niece would get a middle piece, which was thinner, so she thought that hers was smaller than mine. She said to me: “Sara, let’s switch pieces.” And I said: “With pleasure.” I gave her the end piece and she gave me her middle piece. I am still holding my bread, since you have to go and sit to eat. Suddenly, she looks at my bread and says to me: “Sara, I changed my mind. Let’s switch back.” I said: “With pleasure.” I gave her piece back to her, and I got the end piece. She did this four or five times until I couldn’t control myself anymore and I bit into the bread. And I thought to myself: “God Almighty! She wants the bigger piece…” We are talking about survival, and whoever gets that bigger piece – but, really, they are all the same. I will never forget that moment and I will never forgive. It is hard for me to forgive.

Irit: Forgive what? What was it about that moment? What can’t you forgive?

Sara: Because life depended on it. Our lives depended on that bread.

Sara: Because I never would have done something like that. My husband, Alex, would always say: “You never would have done something like that, but that doesn’t mean it was so terrible that someone else did it.” It was a question of survival. It never would have occurred to me to do what she did to me. Never. That is one thing.

In Fallersleben we worked in forced labor. A 12-hour shift, either during the day or at night. My number was 4181 and I was called to clean the toilets. In the middle of doing that I hear my number called out in German *–* “*Einund Vierzig, Einun Dahtzig*.” I run over to my bed. I see that the block is full of people: SS women are there, and all the other girls are sitting on their beds. I come closer to my bed where I see a group of women, SS soldiers, among them “the monkey.” We called her “the monkey” – the *maiyo* in Hungarian – as a warning – “Watch out, the monkey is behind you – watch out.” It was terrible and unbelievably frightening. She was standing by my bed and as I came closer I see that on my bed, I see that in big letters was written – *Vier Decken* – “Four blankets” – in German. I still remember the lettering, the C and the K, how it was written in German. I never stole blankets. I had one blanket just like everyone else had one blanket, but on my bed, there were four blankets. I came to my bed and the monkey says to me: “*Vier Decken?* Four blankets?” And I got two good slaps across my face. And I say: “*Nein, das sind nicht meine* – No, these aren’t mine.” “No!” and boom, another two slaps. But I don’t give up. Again I say: “*Nein, das sind nicht meine.*” And that beastly woman knew that they weren’t mine. I felt that she knew, but she slapped me two more times. So I said to myself: “One minute. She’ll keep on slapping me and I’ll keep on insisting on justice, something that doesn’t exist in this place. It will never end.” So after the next two slaps, I fell down. That ended the story. What had happened was that it was terribly cold. I would never steal blankets from the storage, but some girls had. Suddenly the Germans took inventory and saw that blankets were missing, so they started searching for them. I wasn’t even there; I was in the bathroom cleaning the toilets. The girls dumped their blankets on me. But I always had the feeling that the monkey knew it wasn’t me. The girls threw them there. But someone got the beating, and that was me.

Irit: Did that incident change the way you behaved in the camp?

Sara. No. Not at all. Throughout my entire life, up to this day and beyond, I have always been guided by my conscience. I am stubborn and do what I think is right and don’t change.

Irit: You are describing a broken world in which there are no morals and ethics, which, on some level, helps explain this sort of behavior. Why haven’t you told these stories? You said that you don’t usually share these two moments.

Sara: Because…because it is painful to me, and I end up humiliating my brother’s daughter. I am saying: “You behaved improperly. I wasn’t willing to be like you.” Like with the blankets. I would never steal; I wouldn’t dump on someone else. If I decide to steal, I might do it, but I would admit that I stole. I’ll accept the punishment, whatever it would be. But for someone to do the crime and expect someone else to pay for it – that just isn’t me.

Irit: Do you have any positive memories from the camp?

Sara: Yes. We worked 12-hour shifts in Fallersleben, either at night or during the day, in the arms industry. We were making 3-kilo anti-vehicle mines. It was hard work. None of the Germans were allowed to talk to us, except for the female SS guards. In the big factory there was one elderly German, short and plump – a typical German. His job had him working at a grindstone that was bigger than he was. One day I decided to fashion a knife for myself. I took some tin and cut a piece off of it. I folded it over and soldered it together in three places. I went over to the old man and showed him what I had made. He wasn’t allowed to talk to me, but he told me that he had a sharpener that I could use. I made myself a knife and used it to cut my bread. I always wanted to cut my bread ration in half so that I could save some for later and not go to sleep hungry. This man let me make my knife. It seems that he was impressed with my idea. One day I passed by the old man and he motions to me. He shows me a box that he gives me. When I open it, I see that inside there is a small package – a sandwich wrapped in a recent newspaper. I take it home and open the sandwich. Inside there were two – I mean two – slices of bread (you don’t understand the meaning of hunger, what it means to be starving), and between the slices there was chopped liver. The chopped liver certainly wasn’t kosher, but it was very, very delicious. I had forgotten that taste. We opened the newspaper and saw that it said how the Germans were losing the war to the Russians and how the Red Army was advancing. We understood what this news meant – and that was this old man’s goal. He was a wonderful man. He gave us the newspaper, knowing that we didn’t know anything that was happening He wanted to show me that soon this would end. I met a good German. A good German. It’s not true that there weren’t any.

**Irit**: Can you help us understand the meaning of hunger?

**Sara**: Hunger. We say that we are hungry. We eat supper and go to sleep. When we wake up the next morning we think we are hungry. That is not hunger. Hunger is when there is never anything to eat. When you are hungry all the time. When you are hungry for weeks and months. The problem was that I was a 15-year-old. I lay in bed in Auschwitz with women who were 30- or 35-years-old who were always cooking in their imagination. How did you make the soup? Did you make the *kneidlach* (matzoh balls) first? What do you put in them? They cook in their imagination. And I hear them cooking. And I hear it and it affects my digestive system, making stomach acid. And the acid eats away at my stomach. Hunger is such that you can’t think about anything else. It’s demeaning. Suddenly I ask myself: Am I a human or am I a donkey? Where is the dignity? So I am hungry, so what? But I can't think about the sun. Or the stars. About a book. Or about school. Or literature. I only think about bread. I keep seeing a loaf of bread. I want a loaf of bread. To eat all the bread – alone, just by myself. Not to cut it into slices, just to break it up and eat it all. For once I want a whole loaf of bread to eat, the whole thing. And then I ask myself: Am I no longer human? Am I not a human being? But I just keep thinking about bread. That is hunger. It is terrible. Terribly demeaning.

Irit: During the war, in the camp, during the Death March. Was there ever a moment when you just gave up? When you decided that you just couldn’t go on?

Sara: No. I never felt that. I always wanted to live, to survive. But maybe there was one moment. It was when we were in the gas chamber and I was in great pain. My teeth hurt me very, very badly. I was in the gas chamber.

Irit: Why don’t you tell that story from the beginning.

Sara: I think it was about three months after we arrived, Dr. Mengele came and made a selection in Block 19. We all had to stand naked. And I had to raise my right hand and walk over to Dr. Mengele while naked so that he could point with his finger – to the right or to the left. He looked and me and I was already very thin, and I was in great pain. My gums were infected and my mouth hurt me terribly. He looked at me and pointed to the left. I got to a block quite far from there, and there were a lot of SS men with their dogs. They told us to throw the dresses on one pile and to place our shoes on another pile. But nothing seemed suspicious to me at all. I assumed that after I took a shower I would get a different dress and another pair of shoes. It didn’t occur to me that this was the end. I was given some soap and a towel and I entered the block. They closed the door behind us. I walk in, the door is closed behind me, and I want to hang my towel, but I couldn’t find a place for it. Then I looked up at the ceiling and I saw that there weren’t any showerheads, just holes in the ceiling – and I understood that it wasn’t a shower. Nothing happened, but at that moment I said to myself: This is it. At least it should end quickly because my mouth really, really hurts me. And then suddenly, they opened the door and the Germans shout: “A hundred pigs! Out, Jews!” We made it outside, but they pushed the rest back in. That was the moment when I thought it was all over.

Irit: When the Allied soldiers arrived and liberated you, did they come and say: “You are free. You can go home?”

Sara: Yes.

Irit: And what did you feel when they said that to you?

Sara: I remember being afraid. There was a lack of self-confidence and no small amount of fear. What will be now? What do we do? Where do we start? But there were so many people in the same situation, that there was a sense of togetherness. After all, she is also alone, and he is, too. Also, him. That one is also alone. Each and every one of us is alone. Something will work out. There wasn’t really a full sense of joy, since you were alone. Can you be happy by yourself? Start to dance? Are you crazy? There was no reason to be happy. No parties. Then we went home. But I never felt that I was back home. There was no home. Everything seemed upside-down. No old men in the streets. Not a single Jewish child. No pregnant women. Where are the babies? The children? There are no children, no fathers, no mothers, no grandparents. None. My village had 290 people. Maybe ten returned home. They were all killed. Today there isn’t a single Jew there. Nothing went back to normal. And you are stuck there, trying to figure out what to do. But there are so many in the same situation that you aren’t miserable. Because everyone is like you, alone. Alone.

Irit: When did you realize that no one survived?

Sara: When we got to Bergen-Belsen from Salzwedel – this is when Bergen-Belsen was already liberated – we understood that everyone was alone.

Irit: Was there no hope that maybe one of your sisters survived? Maybe that your father survived?

Sara: We knew that wasn’t true. I had found my brother at home, he came by foot from Ukraine. And he said that no one was left. He no longer had a wife; his two daughters were gone. He said to me: “Sara – Our parents are gone; your sister is gone.” He was in the village. The house was still standing, but other people lived there now. They barely let us into the house.

Irit: And what kind of welcome did you get when you arrived in Israel?

Sara: First of all, the British were in charge. I thought that I was going home. Joy and happiness! I am coming home! But the British intercepted us in the middle of the sea. Two destroyers escorted our immigration ship. But I was happy. Because I saw the Jews, the people of Haifa. They came to the port to welcome the new arrivals with flags. I suddenly saw so many Stars of David and all the houses were full of Stars of David. But what made me really happy took place on the buses on that summer night. The windows were open and I kept thinking, “I’m alone. I'm alone.” But the whole bus was full of children and all of the children were alone. The atmosphere was of togetherness and of being alone. We were all together, even as each one of us was alone. The windows were open, and people started throwing oranges into the bus . I had never eaten an orange, I had only dreamed of eating oranges. I remember that the first thought that went through my mind was that if they throw oranges into the buses in this country, there are no problems. I always look at the bright side of things. And I arrived at Ein Harod, where there were really no problems. Except that we were jealous of the local children. They had parents. I always wanted someone to adopt me. To have a place to sit on Saturday on the grass with the other children and drink tea with biscuits. Was that a big dream? No, it wasn’t. But we were alone, the Holocaust refugees. As sheep to the slaughter we went. “How come you didn’t fight? How come you didn’t revolt?” I’m 24 kilos, how did I not rebel? “Why didn’t you kill the Germans?” Sure…after all, I had a knife…

Irit: Did you respond? Or try to explain?

Sara: No.

Irit: Why not?

Sara: Because I understood that they spoke like that because they lacked knowledge. They had no idea what we had been through. They didn’t know and didn’t want to hear. And we didn’t want to tell. So it worked very well. We stayed quiet. Until the Eichmann trial.

Irit: Why didn’t you want to tell?

Sara: They didn’t want to hear, so there was no one to tell it to. We had two counselors in charge of us who were very good. Very pleasant. Our teachers and counselors were the best. Solid citizens. They never asked. When the big annual vacation time came, I had nowhere to go. But no one asked me why I stayed behind. I had nowhere to go. It was the same thing in the Palmach. They closed down the camp on weekends. Rosh HaShana fell on Thursday–Friday, so the camp was closed Thursday, Friday, and Shabbat, and I had nowhere to go. I had been issued a Czech rifle, I was in the Palmach, I had enlisted legally. Zvika Zamir was the battalion commander. I go to him, I tell him “Zvika, don’t close the camp. If you do close it, I’ll stay in the warehouse with the explosives.” I worked in the explosives warehouse since I had taken a course in munitions. I had a small room with a bed and everything – a writing desk and whatnot. And, of course, explosives. “Let me stay in my room. I have nowhere to go.” So Zvika Zamir said to me “What do you mean you have nowhere to go? Go to your grandparents. Or to your aunt or uncles.” I said, “I don’t have any.” I can’t take my gun and sleep in Meir Park. Soldiers used to sleep in Meir Park in Tel Aviv, but I couldn’t do that. I’m a young woman with a gun and an army helmet. What could I do? Sleep in the street? He had no idea that I had no one.

Irit: Sara – Did you mean to enlist with the Palmach? To fight in a war? I can’t ignore the fact that when you were in the labor camp you worked on manufacturing mines and in the Palmach you worked in an ammunition warehouse. How do they fit together?

Sara: It didn’t occur to me that I wouldn’t enlist. All of us were Holocaust survivors. Alex was the prime example. He was one of six children, five of whom were killed. He was by himself. It didn’t occur to us that we wouldn’t enlist in order to fight in the War of Independence. Not only that, but they always said that we went like sheep to the slaughter. Think we are cowards? We are not cowards. We are a strong nation. We know how to fight.

Irit: Over time, throughout your story, what was the hardest thing for you to deal with?

Sara: (Sighs) Look, to be without parents from when you are 15 years old is the hardest thing in the world. There is no replacement for that. You don’t have…It’s spiritual loneliness…there’s nothing instead of it. That is to say, we married when we were both 20 years old. We were the same – Holocaust survivors. There is no one to complain to, to talk to. When I went to the labor room, in the middle of my contractions, the mid-wife says to me “Sara, it is time to scream. Scream ‘Ima!’ (Mommy)” So I look at her, and again she says “Scream. Scream and push and say ‘Ima!’” And I think to myself: “Damn it, you have no idea what you just said to me. How can I shout ‘Ima’? I don’t know what a mother is; I never called my mother that and why, all of a sudden, ‘Ima’?” Or there was a wedding of two youngsters like us, and the Huppah (wedding canopy) is standing there and we have to go under it, but there is no one to bring us there. You want to cry but instead you just laugh. And you feel for those two unfortunates. Those poor people. It’s as if they fell out of the trees. As if they were born without parents. It isn’t easy. It really isn’t easy. It’s with you all the time. The question is – where will it take you? It took some people to the psychiatric ward, but I decided that wouldn’t happen to me. I am strong. I will be happy. I know how to value what I have. I won’t break. I won’t cry. Because, as I said, I am strong. I fought hard to be normal, and I won. That’s all there is to it.

Irit: You described your story from the labor room. After what you experienced in the Shoah, was the decision to have children a natural one? Or did you have to stop for a moment and think about it?

Sara: Before we got married, Alex said to me: “Sara, can you have children?” I said: “Why are you asking me?” And he said: “Having children is very important to me. We were six siblings and I was really happy having so many brothers.” So I laughed and I told him that I really couldn’t say, since I have never tried having children before. I never tried to get pregnant. (She laughs) I never tried. So how can I know if I can get pregnant? I don’t know. Maybe I won’t be able to. Or maybe I’ll be like my mother who gave birth to me, but could never become pregnant afterwards. I said to him: I hope that I will be able to have children, but I can’t be sure.” Of course we wanted children. We both loved kids. Even before I had children I would look in every baby carriage – I still do it today. I look for the baby in the carriage. Sometimes people think – and I can’t blame them – that this old woman has a screw loose. She is always peeking into strollers to see the babies.

Irit: As a parent who did not go through what you went through, I have to say that as soon as someone becomes a parent they become fearful. That something will happen. That something bad will happen. After what you went through, how could you trust the world and go ahead and have children?

Sara: So I want to tell you. Every person is born with a certain amount of blood in their body, I think about six or seven liters. And I sometimes think that maybe every person is born with a certain amount of love. All of the love that we possessed we poured into our two children. We couldn’t give any love retroactively. There was no one behind us, in the previous generation. It was all passed forward. I always thought that I loved my children more than anyone else in the world, that no one loves their kids as much as I do. But there was no fear. I was no more afraid than any other parent. Today I ask my kids: “Tell me, how was your childhood? I’d like to know. Was it a sad, Holocaust home that you lived in?” They both say that it was not. That it wasn’t sad.

Irit: When did you tell your story for the first time?

Sara: I told it for the first time at the Beit HaYeled school. When my older son was in eighth grade. On Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Day). So he heard the story for the first time when he was already a big boy. There were hints of it in the house. He used to say to me, “Ima” – he was a little boy – “You come to kindergarten all the time, just you and Abba. All the children have a grandmother and grandfather, but I don’t have any. Why don’t I have grandparents? And where are my aunts and uncles? Where are your siblings? Why don’t I have, when everyone else has?” Then he told me that all the children have beautiful sweaters knitted by their grandmothers, but we don’t have a grandmother who knits. So I went to learn to knit so that I could knit sweaters for him.

Irit: What answers did you give him over the years?

Sara: It depends on the age. It’s hard. It’s very hard. But I always had the feeling that I had to present the positive side of things. I didn’t want to punish myself more than I had already been punished. Now I should act sad and depressed? Why? That is what I didn’t want to be.

Irit: Were you afraid of the moment when they would start asking you these questions?

Sara: I knew that they would ask. And I wasn’t nervous. Each time I thought about how to answer. In our family, every Bar Mitzvah began with the lighting of memorial candles for the grandparents who were killed in the Holocaust. I always said that you break a glass at a wedding to remember the Temple and you light a candle to remember the Holocaust. Don’t erase it and don’t ignore it. Cope with it. First, light two candles to remember those who cannot be with us today, and then have the band play, and dance to the music. Don’t worry, Jews are used to being sad at the beginning and happy at the end.

Irit: What else did the Holocaust teach you?

Sara: It is hard for me to see elderly people who have nothing to eat. It really bothers me that there is such a wide income gap in Israel. I would very much like there to be a little more equality. Let them not be so rich and let them not be so poor. This is my most sincere desire. May the Jewish people have peace, quiet and tranquility. And that for everyone it will be a little better and a little easier. One thing I certainly learned from the Holocaust is to appreciate. To appreciate the small, simple things... Oh, I how I love to be alive! I love my children and my grandchildren very much. Considering the fact that I am 90 years old, I feel pretty good, and I thank God for that. I am happy and I am grateful.

Irit: Sara, of all that we have talked about and of all the stories you have told at gatherings with students and soldiers, what, to you, is the most important thing to remember? What thoughts would you like them to come away with?

Sara: These young people who are 16–17-years-old are going to the army. They will soon be the leaders and citizens of this country. They must understand what we are doing here. Why we need our own country. We have to be a normal nation; a simple people living in its homeland and protecting it; living and dying for it. They have to understand that a person must be strong. Just like I was nothing during the Holocaust period, zero, worthless, and suddenly I became an independent person who fought, worked, built, gave birth to children, raised a new generation – they will also be grandparents one day. We won’t be here anymore. Someone will say: “The Holocaust never happened.” I want them to know that they saw a Holocaust survivor whose name was Sara. She was there. She wasn’t lying to us. She was there.

Irit: Thank you, Sarale.

Sara: It was my pleasure. Happy to have spoken with you.

On April 4, 2021, Sara Leicht passed away, 92 years old. She left two sons, five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. Her story and her captivating personality touched thousands of young women and men. They are her messengers. Now, you are too.