

# Shockwaves

by Abraham Aamidor

*“Stabbed himself with a knife while temporarily insane.”*

That’s what the Coroner wrote on my oldest brother’s death certificate, dated October 19, 1960. The document includes the usual details—place of death (Chicago), age of the deceased (twenty-four), and names of mother and father. It does not disclose that he served six months in the Air Force before receiving a General Discharge (it’s not a dishonorable discharge, just means things didn’t work out), nor does it reveal that he graduated from the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio before that. And, certainly, there’s nothing about being a child Holocaust survivor. Well, it’s only a death certificate, not a biography. Now, sixty years after my brother’s death, it is I who must fill in the blank spaces of his short life, though I should say *my blank spaces*.

Yehoshua Chaim Rosenberg, also known as Sidney, was born in Wyzskow, Poland on May 1, 1936, to a rebellious teen-age Jewish girl who spoke Yiddish and Polish and knew Halacha, or Jewish law, as well as any of her peers, and a young Hassid from further east in what was arguably an arranged marriage. There is nothing in Jewish law that says marriages must be arranged—it’s more of a cultural artifact that has insinuated itself into religious practice—but my mother always claimed she never wanted to marry the man and, in fact, divorced him soon after arriving in America after World War II. My father’s large family had travelled to Memphis, Tennessee, well before the war began, and so escaped the slaughter, but for some reason my father, mother and Yehoshua were left behind. My mother’s family—she was the oldest of ten siblings from Zambrow, a small town in Eastern Poland—never got out.

Yet, Judith and Joseph Rosenberg, and their first-born son, as well as two other sons who were born during the war, survived. This was thanks to the Soviet Red Army, which briefly occupied a strip of land in Eastern Poland after the war began, as well as Lithuania until the Germans invaded that country, too; the good offices of Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese consul in Lithuania who wrote transit visas for many Jewish refugees in the summer of 1940; and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which funded the refugees’ trek across Eurasia. From Vilnius, where they were based at the time, the family was on its way to Moscow, then Kobe, Japan, where they hoped to board ships to America, yet were diverted to the Jewish enclave in Shanghai, China, after Pearl Harbor, where they spent the next four years. My brother, Jonah, also known as Irving, was born in Kaunas, Lithuania prior to the evacuation, and Isaac, also known as Isidore, was born in Shanghai in February 1945. Because both Sugihara’s heroism and the Shanghai Jewish ghetto, which was earlier established by Iraqi Jews under British protection in the 1920s, have been written about before I will move forward with Yehoshua’s story, which is my focus.

## “Elvis”

My parents traveled aboard the USS *General M. C. Meigs*, a troop transport ship during the war, and arrived in San Francisco in February 1946, and soon made their way to their real destination, which was Memphis. Home at first was upstairs in the Rosenberg family bakery on Bethel Street near an older Jewish neighborhood known as “the Pinch.” Most of the extended family worked in the bakery, though in time one uncle became a liquor distributor, an

aunt married a local accountant, and others went in directions that I don't know about.

I have many memories of Memphis, many that are happy, but only one that is germane to this essay. When Yehoshua was home from the yeshiva (Jewish seminary) in Cleveland, Ohio, where he'd been sent to study so soon after arriving in America at that tender, traumatized age of his, he would drag me and Isaac to services at the Anshei Sphard synagogue on North Parkway. He was always in a hurry to get there on a Saturday morning, before the gates would close, as it were. The building is now a neighborhood senior center—I almost wrote “the synagogue”—but once the Torah scroll and the cabinet that holds it are removed it's just a building.

### Telshe Yeshiva

The original yeshiva was established in *Telsai*, Lithuania, in 1875; it relocated to America, and Cleveland, after Germany invaded the small country in 1941 and killed many of the yeshiva's teachers and students. (It's possible my father was a student at this yeshiva before the family fled to Shanghai.) I have a copy of the Commencement announcement from the high school division of its Cleveland campus, dated June 30, 1954. Yehoshua Rosenberg is one of fourteen graduates listed; the Announcement is printed in English and he, as well as the other boys, all have their Yiddish or Hebrew names transliterated reasonably well, such as Avrohom and Moshe and Shmuel. Many of the graduates would go on to study for the rabbinate, but that was not automatic. The yeshiva still operates in the Cleveland area and I tried twice to contact personnel there to learn more about Yehoshua's enrollment, but they do not answer.

### Warren AFB

It was during Yehoshua's brief time in the military that a few of the other boys in uniform beat the shit out of him and put him in the hospital for several days. He was stationed at Warren Air Force Base but was traveling in the

South at the time with some other Airmen. Our family asked questions; the answer was that “boys will be boys,” and no one was prosecuted for the assault. With the help of a man named Joe L. Wise, an archivist at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, I was able to confirm “Sidney” Rosenberg's enlistment and discharge in 1956, as well as some other details. One photo of the era shows “Sidney” as a bony, gaunt and close-cropped soldier under a stiff, seemingly oversize cap while he's wearing standard issue, heavy black plastic eyeglass frames. I compare that to his Bar Mitzvah photo taken a few years earlier, except that in the earlier image he's wearing a suit and tie and what is generally known as a “Temple” fedora, a hat with a sharp taper in front and a wide brim. He looks quite staunch, even noble, in the Bar Mitzvah photo, unlike the official Air Force photo, in which he also seems staunch, but *resigned* to his fate.

I have the original letter from Chaplain Philip Silverstein, 1st Lt., USAF, dated 7 May, 1956 and addressed to my mother. This was after my parents' divorce and just two or three years after the family had left Memphis and moved to Chicago, where for a time we lived with two Orthodox families my mother knew from Poland. Most of the survivors she knew from Poland, who all were traditional Orthodox, had settled in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles or Palestine. The key paragraphs from Silverstein's letter follow:

Sidney had been coming regularly to the services here on base and we got to know each other very well.

He is an intelligent boy but he has been suffering from a mental illness which began prior to his entering in the Air Force. It was on these grounds that he was discharged and I'm afraid it cannot be reconsidered. I have spoken to the psychiatrist at length [sic] about him and I could only urge that he begin treatment in civilian life.

I am very much concerned about him and I hope that he will adjust to civilian

life. I can see by your letter that you have tried to help him but I'm afraid that it is not in our hands. He should see a doctor.

Nothing in the letter is really a diagnosis, of course, and part of it counts as a legal disclaimer—*Sidney was ill before we ever saw him, Mrs. Rosenberg*—but I'll go so far as to acknowledge that Yehoshua was *troubled* prior to his enlistment. It's an interesting word—troubled—because it refers both to Yehoshua's state of mind and to a world that had made lots of trouble for him. I found the letter among my mother's effects along with one written by Yehoshua himself, after he was committed to a psychiatric hospital in Illinois. More on that letter later.

### Cottage Plan

The psychiatric literature on mental illness and Holocaust survivors, which I surveyed as no more than a lay reader, is mixed. Some studies suggest that mass trauma PTSD would be the likely diagnosis today for those who were pegged as schizophrenic after the war, while other research says diagnoses of schizophrenia were routinely missed. Part of my interest in researching my late brother's real story was an interest in the evolving yet sometimes fugitive nature of psychiatric theory.

Before I tell you about the Galesburg (Illinois) Research Hospital, where Yehoshua spent much of the last two years of his life, I have to explain this nonsense about calling him Sidney, or calling my other brothers Irving and Isidore, respectively, instead of their real names. According to our family history, it was all the in-laws' doing. They simply Americanized my brothers' names—they are stupid names drawn from nineteenth-century British literature. At least Yehoshua's name is written correctly on his gravestone in Hebrew, and I was always proud that no one changed my name from Abraham, though in truth it's spelled "Avraham" on my birth certificate. I was named after my grandfather on my mother's side.

Now, Galesburg: I had hoped that the deep

dark secrets pertaining to my brother's commitment, the Pentagon Papers, so to speak, were to be had at the Galesburg Research Hospital, a state-run psychiatric facility built on what is known as a Cottage Plan architectural style, i.e., separate buildings and lots of green space. The facility was opened in 1943 as a hospital for ill and wounded soldiers, including some German POWs, then it was declared "surplus" after the end of hostilities and given to the State of Illinois. The site was adapted and repurposed as a psychiatric institution in 1950. I quote from a short history of the facility posted by [Asylumprojects.org](http://Asylumprojects.org), which knows that state institutions of this sort were a kind of American archipelago, although Galesburg was far from the worst:

The hospital was planned [by the state] to primarily care for elderly patients and develop a major research program. By 1960 the hospital began accepting patients of all ages and a focus on alcoholism treatment. The hospital used all types of treatment during its history including ECT and insulin shock therapy. Patient population peak reached 3,000 by the late 1950s. The hospital was closed in 1985 and research programs moved to Chicago.

Yehoshua was not elderly and never drank alcohol other than sacramental wine and in no way belonged in a facility such as this, but it was free, which mattered at the time. It was at Galesburg that he endured the first of several shock treatments, too, and perhaps Lithium, and perhaps Chlorpromazine, an antipsychotic drug which was proudly developed by a Dr. Harold Himwich right at the hospital in 1955! It was Yehoshua's psychiatrist in Chicago who'd declared that he was a paranoid schizophrenic, irrespective of the fact that he'd bounced around the country from Memphis to New York to Chicago to Cleveland a few times by the time he was sixteen, and had *been bounced* from Poland to Lithuania to Kobe, Japan, to Shanghai to port in San Francisco by the time he was ten.

Yehoshua never agreed with the diagnosis. “Insane is the sane man in an insane world,” was his favorite quote, and “Mother, don’t take sides,” was a common injunction he would utter to her. He liked to read about British sports cars, smoked Pall Mall cigarettes, which I never had trouble buying for him in Chicago when I was a boy, and was thoughtful in his critique of the State of Israel, i.e., he was a fairly normal *and* bright young man in the late 1950s. His death certificate lists him as an “engineering student,” though that was no longer true by the time he died.

### “Guernica”

I initially recalled the Chicago psychiatrist only by his last name—Dr. Hilkevitch—but I now believe he was the locally well-known Aaron Hilkevitch, a Russian-born Jew, a University of Chicago graduate (as am I), and a past member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which was a group of Leftist and often Jewish volunteers that fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). This is somewhat speculative on my part, but my mother worked at the Park View Home for the Aged for many years after we moved north; she worked with a social worker at the Home named Milton Cohen who also was a well-known former member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. It’s not a stretch to think Cohen referred her to Hilkevitch.

My mother did not want to send Yehoshua to Galesburg. As she worked at the Park View Home, a project of the Chicago Jewish Federation, she had asked for a “scholarship” to the psychiatric ward at the old Michael Reese Hospital, which was much closer to home and also connected to the Jewish Federation. Part of her reasoning was that Michael Reese served kosher food, which still mattered to both her and Yehoshua, but there also was the issue that my mother trusted Jewish institutions in America—after all, it was HIAS that had helped save her in Europe, and she always worked for Jewish communal institutions after she left the bakery

in Memphis, including the old B’nai B’rith home in Memphis. And, there was this: She was smitten by the Jewish American success story. These were people who had made it—Hyman Rickover was an Admiral in the US Navy! Albert Einstein had settled at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University! Sid Caesar had his own television show! Well, if so, Aaron Hilkevitch must be a great psychiatrist.

She was turned down by the Michael Reese Hospital. I don’t know if the term, “scholarship,” was official bureaucratese, or if my mother was simply asking for a financial waiver of some sort. Either way, she was denied. My mother claimed she was told that since she had a job she could afford to pay for her son’s treatment, but private pay psychiatric treatment was expensive and, anyway, Yehoshua already was twenty-one and he did not have a job. He was simply a Holocaust survivor, a United States Air Force veteran (albeit truncated service), and a very troubled young man. He was referred to the Galesburg Research Hospital by his psychiatrist, namely Dr. Hilkevitch, who should not have been indifferent to his patient’s history. Was this an act of heartlessness? Negligence? Or deliberate contempt for Orthodox Judaism and Holocaust survivors, an example of the *countertransference*, a known, key weakness of Freudian psychoanalysis? I can only think of Bruno Bettelheim, the discredited Jewish psychiatrist who claimed to have personally known Sigmund Freud and was reported to have bullied and perhaps forced children into submission at his famous Orthogenic School on the campus of the University of Chicago—it was Bettelheim who had argued that many Jews didn’t resist the Nazis, i.e., were cowards and complicit in their own genocide. Hilkevitch, too, according to his obituary, was a Freudian psychoanalyst and surely would have known the once-famous Bettelheim during his own University of Chicago days and later, life-long residence in the university’s Hyde Park neighborhood. And, Hilkevitch did fight—did all

other Jews?

### Privileged Communications

The Galesburg hospital is long-since demolished, but I wrote to the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Mental Health for guidance on obtaining my brother's old medical records. After a few false leads, I connected with Kelly Cheesman, Clerk of the Circuit Court of Illinois, Ninth Judicial Circuit, i.e., Galesburg, and she generously offered to intercede on my behalf with the court. I sent her what documents I already had that might justify my interest in my brother's records, which she forwarded to Anthony W. Vaupel, the associate judge who handles psychiatric matters for the court. Here is what he personally wrote to me after reviewing my petition:

Disclosure of records through the Illinois Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Act is intended to be prohibited except for a few people or entities. While I understand why the statute is written the way it is, it seems to lack common sense exceptions, such as your situation. . . . I understand this letter must surely be disappointing, especially when I can think of no societal interest in precluding family members from records nearly sixty years after death. I am required to follow the law, even in those situations where I disagree and it is for that reason I must deny your request for an order.

Judge Vaupel's letter was respectful, clear and final. I have no quarrel with him. But, I do note the irony of the relevant statute that says, for example, had I been suing my late brother's estate for any monies he might have left, oh, well, in that case I *would* have had access to his records! I think it was Karl Marx who wrote that all law is really about property rights; you don't have to be a Marxist yourself to see that he had a point. (In fairness, I should add that if I were suffering from a genetic disorder my medical team would have had limited access to the records. I might also add that other state offi-

cialists told me the records almost certainly would have been lost or destroyed even if I had received permission to access them.)

I do have one original document from Galesburg, though. It's a letter that Yehoshua wrote to our mother while he was committed there; she kept it all the years of her life.

"Dear Mother, I want to come home," he wrote. "I promise to be good." That's it. The note is written on a half-sheet of paper and his handwriting is slow and scraggly, much like a schoolboy's. The letter is undated but he was twenty-two or twenty-three by then, yet he was promising "to be good." He was a Holocaust survivor, a world traveler and an Air Force veteran, yet he was reduced to promising to be good like some seven-year-old in sit-out in second grade.

### A Studebaker Lark

Yehoshua died on October 18, 1960, a school day for me; I was in my first semester at Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School in Chicago, after graduating from the Arie Crown Hebrew Day School. I had no interest in going on to a religious high school.

I still came home for lunch in those days, as the high school was just around the block from where we lived at the time in the Albany Park neighborhood, and I watched from the front living room as Jonah, who was by then attending a teachers' college, and our mother tried to get Yehoshua into the back seat of the family Studebaker Lark, which my mother had recently purchased. It was time to take Yehoshua back to the hospital, but he didn't want to go. There had been some issues in the household prior to this—Yehoshua and Jonah had gotten into some fights, and Yehoshua had called me into the kitchen one time to see if I saw what he saw in the alley behind our third-floor apartment. He thought there was a person hiding behind a telephone pole who was spying on him. I looked and told him I didn't see anybody and he asked me to look again, and then he stood guard at the window, partly hidden by

a window curtain, on the lookout for the stranger. So, there were problems.

Nonetheless, he did not want to return to Galesburg. As Jonah tried to force him into the back seat of the car on the street below I watched in confusion, then shock and horror, as I saw Judith pull a shoe from her foot and begin to beat Yehoshua on the head, just try to beat him into submission. I don't know if she really knew what she was doing, and it was Yehoshua who cried repeatedly, "Mother, please! Mother, please!" as he covered his head and face with his raised elbows.

He wouldn't go. I was too disgusted by the scene, or too confused, and started back to school. As I descended the stairs Yehoshua rushed past me on his way up, followed closely by Jonah. I continued on to school. When I returned home later that afternoon, I discovered that the fire department ambulance had come and gone, taking Yehoshua's body with it, and that he had died in the kitchen of a stab wound to the heart. ▲▼▲