

Ella Freilich dead at 87: Riverdalian almost nation's "Second Mother-in Law"

By Written by Robert Lebowitz, Riverdale Review



Devoted friends, community leaders, and one nationally known political figure gathered at the Riverdale Jewish Center this past Monday to mourn the loss of long-time Riverdale resident Ella Freilich.

Mrs. Freilich, 87, died on Friday, August 6. Although her life's

challenges and experiences made her an inspiring figure in her own right, she garnered national media attention four years ago when her son-in-law, Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman, became the first Jewish vice-presidential candidate in this country's history. Lieberman attended Monday's funeral services with his wife, Mrs. Freilich's daughter Hadassah.

Hadassah married Senator Lieberman in 1982, when she was living in Riverdale, forcing the Senator to come here regularly to court his future wife. At the time, Mrs. Freilich and her husband, Rabbi Samuel Freilich, were already living in the community, having moved here in 1978 to be closer to their daughter.

Born in

After the war, Mrs. Freilich made her way to Prague, where she met her future husband, Rabbi Samuel Freilich. The emerging communist threat in Czechoslovakia forced the Freilichs, along with their new-born daughter Hadassah, to then come to America.

The Freilichs settled in Gardner, Massachusetts, where their son, Ary, was born and where Rabbi Freilich assumed the position of rabbi of Ohave Shalom Synagogue.

In his eulogy, Ary said that the lingering effects of the war's devastation were most palpable when extended family would be absent during holidays, or when he would hear his mother sobbing in a quiet part of the house.

However, this sense of loss was offset with his mother's fierce love for life.

"She was unyielding. Resolute. Demanding. Insistent. Formal at times, zany at others," Ary recalled. She loved to sing, took great pleasure in nature, and, despite the horrific persecution she experienced, she appreciated people of all different backgrounds and cultures.

When Rabbi Freilich retired in 1978, the two moved to Riverdale to be closer to

Hadassah and Ary, who then lived in Riverdale and New Jersey respectively. They became active members of the Riverdale Jewish Center and, with the encouragement of the community, Rabbi Freilich published his war-time memoirs, "The Coldest March".

It was also about this time that Joseph Lieberman, a state senator from Connecticut, began coming into Riverdale to spend time with Hadassah. The two were married in 1982.

Mrs. Freilich took pride in her son-in-law's ever-expanding list of political accomplishments: in 1983, Lieberman was elected as State Attorney General, and in 1988, he won a tight race for U.S. Senate. In 2000, he became the running mate of presidential candidate Al Gore in his race against George W. Bush.

According to a close family friend and neighbor, Bernie Wallace, Mrs. Freilich took pride in watching her two children on national television--son Ary and his family joined Hadassah several times on the campaign trail--and she was featured in high-profile media sources, including the New York Times.

But despite her prominence, Mrs. Freilich's impact was most deeply felt by her simple acts of compassion and her strong sense of human dignity.

"Any time someone in the building got sick, Ella was always there to offer soup or rugelach [baked pastries]," recalled Ms. Wallace. "Her question was always, 'Are you hungry?'"

"When my sister and I lost our mother years ago, Ella came to our door, and immediately offered her support. She told us, 'Everybody needs a Jewish mother,'" said Ms. Wallace, an Irish Catholic.

Another powerful example of Mrs. Freilich's humanity in the face of difficult trials was demonstrated in the concentration camps, where, according to Wallace, she fashioned her prison uniform into a dress, using a wooden needle. A few years ago, before her health began to decline, Mrs. Freilich donated the uniform to the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Manhattan's Battery Park.

Rabbi Samuel Freilich died in 1993. During his eulogy, Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt, head rabbi of the Riverdale Jewish Center, pointed to the many legacies she and her husband left behind.

"Ella and the Rabbi had many journeys and built many encampments," he said. "Riverdale was one of them."

Ella Freilich is survived by her daughter Hadassah and her husband Joe Lieberman, and her son Ary and his wife Judy; her grandchildren, Ethan Tucker, Hanah, Matthew, April and Rebecca Lieberman, and Sarah and Elizabeth Freilich; and her great-granddaughter, Eden Migdal Tucker and Tennessee and Willie Lieberman.