News



Sr. Regine Canetti, 102, a member of the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion, who is a Holocaust survivor, stands in the garden of the Convent of the Sisters of Zion on April 14 in the biblical village of Ein Kerem in Jerusalem. (OSV News/Debbie Hill)



Judith Sudilovsky

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When the raging ocean finally spit young Regine Canetti out, lifting her up a huge wave onto the thorny coast of the Turkish town of Silivri, she was stunned and shaken, her clothing fairly ripped from her body by the stormy sea.

On Dec. 12, 1940, 19-year-old Canetti, her parents and her younger brother had been among the 350 Bulgarian Jewish refugees escaping from the Nazis on the wood-hulled schooner called the Salvador ("Savior" in the Judeo-Spanish Ladino dialect spoken by many Jews in the Balkans). They had originally left the Bulgarian Black Sea port of Varna on Dec. 3 with 10 times the ship's capacity for passengers, hoping to reach British Mandatory Palestine.

With no engine or navigational equipment, three days after it left the Bulgarian shore, the Salvador was finally towed into Istanbul's port, where it remained for a week, before it was ordered back into the Sea of Marmara.

"It was a terrible, stormy sea, and we couldn't continue," recalled Canetti, now 102 and a member of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion living in the order's convent in the Jerusalem Ein Kerem neighborhood.

"But the Turks couldn't accept us, and we had to stay at sea," she continued. "After a few days, we ran out of food. The good Jewish population in Istanbul heard about our boat from the news — it was not like today where everyone has phones — and brought us food every day. But we were illegal refugees, and when it was a sunny day, the Turkish government told us we had to go."

In a scenario that continues to play out today as refugees crowd onto unsafe ships desperately seeking safety on foreign shores, the Salvador encountered a severe winter storm, and the hull of the ship broke apart and sank a mere 330 feet from shore, west of Istanbul. More than 220 passengers perished, among them Canetti's mother and brother.

"We knew how to swim, but in that sea, you couldn't swim. It was impossible. Once you were in the water, there was no mother, no father, no brother, just pieces of wood floating by and the waves pushing. I made a terrible effort, but I couldn't swim," Canetti told OSV News as she sat in the convent's lush garden retelling once more the story of her survival, one she has related countless times during her lifetime.

April 18 marked Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel. On April 19, the world commemorated the 80th anniversary of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, a fight started out of desperation in the district of the German-occupied Polish capital where Nazis forced the Jewish population to live in unlivable conditions.

"There came a moment when I said, 'I can't anymore,' and just then, a big wave came and threw me on shore," Canetti said.

Eventually, the young Regine was able to find her father among the survivors, and they were helped by the local Jewish community.

Though Jews in Bulgarian-occupied regions of former Yugoslavia and northern Greece were deported to Nazi extermination camps in German-occupied Poland and murdered, the deportation of Bulgaria's own 48,000 Jews was halted due to public protests and the intervention of prominent figures, including two Bulgarian Orthodox Church prelates, Metropolitans Stefan of Sofia and Kiril of Plovdiv. Bulgarian Jews were internally deported, their property confiscated, and young men conscripted into the Labor Corps, but the majority of the Bulgarian Jewish population survived the war.

"There is persecution everywhere, even today, but it can't be compared to the Holocaust," Canetti said. "People are persecuted in Africa, in Asia. But the Holocaust was a plan for the total annihilation of the Jews. [The Nazis] wanted to concentrate all the Jews in one place, in [German-occupied] Poland, and then annihilate them." She was clandestinely sent to Mandatory Palestinian with other young Jews who had survived the shipwreck, and her father followed her later.

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Regine was sent to work in a kibbutz, a communal farm, and because she could not speak a word of Hebrew or English to communicate with anyone, it was a far cry

from her privileged upbringing studying at the Catholic boarding school. When the Bulgarian Sisters of Sion got word of the fate of their former student and her father, they contacted their community in Jerusalem, who invited her to join them. With her father's permission, she went to Jerusalem with the community and, in time, converted to Catholicism and joined the order.

The Sisters of Sion, also known officially as the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion, was founded by French-Jewish convert Fr. Théodore Ratisbonne in 1842 and is a community called to witness God's faithful love for the Jewish people.

"I was born to a Jewish family, but we were not very Jewish. But I had spiritual feelings," she said. "When I came to Israel, I felt alone in life, and when I came to Jerusalem with the sisters, I felt at home. The thing that saved me was the Sisters of Sion, their solidarity. If it weren't for the Sisters of Sion, I don't know what would have happened to me. We should have our eyes and hearts open because there are so many refugees today, so many different people [in need]. We need to keep our eyes and hearts open to help."

She spent 60 "very happy years" as a teacher at Sisters of Sion schools, including in Egypt, and even until recently had reunions with her former students once a year in Paris. On her 100th birthday, they came to visit her in Jerusalem. Every year, she still attends the official memorial service in Israel for those Jewish refugees who drowned in the tragic shipwreck of the Salvador.

Maybe, she ponders, if she had felt she was receiving more help from the Jewish community in Israel when she arrived, her life would have taken a different trajectory.

"I am always in communication with God," she said. "Now that I am approaching him soon, I am more in touch."

Today, she is still asked by mainly Israeli groups to tell her story, and though she is tired and wants to stop, when she is asked, she speaks.

"I am the only survivor left of the shipwreck, the only one left to tell their story," she said. "Many Israelis ask me to tell my story, but they have a very different understanding of what it is when God calls you. I will still tell my story as long as I am asked to do so and as long as I remember. I don't have the right to say no. I can't refuse because they want to know. Sometimes there are people that don't know the Holocaust happened. So I tell them what happened."