

## **Eternal Light: A Survival Story**

Jack Meltsner – Producer, director

**Mentor:** Hubbard, Glenn

I produced a Holocaust Documentary titled “Eternal Light” for my Signature Honors Project Creative Endeavor. The film premiered on campus at the Black Box Theatre on November 22nd, 2024. Below is a link to access the film on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLj5lhY3ExA>

Beginning in November 2023, I outlined my vision for the film and identified two Holocaust Survivors that I would be featuring. In January, I contacted the Levine Jewish Community Center’s Butterfly Project which is a non-profit that teaches school children about the Holocaust and trends of hatred in Charlotte, NC. The Butterfly Project organizes workshops where survivors speak to school children about their story and teach them how to handle hatred.

The Butterfly Project helped me attain an archived interview of 98-year-old survivor Irving Bienstock and put me in contact with fellow survivor Suly Chenkin. In May, I recorded an interview with Suly and began a month’s long editing stage. In July, I found the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s archival footage database which provided me with royalty-free B-roll to include in my film. In August, I found appropriate graphics and music via royalty-free online databases. Finally, in November 2024, I finished production of the film and held a screening on campus at the Black Box Theatre.

"Eternal Light" tells the powerful and inspiring stories of two Holocaust survivors, Suly Chenkin and Irving Bienstock. Their testimonies provide a firsthand account of the horrors they endured during one of humanity's darkest periods. They persevered to positively impact the world leaving a legacy behind as an American Military veteran and Holocaust educators. The documentary weaves together historical footage, music, archival materials, graphics and interviews to create a compelling narrative capturing the essence of their resilience and determination to not only survive, but to thrive and leave a lasting impact on the world.

The film was produced in Association with the Levine Jewish Community Center's Butterfly Project to preserve the stories of Holocaust survivors and to promote understanding, empathy and act as an educational tool to combat antisemitism and discrimination today. Eternal Light and The Butterfly Project use the Anti-Defamation League's Pyramid of Hate to analyze the development of hate in society and suggest ways to interrupt its spread. I've known the survivors' stories my whole life and am excited to share them.

The story begins with Survivor Irving Bienstock's life growing up during the early stages of the Nazi Party in Dortmund, Germany. Following Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Bienstock and his family faced death threats by their former friends and neighbors and were eventually left behind in Germany while their entire family was deported to Poland.

Following the Nuremburg Laws, Bienstock and his family began scrambling for a way to get out of Germany. In 1939, at the age of 12, Irving's mother smuggled him onto a train that was leaving Germany for Holland. Irving's mother was taken off the train by SS members and sent back to Germany while Irving was handed over to a Dutch Jewish man. The Dutch man eventually brought Irving to a children's home on the coast of Holland in a city called Wijk an Ze. By pure chance, he was reunited with his ten-year-old sister in the same children's home.

Irving's parents escaped to Belgium and made their way to Wijk an Ze to meet up with their children. Once they reunited in Holland, they boarded a ship and emigrated to Brooklyn via Ellis Island.

Once Irving turned 18, he enlisted in the United States Army and was deployed to fight the Nazi's in Europe. Irving safely returned home and finished high school before working as an engineer for a company in Ozone Park, Queens. In the 1970's the company relocated to Monroe, North Carolina and Irving moved with the plant. Located just outside Charlotte, Irving began volunteering with the Butterfly Project at the Levine Jewish Community Center in Charlotte.

Irving has been an important figure at Temple Israel in Charlotte and met Suly Chenkin through the Jewish Community. I am fortunate to have met Irving as a toddler and have known his story for as long as I've been able to understand it. I am blessed to also know fellow Temple Israel member and my grandmother's best friend, Suly Chenkin since a young age.

The documentary continues with Suly's story and picks up when she was born in Kaunas, Lithuania in the occupied Soviet Union in 1944. Suly and her parents lived in an extremely overpopulated area of Kaunas with terrible living conditions. During the war, all the Jewish people living in Kaunas were rounded up and sent to live in the poorest part of town called the Ghetto.

Suly's parents, knowing the Nazi's were quickly moving into Soviet territory looked for escape plans to save their eight-month-old daughter. In a matter of weeks, they organized a plan to drug their daughter, put her in a potato sack and instruct a cart driver to throw her sack over the fence of the Ghetto.

The sack was picked up by two young women including Suly's former nannie who wheeled her away to freedom. The woman along with her own children and Suly, embarked on a

ten-month trek across Europe from Lithuania to Poland to Constanta, Romania. The family got on a boat at the port of Constanta on the Black Sea and travelled to Jerusalem. Suly lived in Jerusalem for three years from 1944 to 1947.

Suly's parents were both sent to concentration camps and miraculously survived. Once they were both liberated, they went searching for each other and found each other in West Germany. Once they reunited, they travelled to Havana, Cuba to seek refuge with her father's brother who had emigrated before the war. After staying in Cuba for a couple months, Suly's mother boarded a boat to get her daughter in Jerusalem. Suly reunited with her mother and returned with her to Havana where Suly lived most of her young life.

Years later, Suly went to college in Miami while Fidel Castro rose to power in Cuba. Her parents eventually followed her and fled Cuba to Miami. Suly never returned to Havana. Once Suly graduated from college, she moved to New York City for a job at an export/import office in Manhattan. She worked and lived there for years before moving to Charlotte with her husband in the 1980's.

Suly has since been an active member of Temple Israel and regularly volunteers with the LJCC Butterfly Project sharing her story and inspiring children to stand up to hate.

I am extremely honored to have produced this documentary in their memory and preserve their stories for generations to come. I plan on archiving the film on campus and making it available for the public once I get approval from The Butterfly Project to do so.