



Gratz Insider, February 2016 - Story Continuation

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In Memoriam: Celebrating the Life of Rivke Klein Berkowitz

Daughter of an esteemed rabbi, Rabbi Isaac Klein, and an excellent Jewish educator, Henriette Levine Klein, Rivke Klein Berkowitz had Jewish education in her lineage. She taught her first class at age 15 when she was handed the reins of a group of unruly 11-year-olds that no one else in her father's synagogue school wanted to teach. Rivke was a natural. She even received praise from the grandfather of one of those students, who was grateful that, for the first time, his grandson had the knowledge and ability to participate in the Passover seder.

But Rivke had much more than on-the-job training. She was a graduate of the College of Jewish Studies in Buffalo. She also earned her bachelor's in education from the University of Buffalo, and she studied in Jerusalem at both the Hayim Greenberg Teachers Institute and The Hebrew University. Although she began a program in Jewish education at The Jewish Theological Seminary, she transferred to Gratz College after marrying Jerry Berkowitz, who was completing his Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania.

Rivke excelled at Gratz, winning awards in rabbinics and history at graduation. Jerry, who is also a Gratz alumnus (B.H.L. '63), remembers his wife's graduation, in part, because the graduating class did not wear caps and gowns. It was 1967, and the students decided to donate the money that would have been spent on caps and gowns to Israel for the Six-Day War.

Three years later, on September 6, 1970, the situation in the Middle East thrust itself into the lives of Rivke and Jerry Berkowitz much more dramatically. The couple had spent the summer in Israel with their two-year-old daughter, Talia. As they were flying home, their plane, as well as three others, was hijacked by a terrorist organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). After landing the plane in the Jordanian desert, the hijackers took six men off, including Jerry, under the misconception that he was an Israeli. Jerry and the other five men were held at PFLP's northern headquarters for over three weeks, while Rivke, Talia and many of the other passengers remained captive on the plane for a week.

Despite the dire circumstances, Rivke remained true to her character. She sang songs with the children and served as an intermediary between the flight crew and the Orthodox passengers. When asked by the hijackers about her religion, she told them, without hesitation, that she was Jewish, and she also refused to let them take her husband's *tallit* (prayer shawl).

After a week, the women and children who still remained on the plane were finally ushered off. The plane was then detonated, and the women and children were transported to Amman. Along the way, Rivke waved proudly and defiantly to angry crowds, who lined the road, screaming and shaking their

fists at the hostages. Yet even after her release, she still suffered from the uncertainty of not knowing whether her husband was alive or dead.

Eventually, the hijacking became the subject of a PBS/National Geographic documentary, [American Experience: Hijacked](#), as well as a book called [Terror in Black September](#) by David Raab, who was a passenger on the flight. Although the experience was life-changing for both Rivke and Jerry, they did their best, after being rescued and reunited, to return to normalcy - and for Rivke, that meant teaching and raising her growing family. During the hijacking, Rivke was in the first trimester of pregnancy with twins, one of whom did not survive.

The Berkowitz Family eventually settled in Buffalo, where Rivke had lived as a teenager. Over the years, she taught at congregational Hebrew schools and served as associate headmaster of Kadimah Academy, the Jewish day school that her parents had helped establish and that her children attended. In fact, her daughter Talia is teaching there now. Rivke was made a life member of Kadimah Academy's board of trustees. She also worked for years at Buffalo's High School of Jewish Studies, and was still teaching there at the time of her death.

Throughout her career, Rivke was often recognized, both formally and informally, for her teaching ability. Regularly selected as a favorite teacher by the Hebrew high school students, she also won the first award for outstanding teacher from the Bureau of Jewish Education. More recently, at a dinner at Kadimah Academy, she was selected as one of the honorees among Jewish women educators in Buffalo, including teachers from both secular and Jewish schools. Given the impact she had on her former students, many attended her funeral, including Rabbi Steven Weil, the senior managing director of the Orthodox Union, whom Rivke taught when he was in fourth grade.

Committed to mentoring Jewish youth, Rivke and Jerry were also active volunteers for over 30 years in the Upstate New York Region of the Orthodox youth group, the National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY). The tributes to Rivke after her death by some of her youth group mentees were stunning. The following is an excerpt from a Facebook post by Shira Reifman, a former Upstate NCSY Region director:

Mrs. Berkowitz was my "*Rebbe*" in Jewish communal work. Like a *Rebbe*, she was a mentor, a teacher of Torah, a role model, someone who knew exactly what each person needed to hear, someone who carried the Jewish People on her shoulders. . . . She pushed just the right amount, stood back just the right amount, worked tirelessly and loved boundlessly. She was so full of life and energy and I can't quite fathom that that energy has been extinguished. I loved you, Mrs. B., and I'm sorry I didn't say it recently enough. I think of you often and always carry your example, my "*Rebbe*," with me.

In addition, a former Upstate NCSY Region adviser told Jerry that she had chosen "Rivke" as the middle name for her first child. She added that she hopes her newborn daughter will lead a life in the footsteps of her namesake.

Rivke Berkowitz left a legacy and a trove of cherished memories for her husband, four children and twelve grandchildren, as well as for her many friends, former students and past youth group participants. As Jerry said, "She had a way with people. She was unique. She was Rivke."