

Gitta Lederer Gittel bat Yehuda v'Chana

Passed away January 2, 2003

28 Tevet 5763

"Life throws you obstacles, but I don't think anyone was ready for this one."

These are words written by Gitta's daughter Beki in a description of what her family has gone through over the past two and a half years. Because of the outpouring of love for Gitta it is a journey that the family has not had to experience alone. She fought her illness with courage and determination until she slipped away to her eternal rest yesterday morning

Gitta was born 52 years ago in Legnica, Poland. Her family took advantage of a rare opportunity to leave the Communist country and immigrated to Israel in 1956. In 1960 she came to Edmonton with her parents and brothers, sponsored by family who already lived here. Gitta was enrolled in Talmud Torah and immediately began making friendships that lasted through her life. Gitta was loyal to her friends giving so much in her understated manner. Being with people was one of the most important aspects of her life. She was surrounded with friends on a trip back to Israel 30 years ago, an event that both established and strengthened relationships that have lasted to this day. In her restaurant on 97th street there was a family and friends table where you could always be assured of a great cup of coffee and lots of attention from Gitta no matter how busy she was. The warmth of friendship continued in the last few months when the crowds in her room at the Cross or Norwood were reminiscent of Hadassah meetings

She made acquaintances easily as people were drawn to her positive energy. She was kind to all and developed a special relationship with the street people that frequented the neighbourhood around her restaurant. In her understated and non-judgmental way she was teaching her daughters and her friends by example of how important it is to respect everyone.

Gitta followed the lessons of her parents, aunts and uncles and lived a life of true Yiddishkeit as she practiced the traditions of kashrut and modesty both in and out of her house.

She helped Robert raise children who will be independent and strong as they go on in their lives without her. Her family inherits her love for Israel and the teachings of our faith.

Gitta was an accomplished woman who earned an Honours degree in Psychology from York University and went on to teach at universities in both Canada and Australia.

It was in Sidney, Australia that she met Robert. He was on the Fencing team at the Hakoah Sports Club and it was love at first sight. After they were married in 1978 Robert found himself studying under Gitta in a Psychology of Design course at the Sydney College of Art. This didn't stop her from failing him on one paper he wrote, possibly because she knew he only worked on it the night before it was due. They lived in Australia until 1985 where they celebrated the birth of their first two children, Ali and Beki. They traveled to Edmonton for a temporary stay so that the girls could spend time with their grandparents, Leo and Chana Sturmwind, but when Leo passed away Gitta realized the need to support her mother and the visit became permanent.

Gitta quickly re-established herself with her friends and the family grew with the birth of Daniella. Her love of antiques, which she began collecting in Australia, developed into a business. She had an appreciation for finer things and objects of art, finding value in items that others would discard. But there were no pictures or sculptures more precious to her than those created by her children that decorated her home and restaurant.

Gitta always seemed to be active, her delicate and fragile hands always busy and her telltale nervous laugh filled the void if she was suddenly at a loss for words. She was there for friends and family whenever needed. No hour was too late for her to lend a helping hand or offer a kind word.

Gitta was always optimistic and the setback that cancer gave her would not go unchallenged. She fought hard against her illness, never complaining despite the needles, chemo, nausea and pain. She had faith that she would be healed and never stopped whatever treatments would help. Just as throughout her life she saw every project to completion this was one more challenge.

She helped co-found the local chapter of l'Chaim a support group for Jewish women with Cancer. Gitta felt the need for this kind of organization when she was undergoing her treatments. Thanks in part to her determination, women who are fighting cancer will find comfort and learn from the experience of others. Just a few weeks ago she lent her support to Hadassah-WIZO for the Medical Services Campaign to raise funds for the Comprehensive Breast Care Institute at Assaf Harofeh Hospital in Israel. Her message was one of hope and gemilut chasadim, acts of not just charity but also personal acts of lovingkindness to bring goodness into this world. The cure that we pray for will come too late for Gitta, but with her help and with the help of those who supported this cause in her name, there will be hope for others.

It was only in her last few days that she admitted to her mother how tired she was and perhaps she sensed that the fight could go on no more. While the rest of us knew the reality of the situation much earlier Gitta never wanted to quit. You couldn't help but leave after a visit with admiration for the way she spoke of regaining her strength and returning home.

In her words to express the feelings of her family Beki continued, " My mom was a healthy woman until two and a half years ago. I remember it like yesterday. I was at summer camp, my first year as a counsellor, Ali was in Jerusalem and Daniella was at Camp BB. My Dad had called, we weren't allowed to receive phone calls so he left a message to call home. For some reason I knew it wasn't anything good. When I called my Dad's voice began to crack, he told me that Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, I don't think I had ever been so scared as I was then. But dad reassured me that it would all be OK. As much as I wish this was a fairy tale and everything ends happily ever after, it doesn't. To all of our dismay, the cancer came back and this time it was more serious. It had come back in the bone, which means chemotherapy and radiation would be needed to fight it. So we started down the difficult path of treatment. I remember when my mom lost her hair, we got her this wig which was quickly nicknamed rodent, it looked very nice and real on her, but sitting on the dresser you didn't know if you should brush it or kill it. That wig was one of the few things we could all laugh at.

After her hair, fell out, she started to get weak, but that only lasted a few days, then Mommy was back to her old self. Mom was doing so well we decided to take a trip to New York, the last trip we ever took as a family. When we got back Mom got sick again. She was in and out of the hospital, then the doctors said she had to stay. When I said earlier that I had never been so scared, I lied, the most scared I have ever been was when my Daddy sat us down, with tears streaming down his face, and he told us "Mommy is dying". What would we do without Mommy. She was the strong one, while Dad would give in to us, Mom would be the one to discipline. She taught me so much even though she never thought I learned. So for the next while we waited for the inevitable to happen. It was so hard to watch my strong Mom become so weak. All I could think of was how much I wanted to turn back time to when we were little and life was good, to when I had my Mommy and cancer didn't. In the two and a half year battle with cancer, she never once gave up. Cancer won the battle but my Mom is still my hero.

Life deals you cards, no matter the hand good or bad, it's all in how you play it. And I'm not ready to throw my cards in. I have a full house, yes it's missing its queen, but I'm still going to play my cards as though she is still there."

It's hard to find any justification for a life taken too soon but perhaps our last memories will be of a young woman who fought to the end with the same determination and caring for others that typified her entire life. She left us knowing she was loved and admired. She passed away surrounded by family knowing that she did all she could do.

I don't believe that Gitta would want us to dwell on the pain she experienced over the last few years but rather on her accomplishments and the legacy she left us.

The tzedakah box that was always present in her room was a reminder that no matter what circumstances we may find ourselves in there is always the need to think of others. The work of Asaf Harofeh Hospital was dear to her heart and the family has requested that you consider a donation to Hadassah –WIZO in Gitta's memory so that the quest for a cure for breast cancer can continue.

I'm sure Gitta would also hope that over the next days and months her friends gather for a great cup of coffee, and remember the wonderful times that they enjoyed.

Intellectually we agree with Ecclesiastes that there is "A time for birthing and a time for dying" but emotionally we find it unfair to accept the loss of a daughter, wife, sister, mother, cousin or friend at such a tender age. Our tradition encourages us to accept the immortality of our loved ones by affirming that the death of an individual does not mean her end. The memories will continue to live on through us.

Moshe Rabeinu came to the conclusion towards the end of his life that "the mysteries belong to God". There are limitations to knowledge and comprehension; there are problems we are not meant to solve. In the face of such mysteries we recite the words of Job: "Adonai has given and Adonai has taken", and we continue to place our faith in God and in the ultimate meaning of life. We have the ability to relate the ways that a person's life has affected our own, for as Moshe assured us, "the revealed things belong to us and to our children."

Tehi neeshmata tzroora beetzror hachaim

May her soul be bound up in the bond of life