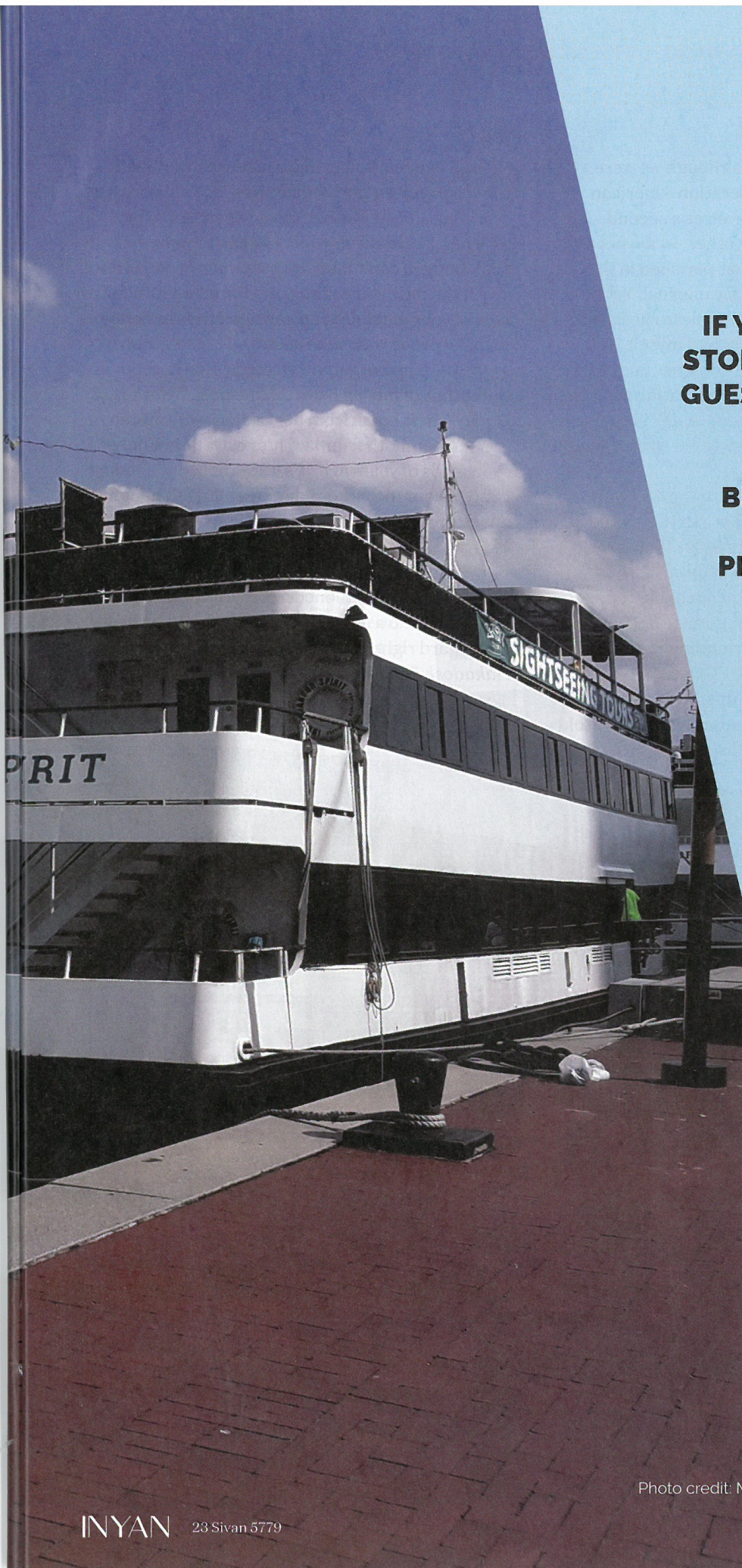


ALL IN THE SAME BOAT... **LITERALLY!**

*A cruise and a
shmooze with valiant
women who take
care of elderly
Holocaust-
survivor
parents and
in-laws.*

The ship at the
harbor.



by **MARGIE PENSAK**

**IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW THEIR
STORIES YOU WOULD NEVER
GUESS. THE SCHOOLGIRLISH
CHIT-CHAT PEPPERED
WITH GIGGLES, THEIR
BEAMING SMILES AS THEY
POSED FOR CELLPHONE
PHOTOS, THEIR CAREFREE
SPRINT UP *THE SPIRIT
OF BALTIMORE* CRUISE
SHIP'S GANGPLANK,
ALL SEEMED QUITE
UNCHARACTERISTIC,
CONSIDERING.**

**I ENTHUSIASTICALLY
WELCOMED
APPROXIMATELY
100 WOMEN TO MY
HOMETOWN AS
THEY FILED OFF
TWO MONSEY
TOUR BUSES AND
JOVIALY MADE
THEIR WAY PAST
THE SHIP'S
OFFICIALS
DRESSED IN
CRISP WHITE
UNIFORMS,
AND
PROCEEDED
ONTO THE
SHIP.**

Photo credit: Margie Pensak

We bonded immediately, although we were worlds apart. As a third-generation American on my maternal side — and even as a second-generation American on the other — I am not aware of even one relative that perished in the Holocaust! Unfortunately, very unusual. Yet I felt an instant affinity between these caregivers of Holocaust survivor parents and myself, as I joined them on their cruise. It was just one of the many fun, inspirational and invigorating activities planned for them in the Baltimore-DC area by the Williamsburg, New York-based non-profit agency Pesach Tikvah.

The women were at the end of the 48-hour respite meant to revitalize them so they could return refreshed and recharged for their heroic efforts of extraordinary *kibbud av va'eim*. I welcomed the rare privilege of speaking to as many of them on the two-hour cruise as I could, while enjoying the sites surrounding Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

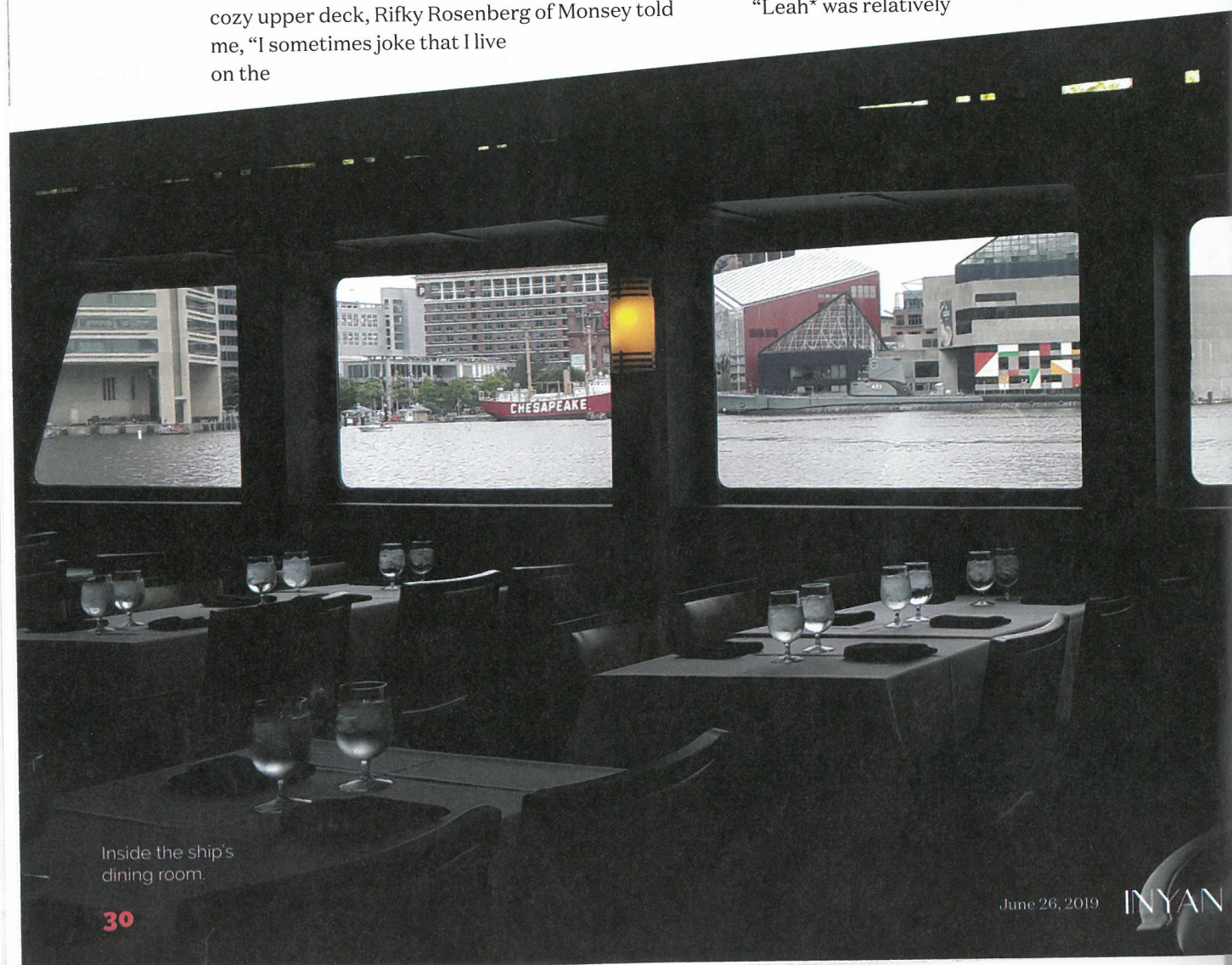
As we basked in the radiant sun on the ship's cozy upper deck, Rifky Rosenberg of Monsey told me, "I sometimes joke that I live on the

George Washington Bridge, because my mother, *zohl zayn gezunt und shtark*, lives in Williamsburg; every Tuesday is Mother's Day, when I go to be with her.... I always say that you can't live in the past, but you can't take the past out of you. If you live in the past you get bogged down, but it is still a part of your make-up and you need the resilience to make peace with your past."

Rochel Ginsberger interjected, "Rus had the *zechus* of having Dovid Hamelech, *Melech Hamoshiach*, come from her because she was so good to her mother-in-law. It's relevant not only thousands of years ago, it's relevant today — being good to your mother-in-law pays off! I've thought about this many times, because sometimes it is not easy.... A good deed goes far; Hashem has a very good bookkeeping system."

Chane Eizikovits concurred. "How many times in life do we do a good deed and we don't receive the reward right away? We must always know that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* has an excellent accounting system... And here's a story to prove it.

"Leah* was relatively



Inside the ship's dining room.

young when she was diagnosed with a terminal illness. The doctors, without permission from *Shamayim*, said she had two months to live. With the help of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* she defied the doctors, and went on to live for another nine years, three months and ten days. After she passed away, a member of the family mentioned that 25 years earlier she had taken in her mother-in-law, without considering the toll it would take on her family dynamics, on her health, and on her finances. She did it willingly and with a smile — and kept it up for exactly nine years, three months and ten days! So there are times that we do get a glimpse of the reward. May *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* help that we all be rewarded *oif ah gutte oifen* — not in trying circumstances.”

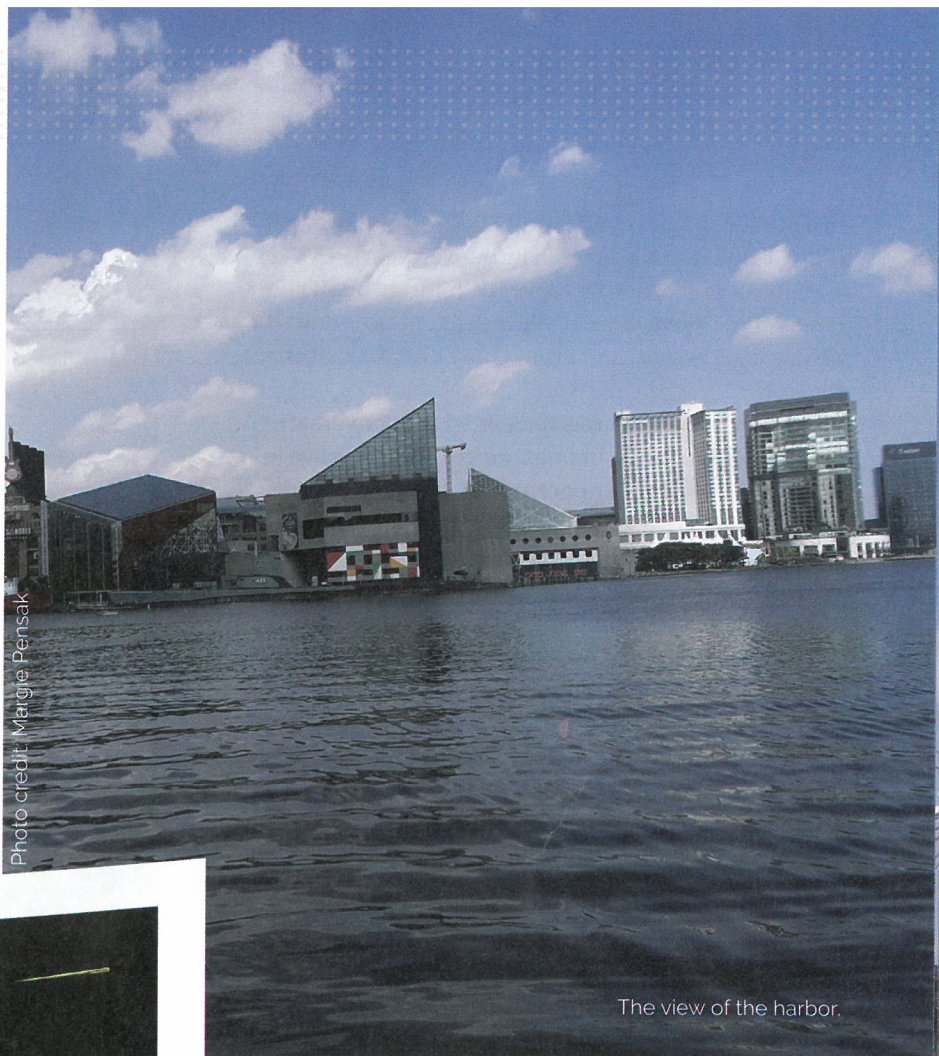


Photo credit: Margie Pensak

The view of the harbor.

As we made our way down the upper-deck stairs to the dining hall of the ship where a delicious O'Fishel Kosher Caterers salmon buffet lunch awaited us, Rochel added: “We are the sandwich generation and have a lot to juggle. We have our kids, *b”H*, who are young and really need their mothers’ help. Then we have our parents who really need our help. We are trying to help the young ones and trying to help the old ones. We all have our obligations — we are also trying to help our husbands with *parnassah* — and there is not an extra minute in the day. It is very, very important that we have the right perspectives in mind, because if you waste your time with the non-important, there is definitely no time for the important.

“Our mothers-in-law take up a lot of our time,” continues Rochel. “Most of us are close to 70, so you can imagine that our mothers-in-law are 90 plus. They need our time, our patience, which there is really very little of, so how are we going to do that? We have to think, ‘Is this more important or is that more important?’ If you know what is more important, you drop what you know isn’t, so you stretch your time there.”

During lunch one caregiver said, “I go to my in-laws once a week, but what I pack into that one Thursday! If I work on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and every second Sunday, when do I make Shabbos and Yom Tov? My mother-in-law wasn’t well a few years ago and she was



Photo credit: Margie Pensak

in a nursing home. I said I would take Thursdays, but I didn't think it would stretch into seven years!

"She loves me. She has several children, but if she needs something, it is usually me that gets or does it.... I know it's a *zechus*, and even if they live to 120, it is not forever."

Miriam, another caregiver, joined the conversation. "We are a family of 11 siblings, *ka"h*. Most of us live in Williamsburg near our parents. My father suffered a stroke 17 years ago, when he was very young, *zohl ehr zayn gezunt*. It affected his speech, which is very difficult for us, but we communicate with our eyes. He is surrounded by his children and grandchildren; he goes to shul every day, and we have family helping him. My mother is aging as well. Taking care of him for so many years took a toll on her. We are there for them — 11 kids are not enough! We never leave them alone for a Shabbos or Yom Tov meal. Each of us girls has a day, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Then my nephew comes in and takes my father to *Minchah*, and someone else comes to learn with him. We occupy his time. It's beautiful. We are such a united family."

When we were up to dessert we played a lively, comical trivia game show hosted by the very entertaining Baruch Perlowitz. The women themselves came up with the questions for the show, which provided them with non-stop laughter for close to an hour. They pressed on their buzzers to vote for what they thought the answer was to questions such as: "What color is the black box of an airplane?" "In which park was the World's Fair in 1964?" and "On which holiday can you have a three-day Yom Tov in Israel?"

Baruch really seemed to understand his contestants, interspersing the game with what sounded like inside jokes in Yiddish. No wonder. After the game Baruch mentioned to me, "The people who went through the Holocaust are the victims; their children are the survivors. I know because my grandfather was in Auschwitz..."

Before we disembarked *The Spirit of Baltimore*, I asked the women what they got out of their trip. One said, "It gives us a respite, a breather. We aren't thinking about our stressors for the moment... I tell my children that the most precious things in life are what money can't buy — family, love and happiness; no material thing can fill that need."

"I don't know all the women on the ship, but I would venture to say that most of them will come away from their tasks of helping their parents and in-laws with *chizuk*. We walk away uplifted. There is a *chiyus* in doing what we are doing."

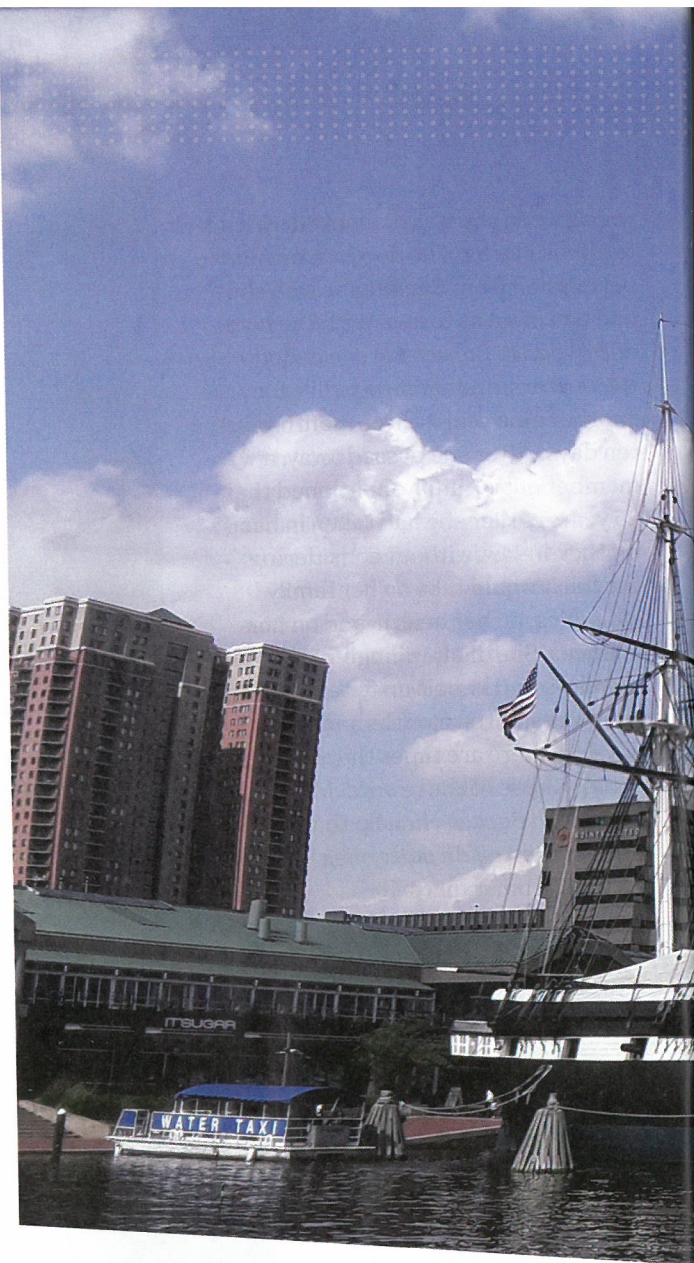
"I love being here because I feel loved and cherished," says another. "It's very inspirational meeting all these

women and hearing their life stories, sharing the hardships of taking care of parents — and the fun part as well."

Yet another woman admits, "I'm not the caretaker; my sister should really be here. Our father died when my mother was 40. I was 5 years old when he died. My sister was 12 and took care of the family of seven. She got married and then divorced, then took care of our grandmother. Now my mother is 87, and my sister is living with my mother and doing a great job. Whatever my mother wants, she gets for her. I wish my sister could be here, but she is not as sociable as I am — probably because she has given her life away for others. That's very special!"

Shifra and Sara also spoke about their sisters. "Whatever we are doing here and enjoying, we feel bad that our other sisters can't join us, because they deserve it just as we do," says Shifra.

"Sara lives in the same house with our mother, who is 95, *ka"h*. She is 24/7 with our mother, going up and down the stairs every few minutes."





Another view of the harbor.

Photo credit: Margie Pensak

“When I have to leave her, for example, to go shopping, my mind is at home,” says Sara. “Even if she has someone there with her, I wonder what Mommy is doing now; what she may need from me... We are so attached... This getaway is a wonderful thing for us.”

Another caregiver mentions, “We have it so special; we don’t take this get-away for granted... Going home, I really want to give my all to my parents. Somehow, they gave us spiritual fortitude that will definitely make us better, *iy”H*.”

As I walked my new friends back to their buses, Shoshy Soibelman, a Pesach Tikvah case management captain, mentioned that once a month they have a get-together for the survivors to socialize with friends.

“The most rewarding part of my job is meeting survivors, because they are people with resilience, *emunah* and *bitachon*. Nothing stopped them in life. I

work with survivors who lost everything — children, parents, sisters and brothers — yet they stand strong. Their *emunah* in *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is intact. They never question what He did. They are grateful that He saved their lives.

“They tell me: ‘I was one of ten children and I am so thankful to the *Eibishter* that He saved me, at least. He gave me life so I am able to continue what my parents did and raise *Yiddishe kinder*, *einiklach*, and *ihr-einaklach*, and I am so grateful to Him.’”

In parting, before Debra Gewirtz of Williamsburg stepped up on the bus she concluded, “It gives me a lot of *chizuk* to see how others get through hard times. Everyone here feels that she is doing what she has to do; we don’t think we are special.” ■

**Name has been changed.*