

Mrs. Philip (Rebecca) Esformes

Born April 15, 1922 in New Jersey, Rebecca Esformes is a descendent of a proud line of Sephardi Jews hailing from Salonika (Thessaloniki, Greece). She was educated at the McDowell School of Design in New York, achieving her Instructor's Degree and launching a career in fashion. She married Philip, a Captain in the U.S. Army, 67 years ago, and with him moved to and from Missouri, then to New Jersey, and finally, upon his discharge, settled in California where Philip established a successful leather business. They had two children, Rabbi Morris and Flora.

A pillar of Rebecca's spiritual life from an early age was *chesed*. Paramount in her life was her work on behalf of Jewish immigrants, particularly the survivors arriving in America from a devastated Salonika, hosting these refugees from Greece, as well as those arriving from Israel and Hungary (in the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956). Many of these refugees lived in her home, where she supplied them with money and clothing, until she was able to find them housing and initial employment.

She especially remembers caring for a frightened little girl who had been hidden in a basement during the war. This child's father was killed, her mother survived. Rebecca was charged with ensuring that this terrified child arrive properly dressed and emotionally prepared to her mother's remarriage. She remembers that this was no easy feat.

As her organizational ability became wider known, Rebecca became active in the Council for Jewish Women, and was the first Sephardic woman to be on the Board of the JCC. She found time to volunteer as a Ladino and Spanish translator at Cedar-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. When Morris became increasingly *frum* and yearned to attend Yeshiva, Philip and Rebecca did something extraordinary. They, too, became fully observant, agreed to Morris' request and sent him a thousand miles away to attend Hebrew Theological College in Chicago. In addition, they placed Flora in Bais Yaakov Day School in Los Angeles.

When Philip's business took a downturn and they had to earn money to pay for Yeshiva and Day School, although "the kind and caring Rabbi Babad, President of Hebrew Theological College, told me not to worry about tuition. Morris was always welcome." It is for this reason, among others, the Yeshiva in Skokie holds such a warm place in Rebecca's memory. Nonetheless, Rebecca went back to work, designing and altering clothes for the movie stars, including Bette Davis, Elizabeth Scott and Loretta Young. This profession would have become extremely lucrative had she been willing to compromise on the sanctity of Shabbos. Mrs. Esformes gave up her job and continued working in fashion at her home. In addition, she worked in a bakery and taught Home Economics and Hygiene at Rambam School and Bais Yaakov, where she was a favorite of the students, serving as chaperone on school trips and functions. She remembers the years she taught at Bais Yaakov and served on the Board as her fondest, although she found herself in an Ashkanazi world and had to adapt.

Rebecca Esformes is an independent, highly educated woman, fervent in her acts of *chesed* and religious beliefs and fiercely proud of her children, six grandchildren and numerous (as she says – never enough!) great-grandchildren – all of whom adhere to the holy traditions of their family and Sephardic heritage. She takes greatest pride in that her very successful children, Marty and Flora Weiss and Rabbi Morris and Delecia, follow in her footsteps, and are steeped in public and private *chesed* and philanthropic pursuits which make them world renowned as builders and transformers of many institutions and communities.