

Roma Barnes

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

My name is Roma (Rozenman) Barnes. I was born in Demblin, Poland on March 15, 1930. We were a family of four, my mother, father and younger brother, Sevek. I also had grandparents on both sides. Also aunts and Uncles and cousins. I came from a well-to-do, middle class family. My father's family owned the sawmill factory in our town. My father used to travel all over Poland to buy trees. There were three sons in my father's family – my father, Benjamin Rozenman, and my Uncles Samson and Moshe. My father also had three sisters – Ela, Sala and Chana Leah. On my mother's side, there was my mother, Chaya Szajnzicht, and her four sisters, Eva, Malkalaya, the twins - Raisela and Faigela, and three brothers – Chamuel, Yitzchak and Sruel. We didn't really have the need for friends, because we had such a close, large, extended family. I had a happy childhood.

When the Germans bombarded Poland in September 1939, my family escaped to the villages nearby, and we hid in the forests. I was 9 years old. We returned to the town, which was now occupied. And I remember how we buried many household items of value, such as crystal, silver, the Bible and the Siddur, so that they would be safe from the Germans, and we could reclaim them after the war.

I have a strong memory of being in the town square and watching the spectacle of the Germans shaving and cutting the men's beards on trucks (the Hassidim, the Rabbis, and the old men), and making a mockery out of them.

From the invasion to the time of the first roundup in 1942, I remember being restricted to a certain area of town and only living near Jewish people. I believe my family was safe during this period and not as threatened as other Jews in the town, because of the sawmill factory, which was half owned by a Pole.

At Passover time, in May 1942, the Germans forced all the Jews in my town, from their homes, and into the town square. As I stood with my family, my mother said, "You have to survive!" She gave each of us, my brother and I, a bedspread, and said, "Run!" And I did run. I put a little scarf over my hair (so I looked like a peasant). I ran and ran and ran, until I came to a village. I still had the beautiful bedspread with me. I hid in an outhouse. The Polish farmer, who owned the farmhouse nearby, found me. He said that if I didn't give him the bedspread he would tell the Germans where I was hiding. I did give him the bedspread. After a certain time I came back into the town. I saw some of my friends, people I knew, dead, on the synagogue windowsills. The doorways, the well, blood streaming out. My parents and brother were gone, and I was alone.

My Uncle Chamuel was looking for me and he found me wandering in the streets, looking for my family. He took me into his home. He was getting passports ready for us. He had three

children, two sons and a daughter. We were just ready to leave for Switzerland when someone reported him and he was shot.

Eventually I came to live in the airport labor camp next to our town where the Germans confined us in a fenced barbed wire area. My remaining relatives were also in this camp. I remember there weren't any old people or babies in the camp. I worked with other young people in the fields, planting potatoes, carrots, and beets. We also pulled weeds in the town square.

There was another roundup where they were putting Jews in cattle trains and I escaped at the trains and I tried to sneak back into the airport camp. When I was outside the barbed wire of the camp two Germans came up. They had their guns pointing at me. They said in German, "What are you doing here?" I pretended I didn't understand. They asked me again, in Polish. I had picked up a stick like I was taking care of the chickens and geese. I answered them in Polish that I was watching the geese. Inside of the camp, behind the barbed wire, the rest of the family, my Aunts, were standing and praying and saying the Shema. The Germans began to move away from me and every few steps they would turn around and see what I was really doing. I sat there. I didn't move one inch. Eventually the Germans disappeared out of my sight. My Aunts were beside themselves that I survived, because I was so close to death. At night, I sneaked back into the camp.

I was determined to survive, by escaping and pretending to be Polish. My survival depended on not looking Jewish and not having a Jewish accent when I spoke Polish.

In 1944, the Germans put those from the airport camp on cattle trains. It was the first time I felt I couldn't escape any more. I was tired, but the determination was still there, to survive. It was very imperative for me to survive due to the influence of my mother's words that we had to survive. The Germans took us to Radom, and then to Czenstehova, to camp Hasag – an ammunition factory. I remember how they took some of the children and threw them into a hole they had dug and then filled it with dirt and threw grenades in. In the ammunition factory we made casings and ammunition shells. We worked in shifts. My shift was at night. The Russians liberated us in January 1945.

The Jewish Refugee Committee was responsible for finding the children who survived. They placed me in an orphanage in Lodz. I was with my cousin Cesia, my Uncle Chamuel's daughter. My cousin's brother Moniec then came and the three of us went by ourselves to Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia, a very dangerous and difficult journey on train and foot. My cousin Moniec had heard there would be a children's transport to make Aliya to Israel. The Jewish Refugee Committee arranged this first transport of 300 displaced children.

First, we went to Prague, and then by plane to Windemere, Scotland, where the Committee rehabilitated us. We all then went to England, where I lived, worked and went to school for seven years. There I met an American who I married and I had my first child, Benjamin in

France. When he was six months old, we came to live in California. I had three more children, Helen, Stephanie and Mark.

In the photo of me, there is a picture of my mother, Chaya Szajnzicht Rozenman and another of my Aunt Eva and another of my Grandmother Mindel and my twin Aunts, Raisela and Faigela . These were taken before the War. Of my relatives, on my mother's side, only my Aunt Eva and Malka survived. On my father's side, only my Aunt Sala survived, as well as the wife of my Uncle Samson. Some of my cousins also survived. The Menorah in the picture was in my family for 300 years. My Aunt Eva found it buried after the War and then gave it to me. I later learned that my parents and my brother were taken on one of the first transports to Sobibor along with 2000 Jews from my town, where they were all gassed. This was in the first round-up in my town, on May 7, 1942, which I have described.