

Esther Kozlowski

Wartime Experience: Lived on the run in Poland

I was born in Wodzislaw, Poland, October 12, 1914. My name was Estera Naiman. We were six children in the family, four brothers and two sisters. My oldest brother's name was Moshe; we called him Monick. He was the most beautiful man I have ever seen, blue eyes and black hair. His family, his wife Molly and three children, lived in the same house with us. They were planning to send their daughter who was not much younger than I to Jerusalem to the university. I really don't know why they did not. After Monick there was my only sister Anna, we called Anika. After Anika was Karol, who mother called Kopele. I once said to mother that she loved him best, and she said that each and every child of hers has a special place in her heart. But Karol was a real wonderful man, always helping everybody financially and very generous. In a way he was instrumental in my survival. The fourth one was Josef, the genius. He was killed by Ukrainian bandits along with sixty Poles and was buried in a mass grave three days before the war ended. His wife and only daughter survived. His wife watched the execution of the sixty Poles and her husband and she had to dig the grave while the drunken murderers were joking and laughing. She passed away in 1996, never recovered from a mental illness that plagued her the rest of her life after that execution.

Now it is me that you want to read or hear about. Well, I came from a large and happy family. There was great happiness in my parents' house. We all had great respect for each other. Our parents did not mix in our business, and we all loved one another. People really were jealous how we all got along with one another.

I remember the last Rosh Hashonah in my parents' house. We were all dressed up and going to shul. I was already pregnant with my son and my husband and I wanted an abortion. Mother caught me throwing up and I had to promise her that I would see our professor in Krakow before I did anything. He talked me out of the abortion and the 5th of June I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy, Moshe Mandelman not quite three months before the war started.

And that's when all our tragedies started. Our business was wholesale and retail lumber for builders, mines as well as furniture makers. There were two offices and a big huge yard with railroad tracks that brought in the lumber and unloaded it straight into the shops where the machines prepared the lumber for any use. We were not the richest people, but we could afford to go twice a year for vacations and to keep a live-in maid. My son was born into a comfortable living. When my father came for my son's bris he was so happy, he cried. My husband and I meant to go to a famous resort but no one could predict what would happen in the next few weeks. The nurse was called into military duty and the first of September our town was bombed. We had to run for the shelter and my father could not watch me and the baby exposed to those horrible times. He asked one of the field workers if he would drive me, my husband, and baby to my in-laws, 60 km away. I can't describe the chaos on the roads, but we arrived uninjured and we did try to make the best of it. In order to cook the formulas for the baby, I had to get up at 2 a.m. Our whole household came as well as many other family

members came out to this huge farm. There was a large front garden and since there were only two kitchens, we often ate the fruit straight from the trees.

Finally, after about two months, my father sent for us and we returned home. My child was sick with diarrhea by then, and I went to Krakow to the clinic for help. My child got better. I could not get into my apartment. The lumberyard was taken over by a turncoat. I went to his office and begged him for help. He had a Nazi pin in his lapel and he did not even ask me to sit down. I told him that I was desperate and that I didn't have any money for milk for my baby. He took out five German marks and put them on the counter. I left and I hope to this day that he choked on those five marks which was at that time about one dollar. I went to some of our debtors and I collected about 2,000 marks and that lifted my spirits and made me believe that not all people are monsters. Some of those people, mostly German, gave me new clothes for the baby. In the meantime, the authorities let me in to my sister's apartment. I stayed about a month but I did not go home empty-handed. When my baby saw me he did not even recognize me. His eyes turned black from blue and his lower lip curled up to cry. But when I said, "Don't you know mama" he threw his little arms around my neck and did not want to let go. After all those experiences, I was sick in bed for a month.

The Germans were everywhere. Little by little they took away everything that had value, the fur coats even the fur collars, the gold, the silver. My son was already two years old and had whooping cough, and I begged the Germans not to take the little coat away from him. Leave it to my baby, please, as a present. They said we have no orders to give a present and get lost you dirty Jews. Oh, how I suffered.

When it became common knowledge where the transports of the Jews were going, I became very restless and being the rebel in the family, I decided rather to die from one bullet with my baby than to suffocate in a cattle train. I made only one attempt the night before I escaped to ask for help from a gentile friend who was in love with me. He promised to take me and the baby to a remote village to his friend. Coming home, my oldest brother Monick told me that his daughter was leaving with an engineer as a governess to his children. I went out to say goodbye to her and asked the engineer to please come into the house for one minute. I took him to the little room that my husband and I occupied, and he stood at the foot of my son's little bed. He went to his office and brought me a note with an address, and that began my salvation and at the same time, my torture. But for some reason or other God wanted me to live. There were places that I stayed three days; there were places that I stayed for months. It would take ten volumes to write my story in detail.

In September 1944, the liberators found me in a remote village ten kilometers from Treblinka where I made my living by digging potatoes and writing letters for the Polish women in German to their slave-laboring husbands and sons in Germany. I survived the Germans, and finally, the Russians crossed the river with their rifles carried above their heads. They almost collapsed at our cellar door where we were hiding from the bombs. But the next day we were free. I borrowed some clothing and off I went to Dublin where there was a concentration of some

Jews, mostly from Russia. I found an aunt of my late husband. She gave me money and some clothing. I bought for my son boots and a little fur vest. It was February 28, 1945.

In the meantime, my youngest brother found us at the village. My husband had been killed in 1943. We thought that no one else survived. For several months I spent time every day searching the announcements on the walls of the Jewish committee, and there was the name of my oldest brother and his son. I ran to tell that they were returning from Buchenwald and all the seven Hells, emaciated but alive. I took them to my apartment, which was spacious and airy. I was working and that is why I could keep the apartment.

In 1945, I lost my job because I did not sign up for the Communists and I lost my apartment. I went to my sister-in-law where we got jobs maintaining a government grocery store. But it was not a way to live or to die. I took my child by his little hand and my rucksack on my back and off I went again, crossing illegal borders. Finally, I found myself and my little boy in a quarantine camp in Germany, living under the most horrible conditions. I spent five years in different German DP camps, always with my son. I worked as a secretary to a legal counselor.

A law was passed, allowing those Jews who came to Germany after the pogroms to come to the U.S. I registered in the spring of 1951. On June 16, 1951, I arrived in New York. Three months later I married Harry Koslowski who I knew in a German DP camp. He had a brother in California and since then I have lived in San Francisco. Harry died in 1970. I raised my grandson Rafael since the age of twelve after my son's divorce. When Rafael was in high school, I was taken seriously ill and he lived with his English teacher, Eleanor Burke and her family for three years. He now has graduated from Yale and intends to study law.