

Erna Pinto

Wartime Experiences: Camp Survivors

Photographed with her brother Fred Heilbronn and her sister Hella Weiss

Erna Heilbronn Pinto born Dec. 5, 1922

Fred Heilbronn born March 14, 1925

Hella Heilbronn Weiss born October 29, 1934

Legerich, Germany, a small town near the Dutch border, was the birthplace of Erna Heilbronn Pinto, Fred Heilbronn, Hella Heilbronn Weiss, and two other brothers, Philip, and Gunther. Their mother died in childbirth delivering Gunther 1938, Erna and Fred were forced to discontinue their studies. In March 1939, Erna, Fred, and Hella were sent for safety's sake on a children's transport to Rotterdam, Holland, where they lived in a children's shelter for almost a year. Gunther was adopted by an aunt and uncle and left for Cuba, and Philip crossed into Holland with a Zionist youth group.

After selling their home and business, Bendix and Johanna Heilbronn met three of their children in Rotterdam and went to Westerbork, a camp built by the Dutch government to house the immigrants who arrived daily seeking refuge. In May 1940, the Germans invaded Holland. They took control of Westerbork and used it as a transport and distribution center. Every Tuesday in 1942, the transports left Westerbork; they took the Jews to concentration and death camps. Bendix was among those sent to Auschwitz, where he perished; Johanna and Hella were sent to Theresienstadt; and Fred and Erna remained in Westerbork until liberation in May 1945.

While in Westerbork, Fred worked for the Dutch Underground, helping to smuggle Jews out of the camp to safety. For this work, he was awarded a certificate of thanks from the Dutch government. After liberation, Fred and Erna lived with an aunt and uncle in Amsterdam. In 1947, they immigrated to the United States. Their first home was in Illinois, where Erna worked as a manicurist and Fred worked as a cabinetmaker and livestock dealer.

In 1949, Erna moved to San Francisco. In August, she married Erich Pinto, who was also a survivor from Westerbork. In 1952, they moved to Petaluma, where Erich went into business as a livestock dealer. In 1976, they returned to San Francisco. Erich had become gravely ill, and he passed away in 1979. They had two daughters and one grandson. Erna continues to live in San Francisco; she keeps busy with friends and families, and she is active in Jewish organizations. She has two daughters, Beverly and Ellen, and two grandchildren. Fred remained in Illinois until 1952, at which time he moved to San Francisco. He married Evelyn Levy in 1953. They have lived in Modesto since 1957, and have a son and daughter, Ben and Janet. Hella came to the US in 1953 with her mother and joined her brother and sister. She married and had three daughters and a grandchild.

Individual experience described by Hella Heilbronn Weiss

In 1939 when I was five years old, I was forced to leave Germany with my sister Erna and my brother Fred. Two months later, my mother and father joined us in Rotterdam. In April 1940 we went on a transport to Westerbork, a Dutch concentration camp. I stayed with my parents in the same barracks. On January 18, 1944, we were called upon to leave Westerbork by train to go on to Theresienstadt. My father was assigned to a men's ghetto/barracks while my mother and I remained together, at first in a women's ghetto and later at a children's home. I was able to see my father daily, and I could wander around with the other children. My mother worked in a factory afternoons and evenings. October 16, 1944, my father and I were "selected" for a transport to a camp the Germans referred to as "Arbeit Macht Frei"; they did not say that it was Auschwitz. When my mother "came home" she did not see us and sensed what had occurred. She went to the train, found me, and took me off. A Nazi saw this and came to her from behind; he told my mother that she could not take her child. She replied: "If I can't have the child, I will go with her." The Nazi then brought me to my mother and told her that he would hide me at his girlfriend's home just outside the camp. My father left on the train, and we never saw him again.

Every day for three months, the Nazi who had allowed me to remain behind went to my mother and told her how I was doing. When there were no longer any transports leaving from Theresienstadt, he brought me back to her.