

Ann Weinstock

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born on September 5, 1920, in a small town in Germany. I had a wonderful life with my parents and two brothers until 1933, when Hitler came to power and all the Jewish children were thrown out of school. My parents sent me to relatives in Berlin so that I could attend a Jewish day school and finish my education. I was only thirteen, and it was very hard for me to leave my parents at this time. Berlin had thirteen Jewish day schools, and they filled up quickly. After I graduated from high school, I went into nursing training at the Jewish Hospital in Berlin. This was the last class, and I was lucky to get in. I graduated in September 1940 as a registered nurse.

My profession directed my life during and after the war. I was "protected" until March 1943 because I was trained as a surgical nurse, but when I got notice to go to Bergen-Belsen, I ran away in the middle of the night. It was very difficult to escape because the hospital was surrounded by Gestapo agents, but I managed to escape anyway. A Gentile driver, who was a decent man, smuggled me out of the hospital through the gate where the Gestapo were posted as guards. I lay on a stretcher with a sheet covering me, pretending to be dead.

A non-Jewish aunt helped me go into hiding. She also helped my late husband, who was already in hiding, with food and moral support. It was very difficult to live in fear night and day, but I was determined to survive. I was a fighter and I lived day by day. Sometimes I slept in a bed and sometimes I slept in the ruins of Berlin amid scurrying mice and rats. I learned to be hungry from March 1943 until December 1944, at which time I was caught.

I was considered a political prisoner because I did not obey the Nazis, so they took me to the death camp of the Kleine Festung in Theresienstadt. It was horrible! We were made to go into a gas chamber, but the war was nearly over and the Germans had run out of gas. They let us out and took us to a field in order to shoot us. The Swiss Red Cross, in the ghetto of Theresienstadt at the time, heard the shooting and freed us. The Russians were everywhere. I lived because I was strong and young and the war had come to an end.

When I returned to Berlin, I learned that everyone in my loving family was gone. It was terrible to be alone. My husband's family was gone too. Both of us were alone. In 1945 we got married, and in 1947 we emigrated to the United States. After a week in San Francisco, I found a job as a nurse at Mount Zion Hospital. While there, I met people who treated me like a daughter. They encouraged me to move to the town of Petaluma and helped us to buy the property I still live in. We had a big house, and I did not want to leave my first child with a baby-sitter, so again my profession helped me. I started a small nursing home, which I ran for many years. My husband helped me until he became ill and was unable to work. He passed away in 1976. My husband and I were very active in the Petaluma Jewish Community. I was a past and present president of Hadassah.