

## Tauba Weiss

### Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born in 1926, in Lask, Poland. My Father Noah had a bakery and Mother Sabina worked there when not caring for the children. We were a family of ten people, eight children and my mother and father. We must have had over 65 relatives--aunts, uncles, and lots and lots of cousins.

I was a happy-go-lucky 13- year-old girl when a new chapter in my life began--a chapter I wish would not ever have opened up. It was September, a Friday in 1939 . It was warm around noontime, I remember. My mother was cooking potatoes for lunch. All of a sudden, planes came overhead; they started to bomb our town. War had broken out!

People ran and just scattered themselves everywhere. I ran into a nearby ditch. I can still recall, looking up and seeing the plane coming lower to the ground. I actually saw the faces of the soldiers flying the plane, laughing, and I saw machine guns. I can remember older men in the temple several weeks earlier talking of a war to come. Some men believed the Messiah was coming. I knew that day in 1939 this was no Messiah--this was HITLER!

We were not sure what to do: run and hide, stay put--we just didn't know. My father suggested making pouches for keeping money. I can remember sewing these pouches for my brothers and sisters. They were small with a rope that would fit around your neck. Inside, my father put a few dollars for us to have and try to hide.

There were four bakeries in the town, and the Germans closed all of them except for my father's.

There must have been maybe 3,500 Jewish people in our town. After a while the Germans condensed our town into a Ghetto. There were now two main long streets; we were surrounded by barbed wire fences. Each day the German trucks would come with their sirens blaring and picked people to work for them. Sometimes the people came back, sometimes we never saw them again. The Germans needed people to work near a train station. I remember two brothers named Cher. They were caught with coal in their pockets and put into jail in Lask. There were maybe ten people in the jail; one was my brother, another a cousin. The soldiers decided to take everyone out of jail and hang them. There was an official of our town who talked the Germans out of killing everyone in the jail. Unfortunately, the two brothers were taken to the center of town where everyone could watch them being hanged.

I remember having a dog named Azza. He would always bark like crazy when the German soldiers came around. One day a soldier shot him. I screamed not to, but Azza was hit. It was only a dog, but he was a member of our family. I remember the Germans taking the rabbi, who was like the Pope to us. They took him outside in front of other people, undressed him, shaved

him, and beat him. They would take very religious men and shave off their beards in front of everyone.

Several years passed. I remember more trucks and sirens coming, and all of us left in the town went into a church. The older people who couldn't walk anymore were shot; graves were dug, and they were thrown in. We were closed up in that church for three days. We had no food. The children were hungry and crying. There was a woman who was pregnant. I remember her being taken away in a wagon, being pushed toward the cemetery, and while in labor being buried alive!

I visited Poland maybe 6 years ago, and we went to where those graves were. A Polish woman said she remembered seeing the dirt moving because so many people were buried alive.

After those days in the church, the doors were thrown open and people were told to go to the right or left outside. Selections were being made, but we didn't know for what. My mother and six of my brothers and sisters went to one side. My dad and one brother went to the other. I ran over to my father's side, followed by a cousin. I got in line, but my cousin was shot.

We marched to fields where we dug holes and stayed there for days. My father, brother, and I went to the Lodz ghetto. We found out later the other members of our family went to Chelmno. We saw trucks daily carting people away, but we still didn't know where they were going.

Six people were put into a room of a large house in August of 1942. I was still with my father and brother. We were there for two years. I was assigned a job as a janitor cleaning the streets. After that, I worked in a straw factory. To get to work, I had to cross the Lutomeska Bridge, which was very far from where we were living. I remember having to cross over dead people to and from the bridge. I was lucky to have come back every night.

My job was to braid the straw for the German soldiers' boots so their feet would keep warm when the weather was cold. We had to wait in line for something to eat, which didn't last very long at all. The German soldiers were going around and forcing people to give up their children. One woman refused, and as she walked away holding her child, a soldier shot them. My brother got work in an iron factory, while my father worked in a bakery. The factory was called the Metal Resort. The three of us were able to hide at the Metal Resort, but then cattle trains came and we were carried off to Auschwitz.

The trip from Lodz to Auschwitz took only three hours, but these trains full of people in the heat with no food or water drove back and forth, back and forth, for three days. People suffocated from the heat and died of starvation. We arrived in the evening. There were lights, but the sky was dark because of the smoke from the crematorium. It smelled like burning; we didn't know then that it was body flesh!

We got on a list of 500 people to work at an ammunition factory. I remember seeing dead bodies hanging on the wire fences. I had to have my head shaved and had my face put into a

barrel of liquid to sterilize me. How I cried! Another selection was made, and we went to Birkenau, then off to Stutthof. The Nazis had separated the men and the women. I could only see my father and brother through the barbed wire fences.

We slept in barracks. They would pull us out at night in the bitter cold to count us. We had no water or bathrooms there either. We got soup to eat. If you were able to get up and get in line to get the soup you could eat, otherwise you didn't eat. We were beaten in the barracks and had cold water thrown on us.

From Stutthof we were sent to Dreisen in Saxony. I was back with my father and brother. We worked making bullets in another ammunition factory from 1944 to 1945. I was also chosen to cook in the kitchen. I worked in a basement making the bullets for the ammunition. I had to carry boxes of bullets that weighed 100 pounds up the flights of stairs, and when I had trouble carrying them because they were so heavy, I was hit with the butt of a rifle.

There was a man named Kremuvich. He had young girls brought to his room at night to sleep with him. When a soldier came to get me one night, I held onto the doorknob so tight, he couldn't pry me off. I ran and hid in bunches of wire wrapped in a round circle in the basement for two days.

My father was worried because he hadn't seen me. When I had finally come out and told my father what almost happened, he told the others and people went on strike. After this incident, no other girls were brought to this man's room. We were very lucky we all didn't get killed! We were given two meals a day here and I believe there were bathrooms.

In February of 1945, Russians began bombing. We didn't know who it was. The third floor of our building was on fire. Running through the basement, I was cut by flying glass. My father told me to run out and away to a certain bombed house. I ran and was in this empty house for almost 3 days. I remember hearing the voices of my father and brother when they came for me. I was so weak I could hardly speak when they found me.

We found a woman that knew my father from his bakery, and she took us home with her and helped us get cleaned up and dressed. She arranged for papers for us with new names. They were Polish names. My name was Bronca Kencherska. We were picked up on the street and sent to jail. A Polish woman came to the jail because she needed people to work on her farm. There were ten of us in the jail, and we were all chosen to go with this woman. We worked in fields, growing vegetables for her. I was also chosen to work in the kitchen, cooking. I would cook and heat up a fire with the needles of pinecones. My dad would have nightmares in his sleep and speak out loud in Yiddish. They thought my cooking smelled like Jewish cooking, but we still pretended to be Polish.

We heard bombs again one day, and as I looked outside, I saw some soldiers crawling on their stomachs and huge German tanks outside the home we were in. I was grabbed by one soldier

and taken up against a wall, where I believed I was to be shot. One German yelled out Frilsen Wilnot, which I understood to mean "Get out of this place." I remember leaning down and throwing sand in the face of the soldier who I believed was going to shoot me, and I ran and left.

It was the Russians who liberated us. My father found a wagon and some horses, and I was hidden under straw in the wagon as we tried to make our way home to Lask, Poland. We knew Russians liked to rape the women, so my father made sure I was well hidden. When we did arrive back, we learned that the rest of my family was all gone. I had lost six brothers and sisters and my mother at the tender age of thirteen .

I married in 1945 in Poland and came to the United States in 1951, going first to San Francisco, then settling in Petaluma, California, and becoming chicken farmers. Some days I feel lucky to have survived, some others I am not so sure. It's hard to remember everything that happened so long ago. It's just hard to want to remember those things.