

MARIA SEGAL PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, circa 1930-circa 1955
2005.160.1

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW
Washington, DC 20024-2126
Tel. (202) 479-9717
e-mail: reference@ushmm.org

Descriptive summary

Title: Maria Segal photograph collection

Dates: circa 1930-circa 1955

Accession number: 2005.160.1

Creator: Segal, Maria.

Extent: .5 linear feet (1 folder)

Repository: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, 100 Raoul Wallenberg Place SW, Washington, DC 20024-2126

Abstract: The collection contains photographs documenting the Holocaust-era experiences of Maria Segal (born Miriam Polanowicz), originally of Okuniew, Poland. Includes pre-war depictions of Maria and her family in Okuniew; Maria as a hidden child in 1943; Maria's First Communion in 1945; her trip to Denmark in 1947; and her immigration to France.

Administrative Information

Access: Collection is open for use.

Reproduction and use: Collection is available for use. Material may be protected by copyright. Please contact reference staff for further information.

Preferred citation: (Identification of item), Maria Segal photograph collection (2005.160.1), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC

Acquisition information: The collection was donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum by Maria Segal in 2005.

Related materials:

Childhood memories of the Holocaust (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2003.194.1)

Maria's story: childhood memories of the Holocaust by Maria Segal (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, DS135.P63 S429255 2009)

Oral history interview with Maria Segal (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1989.228.69)

Oral history interview with Maria Segal (USC Shoah Foundation, interview code 43650)

Accruals: Accruals may have been received since this collection was first processed, see archives catalog at collections.ushmm.org for further information.

Processing history: Finding aid updated by Adam Fielding, July 2020

Biographical note

Maria Segal was born Miriam Polanowicz on 15 June 1935 in Okuniew, Poland. She was second to the youngest child of Lejb Polanowicz, a shoemaker and Laja Rymerman Polanowicz. Maria had six siblings: Nicha, Moshe, Josef; Elka; Szajndl Szandulka, and Sonia. Lejb was an observant Jew and his wife, Laja, tried to accommodate the demands of the orthodoxy, despite not being raised as such.

In the summer of 1940 the Germans deported all 500 Jews from Okuniew to the Warsaw ghetto. Maria's maternal uncle, Itzhak Rymerman, took in the Polanowicz family. They lived in one room, on Nowolipki Street. All the members of the family worked, but the food was always scarce. A Polish woman from Okuniew, Stasia Polanska, entered the Warsaw ghetto on regular basis, smuggling in food and selling it to the desperate Jews. Maria, who was at that time 7 years old, left the ghetto together with Stasia and traveled with her to Okuniew. There she was able to collect money owed to her father and bring back food to her family. Maria was able to do the same once more, but the third time around, she was unable to enter the ghetto. She distinctly remembers that her mother told her: "Go, at least you are the only one in the family that has a chance to survive, because all of us will be killed sooner or later."

Maria stayed in Okuniew with Stasia and her husband, Janek, and her duties included taking their cow to the pasture. At one point it became impossible for Maria to stay with them. The couple drank alcohol excessively and Maria was scared of their yelling. She escaped their small hut to Stasia's parents, who lived nearby. Maria continued to be a pasture girl and by now she took care of six cows. In the spring 1943, Maria met a daughter of the local grocer, who managed to flee from the Warsaw ghetto. Toba Zylbersztajn (?) and her boyfriend found a safe haven with Mr. Miller, an owner of a flourmill in Okuniew. Toba reported to Maria, that she saw her family being deported by the Germans, likely to Majdanek. A few days later Toba and her companion were denounced to the Germans and executed at the local cemetery.

Shortly after this incident Maria befriended a young woman, Wanda Hadrysiak. Wanda was a young married woman, whose father was a local policeman. She invited Maria to come and live with her and her husband in Warsaw. Maria helped Wanda in her grocery store. In August 1944, during the Warsaw uprising, Wanda, her husband Jurek and Maria were expelled from the city to the nearby town, Pruszkow. Later on they moved to Krakow. Maria, a child of seven years, was sent to Czestochowa smuggling different goods.

In January 1945 the Russian Army reached Krakow. Maria started immediately to search for surviving family members and wrote to the International Red Cross in Switzerland. After a few months she was able to locate a cousin who survived in the USSR. Unfortunately she was unable to actually meet him. Wanda and her husband Jurek continued to take care of Maria and moved together to Bydgoszcz. In

July 1945 Maria took her first communion at the local church. Maria started to attend school and in May 1947 she was selected to go to Denmark for a vacation organized for orphaned children. The Larsen family, who lived on Fynn Island, took good care of Maria. She even started to keep a diary. Maria returned to Bydgoszcz and continued to live with Wanda and Jurek Hadrysiak.

At the same time she continued her search for family members. Maria wrote a letter to Paris, addressed to her paternal uncle, Abraham Polanowicz. He responded and she learned that he survived Auschwitz, but his wife and child perished there. Abraham invited Maria to come and live with him and his new family in Paris. The formalities were supposed to take a few weeks, but suddenly two men appeared (most probably from the Jewish Committee), who told her to pack her things and get ready to travel to France. Maria was convinced that this was arranged by her uncle, but soon found out that the final destination was Palestine. Maria was able to notify her uncle that she was in Paris and he arrived at the gathering place. Abraham insisted that Maria stay with him and not continue the journey to Palestine. Maria stayed with her uncle, his wife and a cousin, but conflict arose between Maria and her aunt. Maria was now a committed Catholic and insisted on attending church. She soon found a Polish catholic boarding school and left her uncle's household.

She continued to be in touch with her uncle Abraham and a cousin, Maurice. A teacher introduced Maria to a Canadian Jewish couple, which wanted to adopt a Jewish orphan. Maria decided that she is too old to be adopted, but she liked the idea of immigrating to Canada. In July 1950 Maria boarded a ship for Canada. The Canadian Jewish Committee placed Maria with a Jewish family, Elkin. After a few weeks she was transferred to Quebec City and placed with the Goldberg family, but the arrangement did not work out. Again the social worker arranged a new placement, this time in Montreal, with the Lerner family, where Maria lived for few years. She graduated from a high school and from a teacher's college, where she obtained a teaching certificate. Maria was 18 years old at that time. Maria decided to continue her education and she attended St. George William University, from which she graduated with a B.A. degree in 1958. She taught school during the day and attended the university at night.

In September 1957 Maria met a young Jewish American man, David Segal, and the two married in December 1957. They settled in NJ and later moved to Maryland and to Arizona, where Maria currently resides. They had three children: Michelle (b. 1960), Laura (b. 1961), and Glen (b. 1963).

Scope and content of collection

The collection contains photographs documenting the Holocaust-era experiences of Maria Segal (born Miriam Polanowicz), originally of Okuniew, Poland. Includes pre-war depictions of Maria and her family in Okuniew; Maria as a hidden child in 1943; Maria's First Communion in 1945; her trip to Denmark in 1947; and her immigration to France.

System of arrangement

The collection is arranged as a single series.

Folders are arranged alphabetically and documents are arranged chronologically.

Indexing terms

Person:

Segal, Maria.

Polanowicz, Abram.

Polanowicz, Gittel.

Polanowicz, Moishe.
Polanowicz, Nicha.
Polanowicz, Joseph.
Larsen, Christian.
Larsen, Vibeke.
Larsen, Eric.

Topical Subject:

Vacations--Denmark--1940-1950.
Orphans--Poland--Bydgoszcz--1940-1950.
Orphans--Denmark--1940-1950.
Orphans--France--1940-1950.
Communion--1940-1950.

Geography:

Poland.
Denmark.
Paris (France)

Genre/Form:

Photographs.

PRELIMINARY INVENTORY

1. Polanowicz family, including Nicha and Josef Polanowicz, Okuniew, Poland, circa 1930's
2. Polanowicz family, including Maria's aunts and uncle, Okuniew, Poland, circa 1930's
3. Moshe Polanowicz, Maria's uncle, Okuniew, Poland, circa 1930's
4. Lila Polanowicz, Maria's paternal aunt with her husband and a baby, Okuniew, Poland, circa 1935
5. Polanowicz family, including Moshe Polanowicz (middle), Abraham Polanowicz (bottom left), and Abraham's wife Gitl Polanowicz (far left), Okuniew, Poland, circa 1930's
6. Moshe Polanowicz (middle) and his two sisters, Okuniew, Poland, circa 1930's
7. Maria's paternal grandparents, Okuniew, Poland, circa 1930's
8. Gitl Polanowicz, Okuniew, Poland, circa 1938
9. Maria Segal (left) during the period of time when she was hiding in Okuniew after escaping the Warsaw ghetto, circa 1943
10. Maria Segal during her First Communion, Bydgoszcz, Poland, July 29, 1945
11. Maria Segal during her First Communion, Bydgoszcz, Poland, July 29, 1945
12. Maria Segal (right) and Vibeke Larsen, her host, during her vacation in Denmark, May 1947
13. Maria Segal (lower left) with the Larsen family, which were her hosts during the vacations in Denmark, May 1947
14. Maria Segal with the Larsen family's dog, Lady, during Maria's vacation in Denmark, May 1947;
15. Captain of a Polish ship "Sobieski", who gave this photo to Marysia as a memento of the voyage to Denmark, 1947
16. Abraham Polanowicz, Paris, France, circa 1955
17. Maria Segal, France, 1949