

Holocaust Eyewitness Project  
Harriet Steinhorn Roth  
School Presentation  
Edited Version  
59 Minutes

Harriet Roth was born in Lodz Poland and is the oldest of three children, with two younger sisters. She was ten when the war broke out in 1939. She had just spent the summer with her grandparents and was looking forward to going back to school. But, on September 1, 1939 war broke out and within one week her town was invaded and occupied by the Germans.

The Polish children were able to go to school while the Jewish children were not. Daily, in her town posters were put up which specified the rules: the Jews could not use public transportation, they could not go to school, and they could not write letters out of town.

The family had to go into the ghetto and were told that they could only take one suitcase with them. The family moved into Harriet's aunt's apartment which was in the part of town sectioned off for the ghetto. Her parents were taken to forced labor every day, being escorted to and from work. Her mother worked in a kitchen and her father worked in some gardens. Harriet was only ten at this time and she was given the responsibility of taking care of her little sister.

Sometimes in the ghetto the German soldiers would ask the prisoners for high sums of money, knowing full well that they didn't have any. The jobs people had were not paid. If you did not have the money to pay the soldiers they would take you to jail. Frequently, in the middle of the night those in prison would be transported to concentration camps.

In 1942, three years after they had been in the ghetto, Harriet's little seven year old sister came into the house screaming that she had heard that all of the children under 10 were to be killed. She couldn't be calmed down. Harriet was a tall girl for 14 and she wanted to replace her mother at the forced labor because she was extremely bored all day and she had never been outside of the little village. After much

persistence, her mother let her take her place. One day of tending after cows and going through the forest told her mother that Harriet could not do it; therefore, the next day her mother went back to work. Two weeks later, Harriet was able to talk her mother into letting her go back to work. The Germans took her and her group of workers to a concentration camp. Normally, children wouldn't go to a camp, but since she had taken her mother's place, she had no other choice.

At this time in Poland most of the camps were located near munitions factories. The camp Harriet was sent to was called Hassak Werk C (ph). This camp was a manufacturing company which specialized in two specific chemical gases. These gases had many side-effects. Normally, if you were to work in this factory you would wear special clothes and masks, and you would be given 10 minutes every hour to go outside for some fresh air. The prisoners in the camp that worked at the factory did not have these luxuries. By the time Harriet arrived at this camp most of the prisoners were sickly and yellow.

Harriet described a normal day in the camp with the morning counting of the prisoners, the breakfast, work, lunch, and dinner. The prisoners had two cups of coffee, two cups of soup, and one piece of bread for the entire day. Harriet worked in the gardens with about 50 other women; they were a privileged group because if you were lucky, you could steal a leaf of lettuce. Because of the poor diets and work conditions diseases like typhus and dysentery spread fast.

About a day after Harriet was taken to the camp her family found out what had happened. Her sister came to visit her at the camp and brought her some extra clothes (since she only had what she was wearing that day at work), some food, and some family photos. There was a well-guarded forest near the factory that Harriet's little sister went through to get to the camp. It was amazing that a 10 year old could do that. Another time her sister came and brought her a pillow. A Jewish commander saw this and he asked her for one also. Her sister said she would

bring it if he treated her sister well. The next day she came back with a pillow, and he did return the favor eventually.

Six weeks after Harriet arrived at the camp the ghetto at home was raided and her mother went to Hassak Werk B (ph). In the end of September a rumor went around that everyone who is under 16, over 35, or sick could go home. The next morning at roll call this was announced and Harriet believed that she was going home. But she was passed over because she was so tall, and when she spoke up the soldier told her that she was strong and would be a good worker.

On October 1 all of the people from her ghetto at home were deported to Treblinka and killed. The people who were deported included those who had been weeded out the day before at Hassak Werk C (ph). Obvious to Harriet at the camp was how people risked their lives for others. She never lost faith in humanity. When she got typhus the others would carry her to work to avoid her from going to Barrack 7 where all the sick people were. This barrack was disgusting and every once in a while those from the barrack would be load on trucks and shot in the forest. Harriet finally did end up in this Barrack, but after three days there the Jewish commander who owed her a favor stole her away. The next day the barrack was invaded and all were killed.

One year later, Harriet went to her mother's camp and they stayed together from then on. As the front moved westward, the camps moved. Harriet went to Chestohova(ph), Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen. On April 15, 1945, three days after Harriet's 16th birthday, the camp was liberated. She had TB and typhus at this time and she was in a German hospital for four months and then she went to Sweden for more medical treatment.

She came to the US in 1949. Harriet got married and today she had three children, two step-children, and four grandchildren. She teaches religious school and also teaches about the Holocaust.