

## **Kowalski I. RG-5-.028.0129.01.01**

### **Summary of Interview**

**Irene Kowalski** was born in Poland. Father: Joseph was born in 1899 and died in 1976. Mother: Helen died in 1940 or 1941. Younger siblings: Sister: Kashmira. Brothers: Sigmund and Richard.

Irene Kowalski's family were Catholics and she attended church regularly with them. Irene's father was a forest ranger and at one time, had up to 40 people working under him. Irene's parents were hospitable and generous with their neighbours and friends. When the Second World War broke out, Irene's father decided it would be safer for the family if they moved from their isolated home in the forest to his mother's house in a village. Many of the businesses in the village were Jewish owned and Irene's family had many Jewish friends. They mourned when Jews were rounded up and killed by the German SS. Irene had heard that Jews were executed and buried in graves that they had been forced to dig. When she was 12 years old, her mother fell ill with an ear infection. She could not be treated because their Jewish doctor had already been executed. She eventually died at 37 years of age when the infection spread before she could get medical help. With the loss of her mother, Irene now had to help care for her siblings and her ailing father.

When Polish people were deported from Poland to Germany, Irene's family were sent on an overcrowded open train wagon with only the clothes they wore. Each person was given a quarter of a loaf of bread to eat and only could get water to drink when the train stopped to fill the locomotive's water tank. When they arrived in Germany, Irene and her family were taken to a concentration camp. They slept in barracks on bunks that had straw on the wood planks.

Irene's father had heard that young people were being moved out of the camp to work in a factory, so to stop Irene from being sent off with them, he told her to rub the stamp off her arm, put on a scarf and coat, and pretend to be his wife. The ruse worked, and Irene's family managed to stay together.

Later, they were split up when they were sent to three different farms to work. During harvest time, everyone, including the farmer's family, had to work very hard. Nonetheless, Irene and her family lived in better conditions than they did at the concentration camp. They were able to spend Sundays together after attending church.

Irene recalled that Polish prisoners wore the letter P sewn on their clothes for identification. When the American army arrived, they shared their rations of chewing gum and cigarettes with the Polish prisoners. When the war ended, Irene and her family were taken to a displaced persons camp where they were given food and clothes. Although they had land in Poland, Irene's father decided they would not return to Poland because it was occupied by the Russians. Her mother's family had been taken to Russia and executed. In April 1949, they emigrated to the United States.

When Irene and her husband arrived in the U.S., a priest got them work on a tobacco farm in North Carolina. They lived in very poor conditions, in a small house with holes in the floor and without windows or doors. Afterward, they found temporary work with another family. The family helped Irene and her husband to rent a home large enough for her father and siblings to live together with them. They later moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where there was a Polish community and employment. Irene's sister got married, one of her brothers was drafted into the army and sent to Korea, and the other brother married and moved to Chicago.

After Irene's sister lost her husband unexpectedly, she wondered what happened to the soul when a person dies. She met Jehovah's Witnesses and began to study the Bible with them. After getting a Catholic Bible, she shared with Irene and the rest of the family what she was learning about the Bible from the Witnesses. Irene was baptized as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1968, followed by her son in 1969, her daughter in 1970, and her father in 1971. Although Irene's husband did not get baptized, he supported the family in their religious activities. Irene and her husband cared for her father until his death.

**Keywords**

Jehovah's Witnesses