

Summary of Oral History: RENIA BRITSTONE

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This Summary was written by a USHMM Volunteer on [05/2022]

Renia was born on February 28, 1927, in Lodz, Poland. Besides her mother and father, she had an older and younger brother. Neither survived the war. She had a happy childhood until 1939 living in a predominantly Jewish community. She went to a public school with other Jewish students to whom she spoke Polish. At home, her family spoke Yiddish. Her parents had a successful business and dealt with many Germans who were considered friends. These friendships did not last the war.

Renia and her family spent many summer days at a cottage near Lodz, but with the German invasion in September 1939 they returned to Lodz. Conditions immediately became harsh. There was little food and young men were rounded up and sent to labor camps. Her father and older brother went to Bialystok under Russian control while she, her mother, and housekeeper remained behind in Lodz. Renia and her mother then went to Warsaw hoping the situation there was better. Her father and older brother joined them when they found Bialystok overcrowded. But her father and brother then went back to Lodz to check on his business and were incarcerated in the Lodz Ghetto, while she and her mother were forced into the Warsaw Ghetto. [Her father apparently joined them in the Warsaw ghetto at a later date, but testimony is not clear] Conditions were terrible. There was little food, and the family was forced to share a single room with many others. When the deportations began and the head of the Judenrat was asked to give names Renia claimed that she was the first one to find that he, Adam Chernikoff, had committed suicide. She was fortunate to have survived several more deportations by her father finding a job for her in a workshop. Renia's father apparently was part of the resistance and helped buy munitions for the ghetto fighters, but she knew very little about this.

On Passover 1943 her family went into hiding in a ghetto attic while the Nazis were burning down the ghetto. But they had to come out when their apartment, one of the last, was being burned. At first, she was deported to Majdanek where she was beaten and became very sick, but she kept working fearing that she would be gassed otherwise. In June 1943 she was sent to Auschwitz where conditions were even worse. She again became sick, but this time she had to go to the hospital. A Jewish doctor sent her to another hospital and after several days she began to recover. Rather than stay in the hospital Renia returned to work. Her father was also at Auschwitz and despite the separation between men and women she was able to see him briefly. Her mother and younger brother came on a later transport. Her brother died of malnutrition and her mother was sent to the gas chamber, but Renia managed to talk to her mother for several minutes before she was gassed.

Liberation from Auschwitz came in January 1945. By then Renia was working in a room filled with suitcases of the thousands of Hungarian deportees. As Russian troops approached, her Nazi guards marched her and many other women for ten days to Ravensbruck in Germany. Many were killed along the way. Renia was then sent to another camp nearby. On May 8 she noticed that the Nazi guards had fled and so she fled the camp. With others Renia decided to go back to Lodz to see if other family members had survived. While there, her father called out to her, but there were no other family survivors. Told to leave she went to a nearby town where she met her future husband and married after six weeks. She became pregnant and stayed there with her husband for several months while he worked in a linen workshop.

However, Renia's father told her that she should not bring up children in Poland. He remarried and was able to emigrate to the United States. She was not able to because of the U.S. quota. She and her young family went to Israel but only remained for two years because of the poor conditions there. They were able to emigrate to Toronto, Canada. Her father joined her shortly after. Renia hoped that by telling her story people would learn what was happening and not allow it to happen again.