

Stella Tobis

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Summary

Stella Tobis was born October 17, 1928 in the settlement of Brantawice in Bialystok, Poland as Stanislaw Helena Synowiec to Zophia Bokwajts and Wawjeenitz Synowiec. She had an older brother, Stanislaw, born in 1928, a younger sister, Irene, born February 16, 1930 and a younger brother, Urich, born June 6, 1939. Her father received this land in a six-family village as a reward for his service in World War I. They had fruit orchards and fish ponds and her father worked in the jail in Wolkawysk. It was 35 kilometers away so he only came home once a week. They did not have electricity or running water. Stella attended a Polish school by horse and wagon. She was careful when she went into town as the Bylo-Russian children would chase her and call her names. When the newspaper and school stopped, the family realized war began. Her father walked into town to learn the news and was arrested along with the wealthy. He was let out to move the fish to the winter ponds but was arrested again on January 5, 1941 claiming he beat the men in jail. Her father was not seen again for eleven years. On February 10, 1941 Stella was deported along with her mother and siblings. A young Russian soldier helped them pack their belongings in a trunk and placed it on a sled. Their photos were burned. They were taken to a boxcar, one of 100 boxcars, with 60 people in theirs and placed on a lower plank. When they saw the Russian border, the deportees sang Polish hymns. There was a hole in the floor as the toilet and a window was high on the wall. They were given bread and water daily. As the babies died, they were thrown out the door. The deportees got out at Arkhangelsk, Siberia, and placed their belongings on sleds. It took them a week to walk to Shilova where they were given a room with another family in Camp Teshwava. The director of the camp of 800 deportees signed up one person from each family as a worker. Stella's older brother was 15 and he was assigned as the worker for their family. His job was to cut the trees and their branches and was only permitted to come home for New Year's Day and May first. He got ill due to malnourishment. Later Stella attended school part of the day and cut wood part of the day. Sometimes the family sold their belongings to earlier deportees for food. In the summer they collected berries and cranberries, some of which they ate and some they sold. There was no milk or food for the baby so her mother chewed up the bread to feed him but he died July 4, 1940. The grandmas of the camp were taken away and disappeared. In November 1941 they learned that they were excused from work and they left January 17, 1942. They had received a postcard from her father that he was released and they should join the Polish Army like him. Stella's older brother joined the Polish Army. Her mother obtained some money from her brother who was living in Moscow. They used the money to take the train south after walking 100 miles to Polwana. The train stopped at night when there were German planes overhead. After a week they arrived in Vologda and the train left while her mother was searching for food. She was never found but later some witnesses thought she had frozen to death and her ID was found on another woman. The two sisters survived for a month with some money left by their mother and in the company of other children.

The Polish Army gave them some food and sent them to a collective farm. They picked cotton for four months and a Polish lady reported them to the Polish Consulate who placed them in an orphanage in Lenin Jol. They were there about five months until they were taken by train from Jalabad to Krasnoyarsk. Most of their belongings were taken away as they would not be needed in Iran. It was difficult for Stella to part with their trunk as was the last reminder of her mother. The sisters took a ship across the Caspian Sea to Pahlavi where they got showered and their hair was cut. Every day, as there were new arrivals, Stella and her sister would look for their mother. The authorities wanted to place Irene in a camp which had better food but the sisters refused to be separated. They were taken to Isfahan where Stella and her sister lived in separate summer homes of wealthy Persians and attended school. There Stella wrote a few pages about her deportation. Later, in Mexico she wrote 15 pages and, more recently, wrote a book, "Fulfillment of Visionary Dream." From Isfahan, they were taken to Maleer, India, and placed in a convent with 300 children. Next they were taken to Santa Rosa, Mexico, where they arrived November 1, 1943 while other Poles went to English colonies in Africa. In May 1946 Stella and her sister were part of a group of 105 children taken to the US where she took some courses to complete high school. In 1953 the Polish Army was abandoned and her brother and father came to Chicago. Her father worked in a hospital and remarried. Stella got married and had three children before she got divorced. She gave this interview so people would know that such an experience could happen to their country.