

Irena Bach

December 12, 2015

RG-50.030*0859

Abstract

Irena Bach was born Irena Schvetza (?) on July 10, 1925 in Lvov, Poland. She had a sister Genena who was three and one-half years younger. Her father had a business and the family spoke Polish. Irena was in Gymnasium where she studied German and took private piano and gymnastic lessons. The family talked about the Jewish problem in Europe and helped the refugees who came from Germany to Lvov. When the Germans came from '39 to '41, her father lost his business and then the Russians came and she had to speak Russian in school and no longer studied religion. Also, the refugees were deported to Siberia. The Germans came on June 21, 1941 and her father was deported to the Limburg concentration camp where he died from typhus and the family was put into the ghetto. Irena got false papers and took a train to Krakow where she stayed with a Polish woman until she learned the Germans were picking up people on the street. She decided to volunteer to work in Germany and obtained a position as a kitchen maid in May '43 in Berchtesgaden where she remained until the end of the war. Her family rented a room with a Polish woman and remained hidden there. After the war, Irena returned to live with her family in Krakow. Her sister and husband moved to Argentina and Irena and her mother went to Austria on their way to Palestine. Irena met her future husband in Salzburg who had returned from Siberia and they married and had a daughter. They remained 5 years until they got papers and left for the US in '51. JOINT, the Jewish Social Service Agency gave them a start in Boston. Eventually her husband worked in a shipping department for ten years and they had a second daughter and Irena was a salesgirl at Filenes for 40 years. After the interview, Irena shows documents and old photos.

Summary

- 00:00 Irena Bach was born Irena Schvetza (?) on July 10, 1925 in Lvov, Poland. She had a sister Genena (Yanina or Yanka in Polish) who was three and one-half years younger and was born in '28 or '29. Her father was Sol Schvetza and her mother, Paula Scherna. The family lived for many generations in Lvov. Her grandparents were born there when it was Austria. After the First World War, it became Polish. In 1939 it became Russian. Her father was a businessman and they had a comfortable life. Irena attended Gymnasium and had private piano lessons and gymnastic lessons (as she was overweight) until 1939.
- 05:00 Her mother was a housewife and took care of the two children. They lived in an apartment with two bedrooms (one for the parents and one for the girls) and a kitchen in an old building with no bathroom. They had gas, electricity and running water and a coal

and wood stove to heat the apartment. Each room had a special stove with beautiful tiles that had to be taken care of daily as you had to remove the ashes. They had no radio as it would disrupt the children's studies. Her mother had a cleaning lady. They had no carpets but beautiful floors to wax and clean. It was a big job to get a nice shine. They only vacationed inside Poland to Krinesta (?) (She has a photo of her parents from there), to the Carpathian Mountains, to Uramsha (?), overnight to Cologne and to an overnight summer camp associated with school. After six years of public school, if you can afford it you can attend a private Gymnasium. It was public, not religious or Polish. She attended four years until the war started. Irena spoke Polish at home and at school. She did not know any other languages. Her parents were assimilated in Polish. Irena studied German in the Gymnasium.

10:00 Her family was a little religious as they observed the High Holidays and Passover. Lvov (Limburg in German) had a population of about 100,000 people. It was a big city with many Jews, Poles and Ukrainians. Irena lived in a Polish/Ukrainian neighborhood. Now Lvov is Ukrainian. Irena had Jewish friends from school. She had a small family. Her mother had two sisters, one in Lvov and one in Krakow which was five hours by train. She had no family on her father's side. Her grandmother on her mother's side lived with them for a while. Her parents had a difficult childhood so they did not talk about it. Her father read newspapers from beginning to end and always discussed politics. Once Hitler came to power, they talked about what was going on in Germany and Europe and, also, talked about events in school. She knew about the First World War; that it happened in the same area. They talked about the Jewish Problem being the first problem. Refugees came from Germany to Lvov. They helped them a lot.

15:00 The German Jews had Polish passports and were forced to move to Poland to live. Their distant relatives came from Germany and lived with them. They were deported to Siberia because they were refugees with no papers so could not survive in Lvov. Poland was the closest country that they could run to in '39. The Jews had been told by the Germans to leave. The refugees came two or three years before the war started. The family talked about Polish politics. Poland was quiet as there were no demonstrations or anti-Semitism before the war. She felt at home until the trouble started and did not feel uncomfortable to be a Jew in Poland. Nothing happened in school except when they studied religion all the Jewish girls were in one room with a Rabbi and the Catholic girls were in another room with a Priest. She felt they were already dividing them between Jew and non-Jew. Her non-Jewish girl friends were friendly but not close.

20:00 Her parents only had Jewish friends. They did not have any youth groups. The Columnar (?) summer camp was very pleasant with hiking and swimming. The air was different from the city air and the scenery was nice. The camp was just for girls. Irena did not complete the six year Gymnasium as she only attended for four years. She did not think of her parent's personalities when she was a child. Her mother did not have

hobbies; just stayed at home. They were a quiet family. She remembers when her aunt lost her husband who Irena liked a lot. They did not tell her that her uncle had passed away but someone else told her and she felt bad. Irena did not attend the funeral as you did not tell children bad news in those days. Hitler felt Germany was too small and wanted more land, Lebensraum. He took over part of Czechoslovakia and they were afraid he would take over the entire Europe.

25:00 They heard about Hitler's speech from the newspaper. After the Russians came, Irena still attended school for two more years until '41. German bombs fell on their head and they ran to the cellar so found out the war started. In three weeks Poland fell as it had no Army and no planes to defend themselves. The Russians came from one side and the Germans from the other and divided Poland. The Russians entered slowly. Then everything changed as her father lost his business. The rich had to leave their houses and go to live in a small village. Her family remained in their apartment. She does not know how her father earned a living from '39 to '41. It was unexpected that Russia took over part of Poland. She had to learn Russian in school as there was no Polish language spoken in class except the one on Polish.

30:00 They no longer studied religion in school nor politics as the Motherland was their politics. She learned Russian history, songs, and poetry by heart. They spoke Russian and Ukrainian. Many Ukrainians lived there. Ukrainian was a very difficult language, even more difficult than Russian. The Poles and Ukrainians hated each other. It seemed that the Russians were going to stay forever. The shelves in the stores were empty as the Russians bought everything. The newspaper told about Germany and soon refugees came. Irena knew some refugees but they just stayed a short time as soon they were deported in cattle cars to Siberia. They were homeless. Some Poles and Jews were also deported—her husband was deported. Some of the very rich were deported. She was not afraid that her family would be deported as they were not rich. Her family had no interaction with the Soviet authorities. She was 14 and life changed in school. She thought she would finish Gymnasium and was thinking of what to do afterwards.

35:00 They got new teachers to teach Russian. She did not know what happened to the Latin and Polish teachers. It was difficult for her mother to feed them. At the beginning she was able to go from school to see a play at a beautiful theatre. She saw beautiful American movies from Metro Golden Mayer every Saturday afternoon for one zloty. One was with Tyrone Powell, "The Suez Canal," a love story with Jeanette McDonald. The Soviets came and they still saw the films including some Russian films. The people who she knew were not Communists. They had many Jewish refugees who were deported. They brought belongings that they could carry and were hounded like dogs. The Germans came to their home and told them to leave. They always came at night. The Soviets came to deport them.

- 40:00 No one was deported in her building. They were not important people. The Soviets were there for two years and then the Germans bombed them. They ran to the cellar for a few days and saw the Russians running. The Poles did not defend themselves and the Russians were not prepared to fight the Germans as they were their friends. It happened on June 21, 1941. There were lines for bread. Her mother stayed in the line as she did not look Jewish. If you looked Jewish, you were thrown out of the line. There was nothing to eat at first, especially if you were Jewish. Her mother was afraid of Irena being in the line. Her father hid in the living room for a few months and then went out and was caught on the street with a friend. He was deported to Limburg concentration camp in Vienfeka (?) on the outskirts of Lvov and never returned. He was there for two months and got typhus fever and died. She does not know if he was buried. His name was Solomon Schvetza and he was 42 years old. They were thrown out of their apartment and placed in the ghetto where there were three families in one room.
- 45:00 First they went into one room and then were thrown out and placed into a smaller room. People were caught in the street and you never saw them again so they hid though the ghetto was open. The Action started where the Germans went from house to house to get the Jews. Her girl friend had papers so the Gestapo did not stop her when she was sewing. Her friend had her own unit with wall-to-wall closet so she and her mother, sister and grandmother hid there for a few days. They were in a small room behind the closet in the Lvov Ghetto. The Germans were taking almost everyone, especially men. Her family came out when it was quiet for a few days. Some of the streets were emptied out. The Polish people were selling their apartments so they bought a tiny room with an outside toilet in the outskirts of Limburg, outside of Lvov.
- 50:00 A Jewish man had come to them and said he would get them out of the ghetto with false papers made by Poles. She was the only one in the family to get a Kankarte, a false ID, so left the family as the ghetto was about to close. She went with her girlfriend and took a little suitcase in a horse and buggy to the train to Krakow. There she had an aunt in the Ghetto. Her friend went to the Warsaw Ghetto. Irena had little money when she reached the aunt. The ghetto was being liquidated so everyone was moving out. The ghetto had barbed wires all around it. Both the ghettos in Lvov and Krakow were in the outskirts of their cities. Irena was afraid to be caught inside the ghetto so walked the streets of Krakow.
- 55:00 She did not know where to go. Someone gave her an address of a Polish woman who was renting a room where she would be safe. A Jewish couple lived there but she did not know they were Jewish and they did not know she was Jewish. The woman was a French old maid and Irena lived there for six months through the winter as the lady liked her. The lady was in danger of being caught. Irena told her lies and had to remember the lies. Her false name was Irena Starjeska (?). She told the woman that her father died in a concentration camp and her mother also died so she was an orphan. Irena was frightened

all the time. The woman's name was Cecilia. Irena wanted to look for her family after the war and continue her education so she did not want to remain with her. At the end of '42 the Germans were catching people on the street to work in factories to make bombs.

60:00 One could choose the city in Germany where you want to work. Since Irena knew German and had papers, she thought that would be better for her. She went to the Polish Administration and said there was no chance to survive in Krakow as she would be caught. She said her preference was to go where there was a lake and mountains. They needed help in Berchtesgaden so sent her the next day in a regular passenger train. When they got to the border, she got out and showed her papers. She saw two men looking at her so she was shaking. They were Volkdeutch in uniform and told her they thought she was Jewish and looked at her papers. She had a pink sheet which indicated where she was going and why she was going. She was happy when the men got off before Traunchnein (?) which was before Berchtesgaden.

65:00 She was taken to a beautiful place where she had a room in the barn and she served as kitchen housemaid and did cleaning. Every month she had to visit the Gestapo and show her papers. She was afraid the Poles might realize that she was a Polish Jew. She looked good and spoke perfect Polish and knew Polish Christmas songs perfectly. For a Sunday excursion, she walked five miles as Poles could not take the train or go anywhere without permission. She wore the yellow "P" for Polish. One time she did not and wore a dirndl with a German hairstyle which saved her as she looked Bavarian. She did not know that Hitler's house was nearby until after the war. There was another Polish person at the Inn and her boss was not allowed two helpers so sent the other one away. There were a few Oost-Russians there in the little village that had hotels for vacationers. She saw only women and children who were hiding from the Berlin bombardments. Irena was there from May '43 until the end of the war when the Americans came.

70:00 Irena behaved nicely so was ignored. Her boss had a radio in the dining room so she would try to hear it from the kitchen. She knew the Germans were losing the war when they announced, "We're cleaning this place by plan" so she was in heaven. Irena knew they were evacuating from Lvov. Her boss treated her good. They had a ration card and she ate the same food as her boss but by herself in the kitchen. Her boss came from Prussia and knew Polish. Irena worked hard as shopped daily because there was no refrigeration. She would carry two cans of milk in a big backpack and walked uphill. She would pretend that she knew little German. Always pretending was the worst part. One time she thought she would faint but "Ich Cannich" (I cannot) does not exist in the German language. When she left, she did not tell them she was Jewish. Irena returned to Poland and looked for her family in Krakow and found her mother and sister. Her sister came from Berlin as she ran away from her two little children.

- 75:00 She ran away from the bombs. Irena was glad that she lost everything like she did. Once she said “Nebbish,” a Jewish word, and made up that she did not know it was Jewish. Once a man said, “Are you sure she is a Polish girl?” and she responded, “What else could she be?” and he said, “A Russian girl.” She never felt safe even with papers as someone could recognize you. Once on the street a Polish man said that she walks like a Jewish girl. The Poles have a nose to find Jews. There were no soldiers in the town, only Politzi (Police). No one criticized Hitler. The lady was Protestant and did not go to church nor said, “Heil Hitler.” When an older neighbor wore lederhosen and said “Fraulein,” she knew the war was coming to an end. Americans came to the city.
- 80:00 A few months earlier, there were a few bombs. Maybe they knew that Hitler’s summer home was nearby. Irena knew that she was liberated but did not say she was Jewish in May 1945. Her boss was thrown out as they needed the villa. Irena had a tiny place with a room downstairs and one upstairs and lived with her boss. She was afraid that she would have to clean up as left before they did and said she was going home. It took her two or three days to return to Poland. She had papers for free trains and buses as she was a volunteer laborer. She knew where the aunt’s friend’s office was. He was a lawyer and told her the aunt survived and gave her the address where the daughter and her mother also lived. Irena’s younger sister was engaged at 18 and gave her the address. Irena went by streetcar. She was afraid of her mother’s reaction as did not know what happened to her.
- 85:00 Her mother started to cry and scream and hugged and kissed her. She is dead 25 years. Her mother looked the same as it was just four years since last seen. The same guy who helped Irena with the papers knew a Polish family who took in her mother, sister, aunt and grandmother for payment. The ghetto was open so they could leave. They spent two years in the single home. The landlady was not nice to her mother as thought the war would be over in a few months and they would leave. The landlady fed them. She did not have a bathroom so used a pail. They were afraid they would be caught if they left as people would ask where they had been so they had to stay. They had been liberated by the Russians a year before the war ended in ’44. They were all pale with swollen legs as they had never walked. People would say, “Jews are coming.” Poles left as knew the country would be divided. The family went to Krakow and stayed less than a year. They thought to go to Palestine as Poland was not the same. Irena lived with her mother.
- 90:00 Her sister had papers to go to Argentina with her husband. They went through Austria and Czechoslovakia by bus. Irena sees herself when she sees the refugees from Syria. They stayed three weeks in Vienna. They were thrown out and went to Salzburg for five years. Irena met her future husband on a military bus. There were 20 people on the bus. They got married in Salzburg after two years. They were stuck in Salzburg in three DP camps. Many others from Lvov found apartments outside the camp with a German woman. They got a room and Irena gave birth to her first child, a girl, and waited for

papers. Her husband told her his story. He went through a lot. After studying in Paris and Italy, he worked for MGM. The Russians thought that he must be a spy as he was working for an American company so they deported him. They told the parents that he would be back in the morning. He was taken by cattle car to Siberia. A woman gave him papers to leave as you needed papers to move anywhere. He dug frozen earth with a shovel, just useless work. People died from hunger. There was lots of snow and people would fall down and no one would look at them. Some ate the barks from the trees but her husband was never that hungry. There was black oil on top of the soup.

95:00 Joseph kept himself from not doing what the others did. Some people were in pain when they were hungry. Joseph got typhus and went to the hospital and they returned him in an open horse and buggy. He decided he would not survive there and a lady on the staff gave him papers as she liked him. Poles in Russian labor camps were released in '42 due to negotiations. Some left the Soviet Union and Joseph wanted to go to Palestine. He took a train to Russian Asia. The Russian women were nice to him and knew he was from the West and gave him cheese to eat. His papers expired and the Soviet police were asking for papers so he held on to the outside train window while the women had their backs to the window.

100:00 A man wanted to place ashes outside the window and Joseph jumped on the grain. He became unconscious and awoke OK but did not know which way to Tashkent. He thought he would go through Iran to get to Palestine. He was not accepted in a few places as he was Jewish. One place accepted him and he entered the Russian Army which was together with the Polish Army and they went towards Poland. He returned to Lvov and he heard the Jews were being killed but he did not believe it. He was looking for his parents and his brother. He saw the janitor who could not believe he was alive and Joseph learned his family was taken by the Gestapo. After a few weeks, he went to Salzburg.

105:00 The German area became Polish after the war. He met Irena on a bus of people headed for Palestine but they spent five years in Salzburg. The aunt got married in Salzburg and wanted to go to Palestine. She could not stand the climate there as she lived in a tent on the sand and wrote them not to come. She said they would not survive the climate so they decided to go to the US. They already had a baby. They had no sponsor so had to wait five years for make the Polish quota. They spent the five years in Salzburg and entered the US in 1951. Their daughter was born in '49 and was two years old when they came. It took them 10 days by ship to reach New York in February. They thought they would drown in the English Channel. Joseph was so sick and only ate grapefruit and lemon for the ten days while their daughter ate apples. Men and women were separated on the ship. Irena was sick but their daughter was fine. They went through Halifax to get to New York. They saw people waiting for other immigrants so she sat on her luggage and cried that she wanted to go home. She had no money and no relatives and did not

know English. Joseph knew five languages but no English. JOINT, the Jewish Social Service Agency, helped them.

110:00 They wanted to stay in New York but their destination papers indicated Boston. They were told that Boston is more a European city than the others. It was a nice city and she does not know if it was more European. She wished the winter was not so strong but so far this year it is good. The JOINT gave them an address for a room but it had no bed for the baby so she slept between them in the double bed. Later people had apartments and equipment for children. The next day the JOINT gave Joseph a paper to get a job but who would hire him. They were given \$27 a week for a month and Joseph found a job and went from one job to another. Finally, he found one where he was in charge of the shipping department for ten years. Irena has a second daughter and was a salesgirl at Filenes for 40 years. Naomi is the elder daughter and Anita is the younger one. Joseph got a license for real estate but it was difficult. They survived. She never returned to Poland and would not return to Lvov where she does not have anyone to visit. They told Joseph's story to the grandson but told little to the daughters. The children knew they were immigrants. Irena spoke to the older daughter in German as she was in Austria for five years. She learned some English from her daughter, from TV and from the citizenship school. She learned history and after five years became a citizen.

115:00 Irena learned to drive. She loves the US as it is important to her. 1) Irena shows her false papers that she used for three years in Germany. They were produced by Poles and saved her life. It has her photo and indicates she is Roman Catholic. 2) Irena shows a second document that she got when she worked in Germany which indicates she is three years older. She was afraid that she was too young to be allowed to work and wanted to work so she would survive. 3) Irena shows a third document from the military government of Germany that she is a displaced person on 8/13/45 with a false name. She showed it in Berchtesgaden so they would not think her Jewish and return her to Poland. In October she went to Poland and the US military authority gave it to her. 4) She shows her photo in her Polish Gymnasium uniform in '41. She had long hair like the Bavarians so it saved her life. 5) Irena shows two photos of Joseph Steven Bach; one in college and one in his 30s when they met. She was 22 and he was 38. 6) A photo at their wedding reception in February '48 at 5 Merkenstrasse in Salzburg, a religious wedding. In June they got the papers from City Hall. 7) She shows another photo at the reception with more people, other survivors. 8) She shows a photo of her mother, Pearla Schvetza, her mother's sister and her sister, Genena Schvetza (behind Nathan Schuman) with her husband, and her aunt with Tony Hacavy, the nephew. 9) A photo in Buenos Aires of her sister, Genena Schvetza and her son, Ricardo Schuman in '53.

120:00 10) She shows a photo of her parents, Pearl and Solomon Schvetza in '38 in a boat in Kineister, Poland on vacation. Her mother is drinking special water to lose weight. Her father was a sharp dresser.