

RG-50.030.1007

Summary

Harold (Chanoch) Schindler was born in 1936 in Zgierz, close to Lodz, Poland. Since he left there when he was four he has few memories of the town. He had two older brothers and two older sisters in addition to his mother (Gila) and his father (Jonah). His mother was born in Zgierz and his father nearby. Theirs was an arranged marriage. Harold's mother came from a very observant family. His father was less religious, but the family followed Jewish law as much as possible. (Harold still wears a kippah.) His father had one brother and two sisters, but Harold did not know them. His mother was an only child. Harold's grandparents on both his mother's and father's sides had died by the time he was born. The family spoke Yiddish at home, though they also knew Polish. His father was a shoemaker.

When the war broke out in Poland his father and several other men in the town wanted to join the Polish army but were told they would have to go to Warsaw to enlist. By the time they got there it was too late. Harold's father decided to go to Bialystok, which was under Russian control, but first he went back to Zgierz to get his family. There he was arrested by German soldiers, but when he told one that he needed to go home and care for his sick wife the German soldier gave him a pass knowing, according to Harold's father, that he would not return. Once his father returned home, he hired a driver and wagon to take his family to the border near Bialystok. There the family was beset by bandits, thought to be friends of the carriage driver, and were beaten and robbed. But they made it to Bialystok and German soldiers caught the robbers and returned the family's belongings. Harold's father clearly trusted the Russians more than the Germans, though he was no communist. In fact, he had served in the Polish army in WWI and was a right-wing Zionist, something the Russians never found out.

Under his resourceful father, Harold and the family pushed on by train inside Russia almost to Siberia. While the Russians gave them room in a barracks and some food the family still experienced tragedy and hardship. Both Harold's second oldest sister and his mother died of disease. It was very cold and there was little food. Harold stayed there for four years. His father and oldest sister worked in the local shoe factory. Unfortunately, his father was arrested by the Soviets, because he reported people associated with the Communist Party who stole shoes from the factory. His father went to prison for over two years while his sister continued to work in the factory. He and his two brothers went to an orphanage run by Polish Catholics. Though harassed by antisemitic boys he generally had a satisfactory experience. In 1946 after the war ended Harold's father was released from prison, the family united and made their way to Kursk in Poland. They stayed for two years where Harold lived in a Jewish-run (Hadassah) orphanage when Harold and his brothers were able to go to Israel after the state was formed. His father and sister were not able to go until 1951. Once they came the family was reunited. Years later Harold immigrated to the United States. His adjustment was difficult – he worked 80 to 90 hours a week – but he was determined to make a good life for his family. He remained close to his children and surviving siblings' families.

Although Harold lost his childhood, he nevertheless felt that he was loved and cared for by his family and Jewish organizations. He did not tell his children about his experiences until much later in life.