

RG-50.030.1076

Summary

Irene Fogel Weiss (born Rachel Fogel) was born Nov. 21, 1930 in Bótrágy, Hungary (Czechoslovakia at her birth and now Ukraine), the third of six children. Her parents were Meyer and Leah (née Mermelstein). Yiddish was the primary language at home, followed by Hungarian. The family was Orthodox, as were the other ten Jewish families in town. Her father was a lumber dealer in the neighboring town of Batyu, where her mother was born; he was born in the area as well, though his family originally came from Poland. She describes her homelife and relationships with her parents and wide range of relatives.

Contrary to custom, her father taught his daughters to read sufficiently to read prayers. She had two years of Czech schools before Hungary took over in 1938. In the early years of the war, she commuted daily to Munkács (now Mukachevo, Ukraine) for school by train. Developments in the war and Hitler were well known to them. They knew the invasion of Poland was bad news for them. Persecution started slowly with laws to wear the Star of David and expulsion from Hungarian schools, but few deportations. Her father successfully established their Hungarian citizenship, which he thought would guarantee their safety. Nonetheless, her father was sent to a labor brigade for a while during which his business was confiscated.

Three weeks after Germany invaded Hungary in March, 1944, her and other local Jewish families were in a Munkács ghetto working in a brick factory. Three weeks later, her family was in Auschwitz. Irene describes the family's preparation for deportation and the experience in the ghetto. Dr. Mengele separated her group on arrival: men in one direction; woman and children, and older women went to another side; younger women without children went to a third side. Irene and her younger sister were holding hands, but Mengele sent Irene with her older sister, Serena, while her younger sister was sent with her mother. A German photographer captured the moment of separation. Her younger sister didn't survive. Irene talks of the impact of that sudden separation.

Irene describes how she came to find two maternal aunts, Rosie and Peri, inside the camp, who had arrived from a separate ghetto. Irene was assigned work in Birkenau, and described the harsh work and living conditions. Irene's relatives helped her to avoid sudden the separation and execution that could come to younger prisoners. She was assigned to the Kanada warehouses where prisoner's possessions were sorted. Her father was assigned to empty the gas chambers as a *Sonderkommando*, while also harvesting belongings. Irene heard that he was eventually executed as he couldn't meet the Nazi's pace of work. Her brother, who had been with his father, had been assigned similar work; he disappeared without clear documentation and was presumed dead.

The camp was evacuated in January, 1945 as the Russian approached. All were sent by a brutal march and open cattle car to a camp near Neustadt-Glewe. Severe starvation set in and Irene's aunt Peri helath declined, whereupon she was sent to Ravensbruck for execution. Irene and her sister, Serena, were also "selected" for execution just days before the end of their

imprisonment, but the truck never came. A few days later the guards fled; some prisoners fled, but Irene and her relatives remained. They were careful not too overeat on the Red Cross and leftover provisions that were found. Eventually, they went into Neustadt-Glewe where Rosie was hospitalized for a few days. Acting on rumors, they – along with a distant cousin – started to walk. Irene relates a number of incidents along the road, including avoiding assault by Russian soldiers by feigning afflictions with infectious diseases. They managed to board buses that took them to Prague where they were treated at Masaryk Hospital.

They happened upon Irene's maternal uncle, Joseph, who had left in 1938 for Palestine. When the war started, he had joined a Jewish detachment under British Army authority, which was sent to Czechoslovakia to help with demobilization. Joseph set them up in an apartment in Nepomuk where they were fed from the soldier's mess. Rosie was hospitalized for a few months. They had some success in finding more family survivors from those who had returned to Batyu. Two of her uncles stayed in Batyu and couldn't leave until the USSR allowed Jews to leave 30 years later under the Jackson-Vanik amendment. But, three relatives joined Irene, Serena and Rosie in Pilsen. Life stabilized in 1946 as they sought exit visas to various destinations. Irene and Serena obtained a visa to the US sponsored by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Before they could disembark their ship in 1947, they were subjected to extensive, distorted press interviews. She married in 1949, moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan for four years, and then on to the Washington, DC area.

Near the end of part 5 and early on part 6, she discusses her view on the impact of her experience on her worldview, specifically that mankind is not as advanced as it seems or pretends. Irene's testimony concludes in part 7 relating how after obtaining her degree and teaching English as a Second Language, she became comfortable telling her wartime experience, eventually volunteering with the Holocaust Museum to provide a survivor's experience.