

FRANCES LEDER KORNMEHL

BORN: 1925

TARNOW, POLAND

Fances Leder Kornmehl comes from a Chassidic home. She was born in Tarnow, Poland, in 1925 and is the youngest of three sisters and two brothers. She was an outstanding student in a Polish school. Her mother was a homemaker and her father had a business selling feed to farmers. Her older brother was 18 years older, married, and had a small shirt factory. The family was not sick but lived in a beautiful flat where she was happy and content.

When the war started in 1939, she could not continue school. They could not be in the streets, and stores and the temple had to close. People were caught in the streets and there were random shootings. Food was rationed but Jews did not receive ration cards and had to stand in line. Conditions got worse all the time, and she was always hungry. There was a black market but people who were caught were shot. They had to live on their savings. At that time, there was no ghetto, and many people fled to Russia. One sister, who had been married and lived in another town, came back and stayed with them. Everyone was very scared, and they went out only for food or to make visits, but never knew if they would come back. One brother was shot then and the other some time later. Her mother had a heart attack and was quite sick. Once, the Gestapo came to their home and saw her mother and father but, miraculously, left them alone, although they did shoot some neighbors. Her mother eventually died. She exchanged clothes for food to help her sick father and could have been killed for this. He later also died but she does not know how.

Before the ghetto was built in 1942, many people had been killed by shooting and burning. Actually, there were two ghettos, one for the young, where she was with her brother, and the other for older people. There, they did all sorts of work for the Nazis and saw children being buried alive while some music was playing. People also were taken from hospitals and shot. Later, she was taken to a very large camp where she sewed and did other work for German soldiers. They received only soup and bread and also got soap made from human fat. She was there for over one year until November 1944. Then they were brought to Treblinka and taken to the showers.

Dr. Mengele was there and separated them into two groups one of which was killed. It was very cold. Their hair had been cut off and their clothing was inadequate. That is also where she was tattooed on her arm. Subsequently, they were taken in a cattle car to the Sudeten part of Germany where things were better. They received bread twice a week and had more food. She lived in barracks with bunk beds and worked in a spinning mill where work started at 6 A.M. Some German men and women also worked there but did not speak to them. They did not know where they were and had no news about the war.

One morning, all the Germans had left and the next day a group of Russians arrived. Their officer turned out to be a Jew whose family had been killed by the Nazis. He took them into town and gave them clothes. Then he sent them away because passing German or Russian soldiers might have killed them. They walked in groups of about 80 and slept on the road or in empty houses until eventually they came to Kattowitz. From there, the Russians sent them by train to Cracow. As refugees, they could travel without a ticket to wherever they wanted to go. She went back to her hometown where a non-Jewish lady took her in. In her old apartment nothing was left of their previous belongings. She started to write poems and people could not understand how she could write at that time. For about one year, she stayed there and worked in an office. Later, there were pogroms and some people were killed. After all her suffering she did not want to go to Palestine, where she felt she would have been all alone. She was taken to Germany and worked in a post office where she met her future husband who was head of the office. They were waiting for their American immigration quotas and came to the United States in 1947 and got married. They were first in New York and then went to Buffalo where her first impression of the city was beautiful.

She never told her experiences to her children, because she did not want to take their innocence away and wanted them to have a happy childhood. She feels that freedom and liberty for everybody are the most important things in life.