

FRIEDA SYSMAN
BORN: COLOGNE, GERMANY

Frieda Sysman was born in Cologne, Germany. Her father had a textile business. She and her younger brother had a very happy childhood. The grandparents had left Poland because of the persecution of the Jews long before the Nazis came to power in Germany. In 1938, the grandparents were sent back to Poland because of their origin where they did not survive the war like many of their relatives.

In 1939 after Kristallnacht, when she was 9 years old, they were warned by a friendly non-Jewish neighbor that all the Jews would be killed, and her mother sent her and a seven year old brother by train to Brussels where the Red Cross helped to place them with Jewish families. Her parents went into hiding and a few months later were smuggled to Belgium. It was a difficult trip because her mother was pregnant and they had to swim across a river at the border.

In 1940, after Germany occupied Belgium, the family fled to France, partly by walking, but they were caught by the Germans and sent back to Belgium. In August 1942, her father was caught in the street and taken away by train. They never saw him again and later found out that he had been taken to Auschwitz. She has a 1934 photograph of herself and a brother. A priest took her brother to an orphanage and her mother and herself to a convent. However, there was no room for them and she and her mother went into hiding. Eventually, her mother was taken in by the convent where she could see her son only at Christmas time because it was too dangerous at other times. Frieda stayed with a woman who gave her so little food that she took some from the dog. Finally, some man took her back to the convent and they took her in after a great deal of pleading. She was only 13 years old but placed in charge of some younger children including her brother. The convent arranged that she could learn shorthand and typing. After liberation, she found a job as secretary for the American Army. She was then only 16 which was too young for a job but she gave her age as 18.

In the convent she had a non-Jewish girlfriend (photograph) whom she saw again two years ago during a visit. She is still in touch with the convent where she spent four years. She has high praise for the Mother Superior.

After the war she met her future husband who had escaped from Poland and whose entire family had been killed there. She feels quite badly about the strong antisemitism among the Polish people. She got married in 1947 and the couple moved to Israel in 1949. Her mother followed them there but then located two surviving sisters one of whom lived in the United States. In 1958, she and her husband also went there and settled in Buffalo.

She is still very much affected by the memory of her experiences and finds it difficult to talk about them. She did not tell her children but they now know about the events.