

## **RG-50.407.0137**

### **Summary**

Sonia Wacjman was born in 1922 (?) in Warsaw, Poland in a Jewish neighborhood. Her father, Abraham Shiletsky (PH) was a coal entrepreneur and was religious. Her mother, Reisel Silberstein (PH), worked with her father. The family was very well-off. None of her grandparents lived in Warsaw though she was surrounded by many other relatives. Sonia was the fifth of ten children. Three of her siblings had moved to Belgium where they were killed during the war. Sonia described herself as strong-willed and outgoing and she frequently spoke up when she felt that she or others were wronged. She went to gymnasium for only two years since her father did not believe that girls should get an advanced education. She spoke about several antisemitic incidents which she and other Jews experienced by Poles, including the Polish police and the Polish army. One of her brothers joined the army before the war but was treated well because of bribes paid by Sonia's father. Since the family generally lived a good life before the war, they did not think of leaving, despite the fact that her father's brother pleaded with him to come to Israel with him and his family.

In early September 1939, the Polish government announced that it was about to blow up the bridges in Warsaw to keep out German troops. With about a hundred other people Sonia decided to escape over the bridges before they were blown up. They walked about 800 kilometers and were harassed by Ukrainians, but the Polish army chased off the Ukrainians. There was lots of bombing, presumably by the Russians, who took over eastern Poland. The Russians asked her and the other escapees (Jews and non-Jews) if they wanted to return to Warsaw or stay with them. She decided to stay with the Russians. Those who wanted to go back were sent to Siberia. The Russians took Sonia, her boyfriend, and many others to Belarus near Minsk where they worked in a mill. She had a baby on the street in 1940. Her husband, formerly her boyfriend, was arrested by the Russians as a spy and never heard from again.

On June 23, 1941 the Germans invaded, and she escaped with her child and others further east (Siberia?) under terrible conditions. The Russians treated them badly but took good care of the children. Sonia became very ill with Typhus but was able to recover. The Polish government in exile (in London) insisted on better treatment of Polish refugees. She ended up working in an orphanage between 1944 and 1946. In 1946 the Polish government requested that the Polish children and adults be brought back to Poland. At the border between Russia and Poland the Christian children were taken off the train and handed to nuns and priests. Sonia went on with the Jewish children, most of whom were sent to Israel. Under the auspices of Jewish organizations Sonia stayed in Poland and helped run an orphanage for Jewish children. There she met an older man (Weitzman) who took to her and her son. He emigrated to Australia and after a year sent her money and a visa to join him. After getting papers in Warsaw, she traveled to Australia with her son and has lived there ever since. Although she does not speak about what happened to her parents, she did say that she was the only one left after the war except for a brother and sister in Israel.

She worked at the Holocaust center in Melbourne for many years believing that it is very important to tell younger generations what happened.