

USHMM Oral History: Sarah Saaroni, interviewed 23 February 1993

Summary

Sarah Saaroni (nee Fisman), born in Lublin, eastern Poland (approximately 165km southeast of Warsaw), June 1926, describes: being born the youngest of four children, having two older brothers (11 and six years older) and one sister (nine years older); being born into a comfortable, middle-class family, both parents' being from the same region; receiving very little Jewish education and her parents not being very religious; knowing about antisemitism before the war but not being affected by it directly; her oldest brother leaving Poland for Palestine in 1937, and her middle brother being a Communist; her father owning a clothing store and her family originally living in a nice neighborhood, in a large flat with five bedrooms, an indoor toilet (uncommon at that time), a cook and maids; moving twice in the early 1930s to progressively smaller flats; their home remaining comfortable, although silver and precious items gradually disappearing; having her first direct encounters with antisemitism around 1936-1937 when her sister, who was always fashionably dressed, traveled east to meet her future in-laws and had to dress very simply — like a “country girl” — so that she would not be suspected of being Jewish; her parents talking about students blocking the entrance to their shop because it was Jewish-owned; being rejected from a Polish (non-Jewish) high school because of poor health, although she had never been examined by a medical professional and had no record of serious illness; when war was declared, bombing raids by the Germans beginning immediately and continuing daily for several weeks, partially destroying their flat while the family sheltered in a bunker; upon invasion, the Germans taking control of her father's shop and stealing everything; her middle brother, sister and brother-in-law fleeing to the Russian occupied side of Poland and urging Sarah and her parents to escape while they could; nearly being betrayed to the Germans by a man who had agreed to smuggle them to the east and, thus, deciding to stay in Lublin; being ordered out of their flat and into the ghetto, ultimately settling in a single room and kitchen which they had to share with another family; hiding in neighbors' cellars to avoid being transported out of Lublin; finally fleeing to Zakrzówek (approximately 38km south-southeast of Lublin), where they found a room with a farm family for a year or so and Sarah worked very hard in the fields; returning to Lublin, again to avoid being transported out with other Jews; separating from her parents because she could pose as a Polish Christian and go to Germany to work; being given papers identifying her as Lydia [Volnik], age 23, although she was only 16; making her way to Hamburg where she worked in a food processing factory; leaving Hamburg in June or July 1943 after an allied bombing raid that destroyed nearly half of the city in one night, and finding work on a farm about 50km away; having to flee because the Gestapo confiscated her papers to check their authenticity; again being held by the Gestapo in Gotha and finally admitting to being Jewish and being transported with other Jews back to Poland, but slipping away at the train station in Leipzig and boarding another train at random, finding work on a farm outside of Dresden; getting back to Poland near the end of the war and working behind the Russian lines as a nurse; when the war ended, finally returning to Lublin in August 1945 where most people were neither welcoming nor helpful; finding her cousin in Łódź in order to reconnect with her brother, but he had already left for Czechoslovakia and later Italy; joining a Jewish youth group called [Ichud] and deciding to go to Palestine; having to falsify her nationality in order to get out of Poland; with a group from Ichud led by the Jewish Brigade, making their way to Villa Cavalletti outside of Rome and then being transited to Milan, where they were met by trucks and taken to port in La Spezia; boarding cramped fishing boats for transport to Palestine; the boats being held in port by Italian and British authorities for six weeks; finally being allowed to sail, reaching Palestine and being permitted entry as legal bygoners on 10 May 1946; being reunited with her oldest brother; joining the Haganah in 1948

when war broke out; marrying in 1948, having a son in 1949 and later a daughter; her middle brother emigrating from Italy to Australia and urging her to do the same because Israel was so volatile; finally emigrating to Australia about two years later.