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**Summary**

Rachel Nastase Pasternak was born in 1929 in Săliște de Sus (Felsőszelistye) in the Maramureș (Máramaros) region of Romania. On most of her identity papers, however, the year of her birth is 1928, the year in which she claimed she was born when deported to Auschwitz in order to be registered as a 16-year old.

She did not remember her birthplace because she was an infant when her family moved to Csikszereda (Miercurea Ciuc), in the Transylvania (Erdély) region. Her father, Alter (Mordechai) Pasternak worked in a sawmill owned by the Lember (sp?) family. The Pasternaks lived outside of the town, adjacent to the sawmill. Lember was very generous with her family. Her mother was Malka (Regina) Pasternak. She had two older sisters and an older brother: Rózsi, Wolfi (Wilhelm), and Eszti. They had a very modest existence.

She had no family papers, documents, photos of her family, since she returned alone to Romania, but not to Csikszereda. Her parents did not survive the Holocaust: her mother perished in Auschwitz, her father in Reichenbach [a sub camp of Gross-Rosen, in lower Silesia, now Poland].

Her family was religious, celebrating the Sabbath and keeping kosher. Csikszereda had a small Jewish community of 15-20 families, a small synagogue, a mikvah, and a kosher butcher. She herself was always a believer, but her faith was shaken in Auschwitz. At home, they spoke Yiddish, outside of the home Hungarian.

Growing up in Csikszereda, she experienced anti-Semitism. She was called “stinking Jew,” “lousy Jew,” etc. The windows of some Jewish homes were broken on the Sabbath. Anti-Semitism became more prevalent after the Hungarian occupation [September 1940]. She remembered that [Regent] Horthy visited Csikszereda and there were placards with the demand: “Székely land without Jews!”

After the Hungarian occupation, she was “kicked out” of school, without finishing her elementary school education. She helped out at a hairdresser’s salon, mainly with cleaning, and earned a little. Her sister Rózsi became a milliner. Eszti trained to be a seamstress. Her brother worked in Kolozsvár (Cluj), as an interior decorator.

In 1944, she remembered that they had to wear the Yellow Star, but they barely left the area of the sawmill.

One day in the spring, gendarmes came to collect her family. They took them to the local police station. Her family had no time to pack their belongings. Later that day, her father was allowed to return home to gather some necessities, guarded by a policeman, but their home had already been robbed by local Hungarians. Rózsi had a suitor, Gyula, a Hungarian policeman who proposed to her and wanted to hide her, but Rózsi chose to stay with her family.

From Csikszereda, the gendarmes transported them by trucks to Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfântu Gheorghe) where they spent a few days in a textile factory, which was still under construction. Their next destination was Szászrégen (Reghin) where they were placed in a brick factory. She did not remember how long they were in the brick factory, but it

was crowded, and the conditions were very poor. Her father tried to built a tent of poles and bed sheets to protect them from the elements. Rich Jews were interrogated and beaten to reveal where they had hidden their valuables. The well-to-do Popper family from Csikszereda was with them and the head of the family was taken for interrogation, from which he never returned. Everybody said that the Jews in the brick factory would be taken for work in Germany.

When they were entrained, Gyula, the policeman came and tried to take Rózsi out of the crowd. A gendarme shot his hand and he was badly injured.

She thought it was May when they were deported [June 4, 1944 was the date of deportation from Szászrégen].

She said that the journey did not last longer than a day and a half. They had no food and water. Her father with the help of other men made a hole in the bottom of the railcar for the prisoners to relieve themselves.

When the train arrived at its destination, at daytime, they did not know where they were. She was separated from her parents, but stayed together with her sisters. The next day, in the barracks, the *Blockälteste* told them that they were in Auschwitz-Birkenau, in Poland. They noticed the strange smell and soon found out that it came from the crematoria where their relatives not selected for work – among them their mother – were cremated. The *Blockälteste*, a Polish woman had sexual relations with an SS officer.

She and her sisters spent only a few days in Birkenau, in Camp B3. They were neither tattooed nor registered, and they wore their own clothes. They were transferred to nearby Krakow, outside the city. She assumed that it was a former Jewish ghetto where they were housed, because the Jewish cemetery was there. There were several hundred women; Hungarians, Poles, Slovaks. They slept in beds, the food was much better than in Birkenau, and they were able to wash themselves and their clothes. But they had to perform heavy physical labor: digging trenches, working on the construction site of an airfield, and, worst of all, working in a quarry where they had to load stones on miner's trams and push them uphill. Once, the tram tipped over and hurt her leg (she showed the old injury on her leg). Her sisters rescued her and Rózsi protected her from the beatings of an SS guard. She said that the SS guards had dogs and unleashed them on the prisoners. She emphasized over and over again that she owed her life to her sisters, who always helped her and protected her, especially Rózsi who dealt with all practical matters. She was not only the youngest of the sisters but physically the weakest.

In early fall of 1944, they were transferred back to Birkenau, to Camp B2. They were registered - she claimed to have been born in 1928 - and was this time tattooed. She showed her Auschwitz number: 18793. Their hair was shorn for the second time, and they received prison garb. She said that their *Blockälteste* was a very good- looking and cruel German woman, Ilse Koch (the infamous Ilse Koch served in Buchenwald, not in Auschwitz) who frequently beat the prisoners.

They were digging trenches along the Vistula River to hold up the Soviet army. They heard from male prisoners, who worked in the camp maintenance that the Russians were near. Afterwards, they worked inside spinning a combination of linen and rubber bands with which she badly hurt her hand. Toward the end of December, she was not

able to work any longer. She was separated from her sisters and put into a barracks within the former Gypsy camp [The Gypsies were killed in August 1944]. There was barely any food or water. The conditions deteriorated further when the Russians bombed the electric power station of the camp, and there was no more electricity. Many people died around her and she awaited her own death.

On January 27, the first Russian soldiers arrived. The next day, the Soviet Red Cross came and transported the prisoners to Auschwitz, the town, to be properly housed. They were washed, examined, and carefully fed. She was 32 kg. She said she remained eternally grateful to the Russians and considered her liberation as her second birthday. In the spring, Romania sent a train for the Romanian prisoners. She traveled with another girl who lived in a village close to Szatmár (Satu Mare). The war came to an end when they reached Romania. She was ill and spent a couple of weeks in a hospital in Szatmár before traveling to Kolozsvár. In Kolozsvár, she registered, and was placed in a convalescent home, Villa Péter-Pál. She was ill and depressed, alone in the world, considering taking her own life. Someone suggested smoking cigarettes to alleviate her depression. She became a smoker and gave it up only three years prior to this interview. From the convalescent home she was transferred to an orphanage. She had to work and finished her elementary school. She also completed her high school studies in evening school.

In 1946, accidentally, she met her brother who dated a girl, Lili, in the orphanage. Her brother had also survived, returning from Reichenbach. Her brother did not help her. He brought food only to Lili whom he soon married. They left for Israel in 1946. She did not want to go with them, because she knew that she could not rely on her brother. She went to study in Bucharest and also worked to support herself. She became an economist and taught economics all her life. In Bucharest, she also joined the Jewish community. She said that she never hid her Jewish heritage and talked to her students about her experiences during the Holocaust.

In 1951, she married a Romanian journalist, but divorced him after a few years. She had a son who became a medical doctor.

In 1968, unexpectedly, she heard of her sisters through an intermediary whom her sisters had asked to look for her in Romania. After being separated in Auschwitz-Birkenau, her sisters were on a forced march, afterwards on an open train toward Germany. Many women died of exhaustion. Others were shot.

Her sisters were liberated by U.S. forces. After convalescence, they left for Argentina. They remembered that they had an uncle in Buenos Aires whom they managed to find through the Red Cross. The uncle sent them tickets to Argentina, where they lived and married. They came to visit her in Romania and later she also traveled to Argentina. She also traveled to Israel with her sisters. In the later years of her life, she traveled all over the world. She went back to Auschwitz, and brought flowers for a mass grave in Reichenbach in memory of her father.