

Estelle (Wakszlak) Laughlin



Born July 9, 1929, in Warsaw, Poland

Estelle Laughlin was born in Warsaw, Poland, on July 9, 1929 to Michla and Samek Wakszlak. Estelle also had an older sister, Freda, who was born in January 1928. Michla tended to the home and children while Samek ran a jewelry shop. Estelle and Freda attended the local public school.

First Person
Today at 1:00pm
Doors open at 12:45pm

Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. The siege on Warsaw began a week after German forces invaded Poland. On September 29, shortly after Poland's surrender, German forces entered Warsaw. Estelle and Freda were no longer able to attend the local public school. In October 1940 German forces decreed the establishment of a ghetto. The Wakszlak family and more than 400,000 Jews from the city and surrounding areas were forced to live in a 1.3 square mile area and to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David. The food allotments rationed to the ghetto by the German authorities were not sufficient to sustain life; however, Samek was able to get extra food for his family from the black market. From July to September 1942, 300,000 ghetto residents were deported to Treblinka II, an extermination camp. During this time Estelle and her family hid in a secret room to escape the deportations.



In April 1943 German forces made one last push to liquidate the remaining 55,000-60,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to work or death camps. Samek, who helped to organize the resistance movement, built a bunker in which he and his family could hide during the Warsaw ghetto uprising. As SS and police units began roundups they were met with artillery fire from resistance fighters. In retaliation, the SS began razing the ghetto, block by block. The bunker where Estelle and her family were hiding, which was in the basement of a house, was exposed by a bomb. Everyone was dragged out onto the street. The Wakszlak family was marched to the *umschlagplatz* (concentration point), forced to board freight train cars, and transported to Majdanek.

Upon arrival at Majdanek the women and men were separated. Estelle, Michla, and Freda were chosen for forced labor but Samek was sent to the gas chamber. The women moved

turf from one place outside the camp to another. At one point Freda was badly beaten by a German guard and could not work. She hid in the barracks, but was discovered. Her name was put on what she thought was a gas chamber list. Estelle and Michla switched places with two women who were on the same list, thus believing that the remaining Wakszlak family members could die together. Michla, Estelle, and Freda were, instead, sent to the Skarzysko concentration camp to work in a munitions factory. Later, they were sent to the Czestochowa concentration camp to work in a different munitions factory.

Soviet forces liberated Czestochowa in January of 1945. To escape pogroms in Poland the three women moved to Bavaria in August 1945 and lived there until 1947, when they moved to the United States to join Michla's two sisters and brother in New York City.

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