



Gerda Cohen

Holocaust Survivor

Gerda was 6 years old when the war broke out in 1939. She was born in Katowice, Poland. Gerda and her family were evacuated from Katowice and relocated to Sosnowiec in 1939. Gerda grew up speaking German, but she came in contact with children who spoke Polish and Yiddish upon their relocations during the war. Gerda recalls a relatively playful and happy childhood in Sosnowiec, and the later Bezdin; she had no real concept of evacuation, and saw their relocation as more of a holiday.

In Sosnowiec, Gerda's family lived in a single room with one bed, in which Gerda slept with her parents after witnessing robberies and shootings in their street.

Gerda's father was sick and interned in the hospital in Sosnowiec for an extended period. This was before the ghetto was closed off, so Gerda's mother was able to travel back to Katowice to buy from the butcher with forged meat coupons.

Whilst Gerda's father was still in hospital, a German order was given for Jews to report to a sportsground for registration. Gerda's mother hid with Gerda and did not report. The 'registration', or 'Punkt', lasted several days in the heat. Jews were to give over jewellery and valuables in return for water. Gerda later learned that from the Punkt, children and elderly were in the first transportation from Sosnowiec to the death camps. Among the children and elderly were hospital patients, too. The doctor who treated Gerda's father, Dr Frischer, hid him in a cupboard at the hospital and saved him from the deportation.

Families were often moved from apartment to apartment, and from region to region, within Sosnowiec in order to maintain optimum density of residents, for ease of evacuation. After her father had recovered, Gerda and her family were resettled to Bezdin with those who survived the Punkt. Able bodied people were put to work making military uniforms. When the ghetto in Bezdin was closed, workers marched in and out of the ghetto to work. One day there was an evacuation, and the workers did not return to the ghetto. Gerda's father was deported to Auschwitz and did not survive the war.

Upon the liquidation of the Bedzin ghetto in 1943, Gerda's mother approached a German soldier and pleaded with him in fluent German to save her and her daughter. Gerda's mother knew of a Polish woman who had previously been active in assisting resistance fighters within the ghetto. Wanda Hornik hid Gerda and her mother in her apartment which, luckily, had no neighbours living downstairs. Wanda was a retail assistant at a shoe shop, and sustained Gerda and her mother with her small income. Wanda even bought Gerda a turtle to keep her amused in her confinement.

Gerda pondered, in her testimony to Yad Vashem, that Wanda's willingness to risk her life to save Gerda and her mother came down to the loss of her Jewish lover who failed in his plans for resistance in the ghetto. She noted, too, that Wanda was a kind-hearted person by nature, and that her selfless act was perhaps something that she didn't even think twice about.

Wanda and the Grunpeters moved to Katowice after the war ended. Gerda and her mother moved to Australia in 1964, and kept in contact with Wanda until her death in 1978.