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United Nations Headquarters

Belz, Mein Shtete Belz performed by Doori Na



EDITH

I was four and Selma was three in 1939 when WWII reached us in Zloczow, Poland (now Zolochiv, Ukraine).

Our mother and father, Linka and Lipa Tennenbaum, were both lawyers.



We lived with our father's parents above grandfather's paper goods and printing factory. Mother's mother lived near the Zloczow railroad station. We celebrated Jewish holidays and assimilated into Polish culture.

I have happy memories of our pre-war life: guests around the candle-lit table, talking and singing, horse-and-buggy trips to the forests of the neighboring Jelechowice.

SELMA

I have no memory of life before the war.

First came the Russians, then the Germans, and the Russians again. Each time, bombs fell. I saw strings hanging from a plane and wondered what they were. I heard a boom. Someone scooped me up and rushed me to the cellar. I was afraid, but this became my normal.

I think of myself back then as a little animal that lived in a dangerous forest. Outside are enemies and that's the way life is. You either survive or you don't, but you have your parents to protect you. Our parents created an imaginary existence for us. We pretended to be at school and

at the park. We played cards and homemade board games, and we were early and avid readers. Father taught us sign language so we could communicate when we had to be quiet.

EDITH

Our grandparents fled to Lwow (now Lviv in Ukraine) to avoid deportation to Siberia. The Russians ordered Father to work in the factory.

Even though the Russians took away our home, our parents' careers, and grandfather's business, we weren't afraid for our lives. This changed when the Germans came to Zloczow on July 1, 1941. We learned a new word: Akzion, Jew hunt.

The Germans ordered Father to continue working in the factory, which gave him access to the factory building and to information. He learned of an imminent Jew hunt. Our family and some neighbors hustled to the factory attic.



Selma and I were instructed to keep absolutely quiet because the attic was not insulated. It was cold. We didn't have time to prepare. We heard shots and screams. Our parents shushed and hugged us.

SELMA

Jews were shot on sight on the streets and systematically executed in the jail on the outskirts of town. Three thousand Jews were killed in the first Akzion.

The factory, which still stands today, saved us and others many times.

When the Jew hunt ended, we returned to our apartment. The body of a murdered neighbor lay in our courtyard for several days. Mother said to look the other way, but we could not shut out the smell.

The Germans mandated that Jews wear armbands and issued edicts abolishing their rights. These were published in the factory, where father still worked.

During the next 16 months, the Germans initiated two more Jew hunts. They claimed that the Jews were being transported to the Belzec and Lackie concentration camps for work. When it became evident that most captured Jews and all children were being murdered, our parents gave us away to Christian friends.

EDITH

At first, I was given away without Selma because I supposedly looked less Jewish. But I didn't want to be without her, so I climbed through a window and ran back to my family. The second time, both Selma and I were given away. This time, we climbed through the window together.

Mother was never happy with giving us away, so the new plan was for us to pass as a family of non-Jews. We were taught Catholic prayers.

SELMA

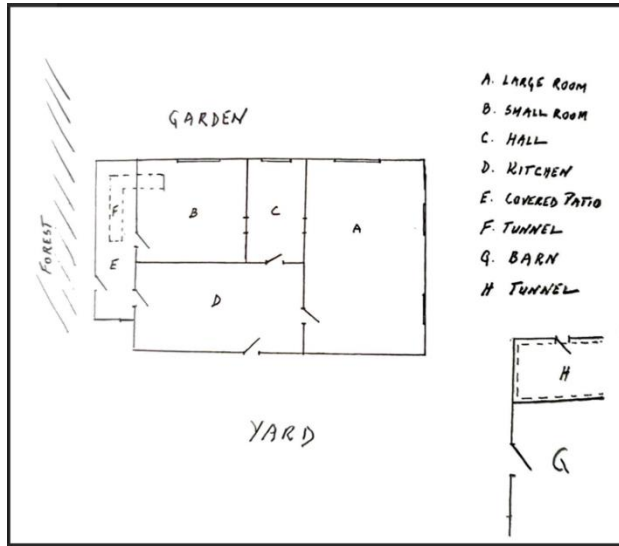
In December 1942, Zloczow Jews were squeezed into a walled ghetto with thirty people per apartment. Typhus broke out in the ghetto. Afraid of catching it, the Germans ordered father to live outside the ghetto. Father contrived to take us all with him. Both grandmothers caught typhus. I remember seeing my father crying after holding a mirror to his mother's mouth and realizing that she had died.

The 4th and final Jew hunt broke out. Zloczow was to be Judenrein, Jew free. We hid in a bunker. Germans came looking for us. Our Polish neighbors lied and told them, "No Jews here".

Unexpectedly, Helena Skszeszewska, our summer landlord and friend appeared at the trap door of our bunker and said, "Come with me."

EDITH

Helena and her two Ukrainian tenants, Misia and Hryc, hid us and two more Jewish Families in her three-room cottage for the 15 months and 7 days until liberation.



Helena was in an end room – the large room. Misia and Hryc in the middle, we in the third. Beneath an adjoining porch, the men dug a 3-foot tunnel.

When danger approached, Misia would sing "Wieczorny Dzwon," "Evening Bells," the song you will now hear.

PAUSE FOR THE SONG, "Evening Bells" performed by Doori Na

EDITH continues

As Misia sang, we rushed to the tunnel. The Jelechowice forest next to us became the execution ground for the remainder of the Zloczow Jews. We heard the shots. Somebody said, "I can smell the corpses." I started to cry.

SELMA

Toward the end of the war, different groups of German soldiers occupied Helena's room. They never explored the house. If we had been found, we, Helena, Misia, and Hryc would have been murdered.

On July 17, 1944, we were liberated. Out of 10,000 Zloczow Jews, about 100 survived. Father repeatedly said that we survived by chance. It was really a matter of luck.

Helena, Misia and Hryc saved 15 Jews. They have been recognized as righteous among the Nations.

EDITH

We learned after liberation that Grandfather had poisoned himself with cyanide on the way to a camp.

When he was 88, Father wrote us a letter which he said was the most difficult he had

ever written. He and Mother often wondered how we felt knowing they were planning to poison us and themselves with cyanide if we were captured during the Jew hunts. We never spoke with Father about the cyanide.

SELMA

After crossing three borders illegally, we were able to come into the USA legally. Miraculously, we were able to make new lives. We are very grateful to this country.

EDITH

Now in our eighties, we live our lives — which continue to be wonderful— in the knowledge that, when we were girls, people who did not know us wanted us dead.

SELMA

They wanted to kill us.

EDITH

They wanted to kill our family.

SELMA

Had they succeeded, we would not have had our husbands, our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren, whom we love with all our hearts.

EDITH

We would not have done productive work.

SELMA

We would not be here in this hopeful place talking to you today.

EDITH

We have seen that hatred can be very strong.

SELMA

But we can be stronger.