

ANNA HEILMAN

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.



Anna Heilman (born Hanka Wajcblum, and written in some places as “Hanna”), daughter of Jakob and Rebeka, was born on December 1, 1928, in Warsaw, Poland. Anna had two older sisters, Sabina and Ester (Estusia). Anna’s

parents were deaf, and Jakob employed deaf people at his factory, where they carved wooden objects. Anna’s family celebrated major Jewish holidays like Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Passover, but the family did not attend synagogue regularly. Anna went to a private Catholic girl’s school, and was fiercely proud and patriotic when it came to her Polish heritage.

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, and World War II began. During the initial attacks of the invasion, Anna hid in a cellar where coal and potatoes were usually stored. The attacks left the city without water and electricity. Shortly after the Nazis occupied Warsaw, Anna and Ester were no longer allowed to attend their school. Sabina and her fiancé, Nieczyslaw Zielinski, fled towards Eastern Poland, which was occupied by the Soviet Union, and they tried to convince the rest of the family to go with them. Anna’s mother felt that leaving was unnecessary; she said she had survived World War I and rebuilt after that, and would do the same thing again.

Beginning on December 1, 1939, Jews over the age of ten in Nazi-occupied Poland had to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David. While the armbands were supposed to mark Jews as “others,” Anna remembers being proud to wear hers—it was a badge of honor that her mother embroidered for her. In November 1940 a ghetto was established in Warsaw. The ghetto was overcrowded and cramped, and the food rations were insufficient. At first, Anna and her family thought they would be okay in the ghetto; they believed the Jews would just have to live together. Their perception quickly changed, however, when Anna’s aunt was taken off the street and they never saw her again.

While living in the ghetto, Anna attended clandestine school in the apartments of teachers. She also became very involved with the Zionist-socialist youth organization Hashomer Hatzair (the “Young Guard” in Hebrew). Anna taught children to read and write Polish. By this time, Anna’s father was working and living outside the ghetto, and he was able to secure Anna and her mother jobs outside of the ghetto as well. However, Anna snuck back into the ghetto to help Hashomer Hatzair. During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April 19, 1943 – May 16, 1943), Anna went out after curfew and pasted posters onto the sides of buildings. These posters encouraged Jews to fight against the Nazis and to fight being deported to concentration and death camps.

On May 3, 1943, Anna and her parents were found, seized and taken back to the ghetto. They were taken to a train used to

transport animals with thousands of other Jews, where 150 people were put into each wagon (called “cattle cars”). Anna was in a cattle car with her parents and sister. There was no food, no toilet, and no water. When the train stopped several days later, they were at Majdanek, a concentration and death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. Men and women were separated, and those who were perceived as able-bodied were separated from the old and the weak. This was the last time Anna and Ester saw their parents, who were murdered in the gas chambers. The sisters were forced to work in a field at Majdanek, where they were so hungry that they stole horseradish to nourish themselves.

In September 1943, Anna and Ester were deported from Majdanek to Auschwitz. Their hair was shorn and they had numbers tattooed on their arms. The woman who gave Anna her tattoo was Jewish, and commented that Anna would survive the war; her number, 48,150, added up to 18, which means “life” in Jewish numerology. Anna and Ester worked in a munitions factory and, along with some other female prisoners, they started smuggling gunpowder from the factory to the Sonderkommando (a special unit of Jewish forced laborers who worked in the crematoria) at Auschwitz-Birkenau. In October 1944 this Sonderkommando unit staged a revolt. They managed to burn down one of the crematoria and kill some of their German guards. The Nazis killed the Sonderkommando members who participated in the uprising, and they then traced the gunpowder back to the factory where Anna and Ester worked. Ester and three other women—Róza Robota, Ella (or Ala) Gärtner, and Regina Safirsztain—were tortured and hanged. Anna and Ester had formed a special friendship with Marta Bindiger, a Slovakian Jew. While Ester, Regina, Ala and Roza were awaiting execution, Ester snuck a note to Marta asking her to look after her sister. Marta kept her promise to take care of Anna. They stayed together and remained lifelong friends.

In January 1945, the Nazis forced most of the prisoners at Auschwitz on a “death march” toward Germany. On these death marches prisoners were subjected to great cruelty. They were marched by foot and at times also put on trains and other methods of transport, as they were taken to the German interior. The prisoners in Anna’s group, including Marta, were put on a train to Ravensbrück, a concentration camp in Germany. They were then sent to a sub-camp, Neustadt-Glewe, where they were liberated by Soviet and British forces, and then handed over to the American army.

Anna lived in Brussels, Belgium, until 1946, when she immigrated to British Mandatory Palestine. She married her husband, Joshua, in 1947, and they had two daughters. The family immigrated to Boston, Massachusetts in 1958, and settled in Ottawa, Canada, in 1960. Anna worked as a social worker for over thirty years. At the time of her interview, she had four grandchildren. This interview was conducted on February 22, 1996, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.