

HELEN FAGIN

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



Helen N. Fagin was born February 1, 1922, to Ewa and Solomon Neimark in Radomsko, Poland. Helen had an older sister, Wanda, and a younger sister, Terry. Her father

owned a department store as well as the apartment above it where the family lived. After graduating high school, Helen attended the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and remembers that she and the other Jewish students were often forced to stand in their classes and were not allowed to wear clothing that had the name of the university printed on it.

When rumors began to circulate about the sightings of German planes, Helen's family started to prepare for the worst. On September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, they heard bombings in the outskirts of Radomsko. Within a couple of months, the German authorities turned the town into a ghetto. Helen, who was seventeen at the time, set up a clandestine school and taught her younger sister and other children whatever she remembered from her own education including lessons in Latin and geography. The children liked hearing stories, so Helen would often tell them the story of *Gone with the Wind*, which she had recently read, transporting the students to another place and time. In October 1942, Helen's parents were taken away in a raid while Helen and her two sisters managed to hide. They never saw their parents again.

Soon after, Helen's sisters escaped from the ghetto with the help of the underground while Helen remained behind. In January 1943, Helen was selected for deportation when the ghetto was being liquidated, but she managed to escape on the march to the railroad station and find her younger sister Terry. With the help of the underground, Wanda and Helen were able to secure false identity papers and jobs and Terry hid in a

Catholic orphanage. After months of living under false identities, the three sisters ended up together in Busko, Poland where they were liberated by the Russian Army.

After liberation the sisters returned to Radomsko and eventually went to Bad Gastein, Austria, a displaced persons' camp. Wanda met her future husband, an American Army lieutenant and director of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration team in Bad Gastein, who helped the three sisters immigrate to the United States in 1946. On May 15, 1947, Helen went to a dance in New York City where she met her future husband, Sidney Fagin.

Helen and Sidney married on November 14, 1948, and had two children, Judith and Gary. In 1951, the family moved to Miami, Florida, and Helen went back to school and earned a Ph.D. from the University of Miami where she became a professor of English and the director of Judaic Studies. Helen received a number of awards for her work promoting tolerance and in 1994, President Clinton invited her to be on the advisory board for the World War II Memorial in Washington D.C. At the time of her interview in 1996, Helen and Sidney were living in Sarasota, Florida.