

Romana Holder During The War



This is me at the beginning of the 1940s. I don't know where this photo was taken.

I worked in the 'Linia i Litera' print shop before the war. In August 1939 I went on vacation to Muszyna [a resort in the south of Poland, in the Beskid hills]. I returned to Warsaw from Muszyna on 23rd August, and on 1st September 1939 I went back to work at 'Linia i Litera' [on 1st September 1939 the German army crossed the Polish border and World War II began]. When the Germans came in, the print shop lasted a month or two and was closed down.

We lived at Leszno: my mom, my brother and I. My father cut it short and committed suicide, through the window in his sisters' apartment... That may have been in 1940, before the Ghetto [before October 1940].

When there was the Ghetto, my grandmother lived with us. First she was with my mother's sister, Mania, but then that aunt's kids did something inexcusable. When things got tough-not as bad as with us, because we had no means of supporting ourselves-they told her to leave. So later we didn't have anything at all to do with them. My grandmother was 84 when she got ill because the food was unsuitable. A doctor came and said that it was an intestinal torsion, and that she was too old to have an operation and anyway, in those conditions, in the Ghetto.... If not for the war maybe they would have saved her. She died shortly after. I wasn't at home at the time. I don't even know where she's buried.

We remained at Leszno until the deportations began. Two Germans entered the house and yelled: 'Alles raus!' [Ger.: everybody out!]. We were all scared, so we all went out. Only we took bedclothes with us, to have something to sleep on. We got an apartment at 16 or 18 Mila. I wasn't there long, only a few weeks; then I got out of the Ghetto.

But before I got out, I worked. First, for a short time, I worked for Ringelblum's archive in the basement of the synagogue at Tlomackie. I got that job through an acquaintance of my brother's who was madly in love with him. Her name was Felka, I don't remember her last name, and I think she was active in some organization. A few other girls worked there, too; we were making lists of donations for Jewish children.

And then I worked in an ink factory. A private company, not far from where I lived, called 'Leszczynski and Company.' A big firm. They employed Jews for the dirty jobs in which you had to deal with ink. Poles did all the other kinds of jobs, because there were also paints, carbons and other papers. When things got really bad and Jews were being rounded up, one of them offered to get me out of the Ghetto. I asked how much for. And it turned out that for nothing.

It was September 1942, a few days before the big deportation [Grossaktion]. So I got up and left. I hid a few pictures in my purse: my mom's, my brother's and sister's, her son's and my own. And five dollars which my last friend made me take. I remember that somewhere on the way from Leszno to Gesia [a street which exists only partly today, as Anielewicz], I had to go through a Jewish kitchen where they gave out soup. And there was my friend's mother. It was the first time I saw her. She gave me a rose from my friend and with that rose I went out of the Ghetto. Opposite the Jewish Cemetery I had to cross the Ghetto demarcation line. A German stopped me at the exit and said 'Ausweis!' [Ger.: identification card]. Damn it, nobody told me you had to have an ausweis. I just went like an idiot with nothing, not a slip of paper for that German. I hadn't thought they should have written something for me in German. I had toilet paper with me, so I took out a piece and showed it to the German. He said 'Los' [Ger. colloquial: go], so I walked on. Was the German bribed already? Maybe my brother arranged that for me? And there, on the other side of the street one of those workers was waiting for me. I accidentally dropped the rose, so I bent to pick it up and he told me off me for being silly, wasting time for a rose. We got on a tram and went to his house on the corner of Marszalkowska. I spent two days there.

As was decided earlier, I called the husband of my friend Marysia. When I called him, he came to pick me up and we went to their house at Czackiego [in the city center]. I stayed there only for 2-3 days, because other people were hiding there too.

He found a very pleasant apartment for me, at 62 Hoza [in the city center]. I lived there for a month or two, but then Marysia got mad and refused to help me any more. She probably thought I was flirting with Wojtek. Anyway, it was horrible. I asked her 'So what am I supposed to do?' 'As far as I'm concerned you can walk out of a fourth story window,' was all she said. So I wrote a letter to my brother saying that I wanted to go back to the Ghetto. He wrote back that a woman would come and take care of me.

And indeed, a woman came. She was a friend of his, Zaba, from Konskowola [around 100 km south-east from Warsaw]. I have no idea where he met her. The year was 1942. So I went with her to Konskowola and I actually was very comfortable there.

My brother sent me letters by mail addressed to Zaba [toward the end of 1942]. My mom no longer added anything. He lied to me that she had bad legs, but what could legs have had to do with writing? Probably she was already gone. They took her out of the house and just took her away. I don't even know where and when she died. To this day I can't forgive myself that I wasn't there. I got the last message from my brother on 14th April 1943. He wrote: 'I am well, don't worry about me, think about yourself.' Zaba went to Warsaw to get him out, even though we didn't have a hiding place for him. But when she got there she saw that all of the Ghetto was burned down. He was a wonderful brother and a wonderful son...

When I was there I still got messages from my sister. She was taken from Lublin to Majdanek. From Majdanek she apparently sent me a diamond, through a man who undertook to give me some of the money for that diamond. For a while that was the only money Zaba and I had to support ourselves. In the meantime, my sister's husband-who they didn't take to Majdanek and he was still in Lublin-wrote to me asking if Zaba could organize a hiding place for him. It was hard to read what he said, he'd gone completely crazy. He was wealthy. If he'd given her some money, maybe Zaba would have managed to help. But he only liked making money and didn't know how to use it. Sometime earlier my sister wrote us that we should remember about this man who could save her husband. So Zaba and I went to Lublin, which was rather dangerous as we later found out. The man said he didn't know my brother-in-law, though he was wearing my brother-in-law's jacket... I recognized it because I had a jacket from the same cloth (the one my sister is wearing on this photograph). It's all so strange. My brother-in-law really had a chance of surviving: he didn't have black hair, he had brown hair and blue eyes, he spoke Polish well. I'm not even talking about the rest of his family but himself. Because he was basically alone by then. His little son Gucio and my sister died in Majdanek, the child before her. I figured that out from the letters I got from my brother-in-law: there was no mention of the child.

I spent two years with Zaba, from 1942 till the end of the war, when Lublin was freed [July 1944], possibly before Warsaw was. In 1944, when I was still in Konskowola, the Russian Army and Polish officers arrived. One of them asked what I was still doing there. He told me to go to Lublin to the army and say he sent me. I went to Lublin to look for someone from my family. I went to the Jewish Committee, but I didn't find out anything. I registered in case someone was looking for me. Nobody was. So I went to the army. I went from Lublin to Berlin with the army as an ensign. I was demobilized in Katowice in 1945.

Everybody died. Nobody was left from this family, nobody. I got out of the Ghetto then because I wanted to live. I was the only one to cut myself off, and that's why I'm left all alone. Closer family, distant family, they're all gone...