Leah Laskowski

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

My name is Leah Russ Laskowski. I was born on September 8, 1912 in Warta, Poland. My parents were Yaakow and Miriam Zaleberg Russ. I had four brothers and two sisters: Pearl, Israel Wolf, Moshe, Chaim, Josef Juda and Brana. We moved to Lodz in the mid nineteen thirties. When the war broke out, we were moved to the Jewish ghetto in Lodz. My father died shortly thereafter at the hands of German soldiers who beat him. Two of my brothers, Moshe and Chaim, were drafted into the Polish army where they eventually met their deaths. The rest of us were taken to concentration camps. All were killed except me.

In June 1943, I and the remainder of my family, my mother and two sisters were living in Poland, in the ghetto of Lodz. It was early morning when the supervisor of our factory came to tell us that we were being taken to work in a difference place. We hurriedly gathered a few belongings – photographs, a scarf my grandmother had once given me, and a few articles of clothing which we tied into a small bundle. We never had a chance to open that bundle because it was taken from us. We arrived at the station to find thousands of others like us. We were herded into cattle cars. The heat was unbearable, and soon we were begging for water. At one stop, a small window was opened and we were handed a pitcher of water. Many hands reached for the pitcher; it fell and broke. We began to realize we were not going to another factory to work – but were being taken to our death. But here we were, already dying of heat and thirst. Some ripped off their clothes in the unbearable heat. We were so crowded – one person on top of another. I do not remember how long we were on this train, but it seemed forever. When we finally stepped off the train we knew we were at Auschwitz. I was thinking – "What will be my fate?"

Several hours later, the SS guards in their polished black boots approached us while the bands played martial music. They ordered us to make two columns – one to the right, and one to the left. My two sisters and I were directed to the right, and my mother to the left. Later we learned that the elderly and the children in the left column were sent to the gas chamber. I can still hear my mother screaming to us, "Don't run after me. You are still young. Live. Live. Save yourselves." The SS officers beat my mother as they drove her off. I found myself with thousands of other women in a large room. A Nazi woman ordered us to take our clothes off. Our heads were shaved. We looked at one another. I was unable to recognize even my own sisters. We were no longer ourselves. They gave us coarse rags to clothe ourselves. We were marched barefooted to barracks. I remember sitting on the floor with the others, falling asleep and waking. It seemed like days had passed.

Again we were marching to a military band. We were being sent to Studhof. Here there were ten barracks with almost a thousand women in each. We slept on wooden planks and had no facilities for washing. We had to be counted in the yard every morning no matter how we felt, no matter what the weather, rain or cold or snow or wind. Sometimes the count lasted for hours until they got it right. It could never be right because some us had already died.

Just for fun, the officers would beat some of us. Our food consisted of a bowl of tasteless soup and one slice of bread. The coffee was bitter water. Our clothes became full of lice. Every day hundreds died of starvation and typhoid. I saw many corpses hauled away.

In March 1945, those of us who were still alive were marched out of these barracks. They told us we were going to Berlin. For days and days we walked and walked. Many dropped like flies from starvation and exhaustion. At night we were locked in barns and slept on wet straw. Later we learned that this was known as the Death March. We were being driven along because the Russian Army was pursuing us.

At one place I reached for an icicle hanging from the roof of a house we were passing. Before I had a chance to taste it, the Nazi guard hit me and knocked me to the ground. "Stand up," he yelled at me, kicking me with his iron heel. "Die like a dog," he hissed, leaving me for dead.

When I awoke from my faint, I found myself surrounded by Russian soldiers. I was taken to a makeshift hospital where the Russian women nurses treated me gently. They kept me for several days until I got my strength back. The Red Cross took me on a stretcher to the train, and I was on my way back to my home in Lodz, Poland. When I reached what had once been my home, I found it was no longer mine. A Polish neighbor had moved in and occupied it now. All I could find there to remind me of the past was a single lamp. I remained with the Polish neighbor for a few days, looking forward to a reunion with the rest of my family.

I discovered a group of survivors were gathered in a house nearby. There I learned that my entire family had been wiped out. All of them –my four brothers, my two sisters and my parents - all of my relatives were dead.

During all these terrible times I believed that God was guarding me. Even now I fight off images of this period. They appear in my dreams – they're always with me. It is right that we who suffered so much should always remember. But it is important that the world too, must never, never forget.

I came to the United States in December 1950 with my husband, Michael Laskowski, and our four-year-old daughter, Miriam. I knew my husband before the war. We married in 1945. All but two of his sisters died in the war. We settled in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where my husband found work in a junkyard. After he died in 1962 of cancer, my daughter and I moved to Berkeley, California. I worked as a hostess and interpreter at the Men's Faculty Club at the University of California for several years.

My daughter married David Michael Wilson in 1969. David is an attorney in San Francisco, and Miriam works as a real estate broker. They have two children, Michael Jacob and Laurence Anthony, born in 1970 and 1972, respectively.

The pillow in my photo I made when in the DP camp in Germany. The quilt was made in Berkeley. It is the first and only quilt I have ever made.

Additional information added by Leah's daughter Miriam and son-in- law and David Wilson:

Dominik Michalnik was a non-Jewish teenager in Warta who helped local Jews who had gone underground when the Nazis rounded up the bulk of the population and sent them to death in Chelmno. The story is that Michael Laskowski had fled by swimming across the Warta River. Returning at 2 a.m., he knocked on a neighbor's door and asked for food and dry clothes. Michalnik answered and helped Laskowski, who then went underground and survived the war. After the German surrender, Leah and about 25 other camp survivors returned to Warta. There she married Michael, whose first wife and infant daughter had been sent to Chelmno. In December 1945, locals killed two of the returnees, and the rest fled westward, including Michael and Leah.

Michalnik assumed that one of the two Jews killed by neighbors was Michael Laskowski, and in the year 2000 wrote letters to another sympathizer, telling the story and volunteering to file a complaint with local prosecutors. The recipient, Ireneusz Slipek, revealed that Laskowski had actually survived, named the actual victims (but not the killers). Slipek himself spent his last years refurbishing the Jewish cemetery, lifting heavy gravestones and replacing them upright with his own hands.

Michalnik and Slipek are now dead, but there are copies of letters between the two confirming the story set out above.