

## Mella Wende!

### Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born in Warsaw, Poland to the Schwietzer family, which consisted of 9 children (6 brothers and 3 sisters). I was the youngest. In 1939-1942, when the war broke out we were still together, but little by little my family members started disappearing. My oldest brother David, escaped to Russia in 1939, and died in Israel at the age of 90. I was sent first to Maydanek, Birkenau, and Auschwitz. Both of us were the only ones that survived the war. I went from Auschwitz to Ravensbruck and also to Malhov. I was working in Auschwitz and Mydanek carrying large wooden pallets of fertilizer and gravel back and forth, during the winter and summers, wearing wooden shoes, a striped uniform, and no underwear at all. The Germans wanted to work us hard to wear us out so they could put us in the crematoriums.

In 1943 I was in Birkenau and was chosen to work in the "UNION" ammunition factory. There I could sit down on a chair and I would inspect the ammunition dividing the good ones from the bad ones. Because I was warm working inside a building, I survived even without much food. I ate ¼ bread a day and watered-down soup made out of weeds. I had to wait 24 hours until the next day for my portion of food again.

One day in 1945 the Russians started bombing Auschwitz and we went on a death march by foot to Ravensbruck. On this march, I got frostbite on my feet and almost lost my toes. I am suffering with this problem till today. I had many bad experiences, but I can't explain them all. I was beaten up badly by the Germans for not walking straight. I was beaten up once again, this time from an older officer who caught me at the block for not going to work one day. Instead of shooting me right there, he gave me two slaps across my face and let me go – I know I escaped from death this time. I went through several selections completely naked, and my life was always hanging on a thin line. But God saved me from all these terrible experiences, and I am living today.

In May 1945 the English army liberated me in Hamburg, Germany. There I married and in 1947 I had my son, Herman. In 1949, we moved to Israel, and there I had my daughter, Gail. In 1952 we decided to move to Montreal, Canada, where my husband's brothers lived. Because of the difficult winter weather, and my ailing feet problems, we moved to San Francisco, where we had some friends. I have lived in San Francisco for thirty-seven years with my family and three grandchildren.

In 1973, I went to visit Israel and there I met my present husband Dr. Zalman Katznelson. We fell in love and came to the United States and got married in 1974. My husband was born in Russia (Minsk) and finished studying in Moscow. After the war he was sent to Poland to work there as a doctor, so he speaks Polish very well. Polish is our main language together, although we both speak Yiddish, Russian, English and Hebrew.

Now we both live in the United States for six months out of the year and six months in Israel. We have had this living arrangement for over twenty years, because my children both live in San Francisco and have their businesses here; it is easier for me to travel back and forth to see my family. I hope to retire completely from traveling because I am getting tired of the long distance. I will make my permanent home in San Francisco to be with my children and grandchildren.

I hope that the Holocaust stories continue and are never forgotten.