

LEAH LASKOWSKI

Leah Laskowski survived the Lodz ghetto, Auschwitz, Stutthof, and a death march.

“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 of us had already died.”

Leah Laskowski (née Russ) was born in 1912 in Warta, Poland, one of seven siblings. The family moved to Lodz in the mid 1930s, and when the war broke out, they were sent to the ghetto there.

In June 1944, Leah, her mother and two sisters were herded into cattle cars and sent to Auschwitz/Birkenau. SS guards ordered the prisoners to make two columns. Leah and her two sisters were directed to the right. Their mother, in the left column, was sent to the gas chambers. Leah remembered hearing her mother scream “Don’t run after me. You are still young. Live. Live. Save yourselves”

After being stripped and having her head shaved, Leah and her sisters were given coarse rags to wear and marched barefooted to barracks. Eventually, Leah was sent to Stutthof concentration camp where the conditions were brutal and just for fun, the officers would beat them. Almost a thousand women occupied each barrack, sleeping on wooden planks. They had no sanitary facilities, and their clothes were full of lice. Every day hundreds died of starvation and typhoid.

In March 1945, the surviving prisoners were marched out. They walked for days, many dying from starvation and exhaustion. They were locked in barns at night sleeping on wet straw and at one place, a Nazi guard knocked Leah down, leaving her for dead.

When Leah returned to Lodz after the war, she learned that that the rest of her family had been killed. She then went to Warta, where she married Michael Laskowski. He, with the help of a teen-aged Polish neighbor named Dominik Michalak, had escaped the Nazi roundup, and hidden underground for more than four years.

Leah, Michael and their daughter Miriam immigrated to the United States in 1950. She chose to be photographed with a pillow she made in a German DP camp after the war, and a quilt she created years later in California.