Remembering the Jewish Community of

Crakow, Poland

Remembered by Susan Creditor

According to the Holocaust Encyclopedia, the first recorded presence of Jews residing in Cracow, Poland dates from the early 13th century. 55,515 Cracow residents identified themselves as Jews in the Polish census of 1931; this was almost one quarter of the total population. In November, 1939, the Jewish population in Cracow had grown to about 70,000. The great increase was due to Jews who had fled from the countryside into the city and the arrival of Jews who were deported from the District Wartheland. (German-occupied Poland, which was directly annexed to the Greater German Reich).

Bronia Schonberg, Susan Creditor’s mother, resided in Podgorze, which was a suburb just south of Cracow and which, in 1941, would become the Jewish Ghetto. Before the war, Podgorze was a lovely town, filled with Jewish families who lived a comfortable Jewish life, owned businesses, and engaged in the many cultural opportunities that Cracow had to offer. Bronia’s father, Isaac, owned a roofing business with a partner. Bronia's uncle owned a chocolate factory and she was very popular in school as the girl who was willing to trade her chocolate during lunchtime. Bronia had music lessons, went to summer camp, and went skiing in Zakopane in the northern part of Poland. Many families, including Bronia's, had maids, despite not being overly wealthy.

Despite this apparently idyllic life, there was an undercurrent of Anti-Semitism in Poland. For example, according to Bronia, Jewish students attending the university were often the targets of beatings and bullying by non-Jews.

The German army occupied Cracow during the first week of September, 1939. Hans Frank, the legal counsel to the Nazi Party, set up headquarters in the Wawel Castle and
the German Security Police established their headquarters near the Montelupich Prison. Jews were commanded to perform forced labor and to establish a Jewish Council; they had to identify themselves by wearing a white armband with a blue Star of David, and ultimately, by Sept. 1940-March 1941, they had to be concentrated in Ghettos. By March 1941, the SS and police had expelled more than 55,000 Jews from the aforementioned District Wartheland and about 15,000 Jews remained in Cracow. The ghetto in Podgorze held between 15,000-20,000 Jews. Although streetcars traveled through the ghetto, no stops were made within its boundary. The Germans opened several factories inside the ghetto and Jews were deployed at forced labor. The Nazis turned Bronia's uncle's chocolate factory into a uniform factory for the SS and many Jews in the ghetto were forced to work there. Another firm that was opened was German Enamel Products, which was owned by none other than Oskar Schindler. He later moved the factory to Plaszow.

In June 1941, Cracow SS and Police Leader Scherner authorized the establishment of 2 forced labor camps for Jews, one for men and one for women, on Jerozolimska Street in Plaszow. By Feb. 1943 there were 7 more forced labor camps there. In the Spring of 1942, Operation Reinhard began, where Germans, claiming to be deporting some 1,500 Cracow Jews to Plaszow, in reality sent them to the Belzec killing center. By October 1942, Germans deported approximately 6,000 of the remaining Jews in the ghetto to Belzec. During the operation, about 600 Jews, half of them children, were shot by police in the ghetto. By mid-March 1943, Himmler ordered the liquidation of the Cracow Ghetto. Some Jews were shot and killed in the ghetto, while others, like Bronia and her mother, were deported to Auschwitz. Her father and sister were among those killed in the ghetto. Bronia, through a close friend who was selected for Schindler’s List, had been offered a place on the list as well, but she would not go unless her mother was included. As a result, Bronia and her mother, and a few other family members and friends were imprisoned at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, losing track of each other at times, only to be reunited at others. Bronia's mother, unfortunately, could not survive
the starvation and suffering that the imprisonment imposed, and she died approximately 3 weeks before liberation in April, 1945. When Bronia was liberated, she returned to Cracow to seek out family members, and she learned that she had lost all 46 members of her family. She went to Sweden with several friends, sponsored by the Swedish King who took 1800 survivors in, and resided there for 4 ½ years. Ironically, Bronia worked in a chocolate factory in Malmo. Bronia was sponsored to emigrate to the United States and arrived in New York in 1950.

As for Cracow, by 1946, there were approximately 10,000 Jews in the city, including those who returned from the Soviet Union. However, Pogroms and the murders of individual Jews led to the emigration of many of the surviving Cracow Jews. Today, only a few hundred Jews remain.

For more information about Cracow during the Holocaust, see the page at the US Holocaust Museum site. Flicker has a picture of a holocaust memorial in Podgorze. A 2006 slide shows some of the remnants of Jewish Krakow.