Remembering the Jewish Community of

Sosnowiecz, Poland

Remembered by Fran Litner

My mother, Adele Zysman, was born Adele Breski in Sosnowiecz, Poland, on May 13, 1923. She was one of eight children, five girls and three boys.

Sosnowiecz was a large city in the Dombrovski region of Poland, about 25 miles from the border with Germany. Prior to the Shoah, nearly 30,000 Jews lived in Sosnowiecz, most of whom were quite poor. Jews worked as tailors, carpenters, grocers, and bakers. Because of their difficult economic lives, the Jews of Sosnowiecz had little time for education or culture. Most Jewish boys did not go beyond 7th grade in school because they had to work to assist the family. Many served as apprentices in order to learn a trade. Jewish girls rarely had anything more than a rudimentary education because they were expected to assist in the home and with child-rearing.

There were two Orthodox shuls and several shtiebels in Sosnowiecz. Each congregation was devoted to its synagogue, and the entire Jewish community lived very strict Orthodox lives, adhering closely to Jewish law in both their communal and personal activities. The highlight of their lives were the holidays, when the entire community came together with much joy and celebration.

The German army entered Sosnowiecz at the very beginning of the war, September 4, 1939. On that day, they organized an attack on the local Jewish population, killing 13 people. A few days later, they burnt the Great Synagogue on Dekert Street. My mother, at the young age of 16, was taken from her family and sent to a slave labor camp where she worked in a thread factory.
Between May and August, 1942, more than 11,000 Jews were sent from Sosnowiecz to Auschwitz, where they perished. The remaining Jews, including my mother, were herded into a ghetto in the suburb of Srodula, where conditions were atrocious. My mother was forced to endure unthinkable cruelties and she contracted tuberculosis, sustaining permanent lung damage because of the absence of medical care.

The Germans turned the ghetto into a concentration camp, where the remaining 16,000 Jews of Sosnowiecz were forced to live their miserable lives. On August 16, 1943, all but 1,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz. Most of the remainder were murdered in January, 1944, but a small few, including my mother, managed to stay alive until May 1945, when the Russian army liberated the camp.

My mother was taken to the Landsberg displaced persons camp, where she was reunited with her only surviving relative, one of her brothers, Jack Breski, who had been at Auschwitz. There she also met and married my father, David Zysman. In 1949, they came to the United States where they raised my brother and myself, and where my mother died in 1982, at age 59, from cancer, which was caused by the scarring in her lungs from the TB she had contracted in the concentration camp. To the end, she never lost her strong sense of values that were grounded in the Jewish faith.

Today Sosnowiecz is a small, quiet Polish city that is entirely without Jews.

_The New York Public Library has an exhibit about a survivor from Sosnowiecz, Letters to Sala, and here is the story of Rose._