

Holocaust Survivor Biography: Rita B. Ross



Rita B. Ross was born in Vienna, Austria in 1936, two years before the Nazis annexed the country in March 1938. Her mother was from Wieliczka, a small town near Krakow, Poland and was tall, with blonde hair and beautiful blue eyes. Her father was from Czechoslovakia and worked in an insurance company but enjoyed traveling abroad when he could. The family enjoyed a culturally rich life.

While coming home from work one day, her father witnessed a group of young Nazi boys beating a group of older Orthodox Jewish men. A crowd gathered but no one defended the older men. He then realized that his family needed to leave.

Having acquired a travel visa to the US, he left Austria and began working on a way to bring his family to America. Unfortunately it did not work out as planned.

Just before Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Rita's family fled Vienna to Poland. In September 1940 they moved to Krakow and her mother gave them all a new identity declaring that they were Catholic. Rita was four and a half years old and her brother was three. The small family hid in Cathedrals for shelter and when the weather was nice they played in the cemetery. Her mother then decided to move to the Krakow ghetto, which the Nazis established in early 1941. By March 1941, a neighborhood where 3,000 people once lived, housed more than 20,000 people in miserable, cold, disease ridden, and starving conditions.

Meanwhile her father was able to mail documents, written in English, to Rita's mother in hopes that it would help them come to America. After receiving the documents, the small family was arrested and imprisoned in the Montelupich prison, which was controlled by the Nazi Gestapo. Her mother produced the papers for the guards and, through a lucky series of events they became prisoners of war in an American-British civilian internment camp.

While at the POW camp, some British nuns started a school teaching English to the children. Rita's family remained there until late 1944 when they were exchanged for German prisoners of war. They arrived at Ellis Island in March 1945 and processed as immigrants. Her father received word that his family had arrived and went to see them. The family settled in NYC and Rita was enrolled in a Jewish Day School. She went on to graduate from the High School of Music and Art, then Queens College, and then Yeshiva University. She married her husband and had five children and taught at Perelman Jewish Day School in Philadelphia for 27 years. Now retired she frequently speaks about her Holocaust experience and teaches students about the need for tolerance.



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Witness to History Project:

The Witness To History Project is designed to further the message and lessons of the Holocaust by direct interaction between students or interested adults and Holocaust survivors. Participants "adopt" a survivor by learning his or her unique account of via listening to the survivor tell his/her story, asking questions, writing a biography, reviewing a videotape, and memorizing and re-telling the story to others. Ultimately, the participant will have the lifelong job of educating others about the Holocaust by sharing this personal narrative. Contact the Holocaust Awareness Museum to participate.

Holocaust Awareness Museum and Education Center

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