

Holocaust Survivor Biography: Sarah Danon Meller



Sarah Danon Meller was born in Split, Yugoslavia, in 1933, to hardworking, happy parents. She had three siblings: 2 sisters and 1 brother. The family was observant and attended synagogue on Friday and Saturday evenings. This small city, on the coast of the Adriatic Sea was home to about 200 Jewish people. In April 1941, Germany invaded Yugoslavia and carved the country up, giving Croatia to Italy, their wartime ally. The Italian occupiers were not virulent anti-Semites like the Nazis were but still expressed their anti-Semitic hatred. During the summer of 1942, on a Friday evening during services, Italian Fascists in black shirts burst into the Split synagogue and forced everyone out into the nearby square. They then beat the people bloody and, at the same time, looted and burned religious texts, artifacts, and other records. They also smashed Jewish-owned businesses and looted the stores. Sarah, her father, and her brother, late because of a customer at her father's store, watched in horror from across the square.

In September 1943, the Italians surrendered to the Allies and the Nazis invaded Split. Sarah's neighbors notified their family and they fled the area. Her father and brother snuck off to fight in a partisan unit while her older sister went to fight in a separate partisan unit. Sarah, her mother, and younger sister hid in a farmers home for about 5 months before fleeing to the mountains to hide with partisans for 6 months. She was 10 years old.

In the fall of 1944, the partisan unit was able to hide a rowboat near the Adriatic Sea and was able to get in touch with a British destroyer who agreed to save the women and children. After a harrowing journey, at night, on the small rowboat, Sarah was rescued. The ship then sailed to Italy where she was luckily reunited with her brother and father. Her older sister remained fighting with the partisans. About a month and a half later they sailed on the Henry Gibbins to Fort Ontario in Oswego, NY, where they were put into a camp as guests of President Roosevelt. The US government then pressured them to return to their home country at the end of the war.

When the war ended, HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) persuaded President Truman to let the family stay and not return to war-torn Europe. Sarah's family then moved to Philadelphia in 1946 in search of work. Sarah went on to graduate from Benjamin Franklin High School and, with her husband, owned several delis throughout the city.



This educational program has been supported by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

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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.

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