My maiden name was Danuta Today I am Dina Schweitzer

Mandel Dina

In recent years I have been thinking a lot and rummaging through my past. Actually, more than 60 years have passed and everything seems to me like a bad dream. On the other hand, it feels as if it happened not long ago, because I remember every detail clearly.

I was born in Zolkiew, sometime between 1934 and 1935. I don't know exactly when, because there is no one who can tell me. The only one to survive from my father's family is my uncle, but he doesn't know exactly, either. There were six people in my family – three sisters, my brother and our parents.

I was the youngest. My father owned a sawmill, where he cut lumber for export. Naturally, he did most of his business with the peasants of the surrounding region, who provided him with the timber. Even then, we had a telephone (number 32), which was quite rare.

Until the outbreak of war, I had a very nice childhood. Everyone spoiled me. One could say that our live-in housekeeper was almost a member of the family. She could even use some Yiddish when she spoke with my father.

When the war broke out in 1939, the Russians came in and we were supposed to have been sent to Russia (to Siberia). But to our misfortune, my father worked very hard to enable us to stay, using all of his contacts to avoid our deportation, and it was this that sealed our fate. When the Germans breached their agreement with Russia and conquered Poland, our lives changed entirely.

The first Aktzion took place even before the ghetto was created. We hid in our secret hiding place, in the attic of our house. I'll never forget how they put pressure on the woman whose baby was crying, to get her to take the baby and leave the hiding place. It was our great good luck that she didn't give us away.

In 1941-1942 they transferred us to the ghetto. At the beginning, it was still possible for Jews with work permits to enter and leave the ghetto. The peasants brought their merchandise up to the gates of the ghetto. But we all feared the coming Aktzion. Our housekeeper, whose name was Katya,

Mandel Zalman

Dina in 1939

would come every evening to take me home to her house, returning me to the ghetto in the morning.

During the second Aktzion, we were in the ghetto and fled to our hideouts. Typhus broke out and spread throughout the ghetto. My mother died of the disease. My father became ill with typhus and my brother also caught the disease and had a high fever. We hid in the hideout, where we could only stand upright. Because my father was very weak, my sisters decided that papa would go to a hideout where he could sit down. But they discovered the place where papa was hiding and we heard shouts "Mandel, quick, quick." Apparently, some Christian who knew papa's name recognized him – who knows if he didn't beat him, too, because papa was weak from the typhus. As I said, my brother was also ill with typhus, with a high fever that made him delirious and as a result, he began to cough. Fortunately, just then a Christian woman came up to take the washing in from the line and when the Nazi heard coughing, he found the woman and assumed that it was she who had coughed.

After the Aktzion, they reduced the size of the ghetto to a minimum and it was no longer possible to enter and leave it. We remained – only the sisters, my brother and one uncle, whose family had been killed earlier. After the Aktzion, they prepared more hideouts (I don't know, perhaps out of desperation).

In the last Aktzion, they caught us all and brought all of the Jews from the ghetto to a large open lot. My big sister knew that they wouldn't take a girl of 7 or 8 to a work camp, so she begged a German soldier to let me escape. And, Lo and behold!, a miracle occurred and he actually made believe that he didn't see a thing. My sister told me to flee to Katya (our housekeeper) and hide somewhere, until dark, after which I should run away.

Mandel Lucia

I waited behind the ruins of a building that had a high fence facing a busy street. People passed by and there were men who used the fence as a toilet. I had to stand up very straight and hold my breath so that they wouldn't sense that there was someone behind the fence. In the meantime, darkness fell. I waited there until dawn. I broke through the fence (apparently, God gave superhuman strength to an 8 year old girl) and I began to run for my life. On the way I met a peasant woman on her way to the market and she called out to me, "Jew." I answered, "You're a Jew," and ran on.

I reached Katya. She opened the door and when she saw me she turned pale. She took the white shoes off my feet and put me right into bed, under a thick comforter (Katya's house had only one room). In the meantime, a neighbor came in who talked and talked, and I thought I would be smothered by the comforter. Finally, she left. Then we got scared that she had seen my shoes. So Katya decided to send me to a friend, until she could decide what to do with me. I spent a whole week in bed, until Katya decided to travel with me to her sister in a remote, very primitive Ukrainian village. I must say here, that I had never been a blonde girl with blue eyes, but had thick, somewhat curly hair and dark eyes, not typically Aryan, something which caused me great difficulty all along the way and aroused a great deal of suspicion.

It was unrealistic for Katya to set out from our city, because everyone knew that Katya didn't have children and it would be very dangerous to do so, even for her. So Katya decided to go by way of all kinds of little villages to a small train station and from there to travel to Lvuv. On the way, Ukrainian peasants from the area caught us and surrounded us on all sides. They asked Katya who the little girl was that she had with her. In the beginning, she answered that I was her daughter, but they didn't believe her and wouldn't leave her alone. In the end, she broke down and admitted that I was the daughter of Big Mandel. When they heard his name, they immediately turned and ran away, but they took the things she had brought with her for her sister. (What honor they showed papa, by leaving us alone as soon as they heard his name).

We went on to the train station. While we waited at the station, I had to make believe I was sleeping, with my face to the wall. We boarded the train when it came and rode to Lvuv.

When we arrived at Lvuv, we entered a big hall, where again I pretended to be asleep, with my face to the wall. After all of this wandering we reached Katya's sister, a very poor woman. She lived in a miserable room that served both as a kitchen and a bedroom and was also home to several chickens that also slept there. Her children had three sons, although two of them had already left home. They worked for wealthy peasants in other villages. Only the little boy, who was 5 or 6, lived with her. Katya left me with her sister, claiming that I was her daughter and that I needed a little country air to recover.

Once Katya had left, I stayed with a strange woman and her little boy. I didn't dare leave the room. I was left alone in the room all day long and peeked out through the keyhole. This continued for quite some time. Slowly, I dared to venture outside the room, and I could already speak a little in Ukrainian. The woman always went to work in the fields for wealthy peasants, taking the little boy with her. I remained alone. She left something similar to pita for me to eat. After a while, I made friends with the children of the peasants from the area, who took me out to the pasture with them. Sometimes I even got something to eat from them. Sometimes they remarked that I should get suntanned, "so that I wouldn't look like a Jew."

The situation was more difficult in the winter. I always went barefoot, like everyone else. In general, the village was so primitive that women urinated standing up wherever they stood, while they continued to talk with other people, and this was considered entirely normal. I don't remember ever washing. I just remember that every Sunday the woman unbraided my hair to look for lice, and then braided it again, until the next Sunday. As I said before, in winter the situation was harder, because the snow was piled high and I never had shoes. Nonetheless, to answer a call of nature I would run barefoot in the snow to the abandoned, straw-filled barn.

The Mandel Family

Suddenly, the German army arrived in the village. One of the soldiers became suspicious of me and asked where I lived. I waved my hand, "over there, over there," and scrammed out of there with the speed of a rocket. But in the evenings, the woman entertained the soldiers in her miserable house. They brought her pieces of bacon fat and she prepared a meal for them. I was lucky there was no electricity in the village. The room was very dark and the soldiers were drunk. But there was one time that got very dangerous for me. The Germans came to search for girls to take as workers. The woman ran away and left me alone. She told me not to open the door. I was very lucky that they didn't enter, because he house stood on the main road.

Still, when I think about it today, I was very lucky. Fate wanted someone to remain behind who would say Yizkor.

Life continued in that way, until the Russians came and liberated us and Katya came to take me back to our city. There was no one left of my immediate family. Only a few of the city's residents survived, among them the Melman family. Katya told Mr. Melman that the little girl from the Mandel family had survived. They didn't believe her, and Mr. Melman came to see me. He took me under his wing.

But, to my great sorrow, there was no one to reward Katya, who had saved my life. Only Mr. Melman, who was the manager of a flour mill, gave her a sack of flour as a gift.

It was very dangerous to remain in the city of Zolkiew, so Mr. Melman decided to take me to the center of Poland, and Katya, who knew that it was dangerous for me to stay with her, agreed, for lack of choice, to part from me, and the parting was very hard. We both cried bitterly. I never saw katya again.

Even correspondence was dangerous under the Stalinist regime. Only in 1953 did I write, and then I received a reply from someone who knew Katya, that Katya was no longer alive. I will never forget her. The unfortunate Katya never got any pleasure from me and to this day my conscience troubles me, that I didn't insist that they take her with us. And it hurts terribly, but I was only 10 and I didn't think that we would ever see each other again.

When we reached central Poland, they put me in an orphanage and when my uncle learned that I had survived, he came to take me out and I stayed with his family, with my two cousins, Tova and Ada, and with my Aunt Henya.

Today, I live in Luxembourg. My husband is a technician and he once wanted to learn color television. We moved with the idea that he would specialize in that trade, and we've stayed here ever since. We are now retired. We have 5 sweet grandchildren and we live in a small, quiet country.