



‘We started hearing shots. We started hearing screams’

Holocaust survivor shares her story

By: Maria Allard | Grosse Pointe Times | Published December 3, 2019

FARMINGTON HILLS/GROSSE POINTE WOODS — When the group from the Grosse Pointe Woods Community Center visited the Holocaust Memorial Center Oct. 23, there was time for them to listen to a presentation from 95-year-old Holocaust survivor Mania Salinger.

The museum has guest speakers on a regular basis. Along with the Grosse Pointe Woods tour, there were groups from local high schools in attendance Oct. 23.

Salinger, of West Bloomfield, was born in 1924 in Radom, Poland.

“I was very close to my mom. I adored my mom. I had an older sister and younger, little brother,” said Salinger, who although Jewish attended a Catholic high school where she learned how to speak German and how to type. “I grew up very happy.”

But that all changed in 1939, at age 15, when World War II broke out in Europe.

“We heard what was going on in Germany, what the Germans were doing to the Jewish people,” she told the crowd. “I kept saying to my parents, ‘Let’s get out of here. This is scary.’”

Soon, her town of Radom became a ghetto run by German soldiers.

“You can’t get out. You’re stuck there,” she remembered. “We were totally occupied.”



Mania Salinger, of West Bloomfield, talks about surviving the Holocaust to a group of visitors, including those from Grosse Pointe Woods, at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills Oct. 23. *Photo by Maria Allard*

Salinger, whose maiden name was Tenenbaum, said that not all of the German soldiers were “killers.”

“Some of the German officers were kind,” she said. “Some shared their food with us.”

She was still living with her family, where she cleaned German office quarters outside the ghetto.

“It wasn’t a safe place to be,” she said.

One day, something was up as she and the other workers went to their jobs early outside the ghetto. Instead of them returning to the ghetto in the evening, their boss had them stay overnight in a deserted warehouse while he kept watch with a gun.

“At dawn, we started hearing shots. We started hearing screams. I wanted to run to be with my parents,” Salinger told the audience. However, the group was told to stay quiet. They stayed in the warehouse for about three more hours.

“When I arrived at the ghetto, I found that my mom and my brother were gone. This was the first deportation from the ghetto.”

A few weeks later, she found out that her brother and mom had been taken with others to the Treblinka extermination camp in Poland and gassed. She didn’t want to believe it. During the war and under Nazi rule, Salinger went from Radom to the Pionki labor camp in Poland. There, Salinger worked in an office. At one point, an identification number was tattooed onto her arm.

“They shaved my hair. It’s devastating. I can’t begin to tell you,” she recalled. “My sister and my father were there too. My father worked so hard. They gave us only soup and a piece of bread per day. The hunger was unbelievable.”

Her father died after being shot at Pionki. After a year and a half at Pionki, Salinger was shipped via the Theresienstadt ghetto to the Auschwitz concentration camp. She’ll never forget what she saw.

“You see the smoke. Oh, my God. Those are the gas chambers,” she thought. “Is this where they took my mom? I couldn’t believe it.”

During the war, Salinger was forced to work in a factory in Hindenburg briefly, and as the Russian army approached, she was sent to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. As the war lingered, Salinger heard a news report that gave her hope.

“I found out Britain and the United States was in the war with Germany,” she said. “I am so happy. I will not worry now.”

At one of the camps, Salinger’s arm swelled up.

“I was so scared,” she said, so she prayed to God. “I went outside the barracks and said, ‘Help me; help me to survive.’ It looked like it was spring. I saw some flowers growing.”

Salinger was not feeling well.

“The next morning, I was running a temperature,” she said. She noticed something else.

"I didn't see any German soldiers. I ran back to the barracks screaming, 'The Germans are gone.' We started running toward the entrance. We saw trucks pulling up," she said.

Soon, over the loudspeaker, the camp prisoners heard, "We are American soldiers. We are here to help you."

She was still ill, however. After seeing a British Army doctor, she was told that her arm would need to be amputated to save her life.

She said no to that. It turned out that the doctor had one penicillin shot left. While it was supposed to be for a soldier, he got permission to offer it to Salinger.

"He gave me a shot and saved my life," Salinger said.

The camp was soon liberated.

"I had no one, but I was free," Salinger said.

One American soldier would visit the camp with cookies before the prisoners were sent to other areas. The soldier, who was Jewish, would talk to Salinger and asked her about herself. They spent a lot of time together before he confessed that he loved her. Her response?

"I don't love you," she said. But in time her feelings changed.

"He was so thoughtful and so loving, and I said, 'Marty, I'll marry you,'" she said.

At age 20, she married her husband, Martin, and they had three daughters. They were married for 35 years until he died. She also was reunited with her sister after the war.

Salinger's book, "Looking Back," can be purchased online.