

MARIA DEVINKI



Solomon Braun, a decorated German World War I veteran, and his wife, Regina Braun, ran a successful export business in Hanover, Germany. Mala, their second child, was a little girl when they moved to Wodzislaw, Poland, where more than 2,800 of the town's 3,500 residents were Jewish.

In Wodzislaw, the Brauns lived in a 200-year-old house containing 4,000 square feet of floor space. It was owned by Regina's parents and was situated on the town's main street across from city hall. Mala and her two brothers each had their own room. Live-in servants helped with the cooking, laundry and childcare. For fun, Mala and her friends took the bus or train to nearby cities to attend concerts and plays.

The main synagogue in Wodzislaw – where worshipers had their own seats and passed them on from generation to generation – was 400 years old. There were also smaller houses for daily worship and study called *shtieblach*.

Polish law required all children to attend school through the seventh grade. Mala went to public school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and to a Bais Yaakov Hebrew school for girls from 3 to 6 p.m. She studied math for three years in high school and planned to become a teacher, but World War II intervened.

When Hitler came to power in Germany, Regina Braun wondered why he would want to take over Poland, a poor country. But he did.

In 1941, Solomon Braun was sent to the Treblinka death camp. In September 1942, while Mala was a slave laborer in an ammunition factory, she and her boyfriend, Fred Devinki, were married by her uncle. Later, one of her father's former business associates, a righteous gentile, arranged for Mala and her mother to hide in a cramped underground bunker on a farm outside Wodzislaw. They hid for 27 months.

Mala left her possessions with a friend, the mayor's sister. After liberation in January 1945, she returned for them – especially for her shoes. "I have nothing of yours," the so-called friend answered heartlessly.

Mala's younger brother was moving along with their mother to the nearby town of Sosnowiec when Poles – unhappy that Jews were returning – murdered him.

Mala and Fred raised a small sum through barter and sale of yard goods and bought a grocery in Sosnowiec. The grocery flourished but, believing they were in danger, they left and settled in Regensburg, Germany. There they established a successful textile business and their son Sam was born. They left for Kansas City in 1950.

Mala, now Maria, and Fred had several grocery businesses before she borrowed \$2,000 from a cousin to buy a piece of property. Kansas City Life needed the land for a parking lot and bought it for a large profit. This venture gave her credibility with local bankers and enabled her to create Devinki Real Estate, in which she is still involved.

Until recently, Maria Devinki told her children little about her experiences in the Holocaust.

"You put poison in your children, you don't know what you're going to bring out from that," she says. "They know just little...pieces."

Maria believes the stolen assets that are being returned to Holocaust survivors should also be sent in large part to Israel, "so Israel can be strong enough in case of anything happening."



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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