

# SARA MITTELMAN



Sara, the oldest of four children, lived with her loving parents – Ephraim, a candy store owner who was 52 when Sara was born, and Mirla – in a three-room house in Pilica, Poland. To travel to visit relatives, they took buses. No trains stopped in Pilica.

At laundry time, a woman came to help Mirla bring in water, boil it and scrub and soak the clothes overnight. It was a two-day process, after which Mirla ironed. Because there was no refrigeration, shopping for meat was a daily chore.

Pilica had one large Catholic church, one main synagogue and several *shatieblach*, small prayer houses, where Sara's father prayed three times a day. The Jewish children of Pilica went to public school. When the Catholic priests came to teach, the Jewish children waited outside. Although excused from school on Saturdays, *Shabbat*, they were expected to have their homework done by Monday.

Sara's favorite school activity was singing. She and her friends played with dolls and ran to the forests to discuss books. Most Jewish youth socialized in Zionist organizations.

"We danced and the boys rented sleds with a horse," recalls Sara. "We turned over the sled, like normal kids."

Sara stopped going to school at age 14. Pilica had a high school, but you had to pay and it only accepted two or three Jewish students. Instead, she learned to sew.

Sara had a Catholic best friend next door. On September 1, 1939, the day Germany invaded Poland, she stopped being her friend. When Sara's father came home one day with yellow stars to be sewn on their clothes, that was Sara's cue to run away. Sara and Israel Mittelman, who had met at the library, were engaged. Her father found a rabbi to marry them at 10 a.m. on January 2, 1940. Ten minutes later, they were off. They spent the war years in Firlan, Russia, near Siberia.

After the war ended, they tried to return to Pilica, but were warned not to enter the town because Poles were still killing the Jews. Sara is the only one of her family who survived the Holocaust.

The Mittelmans' son, Harry, a physician, was born in Russia. Marie was born in Germany.

Sara and Israel wanted to go to Israel, but after four years in displaced persons camps, they emigrated to Kansas City, where Israel's brother had a tailor shop. Their first home was a basement room at 7<sup>th</sup> and Lydia streets. Sara worked for a garment company. Israel went into business touching up furniture. They joined Beth Shalom Synagogue.

In Pilica, she remembers only two cars. In 1959 her family bought a green Chevrolet for \$2,000. As she rode in it, she wondered what her mother would have thought.

Sara has no desire to return to Poland. The older she gets, the more she thinks about what happened to her.

"There were two kinds of survivors," she says. "Some don't believe in God and I don't blame them, and some say, 'Thank God we are here.' I'm among those. We could never have dreamed to have a life like this."



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

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

© 2001 Midwest Center for Holocaust Education