

SONIA GOLAD



After 4 ½ years in two labor camps and three concentration camps, Sonia Borowik returned to her hometown of Vilna, Poland – now Vilnius, Lithuania – in December 1945. She could barely remember her name. But she recognized the balcony hanging from her family’s bombed out apartment at 57 Zavalnia.

“My father had said, ‘Even if you are at the end of the world after the war, you come back to your hometown to see if anyone else is alive.’”

The family maid – who once offered to hide Sonia’s little blond brother, Abrusha – refused to return any of the things she had taken from the family’s apartment. “I’m married to a Russian soldier,” she said, “and he hates the Jews.”

Of the entire Borowik family, only Sonia and her sister, Vera, survived. Sonia’s father, Israel, was a men’s clothing manufacturer. Her mother, Esther, helped run the business. On Sundays, the poor came to their apartment for loans. Israel

distributed money, while Esther served cookies and tea.

Sonia enjoyed ice-skating and skiing. She read Sholem Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz and had a pen pal in New York. She enjoyed long Sunday walks to the suburbs to visit extended family and carefree summers at a cottage, where she could milk cows, and pick berries and swim in a nearby river.

Twenty-five percent of Vilna’s pre-war population of more than 200,000 was Jewish. Sonia attended a private Jewish day school where, unlike her friends who attended public school, she escaped daily harassment. She was not allowed to sit in the front of her beloved opera or use sidewalks, but, she says, “I never questioned it.”

For two years after the war, Sonia screened Jewish children for immigration, first for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and later the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, which sponsored her to enter the United States in 1947.

Sonia met her husband, David Golad, a businessman from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in Chicago. The couple moved to Kansas City in 1951. Sonia never talked about the Holocaust until her son wrote a paper about it, and the teacher asked whether he could get a Holocaust survivor to talk to the class. He asked his mother.

Sonia has continued talking ever since, “I feel this is the purpose God made me survive,” she says, despite paralysis in her face from a beating on the head. She tells students, “Don’t watch my face. Just listen. I am not talking about Hitler. That is politics. I am telling you what happened to me.”

A Torah reader and past president of her synagogue sisterhood, Sonia has three children: Joyce, Alan, and Esther, who died of breast cancer in her early 40s. She has five grandchildren, who bring her much joy.



Portrait by David Sosland

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

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