

SONIA WARSHAWSKI



In 1939, three-quarters of the residents of Miedzyrzec, Poland – about 18,000 people – were Jewish. Not more than 300 survived the Holocaust.

When Sonia Grynstejn was a child there, the Jews of Miedzyrzec had an orphanage, a home for the elderly, youth organizations, Hebrew schools and a private *gymnasium*, or secondary school. A few Jews were allowed to attend university, but they were required to stand for lectures.

Sonia's grandmother's restaurant was one of the most popular spots in town. Crowds were large on Thursdays when farmers came to the market. The Grynstejns enjoyed free tickets to the Yiddish theatre provided by visiting artists who stayed in rooms at the restaurant.

Sonia's dream was to live in Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. She belonged to a Zionist youth organization, Betar, whose members believed Palestine should be taken by force. She knew young men who trained secretly in the forest with the Irgun, the Jewish underground in Palestine.

Her parents, Moishe and Rivka Grynstejn, had met at a wedding and fallen in love. In his business, Moishe imported bristle and pelts and manufactured jackets and coats.

"My parents were modern," says Sonia. "My father did not wear a beard or my mother a *shetyl* [wig]." Sonia had a Hebrew tutor and attended a public school with crucifixes on the wall, Christian prayers every morning and a visiting Santa Claus at Christmas. Although "Kill the Jews" occasionally was written on walls, most of her classmates were friendly.

On Friday in Miedzyrzec, as Shabbat neared, a bell rang signaling that shops were closing. Friday night, Moishe Grynstejn and his brother Gedalia prayed in the beit midrash, a house of study, across the street and brought home guests with no place to eat. There was fish, chicken soup and song. Sonia's father begged her mother to move east when Miedzyrzec fell to the Russians before the Nazis took over, but she could not bear to leave her home.

After Sonia was taken to concentration camps, she dreamed, "God, why don't you turn me into a little bird and let me be free?"

Sonia's sister, Manya, survived the war hiding in the forest. In the chaos preceding her liberation at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Sonia was shot in the chest. Not quite 18, she recovered and met John Warshawski. They married in 1946 and came to Kansas City a year later.

"After all I went through, I felt I was not a strong anymore to go to a country (Palestine), which is turbulent," she says.

John Warshawski operated a tailor shop on Broadway. Sonia worked as a salesperson. John was stricken with Parkinson's disease in his early 40s, which led the couple to open a tailor shop together in Metcalf South Shopping Center, where Sonia still works. Her husband died in 1989.

Sonia Warshawski has three children, Morrie, Regina, and Debbie.

"I always felt a special strength for my children," she says. "And that kept me going."



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

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

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