

Testimony of Rose (Roessler) Kohn

Witness Data

Rose (nee Ressler) Kohn

A.k.a. Reisel Leah Roessler

Date of birth: July 19, 1922

Address: 1519 Roosevelt Blvd.

Vineland, NJ 08361 USA

Place of Residence at Wartime: Rozanka, Poland until 1941, Fryztak, Poland, 1941-42, Niewodna, Poland, 1942-1944.

Marital Status at Wartime: Single

Rescuer Data

Swienton Family, consisting of father Michal Swienton, approx. 60 yrs of age, his son Pietrik, born 1914 (wartime age 28), and daughter Bronia Swienton, born approx. 1919, (wartime age 23). Michal was single and presumed a widower at wartime. Pietrik and Bronia were single.

Living Relatives:

Michal, Pietrik, and Bronia are deceased. Pietrik had a son who lives in Poland, though his name and address are unknown. Bronia Swienton had one son named Michash who lives in Niewodna, Poland.

Rescue Story

Life until start of the rescue story: The Roessler family (later Ressler in the USA) lived in the village of Rozanka in Poland. The family consisted of Chaim and Gitel Roessler and children Hersh (i.e. Hershel), b. 1912, Itcha, b. 1914, (Yiddish Itcha Baruch), Feiga, b. 1916, Sally (Yiddish Sheindel), b. 1918, Pinchas, b. 1920 (died of illness 1923), Rose (Yiddish Reisel Leah) b. 1922 and Murray Aaron (Yiddish Moishe Aaron) b. 1924.

Chaim did some farming, and shared responsibility for the small store run out of the house. Gitel ran the store and ran the household including raising the children, cooking and baking, and sewing clothing for the family. Sally went to Crakow and worked helping a family with their children. Hersh was learning to be a tailor. Feiga was engaged to a young man from Stryzow, presumed perished in the Holocaust. Rose went to school in Rozanka with the Poles. The boys went to cheder in Stryzow, staying there during the week with Aunt and Uncle Zelda and David Dembitzer, Chaim's sister and her husband. For as long as she could remember, Rose said the family talked of moving out of Rozanka, feeling that they faced a lot of anti-semitism there and there were no other Jews in the village. She remembers being called "Ziduvka" in school, where she was the only Jew in her class. Once they went on a class trip to Jaslo with two wagons full of kids singing and they had fun. Rose recalls that Jewish peddlers

would come to stay in their home and the children would give up their beds and sleep on the floor to accommodate them. On Shabbas everyone was home. The men went to Zovadka, another village, to pray (sometimes Gitel went along). There was a shtiebel there and a torah, Jews came from a few villages to be together. Rose remembers going 3 times a week to Zovadka to study Hebrew with the Unger family. They had a bit more money and had a teacher hired who stayed with them and taught their three children davening and Hebrew, as well as some other children. She used to walk there from the house in Rozanka by herself, sometimes cutting through the woods on a shortcut. Growing up, the children had friends who were non Jews and she recalls them playing together on a sled on the hills in the snow. Sally and Rose used to go into the forest to pick mushrooms.

In the fall of 1941, the family was forced to leave the Rozanka house and to go into the ghetto formed in Fryztak. Hersh didn't want to go and decided instead to take his chances on the outside, staying in different Poles' homes where he would exchange work as a tailor or do other household work for them. The Jews had already been evacuated from Stryzow. The Jews in the Ghetto were called into the town square in 1942, on the 18th of Tammuz on the Jewish calendar. They made everyone line up and asked for the old people and women with 6 or more children. Gitel was taken away, crying. The family learned the next day that they had been taken to the forest in Warzyce and shot and buried in mass graves. The timing is unclear, but Chaim, Itcha and Murray were taken to a work camp, but when there was no room there, they were returned to the Fryztak ghetto. Shortly after, they were taken again, this time to a work camp in Plazow. Later, a cousin named Yossel Baumel (the nephew of Chaim, his sister's son) was able to arrange to get Chaim out of Plazow, probably with a bribe. The Swientons were able to help get packages to Itcha and Murray in Plazow.

Meanwhile, Hersh continued working in different homes. He went to the Swienton's farm in Niewodna, where he met Bronia Swienton. She liked him immediately (Rose says he was very handsome) and took him in to do some work for them. The family heard that the Fryztak ghetto was to be cleared out of Jews. Hersh started to talk to her about taking in his sisters and father for a few weeks, after which they thought they could go back to their house in Rozanka. Bronia Swienton agreed. Pietrik Swienton came to Fryztak one night on foot and walked Rose and Sally to their house in Niewodna. Feiga didn't look Jewish, with blond hair and blue eyes so she went by wagon with Pietrik another night wearing with a scarf on her head, while Chaim was hidden under the hay in the back. They all stayed in the house together and prepared a hiding place for the family in the attic. Hersh would come and go but didn't really stay there, he mostly was with others where he was working and would bring food or things from his earnings. The girls called Michal "*Jadek*" meaning "Grandpa". They always ate together, literally from the same pot and were fortunate always to have plenty to eat from the farm. Sally became the main cook, and Bronia worked outside in the fields. They also had breads that Michal baked himself.

Michal would store apples from his orchard between the straw in the attic and they could eat them. The bread was left around the house and the family could eat whenever they were hungry. Rose remembers that Michal always liked Sally and when he would have some bacon to throw into the pot he would insist that Sally eat it even before his own children because she was skinny and he said, "What will we do if she dies?" They gave Bronia their dresses to wear since they couldn't go out and she wore them to church. Rose also remembers helping Bronia to fix her hair. The Swientons had very little, and Bronia had no mother or sisters so she enjoyed this.

The Roesslers gave the small amount of American dollars to the Swientons in appreciation of their help. They also offered their home and property if they should survive the war, but they didn't want to take it.

When they had been with the Swientons about four to six months, the Swientons heard a rumor in town that they were suspected of hiding Jews. They decided the girls should go into the forest to hide. It was warm weather around Sukkot, and they were to wait there until Hersch came to get them. It started to get dark and they were scared and worried about what had happened. After dark, Pietrik came to them crying very hard and told them that Hersch had been killed. He had been turned in by someone, though no one knew for sure who it was. He had been beaten to death by the Nazis who wanted him to tell where his family was but he never told. Pietrik told Sally and Rose that before Hersch was looking after them but now he would take care of them. It was very emotional for all of them. The next day they decided that they should try to write to the boys and they should bring them also to the Swientons so the family could be together for better or worse. At that time it was possible to escape the work camp if they had a place to go, so that is what they did. They came by train and by foot back to the Swienton's.

When they arrived, the family decided to make a more secure hiding place by digging a bunker under the barn. The entrance was in the floor of the cow barn, and it went under the attached storage building, so the floor of the storage building was the roof of the bunker. They attached straw to the top of the door to disguise it. There were a few dirt steps going down and they dug out a cavity to hide in. It wasn't big enough for them to fully stretch out to lie down nor was it quite tall enough to stand but they could all fit in it like sardines head to toe partly sitting when they were inside. It was completely dark and the bottom would collect water so they put boards and straw at the bottom and they would empty the water out. They all slept in the bunker at night and spent the day in the barn. In the daytime, two people were watching at all times to make sure no one was coming. Chaim spent most of the days in the bunker also since they thought he couldn't be quick enough to get into the bunker if someone was coming. He would pray a lot with his tallit & tefillin. He would tell the family about his dreams of the Rebbes and that they would all be alright.

Once when the family had been in hiding over a year, the Swienton's dog Subush was crying all night. It was a superstition that when a dog howls like that, something bad is going to happen. They were extra vigilant and stayed in the bunker all day. Since the farm was isolated and on a hill they could see if some one was approaching.

That day, two Nazis who spoke Polish came to the farm looking for Jews. Bronia was home alone with the Roesslers in the bunker. They shouted at her and slapped her asking "Where are the Jews?" and "You're hiding Jews!". They threatened that they would shoot her and bury her in a Jewish Cemetery (considered a terrible insult). Bronia only said that no one was there. The Roesslers could hear every word from the bunker and were terrified. The Nazis searched everywhere but one of the cows layed down on the door and there was a large grain bin over the bunker so they were not found. As soon as the Nazis left Itcha started coughing and couldn't stop, so they shoved a pillow in his face because they were still afraid. Michal and Pietrik were glad to hear that they had been so cautious and were relieved later to know they were so carefully looking out for themselves. They had a drink together to celebrate.

The farm was very isolated and the Swientons didn't have any visitors or keep up with the news very much. They did hear that the Russians were approaching and the families could hear the shooting. In August or September of 1944, they were told the Russians had arrived and that the war was over. The Roesslers still stayed in the Swienton's house for another week. They went out of the house and layed in the grass looking at the sky knowing they were free, but they didn't rejoice, they were sad thinking of their experience and thinking that who knows what other Jews survived. The Roesslers then left to go find what they could do next.

Chaim then went to Rozanka to their house, which was being used by the Russians. The officers told them that the girls should not come to the house, saying it wouldn't be safe for them. They went and stayed with some Polish neighbors for a few days. Chaim, Itcha, and Murray were trying to lay low to avoid the possibility of being drafted into the Polish military while the war continued. They found a few other Jews who survived in hiding, including Mr Pepper and a woman named Holtzer. They walked together to Stryzow, where they could take the train to Rzeszow. In Rzeszow, Chaim sold the Rozanka house and land to a Mr. Swirotek who had other land nearby, for not a lot of money. Then the Roesslers lived for a time in one building where a lot of Jews were living together. Then they heard that someone had gone to the Swienton farm and shot through the window and wounded Pietrik in the leg. Pietrik came to the hospital in Rzeszow, and the Roesslers were able to help him. In 1949 the Roesslers came to the United States on the Marine Marlin ship. Chaim died in 1959. Itcha married and had two daughters, but he died at a young age in 1960. Feiga married and had a son. She died in 1974. Sally married and had a son and a daughter. She died in 1992. Rose married and had

two sons; she currently lives in Vineland NJ. Murray married and had a son and a daughter, and currently also lives in Vineland NJ and Delray Beach, FL.

The Resslerers were in contact with the Swientons through letters and packages over the years. Michaj died in Poland, date unknown. Pietrik died in 1985. In 1978, the Resslerers brought Bronia Swienton for a visit to their homes in Vineland NJ. She stayed for six months. She died in Poland, in approximately 1990. Pietrik and Bronia are buried in the church cemetery near their home in Niewodna.

In the spring of 2005, Gail Ressler, daughter of Murray, visited Niewodna and met Mikaj Swienton. The submission of this testimony is based upon the recollections of Rose Kohn and Murray Ressler whose testimony is also being submitted. The reasons for the submission taking place so many years later is complex; but Bronia Swienton never wanted to be recognized; probably because as long as she lived in Niewodna she feared reprisals. Also the Roessler (which became Ressler in the US) siblings had mixed feelings about whether one would be considered righteous who accepted money and did express some anti Semitic views. With the distance of time, it seems to our family that the Swienton family, Michas, Pietrik and Bronia have earned a place among the Righteous of the Nations.

I Rose (Roessler) Kohn testify that the above is an accurate and complete accounting of my experiences. Thank you for your consideration.

Rose Kohn

Date

Notarized by

Date