

Meyer and Frances Shnurman



Meyer and Frances Shnurman with their sons, Benjamin and Jacob, at the Displaced Persons Camp in Neustadt, Germany, in 1948.

Meyer was born to parents Benjamin and Yetta Shnurman. Meyer had a twin sister as well as one younger sister. His parents worked in a large family-owned textile factory. He attended a technical school, learning the trade of cabinetmaking as well as attending cheder (Jewish religious school).

In September 1939, the Germans invaded Poland, converted a slum area to ghetto and herded in the Jews. Food was scarce, conditions were crowded and many people died of starvation, including Meyer's parents in 1942. His father was 47 and his mother 45. Crowded boxcars and cattle cars regularly came into Lodz carrying Jews to the ghetto. To reduce the crowded conditions even minimally, large numbers were continually shipped out to Auschwitz and well as to other smaller concentration camps.

Also in 1942, Meyer's twin, a nurse, volunteered to help the ill. Instead she was transported out of the ghetto to work on the Autobahn. Meyer later had word that, along with 20 other young women, his sister was thrown into cement mixers and killed. In 1944 he was part of a large group of Jews transported out of the ghetto to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he remained until about October. His job was to do clean-up work from the burnings in the four crematoria. The memory of this haunted him throughout his life.

After this, he was transported to different camps, finally ending up at Branunschweig. The Germans tried to figure out a way to get rid of the prisoners so they wouldn't get caught with the evidence of their crimes. Therefore, since most of the prisoners were barely alive, mere skeletons, they were easily crowded into boxcars where they remained without food or water while being transported to Ludwiglust bei Weberle, outside of Berlin. They could go no further, they were surrounded by four armies. The following morning, May 2, 1945, they were liberated by

Americans. Ronald (Ubi) Rabinovitz of Des Moines was among Meyer's liberators. The German soldiers had run away.

After the liberation, Meyer went from city to city looking for family members. In his search he went to Bergen-Belsen and there learned his younger sister had been deported from Auschwitz to Stutthof in 1944 and murdered. While in Belsen, he met his future wife Frances, whom he had known previously. Together they went to Neustadt in Holstein, Germany where they hoped to find news of Frances' family. No one was found. It was in Neustadt, a Displaced Person camp, that Meyer and Frances were married in 1945. Sons Benjamin and Jacob were born in 1946 and 1948 respectively.

With the help of UNRRA (United Nations Refugee Resettlement Agency) the family immigrated to America in November 1949. They were resettled in Des Moines. A third son, Harry, was born in 1953. Meyer worked for Younkers for about 21 years until retirement in 1987.

Meyer died on May 23, 2013, in Bettendorf, Iowa, at the age of 91.

Frances was born to parents Hinda and Ziskind Chojka. Frances was the youngest of six children: three girls and three boys. Her father and mother worked in a family-owned bottling company. Frances also worked there until the Germans came in September 1939. The Germans cleared a slum area and converted it into a ghetto. The entire Chojka family was forced into the ghetto along with hundreds of other Jews. In the ghetto there was little food, and what was supplied by the Germans was a thin gruel with almost no nutritional value. It was in the Lodz Ghetto that Frances parents died of starvation in 1942.

From the ghetto, Frances and her brothers and sisters were shipped out Auschwitz-Birkenau in cattle cars, where they remained for a few days. From there they stopped at several smaller camps ending up at Stutthof. It was here the siblings were separated. Although Frances tried to locate her siblings after the war, she was unable to find any surviving brothers and sisters. She presumes they were murdered at Stutthof.

Frances remained at Stutthof until close to the war's end. At that time she, along with other survivors, were loaded onto barges and placed in the Baltic Sea with the intent of shipping them to the German port city of Neustadt in Holstein. The barges were bombed however and Frances was one of the few prisoners who survived. She eventually arrived at the intended destination and remained there until liberated by the British Army on May 3, 1945.

A short time later, while going from town to town looking for possible family survivors, Frances arrived at Bergen-Belsen, where she met Meyer Shnurman. Together, still looking for their families, they returned to Neustadt in Holstein, which was a Displaced Persons camp. There they were married in 1945. It was there also that two sons were born in 1946 and 1948.

They remained in Neustadt until they immigrated to America in November 1949. The Shnurman's resettled in Des Moines, where a third son was born in 1953.

Frances worked at Drake University for about 11 years in Food Services until she retired in 1977. She was in ill health since her days in the camps.

Frances died on June 13, 2013, in Bettendorf, Iowa, at the age of 91.