

Anita Stern

Anita Stern was born in East Germany. Her mother died when she was 5 years old and she was raised by her grandparents. They immigrated to France when Anita was 10 years old. Anita went to school in Paris until World War II broke out in 1939 her family could no longer stay in Paris as permits were not extended. The only chance was being sent back to Germany or going to the southwest of France and work on a farm. Naturally her grandparents chose the latter. They got to the farm and—though they had never worked on a farm—worked very hard, staying there for 5 months

In 1940 the Germans invaded Holland, Belgium, and France and then came the order from the Vichy Government that all foreigners and Jews were to be interned. The police came to pick up her grandfather and two weeks later they came for her grandmother and her aunt, but not her; they said she was too young. Her grandmother stood her ground and said “Shoot me first” and after a while the police relented and the women were taken to a convent in a small town. There they were interned on the order of the Vichy. They did not stay long there either. Orders came that they were to be taken to a concentration camp in France—Camp Gurs in Bass, Pyrenees.

Meanwhile her father was in the French Army and when the women got to the camp their arrival was brought to the attention of the then French commander. After some discussion they decided to let the women go back to the convent. This time we were lucky. The Sisters and the Mother Superior were wonderful to them. Anita was tutored by the Sisters as long as she was at the convent. Then one day the French police arrived again to take them back to the same camp, but things had changed. The Germans had occupied the rest of France and it was very difficult to be released again, but with some help they walked out of the camp. They walked and they walked and slept in the woods and finally after 3 days were picked up by a truck who took them almost all the way back to the convent. But the Sisters could not take us as there were too many refugees and no room. Then they found a hayloft where they stayed for two weeks until word came that a lady had a room for them.

Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941. Jews were taken away every day and one did not dare go out in the streets. One day you saw a Jewish refugee and the next day they were gone. Anita and her family had to look for different places to hide. One summer they hid on a mountain and lived by eating berries and what they could find. Sometimes Anita wandered into town looking for food; she had dyed her hair blond and wore a kerchief and farmers' boots and her family hoped that she would not be caught. Once the weather turned they had to leave the mountain area for it was too cold there. Someone found them a place together with another Jewish family. They were near a river and at night they were able to do laundry and bathe. The family had a small radio and late at night they tried to listen to Radio London. This went on until the Allies landed in Normandy, changing Anita's life forever.

Anita's father and the rest of her family were deported to Auschwitz. She never saw her father again. The happiest day of Anita's life was when she set foot on American soil in May 1947. She was finally liberated.