

Sobibor death camp and a daring escape

Esther Turner Raab, originally from Chelm, Poland, was one of the participants in a dramatic death camp escape. In 1942, Esther was sent from another work camp to Sobibor Death Camp. Upon arrival at Sobibor, prisoners went to the



Taken before the war, this picture shows Esther (with glasses and braided hair, third from left) with her maternal grandparents and cousins.

wouldn't be alive," Esther recalled. "Why?" she asks. "How could they do this? To educated people, to children, to old people, to babies?"

Esther was selected for the camp work crew. One of her jobs was sorting the belongings of those who were killed and burning the bodies. She also knitted socks for

the Nazis. Through the harsh conditions Esther maintained "the will to live was so great you can endure anything . . . to avenge all those things we witnessed."

Sobibor was the smallest and most secret of the death camps, well hidden in the woods. "Even today, you cannot get there by car," Esther explained. "No roads went there. It was so secret, that when Himmler closed Belzec and Treblinka, he brought the inmates to Sobibor to be killed." Even at the end of the war, while other camps were liberated by the Allied forces, there was nothing to see and no one to free at Sobibor.

When Esther's cousin, Leon Feldhendler, arrived at the camp, she joined him in planning a daring escape, and on Oct. 14, 1943, the camp inmates revolted. A dozen SS officers and some Ukrainian guards were killed by the inmates. Of the 600 prisoners who were in the camp on the day of the uprising, about 300 prisoners escaped.

In the week following the escape, approximately 100 people were captured or shot to death. Only 46 of those who escaped survived the war. During the escape Esther was shot, and she still has the scar today.

The escape from Sobibor was the largest of World War II, and was such an embarrassment to the Nazis that they destroyed the entire camp and all its records. The camp was planted over with pine trees, which, ironically, didn't grow.

In 1982, a book by Richard Rashke, "Escape from Sobibor," was published telling the heroic story of the revolt at Sobibor. In 1987 a movie of the same name was aired on television.



Esther Turner Raab addressing an audience at a performance of the play, "Dear Esther" in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, April 2002

WITNESS *Today* Activity for Further Study

Research other examples of "resistance" during the Holocaust, such as: uprisings in the ghettos of Warsaw, Bialystok, Vilna and others; or in the death camps of Treblinka and Auschwitz; or activities of partisans in the forests. What other kinds of resistance were there?

Coming to Charleston... "Dear Esther," a play written by Richard Rashke and based on the thousands of letters survivor Esther Turner Raab received from students in schools where she has spoken about her experience, will be performed in Charleston April 29-30. See page 17 for details.