

GUTA JACOBSON
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Interviewer: Esther Toporek Finder

Tape 1 Side A

Her maiden name was Rogowitz [Rogowitz] and she was born in Lodz [Poland] on April 23, 1925. Her parents names were Noah and Chaya Steinfeld Rogowitz. She had 3 siblings; Esther, Bella and Chana. Chana did not survive. Guta grew up in Lodz. She belonged to a Zionist organization as a youngster. Lodz was a very big, prosperous city. Her father worked in textiles. She went to public school. Her family was religious; her mother wore a wig. There were lots of Jews in the town. Relations between Jews and Gentiles were strange. She lived near lots of Christians. After the war she returned to her home and her former neighbors wondered why she was alive. Before the war she did not experience much anti-Semitism. Her neighborhood was fairly affluent. Her mother did not work outside the home. Before the war she had only one responsibility; she had to take lunch to her oldest sister who was working in a textile factory. Her sister paid her 25 cents to bring the lunch and that money was supposed to go for the trolley ride. Instead Guta took the money and bought ice cream. Guta had no formal religious education. Her favorite holiday was Passover and she enjoyed getting new clothes, though she was too young to stay up for the whole seder. On Saturdays she met with members of the Zionist youth group; they danced horas and sang songs in Hebrew. Sometimes she played with neighboring Gentile children. She had no idea of what was happening in Germany.

In 1939 her family went to a summer vacation place. Her father came to take them home earlier than had been planned. She heard that Poland would be in a war but she did not know what that meant. Her mother had gone through World War I and was afraid of war. They knew Hitler did not like the Jews and that synagogues were being burned but she never expected to be touched by that. As she reflects back on her childhood she remembers going to the synagogue with her mother. Her father was a Cohen and he would dress in a white kittel. She remembers the holidays and her mother made her own wine from cherries and raisins and Guta helped. Guta also used to take the chulent to and from the oven for the Sabbath meal. The changing of the dishes for Passover is also

a special memory. Guta was the youngest child and she helped her mother while the older sisters worked. Guta was able to attend school and her sisters hoped that she would be able to get the education that they could not get.

It took about 10 days for the Germans to get to Lodz. She lived on one side of the street, just opposite from where the Germans set up an officers' house. She had to wear an armband, there were curfews for Jews. Stores were closed and there was a food shortage. Kosher butchers were closed and hunger set in. In 1940 they had to leave home to go to the ghetto. Meanwhile, the Christian population was not subject to the same restrictions as the Jews. Her Christian neighbors began to separate themselves from the Jews. One of her sisters married and left Lodz. She gave birth to a child the Guta never saw. Her sister and the baby did not survive. Her father had considered going to Russia but her mother wanted to stay. Her father asked to take at least one of the children with him to Russia but her mother would not let any of the children go with him so he did not leave.

When the ghetto was formed her family moved into the apartment of her married sister as that sister had left Lodz and gone elsewhere. They moved into the ghetto at the end of 1939. They were informed that the Jews had to leave the building where they had lived. The family took gold with them. Her mother took gold in belts into the ghetto. Her father used to make heavy shawls and they brought some of those into the ghetto. They also took pillows, covers and photos. The ghetto was closed in 1940; the Germans surrounded the ghetto and nobody could get in or out. Inside the ghetto they were building a by-pass to cross over a street. Her family lived near this bridge. Guta and her sisters stood in the food lines so her mother would not have to. The ghetto was big and included the cemetery. There was smuggling in and out. There were guards only outside the ghetto until Rumkowski took over and a police was formed and currency was made and the ghetto became a little country of its own. She worked in the ghetto. Conditions were unbearable in the winter; no coal and no food. This forced people to go to work so they could get a soup at work. One of her sisters became ill and could not work so her mother asked the other children to save some food for this sister. Guta worked in a tailor factory where uniforms for the German army were made. Her mother never allowed the children to stay in bed; she made them

get up and move and keep themselves clean by washing themselves with snow. Guta stole potatoes from a nearby building where food was stored. She felt bad about that.

Later, when Rumkowski became the Eldeste of the ghetto, he asked parents to give up their children. She was there when he asked for this. Before the war he had been a philanthropist and he cared for unfortunate children. She cried when heard this [request for the children]. She stopped believing in G-d. Her mother no longer wore a wig and she no longer kept kosher; her mother ate horsemeat to survive. She lost her faith in these circumstances. That happened in 1942. She was 15 at the time and Rumkowski asked for younger children. She remembers seeing the children being given up by their parents.

Tape 1 Side B

The Germans had called her older sister to their office and asked if she had gold/jewelry. Her sister's last name was different because she had a different father [Guta's father was her second father]. Her sister's father's family, in another town, was wealthy so the Germans thought she had some valuables. The Germans hit her sister and released her. Then her mother was taken away. It was 1942 when there was the *shperre*. Her father had already been taken away. At Passover, 1941, all the men were told to register to work. Her father went and was taken away.

Her mother made some boiled potatoes and she was able to bring those potatoes to him before he was taken away. 6-12 months later, her mother was taken away. They were able to save her mother at that time. There had been one hospital in the ghetto and there was a nurse there that her family knew. Her mother had been taken away, with other older people, in open wagons. They were taken near the hospital. The sisters spoke to the nurse and the nurse was able to hide her mother. There was screaming and crying that night in the ghetto. Her mother survived that night but later went with Guta to Auschwitz in 1944. Her mother lived 2 weeks in the barracks until she was selected to go to be killed.

In 1943 there was typhus was in the ghetto. Her sister Bella got sick and was contagious. This sister went to that hospital. Guta crossed the bridge at night to take her sister out of the hospital and to hide her. Then Guta went back to her mother so her mother would not think that she had

been killed. She crossed over the bridge again dressed as a nurse. The next day she brought her sister home. It was dangerous to cross the bridge at night. She had gotten the nurse's uniform from the nurse that she knew. She wasn't afraid any more.

While in the ghetto she had no idea of events that happened outside the ghetto. As people came from the small towns into the ghetto they told stories of how their parents were taken away. Hunger increased and people went to work because it was warmer there. People walked around in a daze. People had swollen feet and sat in front of their homes. They looked like crazy people but they were not crazy; they were waiting and praying to die. She saw people being taken from the streets to the cemetery. One spring day she went to the cemetery and she saw some greens growing which her family ate. During the winter this did not grow so the family could not get it anymore. Germans did not come into the ghetto; they were afraid to come into the germ-infested ghetto. She saw Germans outside the ghetto.

The *shperre*, a special curfew, was instituted. People were ordered outside and houses were searched. That was when her mother was taken away [see above]. When the children were taken away nobody was allowed to leave the house. After the children were taken the parents continued to go on. People did not yet know about Chelmno and Auschwitz. Later people in the ghetto found notes inside empty wagons warning others not to come; that these wagons took people to destruction. Some in the ghetto did not want to believe, but she believed it. When Rumkowski said he was giving up "his children" and encouraged parents to give up their children, he was referring to children in orphanages. Rumkowski had no children of his own.

Her brother-in-law Leo had been in Rumkowski's orphanage. Leo has an exhibit in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum: Leo formed a kitchen in the ghetto for the people who worked for the Germans and he also developed a dishwasher in that kitchen. Leo was head of the mint/money printing operation. Leo made a miniature of the Lodz ghetto in a case, much like a violin case. Every house is represented in this miniature. This was made for Rumkowski for some extra bread but Leo never gave it to Rumkowski claiming that it was not finished yet. Later Leo was sent to Auschwitz but he did not take this to Auschwitz; instead he left the miniature in his house with a sign saying this [miniature] was valuable and should be given to the authorities.

Guta's husband was among those Jews left in the ghetto for cleanup and he found this case. When Leo returned from Auschwitz it was returned to him. It is now part of the permanent exhibition at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Deportations; when these were under way she and her family were already suspicious and they tried to hide in their homes in their attic. People were being taken away and the ghetto was being emptied. They hid for a while but eventually had to go because her mother could not hide anymore because they ran out of food. They were deported late; August, 1944. Jewish police were looking for anyone hiding. When they were deported they still had some gold, watches and clothes. She was mad that her mother had not traded these things for food in the ghetto. She did not challenge her mother about this. While in the ghetto they had no idea about what happened in the Warsaw ghetto. She knows that some escaped the ghetto. She knew one girl was taken out by a Polish soldier. She smuggled food into the ghetto to her family. She survived the war with the help of the Polish soldier.

Towards the end of her time in the ghetto, she was chosen to inspect garments leaving her workshop. She had to put her initials on the garments indicating that she had checked that there were no acts of sabotage by incorrectly sewing the uniforms. There were many such acts of sabotage but she would not approve anything that had been sabotaged. She feared not only for her life but also for the lives of others in the shop.

When her family finally left their hiding place and went to the collection point they were given bread and treated nicely. They were put onto trains like cattle. It took about 24 hours on the train to get to what she thought was an arbeitslager [work camp]. She was used to work so she was not afraid. She arrived in Auschwitz. She was told to undress and had her head shaved. They all looked like crazy people. Her mother was with her and the sisters. The sisters took the mother with them without the mother being noticed. They were taken to a barrack. There was a woman there and this woman told her where they were and what they had to expect. They laid on the floor.

Tape 2 Side A

In Auschwitz she felt she was in a crazy house. People had no hair and no clothes. She did not expect to work anymore. Someone in the barrack told her there would be *zellappels* every morning and they should obey, they should not hide, they would be very hungry, and anyone who couldn't stand it would be gassed but she did not know what exactly that meant. The girl who told her this was running down the barrack. There was a pan outside instead of going to the bathroom. They cried but were glad their mother was with them. She expected to die there. Inside the barrack there was a long thing and there were chimneys there. The roll call was at dawn. It was very cold in the winter. The count must be accurate and they would sometimes have to stand for hours. She saw Dr. Mengele daily; she heard people refer to him by name. He was a very good looking man and he had a dog and a stick. He took away her mother. She had been with her mother in Auschwitz for two, maybe 3 weeks. By the time her mother was taken they knew exactly where she was being taken. By the second day she was aware what was happening in Auschwitz.

People came to Auschwitz looking for workers. One day they were looking for 200 girls. She and one of her sisters decided to volunteer for a work group and instead found themselves going to the crematorium. They were staying outside and asked a German where they were going and he pointed to the crematorium. Her sister was beautiful and he took her out of the group. Her sister cried and was able to get Guta out of the group also. Four girls escaped death that day; all the others died. The Germans did not know what to do with them and one of the guards told them to get out of there so they ran back to their barrack and to the other sister. From 2 barracks they consolidated the prisoners into one barrack. A few weeks later they were sent to work. The girls that went to the crematorium that day were nice girls and she had assumed, since they were in good shape, that they would be going to work.

She spent time surrounded with Hungarian girls and she did not talk to them much. She went outside the barracks and sat, just as she had seen others sit when she first arrived in Auschwitz. She wanted to live to see Hitler's destruction. Then civilians came and a call was made for 1000 women to go to work. All the sisters went together. Her barrack had been made of wood and the long thing in the barrack was a chimney. It was very cold in the winter. While in the camp she

heard rumors that the Germans were losing in Stalingrad. Some of the girls may have “lived with” [exchanged sexual favors] and got food from the civilian Polish workers.

She was with a girlfriend from Lodz; her father was a banker and they were well-off. This girl committed suicide by going to the barbed wires. The Germans were cruel; on Yom Kippur [her mother was taken away at that time] there was a lot of food available, but she did not eat it. She left Auschwitz on a work transport to Birnbaumer, a town in Germany. When she left Auschwitz, it was almost empty. She was taken into the woods to make trenches; anti-tank trenches. It was winter. She was with Czech, Hungarian and Polish girls. In this camp she was given food and clothing. From the barracks they walked to work. The German civilians sometimes came out with food or cigarettes. Later, when they left this camp for Bergen-Belsen, the town was empty and nobody lived there anymore. This second camp was better than Auschwitz. In this camp she found a natural substance that she was able to make into a “flower” and she gave those flowers to the German girls. The Wehrmacht watched them, not the SS. She washed herself with the snow. One day she was approached by a German as she was washing herself. She was afraid because she was not completely dressed. He encouraged her to continue and did not bother her; he told her to do that daily so she would be warm. One day he gave her a piece of bread. Her work had her in the water. The anti-tank traps were filled with water. The Wehrmacht guards that were watching them saved their own lives by being guards and not having to go to the military front. She was hit and had 3 teeth broken. Her sister was beautiful and one guard gave her food. The other girls squealed on her and Guta was brought into the office to identify who did what. She told the Germans that her sister found the things on the floor and picked it up. She would not identify the German who gave the things to her sister. The one questioning her hit her and she lost her teeth.

Living conditions were better; they got a little food. There was a lady from Czechoslovakia who knew how to type in German. She was treated very well because they needed her. This woman was nice to her, especially after Guta was hit. She was also good to her sister. Guta would go into the woods and knew enough about mushrooms to pick good ones. The German SS women would send her into the woods to get mushrooms for their Sunday breakfast. Guta got to eat the leftover mushrooms. In her childhood her father had worked in a small town for a while and that is when

she learned about the woods and the different mushrooms. She was only there a short time, for the most part she lived in Lodz. She was in the second camp until about November or December. It was almost 1945. There was a little hospital in that camp. In that camp the Czech girl got very ill and was in this infirmary. When Guta left the camp people were left behind in the infirmary. The Czech girl was there and Guta helped carry her out of the infirmary because it was expected that everyone in the infirmary would be killed. That did not happen. The Russians were close and the 2 remaining German Wehrmacht guards did not kill the patients. As Guta and the other prisoners left, most of the guards went with them. One night they stopped in a nearly deserted town. As they were walking, those who could not keep up were shot. They were still carrying the Czech girl and the Germans did not kill her. In this town there was food. Not far from the town there was a lake. Some of the girls on that transport were killed in that lake. When Guta went out to make food, she hid her sister. 5 girls, including Guta and her other sister, went into the woods to hide. One of her sisters was still in the camp. This sister was beaten and taken to Bergen-Belsen. The Germans were looking for Guta and the other sister. The 5 girls found a deserted hunting shack and hid there. After it was quiet they went to look for the sister. The girls entered a house and found food and slept in beds. They dressed as Polish peasants and went out. Her sister went over to try to milk what she thought was a cow but was a bull. [she said a few words in Polish] A man approached them and asked them in German what they were doing, especially since they were trying to milk a bull. The girls identified themselves as Poles. Immediately after they were afraid of the man. A few days later they saw the Russians and they met a Jewish soldier. He warned the girls about the Russian soldiers [she later clarified that he had warned them that the Russian soldiers were raping women]. He took the girls away and sent them on their way to Poland. This was February [1945]. In May Lodz was liberated and by the time the 2 sisters returned to Lodz, the city was liberated. The 3rd sister was in Bergen-Belsen. That sister survived. Guta and her sister encountered a German that had been one of their guards and he begged the sisters to hide him. They refused to hide him but they did not turn him in either. He had been a Wehrmacht guard, not SS. They told him to take off his uniform and blend in.

When Guta and her sister ran away from the march they had hair. When they first escaped they had to throw away their camp clothing and they were almost naked. At night they stole clothes.

Tape 2 Side B

During the death march people were executed in the woods. She heard the shots and saw the bodies. Once they stopped and had some food, she escaped. She thinks the guards saw them leave. She is grateful to that Russian Jewish soldier who took the girls away from the front.

She was on the death march for about a week. When she got back to Lodz she went to their home. One of the people there gave her a letter from her sister. Then she went to the ghetto.

When they [she and her sister] went up the steps to the ghetto, they saw a photo of her parents. The photo made the sisters cry and they did not go into their old home. When she met her husband she married him after knowing him for 2 weeks. She had no place to go. When she returned to Lodz she was not treated too badly. Right away there was a Jewish organization in Lodz and they listed their names among the living. She was able to take over a Polish apartment. The Jewish committee offered to put them into their old home but the girls were afraid to go back there. The sisters stayed in Poland and hoped to go to Palestine.

She knew where her father had been sent; to Upper Silesia. He sent the family a letter saying that he was hungry and working hard building railroads. He asked the family to send him food. They could no longer send food out. Her father died there and people told her they saw her father dead.

The best reunion was when her sister came from Sweden. She had typhoid in Bergen-Belsen and the liberators shipped her to Sweden, where she recovered. Guta met some of the 500 Jews who were left to clean up the ghetto, including the man she would marry. Her husband had had the job of trolley car driver. He might have been the driver that helped transport her out of the ghetto. He found his brother's miniature of the ghetto. The Germans had planned to kill the remaining Jews, but they hid. She met her husband through her sister. Her sister knew one of her husband's brothers and married him. Two sisters married two brothers. When she married they did not even have a ring.

Her mother's father had had a big beard. He went out into the street wearing his tallis and asked the Germans to kill him and they did. This grandfather never went to the camps. She remembers her great grandfather; he was a renown Rabbi from another town. When he heard that Guta's

mother was there he left the crowd of people who had come to see him and went to Guta's mother. Guta was with her mother because she was the baby. He put his hands over her mother and blessed her. Guta has so much respect for her mother.

After the war, after she got married, she went to Germany and her husband joined her there. She had wanted to go to Palestine. When he came to Germany there was already war in Palestine. In Germany she became pregnant and her daughter was born there in 1948. Guta had a large family in Israel; her mother's sister was still alive in Palestine. Those relatives went to Palestine after WWI. She was told that the situation in Palestine was very bad. The Joint came and got them visas to come to America. Her husband had an aunt and uncle in the US. In America she gave birth to a handicapped child. This son, Neal, is vice president of Wells Fargo bank. He is brilliant in computers. It was hard for her to raise a handicapped child after what she went through and without her parents. She settled in Brooklyn, New York. Her husband was a tailor but he did not want to work as a tailor. Instead he worked in a supermarket and later they opened up their own supermarkets. Her husband had his first heart attack when he was 49 years old and his third heart attack by the time he was 59. He died then in 1959. The Joint helped them when they first came to the US. They were put up in a hotel when they first arrived. They wanted to work on their own. She could not work because she had a handicapped child [cerebral palsy]. She later had a third child. When they came to the US some people asked about the experiences in Europe. The people [American Jews] were nice to them. She came here with a baby in her arms.

She did not want to talk about the war until now. Her daughter saw her crying a lot. Guta found her cousins in Israel and met them when she went for the first gathering of survivors. When her children were small Guta did not talk about the war. When her children started to ask questions they already knew about WWII. They did not want to hurt their mother. Only later did her daughter ask her about the war. She used to tell her children to eat everything that she cooked and not throw away a bite because she had been so hungry during the war. Her handicapped son was the most interested in her Holocaust experiences. He is now going to work for his doctorate at Berkeley. She is willing to talk now because of her son. Her son wants her to make a tape for his children.

She hope there will never be a repetition of this and the whole world should never forget. She hopes we never lose Israel. Had there been an Israel then....