

**Nesse Godin**

**Tape 1, Side A**

**July 16, 1998**

**RG-50.106\*0105.01.02**

### **Abstract**

This follow-up interview will focus on Nesse Godin's post-Holocaust experiences. Nesse was born as Nesse Gautheron (?) on March 28, 1928 in Chalay (?), Lithuania. The Russians occupied Chalay (?) in 6/40, the Germans invaded Lithuania on 6/22/41 and Chalay (?) on 6/23/41. On 11/5/43 her father was taken with the Children Selection to Auschwitz. Nesse, her mother and brothers were placed in the Ghetto. In '44 Nesse was taken with her mother and older brother to Stuthof (?) concentration camp where they were separated. She snuck into the labor camp line for Dubeck (?) work camp upon suggestion of a woman who thought she would be killed in the concentration camp as she was little. Nesse started on the death march from Prous (?) where they stayed a few days and then to Phenos (?). There they sat in a barn for a few weeks and were liberated by the Russians on 3/10/45. . A Russian carried her, weighing 69 pounds, out of the barn and put her on a straw sack in a little house. She remained there until placed in a makeshift hospital. She went to Lodz and was reunited with her mother and brother and soon married Jack. They went to Feldenfield (?) DP camp for five years where she took courses. Nesse's mother's only relative was a sister in the US so they all immigrated by ship where she was placed in a cabin with her children, away from her mother and husband. Nesse needed someone to unload her problems so she found it very helpful to talk to her mother. After her experiences at the concentration camp, it was hard for Nesse to line up for food, even at a party or a restaurant. She attended Americanization School along with her husband, for five years to become a citizen. As Nesse's mother always taught her that the highest observance is of the 10 commandments, Nesse taught that to her three children. She felt that she lost part of her teenage years even upon getting an honorary high school degree. Nesse encouraged Holocaust studies in the school system and went to the schools and gave testimony.. She also shares her memories at churches, and organizations. She is planning a trip to Lithuania and possibly to Stuthof, Poland. .

### **Summary**

00:00 This follow-up interview will focus on Nesse's post-Holocaust experiences. The interviewer has read her 12/14/95 Holocaust Museum interview, her 2/27/85 Jewish Community Council interview and her 5/8/88 Holocaust Museum video interview. Nesse was born as Nesse Gautheron (?) on March 28, 1928 in Chalay (?), Lithuania. The Russians occupied it in 6/40; the Germans invaded Lithuania on 6/22/41 and invaded Chalay on 6/23/41. There were two ghettos by '42 and were made into one ghetto. On 11/5/43 her father was taken with the Children Selection to Auschwitz. In Spring '44 Nesse was taken with her mother and older brother to Stuthof (?) concentration camp where they were separated. From there she went to Dubeck (?) work camp and then to

Malki (?) and started a death march to Haymas (?) and stopped in Prous (?) for a few days and then to Phenos (?). There they sat in a barn for a few weeks and were liberated by the Russians on 3/10/45. As a child she was spoiled, sickly, caught colds, was pampered and would not eat. Her parents worked in the food business. She had a closer relationship with her nanny than with her parents. She was always surrounded by friends and her brothers. She participated in school plays and sang about the Kinneret. Her favorite holidays were Chanukah and Pesach. She liked Chanukah for the Chanukah gelt (money) that she received.

- 05:00 She liked Pesach as her birthday was close to the holiday so they celebrated it then. Her family had to get certified to be admitted into the Ghetto. Each Ghetto had a different system. In Chalay (?) every family had to get a certificate. The Commission came to your house and signed your certificate if you were a healthy adult. You had to bribe someone to get into the Ghetto if you were elderly or sick. Those who were not in the Ghetto got killed. One night those outside were taken into the forest in Zagariai and got killed. When Nesse did not want to go to school, she would say that she had a cold. She wanted to get pampered so would not eat or would complain. Actually, she loved school. Her father was not at work so was taken away with the Children's Selection. Nesse was 15 and ½ and children 14 and younger were taken away. Many of her friends had already been killed or were killed in other selections. In the Children's Selection, they also took the elderly, the sick and some from the Judenrat. She knew many of the children as they were the siblings of friends and neighbors' children. Although she mourned their loss, Nesse mourned the loss of her father the most.
- 10:00 She spoke about the losses with her brother, uncle and friends. She had comforting words from her brother who was seven years older than her. He said that he would be like a father to her. Her mother was in such mourning that the children comforted her. Nesse's mother always taught her that the highest observance is of the 10 commandments, to take care of the poor and the orphans, be kosher and go to shule (synagogue) on the Sabbath. (Nesse recites the 18<sup>th</sup> Psalm in Hebrew.) "Heaven for G-d and heavenly body and earth G-d gives us human beings." G-d gives us power to make decisions to be good and kind or bad. She did not blame G-d on the killings. Nesse spoke Yiddish at home, Lithuanian with her nanny and Hebrew at school. She was aware of Zionism and the underground as her brothers who were 18 and 20 were involved in Zionist organizations before the War and involved in the underground in the Ghetto. At 14 she became an adult as her brother was afraid to deliver messages so she delivered them. She grew up in a hurry but she was not physically mature. Nesse got her period after the War and did not develop so looked younger than her age.
- 15:00 In the camp at Stuthof (?) the old ladies were kind to her. She feels that she survived the Holocaust due to the kindness of Jewish women. Outside the camp were Nazi guards and inside were female Polish Kapos and in the barracks was either Russian or Ukrainian

guards. She had learned some Russian when her town was occupied by the Russians so understood a little. Before she was separated from her brother in Stuthof (?), she was put in a big sandy area and fellow prisoners told her to bury her valuables so the Nazis would not get them. Her brother said that if they survive, they should reunite in Lithuania. They were separated and at age 16, Nesse was alone. On March 10, 1945 at age 17 she was liberated. She felt like 79. She was a bundle of bones after four years of suffering and pain, being alone, her body abused from torture and hunger and her mind abused. She felt like an old lady. When the Russians came, they said they were fighting the war and did not tell them they were free. She was free but did not know what to do. People were kissing the Russians and she was crying. She tried to survive and felt sorry for herself. She did not know what to do. Nesse did not think of retaliation. The Nazi guards had run away. Sometimes in the Men's Camps, they jumped on the Nazis but not in the Women's Camps.

20:00 Before liberation, she wanted to live but then she got tired of living and wanted to be on the top of the pile of bodies. She did not know that the War was ending when she was in the barn. A Russian carried her out of the barn and put her on a straw sack in a little house. She remained in the little house until a school was converted into a makeshift hospital. When she lay on the straw, she thought she was free. She weighed 69 pounds, had typhoid and dysentery, wounds on every finger, was frozen, had a beat-up eye and swollen face. She looked in the window pane and saw a monster and got scared and realized there was no one there but her. She did not know that she looked like that. Later in Feldenfield (?) DP camp, she was reunited with her mother and brother from Lodz. She came with Jack who was her husband. Her mother had suffered so much. She had two brother and four sisters. The only one who was still alive was a sister who had immigrated to the US in '28 and she wanted to be with her. She wanted Nesse and her husband to go with her. Nesse's mother died in 1967. She was the boss of her house who made the decisions.

25:00 She felt that she suffered so much so needed to go to a country where there is freedom. Nesse and her mother conversed a lot. Nesse tried to get Jack to talk but he did not talk much. She reached out to other survivors. Her friends were like family. They always talked about their Holocaust experiences. Nesse's mother told her that her children needed to know everything. She shared everything with her mother as there were no therapists in those days. She needed someone to unload her problems. It was very helpful to talk to her mother. Many do not share their problems and carry a heavy load. Nesse took courses at the DP camp from ORT, the JOINT and UNWRA. She studied bookkeeping and design – how to make girdles and brassieres. Her mother babysat so she could attend school. Nesse was not as afraid of the War as of Nazis. When she walked into the village, she would wonder if she would see the Nazi who hit her. If he

recognizes her, she thought that he might kill her or what she might do to him. It was not easy to live five years among her murderers. It was very difficult.

- 30:00 Summer '45 President Truman sent an envoy to the DP Camps but Nesse was still in Lodz in May of '45. There she found her mother and she went to Feldenfield (?) in October '45. Jack was born in 1921 in Vilna where he lived with his parents, brother, sister, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents. When the Germans took over Lithuania, Jack was 20 and he and a friend tried to run away on bike. The Germans overcame them and sent them back to Vilna. His entire family was killed in Pernod (?). Nesse plans to pay respects to both their families when they travel to Lithuania. In '44 Jack was in the Ghetto with his family. He did not feel like a partisan but he had a gun and escaped with a friend into the forest with partisans from Ukraine and Russia. He blended in with them and was liberated in the forest. After the Children's Selection, every family lost members and was in despair so held séances. Nesse remembers people sitting around a table and they asked the children to show they are alive by knocking on the table. She heard the knock. They were desperate to believe the children were alive.
- 35:00 On the boat to the US, Nesse was separated from her mother and from her husband. The US meant well. If you have children, you should have a cabin. All of a sudden her mother was put in one place, her husband in a second place and she in a third place. They all ate in different mess halls. After the concentration camp, it was hard for Nesse to line up. She attended a 95<sup>th</sup> birthday party where you had to go outside to get hot dogs and hamburgers. She could not do it and someone realized it was too hard for her and got her the food. Nesse was always looking around to see if someone was going to punch her. Were the Nazis coming again? If a caller on the telephone hung up, she got worried. Nevertheless, she does many testimonies. **Tape 1, Side B.** Standing in line for food is a torture for her. It can be the nicest party or the nicest restaurant but she cannot do it. When she put her feet on American soil, she felt it was a place of freedom and security. She is no longer stateless nor a DP. When she got off the boat, her mother and a friend waited with open arms. She had family and felt welcome and secure. She was placed in a big room and had to do a lot of paperwork. Nesse was driven by car from NY to DC. Her cousin asked if she was hungry and she thought she would be given a sandwich. Instead she got out and got her a sandwich. She could not believe that you could travel and get food. Nesse was on the ferry crossing the Delaware River.
- 40:00 Another experience was negative. She signed up for the Americanization School on Lamont Street and went by streetcar. All the Black people sat in the back but she did not know about that. In Germany she would sit in the front and get off the back. Here she sat in the back and found out that this country does not have freedom for all but things have changed since then. Nesse had studied English in school when the Russians occupied Lithuania. She knew a few words and learned more in the DP camp but her English was very poor on arrival. It was difficult to translate from Yiddish to English.

On the boat, a sailor helped her bring the children to the dining room. There was a storm and she worried they would get drowned. The sailor misunderstood what she said and Nesse thought they were going to drown. She attended Americanization School three times a week at night and worked during the day. With her husband, Nesse studied reading and writing for five years to become a citizen. As a child in Lithuania, she did not have voting rights. Then she was a prisoner in a concentration camp, in a work camp and in a DP camp so it was very emotional when she became a citizen. She finally belongs to a country that believes in freedom and the rights of people. Her husband became a citizen at the same time but her mother had been taking care of Nesse's children. So at age 55, Nesse's mother went to Americanization School and became a citizen at age 60. They spoke Polish, Russian, Lithuanian and Hebrew. English was hard to pronounce.

- 45:00 They celebrated becoming citizens. Nesse indicated that the names of the cities mentioned in her interview need to be corrected. She feels she needed to discuss the Lithuanian question but her testimony said she did not have a question. Another inaccuracy in her testimony is that she was liberated in the Ukraine which is untrue. She suggested that survivors should be permitted to check their testimonies for accuracy. Zagariai is the town where the Jews were taken to be killed. Now towns are in different countries or have different names depending on country of occupation. All the names changed when the Soviet Union ended. Perhaps she would have been a different person if she had not lived through the trauma. She is more sensitive to others needs and might have been more educated or less compassionate. No one can know what she would have been.
- 50:00 Nesse lost part of her teenage years. She never got back her years from 13 to 17. She missed out in school dances, dating and having fun. Last year she got an honorary degree at a school where she gave testimony. For 15 years she spoke at Linda Rubin's class at Madison High School in Virginia. She told the teacher that she envied those who graduated and they gave her a degree. She walked in wearing a robe and there was music playing but she feels that there was a puzzle piece missing. She never dated her husband. Her mother said it was a good idea to get married. Many survivors married because they needed a friend and material things. She did not attend Junior High or High School so missed out and you cannot get back those experiences. After liberation, Nesse got healthier but was anorexic so did not get her period. She gained weight, got taller and more developed. At first there were many girls her age in the concentration camp but at the end, she was the youngest. There were girls from her hometown a few years older than her but she had no friends with her. Five girls from her class survived but they were not with her. Some friends were selected in labor camp or died from typhoid.
- 55:00 She started the death march in Praus (?). The healthier prisoners were picked to continue and the others were left to die. Some of them returned to Stuthof (?). She felt she had

few choices during the Holocaust. She felt that there were no places to run away to if she ran away from the Ghetto. She thought she would get killed if she ran away. There was no choice at selections. The only choice was when she snuck into the labor camp line upon suggestion of a woman who thought she would be killed in the concentration camp as she was little. There was an old camp and a new camp in Stuthof (?). In the new camp the kitchen was not ready so they brought soup in a milk can from the old kitchen. Leftover food was given to the children but the children were afraid to go out. Max (?) pulled out the children for extra food and once she was pulled out. The woman told her she might survive if she went to the labor camp. The woman would not leave herself as she had a child in the old camp. The woman told her to stand up on her tip toes and pinch her cheeks to look healthy; that was her only choice. It was said that some people had foresight to leave for America but, actually, they had money and documents. When Nesse's children were 13 and 14, she felt victory over the Nazis. Each child was a victory.

60:00 Every celebration was a victory over the Nazis. In the camps, the women said not to give up. Her children were Bar-Mitzvah. Her granddaughter enjoys life. Nesse wanted her children to have what she missed and she lived through them. She conveyed Jewish culture to them. Her parents believed in Jewish education and she was brought up that way. She paid \$59 to the Hebrew Academy as her children went there. She worked for it. They had a nice home but no luxuries. She brought up three children. They had a secular and religious education. They all graduated from the Hebrew Academy and went to college with no loans. Nesse and her husband paid as they did not want their children to have bills to pay. Her mother was head of the household and believed it was most important to teach the ways of the Torah—the Shema prayer, the importance of HaShem (G-d) and of doing kindness and charity. All three children do tzedakah (charity), follow the torah and are good human beings. She is angry but learned to use it in a useful way. Instead of sitting home and cursing the Nazis, she took the anger out in a positive way as she was taught by her mom when she was little. She tries to mend the world by being involved in the world and teaches love with children.

65:00 Many years ago Nesse felt she owes the dead because of the kindness of Jewish women who held her hand, shared their bread, wrapped her body in straw to keep warm and said not to forget them. She should tell the world what happened to the Jews as they will all die and she will survive. She told the Russian soldier who helped her. In the 70s a Holocaust movie was shown on TV. In 1954 in Columbia Hospital her mother told her what to do in Virginia. Nesse always tried to fulfill the promise. When she retired from work, she encouraged Holocaust studies in the school system. She went to the schools and gave testimony though her speech and spelling embarrassed her. She shares her memories at schools, churches, and organizations and gets honors for doing that. Nesse is involved in the Jewish Appeal, Jewish Council, ADL and B'nai B'rith. She hopes that

when she dies people will say that she made her mark in the world and did what she promised. Nesse feels terrible that many Nazis are free and get pensions from the German government but does not blame young people who are trying to live a Democratic life.

70:00 She is unhappy about the skinheads in DC, Germany and elsewhere. Nesse feels a connection to Lithuania as until she was 13 she led a normal life there. People don't remember her name but call her the Holocaust lady but she had a life before. When she was liberated, there was no counseling. Nesse feels that if she goes to Lithuania, she will connect and it will be important. She is 70 years old and feels that it is important to go to the graves of friends and relatives and to Auschwitz where her father was killed. Also, she may go to Stuthof (?). She does not know how the accommodations will be. There are people in Lithuanian who saved her brother's life and she is anxious to visit them. She is going with Carolyn Keeber (?), a friend through the Holocaust Museum. She met her in 1983 as she was a volunteer and they kept in touch and got better acquainted through the Speaker's Bureau. Nesse did not consider going to Lithuania earlier as it was Communist. She and Jack donated to charity and Carolyn wrote a letter on her behalf and a man contributed frequent flyer for her family's flight.

75:00 She does not know how long she will be in Stuthof, Poland and how long in Lithuania.