

Oral history interview with Esther Gelbelman
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Detailed Interview Summary/Translation:

My name is Esther Gelbelman. I was born in 1926 in Kishinev, Romania (present day Chişinău, Moldova). I came from a traditional Jewish family where we preserved the Jewish holidays and my dad was a Gabbai (Shamash who ran the synagogue services). We had three sons in our family and I was the only girl. I was a twin and my younger brother who passed away in 1939. My older brother was 21 when WWII broke. My dad passed away in 1940, 6 months after the Russians came and freed us. The older brother stayed with my mom and helped out, he is the only one who started working for the Russian authorities who confiscated the home store we owned. We were wealthy and that helped us survive, we continued until July 21, 1940, when the war began. At the beginning I went to a Romanian school and continued to a Russian high-school. During the Russian administration we were not allowed to go to the synagogue or talk about religion. Kishinev had roughly 40% Jews, and when in 1939 the Romans started cooperating with the Nazis, riots began (pogrom incidents). The Jews had an evening curfew and had to be careful. I grew up in a household where we kept quiet and laid-low, a different generation. I don't recall directly experiencing anti-Semitic comments. All the problems began when the Russians conquered Bessarabia and confiscated all that belonged to the Jews. My dad suffered from an ulcer and had a heart attack, he went under an operation at the hospital and passed away on December 19, 1940, I remember we buried him. (12:00 min.)

The Holocaust began a year later in 1941. I remember we woke up to hear German airplanes above us in the sky, we ran outside to see what was happening. Several days later they began bombing Kishinev and things went downhill. We found shelter at a food storage space and spent the winter there hiding at the basement. I had a scary experience when a bomb fell nearby and I ran back to the basement and stayed there. I was in shock, stopped eating and was shaken-up. I remember my brother trying to persuade my mom to run away though she refused to leave our house and belongings behind. There were Russian trains that evacuated residents out of town on scheduled times. We stayed there until Kishinev was almost completely ruined and the Germans took all the Jews, only then my mom became convinced we should leave. We took only what we could carry and started walking. We arrived at the city of Bender (51 kilometers, 31 miles away), where my mom's sister stayed, though we could not find her or her children. We kept going and walked miles and miles all day long. There was a 19 year-old girl with us who was my brother's girlfriend. Her house was completely destroyed by one of the bombs and she continued with us. We were on the run for three months, July through September. We slept in fields under the stars and saw that many of the locals in the villages nearby refused to help Jews as they saw it was dangerous. There was a tragedy in September when we were at a busy train station which had ammunition. Out of fear, I threw my bag and started running, my mom grabbed my little brother's hand and ran after me. We lost all our belongings in this run and left back to the fields until we reached a village with guards. A mother and her 18 year old daughter opened their door and let us in. We stayed with them and in the next morning we heard on the local radio that the

German army conquered the area. We were scared. We then noticed our mischievous Young brother was outside, he returned with a German officer. The officer asked the boy questions and then they came inside. Mom spoke with the officer and he questioned her after hearing them speaking Romanian, asking what they were doing in a small village in the Ukraine. Mom got scared but stayed focused, the officer pulled her closer and asked if she was Jewish, she replied yes and immediately pulled jewelry she hid and gave it to him. He took it and told us to go back to Kishinev, "you have no reason to be here". Meanwhile, we decided to leave at night since it wasn't safe anymore. That evening a German officer came in and we saw the previous officer outside. We got scared and started crying and screaming, no one helped us. The officer asked for me to accompany him and my mom firmly refused saying she'd rather die first. The officer said he'll leave and will return to take me. Right after he left the villager banished us and we ran outside to the fields as far as we could. We didn't have money, clothes, it was cold and rainy in September. We continued until we got to the city of Blizok who was swarming with officers. There were also many Jews here and a ghetto being built. The local Christian residents were evacuated and Jews got settled instead, so many cramped in rooms, disease spread and it was awful. We saw Jews hung themselves every morning, probably those who understood what was happening and chose not to be in the concentration camps.

One day we heard over the radio that Abraham Pascal was looking for his mom, sister and brother. My maiden name was Pascal. It was a miracle that we united with our big brother there. He went through the check-point for Jews where they took all his money and belongings. There was lice, no food and harsh conditions. We were glad he was there to help us since he was resourceful and knew the language. Meanwhile, the officers gathered many Jews into cramped spaces, disease spread and conditions got worse. They would flock us like a herd outside and one time they took us with another group who were barely alive. By now it was November and it got very cold and snowed. The German officers were cruel and abusive, treated us like animals yelling at us to keep moving. Elder Jews who were walking and couldn't keep up fell and got shot on the spot. If that didn't kill them they would release their trained dogs. We would walk all day and at night get to barracks in mud with no windows. It was the beginning of winter when we arrived at Domanovka Ghetto where they settled all the other Jews, conditions were horrific, we took snow in our hands and drank its water. Disease, cold and weakness all around us. My mom took scissors and cut all my hair, then took a rag and put it over my head so I'd look like more boyish and draw less attention. We didn't know that this was a death camp. This area was a pig's farm with 16-18 pig sheds. They removed the pigs and threw us in there as they prepared the area. Many died along the way, only the strong survived and got this far. We lost our humanity. As we were herded outside daily we saw dead bodies of other Jews laying in the snow. My mom would grab my arm and pull me to keep going and not linger, we walked over dead bodies as if they were stones on the ground. We were then tossed into a small house crammed-up with 20 other people which was a little better. Abraham would leave and get us water and some bread. One day we heard gun shots and shouting. We heard it was prohibited to go and get water from the river and we thought the Russians may have arrived on the other side. Some of us were even brave enough to think we'll be rescued. Then we realized the mass destruction began. Abraham took his girlfriend, Pina, who was with us and they hid in the attic upstairs. He probably knew before everyone else that the destruction began and that it was time

to hide. Meanwhile, we were evacuated outside in the cold. We heard gunshots and Roman policemen running, taking orders from the Germans. We stood outside with thousands of other Jews, shivering from the cold, unable to see what was happening. We heard gunshots and screams, then they yelled at us to go back inside. We got back and saw fire, unsure what was being burnt on the other side of the river. Someone burst in suddenly, fell on the floor yelling that they're killing Jews and burning their bodies with gasoline. Every day around 200-300 people died or starved to death in disgraceful conditions. Two sheds were caught on fire killing all those in it. We discovered a big ditch, where the bodies were thrown and lit on fire, covered with wood and tree branches for fire. 8-10 officers were standing around lining the Jews, removing their clothes in the freezing cold and yelling at them. Abraham who was hiding in the attic with his bride Pina came down to speak with mom. He told her he knew someone local who could help hide them and get them to the Partisans in the Woods, so that they could join them and help fight the Nazis.

Part II

I started crying asking my mom "who will take care of us when Abraham leaves?" My brother gave me a hug and said that he'll stay. I feel guilty for not letting him go. The next day, December 22, things were quiet and we stayed in the house. Then on December 23 there was shouting and we were taken outside with all the other Jews. As we were gathering, my brother Abraham saw Moshe, another Jewish captive he knew walking among the officers (polizei). My brother heard they're keeping some Jews to work in the camp. He had gold and money he hid in his pockets and told mom he'll try to get to Moshe and coordinate for us to stay and work in the camp to survive. As he was making his way, an officer spotted him and thought he was trying to escape and immediately shot him in the head. He died on the spot. My mom who saw this collapsed to the ground and started shouting in tears. Two officers came closer and started hitting her hard. Pina stood there, holding me and my brother's hand and telling us to be quiet. I was my mom bleed and cried to her, she heard me and sighed with her mouth filled with blood right before she passed out. We were urged to continue and continued to walk towards a large pit on the other side of the park with Abraham and mom's bodies. We walked slowly as it was crowded with thousands of other Jews. We spotted Moshe the collaborator again with the officers and remembered Abraham had gold and money in his pockets. Pina suggested we reach Moshe and let him know we have money and gold to give him if he'll help us work in camp. I felt despair and helplessness having my loved ones killed. Moshe came with a young officer, I remember his face, he took us and left my younger brother there, telling him to stay and that we'll be back. When we got back he wasn't there. As we got closer I didn't see my mom's body and yelled "where is my mom?" I was told to be quiet or I'll get myself killed. There were many other bodies lying around. Struck with fear, I started searching for her body. The officer took the gold and all the money and took us. It turns out that the convoys of people heading towards the large pit had to walk around the park since it was on the other side, and there were officers waiting and raiding the bodies left there for gold and money. They even pulled golden filled teeth out. It was freezing outside and Jews were standing barely dressed waiting quietly for their deaths. As we

got closer we found out that the extermination had begun on December 21 and that three days passed. Jewish women were sorting the clothes. The officer approached one of the women telling her that we came there to work and sort the clothes. We did not know the severity at the time as we started sorting through all the clothes and bodies. I found bandages and secretly hid them in my clothes. It got dark and we were taken back to the house to sleep. The space was all overcrowded with other Jews and there was no electricity. Someone saw me and asked me where Abraham and my mom were, and I replied that they were killed. Someone else shouted that my mom's alive and in the other room. I got up and immediately went looking for her, trying not to step on other people. I found her and she started crying, she was bluish, cold, covered in blood that froze on her face and clothes. We hugged and kissed and she said "I'm here, G-d doesn't want you to be alone" and told me she managed to get up and sneak back to the house. I started looking for clean clothes for her in the dark. I wanted to clean her up but we had no running water. I went outside and gathered snow in my clothes and came back in, sat next to her melting the snow with my hands, giving her to drink and cleaning her up. She fell asleep and I sat there worried they'll discover her tomorrow and kill her. I asked Pina to stay with her and went to the other entrance of the house to find a woman whose last name was Barsheska, who could help me hide mom. I said goodbye to mom and kissed her. I went outside, it was winter, cold and dark. I stepped inside and started searching for her. I heard my mom shouting for me from the other side and shivered, women came outside to the stairs. I saw my mom with bandages calling for me and police officers arriving and hitting her. My mom cried for help and the women next to me held my arm, told me to stay put so I don't get killed. I felt helpless in those moments that felt like forever. My mom collapsed next to the wall and died. This was the second time I saw my mom get killed.

Last year we commemorated 50 years for the murders of the Transnistria Jews. I gave my phone number and asked to be reached. Two women who were there with me that night called, one lives in Kiryat Motzkin and the other who was 83 said I was like her daughter. Her kids were burned alive in that hut next to us.

The next day we were taken outside and counted before they took us to work. We were on a hill and needed to go around it to get to the park. I saw fire and bodies lying around on the ground next to a large pit and in it the smell was unbearable. They left around 150 men and 50 women to work. The women sorted through the clothes and the men worked hard labor around the pit, collecting and throwing the remaining bodies in. On December 24 the officers took a break to go away and celebrate the Silvester (New Year). We didn't have any food and so we searched for remaining scraps that fell in the snow like pieces of bread. What we found was dirty and covered in blood, we were barely alive. On January 2 the officers returned. They finished off all of the Jews by January 10th. The large pit was fully covered in bodies and the smell was unbearable. They put the heavier bodies at the bottom and skinnier ones on top. When the pit got full they had other Jews prepare smaller fires for the bodies. Pina and I stayed and slept on the floor next to each other. I found a pillow and slept on it. The officers entered the room shouting at us to wake-up. We covered ourselves so they wouldn't see us. They would pick the prettiest girl and take her outside. My mom must have known what she was doing when she cut my hair and put a cloth over it to avoid drawing attention. There was abuse. Only a few of us women remained

while all the others were killed. Those of us still alive were exhausted, we worked from early morning hours until late in the evening. After about 10 days Pina said she can't get up, her body gave in. I told her I'll help her and with another women we held her up and went to work. After two hours Pina went to speak with an officer asking to go back as she wasn't feeling well. The officer said they don't need sick people, only workers, took his gun and shot her. I watched from afar, helpless. She laid there dying on the ground. The officer pulled his leg up and kicked her head and her brain scattered everywhere, it was horrific. I hid behind the pile of clothes, shaken and mortified. I cried every day since and couldn't stop. After we finished sorting through the clothes we began cleaning the death and remainings. There were about 20 women in the shed and we'd clean and cry together. There was an officer who used to arrive every morning to speak with the supervisor who gave him daily updates, saying we were constantly crying and not working well. The officer got off his horse and stood in front of me, pulled his gun out and yelled at us to work or it'll be the end of us. We went through hell. I walked barefoot all summer since I didn't have shoes. My legged were torn up and I had lice, like many others, who dug in us. We worked manual labors all day, exhausted, in worse conditions. This was three years until April 1944.

During Passover we got a "day off", where they allowed us to go to the near village and talk to the locals and get back by 2:00 pm. I went with another girl to knock on doors. There were some villagers who let Jews in and gave us some bread and a meal, and there were others who unleashed their dogs at us. We all strolled the streets knocking on doors. The girl and I reached a home of a Christian couple, the man knew my brother Abraham. They let us in and fed us. I recognized our clothes, table cloth and other items from our home and became pale. The man was in his 50's, his wife was there too. He told me there was a Jew who came to trade these items for bread and food elements. I told him it was my brother who got killed, and that I wouldn't let him leave us to be with the Partisans in the forests. The Christian gave us some food to take with us (cookies, salami slices and salt). The girl and I left a little after three and got scared, we were late and didn't have a watch. We started to head back and saw on a hill three officers standing with a leather whip. As we were approaching one of the officers yelled at us asking where we have been and why we were late. They started hitting me and the other girl ran into a shed near us. I dropped the bag with the food and was knocked to the ground, got hit pretty bad. Another Jew who was nearby saw what they were doing and came over trying to get them to stop. I was hit so bad it took me weeks to recover. I still don't know what to reply to questions about how I survived. I wasn't a healthy child, I got sick frequently though during the war I was not sick and stayed alive.

After the war I relocated to the former Soviet Union, had children and raised a family. It was forbidden to talk about the Holocaust and war, still it burned in me. After 20 years I was invited to testify in a trial at Odessa, and there I met other Holocaust survivors. One women told me that they were looking for witnesses for a trial against the German brigade officer Slivinka who was supposed to kill me. It was a happy day for me, I finally felt I could play an important role and testify against him, judgement day arrived. He sat in court on a chair and I was there with 15 other survivors. He was a war criminal, responsible for deaths and crimes against humanity. I remember walking on corpses as if they were stones under my feet, it was horrific and inhuman.

Thousands of Jews waited for their deaths, lost their humanity and were let like sheep to slaughter. None of the German officers helped us and death kept creeping after us. Now when I'm older, I'm alone and still have that young girl inside me, I can't shake her away. I can't stand to be alone, I get scared and panic. My son asked me why and I couldn't explain it to him.

Part III

During the period where Pina was murdered and I stayed there by myself was hard. On January 18 the authorities publically announced that they're stopping to kill Jews. It was publically broadcasted in Romanian, and we thought the torture and killing would stop. I was so scared that I constantly kept my shoes on, even at night, in case I needed to run. My feet were covered with pus and my head covered in lice. I was so weak I couldn't even get up. We didn't have any medicine, what could I do? I had a big bloody wound on my arm. Near the house we stayed in was a barn owned by a Ukrainian man and he kept cabbage there. There were unclean cabbage leafs that were left there. They taught me to use them on my wound and replace them three times a day. It helped and also reduced the lice. I was unfit to work and didn't have any food. The healthy worked in cleaning the bodies and the sheds. The pigs were returned to the farm and kept in the sheds. There was a small kitchen where they made soup daily from the cabbage and small potatoes. Whatever was left at the bottom of the pot was brought to me and the other sick girls from one of the Jews, they helped us survive. We couldn't get up and ate scraps. They would sneak food and swap with the locals for some food and gave us the remaining.

When I went back to work I was still weak and barely functional. We worked in the fields and I used to steal some carrots or corn and eat them. I didn't have my coat as it was covered with lice. I got a man's coat and covered my feet with cloths since I didn't have any shoes. The corn was whatever was left in the fields during winter and got covered with snow. Us Jews had to do the manual labor and dig them out. As summer approached and it got warmer, the authorities began to ponder on the large pit with bodies, concerned of it being discovered. They decided to force the men to dig another pit several meters away. The bodies were carried with stretchers from the large pit to the other. We stood in line and bodies were dumped on our stretcher, and that way they threw the bodies in the other and covered it. Bones were left there half way in the pit, untraceable. The pit remained open and I saw a picture of it in 1989. The pit remained open all these years, it really bothered me. There was no stone or commemoration. I was about 14 when that happened and we barely made it. We just waited for our deaths. We didn't believe we'd survive the war and all we've been through.

In April 1944 we were released. The Russian army approached and we saw the German authorities starting to pull back and move weapons and personnel. Then we understood the Russians are close and that we have a chance. No one came to take us to work in the mornings. We stayed there scared and shivering, unsure what to do. We were afraid of running so we waited for the SS officers as we heard they're the last ones to leave and clean up the area. We received an order to scatter quietly, so we spread out and ran one after the other in different directions. I ran with a few others to Ghetto Karlovka in Odessa, Ukraine. There was a small

village far from the main road. There were only 18 Jews there in a shed, and when they saw us approaching they were scared, unsure if we're friendly or not. When they saw we're also prisoners, they opened the door and let us in. We waited there with them a few days with no food or anything, scared, waiting for our deaths. We saw German officers who ran away from the army or wondered around, and we started to cry. We then realized they didn't see us there. One day we saw three Russian soldiers on horses approaching to check the area and find Romanians and Germans. One of us went outside to speak with them in Russian. We hugged and got released at Ghetto Karlovka. The Russians took us and gave us a shower, change of clothes and some food. We were grateful. There were many Ukrainian Jews there that were released by the Russians, and they were allowed to return home. My home and town in Bessarabia was destroyed and family dies, I didn't have anywhere to go to. A KGB officer asked for Jewish survivors to help lift the moral of the others. I volunteered and returned to Bogdanovka with others to help out. First, we went down to the pit and gathered bones, prepared a coffin for the dead and put bones in it. I traveled with another girl and the Russians took us back. They had women in the Russian army, and I remember they gave us their uniforms and told us to wear it as camouflage. We were waitresses and worked in the kitchen and that is how we got closer to home.

Officer Ivan Slivinka, how did they find him after 20 years? He was a war criminal who escaped to Berlin. The Germany was freed in 1945, then Slivinka came to the Russian authorities and told them he was forced to do these awful things and cooperate with the Nazis and Romanians. The Russians accepted his stories, though they gave him 20 years of hard work in Siberia as punishment. After he finished with his sentence the police took him and put him on trial, called for witnesses and evidence was gathered against him.

Sarah Rabinovitz survived too and stayed in Odessa. She barely made it. She was holding her daughter's hand near the large body pit when they shot her but killed the girl instead. Sarah fainted and fell into the pit. She woke up feeling the weight of the bodies piling on top of her and managed to climb on top of them and get out. She received the invitation to testify against officer Slivinka and told me about the trial. More and more witnesses were gathered in his trial. Rachela Vakselman also testified, a heavy body women who both her hands were broken during the war. The other witnesses didn't recognize me since I was 14 then, I told them who I was and we all hugged. As a child I remembered they helped bring me scraps of food to eat. We went back to the pit and saw the vegetation that grew around it and saw it stayed open. I lost control and started running towards the pit and came down inside it. I started gathering bones and dirt and asked for something to take them back in, I felt as if they were part of me. I gathered them in a scarf and tied it, then the others helped pull me out. Meanwhile, one of the local officials went by on a chariot (korhoz), he asked what we were doing there. We told him about the body pit we had to dig and asked why the pit was left open and why there was no sign or commemoration. He replied that there were still people who come at night to hunt for gold and remainings, and that it was a large expense and that the city didn't have the resources. I returned home with the bones and dirt I gathered, prepared a wooden box and placed them inside, then buried the box next to my dad's grave. Since then I started writing letters to Moscow asking for help closing the pit. I

risked my life and my family's life as it was forbidden to talk about the war at the time, it was not safe. I didn't hear back.

In 1973 we were about to make Aliyah and leave for Israel. We bid farewell to the former Soviet Union and prepared to move to Israel and start over. We left quietly as it was not looked upon well. A few years passed, we worked hard and adjusted. I began writing letters to the Knesset, the President and to Yad VaShem, no one responded. I was restless and couldn't eat. I wrote to Romania as well asking to close the body pit in Bogdanovka. I reached out to contacts I knew at Yad VaShem and they tried to help. Only after 50 years the body pit was finally closed and a gravestone was added. A ceremony was held for the memory of the Jews killed there in the village of Bogdanovka. I'm lonely now, still haunted by these memories, wrestles. The Holocaust Remembrance Day in Israel is very difficult for me, only those who went through this horror of the Holocaust could understand. I'm proud to have raised a family and children. I have a grandson in the air force and a granddaughter who recently turned 14. In the former Soviet Union they're making survivor's lives difficult asking for evidence in order to be entitled to war compensations, which is hard to get since we didn't have documentation.