

Steinfeld, Gerda Kroitzer
RG-50.120*0330
Two Video Cassettes
In Hebrew

- Abstract: Gerda was born in Hanover, Germany, where she also lived after the war until 1955. She had one sister named Margot. Gerda's family was very cultured and her father had an important job at a bank, to which he returned after the war. Gerda's "leit-motif" for the war years (other than surviving hunger) was to be able to study. She pursued many different venues in her search for education. She was interned at Terezin and remained there until the war ended. She returned to Hanover and joined a "hachshara." Gerda describes her trip and decision to go to Israel. Survivor's guilt moved her to research the Holocaust.
- 1:00:35 Gerda Steinfeld (nee Kroitzer) was born on August 15, 1932, in Hanover, Germany. This Jewish community was active and thriving. Her parents were very involved in it. They were traditional Jews (celebrated the holidays), same as her religious grandparents who lived in a different city. Gerda had one sister.
- 1:02:16 Gerda's father excelled as a soldier, defending Germany in WWI. He was wounded in the war, losing a leg and his hearing. He was a banker in the Reich bank. They were well-off and active participants in German cultural affairs. Her father was born in 1894. He played the violin and Gerda's mother played the piano.
- 1:03:54 In 1935 Gerda's father was fired from his job, which was a ministerial one. Since they could not fire him outright, he was given "early retirement." His colleagues ignored him from that moment on. He went to work as an accountant for Jewish companies.
- 1:04:56 One of the anti-Jewish laws was the prohibition to live in houses or buildings owned by non-Jews. In a year and a half, the family had to move seven times as properties were continuously bought and sold.
- 1:05:19 During the war years, Jews had to live in "Jewish houses," a kind of concentration camp within the city where they were very crowded and normal life impossible.
- 1:06:20 Gerda describes her own suffering as a child in those years. The prohibition to learn was the most difficult for her. The winter of 1941 was harsh and cold—no heating and no friends. The adults

were very secretive so that the children would not worry about the situation.

- 1:09:08 Gerda witnessed one of Hitler's speeches in a public square. Hitler Youth were collecting coins; the rhythm of the tin boxes filled with coins, following marching steps, remains in Gerda's mind to the present day and still produces nightmares. (Whoever did not put coins in the boxes was taken to the police station.)
- 1:12:51 Gerda's Kristalnacht recollection: her older sister came back from school saying that the synagogue was in flames. The first time that Gerda heard the word "Gestapo" was in connection with her uncle who had been taken to Dachau and then returned to his home badly beaten up.
- 1:13:09 Gerda's childhood was spent alone in the backyard.
- 1:14:00 Gerda describes the different residences in which her family lived and the one-room school that she attended.
- 1:17:54 Gerda learned in Ulm, far from Hanover.
- 1:18:48 In the autumn of 1940 Jews were expelled from every house. They received a mattress in the hallway of a small synagogue that had been left standing. Her father applied for and got permission to move to another place, out of the city, to a small room inside a Jewish nursing home.
- 1:21:37 She moved to another place in the winter of 1941. It was another nursing home in the city. Gerda explains how they were able to find food. During that time, her mother worked as a nurse in a nearby hospital.
- 1:27:29 Gerda talks about her grandparents.
- 1:29:06 She mentions that her sister's name was Margot.
- 1:33:00 Gerda learned from the old people since there was not a school. She could recite Schiller and Goethe at a very early age. There was a small yard there and she worked a bit.
- 1:34:04 They were at the nursing home for six months.
- 1:35:00 Gerda's family discussed leaving Germany for Palestine after her father had been fired from his job at the bank, but her father did not feel he could get used to a desert land, without any culture.

Gerda's mother suggested then that she would sustain the family through her knowledge of treatments for tropical illnesses; a knowledge that she had acquired in nursing school. However, Gerda's father nixed the idea.

- 2:00:27 Gerda's father also turned down the invitation of an American banker (named Warburg) to come to the States, to work in banking there.
- 2:01:35 Gerda's father volunteered to fill out paper work for Jews who wanted to leave Germany. When Gerda's father saw the situation escalating in Germany, he finally relented and requested an affidavit from a cousin in the USA. Since her father was handicapped and had two small children, the US Embassy required a second affidavit. The latter never materialized and it was too late at that point any way.
- 2:03:18 Gerda relates her paternal uncle's fate.
- 2:05:29 She remembers the growing suicide rates among German Jews at that time.
- 2:07:30 Before the first evacuation, the Jewish community distributed a flyer warning Jews about the difficult times ahead. Among other advice, it warned "to expect thirst and to combat it by drinking one's own urine."
- 2:08:25 Gerda talks about the old, small synagogue.
- 2:12:24 She talks about her friend, Brigitte.
- 2:14:00 The subject of conversation was always "emigration." The question was asked: "How is it going?" The answer was always, "We are learning English."
- 2:22:35 The family made preparations for evacuation from Hanover. They were taken from the nursing home. All of their non-Jewish neighbors watched them ride away in a police car, typically reserved for criminals.
- 2:24:11 Gerda talks more about her parents' families.
- 2:32:09 The evacuation from Hanover occurred on July 24, 1942. Through the police car windows, Gerda and her family observed the neighbors going into their home and stealing their possessions.

- 3:00:00 The gathering point: the train station was Fisherbahnhof, used for cargo trains.
- 3:04:09 The train car in which the family traveled was a passenger car, albeit very crowded.
- 3:05:03 The trip: It was summer and it was dark. After a long walk, they arrived at a gate. They were then processed in Terezin.
- 3:13:50 The illnesses began, mainly dysentery.
- 3:17:32 Gerda explains the crowding, the lice, and the illnesses there.
- 3:18:56 She describes her father's and mother's occupations in the ghetto.
- 3:20:10 Gerda explains the ghetto's food distribution system. The same carts that brought the bread took away the bodies of those who died.
- 3:22:25 Gerda was never hungry because she never liked eating, but she was very weak.
- 3:25:00 Once the ghetto was full, the curfews ended and each person could go to his or her activities. Gerda describes her parents' occupations again.
- 3:26:42 One of the women for whom Gerda's mother cared was a teacher. The mother asked Gerda to come and learn from her, if Gerda could withstand the stench. The woman's speech was barely audible, but Gerda learned from her; mainly, math, literature, poems, and stories. Once the woman died, there was no one else to teach her.
- 3:30:47 Later on, Gerda became very ill and was in the sick room for weeks and weeks (almost six months), without ever seeing her parents. She had pneumonia and fluid in her lungs (they said she also had TB).
- 3:31:00 Gerda made a friend who played the recorder and together they went to entertain the old people before Chanukah: one played, the other sang.
- 3:33:32 Gerda played marbles with her friend, marbles fashioned out of clay.

- 3:34:05 Gerda and her sister stayed with their parents. Upon arrival in Terezin, her mother had forcefully stated that the girls were to stay with her. Eventually, the father joined them and they found a tiny room for the four of them. A group of children who were not in children's houses was organized by the Libeu family from Prague. The organization was secret because they wanted to teach the children, an activity which was forbidden.
- 4:00:47 Dysentery was chronic there.
- 4:03:47 Sanitary conditions were dismal.
- 4:04:18 They eventually started distributing milk to the children.
- 4:07:52 Transports came and went. Not the same people who came, went away. Some were destined for Birkenau, although they did not know what the place was. This was the system of sending people away.
- 4:10:37 In the autumn of 1944, the evacuations were more significant. All who were evacuated were taken to Birkenau.
- 4:12:56 Gerda talks about the Libeu group and the subjects they learned. The celebration of Gerda's Bat-mitzvah, and the blessing bestowed upon her.
- 4:14:00 Gerda describes her notebook that contained notes from her lessons.
- 4:16:03 Gerda and her friend wrote a poem for Rash Hashanah, in German, in honor of their teachers.
- 4:18:00 With transports in full force, Gerda was the only one left in the ghetto (?). The library was still open.
- 4:20:00 Gerda depicts cultural life in the ghetto in 1943-1944. Gerda participated in a play.
- 4:24:06 The play was "Brundibar."
- 4:28:25 There were shows in the block: singers, magicians, and cabaret. A death in the audience occurred during one of the shows.
- 4:30:23 Gerda describes stealing food from the infirm.
- 4:34:16 They made preparations for the visit of the Red Cross.

- 5:00:00 She talks about her friend Ruth Mieberg.
- 5:02:07 Gerda celebrated her 11th birthday and had a party.
- 5:08:00 She had a pen pal.
- 5:10:54 Gerda talks about “Oneg Shabbat.”
- 5:12:00 The roll call of November 10, 1943: They stood there the whole day, with Nazi guards surrounding them. They were supposed to be shot in retaliation for a defeat in the front. For some reason, they were spared and at the end of the day they went back to the ghetto.
- 5:18:00 Gerda describes her ‘diet’ in the ghetto. Her mother, who contracted heart disease there, received salt-free food.
- 5:20:00 Because of her hunger, Gerda ate a lot of snow. One time, she ate so much that she almost died (she went into a coma, etc.).
- 5:24:41 The Nazis made a propaganda film for the Red Cross.
- 5:27:00 There were residences of the privileged among the Jews.
- 5:28:00 Gerda explains her family life and occupations.
- 5:32:48 No one in her family talked about the war or politics.
- 6:00:00 Gerda recollects the British bombardments that occurred in 1940-41. She describes her fears and lasting visual impressions of those bombings.
- 6:08:48 Gerda talks about her father’s family and about family pictures.
- 6:12:39 Gerda describes the showers in Terezin and her shock at seeing naked women there.
- 6:15:50 Zionist education was taught in the ghetto.
- 6:22:03 Judaic subjects were taught by Agudat Israel Jews.
- 6:25:40 Gerda recollects a Jewish family arriving at the ghetto from Mukachevo, Ukraine in 1945, and bringing all the ingredients to make matzoh (which they baked in an outdoor fire).

- 6:27:34 Gerda received little notes from her parents while she was ill and in the hospital.
- 7:00:00 Gerda talks about her teachers and the subjects of study.
- 7:04:19 Worship, including Sephardic style, was brought by the Jews from Holland.
- 7:05:36 Prayers took place between beds, in the bunk.
- 7:06:28 In 1944, during the High Holidays, people received notices with the date of their evacuation, but on the scheduled days, the trains never arrived. During Yom Kippur, Jews beseeched God not to be sent them to Birkenau. Gerda remembers seeing Jews prostrated on the floor, crying and praying. However, after Sukkot, the trains finally arrived.
- 7:09:00 Gerda and her family were not summoned to go to the transport. Her parents forbade her to leave the building, lest they would be taken.
- 7:10:50 Gerda talks more about worship in the ghetto and her religious and Zionist education there.
- 7:22:30 German Jews kept their respect for others, even in the worst of circumstances.
- 7:24:32 The ghetto was almost empty after the 1944 evacuation.
- 7:27:30 Talks about installation of gas chambers in Theresienstadt.
- 7:28:08 The date to liquidate the ghetto was fixed as May 16, 1945, but it did not come to pass.
- 7:29:11 After Ruth, her friend was sent away, Gerda remained friendless.
- 7:32:35 The Germans issued a roll call to deport all handicapped Jews (Gerda's father was among them). However, when her father was interviewed by one of the commanders, it turned out that the commander and her father had both been injured in the same battle during WWI. The commander did not send her father away.
- 8:00:00 In March 1945, trains started arriving, filled with people who were half-dead. Other half-dead people also started arriving on foot. Most of those who were arriving had typhoid fever. They were put

- in a different section of the ghetto. Gerda did not see any German escorts.
- 8:04:34 Rumors that the Russians were approaching spread throughout the ghetto. The inhabitants could hear bombs.
- 8:05:52 One night between May 8 and 9, the prisoners dared to open the gates and saw tanks. The tanks kept going toward Prague, after throwing sweets into the street.
- 8:07:04 The following day, some nursing care arrived, took some of them and quarantined the place.
- 8:08:38 Gerda describes the aftermath of the war. Those who only spoke German, like Gerda's family, were afraid to leave.
- 8:10:43 Gerda and her family returned to Hanover. No houses were left standing.
- 8:23:06 Gerda reflects on the tragedy at Birkenau; those who arrived from there in the spring of 1945 to Terezin told her their stories.
- 8:25:19 Gerda's parents did not believe they had been freed for a long time.
- 8:29:57 Gerda's sister left the ghetto, went to a nearby village, and brought back food.
- 8:31:51 Germans were seen fleeing in their underwear.
- 9:00:00 The Danish Jews were the first to leave the ghetto. They also received food parcels regularly and it was known that they would not be deported.
- 9:05:43 Gerda talks about Leo Baeck.
- 9:11:50 Gerda recalls the plans she had for the future.
- 9:16:00 There was anti-Semitism in Hanover in the 1950s. Gerda decided to leave for France.
- 9:20:00 Gerda's parents returned to Hanover as broken people. Since they all went back to their original home, the family members were not considered refugees. It was very difficult to survive for the first six months.

- 9:24:42 Gerda describes her family's living conditions.
- 9:26:07 Gerda returned to school in 1946, first to a secular school and then to a Jewish school.
- 10:10:00 Gerda's father returned to work in the bank in Hanover.
- 10:04:00 Gerda made a connection with the survivors from Bergen-Belsen. Her uncle in America sent parcels every month, otherwise there would not have been any food.
- 10:06:54 Gerda talks about how her family survived on a parcel economy (i.e. the black market).
- 10:06:57 There was a constant flux of survivors coming from different concentration camps who were looking for relatives.
- 10:07:37 Schooling in Yiddish began, organized by the Jewish community.
- 10:08:39 No one exchanged impressions of what happened to them during the war.
- 10:09:26 She describes her Israeli *shaliach*. Gerda was transferred to a farm to train for agricultural work. Gerda was very weak even two plus years after the war.
- 10:11:20 There were different groups coming to complete training for agriculture work.
- 10:12:34 Most of those who completed training made *aliya* to Israel.
- 10:14:24 In 1948, the situation improved and the German government gave each person 40 new Deutsches marks.
- 10:15:17 Gerda went back to school to study languages. At the end of her studies, she was practically the only young person left. Most of the other Jewish youth had left. She decided to go out to "see the world." It was 1954. She went to Israel as a tourist and moved there in 1955. She experienced problems of adaptation because she was viewed as German.
- 10:21:00 Gerda lists her reasons for moving to Israel.
- 10:23:41 Gerda talks about the influence the war years had in the upbringing of her children.

- 10:25:00 Gerda followed traditional observances in her house in Israel.
- 10:28:00 Gerda's sister stayed in Hanover.
- 10:29:56 Gerda speaks about her guilt feelings for surviving. She contributed by translating testimonies from Yiddish and Hebrew into German: it was an internal impulse.
- 10:33:39 Gerda came upon materials on Terezin at Tel Aviv University archives. This provided her with information she did not have when she experienced the horrors of the Holocaust.