

## Oral history interview with Rivka Liebeskind

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### Summary

Rivka Liebeskind Kuper (née Shpiner) was born in Rzeszów, Galitzia, Poland but she grew up and was educated in Cracow. Her home was traditional and Zionist, and from an early age she was exposed to Zionist songs and tales. She went to a school taught in Hebrew since kindergarten. From within the school, a large group of children and youth joined the movement Hanoar Hatzioni. Its members numbered 1,000. Rivka was active there until the outbreak of WWII.

About the Hanoar Hatzioni Zionist movement.

Upon finishing high school, Rivka was sent to work in the movement Secretariat in Warsaw. She worked there near the movement greats: Aharon Liebeskind (her future husband), Shimshon Drenger and Tzvi Yaffe. After 6 months there, she was sent to the northernmost city Bydgoszcz in order to open a branch there. She did it with great success, even recruiting the help of the parents of the youth to purchase a beautiful club house, and to find a place for the youth going to Israel so start learning the principles of agriculture (hachsharah.)

In August 1939, while spending the summer in camp with members of the movement in the Carpathian Mountains, emissaries from Palestine arrived: Yoel Draiblat and Yehuda Orinshteyn, from kibbutz Beit-Yehoshua. They were hoping to be able to organize a large group of immigrants to Palestine among the more veterans, and to get enough British certificates to do so. On August 15, a serious accident happened that killed many of the participants of the camp, among them Tzvi Yaffe. Many were injured and several died. The camp broke up and the leaders managed to bury the dead, send the injured to the hospital and return the rest to their own homes. The winds of war were already felt. The day after the Germans invaded Poland, they were already in

Cracow. The city was not bombarded, as it was destined to be the capital of the conquering forces in Poland, but Warsaw and many other cities were. People fleeing eastward the border with Russia were hunted and killed. A few made it, and some returned home. In November, two of the leaders were taken to jail: Gusta Davidson and Shimshon Drenger (?) and they were sent to a camp in Tropo (?) They were both in a list the Germans had. Drenger was the editor of the movement's newsletter, where he underlined the words of Irena Harant and other activists of their youth movement, Akiba. An Austrian woman who fought against Hitler and Akiba kept in touch with her. The other important members went into hiding. Thanks to the payment of a bribe, and because the Germans were not so well organized at the beginning of the war, the two leaders were freed after a few months. Because of the imprisonment of the couple, it was decided to go to Warsaw, site of the central Secretariat of the movement, in order to liquidate all the lists with names. Rivka was given the assignment. At the end of November she managed to arrive to Warsaw sidestepping the ruins in the roads. The trip took 2 days. Upon arrival, Rivka witnessed for the first time what war was. The destruction was unbelievable.

The house where the offices were was only half destroyed. It took Rivka and a couple of other members she found "among the ruins" 4 full days, and 4 ovens, to burn all the material. She returned home very depressed, and for the first time she understood the drama that befell Poland. She still did not know what awaited the Jews. On December 5, the homes of the Jews were searched by the Germans. They confiscated everything of value, and immediately prohibitions to the Jews were published, including the closing of schools and stores, and the wearing of arm bands identifying them. The Jews felt trapped. Many Jews were forcibly taken to work clearing streets from snow, delivering coal to the homes of the Germans. If no menial jobs were found, the Jews were dragged from their homes to exercise in the

street. Rivka married on December 26 of that year and the couple tried to engage the children and the youth in activities in order to distract them from the goings-on. They organized classes and events in private homes. Events were developing rapidly. Families disappeared, or left. The Germans would victimize the Jews in the synagogues and other places wherever they met. In 1940, a ghetto was declared: only the Jews with permits could stay in Cracow. They were already used to the anti-Semitism of the Poles, who would point to the Germans who the Jews were.

When the first Jews were shot, and therefore did not come back from work, they thought this is the price of war. They did not think it was solely against the Jews

Organizing the youth even in the ghetto. Conditions in the ghetto.

Working in conserves storage to send foods to the Russian front, and sabotaging the merchandise.

Deportations by train to unknown destinations...

Shimshon and Gusta Draenger were not in the ghetto. They went to the village of Niepolomice with Aryan papers, and they kept in touch thanks to a friend, Yehuda Tenenbaum. He was the owner of the biggest printing press in Cracow but, after the Germans confiscated it, and because they could not find someone with knowledge to run it, they kept Tenenbaum on. He managed to make fake ID cards using original German blank forms, stamps, etc.

Shimshon became an expert in falsifying the Germans' signatures. The printing press became a factory of all kinds of "official" cards and permits: work permits, passage cards, IDs, in and out of the ghetto. This made it easier to leave the ghetto to trade the Jews' own belongings for food, medicine. This freedom of movement made it possible to alert other ghettos about to be deported, and youth would provide them with false documents. Some cards were sold to wealthy people who

wanted to leave the ghetto. With the money received, they would procure weapons and help support those Jews who did not work.

When the situation worsened in Warsaw, they managed to get some of the people to the Cracow ghetto, from whence they went out to the forests to fight.

In June or July 1942, when the big expulsion of the Jews happened, the ghetto emptied out and those with fake documents, including Rivka and her in-laws, managed to hide outside of the ghetto. Rivka's parents were saved by her brother, who worked in the Gestapo garage.

The cruel expulsion showed them that the future of the Jews was in peril.

Manik Eisenshtadt returned from one of those expulsions by jumping off the train going in the direction of Belzec. By meandering through many villages and talking to the farmers, he found out what future awaited the deported ...and he told Rivka and the others.

They decided the Jews have to defend themselves.

The establishment of an official workers' camp in a farm. Only the ghetto Jews were sent there in Kopaliny. Obtaining the first revolver. Training with weapons. This was a novel idea, and all the youth movements in the ghetto were united under one command.

It was later decided to join the underground of the Warsaw ghetto, and for that they were in touch with Antek and Tzivia.

They tried to join the PPR, the Communist group, but the PPR did not see an imminent danger to themselves. So the group destined to join them had to return to the ghetto. Finding a hiding place. The decision to form an underground composed by members of all the youth movements in Cracow. Their slogan, as opposed to other underground groups, was "die with honor". It was December 1942. Division of labor: boycotting, checking on informers, killings, etc. In October, Miriam (Minka) Liebeskind, left to organize an underground in Radom, but she

was caught and killed. In November of that year, Rivka returned to the ghetto from an operation against the Germans, but the Jewish Police came to her house and took her to the police station. She had with her still her fake Polish documents and a chain with a cross around her neck. She got rid of the papers, but forgot the chain (which she removed while waiting her turn at the police station!)

They questioned her about her husband Dolek's revolver, but laughingly she said they probably saw a key in his hand, and not a weapon. She was sent to jail from November till January, but was not punished in any other way. She also maintained contact with her parents, and received letters from her husband Dolek. She found out only much later, while in Auschwitz, that her husband had died in one of the operations.

In January 1943 she was sent from the ghetto prison to Auschwitz.

All about Gusta Davidson's educational activities for her movement. She married and died with Shimek.

Gola and Justina kept on writing, even in jail. Gola had been tortured, and after she recovered she was invited to debate the Gestapo and told them they will lose the war.

Gola received heroism cross from Poland. And so did Dolek, given to Rivka in 1965. (She returned the cross to the Polish embassy after it cut off relations with Israel on the eve of the Six Days War.)

In the summer of 1943 Rivka thought Dolek was still active in Warsaw, but he had already been killed. She found out about it only a year later.

In that year, Rivka managed to organize the underground at Auschwitz also.

Punished for bringing letters to families, she managed to escape the crematorium. The commandant was finally hanged. Sent to Telefunken and Reichenbach.

In 1945, May 8, after liberation, Rivka's train, the Bernadotte transport, found itself in Denmark. They were sent to Copenhagen and from there by ferry to Sweden.