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Summary of Interview with Elsa (Shifra) Lustgarten

The interview is framed as a memorial to her late husband, Symek Lustgarten, who was a member of the resistance movement in Kraków, under the command of Symek (Shimshon) Dranger and Dolek (Aron) Liebeskind.

Elsa tells of her own participation in the Akiva Zionist youth movement and the resistance movement in Kraków that grew out of it. Her family left Kraków but she returned on the Eve of Yom Kippur in order to act as part of the resistance, as requested by her mentor and hero Shimon "Symek" Draenger, who had been the head of her branch of the Akiva youth group in Kraków (the Sharon group). She speaks of Symek's activity as the editor of the Akiba journal, for which he was arrested and imprisoned for three months (his wife Gusta Davidson Dranger accompanied him to the prison). After they were released by dint of significant financial sacrifice on the part of his family, Symek Dranger was followed by the Gestapo. Elsa describes the way he continued to run the youth group by selecting several members to serve as the "mediators" for the rest of the group, meeting under false pretenses (a birthday party, for which Gusta baked a cake), gathering greetings and information from Symek, and transmitting this to the rest of the members of the organization. At one of the transmission meetings, on the roof of a café of a friend (Café Imperial, owned by the father of Paula Kurtz), Symek made a very short appearance in front of sixty Akiva members, reinforcing Elsa's belief that for Symek, his ideology and the well being of the Akiva members were more precious than life itself, as he was constantly followed and could be arrested and killed for appearing among the others.

Elsa describes one of the first tasks given to members of the group – to adopt a family that had been relocated to Kraków. They arrived, she said, "completely naked" and each young person from the Akiva group took a family into their crowded inadequate quarters. She says that Symek Dranger's orders were more precious to her than her own parents' instructions and preferences. She marvels at the bravery and the maturity of the young people under Symek's command, and expresses concern about the adequacy of her Hebrew to describe the power of his personality and his moral code.

Describes cooperation between the Warsaw Akiva group and the Kraków Akiva group (also described by Hela Rupfenheiser in her role as courier between the two groups).

Speaks of her role in helping her family stay out of danger. They saw her as their savior and it was very painful for her to leave them behind in order to participate in the resistance movement in Kraków.

Describes her father's and her father-in-law's continuing faith in God, as well as the last time she saw her (future) husband wearing his phylacteries. Expresses amazement at how anyone could maintain faith in a God who had betrayed his people so profoundly and cruelly.

After marveling at her father's faith in God, she describes her sister's having given birth in the ghetto to a stillborn son and her father's expressing relief that at least the Germans would have one less Jewish child to torture and murder.

Describes the "vow" that she was asked to recite when she became a part of the resistance, something that Hela discusses, in her testimony, at great length.

Describes the famous “Oneg Shabbat,” the last time all the members of the group would celebrate Shabbat altogether, at which Dolek declares that the goal of the resistance is not to survive, and that if anyone planned to survive they should leave immediately. Rather, the goal was to die with their heads held high. This idea of dying proudly, with head held high, is repeated frequently throughout her description of the rhetoric of the movement.

Discusses some of her missions. The first was to accompany Gusta’s ultra-orthodox mother on a train to Kraków. Also, spied constantly on a man named “Shpits” so that they could plan an assassination. She and Symek Lustgarten also, apparently, managed to derail a train full of ammunition. marvels at her own stupidity and bravery. Asked her commanders for a few zloty every day so she could eat sweets and be happy, even if only fleetingly.

Describes Symek Lustgarten’s forfeiture of a valuable watch his father gave him in order to save his life if necessary – to donate to the cause of setting up a network of the resistance in the nearby forests.

Prior to Cyganeria attack on December 22, 1942 she and Symek Lustgarten were the ones who plastered signs all over German trucks and structures calling for revenge. On December 22nd it was her job to calm down Idek Lieber, the boy who threw the grenades at Cyganeria. He was in shock after realizing that the people he had been supposed to do this with had not shown up and that he had been the only one to throw the destructive grenades.

She reports that immediately after Cyganeria, she and Idek overhear some soldiers who misidentify the attackers as Russian paratroopers. It was all she could do to keep Idek from jumping out of his seat and telling them that it was the Jewish resistance who had pulled off this operation.

(Hela shared this concern in her interview – it became very important to those youth who participated in Cyganeria and survived to tell the tale, despite the fact that the point of Cyganeria was to pretend that it had been done by the Polish underground, in order to galvanize ordinary Poles to resist -- to declare themselves the real perpetrators. This is part of the ideology of the “head held high” that they promoted)

Alongside the rhetoric of the “head held high” there was also a decision to stop pretending they were non-Jews but to be openly Jewish and to embrace the Jewish role in the resistance. This may have been an ideological decision but it didn’t seem to bear itself out as the only way for them to move about outside of Kraków was to masquerade as non-Jews.

Describes a woman who owned a pub who agreed to hide them by taking them to a church and “converting them.” After the war, Elsa planted a tree in the family’s honor because this woman had saved not only herself but other Jews throughout the war in this way.

Describes Symek Dranger’s efforts to create a group of writers and artists, to harbor them in a bunker and charge members of the resistance to ensure that their needs were met and that their safety was guaranteed so they could document the war. This impulse is echoed by Gusta in her composition of a diary during the time she spent in the Montelupich prison (with Elsa) after their arrest.

Describes the frenzied writing of Gole Mire and Gusta Davidson Dranger in prison – Gole wrote poetry. Gusta wrote a memoir. All the other women in the cell (about fifty altogether, with twenty from the Akiva group) enabled this writing, crowding around the writing woman in order to protect her and hide

the text if a guard came in, procuring pencils, pens and paper by whatever means possible. They mainly wrote on toilet paper. Gusta produced four manuscripts with the help of the other woman to whom she dictated for transcript. One was hidden in the unused heater in the cell, one in an opening in the door, one under the floor, and one was smuggled out of the cell to a specific Polish man whom she trusted to get the manuscript to members of an Akiva kibbutz for safekeeping and eventual publication.

Describes her knowledge of several executions, including her brother in law Poldek Lustgarten, Gole Mire, a woman named Tsesha.

Discusses their life in the prison – How they saved bread for Shabbat so they could make it a bit more special, how they sang all the time, mainly songs translated by Gusta into Polish from Yiddish and German. Their singing was a form of resistance, she says, because when guards tried to give them orders, they would sing in order to drown out the sound of the guard's voice.

On April 13th Elsa and the Wasserman sisters (two of them) were taken out of prison and deported. They were given red cross package which they had original planned to consume on their own, but when they realized they would be deported in close quarters with a number of their male counterparts, they decided to try to put themselves into presentable order (after months of torture and deprivation) and give their red cross packages to the men.