

Interview with Hela Rupfenheiser  
Oct. 4, 1987

Please note that there are several instances throughout the interviews when Hela, in recreating conversations, speaks in Polish without translation. For a thorough translation/transcription a Polish translator will need to be consulted. These instances are noted in bold throughout the following text.

**First Video:**

Hela Rupfenheiser was born in Cracow Poland, and educated there. She belonged to the Akiba Zionist youth organization. In 1941 she left Cracow to join a "hakhsharah" group, or Zionist training settlement in Warsaw, where members of the youth group lived communally and worked together to educate the next generation of Zionist youth in the Hebrew language, in Zionist ideology, and in Palestinian culture.

According to Hela, there were 60,000 Jews in Cracow before the war, out of a general population of 250,000. When the ghetto was formed, only 10,000 Jews were granted permission to reside inside the ghetto. The rest had to go elsewhere – on wagons, on foot, with very few possessions. People went to relatives when they could. They hid in forests when they had to – 10, 50, 100 kilometers away. Hela was the only one in her family to get permission to stay in the ghetto. Her father had fled the Nazis and was in Sarok (?) with her younger sister. Her older brother had fled to Russia after being beaten by the Germans. One sister had been placed in an orphanage and remained there. One brother had joined a Bobover Hasidic court. When Hela was given the chance to go to the training camp in Warsaw, she took it because, as she puts it, there was no one left for her in Cracow. She took her few possessions with her – a few dresses, some towels that her mother had prepared for her dowry, and her brother's phylacteries. She has no idea why she alone, of her whole family, was permitted to remain in Cracow, but when she left, her papers became very valuable to another girl who, alone in her family, had not been given permission to stay there. Hela gave this girl her permit and borrowed clothes from her that would help Hela look more Polish for her journey to Warsaw.

Hela arrived in Warsaw in March 1941. She lived in a three-room apartment with twenty youth. They did everything together – they lived, worked, sang, took on themselves the task of educating a generation of children in the ideals of the Akiba movement. They ranged in age from 15-20 years old, with only five of the group being as old as 20.

Living conditions in the Warsaw ghetto were difficult – the group of twenty had only one bathroom. During the day the girls cleaned houses and the boys served as porters. They kept the coal they needed to warm the apartment in the bathroom. They couldn't get bread. Social workers helped care for them as they were basically children living alone. They ate 2-3 slices of bread in the morning and soup for lunch. Every day after work they would go out into the ghetto to collect groups of children aged 12-17 to teach them Hebrew, Bible, Geography of the Land of Israel, Hebrew

literature, and songs in Hebrew. The teachers themselves didn't know Hebrew very well, but whatever they knew they passed on to the younger children. They had faith that the war would end and they would be able to move to Israel. Israel was "the light and the hope."

There was a three-meter wall around the ghetto, topped with broken glass, and above that there was barbed wire. The only way to come and go was with special permits and the hunger was tremendous.

The apartment was across from one of the ghetto gates and for two years the "Akiba" youth were treated to macabre images every day. People poured in from the surrounding villages constantly and scrambled to find places to live – in apartments, synagogues and schools, laying down on the ground without mattresses, the floors so crowded they couldn't walk around. There was lice. There was no way to work. In the streets children yelled in Yiddish and Polish—"Bread for Jewish children, dear Jewish children." They went through the garbage.

Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, everyone started contracting typhus and dying from it. Three people had typhus in Hela's group. One went to the hospital in a rickshaw. It was very hard to secure a place in the hospital. Hela worked for two days to try to get a place for her friend. In the hospital the sick lay on the floor with high fevers, waiting for beds. When they brought soup for the sick, the sick couldn't even hold the bowls. The patients shared beds – her friend lay with another person.

Winter 1941-42 was very cold. People were freezing to death in the streets. But there was always hope – maybe in the spring things will be better. But they heard rumors at that time from Vilna about the Chelmno killings. Germans would capture people on the streets and take them as if to work. The family would receive postcards saying that they were doing fine, and they would already be dead.

At this point Hela lists a variety of different Zionist organizations that had their own "hakhsharot" or training camps in Warsaw: Dror Freiheit, Gordonia, ha-Shome ha-Tsair, Mizrahi, Har Etzioni. When they heard about Chelmno (a boy had escaped and come back to tell about it) the word traveled around all the Zionist pioneers. Everyone was in shock. That spring (1942) first 49 leaders of the community were murdered, then 100, then another 100. There were murders every day. Nazis were shooting at children stealing bread to take home. They ambushed the children coming in and out of the ghetto. Sometimes large groups of children would bust through the ghetto gates to buy bread on the black market. Since the "Akiba" apartment faced the gates they saw scenes like this every day.

The streets were very crowded with people, living and dead.

Finally there was a meeting of youth activists, organized by Zionist Hakhsharah leaders. They met at the Jewish library – which was the center of social services for the ghetto.

Summer 1942 – July 22<sup>nd</sup> – Signs went up all over the ghetto – everyone was told to go to the umschlagplatz and they were told that whoever went would get 3 kilos of bread and 1 kilo of jam. People said it was because the ghetto had become too crowded and people were being sent east to relieve the crowding. The first to go were the refugees who had nowhere else to go. Also, the people in hospital went first, in wagons to the umschlagplatz. People stood on the wagons with their arms in the air screaming “save me!” Sometimes they didn’t want to get into the wagons and the Jewish police hit them with sticks. Because many in the “Akiba” group in Warsaw were originally from Cracow and from other cities, they were also called to the umschlagplatz first as they were considered refugees. The nascent group of Ghetto resistance fighters put up fliers telling Jews not to go to the umschlagplatz – they reminded them of the murder of the 100 men... They also told the Jewish police to throw out their uniforms and hats and to stop helping the Germans in their work of destroying the Jewish people.

### **Second Video:**

On July 28, 1942 the Zionist youth decided to rise up and rebel. They knew that they were all destined for death. The older people were opposed. They said that if the youth acted out the whole ghetto was liable to be destroyed more quickly. There were no weapons. Hela and Yisrael Kanow decided that she should go back to Cracow to consult with the leadership there. He was one of the first to shoot at an officer. All decisions were made collectively.

Hela got bread from social services and then she sold the bread and took two girls who didn’t look too Jewish along with her. She put a ribbon in one of the girls’ hair so she would look more youthful. They were going to Cracow in order to decide whether they should return to Cracow to fight, or stay in Warsaw to fight. They wanted advice from the leadership and there was no other way to communicate than to go back and forth between the ghettos.

They bribed Polish and Jewish guards at the gates to the ghetto with the money they had gotten from the bread and they left the ghetto with a group going to work. A few miles out they took off their armbands – a white band with a Jewish star. Then they went to the train station where they learned, to their horror, that the next train wasn’t scheduled to leave until that evening. What would they do all day? They went to a park where, to their shock, people were eating bread and butter, singing songs, enjoying themselves. They thought of all the children in the ghetto hiding in cellars. They were deeply disturbed and couldn’t enjoy the atmosphere in the park, so they left.

Some Polish boys recognized that they were Jewish and threatened to turn them over to the Gestapo. **(Extended conversation in Polish)**. They walked them to the

train, gave them 100 gold coins and left them alone. When Hela and the other girls went to buy the train tickets they learned they needed a work license with special permission to travel. They asked a porter to buy the tickets for them, and he said he would only do it for Jews if they paid him. She said “we have no more money.” They didn’t even have enough to get all the way to Cracow, only to Radom. She had worn several layers of clothing, though, anticipating the need for them. Hela said she would give him a skirt in payment. As she was taking the skirt off, another porter came by and told her not to give the first porter anything. He’s a bad drunk, he said. I will buy the ticket for you, and I will stay with you until you get on the train. He did.

On the train she stood by the window and started a conversation with a man. He told her not to go to Radom because they were rounding up Jews there. He asked if her friends were Jewish and she denied it. She sold a leather bag so they could travel further than Radom. They got off and stayed till morning because they didn’t have enough money to continue. It was very crowded in the station. They walked from house to house, sold some sweaters, bought some apples to eat, and hitchhiked to Cracow.

The daughter of the hospital gatekeeper just outside the Cracow ghetto brought Poldek Wasserman to Hela with counterfeit papers so she could enter the ghetto. They went to see Aharon “Dolek” Liebskind and his wife Rivka “Voskhe” Liebskind (who now lives in Israel, after surviving Auschwitz, Hela makes a point of noting). She also went to see Szymek Draenger who was her counselor in the youth movement in Cracow. Their “platoon” was called “Gdud ha-Sharon.” His dream had been to move to Israel with his platoon. In 1939 they thought they would move to Israel within 6 months. He was arrested early on in the war as an anti-Hitler activist. There was a long list of people on the blacklist. His fiancé “Justina” (Gusta Davidson) went with him when he was deported to the Ospara camp. After a few months they got out with the help of a bribe and went back to Cracow where Szymek continued to organize his movement, even though he had been tortured in the camp. Szymek and Justina were the first to travel to Warsaw and they established a *Hakhsharah* at a farm outside of Cracow. When Hela told them that an underground was active in Warsaw, they said they were far from being able to do that in Cracow. But indeed, they were not so far. It was just a matter of a few meetings with the Polish Workers Party before they got started. Hela told them about the round ups of the Jews in Warsaw and asked if they thought it was a good idea to establish the “Irgun Yehudi ha-Lohem,” or the Organization of Fighting Jews. She asked to be the courier between Cracow and Warsaw. They agreed, and asked her to send people from Warsaw who didn’t look Jewish because they needed more fighters and they wanted to send partisans out to the forest. Whoever couldn’t travel, Szymek recommended, should fight in Warsaw. He showed her a piece of paper with an oath of allegiance written out on it. He didn’t force her to recite it – he just left her in the room with it and gave her time to read it.

When Hela went on a trip to Cracow in 1987 with 35 Israeli youth, she went to a museum in a Cracow synagogue and found the original copy of the oath. She began

feverishly to copy it into a notebook to bring it back with her to Israel and two Polish girls saw her and volunteered to help her by reading it to her as she wrote it down, and then listening to her as she read it back to them to check for mistakes. **(Polish Conversation)** Then she brought the 35 Israeli youth into the room and read it to them. She doesn't know if they asked others to recite the oath or just showed it to everyone like they did to her.

When she went back to Warsaw, she had false papers and she entered with a group of Jews working in the factories outside the ghetto. She went back and forth a lot, often through different places – the cemetery for example.

1942 August/September she went to Cracow. Dolek asked her to bring weapons from Warsaw. She traveled with someone from the Polish Workers Union. She had 5 pistols and a bag of explosives. One pistol cost 5000 gold coins. She hid everything in a bag under her dress and covered it all with dirty laundry.

Everything she did was illegal – riding on a train without a permit, dressing as a non- Jew, leaving the ghetto, not wearing her armband. So she was unafraid because she knew that she would inevitably be killed. Her biggest fear was that she would be caught before she accomplished anything.

Before she entered the Cracow ghetto she would always stop in Vilapole, in Ale Goldberg's apartment, for a drink of water.

Idek Tennenaum oversaw the process of gathering the forms for the false papers. Szymek Draenger was the master forger. She went to Rivka "Voshke's" parents apartment where she and Dolek were waiting in a small room to receive the weapons. Everyone rejoiced. Suddenly they had something to fight with – 5 pistols!!

The plan was to send people in groups of five to fight in the forests.

In June there was a big roundup. 5000 Jews were taken to Belzec. People were constantly fleeing roundups, into Cracow, out of Cracow. There was a sense among the youth who were from the Zionist movements that the end was near. Everyone had escaped from one roundup or another.

### **Third Video:**

Gusta led 20 girls in the youth movement. There were Polish calls for youth to move east to join the fighting. Hela wanted to go with her brother. Gusta couldn't go because she had to stay with her elderly parents. She encouraged Hela to go, and she did. Hela and her brother went east one week before Rosh ha-Shanah. They came back one week after Yom Kippur. At that time Gusta was arrested with Szymek. They came back in March/April 1940, and then they got married. They had to go to the Gestapo 2-3 times a week to report their activities. Gusta and Szymek lived in Cracow in Szymek's parents' apartment – their youth group activists saw them often. Germans didn't believe Gusta was Jewish – she was blonde, blue eyed, warm

and friendly. Gusta knit mittens for Szymek in the camp out of threads from a blanket. She always tried to take care of him, making him eat when he was too busy or preoccupied to do so.

1941 Shavuot – Szymek and Gusta went to Warsaw to encourage the “Akiba” hakhsharah group in their Zionist activities. The group desperately needed encouragement. Hela describes some of the contradictions in Gusta’s personality with the following vignette: The apartment that the Akiba hachsharah group was living in had very limited light. If you were in one room, you took the lantern with you and the rest of the rooms were dark. When Gusta was visiting their apartment she had to go to the bathroom, so she asked Hela to go with her because she was afraid to walk through the dark rooms. She was the bravest person Hela knew – going off to prison just to stay with Szymek when he was arrested – but she was afraid to walk through a dark apartment. Hela says that Gusta could look Satan right in the eye but she was afraid of witches in the dark. While Gusta and Szymek visited the hakhsharah, the group tried to feed them the best food they could procure – carrots and oatmeal, for example.

In 1942 Gusta and Szymek came a second time to visit the group in Warsaw, but they couldn’t get into the ghetto, so they sent messages to the group.

1942 Summer – The Germans were already sending people to Treblinka. She went with two girls to Cracow (described in other interview) and met with Gusta. Gusta would run after Szymek with bread. She asked Hela to give him the bread once because he wouldn’t take it from her.

Hela met Gusta once in the Cracow ghetto. Gusta was with her five-year-old nephew, Vitush, who had been orphaned. It was her sister’s child. Gusta kept looking for her sister. Vitush was always with Gusta. She was always talking to him about his parents. She made him a paper boat and was always promising him that Uncle Szymek would come play with him. Gusta yearned to have a child of her own, but she couldn’t do it in the middle of the war, a time of slavery. She gave all her love for children to this child. When Gusta and Szymek visited in Warsaw in 1941 they conceived the idea of establishing a daycare on the kibbutz. They did that.

Gusta and Hela traveled together once, between Warsaw and Cracow, and they couldn’t really talk, but Gusta did manage to tell Hela that she had translated the poem “Es Brent a Shtetl” (The Shtetl is Burning) from Yiddish to Polish. She sang it to Hela very quietly.

Gusta often spoke to Hela about what it felt like to travel around as a Polish Christian. She spoke of her Zionist aspirations as well – she wanted to start a kibbutz with the group of girls she had led in “Akiba,” not as a leader, but as an equal.

The interviewer asks if in 1941-1942 Gusta was already as fatalistic as she had been in the diary. Hela says no. Everyone hoped the war would end, but no one knew who would be alive to see it. At a certain point, no one had the strength to go on.

January 17, 1943 – Hela met Gusta in the workers kitchen (dressed in black) after the Cyganeria attack (the Jewish resistance in Cracow on December 22 attacked a series of cafes and killed some Germans. They made it look like the Polish underground had done it, to galvanize the Poles into action).

Hela was in Czesow on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, during Cyganeria. She had met Szymek a few days before on Villapola St. She traveled to Cracow after the attack on Cyganeria. She went into a laundry owned by the family of some friends. There were Germans in there. Her friend wasn't there, and the Germans asked to see her papers. She showed them her false papers and then fled the ghetto.

In the soup kitchen (in a church), she looked for other resistance fighters and she also looked for them across the street in the workers' kitchen. That's where she met Gusta. Szymek had gone missing. He had been planning to go to Warsaw before Cyganeria, so Hela reassured her that perhaps that is where he had gone. Hela and Gusta decided to go to Warsaw together to look for him. At the train station, Gusta realized that she would be leaving Vitush alone and she couldn't do that. That was the last time Hela saw Gusta. Hela heard afterward that Gusta had gone from police station to police station looking for Marek Vorushkin, Szymek's Polish name. She always had the feeling that if she could stay near him he would do OK.

When Hela got to Warsaw she heard that there was a round up. They went to the small ghetto and saw Jews shoveling snow. It was cold. They heard that this time the ghetto would be cleansed of all its Jews because the resistance had been fighting. Two Polish boys approached them (she was with a youth named Somek Danbuz) and tried to extort all kinds of things from them. Somek told her to wait where she was – he would speak to the ghetto guards in the meantime. He stood and chewed the fat with them... smoking. Somek had a really nice hat and coat, so he looked like some kind of German agent. He spoke German really well. Trucks were coming and going to and from the ghetto the whole time. The boys kept bugging her and she kept telling them to watch out because they didn't know what her friend might be capable of. Because Somek seemed to be buddies with the German guards, the Polish boys finally left her alone.

Somek came back to get Hela and they went to stay in a hotel. They asked for a room with 2 beds. He sat down on one of the beds the minute they entered the room and started picking lice off of himself. She wept. The ghetto was being liquidated and she didn't know what to do. There was a knock at the door and the Polish police came in and told her that they couldn't share a room if they weren't married. Somek went out to bribe them. Finally the police left. The two stayed in the hotel but ran off at the crack of dawn – he on a mission, she to Cracow.

January 18, 1943 was the first Warsaw uprising. She got to Cracow at night. She had a conversation on the train with a young Polish student. He was excited because he heard that the Polish resistance had attacked cafes in Cracow. She realized that maybe she was the only surviving person in the world who knew the truth – that it been the Jewish resistance to do the Cyganeria operation, not the Polish one. She told him, and she added, “I’m a Jew – turn me over to the Germans if you want.” He didn’t. Instead, he told her where she could hide – a nunnery. She went back there every night. After the Warsaw ghetto uprising, when she left the ghetto through a sewer (a story she does not share in this interview) Hela had nowhere to be, nowhere to fight.

Summer 1943 – Hela was in Bergen Belsen waiting for papers to Honduras (?). Her group was comprised of 70 people. A child sang a song one day, the one that Hela had translated from Yiddish to Polish. Hela asked her where she had learned it, and the child said “Gusta in Montelupe taught it to me.” The child’s mother said that they had been imprisoned with Gusta in the same cell for a couple of days and that is where the child had learned the song. For Hela, this was a sign that Gusta was still alive. Indeed, she died a few months later. The child’s name was Anna Brown. Hela and Anna were very close in the camp – they song together, lit candles together, etc. After the war Anna went to England and Hela went to Israel. Anna came to Israel to see her when she was on her way to Pakistan with her husband, a physician who was an expert on Cholera. She made him promise that he would take her to Cracow and Israel on one of his journeys. In 1967, after the war, Anna came to Israel and stayed 5-6 weeks. She was educated, after the war, in England, in a boarding school where she was told not to let on that she was a Jew. She couldn’t understand why after the war such subterfuge should be necessary.

The interview ends with a photograph of Hela as a young woman, presumably the age she was during the war.