

RG-50.407.0067

Interview: Miriam Gutman, July 1996

Summary

Miriam Gutman, born in Kaunas, Lithuania, 1923 [says exact date unknown], describes: her father, Shmuel, a self-employed artist/painter, “a modern man . . . good-natured”; a family “full of love”; her father dying in 1937 and her mother, Frieda (née Alpert*), “a very good lady,” opening a restaurant; her brother (Ahmiel*) and sister (Sah*); being close to her grandparents, who owned a general goods shop; living in a close-knit community in which “no one was lonely and everyone cared for one another”; attending a state school until sixth grade; speaking primarily Yiddish and a little Russian; coming from “a traditional Jewish home”; being aware of anti-Semitism but not experiencing it firsthand because there was very little contact with the Lithuanian community; the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1939 and her mother being forced to close the restaurant; the German invasion in 1941; marrying “her first love,” a wealthy man, in 1940; deadly pogroms in Kaunas followed by being sent into the ghetto in Slobodke*—which was an improvement because it was possible to work; being pregnant and being hungry; people believing the worst would be over soon; estimating the ghetto population at 30,000; her husband being killed at work [NFI provided] when her child was three months old; meeting a factory owner who hired her, which enabled her to move back in together with her mother; smuggling food, which helped for a few months; morale in the ghetto being very high [sic] until approximately 10,000 people were killed; being sent with her mother to a work camp on 27 March 1943; returning after work to discover that her twenty-month-old child had been taken away and murdered—“I will think about him ‘til the day I die”; a sadistic German guard who “hit us and killed us, but gave us food to eat”; being sent to hard labor building an airport; being sent without food or water for six days to the concentration camp in Stutthof, Poland, and being subjected to selection; being chosen with her mother to survive; seeing “mountains” of shoes and glasses, and being unable to comprehend what was happening; hunger and “soup like muddy water”; five girls sleeping closely together for warmth; finding the strength to survive; the disappearance of her mother; trying “not to lose their dignity as girls”; going through another selection; walking for miles without food or water to another camp near the front, where they were assigned to dig foxholes for German soldiers; being determined not to be broken by the Germans; escaping and being taken in by Poles; being liberated by the Russians; saving the life of the Polish man who took her in; traveling to Bialystok; being told there was no one to return to in Lithuania; going to Lodz; meeting a representative from a kibbutz and moving to Palestine; meeting and marrying a man on 7 November 1945 and moving to Germany; losing a daughter at five months and giving birth to a son (and later another daughter); gradually falling in love with her husband of fifty years; moving to Australia in 1952 because her sister, a survivor, lived there; leaving a message to her children and future generations to avoid hatred and jealousy and try to see the best in people.

*Transliteration as heard.