

DONOR: BETTY KIRSCHNER  
INTERVIEWER: NADA RUBIN  
DATE: MARCH 30, 1989

Tape Footage: Background

1-400 Betty was born in Rzuchow (Rejerkov), Poland on January 1st, 1931.

She has one sister who is two years younger.

They lived in an one story house on the premises of a mill on the outskirts of town, in an area called Ganunen.

Betty's father was a bookkeeper at the mill.

The area was ethnically mixed. The Jewish families tended to stick together. Both Betty's parents had relatives living in town. Many of the Jewish families were religious, and for many the synagogue was the central point. Betty's family did not go to synagogue regularly. They kept a religiously observant and a kosher home. On Saturdays her father did not work, but spent time with his family. They went to synagogue on the High Holidays.

401-726 Betty attended public school in town, traveling by horse and wagon. She finished three grades at the first school she attended. At school she sometimes felt she was treated differently because she was Jewish. At school she hung out with other Jewish children. At home she played with her Gentile neighbors. But at school the environment was different.

Betty was happy before the war.

Betty's mother ran a business out of her home sewing undergarments. She had a large clientele.

WWII

In September-October, 1939, Betty's father left for a while because of the situation. He returned because of his family ties.

728-965 At this time the family was fearful, wondering what they were going to do. There was a strong sense of doom in the air.

Mostly non-Jews worked at the mill. Betty's father still worked there.

Her parents decided to save their daughters, and arranged for them to be hidden on a farm. At this farm the girls worked as shepherds, so they would be out of sight of other people. But their parents could not take the separation, and decided that they would all stick together. They brought the girls home, and then all went into hiding together in 1941-42.

Before going to the farm, Betty would often see Russian soldiers around the mill and on the street.

### In Hiding

967-1500 The family first hid in a large cistern built into the ground for WWI and used to store oil. Betty's father's brother and his family hid with them. This was in the spring or fall, because Betty remembers there was some snow on the ground. They did not stay in the cistern long, because when they tried to cook they were all overwhelmed by fumes and began losing consciousness. They managed to get help from the man who had found them the hiding spot and he pulled them out. He was a Polish farmer who was a friend of Betty's father. He lay them in the snow and revived them, then took them to his sister's farm, where they went into hiding in a spare room. This woman had a husband and a five-year-old son. They dug a small bunker under a floorboard under a bed.

Betty's uncle went into the ghetto with his family. He was elderly and found the hiding was not for him.

Betty's family shared the room with another family. The dugout was just big enough that they could all sit down side by side. It was to be used for emergencies, in case German soldiers came to visit the family. They also arranged a sign so Betty's family would know when to go into the dugout.

There were beds and chairs in the room. They hid there 20 months. Betty and her sister played with dolls. They had to be quiet. The brother of the woman from the other family was very nervous, and would not allow them to speak. He would point a finger at them and say because of them they would be caught. They had to sneeze and cough quietly. To this day, Betty cannot sneeze properly.

Sometimes they had to spend a few days at a time in the bunker. Then the farmer's wife would bring them potatoes to eat.

1501-1576 Betty's mother could cook in the room. She made bread, although she did not have the proper ingredients. It was black and heavy and delicious.

There was no privacy.

1578-1736 In the dugout there was no air or light. Betty's sister sat on a rock that was jutting out and was always hunched over. They had to be very quiet and still, and Betty was afraid. To this day she has difficulty being in a basement or an unlit room.

In the room the windows were never opened, and always shaded. They had to whisper. After the war it took them weeks to talk normally. Walking was also a problem after the war because they had had no fresh air.

1738-1976 Near the end of the war they would watch the skyline every night and knew by the lights and the sound of gunfire that the Russians were close. They would see tanks and other army vehicles.

The five-year-old child in the home had the wisdom to be quiet about Betty's family being there.

### Close Calls

One day his mother asked Betty and her sister to babysit her new baby while she went out to the garden. She forgot to latch the door, and a neighborhood girl whom Betty used to play with wandered in and saw them. Betty and her sister had taken the Polish names Kasha and Marisha. The girl went home and told her parents she had seen her old friends. Betty's family was sure they would be found out. The girl's father came to talk to the neighbor, who denied hiding anyone. Betty's family hid in the bunker in the meantime. The spare room always had to look uninhabited.

1978-2113 At night Betty's father would go out to people he knew to trade for or beg food, or steal from gardens. Once he did not come back until the following night. He had fallen asleep and then had to wait for darkness again.

Betty's mother cut potatoes in half and lit wooden matches in them every Friday night as Shabbat candles.

The woman in the other family hiding with them became pregnant. Her family decided it was unsafe to have a baby in the room, so they found another hiding place.

2114-2487 Not all the families in the area were helpful. Once, before Betty's family went into hiding, the Germans came looking for them in the mill yard. While they hid in a vegetable cellar, they heard their neighbors cooperating with the Germans and helping to look for them.

### Liberation

In the summer of 1944 the farmer they were staying with came and told them they were free. They could not believe it, and thought he was drunk. Slowly they came out of the room. There were Russian soldiers in the house. They cried and thanked the soldiers. Then they went outside for the first time in 20 months and were blinded by the sun.

Betty's family stayed at the farm a few more weeks after that, then went to Lemberg (Laruf, Poland) Here they were still afraid and distrustful. They were afraid the Germans would return.

Before going into hiding the family had worn arm bands.

They were in Lemberg a few months. Betty's father had sever eczema on his face and was covered with bandages. They lived in an apartment and Betty's mother ran a mini restaurant to support the family. Betty and her sister went to public school. This was always important to their parents.

Betty's family never spoke about being in hiding. They did not want to endanger the family that hid them, and this family did not want it known what they had done. Lemberg was in the Ukraine. From there they went to Cracow, Poland for about nine months. The girls went to school there too.

2489-2675 Betty's father's parents died before the war. Her mother's parents, two sisters and a brother lived in Israel. Her mother's other sisters, some from the same hometown as Betty and some from Lemberg, died in the war. After the war Betty's mother tried to find them. She was able to find out what happened to some family members.

In the spring of 1946 Betty's father applied for them to go to Israel. He also wrote to the Jewish Council in Canada asking for help in locating an uncle, because he had a dream in which his mother told him to get in touch with his uncle Beryl in Canada. Eventually he heard he was in Winnipeg.

From Cracow the family went to Germany and lived in a DP camp there for three years. The girls attended Jewish school in the camp and public school just outside the camp.

#### Canada

2678 Betty's father had to prove he was related to these Winnipeg relatives. Finally an older relative living in Detroit confirmed they were related. The Winnipeg families were the Weingartens, the Weidmans and the Halters. The papers for Canada arrived before the papers for Israel and the USA.

Betty's family traveled by warship to Halifax. The trip was very rocky and there was standing room only in the dining hall.

Betty was 17. Her sister Carmella was 15. Carmella and her mother were sick the whole nine days of the voyage.

In Halifax members of the Jewish community met them and put them on the train to Winnipeg. Betty's father had \$60.

2805-2980 Betty remembers drinking pop for the first time. It was a four day train ride. They arrived in Winnipeg on October 19, 1948. Their family met them at the train station. Betty's family stood out because they were dressed in the wrong style.

In the DP camp there were German children in the school also. There was no animosity amongst the children, but no great friendships either. Betty's father worked at the camp arranging living quarters. Her mother worked in the camp kitchen. They lived in army barracks, and had no privacy.

The trip from Halifax was paid for by the Jewish Agency.

2981-3246 Betty's family still corresponds with the family that hid them. This family moved after the war, afraid that people would find out what they did.

Betty was very glad to see relatives in Winnipeg. They welcomed them with a big

lunch at the Weingartens, and Betty ate toast and jam for the first time. She knew a little English from studying in Germany.

On November 1, Betty began Grade 11 at St. John's High School. Her family lived in a suite on Boyd Avenue. Her father worked for Weingarten's scrap metal and her mother worked as a cook and kitchen supervisor at the Sharon Home until 1987.

At first Betty felt strange but there were other DP children at school. Rona Lazar became her good friend. Some children avoided them, others were warm to them. Betty did not feel part of the group. The teachers were very compassionate and willing to help.

3247-3349 Going to school helped Betty adjust to Winnipeg. After grade 11 she worked in the office of Weidman Brothers typing and billing. She was 18 years old.

She dated a little, and met her future husband in 1949 when she was taking typing at night school and he was taking English.

3350-3659 At the DP camp there were organized groups. Betty belonged to Habonim organized by shlichim from Israel. Sh attended two weeks of summer camp in Germany each year learning about Zionism.

There was a lot going on at the DP camp because there were a lot of young people. Betty had friends, and they would get together and sing. Her parents arranged extra-curricular lessons for her and her sister in music theory and literature with a German teacher.

There were many different culturally educated people in the camp, including singers and actors. They organized plays, operas and concerts to keep people busy. Betty received her first appreciation of opera there.

She has good memories from this time.  
She still keeps in touch with friends she made there who now live in Israel.

At the DP camp everyone was supplied with the same boots and jackets. They had public showers and laundry. One room was designated a synagogue. Betty did not usually attend. Her mother always observed Shabbat at home and continues to this day. What happened did not change her religious views.

Betty says her story is nil compared to some that she heard in the DP camp.

3650-3817 Betty found it very hard to talk about her experiences the first few years. Few of her survivor friends talk of their experiences today.

Betty's husband is Polish and arrived in Winnipeg in February, 1948. He spent the war in the Polish army in Russia. He lost family. His aunt brought him to Canada.

### Married Life

Betty was engaged in May, 1950 when she was 19, and married in August, 1950 at the Hebrew Sick Hall on Selkirk Ave. Most of her parents' friends were from the same town in Poland, some they met here, and some were from the DP camp. Betty's friends have always been mixed.

She and her husband honeymooned in Clear Lake for one week.

They have four children. The oldest daughter is 34 and lives in Calgary with her four children. One son lives in Ontario with his family, and one lives in Australia. The youngest daughter is 24 and lives in Florida.

3819-4180 When they were younger, Betty did not want her children to know the hurts she went through. Later, when she wanted to talk about it, her children did not seem interested. Now she sees that was wrong. They are taking more interest in it now.

As they were growing up she let them have many outside interests - perhaps because of the childhood she did not have. She always talked about her experiences with her husband.

Sometimes her children feel she is too possessive of them. She would have liked for them to stay in town. She tries to see them often. Her sister has five children, only one of who left Winnipeg.

Betty is very close with both her parents because of their experiences, and the way they stuck together. Her parents still worry if they phone and she's not home.

Betty used to light Shabbat candles, but stopped when she began helping her husband at his grocery store Friday nights.

Betty attends synagogue for the High Holidays. Her home is not kosher. She cannot help but believe in G-d, that somebody looked out for them.

Life has been good. She cannot complain.

Betty feels that children of survivors have a responsibility to make sure the world knows what happened, and to carry on the story,.

Still her children do not ask as much as she would like them to. She would like them to know now, whereas before she felt they shouldn't.

Betty believes it will take many generations before there are no longer prejudices, because children learn from their parents.

4182-end Betty still has contact with the Polish family that saved them. Her parents send them parcels and medicine.

Betty has no interest in going back to Poland.

She is willing to talk to people about her experiences.

She is grateful to their family that brought them to Winnipeg. This is the place

they have stayed the longest.

Betty, her father and sister have had chronic coughs for many years, perhaps related to their experiences.