

DONOR: RACHEL MEISTER
INTERVIEWER: SANDY HYMAN
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Approx. running time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Tape Footage: Background

- 1-324 Rachel was born in Rozno, Romania. There were four girls and four boys in her family. She was the youngest. Her brothers were born between 1905 and 1911. The girls were born between 1913 and 1923.
- The family was very close-knit.
- Rachel attended public school for seven years, and then attended dressmaker school with her two older sisters.
- 325-631 Rachel's father was a businessman and a tailor. He owned a grocery store and sold small items like shoelaces and ties in the market. He began working as a tailor after he retired.
- Rachel's mother stayed at home with the children. She also helped in the grocery store.
- The oldest brother moved to America. The other boys were tailors.
- One sister stayed at home to help her mother.
- The family was very orthodox, not modern at all. They kept kosher and kept the Sabbath. The girls attended shul on the High Holidays. Rachel's father went to synagogue every morning.
- They had cousins living in other villages.
- 632-904 The closest city was Bistrisa. Two of Rachel's brothers lived there. Another one lived in a nearby village. The oldest brother lived in Cleveland, Ohio. He left when he was 17.
- Rachel's father was born in another town. He married in Rozno, but his wife died in 1917. They had six children. He then married Rachel's mother and together had two children. He was seven years older than Rachel's mother.
- Rachel's father was not poor. After he gave up the store, he owned a bar where he sold whiskey and tobacco. It did not do well, so he rented a hat store where he worked until his family was taken away in 1944.
- 905-1167 There were about 150 Jewish families, both young and old. There was one synagogue.
- The older people got along well with the non-Jews, but the younger ones had more difficulty. Rachel got beat up at school because she was Jewish.

One morning in 1939 Rachel's father went out to buy milk and met three Rumanian Nazis. They made him cross himself, and threw away his hat and ordered he cut his beard. Rachel cut it for him. He was so scared.

WWII

In 1942-43 things got worse. The Jews had to wear yellow stars and could not go anywhere. They could not go on the trains.

1168-1472 The Jews were very upset about what was going on. Gentile stores had signs in them saying no dogs or Jews allowed.

No one knew what to do. Everyone was scared.

They heard what was happening in Poland and didn't believe it. It seemed impossible. If you don't see something happening you don't believe it. Their hands were tied. No one had guns, and they were afraid to run away.

The Gentiles knew what was going to happen. They said the Jews were communists and had contacted the Russians.

There were not any Jews in their town government. In the bigger cities there were Jewish lawyers and doctors.

They felt helpless.

One of Rachel's sister's had red sandals. The police said this meant she was a communist. This scared her, and she did not wear her sandals anymore.

1473-1957 Rachel and her family lived at home until 1944. By 1943 they could not leave their town. Until 1943 Rachel was able to travel from village to village.

Nobody left the town. There was nowhere to go.

No one talked about what might happen. Everyone was waiting to see what should happen.

The Ghetto

On May 3, 1944 two policeman came at five in the morning and told Rachel and her family to pack clothes and come with them. First they had them sign a letter waiving their rights to their property. Rachel was very scared. They were taken to the synagogue, and were joined by all the Jews in town. It was terrible. Around four in the afternoon they were taken to trains. The Rabbi took out the Torah and Shofar and the men cried to G-d for help. Everyone was crying, young and old. They did not know where they were going.

The older people and children were put in wagons with the belongings. They were then put on train used for transporting animals. Friday night they got out of the train. Everyone lit Shabbat candles outside, thinking this would somehow help

them. Families were together. They were taken to a mountain with small cottages. This was the ghetto, where they stayed for one month.

1958-2162 Some rich men were beaten until they went out of their minds.

Hungarian soldiers were in charge. They were very rough young men. The SS were in charge when the Jews were taken from the ghetto.

In the ghetto they were given coffee and a small piece of bread in the morning and some soup at night.

After one month they travelled for five days and five nights by train to Auschwitz. There the older people were sent left and the younger ones to the right.

Auschwitz

2163-2356 On the way to Auschwitz Rachel and the others spent five days in a closed box car. They could not run away. Once in a while a pail with water was thrown in, and the water would spill out as everyone grabbed for it. There was no food. The train stopped and started often and was very shaky. People fell on top of one another. Older people died.

Rachel was with her parents. Her mother was 65 and her father 72. She was 20. One sister was with her two-year-old daughter.

After they arrived in Auschwitz Rachel never saw her parents again. They didn't know where they were going or what would happen to them. They said goodbye to one another hoping they would see each other again. They didn't know about the gas chambers.

Rachel's brothers were not with them. One was already at Auschwitz and the other two were in forced labor.

2357-2579 Rachel's older sister and middle sister were with her. The sister with the baby went left.

Rachel was so skinny and looked so young that the SS didn't believe she was 20. She had wanted to go with the young people. The SS beat her when she told them her age. Then they sent her right.

500 young girls stood a whole day without any food or water. This was June 12, 1944.

Then the girls were taken to a big place where their shoes were taken from them and they were each given one dress. All their hair was shaved. The SS men laughed at them. The girls were very embarrassed. They were then taken to a cottage. At night they were taken out for roll call and given soup with a little piece of bread.

The next day they were taken to work. Rachel spent three weeks in Auschwitz and then was taken to work in other places.

2590-3024 The stronger girls were taken to work in a factory with plane parts.

Rachel and her sister were taken to a house with five old women. They were there two days, when Rachel mentioned to her sister that they were able to work and shouldn't be with these old women. Rachel and her sister left the house and stood by the fence until they could join in between the other girls. Rachel can't believe what guts they had!

These girls were asked if they wanted to work. Rachel and her sister said they did, and were taken to a kitchen to clean vegetables for soup. They worked there for two weeks.

Forced Labor

Then they worked unloading ammunition in an airport, from seven at night until eight in the morning. Two girls carried one box.

Then they were taken to Stutthof where there was another selection. There were prisoners from all over. They spent two weeks doing nothing.

A friend of Rachel's wanted more soup and went to stand in line a second time. The SS saw her and let their dogs on her. She was beaten terrible. This was in July.

Then the Russians started getting closer. The girls walked two days to Bromberg. They were from Romania, Hungary and Poland. The Germans were afraid of the Russians. They spent one day in Bromberg.

Then they were taken to Torun in Poland and spent six months there digging tank tunnels in the fields. Girls were dying all the time. They had no resistance to disease. From 500 girls there were 110 left when the Russians arrived. Here they were given coffee at six in the morning and then taken out to work. Rachel's older sister had been taken to work in the shop with the plane parts.

3025-4356 The guards beat the girls for wrapping blankets around their shoulders. They were in Toran from August until January, 1945. It was very cold. Each girl had a dress, a jacket and a serial number.

Liberation

The Germans gathered up their food and gave some leftovers to the prisoners. Then they walked two days to an empty jail in Bromberg. At night they heard planes flying overhead. At six in the morning the Russians opened the doors to the jail and announced that the prisoners were free.

Today Rachel's oldest sister lives in Israel. One brother lives in Winnipeg, one in France and one in Toronto.

The Russians demolished the German homes. Rachel was liberated on January 26, 1945.

Rachel and the others went all over looking for food. They had fresh bread and a whole cow, potatoes and herring. They found lots of food but there were so many girls that they didn't get that much. There were over 100 girls in the jail.

No people were left in the houses. They had run away and left everything.

Then Rachel and her sister started to go home.

Going Home

3457-3829 They set out by train, going where they could. Rachel and her sister travelled with two other sisters from another town in Transylvania. They stuck together. It took them until March 3, 1945 to arrive home.

The Russian soldiers were very brutal and tried to take advantage of the girls. Some girls were beat because they refused to sleep with the Russians. There were Russian soldiers in the train. Many of them were drunk. Some gave them some food.

The girls slept in train stations. They arrived in Cracow where the Jewish community was waiting for survivors from Auschwitz. They stayed there six days and were given soup, a place to sleep, and shoes. It was a nice, big city.

The girls went to civilian houses and explained they came from Auschwitz and asked for bread. The doors were shut on them.

Then Rachel went to a church and asked the people coming out for food. Some felt sorry for them and gave her money so the girls could buy soup in a restaurant.

The girls then arrived in Katowice where they told their story to some nuns who kept them for a few days and treated them nicely.

Then they stopped in another town where they boarded a coal train. They lay on top of the coal all day. It was very cold. Some civilians and some soldiers helped them get up.

They stopped at another station and then arrived at the Rumanian border. They took a train to a big city where they received warm food and clean sheets. They spent two weeks there.

Rachel's brother found out they were in this city and came to get them. He lived in a town with only Hungarians. Rachel and her sister went home with him.

3829-3959 Rachel's meeting with her brother was very painful. Her sister weighed 36 kilos. Rachel weighed 27 kilos.

They slowly got better. They ate better. After a year, Rachel's sister married. A year later Rachel married. The first year back she lived in her brother's town, then moved to the bigger city of Bislista.

Rachel went to her parent's town but didn't find anything there. A neighbor gave her some bedding she had taken from the parent's home.

Many came home to Rozno, and later left for Israel.

One woman made a skirt from a Tallit she found.

3960-4301 Rachel's husband had spent two years in Russia doing slave labor.

Rachel and her husband spent 13 years in Bislista. They wanted to go to Israel but the border was closed and the Communists would not let them leave.

Then it was announced that anyone who wished to go to Israel could. Rachel got a visa a year later.

Israel

In Romania her husband was a buyer for a big store. They had two children. Rachel stayed home and cared for them. She had her first child two years after marrying. The children were two years apart. They lived in a suite.

Rachel's sister was in Romania too. She came to Israel two weeks after Rachel.

Rachel and her husband had a farm when they first moved to Israel. They did not want to live on kibbutz. As immigrants they were given money and food for two weeks.

Rachel's sister lived in Sefat for two years, then moved to Canada.

Rachel lived in Israel for six years. Five of these years they lived in the city near Haifa. Her husband worked as a mailman and then making cables.

Rachel's husband had asthma and could not stand the heat. Rachel could not afford to buy clothes for her children, or a stove or fridge. Life was very hard. After five years she only had a table and chairs, a radio and two burners. She worked a little in dry-cleaning but her husband liked her to be home with the children. Then she worked for a family cooking, sewing and cleaning, in order to help out her husband. She did not know Hebrew.

There had been no future on the farm. It did not pay.

4302-4501 Rachel's sister sent her papers for Canada.

The oldest sister lived in Sefat. Rachel had a suite there high up in the mountains, but found the climb too difficult. She rented a room for awhile, and then moved to a two bedroom shikkun. The children attended a Mizrahi, religious school. They were nine and six when they came to Israel, and 15 and 13 when they left. The youngest boy had his Bar Mitzvah in Canada.

Canada

Rachel came straight to Winnipeg where her brother and sister lived.

She heard it was very cold.

Here it was very good from the beginning. Rachel had a fridge and stove and worked at Northend Tailor as a finisher.

Rachel's youngest son was born in 1968. She arrived in Canada in 1963.

Rachel and her husband had a grocery store and got established. Her older children helped.

At first both Rachel and her husband worked for 25 cents an hour. He was ashamed to be earning the same as her, so he found a job for \$1.00 an hour.

4502-4790 Rachel is still very close with her siblings. Here and in Israel she kept kosher and kept the Sabbath. Sometimes she had to work on Shabbat.

Her children are good and did well in school. One son is an air traffic controller and one is a dental mechanic. Rachel's husband died at age 57. She then sold the store. Rachel raised her youngest son herself. He is working and in school now.

The older children did not want to leave Israel.

Rachel explained to them about her experiences, but they did not like hearing about it. Her husband talked about his experiences as well. His life had been in danger. The children could not understand what they went through.

Rachel talks about it often with her sister, particularly about how gutsy they were that one time. It seems they were meant to be alive.

Now Rachel discusses it with her older sons, her friends and neighbors.

4791-end It was very painful.

Both Rachel and her sister were healthy. They tried to keep clean and would not eat food from the garbage. They managed on what they were given. They never stole from anyone.

When the Jews were all taken from the synagogue that one day, two women stood and watched and said 'Now the city will be clean. The Jews are going to die.' The church bell rang until they were on the train, just like it did for Christian funerals. One teenage boy stood with a gun and said, 'Go to Palestine. We don't need you here.'