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Tape Footage: Background

1-472

Gitel was born in Lodz, Poland.

In 1939 Polish family life was very normal. Gitel had a good life. She was nine when the Germans came.

Before the war Gitel attended public school.

Her father was in business, and her mother stayed home. Gitel had two older brothers, born in 1925 and 1927. A younger brother was born in 1938.

Before the war they had a normal life like here. They lived in an apartment. Gitel's father was a wholesale butcher. They had many friends and went out visiting and attended many parties.

473-780

There were over 100,000 Jews living in Lodz. Many of them were religious. Every store in the Jewish district was closed on Saturday. There was great respect for the religion. No one used lights and every family made cholent in the bakery ovens. The Jewish holidays were precious, especially Passover when every child received a new pair of shoes and a new dress.

Gitel had a big family. Her father had three sisters and one brother. She had grandparents. Her mother's mother lived with them until she died in 1937.

Gitel has one family photo that relatives in New York sent her. After the war they returned home to look for photos but could not find anything.

In Lodz there was a lot of Jewish theater and a very nice Jewish cemetery.

A lot of materials were manufactured in Lodz.. Many people had machines at home where they did piece work. Many Jews were tailors, factory workers, grocery store and coffee shop owners, and butchers.

781-1007

The city's total population was about 600,000. Some Jews mingled with non-Jews. The closer you lived to downtown the better off you were. Gitel lived in a mostly Jewish district.

Gitel had a girlfriend from school who was half Polish and half German. In school all the children were treated the same before the war.

Gitel's father dealt with Jewish butchers. Then there was a law that disallowed Jewish slaughtering.

Gitel was very happy before the war. Her father made a good living, they had a nice home, and went to the beach in the summer. Her mother travelled often to Vilna where she had family.

1008-1230 Chanukah and Sukkot were happy holidays. At Sukkot the family and neighbors ate in the Sukkah .

After the war the family had nothing left.

When Gitel left the ghetto to join the partisans she took a blouse, dress, needle and thread with her, that she still has today. These are very precious to her. She used to color the blouse with acorns.

In 1945 they looked all over for their things, but only found their keys. Everything else was destroyed.

WWII-German Occupation

1231-1579 At the beginning of September 1939 Gitel and her family came from the beach. The German troops had arrived in Poland.

Lodz was not bombed. But in no time the Germans marched into Lodz. Gitel and her family stayed outside to watch the soldiers. She was not afraid, but her parents were not happy because they had heard rumors about the Germans.

In 1938 Gitel's father's cousin had come to Lodz with his Gentile wife and children because he had lost his business in Germany. In Germany there were many mixed marriages. The wife kept saying how dirty Poland was compared to Germany.

Gitel was too young to know what was coming in 1939. Her older brother Yosel was 17 and he felt it was not good.

Within a week the Jews noticed that things were bad. On the second day signs went up saying the Jews could not go to work.

Gitel went to school the first day. There she noticed right away that things were different. Other children tore her dress, screamed 'Jew' at her, and beat her up. Her Gentile friend saved her and brought her home. Gitel did not understand why they beat her, but she never went back to school.

On the third day three Jews were hung in the nearby market place with signs saying this was what happened to those who didn't obey.

Life became very hard.

1580-1870 The Jews had to wear yellow stars on their front and back. Even Gitel's nine-month-old brother had to wear one. They could not go downtown, and had to stay in their own area.

The ghetto was built in their area, so Gitel's family did not have to move. Three

other families moved into their apartment.

Jews of all ages had to work in the factories, even the sick and the old. Those who didn't work got killed. They were not allowed out of the ghetto.

There were always selections. If you were found at home you were collected and killed or sent to a concentration camp.

Escape to the Russian Side

Gitel's father and older brother ran away in the beginning of 1940. Poland had been divided by the Russians and Germans and they thought life would be better under the Russians. Gitel's mother was from Vilna on the Russian side. Gitel's father could not get back to them so he sent someone to get Gitel, her mother and brother. They travelled by horse and wagon and by train until they met their husband and father. They didn't wear their stars. Gitel carried her mother's jewelry and fur coat. In the waiting room of the train station Germans came in and asked if anyone was a Jew. Someone working at the station indicated to Gitel's mother to keep her mouth shut. She did. All the other Jews at the station were shot.

1871-2304 Finally they met the father and brother. It was very dangerous. They crossed the border overnight. They had to pay to cross. Some of the border crossers were nice and tried to avoid the Russians so the people would not be sent back. But for others it was just a business and they didn't care if the Russians caught them and sent back them back.

Gitel's mother spoke Russian very well. When a soldier sent her back she demanded she see the commander. She cried to him that she would not go back and he would have to shoot her on the spot. He felt sorry for them and let them cross.

The family came to Bialystok. It was very hard there. There were many newcomers from Germany. Gitel's family arrived there in 1941.

They slept in the synagogue. There was no place for all the people. Their goal was to get to Vilna.

Gitel's family then came to cousins who lived 90 kilometers from Vilna in the town of Lida. They were good people.

The Vilna Jewish Congress had sent many refugees to the USA and China, but it was too late to emigrate at this point.

Gitel's mother's cousin had died. But her husband let them stay for 10 days. It was a little town and they lived differently. Gitel couldn't sleep because the beds were from straw.

Lida

The family had to pay to get to Vilna. Finally they were reunited with their family

there. Gitel went to school, but she didn't have the right dialect. Then one day they were told they could not live there anymore because it was too close to the border. They had to move back 90 kilometers to Lida. There they got an apartment and Gitel's father got a job as a bakery driver. Her brother went to bookkeeping school and Gitel went to school. They had a normal life again in early 1941.

The rich were sent to Siberia.

2304-2500 One woman being sent to Siberia told the others not to cry for her because she might be better off going to Siberia than staying where they were.

German Occupation

German bombs began falling. In three days the city was on fire. In July the Germans came into town. Gitel and her family were hiding on the outskirts of town in a barn. Gitel was scared this time because she knew what was awaiting them.

During the German occupation the Jews had to live in a special place. The adults were put to work. There were no wires yet.

One day in May the Jews were told to leave their homes and go to a barracks in the suburbs. There a selection was made. There were ditches and the SS were there.

Selection

When the SS were around everyone knew something was going to happen.

2501-2681 Families with up to five people were sent left. Those with more than five were sent right. Some had documents saying they were valuable workers.

6,000 Jews were killed that day. Gitel's family was sent left. A friend of hers wanted to stand with Gitel's family because Gitel's father and brother each had a document. But this girl's father wouldn't let her. They had six children in the family and he wanted them to stay together. They were sent right.

Jews had dug the ditches two days before.

The 6,000 were machine-gunned and their bodies piled up.

Gitel and the others stood and watched. They couldn't believe it. Because of what she saw, Gitel will not let anyone forget.

2682-3021 Gitel's family survived this selection with another few thousand people. The selection was on a Sunday morning.

It was never the same thing with the SS. The Jews never knew what was coming next. It was never the same thing. One time being sent to the right meant survival, the next time the left might mean survival. It was always unexpected. This was

their strategy. They wanted to mix up the Jews.

There are no heroes when you are surrounded by machine guns.

After the selection the survivors had to kneel and thank the Germans for letting them live. One Polish police man tried to reassure them that they would survive.

Lida Ghetto

The survivors were collected and sent to the Lida ghetto. There a Jewish Committee organized the workers to be sent out and collected jewelry for bribes and payments.

The Lodz ghetto was much bigger than the Lida ghetto. It was more like a working camp, and had its own currency.

The workers were sent out to work for the Germans. After selections in smaller towns the survivors were all sent to the Lida Ghetto.

Gitel's father worked cleaning the gardens and house of a German commander. Her brother worked too as a translator. Gitel's family lived in a small two bedroom house with 13 other people.

3023-3208 In the ghetto they were given a piece of bread or potato each day. Gitel's father worked outside the camp and was able to make trades with farmers and pass food on to Gitel in the ghetto. The hunger was not so bad. It got much worse. They had to stand in line for food, and had ration cards.

Gitel's mother worked in the ghetto kitchen. They had soup, and if they were lucky, a piece of bread. This bread was terrible. It was full of straw. Everyone took the soup home to eat. Gitel's mother gave most of her portion to her children.

There was no milk, and no soap. They wore whatever clothing they had, washing it everyday. They wanted to keep clean. There was a lot of lice in the ghetto. People were undernourished.

They wore wooden shoes.

There was a hospital in the ghetto but you never knew when it was going to be cleared out. No one was anxious to go there. It was too dangerous.

3209-3684 Every few months the SS came in. The people never knew when they would come. It was always unexpected. In between these times they thought they were lucky. Then there would be another selection.

No one knew who would survive a selection.

The Jews worked as carpenters, shoemakers and tailors for the Germans. Doctors worked inside the ghetto and out. Children worked knitting and making shoes from straw. The work was very well organized. There were Jewish supervisors at these resorts, and Germans overseeing them.

They wore their stars all the time.

When Gitel was 11 a wife of her brother's friend died from TB at the age of 20. She had a funeral in the ghetto. Gitel thought she was blessed, because her loved ones would always know where she was buried. Gitel wished she could be this girl. To die a normal death was a privilege.

Brother Joins the Partisans

At the end of 1941, Gitel's brother Yosel began organizing ammunition and young people for the partisans. He was 18. By then many had left to join the partisans. In order to join you needed money to trade for ammunition. Gitel's family had nothing. The Russian partisans would take you if you could prove your bravery.

Yosel's mission was to blow up a train. If he was caught it would be critical for the whole ghetto. He did it, and that night he joined the partisans.

Gitel's family stayed in the ghetto another six months. Gitel was at home with her younger brother. She heard there was going to be a selection for children. She took her brother and hid in the oven in a special place for the chicken. It was terrible in there, very smelly. The children and old people selected that day were sent to a concentration camp.

When Gitel's mother came home from work at seven in the evening, she called out her children's names. Gitel did not answer. At one in the morning she crawled out of the oven and went to her mother. She explained to her mother that she did not answer when she called because she thought maybe the SS was making her call for them.

3685-3900 Gitel's brother had been working as a German translator. He would be missed at work and that was dangerous for his family. So the Jewish Committee reported he had typhus and was in the hospital. Then they reported that he died a couple days later. Otherwise the Germans would have started looking for him.

The Jewish Committee was helpful. It was held at fault when someone ran away.

Gitel's younger brother Simon lives in Toronto. He suffers a lot from guilt for being alive. He feels Yosel should be alive. But Gitel feels they survived because of Yosel, and she does not feel guilty. She named her son for Yosel, and carries him in her heart always.

Because all Jewish babies had brisses, Gitel dressed Simon in dresses while in the ghetto. During selections she ran out to a pasture with him where a teenage Polish farm boy always let them stay. He never asked if they were Jewish. Sometimes he gave them food. Gitel and her brother survived selections this way.

3901-4438 Gitel's father was selected to go to a work camp five hours away by train. He worked on the railroad there. Sometimes the Jewish Committee could bring people back from the labor camp to the ghetto with bribes. The families could send food parcels and letters to the work camp once a month, so they thought maybe it wasn't so bad.

Gitel's mother asked the Jewish policeman in charge of delivering the parcels if she could go with him to see her husband. He allowed it.

Gitel's partisan leader saved 14,000 Jews. This group was strictly for Jews. They took in everybody and lived deep in the forest.

A German soldier had to accompany Gitel's mother and the policeman. They were not allowed to travel themselves. The Jews were only allowed on the cattle cars, but this soldier took Gitel's mother on the regular train with him and covered her star with his jacket. He also gave her food and drink.

Before arriving at the camp, they were to stay overnight in a ghetto in a small town. When they arrived this ghetto had been liquidated, so the soldier arranged for them to stay overnight on a farm. He stayed with them too, instead of going to the barracks. Then they visited the labor camp.

Two weeks later Gitel's father returned to the ghetto.

This German soldier came into the ghetto. This was very dangerous for him. He could have been killed or sent to the front.

There were a lot of Italians in the German army. Sometimes they gave the people in the ghetto some bread.

The German soldier began bringing guns and bullets into the ghetto. The Jews told him about the partisans. They trusted him. He told them they had to fight in order to survive.

The Partisans

More and more men and women between ages 17 and 20 joined the partisans.

Gitel had a boyfriend. He joined the partisans, but didn't want to leave her. Even in those times, parents didn't like their daughters going off with their boyfriends.

You had to buy off the Polish guards or get them drunk in order to leave the ghetto to join.

Gitel's brother came into the ghetto to bring his family out to the forest. He knew nothing else was safe for them. He always said the Germans would have to kill him from the back, and eventually they did.

Yosel came with Gitel's future husband and two others. The head of the partisan's brother-in-law was to be brought out that night as well. It was very dangerous. It was very dark and raining. When people found out the partisans were coming, 60 others waited to be taken out. But they couldn't take them all. This was in 1943.

4439-4601 In the fall, Gitel's future husband took a family from his hometown out from the ghetto. They survived thanks to him, and went on to have more children and grandchildren.

Gitel's future husband Moishe was from a small town near Vilna. He was shot once when he was with the partisans.

At the time that Gitel's family came out of the ghetto, the Germans had surrounded the bushes. They were going after the partisans, who did a lot of damage. It was a bad time. Usually they lived in peace. They had a camp with tents, and covered ditches for the winter. These ditches held 40 people each, and each had a little stove that could be used only at night. During the day the Germans could see the smoke.

4602-4760 When they got to the forest, Gitel and the others could not join the camp because the Germans were bombing it. They lost contact with the camp for a while. They travelled for a few days, and finally contacted them. Those few days they had to wander around, walking in the lake. It was terrible. Gitel's father carried Simon on his shoulders.

The partisan leader was Bilski.

Gitel carried a pail with her in case they had something to cook. Her father always kept matches with him. Everything got wet. They walked for miles for three days, and could hear the Germans screaming. It was very hard.

Brother Killed

Finally they got together with the others. Then Yosel and 80 fighters had to go out of the forest to see what was going on with the Germans. The goal of the others was to get deep into the forest to make a winter camp.

At the edge of the forest Yosel was the first to step out. He was the leader. The Germans were hiding in ditches, and shot him in the back. The other 80 were saved. They told the farmers to bury him so they would know where he was, but they never did find out.

4761-4915 Gitel was out picking blueberries. She returned to the camp and found her parents crying. It was very hard for them. Gitel didn't understand. Her mother was out of her mind, and punished herself. They the had to move deeper into the forest.

In the camp they gave Gitel's family a place for five instead of four, because Yosel was a hero and they didn't want to put a stranger with them. The partisans were very nice to them.

Gitel felt safe. The Germans had to get through the partisans to get to them. The young people would fight the Germans in the towns, and then bring back food from the farmers who had worked for the Germans. In the hiding places, the partisans had kitchens, and decent food.

Gitel was with the partisans for two years, from 1942 until July, 1944. They were liberated by the Russians in the forest.

Before liberation, the Germans came running from the Russian front into the forest. It was very bad. They fought face to face with the partisans.

4916-5168 While they lived in the forest a teacher taught Gitel and the older children for one

hour every day. She educated them with her mind. They had no pencils or paper.

Gitel and three others were in charge of taking the horses out to pasture when the partisans returned.

The partisans had contacts in the city who got them medicine. They sent the children to make the pick-ups. The children would be dropped off at a farm and the farmer would take them into the city. They would pretend they were going to church. They always went in twos.

Gitel used to go on these missions with a 12-year-old boy who was very brave. He was sent all over. They wore crosses when they went out, and learned the Christian prayers. They said they were runaways from villages bombed by the partisans, so they could not be traced.

Once Gitel went into a farm and asked for the partisans. There was a German dance going on next door. Gitel had to hide until a partisan came to get her.

The fighter brigade was the most important. They did damage to the Germans and were in contact with the Russians.

Liberation

5169-5360 One day a Russian tank came through and told them they were liberated. They were very happy. Two hours later the Germans came to the camp. People were killed. There was face to face fighting. The young and old were told to run to a nearby Russian Jewish camp. There was a big field between the two camps. Grenades were thrown. Gitel knew 10 people who were killed. She told her mother she was not going to stay around to be killed, but her father would not run. Gitel grabbed her younger brother and began running. Her mother had to decide what to do, and finally came after her children. A grenade was thrown and Gitel's father had to climb up a tree. Then he came running too. Many Germans were killed in this fight, and many were taken prisoner.

Gitel and her family left the forest. They came out to little towns.

The partisans made the Germans dance, and do everything the Jews had been forced to do. One SS man refused and said he was glad all the Jews were killed. But the partisans told him, "You did not kill all of us." Gitel saw how cowardly these men were. It was not just the Jews who were cowards.

Gitel's family did not have anything. Her brother was five.

5361-5693 They went back to Lida and lived three, four families in a room. Gitel's mother took in whoever she could. She cooked for many. Whatever they had they shared. Gitel's father found work.

The Russians took some of the partisans to fight against the Germans, and many died this way.

Bialystok was liberated in early 1945.

In 1944 there were still Jews in the Lodz ghetto, and there were still transports to Auschwitz. Only 800 people survived the Lodz ghetto. They hid at the very end.

Return to Lodz

Gitel's father wanted to return to Lodz. They started out. It as very hard. The trains were not normal. First they came to Bialystok and stayed in a bank there. They heated the stoves with money from the bank. There were many girls from concentration camps going home the other way. Their stories were impossible. Gitel's experiences were paradise in comparison.

Three sisters told how one of their sisters was shot after the war when a Russian tried to rape her. Gitel's family advised these girls not to go back because no one was left except for the Russians. They were better off going to Germany or Poland, and then making their way to Israel.

From Bialystok Gitel travelled to Warsaw. It was bombed, and there was no place to be. Lodz was still not liberated because the Poles wanted to do it on their own.

In 1945 Gitel came to Lodz. It was now liberated. Her father found one friend who was one of the 800 who survived. He invited Gitel's family to stay with them. They lived in a beautiful apartment the Germans had abandoned. They gave them beds and food, and the daughter gave Gitel a blouse and skirt. They stayed with them for two weeks.

Simon slept under a table, because he was not used to mattresses. Gitel's family gave this family regards from their two sons who were with the partisans.

Gitel's father went to his home and his sister's, but nothing was left.

In 1945 he began work as a butcher in a plant. There was plenty of food. Gitel's mother had an open house for everyone. They lived in a two bedroom suite, and she advertised that survivors could stay with them. Many did, staying for a few weeks at a time.

5694-5829 Gitel attended a well organized Jewish school. Her teacher was a famous poet.

Germany

In 1945 many Jews went to Germany because it was easier to get to Israel from there. No one thought to go elsewhere.

Gitel's father wanted to go to Germany, and then to Israel. Friends visiting from Germany suggested they return with them. They had to cross the border and travel through mountains and towns and cities. They came to Germany in the Russian zone and Gitel was arrested. A friend who had survived Auschwitz said she was his sister and the only survivor from his family, so the soldier let her cross.

5830-end Gitel's family lived privately on the outskirts of Munich with this other family, for two years beginning in early 1946.

Gitel attended the DP camp school. They lived day to day waiting to emigrate.

Gitel's father's sister and niece survived Bergen-Belsen and settled in Hanover in the British zone. Her mother went to look for them and brought them to Munich to visit. They live in Israel now.

Gitel's family is still very close.

Tape #2

1-603

Gitel did not live in the DP camp Newfreimer. She rode the 10 kilometers to school by bike. ORT organized the school. ORT and Hadassah did a lot in the camps. Older children went to university.

There was no synagogue, but the Jewish committee organized for the holidays. There was a cantor and a Rabbi, and matsot for Passover Jewish life was back to normal.

Gitel's future husband was attending auto mechanic school in Munich because he heard it was a good profession in Canada.

The quota to Israel was filled. Gitel's mother had cousins who settled in Winnipeg in 1930 and had actually made papers for Gitel's mother to come before the war. Her father did not want to go because their life was good in Poland, and there was a depression over there. Gitel's mother put an ad in UNRA's Jewish paper looking for Israel Katz from Vilna. A friend of his family saw it and showed it to his family, and they corresponded immediately. But the quota was filled and only certain workers like tailors and bushmen were allowed in. Cousins could not sponsor cousins either.

604-1120

Farmers were being accepted too. So the cousins arranged with Mr. Tennenhouse, who had a farm, to sign the necessary papers. They then sent the passage.

Gitel was dating Moishe. He had a brother in Israel but when he heard she was going to Canada, he registered as a bush worker and went to Timmins, Ontario. He worked there half a year, and then the Jewish Congress took him to Montreal. He arrived in Canada a year before Gitel.

Gitel's family was met in Halifax by the CJC. They gave them food and put them on the train for Winnipeg. They bought Gitel a coke.

Ernie Tessler, his sister and nephew were on the train to Winnipeg. Their uncle had come all the way to Halifax to accompany them to Winnipeg.

They travelled on the prairies, seeing nothing.

In Winnipeg Gitel's cousins met them. They were very nice. They stayed with them two months. Gitel's future husband came and worked at Oretsky's. Gitel and her father worked too, and her brother went to school. He was 10, and had no English. He was called dummy and found it very hard here.

Moishe had \$800. saved so he bought a house on Selkirk Avenue for \$3,900. The mortgage was \$40. a month.

Gitel thought she was in paradise. They had a stoker and a full basement. Her parents lived with them.

Gitel was married on April 12, 1949 at the Hebrew Sick Fraternal Lodge.

She started a new life. Her brother caught up in school. Her mother kept house.

1123-1378 In 1951 Gitel got pregnant and was very upset because they could not afford a child. She went to see Dr. Lyons who told her Canada was the best country and he was a perfect example of that. His father had been a peddler, and now he was a doctor. It wasn't necessary to be rich here.

Gitel realized it was a good country. She worked in a shop until she was seven months pregnant. On April 21, 1951 her daughter Rosie was born on the night of the first Seder. She now has two children aged 12 and eight.

When giving birth all of Gitel's memories came back. For years she dreamt the Germans came and took her child. She felt guilty for having a child.

1379-1749 Gitel's husband went into business. Six years later, she was working again when she gave birth to her daughter Sheila, who now has two children. Gitel's son, who is 29, was born when they lived in Garden City and their circumstances were much better. Her husband had a store on Archibald.

The children went to Peretz school and had a Jewish upbringing. Gitel had said if she survived she wouldn't be Jewish, but she changed her mind and is proud of it. Jeff is now married with one child.

Gitel is 58. She was 17 when she came to Canada. She celebrated her 18th birthday in Canada with a Jeannies cake.

She has visited Israel a few times, but has not gone back to Europe. There are only bad memories for her there.

She has survived very well.

1750-2013 Because she never had anything growing up, she loves to buy clothing and shoes. Walking through the corn fields was like walking on nails.

It would be hard to live in Israel and have to worry about survival.

Gitel could sit for hours and tell her stories.

She is a living witness, and even though it is hard for her to speak because she sees everything so vividly, she does it for her brother Yosel and for all the others who did not survive. They are alive as long as she remembers.