

DONOR: RABBI PERETZ WEIZMAN  
INTERVIEWER: CLAUDIA HOSKINS

approx. running time: 1 hour, 35 mins.

Tape Footage: Background

1-600 Peretz was born on November 23, 1921 in Lodz. He was one of six children, and the youngest son. His family was a prominent, upper middle class family in the pharmaceutical business.

Lodz was the most industrial city in Poland. In certain areas every Jewish home was a factory and every third building had a place of worship. It was a viable, creative, productive and innovative city. This vitality mainly rested in the hands of the Jews.

Lodz was a young city equipped with all the institutions of a modern city. It had famous universities and famous high schools and hospitals built by Jews. There was great affluence and great poverty, great honesty and great crime. There was great Jewish theater.

Jews occupied the heart of the city and non-Jews were rarely seen in this area. There were beautiful synagogues, Chassidic, Zionist and Communist organizations, and a sense of humor unmatched anywhere.

It was inconceivable that a city of this calibre could be destroyed, and that it could function without Jews.

601-1209 With the 1935 Nuremburg Laws everyone intuitively felt a cloud of evil approaching. The laws were too cruel to fathom, so people tried to ignore them. The newspapers were filled with articles about them. The Jews knew they had a problem, but since they didn't have a solution they tried to minimize the problem. Most people were just stunned.

There was the additional problem of the German Jewish refugees who had to be settled in Lodz. The Jewish community kept busy with this so they could forget their own problems. They thought the problem was only immediate for the Jews in Germany, who were now coming to Poland. There was a lot of suicides among these refugees.

German Occupation

When the Nazis occupied Lodz, Peretz realized they were in trouble, and that the suffering of the Jews of the Diaspora was a reality. The Jewish population felt that if they remained optimistic they would endure. Many ran away to Warsaw at the beginning of the occupation and were gunned down by German planes on the way.

Peretz's family did not leave Lodz at this time. They felt the problems would pass. They left the city when it hit them personally, when Peretz's father received a summons from the Gestapo. He was 58 at the time. His oldest son went instead and was forced to agree to contribute 100,000 zlotys to the

Gestapo. His father decided then it was better to go to the occupied part of Poland where they would not be too visible.

They thought that life in this 'protectorate' would be safer. They had some difficulty crossing the border. They took some money and valuables with them, and started a new life. Peretz was not happy. He missed Lodz. Life in this part of Poland was not so good. Lodz was not better, but at least it was home.

Eventually most of Peretz's family went back to Lodz. Then the ghetto was built and closed and the other family members, including his father, could not return.

### Lodz Ghetto

1210-2156 The ghetto was built in the slum area of Lodz. There were 2,000 buildings for 200,000 Jews. After seven months, the Jews in one part of the ghetto were transferred to make room for 'gypsies,' who were really Jews from Czechoslovakia. Six weeks later these new arrivals were all shot. But the other residents of the ghetto were so busy with their own problems they did not pay much attention.

Jewish police removed the bodies from this part of the ghetto. Some of them were then killed to make up the German quota.

After this liquidation, the transferred Jews moved back to this part of the ghetto. Then Jews from Germany, Czechoslovakia and Luxembourg were brought in to the ghetto. These included many scientists, bankers and intellectuals. Generally these people did not endure. They died like flies. The Polish Jews seemed more immune to suffering.

The Jews of Lodz were moved into the ghetto in May, 1940. There were some suicides and some people shot on the streets. The Germans claimed they were forcing Jews into the ghetto to keep them safe from the Poles, and give them peace and quiet. But the slogans outside the ghetto were not complimentary. Still the Jews wanted to believe there was some grain of truth to what was said.

In 1939, the Reform Temple, and then the most beautiful synagogue in Lodz were destroyed. Peretz remembers seeing it in flames. The next day a big church was desecrated and the Germans told the Poles the Jews had done it in retaliation. They were trying to create friction between Poles and Jews even though friction had existed for hundreds of years.

At this point the Germans were concerned with public opinion. Later they realized that no one would criticize them anyway.

Conditions in the ghetto were more than sub-human. Six people lived in one room. Sanitation was a big problem because that part of the city was not equipped with these conveniences to begin with. Thousands died from dysentery. It was necessary to carry out the excrement, chained to wagons. But people still kept hoping it would just be for a short time, and they would endure.

There was food at the beginning. The Germans said they would assist those

who had no income, and did, so people thought maybe it was not so bad.

### 1941-42

Conditions changed in 1941. There was no food and starvation began. Starvation combined with the sanitary conditions to produce an epidemic of the highest proportions. 35,000 people died in the ghetto in 1941. It was clear now the German purpose was to destroy the Jews. There was no medication.

The community sent a letter to the German government requesting some aid for the children. The reply was one sentence, "Jewish children must perish."

Everyone did everything in their power to endure. They brought in fish oil which contained vitamin D and paid for it with gold and diamonds.

People were starving in the streets and praying to die, but first to eat. People ate grass, suitcases and briefcases. They made herring from leaves. The smell of a potato skin was unbearable. Everyone was swollen. Everyone had only one thing on their minds, to eat.

2156-2653 1942 was the culmination of starvation. You could feel the hunger. This was the only concern, and this was the German's intention. They distracted the people so they did not think about their freedom or their lives.

Everyone had to work. In 1942 people were sent to labor camps. Everyone believed if they were productive they would have a place in the ghetto. Everyone tried to look healthy and young. People made rouge from bricks and artificial creams. No one ever complained. Everyone was optimistic, thinking it could not get worse and they would make it.

The Jewish people did not give up. They organized committees and kitchens in every building and set up collective cooking to help those who needed it most.

The Jews experienced the germ of self-government. In the Jewish police they saw a spark of redemption. It gave people inspiration and encouragement.

### Children in the Ghetto

The desire to live was enormous. Children sustained their parents. They needed less food. The parents were the first victims of starvation because they gave their children their portions. The children became the suppliers. Children as young as six made and sold cigarettes, invented different kinds of candies, and stole wood.

Peretz's six-year-old nephew used to get up at five in the morning in the winter and go out with a bag and a knife to steal the bark off wood so they could make a fire. This was a child's use to living in luxury.

Children played a vital role in the life of the ghetto. They were the first to be destroyed. This was very painful. When a child was taken away you knew he would be destroyed. They went by streetcar to Chelmo yelling, "We are the replacement for you." Their bravery was unbelievable. What kind of

generation would they have formed?

Peretz remembers one boy comforting his mother as he was being deported. He thanked G-d for making him a Jew and insisted his mother say Amen. This child was completely forgotten.

The children were the first victims because they were not productive. They were a burden. Maybe they were the first victims because the Germans wanted to see how everyone would react. Himmler believed they had to kill the children so they would not retaliate. Also, the Germans wanted to erase the Jewish race, and the way to do that was by destroying the grandchildren.

2654-3275 Peretz had no trade. He had only studied. He had a knowledge of chemistry though, so he got work with a German laundromat in the ghetto.

In 1941 Peretz's mother had a new coat made for him. One day in December he put it on and went out, forgetting to transfer his Jewish star on to it. He was caught by a German, and certain he would be shot. Then he was handed over to a Jewish policeman. Peretz argued with him that he was an irreplaceable chemist.

At the time there was an order for 10,000 people to be sent away. Jewish leaders counted some of the dead in order to fill out the quota, and also used the sick and criminals to fill these numbers. A criminal could be someone who had used electricity, which was forbidden from six in the evening until seven in the morning since the Germans first came in.

In the end Peretz was ordered to pay a fine. He did so, but refused the receipt so he would not be registered as a criminal.

There was not a lot of work for Peretz as a chemist. He was able to make contact with a lot of people however. Clothing came in to the laundromat to be disinfected. No one knew where it came from. Often one shirt was layered on top of another. There were also many ritual items like challa and matza covers. Diamonds and coins were found hidden in brassieres. All this made the laundromat workers suspicious. It turned out these things came from Chelmo. They were all laundered and sent to Berlin for the German people.

Peretz worked in the laundromat until 1942. In 1942 everyone felt doomed to perish. Peretz's brother told him he heard Hitler's plan was to destroy 10,000 Jews a week.

In the midst of the unbelievable starvation, city workers were sent into the ghetto to trim trees. Peretz believes the people in the city didn't really know what was going on inside the ghetto.

3278-4019 1942 was the bloodiest, cruelest year. Eighty percent of the Jews perished this year.

Before Rosh Hashana in September 1942, the Germans surrounded the ghetto hospital and took away everyone who was inside. Newborn infants were killed on the spot, thrown from the windows on to trucks and trampled. The doctors and nurses were all taken too.

### Deportation

Those inside the ghetto felt the cruelty reaching its peak. But they had no time to sober from this shock when it was announced that every Jew from one day old to age 15, and all those over 60 were to be sent to labor camps. Everyone realized this was a deception, children would not be sent to labor camps. They knew it meant destruction.

Vital statistics in the ghetto were perfectly organized. There were up-to-date records of how many died, and how many were born, of everyone's age and address. The Jewish police and leadership were instructed to collect the people for the deportation.

The Jewish leaders held a meeting to report on the situation. The people resisted. Peretz's nephews were hidden in the attic while his brother looked out for the police. The Germans promised the Jewish police that if they helped with this 'sparrow' (action), their own children would be saved.

The leader of the ghetto realized he couldn't carry out these orders and told the Germans they would have to do it themselves. There was a better chance of hiding from the Germans, who did not operate in the ghetto and were less familiar with the vital statistics. Every family was asked "to make their sacrifice".

This was on a Friday, and in spite of the difficulties everyone went on with life and preparation for Shabbat. Judaism was part of everyone's nature. In Lodz the secular Jews were religious and the religious Jews were secular. Still, everyone felt the Angel of Death hovering.

At 6 o'clock the curfew began and no one was allowed to leave their homes. Anyone seen outside would be shot. Peretz felt responsible for his sister's two sons because her husband was in Warsaw. He suggested to his mother that they be realistic and just try to save one of the children. He suggested she go to the head of the ghetto, whom she knew (he was the former head of an orphanage) and ask if they could keep one of the children. Today, Peretz's face burns with shame when he remembers this suggestion. His mother refused, of course, and Peretz and his brother, like everyone else, began looking for a hiding place. They finally found a place in a storage area, ten minutes before six, and threw in the children, their sister and their mother.

The curfew lasted two weeks. What Peretz's brother did was unbelievable. He put a lock on the outside of the door to give the impression no one was inside, then took his life in his hands by staying outside so he could keep watch. The Germans went house to house with the Jewish police. In the end 25,000 Jews from Lodz were sent to Chelmo where they were burnt alive.

As each area of the ghetto was purged of Jews it was surrounded by Jewish police so people from other areas of the ghetto would not hide there. Some tried to move in the middle of the night. Eventually the entire ghetto was combed.

Then, when everyone came out of hiding, the Germans surrounded the ghetto and took away more. Peretz's brother saw this happening and saved his family again

using the same locked door trick. This time the Germans didn't put in too much effort, figuring they would get them all eventually.

People adjusted. The desire to live was great. People must have thought things would change, or else there would have been more suicides.

In 1942 the Jews of Lodz went through hell. They were living surrounded by death, fear, evil and brutality, but they never heard these actual words. Instead they heard words like "liquidate," and "resettle," the Germans' own special language used to conceal their intentions.

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But their intentions were not concealed. In 1941 the Germans had the idea to preserve something from the Jewish civilization which they intended to destroy completely, so they built a museum and exhibited the works of great Jewish painters, sculptors and writers. The exhibition depicted 'Life in Lodz Before the War.' A huge sign above the exhibition declared that this life would not happen again.

### The Cripa

In November, 1942, Peretz's father was summoned to the Cripa, the criminal police whose function was to squeeze out as much money and valuables as possible from every Jew. The richer you were the more likely you were to be called in, where you were beat with sticks and irons until you gave up everything.

Peretz's father was not in the ghetto, so Peretz's mother and oldest brother argued about which one of them would go instead. His brother knew it meant beatings and killings. His mother went secretly. Her older sons had connections and knew exactly what went on there, but they didn't tell Peretz. Pregnant women were hit naked. The cruelty and sadism were unbelievable, yet everyone working there wore civilian clothing.

The brothers couldn't do anything. They knew that turning themselves in would not help their mother. Peretz was at work one day when a Jewish policeman came to take him to the Cripa. Peretz's single brother was already there. His mother had said she had only two sons, thinking she could spare the married sons by not mentioning them.

They were waiting to be called in. Peretz approached a Jewish policeman and asked permission to go home and pray. He was allowed to. At home Peretz prayed and ate. He met his sister who felt abandoned and excluded from the suffering. Then Peretz returned to the Cripa. There was no place for him to hide. While they waited to be called in, they heard yelling, but Peretz still thought it all must be exaggerated. He asked a Jewish waitress for some tea and she gave him some, making him think that it wasn't so bad after all.

At 4:30 the Germans stopped for the day. Peretz was asked what he was doing there and he said he hadn't received his release papers. He was called in and was confronted by a Yiddish speaking German. He was hit so hard the blood poured from his face. Then Peretz was told to lie down and was beat until he lost consciousness. He was carried to a cell where his brother was being kept. He was so weak. He was beat everyday. When the name Weizman was called out his brother always got up to go first.

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One day his brother came back completely knocked out. Peretz knew if he was called in now he would be killed. His mother had three broken ribs and had been forced to watch them beat her son. They had already told her that Peretz was dead. When Peretz was called in they asked him how many of his brothers were not there, and he told them two. They were sent for and beat. When Peretz saw them he did not recognize them. After three weeks they were all let go. Then the Cripa came to their home and took Peretz's oldest brother away again for another four weeks.

### 1944

From then until 1944 things were relatively quiet. The Germans knew there was no rush to kill the few remaining Jews. Starvation would do it.

In February, 1944 the Jewish police came to Peretz's house while he was davening and took him away. He ran away on the way to the police station. The Jewish police did not have guns, so he knew he could not be shot. He was caught and jailed two weeks.

### Labor Camp

On March 4, Peretz was taken to Chancellekof to work in an ammunition factory. It was an improvement compared to the ghetto, but worse for Peretz because he was separated from his family and had no real home. There was more food and recreation. The other workers he met there opened his eyes. They had gone through hell.

The workers' purpose was to be productive. If someone wasn't productive he was eliminated. There was an organized religious life. The workers dealt with kapos.

Peretz was trained for three days and then considered an expert in producing ammunition. He supervised seven machines.

The prisoners were a highly educated group, many of them Chassidim. They smuggled in tefillin. One kapo noticed and started yelling, and Peretz asked him why it bothered him so much. The kapo told him that G-d did not know they were there and he didn't what Him reminded that they were. There were about 3,000 prisoners in Chancellekof.

One German there was supposedly a humanist only interested in production, but even he addressed the Jews as insects. A Ukrainian responsible for killing 100,000 Jews fainted when he watched a surgical operation, because he forgot for a moment that he was a Nazi, and acted instead like a human being.

Peretz worked in the munitions factory until liberation.

### After the War

Peretz seems in himself a spark of Lodz, and tries to preserve all it stood for. In him some part of Lodz is still in existence.

He questions why he survived, and sometimes feels excluded.

Many perished in Lodz when the Russians were only five kilometers away.

A friend of his Peretz's brother was shot the first day of the war. His brother knew that this friend was the lucky one.

Peretz's brother and the rest of his family all went to Auschwitz. One brother died two days before liberation, and one died two days after liberation. They went through hell.

Peretz is the only survivor from his family. From many families he knew they was not even one.

This is not Peretz's past but his present. These are things he thinks about all the time. He still has nightmares.