

RG-50.477.0881

Summary

Gita Soroka was born in Minsk in 1918, both of her parents were born in Minsk. Her mother was born in 1881, she was an actress, Oda Yakovlevna Lifshitz. She graduated a very famous actor's school in Moscow, but had to stay in Minsk because, she was Jewish.

Gita's father was born in 1871, he was a director of a technical school. He had serious back problems and could hardly walk. His name was Yakov Dvorfovich.

Gita's grandfather was a cantor, he had musical education, her grandmother stayed home, she was an educated woman. Her parents were from Vilna; her grandfather was an editor of a big Jewish magazine.

Gita grew up during the times when going to the synagogues or churches was prohibited. However, Gita visited the synagogue with her grandmother a couple of times. Her grandparents followed Jewish traditions, but her parents didn't. Gita grew up in the house that originally belonged to her grandfather, but later it was owned by the state.

Gita's aunt was a member of the Bund, a Jewish branch of the Bolshevik's party. Her aunt attended the first congress of Bolsheviks. The grandmother told Gita that they always had furniture with double doors and hidden compartments. The aunt and the husband of her other aunt were in prison and then released in 1926. After the death of Lenin Members of the Bund group were persecuted. Her aunt spoke many language; she became a Dean of the Institute of the National Minorities of the West. She lived in a modest apartment in the dorm-style housing, with a common kitchen and bathrooms. The aunt was sent as a party members to work in Siberia, but in 1937 under pretense of espionage she was killed. Gita's another aunt and her husband were also arrested and sent to The Solovkiy prison.

They both died there. Their children were raised by the older sister. Her brothers were thrown out of the university when she was arrested. Both brothers were in the army during the war. The younger brother lost both legs in the beginning of the war, he was about 24 years old. He became a professor of physics and mathematics, he teachers at the university for this day.

Gita first went to a Jewish school, then to a Russian high school, then she went to the Transportation Department technical school because they gave good rations of bread in the 30s. She had to go to a "rabfak" - workers school to complete her education. She graduated with honors and was accepted to the Medical School without exams; otherwise, Gita probably wouldn't have a chance, because she was a Jew. She graduated The Medical school a couple of days prior to the beginning of the war.

Gita read about antisemitism in Russia before revolution. she learned about German's treatment of Jews from a Polish student in her school. Otherwise, people were not informed at all.

Gita remembered that when the war was announced on the radio Minsk already was on fire, it was almost burned down and it was bombed.

There was a great panic among people, nobody was prepared, there was no electricity, no radio connection, no water in the buildings. Gita and her parents among many other people tried to leave the city. The crowds moved towards the main road Minsk- Moscow, about 30-40 km from Minsk. Then they saw German soldiers, who turned the crowd back. When they returned to Minsk they read announcement about The Jewish Ghetto.

All Jews were ordered to move to the designated area of the ghetto. They were allowed to take no more than 3-6 kilograms of personal items.

When Gita returned home, it wasn't burned, and there was nothing left, no furniture, no dishes, nothing.

Gita and her parents arrived at the ghetto sometime after it was organized and it was hard to find a room to stay. The ghetto was organized on the Yubileynay street, in the place of a former horse bazar. All Jews were ordered to move inside the ghetto area. Her parents found a small barn with a stove for cooking and heating. The room was about 9 square meters in size. They found an old metal bed and one chair.

All Jews were ordered to register in Judenrat, the Jewish ghetto "Government".

The ghetto included many streets from Street Respublikanskaya till street Svoboda.

That area was known for the Jewish cemetery. Several prominent people were buried there:

Gita's grandfather and his family were buried in that cemetery. That cemetery was demolished years before the war.

Life in the ghetto was very difficult, no food and no money. In order to get food, they had to get outside of ghetto, that was surrounded by barbed wire and watched by local policemen, who worked for the Nazi. The children were very inventive, they crawled under the wire and went to the local farmers, sometimes they begged food sometimes they had something to exchange. Gita's family had nothing to exchange, so she begged for food.

Then Judenrat organized A Labor Center, it was organized by Yakov Epstein. He was trying to please Germans, he used to pick pretty girls for the entertainment of The Germans.

Different organizations requested workers specialized in different areas; shoemakers, brick layers, later all types of workers were in demand; cleaners, cooks, etc. Gita was happy to go to work. She remembered that the Germans were all very different people; some were empathetic, some were quiet, some were worse than animals. She remembered that some Germans gave extra food for the people who worked for them.

They received soup and also were able to get extra. Sometimes she was able to get a loaf of bread, a piece of butter.

In August 1941 there were three pogroms, so called "actions" in the ghetto: on 15th, the 21st, and the 31st of August.

The action usually started after the specialists were sent to work. Yakov Epstein usually set up feasts for the German soldiers, and after the feast they started pogroms.

The pogroms were organized by streets. The policemen went from house to house and pushed people out of their homes. The Jewish people were gathered on yubileynaya plaza, then put of the trucks and moved to the Trostinets, where they were shot and pushed into the huge pit dead or alive then covered by lime and dirt.

Gita's street was included in the second pogrom. Gita asked her mother to go to the house of her very best Russian friend from the theatre. Her father couldn't move. People started building hiding places. They put her father in the back room behind the clothes hangers. Gita and her mother escaped through the whole in the barb wire in the middle of the night. They had to crawl until they reached the "the Russian Village".

The mother's friend opened the door, but didn't let them in. They set on a bench, and an older woman saw them and invited them to hide in her barn. She gave them some potatoes and water. They stayed in that place until they hid among specialists returning back to the ghetto.

Labor centers were used by Jews to share information with other people in the camp.

Gita and her parents moved to a house into a tiny space. Gita remembered that she was happy to find a hiding place in the new house. They lived in anticipation of the next major pogrom that was planned from November 1941; reportedly thirteen thousand people were killed.

Inside the ghetto there was a camp for prisoners of the war. The commandant of that camp was Gorodetskiy, he was very cruel, he was like a gestapo man.

Gita and her parents survived November pogrom. Gita thinks that everybody knew that they were poor and there would be nothing left if they were to be killed.

1942 was an extremely difficult year, they cold it a "bloody year". The pogroms became more frequent, people who were selected for work were not exempt from pogroms. In March of 1942 pogrom Gita and her mother hid in the attic. Her father died from hunger.

In August of 1942 they realized that, although thousands of local Jews were killed, the size of ghetto didn't change. Soon they learned that many German Jews were brought in.

German Jews had very heavy clothes, as if they were going to Siberia. Initially the German Jews didn't believe they would be killed, but soon after their arrival the police started killing them.

In 1942 the ghetto had two parts decided by Republican street.

German Jews wore yellow Star of David, while local Jews wore yellow circles. They were prohibited from talking to each other.

Inside the ghetto they had two Children's' homes. These homes housed children who lost their parents. Germans used the children to get blood. In 1942 these children were gassed in gas chambers.

The majority of policemen were Ukrainians. People joined police in order to feed their families, others used their position to hurt the Jews. Some policemen helped: they told Jews about planned pogroms, they helped to hide sick people.

Gita remembered a story. She found a winter coat and decided to take it out to the Russian area and exchange for food. She had to cross a small bridge. She had to wear clothes without a yellow sign. They had to look nice for a Russian area. She saw a woman on the street, the woman invited her home. When Gita entered the house, she saw two Germans that were sitting with the woman's daughters. The woman took the coat and "promised" to get her food next time. One policeman told her to go with him. People were looking from their windows. Gita thought that either he was taking her to the prison or to a field to shoot her. She realized that he was quite drunk and decided to jump off and under the bridge. She just had a dress on. He fired several times, but missed. Gita stayed in the snow for about two hours pretending that she was dead, and after that she walked back to the ghetto.

Next day she decided to go back to get her coat or to get food. She went to the same street and another young woman took her inside her house and gave her food; she told her not to go back to that house. Gita told her story, told her that she was a doctor. Then a man entered the room and told Gita about local partisans. The young woman asked a woman that took a coat to bring food; bread, butter, etc. Gita explained to these women that people in the ghetto had absolutely no food and were starving.

Gita remembered a neighbor; her last name was Soroka; she didn't even look Jewish. She remembered that people in the ghetto were afraid of each other, they were afraid that people would report them, sell them for a piece of bread.

Working in the potato field was considered very prestigious, because people were able to put potatoes inside their clothes. Some people shared food, some didn't.

People with little children suffered the most. Many women became prostitutes for food. Other women covered their faces with dust to look old, wore dirty clothes to avoid Germans and policemen.

Minsk ghetto was eliminated, burned down in 1943, Gita was partisans by then.

In 1943 they heard some good news about the war. They realized that there might be an underground organization in the area. The first pogrom in March of 1943 was not planned, but two German officers were found dead in the Russian part and, of course, the administration decided to kill Jews. During that day Gita was at work in the Russian area, when she returned, her mother was killed; she was suffocated in the gas chamber, that was on top of the trucks. A few people survived, because they figure out that putting a wet cloth toward the nose and mouth may save them. These people explained what a gas chamber (a dushegubka) really was.

Gita remembered, that while she was with partisans, people didn't get sick, nobody complained. There were people with chronic diseases, but under terrible stress nobody had symptoms.

Her mother was overweight, she lost her weight, she looked terrible. Her father had back problems, but he didn't complain during the war. Her parents were smokers; but there were no cigarettes, they used to "smoke" dry leaves.

In the ghetto they had only outdoor toilets, that were never cleaned.

The day in the ghetto; they got up very early, they were always afraid of actions, they always thought about getting food and hiding, it was very quiet in the ghetto.

During one action Gita was caught and convoyed to the main square where she saw many young people. It was at the time when the Germans started using gas chambers. The use of gas chambers had its own ritual: first the cars would bring German officers, then the Jews were directed without any force to enter the back of the trucks - the gas chambers. Gita decided to run away. The streets had no names, she didn't know where she was going, and then she saw a toilet and ran inside of it and she spent three days without food or water in filth waiting to be caught and shot. She left at night, she was covered in dirt, smelled terrible. Some people gave her a dress and she tried to find her way back home. When she returned she found her mother? That episode made her feel sick for a long time. Gita can't even believe that it was her life. Gita was dreaming of pogroms for many years after she left the ghetto. She remembered that women had no periods because of hunger and terrible stress. Gita had no friends in the ghetto, people were afraid of each other. Later Gita learned about underground organizations, that were trying to support very poor and trying to show some resistiveness.

Gita didn't think of love, or friendship, she doesn't remember anybody getting married. Gita remembered an actor from her mother's theatre, Vadim Dolskiy. He was a member of Judenrat. When he saw her mother he first didn't recognize her. Dolskiy helped them a lot, he gave them some clothes, some food.

There was another type of action, called contribution; the Jews had to collect certain amount of gold, or give away certain amount of their own people.

People that collaborated with the Germans received food rations. Some good people went to work for the Germans. Some people pretended to help the Germans, and others were really looking for hidden people and bringing them to be shot

Gita wanted to get out of the ghetto; she knew about a group that was planning an escape, but it was impossible to join that group. Gita knew that she would be either tased or shot; so, she decided to run. She heard that partisans were located between Kuydanov and Boranovich, area deep in the woods. In March of 1943 she got out of the ghetto, and she walked as much as she could during the night. She was very lucky because one family found her with frozen feet and hands; they took her in and later transported her to partisans.

Unfortunately, Gita wasn't able to find the family that saved her, because the whole village was burned down.

Gita happened to end up in a Jewish partisan group of Zorin. The majority of people were old and children. They had no guns. They were trying to get weapons by attacking Germans on the roads, as a result, many partisans were killed. They were all starving, they had food once a day; watery soup with grains. Sometimes they found frozen potatoes. They lived in dugouts.

There were Russian partisan groups organized by the Belarus's party; they had real food and weapons, except - sold. They were conducting real operations against Germans.

Gita was a doctor; Russian partisan groups were looking for doctors. They came to the Jewish group, who had two doctors. Zorin asked her whether she wanted to go to the Russian group, she agreed despite the fact that she had no real experience. Zorin "exchanged" her for two cows, several bags of flour, bread and other food and a horse with a wagon. While moving from one camp to another, they were under heavy fire, but they survived.

They arrived in the middle of the night, the commander put a huge piece of bread, plate with meat, a glass of milk in front of her; but she couldn't eat it, she hadn't had normal food for years.

That partisan squad had food, meat, bread. There were two other Jewish squads near Zorin's. One was called Western because, it included people from Poland and other areas near Belarus; and the squad of Bielski. The Western Jews joined Zorin's squad. They had specialists and they helped local Jews; they had people who knew how to make clothes, mend shoes, work small mills, etc.

Later Zorin's squad exchange the goods with Russian groups. Gita was in a brigade that had 10 squads. She was in Stalin's squad. Towards the end of the war many local people were trying to join partisans. She remembered that many local policemen tried to join partisans, but they were detected and hanged in full view.

Gita had to organize something like a small hospital. She had to find medications and surgical instruments. Partisans, that had connections with Minsk found some necessary materials. They had no anesthesia, and they would drink high quality alcohol. She started providing first aid to wounded partisans. She trained two young women as assistants. Gita lived in the dugout with patients.

In the spring of 1943 all partisans had to destroy the rail road, to prevent Germans from bringing supplies to Minsk area. The whole squad including Gita went on a mission. They were supposed to destroy the part of the railroad from Boronovich to Brest. They had to bomb the rails, bomb the trains. Unfortunately, the squad in front of them didn't arrive on time, so they had to get to the area and bomb that part of the railroad as well. At that time the bombs were very primitive. Gita remembers that they tried to run, but the snow was melting and the water didn't let me run fast. She had her medical supplies and a winter coat and a shot gun. Her comrades helped her to carry the supplies. Then they discovered that 3 people were missing,

two were killed, the third one had a gun wound into the spine. They had the airport that was used to transport wounded partisans. There was very little space, so they had to push wounded people inside to get them to the hospital.

Gita remembered that she had one very serious surgery and she had to use a middle made of piece of wire, no antibiotics and the young man survived. Gita is amazed that people survived surgeries and severe wounds without proper modern treatment.

Gita remembered that her squad was involved in an attempt to kill Kuba. The partisan had one of them, a young woman who worked as a housekeeper in the German Casino. She put a bomb under the mattress of Kuba. That young woman received the "order of the hero of the Soviet Union".

During one episode, when partisans were surrounded and they had to walk through swamp Gita's diploma from medical school got wet and partially destroyed. So, when she started applying for a job after the war, one of the party officials questioned her about her diploma. He trusted her because, she had paperwork from partisans. Five years later, when she had to go through attestation, her diploma was questioned again and she was denied attestation at first. After a long exchange of letters, she got the proof that she was a student of a medical school and she received a certificate of graduation from the medical school. She was very fortunate that the archives survived.

Gita received medals for work as a partisan; she attended the parade in 1944 when the partisans were honored. There were 70 thousand partisans. She refers to the famous Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg, who mentioned their squad in his stories.

After her squad stopped functioning she was sent to work as a director of the medical department in the prisoners of war camp. Gita was very upset because, she was supposed to provide medical treatment to soldiers who might have killed her own family. The humanism that Soviet Union demonstrated to the prisoners of war can't be compared with the cruelty of The Germans towards the Soviet prisoners of the war. Gita had to write detailed reports about their medical conditions and causes of death. While Soviet prisoners had to work and never had food, and were often shot on the spot.

Gita worked in that position in Brest until the end of 1945.

In Minsk Gita met her old Russian friend Vera from the medical school, she wore a uniform. Her story was very different; when war started her husband gathered the whole family and they evacuated to Asia. Later she went to the army and worked as a doctor. Gita told her a story with the coat and Vera insisted on visiting that woman. They found the house and they found the woman. Her friend confronted the woman.

Gita had a Jewish friend Lisa, but she couldn't find her.

When her fellow students gathered after the war she found out that only two Jewish doctors survived; her and Sema, who aged severely.

Gita got married in 1945 and moved with her husband to Harikov. Gita met her husband while she was with partisans. One day they heard great noise from many cars. Gita stayed with the hospital. Then one of the hospital soldiers went to look out and when he didn't come back, Gita went to the river and saw a big truck with the radio. Then the door opened and she saw the soldier walking out with a man in the officer's uniform. That car was called an "agitation car". The soldiers came to the partisans' camp. The commander invited Gita and other officers to have dinner. Among those officers was Gita's future husband. Some time later he came back. They had dinner again, they talked about Red Army liberation of Belarus. Then the commander announced that the army wants Gita to join their squad. Gita said that she didn't want to leave partisans, and then he said, "it's OK, I'll find you".

After the war during the parade of the partisans in Minsk, that officer came and found her. They happened to work in the same city Brest and they got married.

After the war Gita had to obtain official passport, but she had no documents, no birth certificate. She had to get the proof of her age. In line to the office Gita saw a husband of her mother's friend with his son. Gita approached him, he recognized her and invited her to their home. In that apartment Gita recognized her mother's fur shawl and she confronted the husband. When the woman came home and saw Gita she fainted. Gita told them her story about the ghetto, about starvation, about an old woman stranger who saved them.

Gita went to Minsk in 1963. New houses were built in the place of the ghetto. She saw a memorial to the Jewish victims. The memorial was made like a ditch with a hand raising with an eternal flame. The only building she found was a theatre that was built before the war, it helped her to find the area of the ghetto.

Gita talks about antisemitism in The Soviet Union because, the Jews were not admitted to the best schools and they were not allowed to demonstrate their skills. Her mother went to the best school in Moscow, but because she was Jewish she didn't have opportunities that her classmate had. She was so beautiful, people recognized her on the streets.

Gita grew up hearing anti-Semitic comments in public transportation all the time. In Ukraine, in Harikov, it was everywhere; in transport, in stores. People were openly telling Jews that they have to go to Israel, instead of "eating Russian bread", as if Jews were not fighting during the war and working as most devoted members of the society.

The antisemitism got worse after the war and it was getting worse every year. Her daughter wanted to go to medical school, but it was impossible for a Jewish girl. Only for people with connections. Her daughter was able to get to the Institute of agriculture, department of electrification.

Her son went to the evening institute he had to work and study. Gita's daughter is still in Ukraine with her 19-year-old daughter. When Gita left, her daughter was told to voluntarily leave her job. She was intimidated by her administration. Gita's granddaughter is a competitive ballroom dancer. She also is a student in the mathematical department.