

Recordings

Priscilla: 1&2

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LAMOTH Project - The Story of Genia Bardach and Pola Spitzer

Room 1: Before the War

Genia Bardach and Pola Spitzer are sisters who survived the Holocaust together. Their story starts when Genia was born September 23, 1927, and Pola was born November 4, 1929. They grew up in a relatively small town in southwestern Poland named Radomsko. Around 30,000 people lived in this town before the war, and roughly a third of the population was Jewish.

Their parents, Hersh and Sarah Fogelman, were Orthodox Jews. They were loving parents who were protective of them, along with their youngest brother Abraham Joseph. Their father, a devoted family man, was a highly respected Master Tailor. Mr. Fogelman's workshop was part of their home where he employed around 8-10 workers. Their mother helped their father in the shop, raised the children, and took care of their home. The Fogelman's were relatively well off and were able to afford a house maid. They also had a garden in their backyard. Their home was furnished with custom-made furniture, linens, religious ornaments, books, and paintings.

As young girls, Pola and Genia shared an idyllic childhood, and remember frequenting the movies and shopping with their mother, going to the park to enjoy picnics, enjoying outdoor

activities such as long walks and boating, visiting their relatives, as well as attending a public school. They enjoyed many activities, such as ice skating, sledding, playing hopscotch with their friends, and having fun with the swing set at their grandparents' orchards. While they spoke Polish, they were also taught rudimentary Yiddish, which they spoke mainly with their grandparents.

Neither of them had experienced overt anti-semitism prior to the war. Both women believe that their family had sheltered them from having that negative experience.

Room 2: Rise of Nazism

In 1938 Genia and Pola's family – including their parents, maternal grandfather, and younger brother – moved into a newly constructed house that their parents had built with tremendous care and patience. On September 1, 1939 World War II broke out when Germany invaded Poland. German aircraft bombed Radomsko, and blackouts became a frequent occurrence. As the invasion progressed, the Germans began shooting at civilians with machine guns. When their town was bombed, the Fogelmans left on foot, following a highway looking for a safe place to find shelter. As they walked along the road they could hear bombs and machine guns firing at people on the roads. They eventually reached the countryside where they stayed until the firing ceased. When they came back home, they found their home was not bombed. Unfortunately, on October 1939, they were forced to give up their home to the Nazis, who wanted to occupy it as their headquarters in Radomsko. The Fogelmans were given a short amount of time to pack their belongings and leave. Genia remembers that their mother, in retaliation to that ultimatum, grabbed an axe and destroyed most of their furniture in a fit of rebellion. The Fogelmans later moved in with Mr. Fogelman's sister, who was also a Radomsko

native.

Room 3: Ghettos

On December 20, 1939, the Nazis established a ghetto in Radomsko. Jews were not allowed to leave while Poles were not allowed to enter. Because Genia and Pola's aunt lived within the boundaries of the ghetto, they did not have to relocate as many other families did. Despite living in cramped conditions and experiencing shortages of many of life's essentials such as food and water, the Fogelmans did their best to continue living a normal life.

Within the ghetto, Genia and Pola's education was done in secret, as Jews were not allowed to go to school or read books. Before the war started, Genia had finished sixth grade, while Pola had finished fourth grade. Their parents paid a woman named Helen Fagin to teach Genia and a woman named Lodka Pouska to teach Pola. Under their tutelage, the girls managed to finish two more grades. In addition, Genia and Pola were taught German, which their parents perceived would be useful to their survival and indeed it was.

There were many harrowing experiences that Genia and Pola experienced in the Radomsko Ghetto. One of the most memorable came towards the end of June 1941, when the Nazis were liquidating the ghetto population. Genia and Pola, along with their mother and younger brother, were part of one of the many selection processes systematically done by the German soldiers. While their father was at work, which consisted of tailoring clothes for the Nazis, the German soldiers started deporting people to labor and extermination camps. When there were not enough cattle trains to accommodate the number of Jews selected for deportation, the remaining civilians, including the Fogelmans, were packed into a nearby synagogue. When the Germans eventually called out their names, they were certain that they were going to be sent

to their deaths. However, it turned out that their father had bribed the German soldiers into sparing his family.

The next day, in order to avoid another situation like what they had just experienced, their father had the children hide in his work building's attic.

Room 4: Deportation and Extermination

On the same day the children went into hiding in their father's work building's attic, many women in the ghetto were rounded up and deported. Unfortunately, to their dismay, their mother's name was called, as she in fact was one of the women being deported. They later learned that she was one of many innocents sent to Treblinka. Treblinka was an extermination camp at which the vast majority of people were gassed upon arrival. Upon its opening in July of 1942, approximately a million Jews were murdered there. After the war, Genia and Pola also learned that their father had died at a work camp called Skarzysko-Kamienna, where it is estimated that between 18,000 and 23,000 Jews perished.

Room 5: Labor Camps

When the Radomsko Ghetto was in the process of being liquidated, many of the Jewish inhabitants were sent to Treblinka and labor camps. While the Jews were not clear about the details of this camp, they knew that they were doomed. In January of '43, in the neighboring village of Czestochowa, a childless woman named Natalia Pisula, who was a Polish Catholic, decided to take in a girl from the Radomsko ghetto, in hopes of having her as her own. There she met a girl named Halina, who was Genia's best friend, and successfully smuggled her out. However, Halina implored Natalia to save Genia, so she went back to the ghetto to find her.

When Natalia asked Genia's father for permission to take his daughter, he agreed, recognizing the opportunity to save her life. After Natalia smuggled Genia out of Radomsko, Genia asked Natalia if she could go back to save Pola. Again Natalia returned to the ghetto and brought Pola to Czestochowa, at a great risk to her life. At the time they left the ghettos, Genia was fifteen years old and Pola was thirteen years old.

Natalia introduced the three girls as visiting cousins to the Czestochowa neighbors. However, her neighbors became suspicious. Since Czestochowa was less than thirty miles away from Radomsko, the girls were at risk of being recognized by the residents of their former town. While their father sent money to Natalia for as long as he could, he was eventually deported to a concentration camp. After this, Natalia was unable to financially support the girls, making their situation dire.

It was then that Natalia became acquainted with a nineteen year old Polish woman working as a maid in Germany, who wanted to stay with her family rather than return to her workplace. On Natalia's suggestion, Genia took the opportunity to assume her identity and work in her place. This was the first time Genia had traveled out of Poland, and yet she somehow managed to travel to Germany with her falsified papers on her own despite her fear and uncertainty. During the trip, there was an instance when she was stopped by the German police and incarcerated; however, she was later released without explanation and allowed to commence traveling again.

Genia arrived at her destination, a German farm, where she explained to her new employers that she was to replace their previous maid. She was instructed to work in the fields and manage the household, which was extremely difficult for her not only because she never experienced hard labor, but because she was a fifteen year old girl expected to work as hard as a

nineteen year old woman. Exhausted and miserable, she considered revealing her identity as a Jewess to escape her situation when her German employers found her work in the city.

Encouraged by her change in fortune, Genia went to a new household to accept her new job.

Meanwhile, Natalia's father came and took Pola to his farm in the middle of the night, crossing the border between a German-occupied and German-unoccupied village. The farm was located in the middle of a forest, where partisans were hiding in an attempt to fight the Germans. Pola remembers a night where Germans stormed into the home, demanding papers from each person living there. A moment before it was Pola's turn to admit that she did not possess the papers, there was a knock on the window of the house. Assuming it was a group of partisans, the Germans ran out of the house to investigate, and never came back. Later, the family tried to find out who had knocked on the window; however there were no footprints in the snow that surrounded the house. Genia pronounced this as a miracle.

It was still dangerous for Pola to be in Poland, so when Genia found out that the family she was working for needed extra help, she convinced them to hire her sister. To make sure that they would take Pola, Genia told her German employers that Pola's parents were cruel, and implored them to save her. With falsified documents, Pola left Poland to join her sister in Germany.

There, they did their best to assimilate in Germany, going to church on Sundays. They were well liked by the family they worked for, and the grandfather would often show them caricatures of Jews expecting them to find the cartoons amusing.

Room 6: Rescue

Eventually, as Germany started to weaken as the war raged on, all foreign workers were

required to work in Labor Camps. Posing as Polish women, both Genia and Pola were sent to the same camp called Primerwald. There, they worked in an ammunitions factory with other women from Eastern Europe, most of who were also Polish.

Their living conditions were very poor. They were malnourished, cold, and overcrowded in barracks that contained about eighteen to twenty women per room. Harsh winds would blow between cracks in the walls during the night, making it difficult to get a good night's sleep. Meanwhile, the factory itself was often bombed by the Allied forces.

However, Pola was sometimes allowed to go to a neighboring town to visit the family she used to work for because she had a special pass. Moreover, as the Germans started to lose the war, the Nazi supervisors became friendlier with the workers; though they still kept them busy, the workers were not expected to do anything essential. The Russians liberated the camp on May 2, 1945, six days before the war ended on May 8, 1945.

Room 7: Life after Liberation

Because they couldn't be sure they would be safe after the War ended, Genia and Pola initially hid from them in a barn where Italian prisoners of war and workers took care of them. However, as it turned out, the Russians needed workers themselves to manage the cattle they were confiscating from the Germans. There were a lot of cows outside the city, and both girls, along with other workers, were put to work and housed in a nearby mansion to tend the herd for as long as the Russians needed them. They were well cared for there, with adequate food and shelter, and the workload was manageable. Gradually, they were able to begin to recover, at least physically.

The summer after the war, Genia and Pola, apprehensive and afraid to reveal their Jewish

identity, went back to Poland to look for Natalia. They went to her father's farm, and upon finding it destroyed, went to Czestochowa, where they registered with the Red Cross to find work. They also discovered a Jewish community, where they were finally able to reveal their identities as Jewesses. They proceeded to Radomsko, and there they learned that their parents died. Tragically, they would eventually learn that their entire extended family of about forty members have perished during the war, with the exception of two cousins. One cousin from their mother's side survived in Poland, while another cousin from their father's side was given to a Polish couple at the age of five. When the war ended, she ran away and ended up in an orphanage in France, eventually reconnecting with Genia and Pola by mail. She later immigrated to Israel, got married and started a family.

After the War, Poland remained unsafe and unstable. Many Russians were killing Poles for collaborating with the Germans, while many Poles were organizing pogroms to kill the remaining Jews. One of the victims was a distant relative of theirs who was shot by an anonymous Pole. Recognizing the danger that they were in, Genia decided to leave Poland. Initially, she traveled to Czechoslovakia to reach one of the American Zones. When that venture failed, Genia and Pola risked traveling back to Germany, and from there ended up in Landsberg, a district in Bavaria that was hosting one of the larger displaced persons camps that consisted of mostly Jewish refugees. They registered to go to both America and Palestine, as the nation of Israel had not been established at the time. However, because traveling to Palestine was illegal at that time and because America responded first to their request, in 1946 both girls were set to arrive at New York. They knew they had an aunt living there, but being unable to remember her address, used the Red Cross to locate her. Moreover, as Genia and Pola were both under eighteen, the Children's Aid Society sponsored their trip to America via the children's transport.

They arrived on December, just in time for the holiday season, and were greeted by New York with dazzling lights. Shortly after arriving to America, Genia changed her name to Jean, after discussing with her family that she should have an Americanized form of her Polish name.

Having arrived in America, their first priorities were to find a job and go to school. When the holidays were over, they registered for evening high school classes and found work. Though they could have asked for foster parents to help support them financially, both were unable to bear the idea of having a substitute family. As difficult as it was for them, they were able to secure their independence.

Two years after their arrival on June 26 1949, Jean married her husband, a survivor from Austria, and eventually had two children, a boy and a girl. Pola also got married. She married a survivor from Hungary on February 11, 1951, a few days after graduating from evening high school.

While Jean and Pola were adjusting to their new lives, Halina was sent to Switzerland to recover from poor health. Through a coincidence, Jean discovered some relatives of Halina in Argentina who brought her to Buenos Aires. She eventually married a survivor from Hungary and had a daughter and a son. In 1969, Jean and Pola had a reunion with Halina in Los Angeles.

While at first they had lost contact with Natalia they were able to find her later in life. Natalia, who never returned to Czestochowa, eventually divorced her husband. When Jean and Pola were able to revive their correspondence with her, they invited her to visit them in America. While she was unable to do so at first, she had an eighteen year old daughter named Janine whom the two sisters sponsored so she could come and live with them. They shared each others' cultures, such as when Janine learned a few Jewish words as well as the basics of Kashruth, while Jean and Pola took her to a Polish church every Sunday. When Janine later met and

married a man of Italian origin at a Catholic church in North Hollywood, Pola's husband gave her away. She had a son in 1970 and eventually moved with her family to Florida. Meanwhile, Natalia was eventually able to come to America in 1972 and 1979 to visit Jean, Pola, Janine, her grandson and her son-in-law. She was later honored by Yad Vashem, or Righteous Among the Nations, for risking her life to save Jean, Pola, and Halina from the Nazi extermination. Jean was also able to reconnect with their teacher from the Radomsko Ghetto, Helen Fagin, during a world gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Washington in 1983. She has been a tireless advocate for Holocaust survivors, who continued her education in the US, eventually earning her doctorate in English literature.