

## ■ HIDDEN CHILDREN ■

# SHELLY & RACHEL HIDE ON A FARM

*First cousins Shelly Weiner and Rachel Giralnik were four and five when the Germans invaded Soviet-controlled Poland in June 1941, occupying Shelly's hometown of Rovno. Six months later, the Nazis massacred 17,500 of the town's Jewish residents, forcing the remaining Jews into a ghetto. In July 1942 these survivors were systematically murdered. Shelly and her mother were able to escape to the nearby village where Rachel and her mother lived. They went into hiding on the farm of Christian neighbors until the Soviet army liberated their region in February 1944. In 2006, Shelly and Rachel were interviewed about their experience, and in 2013 they returned to visit Rovno (now Rivne, Ukraine) and the farm where they had hidden.*

**SHELLY:** The Nazis formed the ghetto, and there were about 5,000 Jews left, and they took all the Jews from the ghetto and they marched them to the center of town, and they walked them to the edge, and they had dug trenches, and they shot them. And that's when our whole family—our aunts and uncles and cousins and my grandfather—they were all killed that day. But my mother had been told by one of her Polish neighbors that they were going to do that, and she snuck us out of the ghetto. And we walked to Rachel's mother's house that night.

**INTERVIEWER:** *Could you describe the hiding place?*

**RACHEL:** The first hiding place was in a barn attic.

**SHELLY:** It wasn't that big. It was just big enough for us to sit down or lie down. We couldn't stand up. We stayed there 18 months.

**INTERVIEWER:** *What was life like in hiding, in terms of meals and conditions? How did you make it?*

**RACHEL:** Meals? We depended on the people who hid us. If they had some food, they would bring us something. It was very scarce. Conditions? We didn't have a toilet. It was hot in the summer, it was very, very cold in the winter.

**SHELLY:** We couldn't bathe. We couldn't change our clothes. We couldn't get up and walk. We couldn't make any noise. We were children. We had nothing to play with. The only thing we had was straw. We didn't have anybody else to talk to. Just us.



Edward Serotta/Centropa

In 2013 Shelly and Rachel returned to Ukraine and visited the farm where they had hidden. They were welcomed by the family's son and daughter-in-law (right). Shelly holds the photograph of the Palaschuks, who hid them for 20 months.

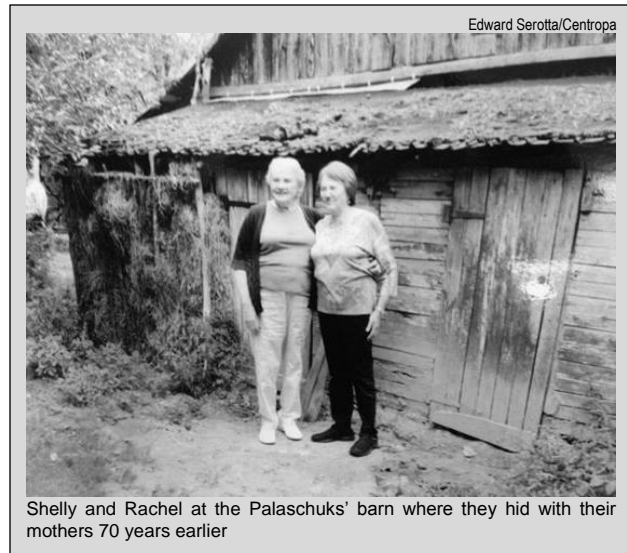


Natalia and Nikinor Palaschuk

*INTERVIEWER: Did anyone ever question you or suspect you?*

*SHELLY & RACHEL: Yes, yes. They were always suspecting.*

*RACHEL: There were some neighbors who were always suspecting that these people were hiding us. And the Ukrainian nationalists were after Jews, too. And the people who hid us, they were very scared, maybe more of the Ukrainian nationalists than of the Germans, because if they would find us, they would kill them, too. And they had a son who was in charge of all Ukrainian nationalists, and he knew that his parents were hiding us, and that's why they never came to look for us, because he wouldn't let them do it.*



Shelly and Rachel at the Palaschuks' barn where they hid with their mothers 70 years earlier

*INTERVIEWER: Were you ever threatened during this time?*

*SHELLY & RACHEL: Yes—oh, yes.*

*SHELLY: They came once to look for us. The farmer came and told us that they were outside waiting for us. It was amazing, because we were probably five and six at the time. We were very young.*

*RACHEL: The farmer said they are coming to look for us. They were tipped off.*

*SHELLY: We had no choice but to come down. And so, the two of us, for some reason, we begged our mothers not to just come down passively. We would take our chances and run into the woods, because the barn was right at the edge of the woods. We just made this plea to them, because they said to the farmer that we needed a few minutes to say goodbye to each other, because they knew what was coming. And that is what we did. We ran into the woods that night, the four of us. And we could hear them that night, looking for us.*



Antoshka, age 16, the farmers' daughter who hid with Shelly and Rachel at times when Germans came to the farm for food or to conduct searches

*RACHEL: We spent the night in the woods. It was summertime. And then we went from the woods into the cornfields, and we were hiding there, for three days, with no food, no water, nothing.*

*INTERVIEWER: And then what happened?*

*SHELLY: Then we came back to the farm, because we were very dehydrated and very sick. It was August. And then the farmer made a place for us in the barn, where the horses drink out of the trough. Just for a week in this horrible trough; it was so hot and horrible. At that time, he was tired of the Germans coming to get his wheat and everything, so he had dug a hole in the woods to put his grain and all his produce and everything. So he said he would dig another hole and put us in it.*

*RACHEL: And his daughter, too, because he was afraid that the Germans would take his daughter to Germany.*

*INTERVIEWER: How did you pass the time, all those hours?*

*SHELLY: We don't know. Our mothers talked to us a lot, told us stories. What else?*

*RACHEL: We were crushing straw. That was our pastime, playing. And before we went into hiding, there were a lot of things happening. They killed our cousins and our aunt and uncle in a closeby village. Actually the Ukrainian nationalists killed them—and another cousin, Luba—who were coming looking for us; they thought they could hide together with us. They couldn't because they found them, and they were killed.*

*SHELLY: As children, we knew about all these things, and we heard a lot of those things. Even when we were in the barn, we could hear people being shot and killed, and screaming and crying. So even at that very young age we knew about fear and death.*

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*SHELLY: There were a lot of side stories we're not telling you.*

*INTERVIEWER: Would you tell one or two, if you have time?*

*SHELLY: My Aunt Sonja, Rachel's mother, would tell me that she would sneak out. She had a lot of things that she had stored in different places. She would sneak out in the middle of the night, and she would go to different farms and she*

***There are very few people our age who survived the war, who were hidden. It had to be not because of what we did or who we are, but it was our mothers. They were very strong women.***

*would take these things and sell them to the farmers, and bring some of the money to our farmer, so he would have something. And [the farmers] would say "Where are you coming from?" And she would say, "Oh, I'm so far away from here." You know, she would never tell them. Our mothers were very brave women. There are very few people our age who survived the war, who were hidden. It had to be not because of what we did or who we are, but it was our mothers. They were very strong women. And my aunt had stories to tell all the time. She was the one who was brave and would get up in the middle of the night. And she knew all the dogs in the village and they would always follow her, because otherwise she would wake up the whole village and she would be caught.*

*RACHEL: And something else. We had a cat before the war and, of course, when we went into hiding, the cat was left alone. I don't remember that, but my mother told me that the cat came into that barn where we were hiding, looking for us. Evidently he knew, or he smelled or felt that we were there. The people who were hiding us were afraid that the cat might reveal our existence there.*

*INTERVIEWER: What happened to the cat?*

*RACHEL: I don't know. I don't know what happened to the cat.*

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*INTERVIEWER: How were you able to leave hiding?*

*SHELLY: We were liberated by the Russian army—the Russian army came in 1944. So the farmer took our mothers into town, or they walked into town—I don't know how they got into town—I think they walked into town, to make sure that it was true; they weren't sure. Then he took us in a wagon and brought us into town.*

*RACHEL: We were left for a while.*

**SHELLY:** Right. They didn't want to take us yet. I don't know how long we were kept before he took us into town. But the war wasn't over yet, because they were still fighting in 1944. A lot of bombs and things falling, a lot of air raids.

**RACHEL:** There are a lot of details that we left out. It sounds like it was easy, but it wasn't. It was hell.

**SHELLY & RACHEL:** There was a lot of hunger, a lot of frostbite. We were frozen, both of us. There were a lot of rats and mice and lice. Hunger and malnutrition.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *As you look back [is there] any memory that particularly stands out?*

**RACHEL:** Darkness, hunger, fear, cold—

**SHELLY:** Cold, a lot of cold, and darkness—

**RACHEL:** Not being able to move around, not being able to talk loud—

**SHELLY:** I think, yes, darkness. If you go into my house today, there are no curtains on any windows. A lot of light.

**RACHEL:** I like light, too. I hate dark homes.

**SHELLY:** Every light goes on as soon as I walk into the house.

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**INTERVIEWER:** *How long was it before you came to the United States?*

**SHELLY:** Well, that's another long story—

**RACHEL:** A long story! [laughter]

**SHELLY:** A long story and a half! In 1945 when the war was over, Stalin [leader of the Soviet Union] made a decree that anybody who was a Polish citizen could go to Poland, so we went to Poland. Rachel and her mother stayed in Russia [in the Ukraine, then a Soviet territory]. And we went to Poland and we were there for about nine months, and then the Poles started having pogroms\* again because some of the Jews returned from the concentration camps and wanted their property back, and the Poles did not want to give it up. In one town 60 Jews were slaughtered. We made our way to the American Zone in Germany, so we were in a Displaced Persons camp for three years.† And then we wanted to go to Israel, but Israel was not a



Shelly and her mother in Poland, 1945



Shelly as a flower girl in her uncle's wedding, 1945



Shelly and her parents, Eva and Myer, in a Displaced Persons camp, 1948

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\* Pogroms are organized massacres of an ethnic group, usually approved or organized by governing authorities, referring primarily to the planned massacres of Jews in eastern Europe and Russia/Soviet Union beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

† Rachel's father had been forced into the Soviet army. He survived the war and returned to Rivne after the war. Rachel and both of her parents were able to get to the American Zone in Germany.

state [nation] as yet. So we were supposed to go—I'm making this very short—on one of these illegal boats to Israel. We were all packed and ready to go. I got up in the morning and I had the mumps, so we had to give up our places. That boat was captured by the British and there was some fighting, and the people were sent to Cyprus (island in the Mediterranean Sea). So, again, my mom didn't think it was such a good idea, so we ended up in the United States in 1949. And that's how I got here. That's my story.

*INTERVIEWER: Sounds like the short version.*

*SHELLY: Very short version—there's a lot in between.*

*INTERVIEWER: Rachel, you stayed in Russia?*

*RACHEL: We stayed there. I went to school, got my education, got married, and had one child. We had not been in touch with Shelly and her mother for a long long time until Stalin died [1953]. And when he died, Shelly's mother, my aunt, found us, and we started corresponding, and they helped us to come to the United States.*

*INTERVIEWER: And what year did you come to the United States?*

*RACHEL: In 1980. My mother, I, my husband, and my son.*

*SHELLY: We had no idea where they were, absolutely none. My mother was walking down the street in Tel Aviv [Israel]. And this man recognized her and said, "I just saw your sister in Russia." We called them. This was in the late 1960s, and he gave her the address, and my mother went to Russia, and then I went with her in 1974. It was still very communist then. Quite interesting.*

*RACHEL: We moved to Leningrad [now St. Petersburg], and this was where we lived and worked, and I went to school. From Leningrad we came to the United States.*



Rachel as a student in Leningrad, Soviet Union (now St. Petersburg, Russia), 1950s



The family in Rome, Italy, 1980. Left to right: Sonya (Rachel's mother), Jerry (Rachel's son), Shelly, Rachel, and Anatoly (Rachel's husband).

*INTERVIEWER: Could you describe your life when you reached the U.S.?*

*SHELLY: I went to school in Philadelphia. For me as a 12-year-old, it was very interesting. I had never ridden in a car. The most fascinating thing as a 12-year-old was I never believed such a thing as television existed—because, well, that's crazy. How can you see things in the air, pictures being transmitted in the air? And I walked into a cousin's house and there was a television set, and I sat right down and watched it. And things like wallpaper—the most amazing things I thought about—full-length mirrors. These are things that*



Shelly and Rachel with their mothers, Eva and Sonya, in Greensboro, NC, ca. 1996

I had never experienced. Telephones were kind of strange. We didn't have that at all. But it didn't take me long to adjust. I very much wanted to be part of something, because I hadn't been part of anything. I didn't have a childhood, did not have any friends, never played with toys. Didn't have a place—even in the Displaced Persons camps, we moved around a lot. We didn't have a home or apartment; we lived in one room. I really wanted to become part of something.

*INTERVIEWER: Rachel, you came much later to the United States. How was it for you when you arrived here?*

*RACHEL: It wasn't easy. It was very difficult. The most difficult part of it was not knowing the language. This was a big obstacle in getting a job, getting around, everyday life. Was very, very difficult. Of course, I came as an adult, and it was different from Shelly. We did have TV and radio and whatnot [laughs]. I was an accountant back in Russia,*

and when I came here, of course, I couldn't be an accountant, and it was very difficult to get my first job. It was a big problem. It was difficult because back in Russia you were somebody. Here you are nobody [as a new immigrant]. You have to get whatever job comes. That was difficult—difficult emotionally to accept that. You can't work. You're treated differently than you were treated there. You're kind of second-class people. People look at you differently. But then after I learned English, everything fell into place.

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*INTERVIEWER: Many years later, did you ever keep in touch with the descendants of the people who hid you?*

*SHELLY & RACHEL: Yes, yes.*

*RACHEL: After the war, the people who hid us, they were still alive, but I don't remember when they passed away; they were older people. Their daughter was still alive, and their son was killed at the very end of the war. And we were in touch with their daughter until we left the Soviet Union, I and my mother.*

*SHELLY: We also stayed in touch with her. My mother and I ended up coming to the United States in 1949. We stayed in touch with her; we wrote her. We could send packages; there was a way to send packages to Russia, and we wrote to her and sent pictures and everything until 1984. And she died. We were planning actually to go see her in 1984. Her name was Antoshka. She lived on the farm.*



Edward Serotta/Centropa  
Shelly and Rachel at the barn where they hid with their mothers before moving to an underground bunker after the Germans searched for them on the farm

*Rachel: "Going back to the hiding place in 2013 was very, very emotional. . . . The hiding place was still there, and it was the same way exactly as we left it in 1945. The only person who lived there is a daughter-in-law of the people who hid us . . . her son, her grandchildren, and she, they were very, very happy to see us."*

*Shelly: "I have often wondered how the Palaschuk family had such strength and bravery to do what they did. To hide us—four people—when they knew that the punishment would be death for them and their children, and all their property would be confiscated. I am not sure how I would react in the same situation. I don't think that many of us would know how we would react."*

*Return to Rivne (video, Centropa)*

In 2013 Shelly and Rachel returned to their hometown and visited the farm where they had hidden. A video on their experience—Return to Rivne—was produced by Centropa. In 2015 Shelly returned again to contribute to Centropa’s teacher seminar program.

Shelly met Frank Weiner in high school in Philadelphia and they married in 1958, moving to Greensboro in 1972. They have three daughters and five grandchildren. In 1957 Rachel married Anatoly Kizhnerman in the Soviet Union, and they came to Greensboro in 1980. They have one son and two grandchildren. Shelly and Rachel continue to speak about their Holocaust experiences across the state.

[See Anatoly Kizhnerman’s narrative in Ch. 4, *The Holocaust*.]

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Shelly Weiner & Rachel Kizhnerman, 2006, 3 hrs. (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
  - collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn607952
- Oral testimony of Rachel Kizhnerman, Shoah Foundation, 1998 (USC Shoah Foundation)
  - Access video via [sfi.usc.edu/vha](http://sfi.usc.edu/vha).
- *Return to Rivne: A Holocaust Story* (video, 23:33, Centropa, 2015, with script & study guide)
  - ◆ Video [www.centropa.org/centropa-cinema/return-rivne-holocaust-story?language=en](http://www.centropa.org/centropa-cinema/return-rivne-holocaust-story?language=en)
  - ◆ Script [www.centropa.org/sites/default/files/film\\_script/return-to-rivne-final\\_script.pdf](http://www.centropa.org/sites/default/files/film_script/return-to-rivne-final_script.pdf)
- “Holocaust survivors to speak about revisiting hiding places,” [Greensboro] *News & Record*, October 11, 2013
  - [www.greensboro.com/news/local\\_news/holocaust-survivors-to-speak-about-revisiting-hiding-places/article\\_1f5a24cb-8f8e-516c-99ad-7fb15c76adc8.html](http://www.greensboro.com/news/local_news/holocaust-survivors-to-speak-about-revisiting-hiding-places/article_1f5a24cb-8f8e-516c-99ad-7fb15c76adc8.html)
- Videos on other hidden-children survivors in North Carolina, with lesson plans (Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education in North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC)
  - ◆ Renée Fink: On the Back of a Stranger’s Bicycle (see narrative excerpts in this chapter, p. 122)
    - [youtu.be/eJAiC7fJXSo](https://youtu.be/eJAiC7fJXSo)
  - ◆ Esther Lederman: Hiding for Our Lives (see narrative excerpts in this chapter, p. 128)
    - [youtu.be/J1mvWa2ky5M](https://youtu.be/J1mvWa2ky5M)



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