

RESISTANCE ■ GIZELLA JOINS THE RESISTANCE

Gizella Gross was born in Tarnopol, Poland, in 1928. She was 11 when World War II broke out, as the Nazis invaded from the west and the Soviets from the east. Her parents decided to send her to live with an aunt and uncle in the nearby city of Lutsk, but soon the Jews of Lutsk were forced into a ghetto. Her uncle was a doctor, so he was allowed to leave the ghetto more often to treat Christian patients. Gizella would accompany him, carrying his medical bag. One day her uncle called for her to bring a medical instrument to a patient's home. There she realized that, with her blond hair, she was mistaken for a non-Jew.

I walked out without my yellow patches.* Suddenly I hear, "Eh, Kleines? Wohin gehst Du? Wohin gehst Du, Kleines?" "Where are you going, little one?" I was walking with my head bowed. They were German soldiers calling me. "Now look at her," they said. "How pretty. She looks like my — look at the blonde hair. Look at those eyes. Do you want a piece of chocolate?"

I remember walking on. I didn't turn around then. I came to the farm and I must have looked a bit strange. Uncle says to me, "What's the matter with you? You look positively yellow. And where are your patches?" He turned to the wife of the farmer he was treating and said, "Do me a favor, put the patches on her." But the farmer's wife shook her head. She looked at me and said, "No, I won't. She doesn't need any patches. She doesn't look Jewish."



Gizella in May 1941, at age 13½

As life became more perilous in the ghetto, her uncle found hiding places with Christian families. He and his family hid in one farmer's barn, and Gizella was to hide on another patient's farm. She slipped out of the ghetto and went to meet people who would take her to her hiding place.

We were to meet at a meadow on the edge of town. I heard trucks coming and hid. When they arrived, they were full of people. The Germans yelled at them to get down, and I saw a shower of yellow stars as they got off. They made the people dig trenches as they argued about how deep the trenches should be. Then they lined everyone up by the trench and made them disrobe. There was a command to fire, and they started shooting. I saw one lady holding her baby. She was smiling and kissing her baby with tears streaming down as the bullets hit her. There was screaming for a while, and then it got quiet. Those voices have haunted me every day of my life.

The Germans left and I crept out. Blood was rising to the top of that pit. I was standing and looking at it when two men grabbed me. "What do you want?" I said. Then somebody put his hands on me, and I was placed under straw in a wagon. They said, "You be quiet. Look, we know who your aunt is. We know who you are."

Her "captors" were members of the Polish Resistance who would train her to join the Resistance.

And that was the beginning. I was taken to a peasant home. They listened to me speak German, Russian, and Polish. I spoke those languages without any difficulties. I was given the birth certificate of a young woman whom I knew—her name was Veronika. The birth certificate

* Jews were required to wear yellow patches with the Star of David (✡), a symbol of Judaism.

was authentic, but the only problem was Veronika was much older than I. So the next picture you might see of me, I had put my hair up so that I looked a little bit older. I remember thinking that I looked much more mature.

[One Resistance member] spoke Polish to me. He spoke fluent Russian. He would correct my Russian. He would correct my Ukrainian, never my Polish. My German was better than his. He said, "I want you to tell them that you live in a village [the village on Veronika's birth certificate]. Say you have a sore throat and that you have come to be cured in Lutsk. You have a sore throat."

At night he would shine a light in my face to wake me up. He would say,

"What's your name?"

"Gizella Gross."

"What's your name?" SLAP.

"Veronika?"

"WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

"VERONIKA!"

That way I became conditioned. When I went for that certificate [ID], I was Veronika.



After getting her false identification papers, Gizella began working with the Resistance. She was told she would know only one person among its members.

The person that I was to know was named Makar. Throughout my stay, I only knew that one man. I was so naive that I didn't even ask why until I was sent on my second job and was given a different identity. I never was permitted to ask any questions. Nothing. If I did, their standard answer was "None of your business. None of your business."

At that job, I was supposed to be the granddaughter and a niece [of people pretending to be her grandmother and uncle] in this house, which was a nicer home than most in that neighborhood. The commandant, the German commandant in that city, lived in that house. My job was to polish his boots, bring his meals, empty the wastebasket. Anything I found in the wastepaper basket, I was told to bring to Makar. My job was to live in this house. Never ask any questions. And tell Makar about the comings and goings of the German officers and the types of insignias they were wearing. And I was to listen to what was said. "Pretend you do not understand German so that you can listen to their conversation. Be like a kitten. Ingratiate yourself."

I was always, always, on guard. It was ridiculous. I had no choice of where to go, what to do. They [the Resistance] knew my real name. They knew where my parents were. They knew where my aunt and cousins were. They had me right in their hands. They said they would help with my family.

You were able to figure out how to do these things. You do not always have to be taught. Maybe they knew that I had this ability, and that I could, intuitively, find ways. Maybe that was my skill—that and those languages that I knew.

You would be surprised how easy it was when you thought of it. You were able to figure out how to do these things. You do not always have to be taught. Maybe they knew that I had this ability, and that I could, intuitively, find ways. Maybe that was my skill—that and those languages that I knew.



Gizella Gross

Gizella's ID in place of a passport before emigrating to the U.S., 1946



Gizella's photo on her naturalization certificate when she received U.S. citizenship, March 1952

With little notice, Gizella left the commandant's house with the woman posing as her grandmother. Soon she was assigned to steal copies of identification and ration forms.

In my next job, I had a completely different identity. I was provided with a job as a cleaning person in a house where all the identification forms necessary for Christians to exist were processed and stored. This was the hub of the German regional occupation. People could survive with those papers. I never knew whom they gave them to. That's what I wonder about today. I would like to know that I saved someone's life. Maybe they saved some Jews.

In late 1943, Gizella was arrested at a checkpoint, jailed, and tortured for information. In January 1944 she was sent to the Majdanek concentration camp and endured brutal treatment and slave labor in a stone quarry, as well as being forced to translate for the Nazis. As the Soviet army approached in summer 1944, the Nazis evacuated Majdanek, sending most prisoners to other camps and executing those who were near death. Gizella was selected for the second group, but no bullets hit her and she was able to hide in the execution trench until the Germans left and the Soviet liberators arrived.

Now liberated, Gizella served as a translator for the Soviets—especially when they interrogated captured German soldiers—until the Allies achieved victory in May 1945. She entered a hospital in a U.S.-run Displaced Persons camp. After months of recuperation, Gizella came to the U.S. in 1946 to live with an aunt in New York. She was the only member of her family to survive. Later she recounted her troubled first years after liberation.

Nothing made me happy. I remember I was like a machine. I ate. I answered questions. But I was dead inside. Why? Why? Why? A person's profile would remind me of someone I knew who was killed. When my aunt made a rare roast beef, the sight of blood made me ill to my stomach; I ran to the bathroom. One day she made hamburgers. The smell of the charred meat brought back the smell of the oven. And I hated. I hated so. One day I was taking a walk. I heard two women speaking German. I turned around. There must have been such hatred on my face. These women looked and ran away.

And I realized that I was given a chance, and that it was up to me to do something with my life. I could not hold onto this hate. I felt that the hate would eat me up, and whatever God-given ability I had, I would not be able to use. I realized I must not let Hitler win: "He will not kill me." If I did not change, I knew—sooner or later—I would break down. That's how I started. I would take one step forward, and two steps backwards. But I knew that if God in his mercy and wisdom let me live, I had to do something productive with my life. I am his partner. This was the beginning.

I realized that I was given a chance, and that it was up to me to do something with my life. I could not hold onto this hate.

I want to prevent atrocities like that from ever happening again. People have to believe that it happened to the Jews and it can happen again. I love America and I love democracy with all my heart, but how can people defend it if they don't realize it can be threatened? I have an obligation to talk about it.

Gizella graduated from high school in 1947 and from college in 1951. In 1952 she married Paul Abramson, and in 1970 they relocated with IBM to Raleigh, NC. They had two children, four grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. For over 38 years Gizella dedicated herself to teaching about tolerance and the Holocaust throughout the state of North Carolina.

[Read about Gizella's life in the Lutsck Ghetto in Ch. 4 (The Holocaust: Ghetto).]

ONLINE RESOURCES

- "Holocaust survivor says 'learn to love,'" *Carteret County News-Times* (NC), May 18, 2008
www.carolinacoastonline.com/news_times/news/article_8f7a692c-b1c3-55a0-b4d6-95d18b2623d5.html
- "May you always walk on the sidewalk," *The News of Orange County* [NC], March 25, 2009
www.newsfororange.com/news/article_0cc1c458-c768-582e-b9a8-8fdcb288c39e.html
- *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, by Cecile Holmes White in cooperation with the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1987
archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit
- Life after the Holocaust: experiences of six Holocaust survivors who rebuilt their lives in the United States (online exhibition, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
www.ushmm.org/exhibition/life-after-holocaust/



Paul and Gizella Abramson, ca. 1993



Gizella (second from right) with her family, ca. 1993



Gizella with one of the many groups of students she spoke to about her Holocaust experience, ca. 1995

Selection adapted from Cecile Holmes White, *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, published in cooperation with the N.C. Council on the Holocaust, 1987, archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit. Reproduced by permission of the author. Family photographs and photo of Gizella Abramson's false ID reproduced by permission of Michael Abramson, son of Gizella Abramson.