

# *Renata Yesner's Story*

By Renata's granddaughter  
Raquel Yesner 28<sup>th</sup> July 2015



Hans Kimmel Project

As a young child I knew her as my granny. Today, I see her as the strongest most admirable woman in my life. She faced untold adversity, which left an indelible mark on her family. My grandmother's wartime experience did not end in 1945, at the conclusion of World War Two; the trauma that lives in her has been carried through to the generations of her children and her grandchildren.

Renata Yesner is a woman of incredible bravery and her story will always be told through the eyes of an innocent child. This story focuses on my grandmother and great grandmother and their courage throughout World War Two; the Nazi occupation of Europe, ghettos, concentration camps and mass exterminations.

The Heyman family came from the centre of Kaunas, in Lithuania and had lived there for several generations prior to the war.

## **Early Life**

Renata Yesner's birthday is approximately January 1932. She was born to two loving parents, Solom and Rachel Heyman. They raised Renata and her younger sister Carmella in the town of Kaunas, Lithuania.

On the corner of Mickevicius street, Rachel spent her days as a successful seamstress altering and sewing corsets. Rachel's utter grace and remarkable courage was the sole reason why Renata survived the ghetto and concentration. Solom was originally from Latvia and worked in Kaunas as a solicitor. "He loved classical music and played the violin," Renata explained to me.



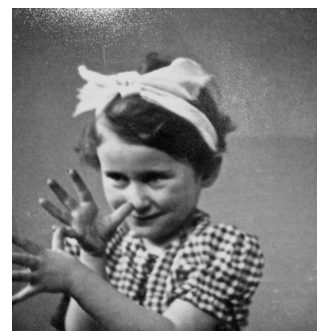
**Renata and her  
dog Tiefka  
approximately  
1934**

Before the Nazi occupation in 1940, and until Renata was about 9 years old, she had a peaceful, enjoyable, normal life which revolved around family and friends. She used to go to a Jewish school called "Yiddishe Literature School", where she learnt Yiddish and Hebrew. The Heymans lived a simple life and visited the main synagogue in Kaunas. They spent many summers in the nearby coastal town called Palanga. "I played with my dog, Tiefka, on the beaches of Palanga," reminisced Renata.

## **Occupation of Eastern Europe**

The Second World War officially began on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland, contravening the Munich agreement between England and Germany. In order to avoid a war on two fronts, Hitler subsequently signed a non-aggression pact with Joseph Stalin who was controlling a Communist Russia at the time. However this pact-fell apart in June 1941 when the Nazis occupied the Soviet Union. This contributed to greater chaos, disorganisation and further warfare within Eastern Europe.

**Photograph of Renata approximately age six**



**Map of Palanga in relation to Kaunas, Lithuania**



During this major historical event my grandmother, Renata was on a school camp situated on the Baltic coast, in a town called Palanga. “My parents saw me off at the station on the way to school camp,” Renata in an interview with the Holocaust institute of Western Australia in 1992.

Palanga was 236 km from her grandparents and her parents home in Kaunas (Kovno as the town is known in Yiddish.) On the school camp, an 11 year old Renata recalls the sight of the Planes and bombings during Germanys occupation of the Baltic States.

In this case it was Lithuania. “It appeared like lightening and thunder and I thought, G/d must be angry to throw such things, then a house next door caught fire.” She remembers the teachers being very distressed and telling the children not to sing any of the communist songs they had learnt. That was Renata’s introduction to tanks, war and occupation.

During this time the Railway that the school used to get to Palanga was bombed, so they all had to walk back to Kaunas in order to reunite with their families. When Renata finally arrived back home, she saw her mother Rachel and Bobba, (grandmother), crying desperately. ”I saw my

mother and granny were crying bitterly, there was no father, there was no grandfather.” In reality German officers arrived to the housing units that Renata’s family lived in.

They questioned the caretaker who was in charge of all the units and asked him to point out any Jews living in these units. The caretaker responded, which resulted in the taking of Solom and Maishe, Renata’s father and grandfather.

Throughout the following experiences, Renata, her mother and her grandmother were unaware of where Solom and Maishe were taken and if they were safe or alive. More than that, they were unaware of what to do in this terrifying situation.

### **The Seventh Fort**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1941 Kaunas, Lithuania was invaded by Germany. During this time an Anti-Communist, pro-German Lithuanian outbreak occurred. Mobs began to attack Jews, who they blamed for Soviet repression and invasion of the Soviet Union. Resulting in a Lithuanian uprising against the retreating Soviet army.

After the war it was proven that Renata’s father and grandfather were taken to the Seventh fort. This was the first Nazi run concentration camp, which was created, in the Žaliakalnis district, Kaunas Lithuania not far from Renata’s home. It is estimated that approximately 5000 people perished here, two of which were my great grandfather and great-great grandfather, (Solom Heyman and Maishe Aranovski.)

The conditions at the Seventh Fort were known to be unbearably dark, cramped and cold. As the Seventh Fort was one of the earliest extermination projects of the war, gas chambers had not yet been utilised, Nazi officers were obliged to take the prisoners into a forest and shoot them. At times, there were also mass hangings. These strategies quickly came to a halt as the Nazi soldiers were having unexpected reactions and intolerable guilt due to the confronting reality of their wrongdoings as well as the cost of the bullets being too expensive.

**The body remains of  
the shooting at the  
Ninth Fort**







**A family photo of Renata, her parents and grandparents, taken in approximately 1937**

### **The Ninth Fort**

The ninth fort was one of the first Nazi experiments in the elimination of the Jewish people. As these massacres occurred earlier in the extermination process, September 1941, the approach was mainly mass hangings and shootings, similar to the Seventh Fort.

The Ninth fort was located very near to Kaunas Lithuania, therefore almost all of the Jews who perished at the Ninth Fort originated in Kaunas. These victims were usually denoted as, 'The Reich Jews'. This is because the word 'Reich' literally translates to realms. During World War Two, Hitler and the Nazis would use this word as a sign of possession and empire. Therefore the meaning behind, 'Reich Jews,' is that, these Jews were now in Germany's possession and Germany could do what they wished with them.

Rudolf Lange was an Einsatzgruppen (SS Security Service and Security Police) commander and on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 1941 he ordered that the first 5 of the 25 trains heading for Riga (town in Latvia) were to be rerouted to Kaunas, Lithuania. The head commander of the third Einsatzgruppen group was Karl Jäger. His particular Einsatzgruppen group snatched everyone from these five trains and deported them to the Ninth Fort.

On November the 25<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, two different shootings occurred. In total of the two slaughters 1,852 Jewish men, 2,755 Jewish women and 327 Jewish children were massacred.

Including my great great grandmother, Renata's bobba (Malka.) The Ninth fort were vile annihilations that took place on multiple occasions during World War Two.



**Jewish policemen standing for roll call on the day of their execution in the Ninth Fort**

**Map of Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland**

### **Introduction to Ghettos WW11**

The first ghetto occupied by German authorities was founded in Piotrków Trybunalski and went into service in October 1939. The ghetto is also known as the 'Jewish Quarter' (Wohnbezirk). Generally the Jewish prisoner would be allowed to exit this ghetto for work purposes.

The initial intentions for the creation of German run ghettos in Europe were to isolate Jewish people into city districts. This idea would disable any sort of dissemination of outside information or news entering the Jewish ghettos. As well as controlling of any of the Jewry concern or questioning inflowing the 'outside world.'



However, during World War Two, three alternative ghettos were introduced, open ghettos, closed ghettos and destruction ghettos.

The Nazi party established approximately 1000 ghettos throughout Europe. The conditions of difficulty varied within the diverse range of ghettos. The majority of the ghettos had unimaginable extremities such as harsh food rations, spreading diseases, long freezing winters with hardly any supplies, large amounts of hopeless orphans and a lack of understanding as to what was going to happen next.

Lodz and Warsaw are the two most notorious ghettos, recognized for their extreme mass of people within small areas. For instance Warsaw encapsulated 400,000 Jews in a 1.3 square mile zone. The ghettos created in Europe hold haunting memories for survivors and were ultimately the prisoner's initiation for the crueler proceedings to come.

***"In the ghetto, young starving children were begging for food, dead bodies were just lying in the streets."- Ed Herman (Warsaw survivor.)***

### **Kovno Ghetto**

After the Soviet Union had fled the Baltic States and Germany occupied, 9200 Jewish civilians living in Kaunas, Lithuania were killed at the 9<sup>th</sup> fort. The Einsatzgruppen in Kaunas killed numerous other Jews. Then extensive laws were put in place, warning Jews that they no longer had a place in their homes as they were to be taken to the ghetto. The remaining Jews in Kaunas were picked up by a horse and cart or taken to a railway where they would make their way to Kovno ghetto.

#### **Crowded Jews arriving at Kovno Ghetto 1941**

Originally the Judenrat (Judenrat is German for "Jewish Council" which consisted of various Jewish leaders, whose job it was to keep order and to communicate to the Nazi masters), of Kovno ghetto was a committee of Jews who were in charge of gathering resources such as housing, employment, education, food and Jewish studies within the ghetto.



The next step for the Jewish civic in Kovno ghetto was electing a leader, resulting with an elder in the ghetto known as Dr Elchanan Elkes. Dr Elkes was very successful inside Kovno ghetto as he created what felt like a life for the Jewish prisoners. He produced workshops, which employed approximately 6,500 striving people and by default created labour brigades.

Between August and half way through October in 1941, 3000 Jews in Kovno ghetto perished. The Nazis slaughtered some of the Jewish people who were in ghettos, whilst some perished due to the excruciating conditions. Following this, the Kovno ghetto was a demoralised, compact, revolting hellhole that so many Lithuanian Jews had to endure.

Despite the unimaginable circumstances, the Kaunas Jewish community created a hospital, medical centres, old age homes, an underground school, music orchestra and soup kitchen. Winters were agonising and the lack of knowledge as to what was occurring was unbearable for the Jews, but out of necessity they got on with their miserable lives.



**Kovno Ghetto, Kaunas Lithuania. 1941-1944 winter**

Shortly after Renata returned from her school camp in mid 1941, Renata and the remainder of her family were sent to Kovno ghetto.

“I remember the horse and cart coming to fetch me for the ghetto.”

Renata, her mother Rachel, Bobba Malka and sister Carmella were all sent to Kovno ghetto. Not long after the arrival of the Heyman women, Carmella, Renata’s younger sister was smuggled past the ghetto gates by a Lithuanian Priest and was looked after in a convent.

Rachel was then located to work in a rubber boot factory, producing shoe supplies for the Nazis. I can’t imagine working everyday endlessly only to know, that your efforts and labours are fighting against you. It was extremely difficult for Renata, Rachel, Carmella and Malka to leave their



home in Kaunas, although Rachel and Malka's worries were much more serious than the children's.

Whilst the two adults were aware of the anti-Semitic uprisings, all that Renata was afraid of was leaving her old life behind, "I wasn't even allowed to take my doll, where we were going I wouldn't be needing it, said my mother," Renata states.

Renata was only ten years old when she entered the ghetto, she didn't work, and she spent most of her days at the rubbish tip playing with the other children. According to Renata her mother Rachel constantly instilled this message in Renata's brain, "Do what you are told, do not go near the fence, only naughty children go near the fence.'



**Two women collect potatoes on an agricultural plot in the Kovno ghetto.**

Renata had numerous positive, but mostly negative memories inside the ghetto walls, some of which I have been lucky enough to hear first hand, others Renata reiterated in her Lithuanian biography, 'Jeder Tag war Jom Kippur.' Translating to, 'every day was like Yom Kippur.' (The biography was printed in German for young school children.)

There are so many moving memories that Renata and her extended family keep dear to their hearts. One of them is the courage and strife that Rachel would constantly show in order to protect her child, Renata. Whilst Rachel would spend her days at the rubber boot factory, she

would risk her life and attempt to steal bread for Renata and Bobba Malka. Occasionally succeeding, half the bread would go to Renata and the other half Bobba Malka would dry and preserve into rusks, so they would last longer.

As her grandchild whenever I ask my grandmother about Kovno ghetto the initial memory she shares with me is one of intensity and sorrow. This is how my grandmother has told me the story to me, “ One day when I was in the ghetto with my mother. I, as well as a Nazi guard were keeping our eyes on a silly young child. The young boy decided to venture towards the gate and the Nazi guard shot him. Just like that.” Renata recounts that at this moment a serious sense of fear condensed her, she was anxious.

Another memory that my father Malcolm likes to share with me is the story about the sugar beets (sweet beetroot,) and potatoes in the ghetto. The food coupons given out at the ghettos gradually became very scarce. Renata gathered a small amount of beet and potato seeds and took the risk to plant the seeds in the lawn of the ghetto, to feed herself, mother and bobba. She would regularly cut the stems of the vegetables so that the guards would not notice.

Renata was a young curious child during the time she spent in the ghetto and as she often got bored she craved something to do with her time. She then sought to knit some crochet with the other children in the ghetto.

Motl, a man that neither Renata, Rachel nor Malka had heard of but who had appeared like an idiot, heard of Renata’s innovative idea. He carved a wooden crochet hook for her to knit with. Whilst Renata recalls that he

seemed to be mad, ‘off with the fairies’, she appreciatively accepted this generous gift from this delirious stranger.



**A group of children in the Kovno ghetto, between 1941 and 1943**

A few weeks later Renata noticed a dead body being collected from the undertakers on a wheelbarrow, it was Motl. Later Renata found out that Motl was a former doctor and after watching his child and wife get murdered it drove him insane, to the point of death.

### **The Selection**

Long lines were commonly seen in the ghettos; queues for roll calling, lines to work, lines when entering and exiting the ghetto but on this day a particular queue was a different. Kovno ghetto had gotten too large for the people in charge, which required selections. There were two separate lines in which Renata's family were separated; one of which Rachel stood in and the other Renata and her bobba stood in.

**Employees of the Jewish council in the Kovno ghetto  
assemble during roll call**

Prior to the selection Rachel had made good friends with a man named Hans who was part of the Judenrat. Fortunately as the lines began to shorten, Hans subtly picked up Renata and positioned her back in the line with her mother, leaving Malka alone in the other line. This was a remarkable miracle that Renata will forever be thankful for.



Renata and Rachel's line was then dismissed, leaving Malka and the rest of her queue's fate in the hands of the Nazi masters. Back at the ghetto, roaring chaos erupted. People sobbed and screamed as their loved ones were snatched out of their lives. Renata recalls her and her mother embracing each other as the realisation dawned on them, they were the only ones left of the Heyman family.

Renata and Rachel later learnt that Bobba Malka was taken to the 9<sup>th</sup> fort, known as, 'the fort of death,' and presumably was taken to Ponary forest (10km south of Vilnius, Lithuania,) and shot. I can't imagine the

tragic loss and heartbreak that Renata and Rachel would have felt when they found out about this catastrophe.



Map of Ponary Forest, Southern Lithuania

Rachel took all the strength she had and made a promise to herself to protect Renata no matter what. But the winters in Lithuania were very harsh and it became more difficult for Renata and Rachel to keep warm, therefore they often got sick. Renata speaks in her biography of the doctor in the ghetto who lived two doors down from her.

He would always tell her that she had bronchitis. She explains the rather strange remedies and methods he would perform to cure her cough, “He took a stick wrapped it in cloth, dipped it in spirit, lit it and inserted into a cup that was later rammed down my chest.” Her coughs would soon get better but this method left large marks on her chest.

As time went on Renata became so jealous of the normal civilians living outside of the gated ghettos. She wanted to be just like them, free. “I envied many birds that flew about the valley. They were masters of all and wandered about as they wished,” Renata yearned for a sense of freedom, so much that she often played a game.

The game was to pretend you were a bird, swoop down, pick up worms, walk about, rest for a while, peck at the ground and essentially be free. Renata found such creative ways as a child to pass time and find an escapism to her cruel reality.

Cruel reality seemed to be a reoccurring theme in Renata’s early experiences. During most of the days in the ghetto, Renata would spend her time at the dump with the other children. When it was winter the



dump became a hazard as icicles covered it. There would be a thick mantle of snow covering the treacherous crevasses and pits.

On one particular winter afternoon Renata remembers her and her friends playing around the dump, until a boy fell inside. Everyone was too busy playing and could not hear any cries or yells. “His parents and other adults along with the police made a search to find him in the dump, but alas when they found him, he was frozen. His foot got entangled in some wire from the fence and he could not release himself,” Renata voices this miserable story of her friend in the ghetto.

...

### **‘Kinder Aktion’**

One day when Rachel was working at the shoe factory outside the ghetto, Jewish policemen warned people that the Gestapo were coming to take all the children away and told the children to hide. This was called the “Kinder Aktion” where the Germans sought to remove all the children from the ghetto in order to make it smaller. The lady who shared a room with Renata and Rachel, Haja (who was luckily sick that day and not at work) ordered Renata to hide underneath a bed, and placed pots, pans and other objects in front of her. Haja also hid her own son.

Then soldiers marched in searching for children. Renata recounts the sound of heavy boots stamping about. Then the pans and crockery was scattered about as the soldier searched under the bed where she was hiding. A large bayonet (sharp pointed end of a rifle to stab people) stopped just short of her nose. She had to stifle a scream of terror.



Then all went quiet as the soldiers left and the commotion died down. Renata must have fallen asleep and then awoke to the sound of screaming and crying. Rachel rushed into the room shrieking and screaming, as she couldn't find Renata.

She was so relieved when Renata came out from under the bed, they could not stop hugging each other. Renata has told me this shocking story numerous times and I always get shivers when listening. I have passed on this miracle to many of my friends explaining my great grandmother Rachel's strength.

Parents had returned to the ghetto after work to find their children gone. There was pandemonium and yelling. Mothers and fathers who didn't go to work had their children ripped from their arms. This was an excruciating and disturbing experience for so many parents. Renata remembers one specific mother who was a hysterical women grasping onto a tiny pink shoe as that was the last memory she would have of her child.

Renata only recalls Rachel mentioning the 'Children's Action' once after this horrific experience. Rachel was very happy one day as she had received some good news from a woman about Carmella, Renata's sister. Renata recalls her mother saying, "At least she is happy. God forbid she would have been taken away in the children's action. I suppose we must count our blessings."



**The 'Kinder Aktion' in the Kovno ghetto**

**Jewish women working at glass factory during World War Two**



I can only imagine the great faith and hope that this would have instilled in Rachel, pushing her to keep going and fighting for her family.

...

Things began to settle within the ghetto and slowly the shattered people attempted to return to their daily life. As Renata was now 12 years old she was just able to work with her mother. She started making rubber boots in the shoe factory with her mother. Renata's job was to seep all the rubber offcuts that had fallen to the floor. On the way to the factory looking outside the ghetto Renata would see Lithuanian people carrying on with their lives, and would marvel at the ordinariness of life outside the ghetto and longed to play with the children who had easy happy lives.

The years that Renata spent in the ghetto were crucial years of her transforming from an 11 year old little girl into a 13 year old young women.

During these years she learnt a lot from her mother and also found herself in confronting situations. One confronting situation was the ideas of misery that she would continuously see in the people around her. She saw what misery does to people and what extreme sadness brings.

### **Kovno ghetto 1941-1945**



Rachel had a friend from work named Yenta, who had already lost her entire family and was living in the ghetto alone. She was very good at working and was remarkable with her hands. One day at work she was crying uncontrollably. Renata overheard a conversation between Yenta and several workers, "The ladies on the assembly line whispered to each other and I learnt a new word: pregnant."

Two weeks later Yenta was no longer seen at work so Renata went to look for her in the lavatories for Jewish women. "I came through the door and the first thing I saw was blood on the floor and the razor used for work was lying beside her." Renata then ran to get some help, still very unaware and shocked as to what had happened to her mother's friend. Renata heard conversations within the factory picking up another new word: suicide.

Renata decided to consult her mother Rachel about the incident that day at work. She was so baffled at the situation and needed some answers. Renata asked her mother what the word suicide meant. Rachel replied, “It means that a person does not want to live anymore so they take their own life and kill themselves like Yenta did today.”

Renata was horrified that somebody could do that to himself or herself. Renata then asked her mother what the word pregnant means. Rachel replied, “That has something to do with having babies. Now stop asking me silly questions you know all about babies and the stork. “

Due to the captivity of Kovno ghetto, 13 year old Renata was quite immature and only gradually learnt about adult matters from her mother. As time progressed in the ghettos Renata learnt many more new words from listening to conversations on the streets of the ghetto and at work everyday. She had picked up a lot of new names, “ I had learnt new words like Dachau, Eichmann and Auschwitz and then I heard something which I didn’t understand.” She heard about concentration camps and uprisings in Warsaw although didn’t quite comprehend what so many Jewish peoples fate was going to entail. All Renata knew was that she must strive to avoid entering one of those places.



**Narrow  
lanes in  
Kovno  
Ghetto**



**Scene  
during the  
deportation  
of Jews  
from the  
Kovno  
ghetto**



## **Kovno Ghetto had come to a close**

One evening whilst everyone was getting their scraps of food ready for dinner, the Jews of Kovno ghetto heard a distant drone. Everybody stopped what he or she were doing and raced outside into the open. “Clouds obscured our vision but we prayed that they were the liberators,” recalls Renata. A large commotion then started to arise within the ghetto. People were screaming and running about in utter confusion and terror.

Renata remembers an older man lighting a fire near her and her mother. He then began to scream, “I’d rather die from a Russian bomb than a German bullet.” Everyone had different ideas as to what was happening. Some said they would soon be liberated, others just yelled about concentration camps. All of the theories were settled when the news came out the next morning.

The following day (July 8<sup>th</sup> 1944) a new decree was issued. All of the Jews in Kovno ghetto were to be moved again. Whilst majority of the people were extremely miserable and scared, Renata had rather positive thoughts, “I was looking forward to the journey and could not understand why everybody was crying and upset as it was not so special in the ghetto and any change would suit me. “

Before the next morning Renata and Rachel assembled all the water and food they could find. Rachel created a rusk sack from a pillowcase, with a rope threaded through, so that they could be ‘hands free.’ That rusk sack held everything Renata and Rachel owned which was almost nothing.

Renata and Rachel dressed in all of the ragged clothing that they owned, leaving all the excess items behind, including Rachel’s beloved teapot. The whole of Kovno ghetto was ordered in a line with their luggage by their sides about to embark on a journey



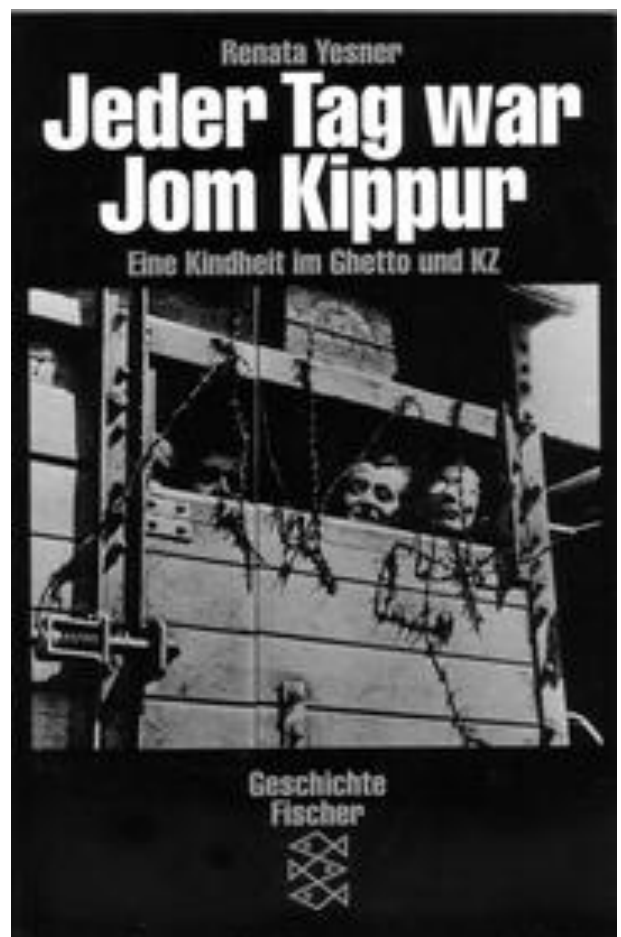
**Women and children being transported by train to a concentration camp**

of fear and horror. There were only a couple children including Renata whom survived the, 'Children's Action.' Renata and her friend named Luba were the only children from their, 'gang,' that hid well enough to continue.

The Jews solemnly walked outside of Kovno gate bewildered with the normality of nature, civilians and everyday life. "A dog that had the audacity to bark at our army of people was soon silenced with a bullet." Renata and Rachel hopped on a train with wooden crates on the wheel, "the type of train that transports cattle" Renata's father, Solom once told Renata.

### **An Excerpt from Renata Biography**

"I had spent three years of my life in the Kovno ghetto at a vital age in a child's growth and development. Normal progress was stunned and in flights of hopeful dreams I often wondered what it would be like to live as most children did. However, survival being the strongest force in human existence, man will endure almost anything while he clings to life at all costs; even when falling (or being pushed) to the lowest depths of degradation. Most will hold on and pray for salvation while those who despair or become cynical give up and are the first victims of brutality. It is interesting to note that some who looked physically able died; yet skeletons hardly able to move clung to life and survived. What untapped forces lurk in the essence of men's souls? We will never know. It is inconceivable even to venture a guess. Are we perhaps capable of far more than we realise?"- Renata Yesner 1995, *Jeder Tag war Jom Kippur*. P78



**Renata Yesner's biography 1995, *Jeder Tag war Jom Kippur***

## **Stutthof/ Arbeitslager**

Stutthof was established in September 1939, originally mantled to be a civilian prison camp, although it later became a concentration camp in January 1942. Stutthof camp was liberated by the Soviets on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945. The camp was situated 22 miles east of Danzig in northern Poland. Over time Stutthof transformed into 40 obligatory labour sub-camps. This concentration camp obtained approximately 115,00 prisoners, 65,000 of which horrifically perished and the remaining people were either liberated in Stutthof or transferred elsewhere.

Principally the majority of Stutthof's population was not Jewish; the prisoners were mostly non-Jewish poles from either Pomerania or Danzig. Over time Polish people arrived from Warsaw as well as Soviets, Danes and Norwegians. Jewish prisoners only began to enter in 1944. Majority of the transfers in 1944 were Jewish women from Aushwitz or the Baltic states.



**Memorial stone to honor the Jewish victims of the Stutthof concentration, created in 2005**

Stutthof's conditions included horrific spreading diseases, unbearable cold and starvation. Due to these terrible factors Stutthof was almost seen as an extermination camp, nevertheless people were also forcefully executed.

One of the worst crimes committed by the Nazis was in Stutthof. Professor Rudolf Spanner, an SS officer and "scientist", was the owner of a small soap factory located in Danzig.

In 1940, he invented a process to produce soap from human fat. This "product" was called "Reines Judische Fett" - which means "Pure Jewish Fat".



**The  
"soap  
factory"  
of Rudolf  
Spanner**

Hundreds of inmates were executed for the "production" of soap. Rudolf Spanner was very proud of his invention. Following testimonies of some survivors, he used to spend hours and hours just to admire his "invention". At the liberation, the Allies discovered chambers full of corpses used for the production of soap.

As time progressed, later in 1944 as the Soviet army was impending, Stutthof was in the depths of its agonizing winter. During this time the SS ordered a death march towards the west including approximately 50,000 prisoners. Thousands and thousands died upon this cruel venture and other people departed by sea on tiny boats.

Horrifically large amounts of people drowned en route. Stutthof is a concentration camp that isn't as recognized as some of the others but it was a place of unimaginable atrocities and sickening tragedies.



**The entrance to Stutthof,  
concentration camp.**



## **Renata's experiences in Stutthof**

Everybody on the train wagons huddled very close together, leaving hardly any room for anyone to stand up. The smell was awful and it seemed like the journey was never ending. Renata and Rachel were starving during the train ride, "I reached into my rusk sack and took out a rusk but I could not eat it, it tasted like shit." After a very long train ride leaving all the traumatic memories in Kovno ghetto, Renata and Rachel saw large gates opening with sunlight gushing upon them.

When they got off the train the majority of the people collapsed, and were gasping for air. Mayhem erupted as the women saw the chimneys at Stutthof. The guards said mothers and children who were not so strong could do sheltered labour and the others would do hard labour. Rachel daringly said that she and her daughter Renata would do hard labour.

The Jews of Kovno marched to the camp. Shortly after this frightening introduction they were given striped dresses which was rough to the touch like a brush. Rachel told Renata to always stand tall and look grown up. They were searched and all of their hair was shorn. They were then taken to their barracks and told that there were 3 women to a bunk and were given one blanket to share. Renata bunked with her mother Rachel and another woman.

**A prisoner being led to execution in Stutthof concentration camp**



They were gathered twice a day for roll call to count all of the prisoners. Renata would stand on her tip toes till her feet cramped, urging to look older and stronger. She learned to build up mounds of earth at the back of her heels and when her number was called out her mother would nudge her (as she would forget what her number was) bearing in mind Renata was only 13.

Renata would step forward on her tip toes all the while trying not to fall. Renata's mother kept telling her if they thought she was older and able to

work, everything would be all right. The women at Stutthof that never came from Kovno ghetto looked even more terrifyingly skeletal.

Renata was the youngest and the smallest in the group. Digging trenches was extremely hard work. Each woman had a section to be dug by the end of the day. Renata recalls that everyday she suffered in excruciating boredom and pain. Questions often fluttered in her brain but she would never dare to question the guard's orders.

They were each only given a slice of bread, substitute coffee in the morning and in the evening thin vegetable soup. The women in Stutthof spoke of food all the time. They were constantly hungry and yearning for anything to give them comfort, warmth and energy. The woman Renata and Rachel bunked with often commented that, everyday was like Yom Kippur. That very interpretation was Renata's inspiration for her future biography, 'Jeder Tag war Jom Kippur'. Renata recounts one night

Renata describes that after work was as bad the work itself. It would be very dark and miserable when everyone arrived back at camp. "Hungry, emaciated people eagerly awaited the one, sparse meal a day," Renata remembers a Norwegian guard who always watched when they arrived from work, waiting to lash someone.

Food was cooked in a milking shed for cows; Renata and Rachel always stared down the kitchen staff, as they were not as skinny as themselves. Sometimes the kitchen staff took all the meat from the workers soup and Renata was almost always left with only stock.

At the worst of times in Stutthof, when the cold was intolerable and the work was painful the women all came together. Renata, Rachel and the other women came together in prayer as the faith in G/d was all these victim's had left. Renata would hear a voice, "Ladies will you please join me in a psalm."

Renata would mimic her mother's and the other women's movements and voice Renata would pray for G/d's help although secretly she thought of G/d as a cruel, evil



**Female prisoners evacuated from the Stutthof concentration camp eat their rations while on board a cargo ship in the Baltic Sea.**

wizard who punished everybody. Renata believed that G/d was the one who gave her lice, who reduced her rations, who stripped her from warmth and who took her family away.

We are unsure how Renata and her mother survived at Stutthof as she seems to have blocked this out of her memory. However it does note in her biography, “Just when we had felt there could not possibly be any chance of salvation, as we were preparing to die, liberation arrived in the form of a ragged, half starved battalion of the Red Army.” Renata was in Stutthof concentration camp for 10 months leaving at the age of 13 on May 9, 1945.

Many of the survivors had to endure the “Death March” in which thousands of prisoners were marched to the Baltic Sea, forced into the water and shot. Those surviving were marched toward East Germany before the Russian army cut them off. Over 25,000 prisoners survived the Death March.

### **‘The Wandering Jew’**

After the war had finished Renata and her mother went back to Lithuania and found Carmela also survived. After looking after Carmela for over 3 years, the foster parents had strong emotional ties to her and initially did not want to lose Carmela. After some persuasion that took a while, they let her sister return to her real mother, Rachel.

Before the war broke out all Renata’s aunts, uncles and Rachel’s cousins had left Lithuania for a better life in South Africa. Leaving Rachel, the only sibling to look after their parents, Maishe and Malka. After the War due to Rachels remarkable will herself, Carmella and Renata were the only ones left.

The three of them then departed to Zimbabwe then known as Southern Rhodesia where they went to live with Rachel’s sister Jenny. Renata finished her schooling there and went on to commercial art college in Johannesburg South Africa.

By 1952 Rachel had remarried and they went to start a new life in Zambia then known as Northern Rhodesia started a bakery. Zambia is where Renata fell inlove with a man named Ronald Yesner, my late grandfather and was married shortly after; three children followed Stewart, Malcolm (my dad) and Simone.



**Renata and her husband Ronald approximately 1962**



**Renata, 2006 visiting the flat her and her family lived in Kaunas, Lithuania**

Life in Zambia was peaceful and Renata constantly strived to care for her mother, after everything Rachel had done for her. The Yesner's lived in Zambia for over twenty years. Renata left Zambia in 1975 and went to live in England. This was followed by a move to Australia where one of her sons were living.

Renata has lived in Australia for over 20 years and a few years ago she returned to Lithuania with two of her children to retrace her life and experiences so her children could learn and pass on her legacy. I am beyond excited go on Israel Studies Tour this year and am the 6<sup>th</sup> Yesner member to visit the history of millions of Jews including my beloved family.







motivates me to do better, try harder. My Hans Kimmel is not just documenting my families history but it is a honourable tribute to their bravery and determination.

The aftermath of the war was very different for Renata and Rachel. This was because Rachel created a shield of oblivion and protection around Renata throughout the war. Renata got on with her life with a bit more ease as she was young and eager to gain the years, which she had lost.

However Rachel had severe posttraumatic stress and never entirely recovered from the horrors of World War Two. After World War Two the attitude was very dismissive and they way to deal with these struggles was simply never talking about it and moving on. Today we know that those sort of tactics only increase a persons stress and anxiety. As time progressed Rachel trauma never dimmed.

For the first 2-3 years after the liberation Rachel spent her nights wailing and screaming demanding her sister Jenny sleep with her every night. A couple decades after the war Rachel was put in a hospital in Zambia which helped to facilitate her worry and suffering. Renata and her husband went to visit Rachel.



**Renata, 2006 visiting Ponary Forest where her grandmother perished**

Renata reached out her hand to touch her mother as a sign of comfort. Rachel immediately reacted with fear, grabbing her daughter's hand, clenched Renata's finger and violently broke her finger. Rachel claims she thought that Renata, her own daughter was a Nazi.

The aftermath of the war wasn't exactly a paradise compared to the camps and ghettos. These survivors have to live with terrifying memories and unimaginable trauma. I can only thank Rachel for her tremendous strength therefore enabling my grandmother to live her life with little stress and ordeals. Renata and Rachel shared the same graceful, resilient and loving characteristics. I really admire their efforts to keep moving and forgive.

*“Human nature is such that it will not always believe the bad things and holds that the good things are true, even when these are improbable. It is necessary to believe in something in order to survive.”* –Renata Yesner, writing in 1959, cited G.Corni, Hitler's Ghettos, p.300



