

FELICIA FUKSMAN: STUDY GUIDE

BACKGROUND

Felicia (Faiga) Fuksman (Lewkowitz) was born in Lodz, Poland, in May 1920. Lodz was an industrial city (textiles) near the German border and had a mixed population of Jews, Poles, and Germans. Felicia, the second oldest child, lived with her parents Abraham and Hana, her brothers Simon and Shmil, and her sisters Rachel and Esther. Felicia's father was a tailor. The family was very poor and lived in a one room apartment at #7 *Brzesinka* St. "I'm coming from a very poor home," Felicia tells us in the documentary. "But we had a very happy life because we had each other." When the war began on September 1, 1939, Felicia was studying at night school to become a nurse. She loved Poland and considered herself a Polish patriot.

WORLD WAR II

In the documentary, Felicia says that everybody in her circle was confident about a Polish victory against Nazi Germany, believing that England and France would help Poland.

KEY TEACHING POINT: After Hitler seized the rump

state of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, England and France issued guarantees of Poland's independence. This was an effort to dissuade Hitler from further aggression. Hitherto, the anti-Semitic, anti-democratic, military government in Poland was viewed by the Western democracies as an *ally* of Nazi Germany.

On September 3, 1939, three days after Hitler attacked Poland, England and France declared war on Nazi Germany but didn't launch the expected (and promised) attack. Felicia was visiting her much beloved grandmother Hanja in the small town of Zgierz near Lodz when German planes dropped bombs on the town and toppled a nearby house. Hanja and her grandchildren immediately offered the prayer *Shema Yisrael*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." The prayer is recited in the morning and the evening – and in times of danger.

In Lodz, the Germans burned the synagogues in their first acts of terror. They dynamited the Kosciusko statue, symbol of Polish independence, and plundered wealthy and non-wealthy people, Poles as well as Jews - the Nazis and their collaborators were thieves as well as murderers. They beat up Jews and ripped off the beards of Orthodox men. Felicia's father and her brother Simon were seized on the street by the Germans and taken away for 'work,' never to be seen again. This region of western Poland was incorporated into the German Reich. The majority of the Polish population was expelled and forced to seek quarters elsewhere in Nazi occupied Poland.

KEY TEACHING POINT: The Nazis quickly instituted a rule of terror; people were petrified and afraid to resist. In addition, the Nazis plundered Jewish *and* Polish property – it was a mad rush to get rich at the expense of others.

LODZ GHETTO

Lodz was renamed *Litzmannstadt*. The Jews were ordered to wear a yellow 'Star of David' patch – sewn to their clothing on the chest *and* on the back. In February-April 1940, the Nazis established a ghetto in the northern part of Lodz called *Baluty*, a district that was impoverished long before the war. Lodz was the first Nazi ghetto created in occupied Poland and would be second largest (behind Warsaw). The ghetto was surrounded by walls guarded by German SS and their collaborators. The 'residents' of the Lodz ghetto were completely unable to communicate with the outside world. Jewish resistance was impossible. Thirty-eight thousand five hundred Jews from Austria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Luxembourg were sent to the Lodz ghetto. "Unlike the original ghetto inhabitants, who had been exposed to malnutrition over a period of several years," Sara Zyskind wrote in her memoir *Stolen Years*, "these newcomers had no time to develop a defense against the disease. The death toll among them soon reached inordinate proportions." Jews and gypsies from the Lodz region were also imprisoned in the ghetto, whose population reached 200,000. The mixture of nationalities in tight quarters, with little food, further sowed discord, confusion, and despair.

KEY TEACHING POINT: The establishment of a ghetto was a key stage in the Nazi murder strategy. The Jews were concentrated in one locale, subject to deportation to an 'unknown' destination.

Owing to hunger and unsanitary conditions, disease was rampant.

Felicia's older sister Rachel died of tuberculosis, and her younger sister Esther froze to death on the street while begging for food. Her grandmother Hanja died in bed – with Felicia present.

Between 1940 and 1944, 46,000 Jewish people died of disease, shootings, and starvation in the Lodz Ghetto.

See: Lodz Ghetto, Inside a Community Under Siege, compiled and edited by Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides; With a Camera in the Ghetto, by Mendel Grossman; Stolen Years, by Sara Zyskind; The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto 1941-1944, by Lucan Dobroszycki; and The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto, edited by Alan Adelson.

JUDENRAT and RUMKOWSKI

As they did in all ghettos, the Nazis established a *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) in Lodz. Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski was appointed 'Jewish elder' and was a 'liaison' to the Nazis and responsible for executing their decrees. Rumkowski was corrupt and exploited his position for personal gain – and sexual pleasure. He argued that (some) Jews would be spared if they became 'valuable' workers in the German war economy. Under German orders, the *Judenrat* operated ninety workshops in the ghetto, employing 77,000 Jews. These workers received extra food (still a paltry amount). "Only work can save us," Rumkowski said. As in all Nazi ghettos, a Jewish police force was established. It enforced the Nazi decrees (and received extra food for its troubles).

KEY TEACHING POINT: The *Judenrat's* role is a painful,

controversial subject. One view claims that the *Judenrat* collaborated with the Nazis and abetted the destruction machinery, while another view argues that the *Judenrat* didn't know about the death camps and tried to alleviate Jewish suffering in an impossible situation.

'NURSE' in the GHETTO

In view of the wretched conditions in the ghetto, the Germans feared a typhus outbreak. With her experience as a student nurse, Felicia possessed a valuable 'skill.' She was given work as a 'nurse' assisting Jewish workers in a workshop (and preventing the spread of disease). As a result of this 'war-essential' work, Felicia received extra food and avoided being placed on the list for 'evacuation.'

BRONIA LEWKOWITZ

Felicia's friend Bronia Lewkowitz (same name as Felicia's but no relation) was born in Poland but had moved to Salzburg, Austria, long before the war. She was a highly skilled surgical nurse and lived comfortably with her husband and two daughters. The Nazis seized Austria in March 1938 – the *Anschluss* ('Union'). During *Kristallnacht*, seven months later, the Nazis murdered Bronia's husband.

KEY TEACHING POINT: *Kristallnacht*, or "Night of the Broken Glass," occurred in November 1938. In retaliation for the

assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a young Jewish man, the Nazis orchestrated the destruction of synagogues and Jewish homes in the Greater German Reich and mercilessly beat Jewish men before imprisoning them in concentration camps. Those men with visas to a foreign country were eventually freed. Those without visas perished in the camps.

See: *Crystal Night*, by Rita Thalmann and Emmanuel Feinermann.

After *Kristallnacht*, Bronia sent her ten and twelve year old daughters to England on a *Kindertransport*. In the documentary, Felicia refers to the *Kindertransport* as the “free emigration.” In 1940, the Nazis sent Bronia back to her native Poland, where she ended up in the Lodz ghetto. She met Felicia when both women worked in the ‘Hospital for the Working People.’ Bronia, who was in her mid-forties, helped Felicia immensely – she wouldn’t let her give up. Bronia was a *true* friend.

KEY TEACHING POINT: Bronia was inspired to endure the hardships because she had something to live for: she knew that her two daughters were still alive and she desperately wanted to be reunited with them. Bronia’s role in Felicia’s experience provides students with an opportunity to discuss the supportive role of friends during the Holocaust – and in their own lives.

NAZI DEPORTATION and DECEPTION

In early 1942, the Nazis began deporting Jews from the Lodz ghetto to death camps. Jews received official notices from the *Judenrat* that they were being sent to 'work camps' in the countryside. They were allowed to take twelve kilograms of belongings and ordered to report to an assembly point (courtyard of the prison on *Czarniecki Street*). They were promised a loaf of bread.

KEY TEACHING POINT: The Germans stated (and spread rumors) that the Jews were being 'resettled' or 'evacuated' in order to 'work.' That made sense. 'After all, it is war-time,' people reasoned. 'Why will the Germans kill us? They need us to work. Besides, we have no choice.'

"Like everyone else," Sara Zyskind wrote in her memoir, "I was longing for a chance to get out of the ghetto. The prospect of living and working in the countryside excited our imaginations." Carrying rucksacks on their backs or lugging pieces of luggage, people trudged to the trains – not knowing what lay ahead but hardly imagining the truth.

The first deportation was in January 1942: 10,000 people were sent to the Nazi death camp in *Chelmno*, a village near Lodz. In regular transports between January 1942 and September 1942, 116,000 Jews were deported to their deaths.

KEY TEACHING POINT: *Chelmno* was the first Nazi death camp established in occupied Poland and began 'operations' on December 7, 1941, coincidentally the same day that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. At *Chelmno*, the Nazis used gas vans (resembling moving trucks) to kill people. The bodies were dumped in pits but, when the tide of war changed, were burned in huge pyres. The Nazis attempted to erase the evidence of their

crimes, proving that they were the first Holocaust deniers.

In September 1942, the Nazis launched an 'action' to deport the children and old people from the Lodz ghetto. "The decree cannot be revoked. It can only be slightly lessened by our carrying it out calmly," Rumkowski said. "Brothers and sisters, hand them over to me. Fathers and mothers, give me your children." During nine days of terror and murder, 20,000 children and old people were seized and deported to *Chelmno*.

Felicia's mother Rachel was murdered during a Nazi 'action' in the ghetto. Felicia's brother Schmil, thirteen years old, was taken from the apartment to the courtyard and put in line with old and sick people – a 'bad' line.

With the approach of the Red Army in August 1944, the Nazis 'liquidated' the Lodz ghetto. Felicia was placed on one of the last transports. To deceive the Jews about their destination, the Germans allowed them to take twelve and a half kilograms of belongings. The deportees were given a loaf of bread. Most of them were sent to the death camp at *Auschwitz-Birkenau*.

One hundred and forty-five thousand Jews from the Lodz ghetto were murdered at *Chelmno* and *Auschwitz-Birkenau*.

Felicia and Bronia were sent to *Ravensbruck* concentration camp on the Baltic Sea (northern Germany). They were later sent on a cattle train to a Nazi labor camp at Wittenberge (misspelled in documentary) on the Elbe River in eastern Germany, where they were slave laborers in an airplane factory.

‘BOILING POTATOES’

As the Red Army approached Wittenberge in April 1945, the Germans dynamited the camp in the effort to murder the remaining prisoners (who were witnesses to the Nazi crimes).

Felicia and her friends slipped out of the camp and scavenged for food in abandoned German homes. As Felicia tells us in the documentary, she found some potatoes and continued to boil them even after her friend Helena was killed by shrapnel. She was about eighteen years old.

KEY TEACHING POINT: Her years of suffering as a Nazi slave had made Felicia indifferent to death. In the moment of liberation, she was more interested in assuaging her hunger with the boiled potatoes than she was in her dead friend.

NOT WELCOME HOME

After the war, Felicia returned to Lodz in search of family members. She knocked on the door of her family’s apartment and was cruelly rebuffed by a Polish woman in her mid-thirties, who was the new ‘tenant.’ The woman told Felicia that the Jews weren’t welcome in Poland.

KEY TEACHING POINT: Many ‘ordinary’ people profited from the murder of Jews. The ‘ordinary’ people included the ‘good’ neighbor who, after the Jews were ordered into the ghettos, simply moved into the ‘vacated’ Jewish homes – or seized Jewish owned businesses. After the war, coldness greeted many survivors when they returned to their homes. Many Jews were killed *after* the war, in some cases by their former neighbors. On July 4, 1946, at least forty Jewish survivors were murdered by Poles at Kielce, Poland.

See: Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz, by Jan T. Gross.

POST-WAR

Felicia spent a year in Lodz after the war – waiting for family members to return. None did. Felicia was the only survivor in her family. She worked as a ‘sitter’ in Lodz until saving enough money (\$25) to buy her way out of the country. Hidden beneath the seat of a truck, Felicia arrived in Berlin, which was then occupied by the Americans, the British, the French, and the Russians. She spent three years there in ‘Displaced Persons’ camp in the French Zone.

Ironically, Felicia was safer in the former Nazi capital than in her Polish hometown.

In 1950, not knowing anyone and not speaking the language, Felicia traveled by ship to New York City and then by train to New

Orleans. There she met Max Fuksman, a fellow survivor from Lodz. They hadn't known each other before the war, although they grew up in the same neighborhood. They married in February 1951. For many years, Max and Felicia owned and operated Fox Furniture Company on Magazine Street in New Orleans. They had three daughters. Max died in 1981. Felicia has five grandchildren. She lost her house to Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

FELICIA FUKSMAN: GLOSSARY

NAME _____

Define the following glossary terms and explain their relevance to Felicia's story:

1. Lodz –

2. Shema Yisrael –

3. Bronia Lewkowitz –

4. Kristallnacht –

5. Kindertransport –

6. Chelmno –

7. Judenrat –

8. Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski –

9. Ravensbruck –

10. Wittenberge labor camp –

11. Red Army –

12. Berlin –

13. ‘Displaced Persons’ or ‘DP’ camp –

14. Palestine –

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FELICIA FUKSMAN: KEY QUESTIONS

NAME _____

Answer the following questions using information and quotes from the documentary and study guide:

1. Describe Felicia's life *before* World War II. According to Felicia, how did her pre-war life 'prepare' her for the war? How did her experience as a student nurse help her?

2. What was Felicia's feeling about her native Poland *before* the

war? How did Felicia (and others) view the approach of war?

3. Describe Felicia's existence in the Lodz ghetto. How much food did she receive? Where did she work? What happened to her family?

4. Who was Bronia Lewkowitz? What part did she play in Felicia's survival?

5. How did the Nazis deceive the Jews? When did Felicia learn about the gas chambers?

6. What was Ravensbruck? Describe Felicia's experience at there. What was her 'uniform'? How did Bronia save her?

7. Describe Felicia's experience at Wittenberge labor camp. How did she stay warm? What work did she perform there?

8. Describe Felicia's experience with the "bucket of potatoes" on her day of "liberation."

9. Describe Felicia's return to her family's apartment in Lodz after the war. What did Felicia do?

10. Who was Max Fuksman? How did Felicia meet him? Describe their lives after the Holocaust.

11. What is Felicia's message to young people (and others)?

