

# STUDY GUIDE: SHEP ZITLER

## BACKGROUND

In 1917, during World War I, Shep (Shabtai, Sasha, Schepsel) Zitler was born in Vilna (Wilno, Vilnius), capital of Lithuania. The country was then a vassal state of Tsarist Russia but became independent after World War I. A slice of Lithuania, including Vilna, was annexed by newly independent Poland. Shep lived with his parents Beila and Asher, his brother Benjamin (Binyamin), and his sisters Sonia, Rivka (Riva), Rachel, and Doba. Shep's parents owned a fabrics store. Fifty-seven thousand Jews lived in Vilna. Most of the Jewish community, including Shep's family, was Orthodox and lived apart from the Polish population. Shep didn't know *any* Polish people and spoke Polish with a noticeable accent. His first language was Yiddish.

Vilna had a deep religious and cultural tradition and was known as the "Jerusalem of the East." *YIVO*, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, was located there. It was a depository of Jewish culture and literature. The Jewish political organization Bund was founded in Vilna in 1897 to promote labor causes and Jewish nationalism. It was, however, opposed to Zionism.

See: *From that Place and Time: A Memoir 1938-1947*, by Lucy S.

*Dawidowicz.*

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Shep's nephew Shlomo Ben-Asher has researched and written the Zitler family history, publishing it (privately) in a book titled Legacy Interrupted. He collected the family's memories before those memories were lost forever. Every family should have an historian. It shows respect to those who came before us and helps explain who we are. 'When an old person dies,' the adage says, 'a library burns.'

## EMIGRATION to PALESTINE

In the documentary, Shep shows a family photograph taken in 1935 when his sister Rachel left for Palestine. His brother Benjamin had emigrated there in 1933.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** During the pre-war period, the British government controlled Palestine and tried to restrict Jewish emigration. This policy continued after the Second World War and ended only with the establishment of Israel in 1948.

In May 1939, the government issued a 'White Paper' on Palestine that limited Jewish emigration to 75,000 people, including 25,000 refugees, for five years. After that quota was filled, Palestine would be closed to further emigration.

# WORLD WAR II

In early 1939, after Hitler occupied the Czech Sudetenland and turned his attention to Poland, Shep was drafted into the Polish Army and assigned to the 77<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion. In the documentary, he bitterly describes the anti-Semitism that he experienced as a Polish soldier *before* the war. He lashes out at the Poles, who he pejoratively calls *Polaks*.

Hitler and Stalin, though arch-enemies, signed a 'non-aggression' agreement in August 1939. This was the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, named after the Soviet and Nazi foreign ministers. Hitler's purpose was to dissuade England and France from honoring their treaty obligations to defend Poland. In a secret protocol of the treaty, Hitler and Stalin agreed to divide Central and Eastern Europe between themselves.

Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Two days later, England and France declared war on Nazi Germany. Shep's unit was surrounded by the Germans near Radom, Poland. In the documentary, Shep tells the story of his 'partner' (and fellow soldier) Harry Sanders who climbed an apple tree and was nearly hit by German bullets. Shep was captured by the Germans and denounced as Jewish by Polish soldiers (in many cases, the Germans couldn't tell who was Jewish). On September 17, 1939, the Red Army invaded eastern Poland, including Vilna. In July 1940, the Soviet Union absorbed the Baltic countries of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania.

# JEWISH SOLDIER 'OF LITHUANIAN ORIGIN'

Between 1939 and '41, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were 'allies.' The Soviets transferred Vilna back to Lithuania and then occupied Lithuania.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Shep fell into a unique category - the Germans classified him as a Jewish soldier 'of Lithuanian origin,' and no longer a Jewish soldier 'of Polish origin.'

Lithuania became a satellite of the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union was allied (temporarily) to Nazi Germany. As a result, the Nazis were 'cautious' with prisoners (like Shep) who came from a country that was an ally, fearing diplomatic repercussions. Shep and other Jewish soldiers 'of Lithuanian origin' were sent to a POW camp at Kielce, Poland, where they were separated from Polish-Jewish soldiers (who were worked to death or simply shot).

Shep doesn't know why the Nazis didn't murder the Jewish soldiers 'of Lithuanian origin.' He and nine friends from Vilna, including Harry Sanders, spent next five years and seven months in various German POW and labor camps.

# LETTERS FROM HOME

In 1940, via the Red Cross, Shep received approximately twenty letters from his family in Vilna (under Soviet rule) and several packages from his relatives in New Orleans. This, of course, was during the period of Nazi-Soviet cooperation. Shep's mother Beila was frantically trying to get him released – based on his 'Lithuanian citizenship.' She was unsuccessful. As it turned out, Shep was *safer* in a German POW camp than he would've been at home in Vilna. The letters and packages stopped coming in June 1941, when the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union. Shep kept the letters throughout the war.

**KEY TEACHING POINT: The Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland and the Baltic countries (1940-'41) was brutal. The NKVD (Soviet secret police) arrested and executed the 'leading citizens' in those territories, or deported them and their families to the wastelands of Siberia.**

In the popular mind, communism was linked to 'international Jewry,' and as a result Soviet atrocities were blamed on 'the Jews.' These stereotypes created an incendiary atmosphere that the Germans would exploit. They didn't have to create an atmosphere of hatred. It already existed.

## INVASION of RUSSIA:

## JUNE 22, 1941

On June 22, 1941, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union. The German Army quickly occupied Lithuania and the other Baltic countries. Local collaborators attacked the Jews.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** In every occupied country of Europe, local people collaborated with the Nazis and committed atrocities against the Jews – and others.

After these ‘spontaneous’ pogroms, the Nazis began the *systematic* murder of the Jewish people.

## PONARY FOREST

In the wake of the Germany Army’s advance, the Nazis dispatched *Einsatzgruppen* (‘Special strike commandos’) to shoot Jews, gypsies, communists, Polish leaders, and other ‘sub-humans.’ The victims were dumped in pits. The *Einsatzgruppen* represented an initial stage in the ‘evolution’ of the destruction process. Shep’s family was murdered by Nazi SS and Lithuanian collaborators at *Ponary* (Ponar) *Forest*, a pastoral setting located a few miles south of Vilna that was a popular recreation area before the war. Jewish people were marched to *Ponary*, shot in the back of the head, and buried in fuel storage pits (dug previously by the Soviets). Between 70,000 and 100,000 Jewish people were murdered at *Ponary*.

**KEY TEACHING POINT:** Shooting Jews proved expensive

(bullets) and debilitating (to the SS killers). A different method of mass extermination was subsequently developed.

At *Chelmno*, a village in western Poland, in December 1941, the Nazis began murdering Jews in gas vans.

See: *"The Good Old Days" The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, edited by Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen, and Volker Riess.

## STERNA MORGENSTERN

Shep's niece Sterna Morgenstern was eighteen years old and strikingly beautiful. She was raped by the Nazis in the ghetto. At *Ponary Forest*, on the evening of October 24, 1941, a sadistic SS officer named Martin Weiss ('the master of Ponar') allegedly offered to spare her. "A beautiful girl like you doesn't have to die," he said. She struggled with him, preferring to die with her family. He shot her in the back of the head.

## FIGHTERS in the VILNA GHETTO

The Jewish resistance movement in the Vilna ghetto, called the '*United Partisan Organization*,' or *UPO*, was led by Yitzhak Wittenberg, a shoemaker. He was arrested by the Gestapo in July

1943. The poet Abba Kovner assumed command of the Jewish resistance. The fighters escaped the ghetto and fought as partisans in the forests near Vilna.

*See: The Partisan: From the Valley of Death to Mount Zion, and Ghetto in Flames: the Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust, both by Yitzhak Arad.*

## ‘RIGHTEOUS GENTILES’ in VILNA

The Jews in Vilna received little help from the outside – Shep’s family received none. The Nazi penalty for helping Jews was death. A rare ‘rescuer’ was Anton Schmidt, an Austrian sergeant in the Germany Army who smuggled Jews out of the Vilna ghetto in his truck. Schmidt was caught by the Gestapo and executed. Anna Borkowska, born in Cracow, Poland, was mother superior at a cloister of Dominican nuns in *Kolonia Wilenska* near Vilna. Jewish resistance fighters, including Abba Kovner and fighters from the Warsaw ghetto, hid in the cloister. Anna Borkowska supplied weapons to the Jewish fighters and instructed Kovner how to use hand grenades. The Gestapo learned of these activities, and the nuns were forced to close the cloister (temporarily). Two nuns were arrested, including one who was sent to a Nazi labor camp.

## ‘SONG OF THE PARTISANS’

In the documentary, Shep sings the ‘Song of the Partisans.’



This song (or poem) was written in 1943 by Hirsh Glik in the Vilna ghetto. He was later killed by the Nazis.

## *HYMN OF THE PARTISANS*

*NEVER SAY THERE IS ONLY DEATH FOR YOU  
THOUGH LEADEN SKIES MAY BE CONCEALING  
DAYS OF BLUE ---  
BECAUSE THE HOUR WE HAVE HUNGERED FOR  
HIS NEAR,  
BENEATH OUR DEAD THE EARTH SHALL TREMBLE,  
WE ARE HERE!  
FROM LAND OF PALM-TREE TO THE FAR-OFF LAND  
OF SNOW  
WE SHALL BE COMING WITH OUR TORMENT AND  
OUR WOE.  
AND EVERYWHERE OUR BLOOD HAS SUNK INTO  
THE EARTH  
SHALL OUR BRAVERY, OUR VIGOR BLOSSOM  
FORTH!  
WE'LL HAVE THE MORNING SUN TO SET OUR DAY  
AGLOW.  
AND ALL OUR YESTERDAYS SHALL VANISH WITH  
THE FOE  
AND IF THE TIME IS LONG BEFORE THE SUN  
APPEARS,  
THEN LET THE SUN GO LIKE A SIGNAL THROUGH  
THE YEARS.  
THIS SONG WAS WRITTEN WITH OUR BLOOD AND  
NOT WITH LEAD;  
IT'S NOT SONG THAT BIRDS SING OVERHEAD.*

*IT WAS A PEOPLE, AMONG TOPPLING BARRICADES,  
THAT SANG THIS SONG OF OURS WITH PISTOLS  
AND GRENADES.*

## **FIVE YEARS as a PRISONER of WAR**

Shep and his fellow Jews ‘of Lithuanian origin’ were sent to Stalag VIII (A) near Gorlitz, Germany. Here they were forced to clean latrines by hand. In Krems, Austria, they built roads and observed rich black soil unloaded from Ukraine; in Ludwigsdorf, Germany, they loaded coal on trains and worked with heavy rocks. The Jewish prisoners were beaten, humiliated, and nearly starved to death. “I went through a cycle of hell for 5 years, 7 months,” Shep says. He doesn’t know “how I survived six winters in Germany without Tylenol or aspirin, which I didn’t have it. Not good shoes, either.”

As Shep tells us in the documentary, he was almost executed twice – once because of a ‘love letter’ written in German by a Ukrainian girl (a ‘forced laborer’). In the last months of the war, Shep heard rumors (for the first time) about the Nazi annihilation of the Jews ‘in the east.’ Shep and his fellow POWs were liberated near Gorlitz by the Red Army in April 1945.

## **POST-WAR**

After the war, Shep and his friends didn’t want to return to

Vilna. Their relatives had been murdered, and Lithuania had fallen into the Soviet 'sphere of influence.' The latter fact was a result of agreements between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin at the Teheran Conference in 1943 and (confirmed) at the Yalta Conference in 1945.

**KEY TEACHING POINT: At Teheran and Yalta, the Allied leaders agreed to divide Europe into 'spheres of influence.'** As a result, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltic countries, became 'satellite' states of the Soviet Union. Nazi tyranny was replaced by Soviet tyranny. For the people of the Baltic countries and Central and Eastern Europe, this was the meaning of 'liberation.'

Shep and his friends pretended to be members of the Jewish Brigade, which was attached to the British Army that fought in Italy. They were sent to England. In 1948, Shep immigrated to New Orleans where two of his uncles lived. He worked as a clothes salesman and traveled to stores in rural Louisiana. He married an American Jewish girl who had been an army nurse (with rank of lieutenant) during World War II. They had a son.

Shep lost his home to Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

# SHEP ZITLER: GLOSSARY

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

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

1. Vilna –

2. Yiddish –

3. Palestine –

4. 'White Paper' –

5. Polaks –

6. Passover –

7. Seder –

8. *Einsatzgruppen* –

9. Ponary –

10. Sterna Morgenstern –

11. Martin Weiss –

12. Jewish soldier ‘of Lithuanian origin’ –

13. Partisans –

14. Red Army –

15. NKVD –

16. Jewish Brigade –

17. Teheran Conference –

18. Israel –

19. Zionism –

## SHEP ZITLER: KEY QUESTIONS

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

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

1. Describe Vilna and Shep's life there before World War II.

2. Describe Shep's experience as a Polish soldier *before* the war.

3. Describe the 'apple' incident in September 1939, when the Polish troops, including Shep and his friend Harry Sanders, were surrounded by the Germans.

4. Describe Shep's experience when his unit surrendered to the Germans in September 1939. How long was he a prisoner of the Germans? How did he manage to survive?

5. How did Shep's mother Beila try to get him released from a German POW camp? What was the tragic irony of that effort?

6. What was Ponary Forest? Describe what happened there when SS officer Martin Weiss confronted Shep's niece Sterna Morgenstern. What happened to Martin Weiss after the war?

7. Describe Shep's experience as a POW, including the two occasions when he narrowly avoided being executed. In these instances, how was he saved?

8. What were the “two things” that Shep (and other Jewish survivors) promised *not* to do after the war? Why did they make this promise? Why did they ‘break’ it?

9. Shep doesn’t think another Holocaust of the Jewish people will occur. Why?

10. What is Shep’s message to young people?