

73. The voice of Sheyna Gram

THE DIARY OF A FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL FROM THE SHTETL OF PREYLI
FOREWORD AND TRANSLATION FROM YIDDISH BY B. GERTSBAKH⁶
JUNE 22–AUGUST 8, 1941

In addition to the six Jews who survived in the small Latvian town of Preyli, one document survived that, better than any other, gives an account of the bestial nature of the German fascists. This document is the small notebook-diary of a fifteen-year-old Jewish girl named Sheyna Gram, who was killed along with the rest of her family and 1,500 other Jews at the hands of the German fascists in this little town in Soviet Latvia.

This modest diary was handed over by a Russian woman, a neighbor of the Gram family, after the dead girl's brother, Gutman Gram, a soldier in a Latvian rifle division, entered Preyli along with units of the Red Army.

The Khagi family from Preyli, who survived, offer the following details concerning the diary's author, Sheyna Gram:

When the war broke out, the Gram family was made up of six people: the father, Itzik, 60, a tailor by profession; his 52-year-old wife; their older daughter Freyda, 20; their son Gutman, 18; their daughter Sheyna, 15; and their son Leyba, 12. Out of the entire family, only Gutman survived; he was evacuated to the Soviet Union and is now in the ranks of the Red Army.

The Gram's daughter, fifteen-year-old Sheyna, had just finished the sixth grade when the war broke out. She was an intelligent girl of good spiritual development. She was a model student.

Sheyna Gram kept her diary in Yiddish. Only the heading, "The Diary of Sheyna Gram," was in Latvian.

According to the Khagi family, Sheyna Gram and all of her family were killed on August 9, 1941. Her older sister, Freyda, who is mentioned in the diary, was kept back after work that day by the commandant, who, when he had had his fill of her, had her killed on August 16. Sheyna's diary begins on June 22, 1941, the day the war broke out.

B. Gertsbakh.

June 22. At twelve o'clock, the radio announced: "Germany has declared war on the USSR. At four o'clock this morning, German aircraft bombed several Russian cities."

Toward evening, I went to Ribenishki (seven kilometers from the shtetl of Preyli—B.G.) I sit by the radio all the time until midnight. They tell you how to protect yourself from an air raid.

6. The original text of the diary is absent from *The Black Book* collection. Using Gram's diary and B. Gertsbakh's foreword, V. Gerasimova (one of the contributors to *The Black Book*) wrote an essay entitled "Sheyna's Voice," which was not included in the final version. An abridged and edited version of the diary is included here. GARF f. 8114, op. 1, d. 962, ll. 10–15.

June 23. In the morning we find out that they have bombed Dvinsk. I find myself a cart and make my way home. A state of siege has been declared, and we are allowed to be on the streets only until 8:00 p.m. We talk at home until eleven. At night the noise of lots of airplanes can be heard. Tanks go along the streets. There is a great deal of noise everywhere. Everyone at home stays awake throughout the night.

June 24. I got up very early. Outside, everything is quiet. There is no news at all. A first aid group is set up, and I sign up right away. The first lecture was at four o'clock. The doctor explains how one ought to give first aid. After the lesson, we all wait for the bus. New people are coming into town all the time. Each person has something new to report. The Germans are successfully advancing. Everyone in town is growing anxious. It begins to rain toward evening. We have to cover the windows. I lie in bed fully dressed. My sister wakes me up at one in the morning. Airplanes can be heard flying overhead. I listen to the noise for a long time, but then fall asleep.

Wednesday, June 25. I go out into the street early in the morning. There is no news from the Front. Everyone is waiting for the bus. Radios are being confiscated from everyone. Airplanes are flying over head every minute. The outdoor bazaar has been broken up. Assembling in groups is forbidden. The bus comes only toward evening. I go to the Red Cross at 6:00 p.m. They teach us how to bandage people. They have divided the group into two shifts: one from eight in the evening until one in the morning, and another from one in the morning until 5:00 a.m. They assign me to the second group. It is quiet until 2:00 a.m. From two until sunrise, one can hear muffled explosions. They are bombing the railroad beds. They release us from duty at five o'clock.

Thursday, June 26. There is tremendous agitation in town. The Germans are advancing. Soviet cars are hurrying back and forth. Everyone is stocking up on things. Many are heading in the direction of the border. My brother and two of his comrades are heading off on bicycles. I get myself a bicycle and also leave with one other girl. We reach Ribenishki in the evening and spend the night there.

Friday, June 27. We go no farther. We spend the entire day at my aunt's place. Soldiers ride by. Many of them are on the move, running from Poland and Lithuania. In the evening, my friend's uncle comes over. She leaves with him. I go with them as well. Later, though, I thought better of it, and toward morning I return home.

Thursday, July 3. We are living with the Germans for the second day already. No one goes into the streets. A huge German formation with lots of equipment passed through Preyli.

The first day went by quietly. On the second day, the Germans smashed the shops and looted everything. They broke into the synagogue, hauled out the Torah scrolls, and trampled on them. In other streets, they go on various sorts of rampages. All the time, German troop carriers and tanks keep going by. We do not know anything about the situation at the Front. We are all living in a state of great fear. Many German soldiers have stopped in our town. There are some proper gentlemen among

them as well. They keep on reassuring us that they are not going to touch the workers. A decree is published that Jews and Russians do not have the right to fly their national flags. Walking on the street is permitted until 10:00 PM, but no one dares poke their head out the door. We can only sit in the apartment.

There are new acts of repression every day. They send people out to work: weeding gardens, washing floors, and so on. The local peasant population has been ordered not to sell anything to Jews.

Saturday, July 19. An order has been issued that Jews must wear a yellow distinguishing mark. It consists of a five-pointed yellow star,⁷ twelve centimeters wide and long. Men are to wear it on their backs, their chests, and their legs, just above the knee. Women will wear them on their chests and on their backs. Many are arrested and put in prison.

Monday, July 21. A group of fifty Jews is sent to work on peat processing. Each one of them has to work fifteen ster (five cubic meters—B.G.). They work for four days and then go home. No one has been taken from our apartment.

Thursday, July 24. A new group has been driven out to do the peat work. I am fed up with sitting at home and would like to work myself. They register me along with my sister. In the evening, they inform me that on Friday at five in the morning we will need to go to work.

Friday, July 25. At five in the morning, we gather on the market square around the fire tower. There is a roll call, then we move off. It is ten kilometers to the peat works. By eight-thirty, they are already dividing us up into work parties. We work in groups of ten: eight girls and two boys. Our job is to turn over the cut turf. It is heavy work. Every minute, a forest ranger comes running up and urges us on. Work stops at 7:00 PM. A barn has been allotted us as our place to stay for the night. At 2:00 AM we are surrounded by a group of strangers, partisans as it seems.⁸ One of them calls for all the Jews to come out, but when none of us answers, they open fire. The scene in the barn was dreadful. Everyone gathered in one corner, and everyone was praying to God. Fortunately, they were only making fun of us. After the shooting, when no one answered, the men surrounding the barn went away. But we did not sleep the whole night. We went back out to work at 5:00 AM.

Saturday, July 26. At six o'clock we go off to work. They give us one hour for lunch. After lunch, they take away several people in our group. Seven of us are left. We meet our quota before three o'clock, however, and go into the forest, where our things are. After a while, the rest come together, and we head for home. Coming out of the forest, we suddenly realize that one of our group is missing. We start looking, but without any result. Greatly worried about the fate of this one man who disappeared, we make for home. Arriving home, we find him in the room. It turned out that he took

7. This is a mistake in the text; the Jewish star, the *Magen David*, is six-pointed.

8. This is a reference to an organization of Latvian "partisans" who collaborated with the Nazis.

another route. There is a stir in our small town. They are picking up horses, and that night several Jews are taken off to Malta.

Sunday, July 27. This is a bloody Sunday for the Latvian Jewish people.

Morning. All the Jews in Dvinskaya Street are ordered to put on their best clothes, take some provisions with them, and go out into the street. Searches of the homes are carried out. At twelve o'clock, all the Jews are herded into the synagogue. One group of young Jews is sent to dig graves behind the cemetery. Then the Jews of two more streets are driven in to the synagogue.

It is 3:30 in the afternoon. All the Jews are chased out beyond the cemetery and shot there. All 250 Jews: men, women, and children.

This is terrible. We did not expect things to end this way. The handful of survivors expects death at any moment.

Monday, July 28. A nightmare of a day. We learn the details of the awful and tragic end. In the afternoon, a new group of surviving Jews is herded out to do the peat work.

Tuesday, July 29. They leave early in the morning. The word goes around that they have also been taken away to dig graves. Girls are picked up to clean the streets. We look at one another and are amazed that we are still alive. Each person desires their own death. The position of the Jews is dreadful. How long will we suffer? The rumor gets around that they will pick people up again toward evening. We decide not to spend the night at home. A peasant allows us to spend the night in his bathhouse. Late evening, one by one, we go to the baths to sleep. There are six of us, and the bath is small. Only three can sleep there. No one sleeps, however. Dogs are barking the whole night. I sit with my eyes closed. Before me appear the faces of those who have been shot. It seems to me that they are crying through closed eyelids.

Wednesday, July 30. In the morning we return to the apartment. The rooms are untouched. Everything is calm. I stretch out on the bed and immediately fall asleep. There is fresh news every hour. Someone says that they are going to take some more, someone else says that they won't. Whom to believe? For the moment, things are awful. Everyone is sitting and waiting for death.

We learn that an even more horrible death is being prepared for the Jews who are still alive. They will burn us. It makes no difference to me. I don't want to live, I don't want to die. Only one thing amazes me: How is it that we are in any condition to endure all of this? My sister and I decide to conceal ourselves in the baths. We hear good news. They are not going to touch the Jews again. They are satisfied with the 250. They take my sister to work to wash the floors. I was sleeping at the time. Today we sleep at home. It is eight o'clock. It is forbidden to go out on the street. Such amazing weather. Can it really be all up for the young Jews? Will better times really never come again? As for what is going on at the Front, we do not know. There are rumors that the Germans have taken a tremendous blow and that they are being forced back. It is not known how much of this is true. It is quiet at night. I can't sleep

for a long time and look out of the window. It is quiet all around. Only far away in the fields are there some dogs barking.

Thursday, July 31. It is quiet today. We receive greetings from Ribenishki. No one has been touched there. In the morning, they send us out to work. My sister and I go into the fields. We sit there until two in the afternoon. A Jewish ghetto is being set up. Three men are going around taking down the names of those able to work. Every day, some forty of the Jews have to go to the peat works and to sweep the streets. Every day there are new persecutions, and there is no end in sight. We have lived this long, but we do not know whether or not we will manage to survive. They send Jewish girls to clean freed-up Jewish apartments for those who have been killing them. They do not take me. But when they clean out the apartment of my murdered friend Mery Plagova, which they are preparing for a police officer, I go. I gather up her photos and keep them with me. I cannot believe that my friends the Plagovas are already dead.⁹

Friday, August 1. For the moment, all is quiet. We still do not know whether or not we should leave our street. During the night my sister thinks she hears yelling from somewhere. Today she is sleeping with me. I open the window. I let myself out into the street and listen. No one in sight, though. It is quiet all around.

At 6:30, my sister and I have to go and sweep the streets. There are fifteen people in our group. We are cleaning Dvinskaya Street. Then they send us to sweep up the market. After this job, a police officer gives the order to gather two hundred Jews into a group. We stand with our brooms in the market for a long time. Every passerby runs to get a look at us. But then they let us go. I go home and lie down to sleep. When I get up, my sister and I look around the apartment in case they throw us out. We decide to go to see my friend, Damba. Her father was arrested and no one knows what happened to him. There is fresh news. They come and tell us that the ones who were doing the shootings here are leaving for Ribenishki. We want to warn them, but we do not know how. Again, panic. My heart tells me, however, that nothing is going to happen. At 8:30 we have our dinner. Last night, there were footsteps going past our window. I go to the window. A German soldier is walking. Not more than a few minutes go by before a whole group of soldiers appears. We are terribly frightened. I stand by the window the entire time and watch. The soldiers go by and come right back. I sit at the window for a long time, but my eyes close and I go to sleep on my things.

Saturday, August 2. In the morning, they call me and my sister out to work right away. There are six of us girls, and we are cleaning the same policeman's apartment. This is again in the home of my murdered friend, Mery Plagova. Everything in my heart is so heavy and painful. In addition to everything else, a police spy has been assigned to us as an observer, and this means nothing good. We clean until two

9. V. Gerasimova mentions the school photograph of Sheyna Gram and Mery Plagova that she had when she was writing her essay. This photograph has not been found in the JAC archives.

o'clock, and when the only thing left to do is to hang the curtains, they let us go to lunch. We have to be back in an hour. So the whole day goes. Late in the evening, the policeman meets with us and lets us go home. The night is quiet.

Sunday, August 3. Today is Tisha B'Av.¹⁰ I have never fasted on this day or ever fasted at all. Today, however, a week after the great catastrophe, after that bloody Sunday, when so many innocent victims fell, I have decided, keeping it a secret from the authorities, of course, to fast the entire day. At 1:30, they come to see me and register me for the peat work. Mama orders me to eat something, otherwise I will not be able to work. I obey her. Then they change the list and send my little brother instead of me. He has to leave at 5:00 A.M. I go to sweep out the market. Coming back from work, I sit at home. There are rumors that the Germans have been thrown back to the border. Everything is so quiet. People are moving into the ghetto. Our street has been ordered to stay where it is for the moment. The night passes quietly.

Monday, August 4. In the morning, I am ordered to sweep the market. After that, I do various household chores. There is a rumor going around that all those who have left their homes and moved to the Jewish street will have to go back. I do not know whether or not it is true. At one o'clock, there is more news. Our police officer is a dreadfully evil man. He announced to three Jewish representatives, whom he had designated himself, that if the streets were not clean enough, he would have them shot. They decided, then, that five girls would work every hour. For the moment, three girls go out to work, and we are sweeping all of Rezhitskaya Street. Russian peasants live there. No news of any kind from the Front. Then I do a few chores. There is nothing to read.

Tuesday, August 5. I get up late. The others in the house are out working. I study my Russian a bit, then go up into the attic and stack issues of the journal *Yidishe bilder* [Pictures of Jewish Life].¹¹ At four, I go to sweep the market. They come to our place and tell us that we have to clear out of the apartment.

In the evening, the policeman comes to look at the building. We have to get out. Our neighbors are ordered to stay. We do not know quite what to do, then. The policeman comes into our apartment and examines the furniture. They are probably going to give our apartment to someone else, as they did with the Plagovas. We are ready for it. He allows us to take everything with us. For the time being, we can stay until morning.

10. The ninth day of the month of Av in the Jewish calendar commemorates the destruction of both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem; observant Jews conduct a full-day fast as an expression of mourning.

11. *Yidishe bilder* was published in Riga, Latvia from May 28, 1937, to September 22, 1939. It was a heavily illustrated weekly journal in Yiddish about Jewish life, replete with short stories, crossword puzzles, and political and cultural reporting. It was directed toward secular Jewish families. I am grateful to Lyudmila Sholokhova of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York for her assistance in locating copies of this journal.

Wednesday, August 6. The night was quiet. Excitement again in the morning. A commission comes. One man gives the order to stay, another to clear out. There are no apartments to move to. It is as though we are living up in the air. No one knows when our suffering will end! Yet another commission comes and decides that we can stay where we are. So far, so good. At four o'clock, I leave to sweep the streets. It was market day so the streets are full of litter. At seven-thirty, I come home tired and dusty. I have a wash and go to bed by eight-thirty.

Thursday, August 7. Early in the morning they call us out to scrub floors for the policeman at the station house. The policeman treats us very well. We clean in groups of four, and he orders us to come every day to do this work. There are new rumors today that they will be burning or shooting the Jews. Everyone who comes around brings news.

Friday, August 8. The peasants say that lots of airplanes flew over during the night. At seven o'clock we go to wash the floors at the police station. The boss is in a bad mood today. It rains the entire time. At twelve o'clock, they arrest the three Jewish representatives. They demand that they send thirty people out to work. Twenty-one turn up, leaving nine short. The commandant demands the nine; otherwise things will go badly. The nine have hidden themselves. We are all dreadfully worried.

Rain the entire day. They want to select nine other Jews, but he insists only on the ones from before. For the moment, the representatives are under arrest. No one knows when our sufferings will end. I feel as though the next awful thing is getting closer and closer to me.

Indeed, the diary ends here. The next day, Sheyna Gram was killed along with her family.

GARF 8114, op. 1, d. 966, ll. 8-24, 26. A typewritten manuscript with handwritten corrections.

74. The death of 5,000 Jews in Rezekne (Rezhitsa)

AN ACCOUNT BY KHAIM AND YAKOV IZRAELIT

RECORDED BY B. GERTSBAKH

[1944]

More than 6,000 Jews lived in the city of Rezhitsa before the war within a total population of 25,000. The city grew rapidly before the war, with a great deal of new construction being completed. Now Rezhitsa is unrecognizable. The German bandits burned and blew up 70 percent of the stone dwellings four days before units of the Red Army arrived. The main streets are nothing but heaps of rubble.

Out of a total number of five thousand Jews remaining in Rezhitsa at the moment of the city's capture by the Germans, only three Jews survived and now live there: Motya Tager, the five-year-old son of K. Tager; fifty-seven-year-old Khaim Izraelit; and his sixteen-year-old nephew, Yakov Izraelit.

The Tager child was saved by their domestic, O. Varushkina. When Tager's father and mother were killed, she concealed him and looked after him during the three years of the fascist regime.

Khaim Izraelit and his nephew, Yakov, were saved by a Polish family in Rezhitsa by the name of Matusovich, who hid them in their attic. For almost three years they concealed the Izraelits in their home, exposing themselves to the risk of being shot. In spite of this, though, they took good care of their unwilling prisoners and brought food to the attic every day.

For the first three months following the arrival of the Germans, the Izraelits wandered from yard to yard and shed to shed in the city itself and in nearby villages, subjecting themselves hourly to the risk that they might be recognized by someone. It was only later that they were taken in by the Matusovich family and their vagabond life came to an end.

Izraelit and his nephew relate the nightmarish details of the martyring of the Jewish community of Rezhitsa, five thousand strong.

The Germans entered Rezhitsa on July 3, and the atrocities against the Jews began the very next day. On July 4, the city was blanketed with posters announcing that all Jewish men between the ages of eighteen and sixty were to assemble on the city's market square. Some 1,400 made their way there. Police surrounded the square. All those assembled were sent to prison. The next day, the butchers selected the healthiest men and shot them in the courtyard of the building where the NKVD had kept their offices in 1940-1941. Among those executed were Boris Veksler, 35, and Mitya Manteyfel, 30. Mordukh Gassel, 30, the owner of a pharmacy, poisoned himself before he could be shot. Iosel Silno, 48, ran, jumped a fence, and tried to swim across the river. But the bullets of the German fascists caught up with him, and he went to the bottom. The rest were tortured dreadfully before they were executed: they were skinned and beaten with clubs. When the turn of dental technician Kh. Izraelit came, an order from the German command to hold off on his execution intervened. He was set free, but subsequently shot as well.

The fascists were not satisfied with this. Every day, dozens of Jews were beaten to death in the prison. They were buried in the Jewish cemetery, and Jews themselves had to bury them. Often, the victims of the fascist terror were those Jews who had buried those killed before them.

So, for example, after Khaim Lotz was tortured to death in prison, a group of Jews was summoned to bury him in the cemetery. Among those wishing to take part were the father of Izraelit's nephew, Khanon Izraelit, Bash, Zuterman (who had escaped from Riga), and a butcher from Malta (the man telling the story does not remember his name). When they buried Lotz, the fascists present dealt savagely with the volunteer gravediggers. It was only after the third shot at point-blank range that Khanon Izraelit fell. Then they killed the butcher. The survivors, Bash and Zuterman, had to dig another grave and bury them.