Part of a joint project conducted by University of California at Santa Barbara in conjunction with the local Jewish community, this series of four portraits showcased at the 22nd Santa Barbara International Film Festival was a collaborative endeavor involving many local film makers. These included Penny Little (Dust and Deceit) and Ethan Turpin (Terror and Tourism). Both participants aired their own films at the same festival.

Under the direction of award-winning documentary filmmaker Renee Bergan, a moving story unfolded about the life of Gela Baser Percal, whose family was captured and shot while she and her sister were out buying provisions from a sympathetic Pole.

Turpin, boom operator, reported that the psychological aspect of the encounter of working with Gela and her husband was dominant throughout the shooting. The real work involved massaging to make the elderly couple comfortable with the crew in their house.

The two met in Europe after liberation. Gela’s husband Fred, then a US serviceman, decided to come back to Santa Barbara to work on his family’s chicken farm. Fred grew up in the area where there wasn’t much of a rooted Jewish population, and Gela had lost all but a sister who lives in LA during the war.

Telling stories that it was difficult for her to access in herself was apparently a process that could not simply be turned on and off exactly in sync with the technicalities of video making. There was no posturing. Once she accessed the material, it was impossible to stop.

Gela’s vividly relates the story of running away to live in the woods with her family. Her father kept refusing to leave, as hostility gradually encroached. But once told that they were going to be taken somewhere where they would be treated better and could eat better, he became suspicious and wanted to bolt. They were also informed that they would be leaving immediately and didn’t have time to pack. Hence the family saw through the Nazi lies. They ran to hide in the woods. Together, a few dozen families avoided the hoax.

One day, Gela and her sister came to get food from a farmer. While procuring food for the family, she and her sister hid in the cellar because the Nazi-sympathizing son came back to the house. Hidden, they overheard that their family had been murdered in the woods.
Gela went to a local official and said, look you have three options. You can call the Gestapo and they will come take me. You can forget you ever saw me. Or you could write me papers and give me the chance to get out.

He chose the latter. Gela parted from her sister and went to Germany as a domestic worker under an assumed name. There she served in two Nazi families as an undercover Jew. She had to brainwash herself. When alone at night, she conditioned her mind to erase her real identity, which finally emerged years later after her children were born in Santa Barbara. She lived in terror, because she was always living under the threat of slipping and showing emotion. Working in the garden helped her survive.

Such strength of will is totally uncommon. This and her intuition got her through.

At times, she would endanger herself because she didn’t know which plants were what. Once she accidentally pulled up vegetables because she thought they were weeds.

The interview itself is intercut with shots of Gela gardening around her current home in the foothills of Santa Barbara.

Gela relates being visited in Santa Barbara by one of the German families she worked for. She describes the discomfort of coming out to them as a Jew by explaining she was like Anne Frank.

Gela is a role model for compassion and transformation.

The second story in the series involves a woman who fled across Europe. Apparently, the experience of fleeing did not traumatize her, but prepared her for life in Foreign Service. She went to India to work after the war.

A third segment tells the story of a woman who fainted in the firing squad. Since she fell, the Nazis thought she was dead. From a pile of dead bodies, she arose and escaped.

At the premier, the interviewees were on stage for a Q and A after the showing. Gela talked about forgiveness and moving beyond hate. Another survivor before her had said he could not get beyond the hatred he still felt for the Nazis.

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