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Gitta Ryle at the Shoah Museum in Paris. Credit: Film still from "My Name is Gitta."

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Santa Cruz Holocaust survivor, 94, sees her life story become award-winning documentary

BY **JANA MARCUS** August 10, 2026

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Quick Take

The new documentary film "My Name is Gitta" follows Santa Cruz Holocaust survivor Gitta Ryle as she returns to Europe in search of answers, discovering that forgiveness is not a destination, but a lifelong journey.

It's a warm June evening as camera shutters fire in rapid bursts outside Hollywood's iconic TCL Chinese Theatre. Photographers jockey for position along a glowing orange carpet that stretches toward the theater entrance.

Publicists hurry filmmakers from one interview to the next. Festival volunteers wave guests through the crowd while movie-lovers press against the barricades, hoping to catch a glimpse of the night's arrivals.

It's a world premiere at the Dances With Films festival. On the marquee is an unlikely star.

She isn't an actress. She's a 94-year-old great-grandmother from Santa Cruz.

More than 80 years ago, people tried to erase her from history. Instead, she survived.

Now, she is watching her own story unfold on the big screen.

As the lights come up following the premiere of "My Name is Gitta," the sold-out audience rises in a standing ovation. Days later, the documentary ties for the festival's Audience Award.

For Gitta Ryle, however, the evening wasn't about applause.

"It was a surreal event," she recalled. "There was so much press. My friends asked me if I felt like a movie star."

Gitta's expression turns serious at the thought. "No, I did not," she said emphatically. "I felt I had given a message – a message that would connect with any human being – of recovery and hope from genocidal trauma."

Portrait of Gitta Ryle. Credit: Jana Marcus

For more than three decades, that message has guided Gitta's life's work. She has spoken in schools, synagogues, churches, community organizations and even juvenile halls across the county and the state, sharing not only what happened during the Holocaust, but what came afterward.

Her definition of forgiveness often catches audiences off guard.

"Forgiveness is not forgiving your enemy," she said. "It's forgiving yourself. All the negativity and the anger you feel inside yourself – give it back to the perpetrator."

I met Gitta and her granddaughter, filmmaker Beatrix Ryle, at Gitta's Westside Santa Cruz home. Gathered around the dining room table, we talked beneath a large sepia photograph of Gitta's parents, whose faces quietly watched over the conversation.

Gitta speaks about forgiveness with clarity, but arriving there took decades.

When her own children reached the same ages she and her sister had been when they were separated from their parents during the war, memories she thought she had buried came rushing back.

"I became very sick," she recalled. "Keeping the trauma inside was making me physically ill. For so long, I didn't know who I was," she continued. "I had lost my identity. In therapy, I learned that all my self-negativity was learned – and if it can be learned, it can also be unlearned."

For the first time, Gitta began to understand both the impossible choices her parents had faced and the person she had become.

Portrait of Gitta Ryle with the papers she carried as a child. Credit: Jana Marcus

Today, that lesson shapes every audience she speaks to.

When she talks to young people, she hopes they leave believing in themselves and loving themselves, refusing to let other people's hatred define who they become. Hundreds of letters from students, teachers and audience members have convinced her that those conversations matter.

That philosophy became the foundation of the documentary's story.

Thirty-year-old Beatrix has known her grandmother's story for as long as she can remember.

"It was always in the back of my mind that maybe we should make a film," she said.

But Beatrix had one condition. She didn't want to make another Holocaust documentary.

"I wanted to focus on Gitta and her bubbly, optimistic personality," she said. "She's worked so hard to overcome her past. I wanted to focus on the positive side of her story, the inspirational message, instead of just the horrible things."

Gitta Ryle with her granddaughter, filmmaker Beatrix Ryle. Credit: Jana Marcus

Instead of centering solely on tragedy, "My Name is Gitta" asks a different question: How does someone survive the unimaginable and then spend the rest of their life helping others heal?

She found the answer in Europe.

For years, Gitta believed she had finally made peace with her childhood and that chapter of her life was finally behind her.

Then, in 2019, her older sister, Renee, died.

Three years older than Gitta, Renee had been much more than a sister. She had been her protector.

When Gitta was only 7 years old, Renee, just 10 herself, looked after her little sister as they were separated from their parents and hidden by families and organizations willing to risk everything to save them.

After Renee's death, the family began sorting through boxes of old photographs, letters and untranslated documents. Forgotten pieces of their history surfaced, revealing that there was still more to discover.

"We decided now was the time for me to go back to Europe and reconnect with the people and organizations that were so vital to saving my life," Gitta said. "I was nervous to revisit the places that held so many painful memories." Gitta paused. "I was concerned about revisiting all the fear, hate, anger, and feelings of not wanting to live that I once had."

What followed wasn't simply the making of a documentary. It became one final journey into a past Gitta thought she already understood.

The French countryside drifts past the train window in a blur of fields, church steeples and quiet villages.

Gitta watches in silence. Sometimes she smiles. Other times she wipes away a tear. One stop after another reconnects her with the road she traveled as a frightened little girl.

First placed together at OSE – Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (Children's Aid Society) – the sisters were eventually separated for their own safety. Renee went to live with the Rivoire family while little Gitta was taken in by the Flocards, just a few kilometers away.

The familiar flowering walkway leading to the Flocard house is still there.

Waiting at the end of it are Gigi and Zette Flocard, Gitta's two adopted sisters.

The decades disappear in an instant. The women embrace, laugh and cry, and begin finishing one another's stories as though no time has passed at all.

For Beatrix, that reunion became the soul of the documentary.

"This is one of my favorite scenes in the film," said Beatrix. "They shared hilarious and very specific memories I'd never heard before. Despite the darkness of the story, there was so much humor and lightness. It was this beautiful balance between trauma and healing."

For a little while, history gives way to childhood. They remember sneaking off to meet boys, hiding in the basement as German soldiers marched by and discovering hidden bottles of liquor. Convinced their time had come, they emptied the bottles together, the only way children knew how.

Throughout the war, Gitta believed only Mr. Flocard knew she was Jewish. To protect her, he told neighbors she was an orphan because she was the only brunette in the home. The fewer people who knew the truth, the safer she would be.

One of the sisters quietly smiles.

"I knew."

Rather than pushing her away, the secret had only deepened her affection for the little girl living in their home.

As the afternoon drew to a close, the women embraced once more.

"We will see each other again in heaven," Gigi says softly. "Yes, in heaven, for sure," Gitta replies, kissing her cheek.

But the journey through France uncovered more than joyful reunions. As Beatrix dug deeper into the families, group homes and villages that had hidden Jewish children during the war, another story emerged.

Records uncovered during the film's research revealed what happened to Gitta's cousin, Martin Spindel, after he disappeared.

Martin was the same age as Gitta. Before the war, the cousins had been inseparable. Like Gitta and Renee, Martin was moved between children's homes and families trying to keep him alive. But it took only one suspicious neighbor or anonymous denunciation for everything to change.

"We only knew bits and pieces of Martin's story before the film," Beatrix said. "We discovered that the group of children Martin was placed with was recorded in multiple books."

The research eventually led to Drancy, the internment camp outside Paris where 13-year-old Martin and the other children were imprisoned before being deported to Auschwitz.

Standing before the exhibit now in its place, Gitta stops.

At the site of the Drancy internment camp, outside Paris, Gitta Ryle touches the photograph of her cousin Martin Spindel. Credit: Film still from "My Name is Gitta."

She reaches out and gently runs her fingers across a photograph of her cousin Martin.

"He almost made it," she says softly, her voice breaking.

Nearby is graffiti he scribbled on a basement wall while imprisoned, preserved for more than 80 years, showing he had been there.

"He wrote his name and the date he arrived at Drancy and the day he left for Auschwitz," remembered Beatrix. "It's chilling to see the physical writing of our 13-year-old cousin being sent to his death."

For a long moment, no one speaks.

The journey also uncovered forgotten letters and documents that filled in long-missing pieces of the family's story. Gitta realized there were still pieces of her own story she had never fully understood. Newly translated letters from the parents she had long believed abandoned her revealed something entirely different.

"Gitta learned all these decades later how much her parents loved her," Beatrix said. "Everything they did was to save her and her sister."

The discovery couldn't erase the heartbreak of losing her parents. But for the first time, Gitta understood the impossible choices they had made to save their daughters.

Beatrix hopes audiences don't see "My Name Is Gitta" simply as a Holocaust documentary, but as a story that still speaks to today's world.

"People may be hesitant to watch a Jewish story right now because of what's happening in Gaza," she said. "But this is an anti-violence film. It's about children caught in political conflicts, families forced to flee, and ordinary people choosing to help. I hope people leave the film believing they can make a difference in someone else's life."

For Gitta, however, the film was never the destination.

"The journey was difficult," she said quietly. "I thought I was done. But the work is never done."

This October, "My Name is Gitta" returns home as an official selection of the Santa Cruz Film Festival, where local audiences will finally experience the journey Gitta has spent decades sharing, one conversation at a time.

Eighty years after others tried to erase her story, Gitta's name will once again appear in lights. Not because she sought the spotlight, but because she chose to transform unimaginable loss into a message of hope that continues to find new audiences.