MY BONES DON'T REST IN AUSCHWITZ

A Lonely Battle to Survive German Tyranny



Gitel Donath

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The great strength of your manuscript is that it does enable a stranger to enter directly into your experience. Most of the book is, in fact, a direct account of these experiences, and the marked individuality of these experiences rings very, very true. The odyssey that you managed, the various people with whom you came in contact, your own indomitable courage and resourcefulness in the face of incredible odds are not only directly experienced in the reading of the book, they are also a celebration - whether or not intended - of the possibilities of the human spirit.

Bernard J. Shapiro
Principal and Vice-Chancellor
McGill University

It is an appalling story of human depradation and cruel loss, at times almost too painful to read. What sustains the reader is the fact that your narrative voice never succumbs to despair, never loses faith in your ability to overcome the most dreadful of circumstances in order to assert your will to live and ultimately triumph over your persecutors. Your account makes a vital contribution to the history of those dark years, a history which must be insisted upon in the face of those who would seek to deny the very existence of the Nazis' war against the Jews.

In my estimation, this is an important autobiographical chapter in the history of our time and should be made available to a wide reading public.

Marvin Butovsky
Professor of English Literature
Concordia University

I consider this writing a remarkable contribution to the understanding of the Shoa..Giving many details, it helps understand not only what happened, but also how people taken in this tragedy reacted. What others have difficulty retelling, Mrs. Donath has put in writing.

Prof. Julien Bauer
Political Science Department
Universite du Quebec a Montreal

Mrs. Donath weaves together a most remarkable history. It is a true and accurate account of her experiences, and, as the old adage indicates, truth can often imitate fiction. Her story of survival in the most wretched conditions takes on a quality of fictional proportions. It is a recording of a life history that begs the reader to return and to reread her dramatic testimony.

Bill A. Surkis
Executive- Director,
The Montreal Holocaust
Memorial Center

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This book could not have been written without my husband's devotion and significant help in preparing the initial version of the manuscript and its countless revisions.

I also want to express my thanks to the Cote St. Luc Public Library for making available the computer facilities on which this book was written.

I offer this work as a memorial
to my family members who perished
under the Nazi oppresion, and to all my
descendants.

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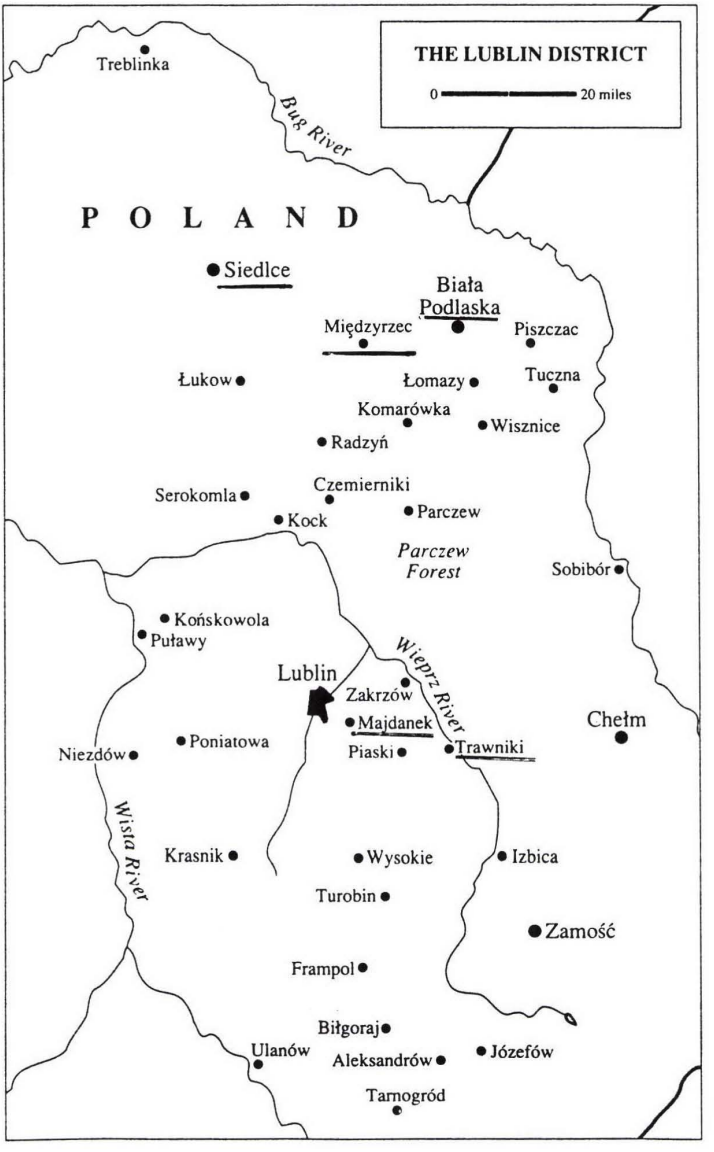
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THE LUBLIN DISTRICT
0
20 miles
Treblinka
Bug River
POLAND
Siedlce
Biała Podlaska
Międzyrzec
Piszczac
Łukow
Łomazy
Tuczna
Komarówka
Wisznice
Radzyń
Serokomla
Czemierniki
Parczew
Kock
Parczew Forest
Sobibór
Końskowola
Puławy
Lublin
Wieprz River
Zakrzów
Majdanek
Chełm
Poniatowa
Niezdów
Piaski
Trawniki
Wisła River
Krasnik
Wysokie
Izbica
Turobin
Zamość
Frampol
Biłgoraj
Ulanów
Aleksandrów
Józefów
Tarnogród

Preface

In December 1943 my sister and I were grieving at the freshly dug grave of our brother Chaim in a cemetery in Sosnowiec in western Poland. I was tempted to think that maybe he was the lucky one, having suffered a quick death, while we seemed destined to continue what appeared to be a hopeless struggle. Ironically, we were accompanied by the very German soldier who, I later found out, had shot him. With no real hope for survival, I promised myself then and there that, were I to live, I would write the tale of our ordeal.

Two and a half years later, in the beginning of 1946, we found ourselves in a displaced persons camp in Germany. We had survived. It was time to begin fulfilling the promise I had made myself.

Feeling inadequate for the task, I looked for someone to assist me in describing events that were, in fact, more incredible than fiction. In the meantime, in order to preserve the memories, I began making notes of my recollections of six years of horror while they were still relatively fresh and while I could still recount them faithfully. Eventually, these notes filled many boxes until, in the winter of 1959-60, I together with my husband, took on the task of sorting them into chronological order. The project then lay dormant.

In 1990, I took up the manuscript once again. I slowly proceeded to flesh out the bare-bones manuscript and to rewrite it countless times. Dredging up memories of the dreadful past was not only difficult, but painful.

My tale is an eye-witness account of the anguish and misery of life in war-torn Poland, describing the horrors that mankind produced, and a story of an unfaltering will to survive against seemingly hopeless odds. It is hardly possible for the human mind to grasp the scale of the atrocities that were committed at the hands of ostensibly civilized human beings, nor can any written account tell all.

I witnessed the crumbling of my entire world, the untimely death of my mother, the puzzling disappearance of my father, the loss of our home, store and all our possessions, the deportation of my stepmother and baby brother to the gas chambers of Treblinka and of my younger sister to the concentration camp at Majdanek, as well as the slaughter of my brother.

We skirted death by wriggling out of deportation after deportation, by fleeing from ghetto to ghetto to labour camp, until there was no place left to go.There was no goal and no destination other than to avoid the ruthless, inhuman and cold-blooded Germans, whose tentacles reached everywhere.

In desperation, in 1944, without identity papers, with facial features that were immediately identifiable by the Poles around me as Jewish and no idea how my sister and I would get there, we set out for Germany.

There, my sister and I struggled against hopeless odds, dealing with each predicament as it befell us. The hard work and constant fear of living amongst the very enemies we were trying to escape, took their toll on us. With some good fortune and careful decision making we succeeded in posing as Polish girls until the endless wait for freedom finally came to an end on May 9, 1945.

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST DAYS OF THE WAR

I was in my mid-teens on the eve of the Second World War. My family and I lived in the city of Siedlce, in the Lublin district of central Poland. Siedlce was home to some twenty thousand Jews. Ninety kilometres from Warsaw, we were quite remote from any border. Six months earlier there had been border skirmishes between Poland and Germany. Poland mobilized its reservists. In August 1939 we began to have problems with food shortages; we had to stand in line at the grocery store.

There were regular communiques on the situation at the frontier. Morning and afternoon, newspaper boys cried out the headlines. News about the danger of an outbreak of war circulated constantly. Very few people had radios of their own, but in the street there were loudspeakers belonging to various institutions that also blared out the latest news. We knew that England and France had promised that if Hitler attacked Poland, he would have to fight them too.

Germany launched a full fledged attack on Poland on Friday, September l, 1939. The German air force, the Luftwaffe, seemed to be ignoring our city. Then on Monday afternoon there was a brief bombing of the train station and the local military installations. But transportation and communication remained nearly normal. We were lulled into a false sense of security; surely it would take a long time for the war to reach us.

Early, on the morning of Wednesday, September 6, my father

boarded a bus for Warsaw. He went there regularly to buy leather and shoe trimmings that he needed to stock our shoemaker`s supply store. It was warm so he dressed in light clothing. We did not expect him back until the following morning. Little did we know when we kissed him goodbye how dramatically the next day's events would alter our lives.

I awoke on Thursday, September 7, to a beautiful, sunny day. At eight o' clock my older sister Pearl and I went to our store on Pulaskiego Street to attend to customers. Because it was quiet we paced up and down the street to look for our father.

By mid-morning bombers began blocking the bright rays of the sun. As there were no aerial alarms, we thought they were "nasze," our Polish warplanes. But the moment bombs began to fall we realized with a jolt that these were enemy planes.

We were near the city hall clock tower, two blocks from the store. Suddenly there was an enormous explosion. We looked up just in time to see the spire of the clock tower blow up. We dashed across the street for shelter. The first building we entered had four walls, but staring at the sky, we looked in disbelief for a moment at where the roof should have been. We ran out. The streets were deserted. Bombs were falling on all sides. We ran to the next house. On the ground floor the building's inhabitants and neighbours were gathering with passersby.

It grew dark. Suddenly a shockingly bright fireball erupted nearby. It created thick smoke. Bricks and clouds of dust rained on us. We were stupefied for several minutes. Gradually, we realized that a bomb had exploded in the roofless building next door. When the attack seemed to abate we left the shelter.

The scene outside was indescribable. Of the neighbouring buildings only a pile of rubble remained. The familiar surroundings were no longer recognizable. Never before had we seen such complete destruction.

Our first thought was of our family. Pearl and I, filthy, covered from head to toe with soot and coughing from the smoke, ran out to the gate towards home, three blocks away.

On the way we came across sights which remain etched in my

memory. Some buildings were engulfed in flames, while others lay in ruins. Smoke and dust rose from the debris. We could see corpses and torn limbs scattered on the ground. Screams and cries for help filled the air. People made frantic efforts to dig their loved ones from the rubble.

Panic swept through the people. Women wrung their hands as they ran through the streets screaming in despair, "For G-d's sake, what shall we do? How shall we save ourselves?" People scurried in all directions trying to find their relatives.

We ran and ran, propelled by fear. We felt as though we had been running for an eternity before we reached our home. We found our stepmother Tauba with our not yet one-year-old half-brother Hirsh and our nine-year-old sister Rifka. But where was our brother Chaim, two years my junior? As we glanced at one another, I knew that we were all plagued by the same question: Is he alive?

Without a word passing between us, Pearl and I stepped back outside and began to search. We assumed he was alive. As we walked up and down Pulaskiego Street we asked each person we met whether he or she had seen our brother. We tried to concentrate on the task at hand, but it was impossible to remain oblivious to the scene around us. We shared the same feeling of utter disbelief. How had we survived?

Suddenly, we spotted Chaim. It was as though he had fallen from heaven! Deliriously happy, we raced towards him. He told us that he had been on Kilinskiego Street when the attack began. He had found a ditch to hide in, but he did not feel safe, so he scrambled for cover nearby. Later on, he found out a bomb had fallen on the ditch! He was on his way home, desperate to learn what had happened to the rest of us. We all felt thankful to be alive.

On the way home we passed our store. Located in a one-story wooden building one long block from our home, it had been reduced to half its former height. Gaping holes replaced the windows. The entrance was smashed by a detonation bomb that had fallen on a neighbouring building.

As we hurried by I remembered that we had taken in about fifty zlotys that morning. I crawled through a hole where there had been a

window and reached the drawer to collect it, while Pearl and Chaim waited outside. That was the last time I saw the store.

I knew it well, because after our mother died in childbirth in the 1930s, I had worked there after school till late each evening. Little time was left for homework. Pearl had been too distraught with our mother's death to help out and Chaim and Rifka were too young. I was the only one left to help run my father's leather and shoemaker trimmings store.

After graduating from public school I began to work full time. I quickly learned to help my father carry the burden of caring for the family. Whenever he was out of the store and a customer had to be served, I used the special knife for cutting leather for soles over half a centimeter thick. I am left-handed, but could change hands for the difficult task.

I dealt with suppliers and the customers seemed to like me. Transactions were paid with so called "weksels", similar to promissory notes, with a maturity of around three months. When a "weksel" was due and there was not enough cash available, it was my responsibility to borrow money from other business people for a few hours or a day to cover the payment. I was careful to maintain my father's credit. As I got more and more involved in running the store, it became apparent my late mother's dream of sending me to a business school would not become a reality.

Next to our business was a brick building. On the main floor were six stores, separated by a gate in the middle, which served as the entrance to the building. The floor over the stores was occupied by the owners of the stores and their families. A third floor was inhabited by tenants. Whenever there were aerial alarms, all the residents would gather in the corridor on the ground floor. People from other buildings and passersby would take shelter there as well.

In the past, every time there had been an aerial alarm, my father, Pearl and I had taken refuge in the building next to the store, now destroyed. It remained a mystery how an invisible force pushed us away from it on that day.

Now the building was reduced to a pile of rubble. People were buried underneath. Most of them were dead, but some were still

struggling to free themselves. The bodies recovered from beneath the debris were unrecognizable. The families of the pedestrians who perished under that building never found out where their loved ones had disappeared. The scene was heartbreaking. Six members of one family that lived in the building died under the ruins, leaving the mother and one daughter alive because they had been away at the time of the bombing. Other inhabitants were so deeply buried that they were never found.

That afternoon, a second alarm sounded. This time we were all together in the back yard of our home. We figured that it was safer to remain under the open sky than to stay inside. As we stood in the yard, we could see the mighty bombers becoming bigger and bigger as they approached. These maneuvers lasted for about fifteen minutes. Then a deadly quiet descended over the city.

Suddenly, the whole world started to shake. We heard the sound of glass shattering. Explosions erupted one after another at an incredibly fast pace, causing buildings to collapse like card houses. We thought our eardrums would burst. Mighty tongues of fire and thick clouds of smoke rose on all sides of us.

The wild roar of the German planes reverberated in our ears as they hunted down their prey. They circled lower and lower. It seemed as though the pilots wished to hear the wretched screams of their victims and observe the fear on their faces. We huddled together, praying that the bombing should cease and the suffering end. The aerial attacks were primarily directed at the Jewish sector of the city.

It continued for hours and only ceased after darkness had fallen. We decided it was time to leave. When we stepped out onto the street we had the impression that the entire city was burning. Flames tore into the darkness as a strong wind spread enormous walls of fire. The destruction, confusion and lack of equipment and manpower made it impossible even to try to extinguish the flames. The screams piercing the air were no longer the cries of desperate people, but wild, horrible sounds of humans driven to the edge of insanity. People ran through the streets and scrambled through the debris in search of their loved ones.

We walked more than a kilometer to an orchard on the outskirts

of Siedlce where we thought it would be safe to spend the night. When we got there we were surprised to meet our Uncle Alter, our mother's brother, and his family along with many family friends. No one was in the mood to talk about what was happening.

Once we got settled, Pearl and Chaim went back to our house to find out whether our father had returned. We had left our home in a hurry, dressed in whatever we were wearing and without bringing any food or extra clothing with us. Feeling chilly and hoping to return home in the morning, I asked them to bring my boots and a warm jacket.

I tried to calm down in the midst of the horrible destruction and anticipation of what the next day might bring. Still terrified as I lay down on the grass, I could not disentangle myself from the madness, the air raid sirens, the destruction caused by the exploding bombs and the corpses lying in the street.

Was it really just yesterday that our father left for Warsaw? I hoped that he would soon return.

Pearl and Chaim came back and informed us that the bombing was still going on. The city was an inferno. Our father was not back. They managed to bring my winter boots and jacket, as well as a small pillow for Hirsh.

At dawn, the fires were still raging. We decided, like other families, to go to the nearest village, twelve kilometers distant. We dragged ourselves the whole morning until we reached it. The long march and the sleepless night left us exhausted. Then we had to wait for the mayor of the village to let us have a shelter. Finally, he gave us the key to an empty house. We got some straw from farmers for makeshift beds. There was no bread; we had to be content with milk.

The bombing of Siedlce continued for several days.

We were getting restless, so Pearl and I decided to venture into the city. We left at night, hoping it would be less dangerous. We walked about halfway, but the total darkness compelled us to return. The next night we tried again, but we kept stumbling. We could not even see one another; we gave up and returned to the village.

On Sunday we went to a neighbouring village to see one of our Polish customers, a shoemaker. He was able to give us half a loaf of

bread. On the way back we saw three German planes flying low toward us. They opened fire. We dropped to the ground among potato plants and luckily were not harmed.

The Polish defenders fought until they no longer had the strength to resist the unrelenting onslaught of the Germans. On Tuesday, September 12, the Germans occupied Siedlce. The next day we returned. Fires still burned and the air was filled with smoke. The building where we had lived was reduced to a charred shell. Only the brick walls were standing, a desolate relic. We were homeless. All our possessions had gone up in smoke. Furniture, bedding, clothing, shoes, dishes, everything was destroyed. We went to the store; it had burned down to the ground. Our despair grew with each discovery.

The death of our mother years before had been extremely hard on us. Now, in addition to everything else, we were faced with the loss of our father. Concerns about our future were heightened by his absence. We asked about him everywhere. We received all sorts of replies; one man said that our father had been in Siedlce on the evening of the bombing. A former neighbour was certain that he had seen him on the road to Siedlce the following Friday. He described the horrible conditions on the roads, filled with Polish soldiers and their weapons and lined with hundreds of refugees. Motorists were stranded on the highway without gasoline. Chaos and panic reigned as German aircraft with blazing machine guns periodically swooped down over the fleeing refugees. People scrambled for cover in the forests and fields, but many were wounded and killed. We refused to give up hope that when the fighting in Warsaw abated, our father would return.

The house of Tauba's mother on Swientojanska Street remained intact. Since she lived near the Siedlce railway station, she thought that the bombs would hit her first, so she had brought all her belongings to our house. Now her things had been lost together with ours. She went to stay with her other daughter on Sokolovska Street. Hirsh and I moved along with Tauba into her mother's empty house. All it contained was an old table with chairs and some bed frames.

Rifka and Chaim stayed with our mother's sister, Aunt Bruche, on Jatkowa Street. Her house had also survived and they were lucky to

have some food because they owned a fruit store. I was too proud to ask my aunt for food and so I went hungry for days.

Pearl stayed with her friend Feiga, who had the good fortune of having a baker as a neighbour. After a few days she was able to get a loaf of bread for us.

At first, the behaviour of the occupying German troops was relatively restrained. Our immediate problem was food. We stood in line for bread at five o'clock in the morning, but sometimes we could wait until eleven only to find out there was none left. Our stepmother had to go and beg for some nourishment for our little brother. The homes of friends had also burned down and they too were struggling to find something to eat.

Civic order had ceased to exist and the streets were deserted.

Smoke continued to rise from the burned-out buildings and corpses lay on the ground with no one to bury them. A strict curfew was imposed; people were prohibited to leave their houses after dark.

After a week of inactivity, the German soldiers in their olive-green uniforms with bayonets on their rifles, began to go from door to door. They were detaining all the men they could get hold of. When I learned about this I was at my aunt's home. Chaim was with Tauba in her mother's house. I decided to warn him. I crossed the few blocks toward the burned-down city hall. From there I had a few blocks to run before I turned onto Swientojanska Street.

When I finally reached their building I was terrified to find that German soldiers were already there, guarding a few hundred young men who had been assembled in the street. One soldier stood at the gate in front of the building, while another ran from one apartment to the next, rounding up men and handing them over to the soldier at the gate. Upon completing the search in the front of the building, he turned his attention to the rear.

I thought that perhaps I could get to my brother before the soldier searched that part of the building. But I was too late; he was already there. My heart was pounding as I watched. The soldier opened the swinging door to the house. Probably because the hallway looked like a shed, he decided no one lived there. He slammed the door,

gave a signal with his hand and returned to the street.

When the soldiers rushed to the next building, I felt a great surge of relief. I could not believe the combination of luck and circumstances that had saved Chaim from the Germans' clutches. I ran into the house and found him exactly where I thought he would be.

I embraced him. "We are very lucky to have you with us," I said, "Do you know what's doing outside?"

"No. Why did you come running? Has anything happened?" he replied.

"The Germans are grabbing men from the streets and homes and we don't know where they're taking them," I said.

"It's a good thing that you came. I was about to leave the house," Chaim replied.

The Germans continued assembling Poles and Jews in one large group. The final tally must have been in the thousands. It was impossible to tell whether a friend or relative was among the group. They were marched through the streets and taken to spend the night in the jail yard. The next morning they were led out of the city and had to march without food or water through Lukow, Vengerov and other towns and villages. When they were finally allowed an overnight rest in a farmer's field, they ate vegetables that they found there. Because there were few Germans guarding the prisoners, many managed to escape. The men who lacked the courage or luck to run away were taken to a prison camp.

By now more food had become available, although we did not have money to buy it. We had to take charge of our lives and build from the ashes to feed and dress six people, particularly since winter was approaching.

Without a mother from a very early age, I had learned very early on that survival required constant effort. The pain and distress from losing my mother at the age of ten had given me an unquenchable determination to succeed.

I outlined a plan for us to get some money for food. There was a leather wholesaler whose store had survived the bombing and who was still conducting business. I got some leather and trimmings from him on credit and Chaim and I took them to the town of Mordy,

eighteen kilometres from Siedlce. A close-knit community of about one thousand Jewish families lived there.

My father's family, the Kaplans, had branched out from there. In the 1920's my father had a leather store in Mordy. During the Great Depression business fell off and, hoping for better prospects in Siedlce, my father had moved the family there on a cold winter night in December 1930. My mother was glad to go because her whole family lived in Siedlce.

We still had many friends in Mordy and the dealers of leather and shoemakers articles did not hesitate to buy from Chaim and me since they were afraid to travel.

With the money we earned from the sale of leather and shoemaker trimmings we bought food and sold it in Siedlce, where it was scarce. This became our regular operation. It earned just enough to feed us.

CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF REPRIEVE

In 1939, before the start of the war, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact partitioning Poland, with the Soviets occupying the east and the Germans occupying the west. The weakened Polish troops had hoped to regroup and strengthen their army behind the Russian lines, but instead they ended up as prisoners of the Russians.

Many soldiers from our region who had been stationed on the Russian front were now released. They were greeted with open arms and happy smiles. Among them were two of my cousins, Chaim Fogel and Joseph Fainsilber. The entire family was overjoyed to see them back and we all listened attentively to the stories of their war experiences.

In the west fierce battles with the Germans were still raging, mostly around Warsaw. When the war broke out, many people from the Warsaw region fled to Brest-Litovsk. Later on, quite a few returned with the soldiers from the east. However, they could not enter Warsaw while fighting continued, so many remained in Siedlce.

Rumours circulated that the Russians would occupy our city too. As a pleasant surprise, early in October the Germans abandoned Siedlce and the Russians marched in.

We were overjoyed and greeted the Russians in the streets as our liberators. They certainly did not give us the impression that they

were conquerors. Our mood changed overnight; people allowed themselves the luxury of hope. We had almost forgotten how it felt to live in a free atmosphere. The Russians were friendly. They visited our homes, distributing biscuits and jam and entertaining themselves and their hosts.

They posted armed civilians sporting red ribbons on their arms to guard government buildings.

Before the war, an illegal Communist organization had operated underground. Young men and women who joined this organization were extremely dedicated and unyielding in their political views. The Polish government at that time was rabidly anti-Communist and staunchly opposed to all Marxist ideas. They arrested these idealists and threw them in jail. Members of the Communist party would meet in each other's homes so as to escape detection by the Polish police.

Prior to the war, on the first day of May, when the Polish workers celebrated Labour Day or at other festivals involving the working class, small red flags used to appear on the overhead electrical wires, planted around the city by the Marxists. The flags were attached to small balls, held firmly in place with elastic bands. Great skill was necessary to throw the flags up towards the overhead wires so that they remained there fluttering in the wind. They also distributed Marxist literature.

When the police detained Communists, their homes were searched and the police demanded that they disclose the whereabouts of their comrades. If the detainees refused to respond, there were harsh reprisals. They were thrown into jail without trial, often kept there for extended periods and tortured. When they were released, more often than not, their bodies were crippled and their souls shattered. Relatives and friends of the prisoners used to stand across from the jail, hoping to catch a glimpse of their loved ones through the narrow prison windows. When inmates appeared, they would communicate with their family by pre-arranged signals.

A wall about two stories high surrounded the several-story jail building, which was painted a light beige colour. It was located in the center of Siedlce, stretching from Swientojanska Street to Warszawska, the main thoroughfare. The wall continued onto an adjacent

military establishment. It lent the jail the air of a fortress. Most of the inmates were political prisoners.

Because we lived across the street from the jail, we often heard shrieks and wails from inside. Usually this was a sign that the prisoners had either gone on a hunger strike or were being tortured, or both.

Shortly before the war, on a cold winter night between Christmas and New Year, in a dark lane across from our store, a man was shot. Later it turned out that the victim was a Communist who had betrayed his comrades. He had landed in jail and when he was released, other prisoners informed their friends on the street. One of them had lured the man into the alley, killed him, and then escaped to the Soviet Union with a false passport. The case was investigated by the Polish police, but the killer was never found.

With the Russians occupying Siedlce, these diehard Communists rose in status.

During the short period of the German occupation, the streets had been deserted. Now they were crowded and if I needed to find someone, I could search for them in the streets.

We were very disappointed when rumours began to spread about the return of the Germans. It came as a severe blow to learn only eight days after their arrival that the Russians were indeed leaving Siedlce and going east to Brest-Litovsk. They encouraged the population to follow them to the east. Many families took advantage of the invitation. They were given horse-drawn wagons, trucks, and even railway cars which were quickly filled by the refugees and their movable possession. Hundreds of Jews, mostly young people, embarked upon this voyage to make their homes in the Russian-occupied territory. In some cases men left their families in the hope of finding a place to settle in Russia. Once they had found a home, they hoped to have their families join them. Some people's political leanings played a role in the decision to leave, but most left to get away from the official anti-Semitism of the Germans.

Returning from one of our trips to Mordy, Chaim and I passed many Russians who offered to take us with them, but we declined. We regretted not being able to go, but our priority was to find our father.

We wondered constantly whether we should give up, but so great was the pain of our loss that we chose to stay.

When the last Russians left Siedlce, they took our optimism along with them. As the Germans marched back in, the streets were deserted by Jews and Poles alike. Our unrest and anxiety returned. Nobody had any illusions about what was in store for us.

We had no choice but to go on. Chaim and I continued traveling to Mordy to trade with dealers. Mordy was twenty kilometres from Drohodzyn, the nearest town on the newly established Russian border. At one point, Chaim had decided that he could not take it anymore. He wanted to cross into the Russian zone. With difficulty I persuaded him to stay until our father returned.

CHAPTER 3

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

Life became very difficult. The Germans seized from Jews the best houses with furniture as their quarters. The Russians had slept on bundles of straw in the cemetery.

Strolling down Warszawska Street one day, I was shocked to notice that parts of victims' bodies were still on the sidewalks. A long time had passed since the bombing, yet nobody had taken the responsibility of burying the corpses. I was walking, deep in thought, to my friend Rachel's place. It was across the street from where our store had been. It had been damaged by the bombs too, but the walls remained. They had erected a roof of sheet metal and lived there under appalling conditions. The family consisted of Rachel, her parents, two married sisters and their husbands.

I knocked and Rachel opened the door. They were all very surprised to see me. We hugged each other and I said, "It's good to see you all well after all our painful experiences! It seems like a long time since we saw each other."

"We've lost our possessions," Rachel said, "but we're all happy to be alive." She added, "When things calm down, we might rebuild our house."

Two houses down the road there lived another friend of mine, Ella Steinberg. I knew her from school. It was Ella who had introduced me to Rachel. At first, a mutual dislike had existed

between Rachel and me, but with time we had grown to understand and like each other. Now, we were the very best of friends. Prior to the war, Ella's parents had run a fruit store in the front building and lived in the rear building. We three girls usually met in the store because it was so convenient, and Ella worked there much of the time. Ella's family had managed to rebuild part of their house. They used wooden crates as furniture. Our life styles resembled those of uncivilized people from the distant past. Ella was sixteen years old and her younger sister only eight. Her mother was expecting again, and they were anxious as to how they would cope with the baby.

A third friend, Itka, was also experiencing much hardship. Her mother and older sister had perished in the bombing, leaving her to mourn with her father and two brothers. They had no resources.

Meanwhile, the battle for Warsaw raged unabated. Despite a lack of weapons, medical supplies and training, the people held out against the well-trained and heavily armed Germans. The Jewish population participated fully in the defence of Warsaw. At the start of the Jewish High Holidays, the German air force bombed the Jewish quarters of Warsaw, wiping out whole sections of the city. The death toll reached into the thousands. On October 1, 1939, the Germans claimed the capital city. When the city fell, all the people of Poland suffered defeat. We felt terribly alone, cut off from the rest of the world. Poland was occupied by the Germans in the west and by the Russians in the east. The government and military command surrendered Warsaw and Poland simply ceased to exist as an independent country.

Pearl and I decided to venture to Warsaw, to find out what had become of our father. We traveled in an open railway freight car and carried food for our relatives. We were pleased to find them in good health. Their encouraging faces made us happy. We swapped stories and news. But great disappointment overwhelmed us when we learned that our father had left Warsaw on Thursday, September 7. Now we realized that they knew nothing of his whereabouts. Our father had vanished.

With bitterness and deep sadness, we returned to Siedlce. When Tauba, Chaim and Rifka asked, "What did you hear about him?" we

could not answer and burst into tears.

Chaim asked, "Why are you crying ?"

"I have bad news," I said. "Father is not in Warsaw. He left the day after his arrival."

We were all shaken and uncertain of what to do next.

Chaim and I abandoned the dealings in Mordy because of limited opportunities there. Instead, Pearl and I began to travel by train to Warsaw to sell food. We purchased leather and trimmings and sold it to merchants in Siedlce. When we found some winter clothing available in Warsaw, we bought that too.

In Siedlce, we operated from a backroom rented from our cousin Szejwa. In the front, she kept a fruit store to support herself and her parents with whom she lived upstairs.

At the end of October, Pearl and I took a trip by passenger train to Warsaw. The car quickly filled up with German soldiers and civilians. Among them was a young woman, who had probably been living in Poland before the war; such people were called Volksdeutsche. She began harassing us and taunting us with the words, Jude, Jude, Jude. At first, we merely ignored her, pretending that she was not referring to us. When she demanded that we leave the train, we fearlessly refused to move. She threatened us, saying that the train would stop at the next station and not move until we disembarked. When she noticed that we were not complying with her demand, she increased the pitch of her voice until she was screaming.

We were shocked by her behaviour and outraged at being made to feel like criminals. As the uproar escalated, my sister and I silently got up and left the train. There were not yet any German rules prohibiting Jews from traveling by rail, although we had heard reports of Jews being kicked off trains. To experience it ourselves was entirely different. Of course, we were disturbed by the ordeal, but we decided not to give in easily. We slipped, unnoticed, back into another car of the same train.

Gradually, the Germans implemented sweeping anti-Jewish laws. Jews had to wear white armbands with a blue star of David. Eventually, we were forbidden to travel by train. Among many other "don'ts" was a prohibition against trading in leather. Circumstances,

however, forced us to be bold or foolhardy or both, and to ignore the prohibitions. Pearl and I continued to travel by train to conduct our business, either covering or removing our ribbons.

One cold day in late November we were traveling from Warsaw with four pieces of luggage filled with leather and rubber. The train was late, and we stood waiting on the platform. It was empty except for one man who strolled back and forth. He watched us and then went to the stationmaster's office. We could see them gesture as they conferred. When I realized that we were attracting their attention, I began to shudder at the thought of these men discovering the contents of our suitcases.

The German stationmaster came out and questioned us about the missing star of David armbands. Then he asked what we were carrying in the suitcases. We answered evasively. He ordered us to follow him into the office. Confused about what to do, I thought it would look suspicious if we dragged the heavy suitcases inside with us, so I persuaded Pearl to go and leave me with the luggage. At that moment, a man walked onto the platform. He saw our dilemma and wanted to help. A train was arriving on the other track, so he grabbed our suitcases and was about to throw them into the train. But it was going in the opposite direction, so I took his hand and removed it from our luggage. Thanking him for his concern, I explained that we were not looking for more trouble.

Meanwhile, fear welled up in me as I waited for Pearl to return. Finally, she appeared, pale and trembling. The stationmaster had hit her, yelling at her to pay a fine of twenty zlotys for not wearing the armband, a badge of shame, to distinguish Jews from non-Jews. I wanted to scream at the German: What do you think you're doing to my sister? What have we ever done to you? But I restrained myself, already aware of the answer: we had been born Jews. Soon, the train arrived, and we boarded it. We were very lucky that afternoon.

In the city the Germans regularly dragged people from streets and homes and forced them to unload huge piles of hay and straw, while others were forced to clean the houses of German officers and to transport furniture confiscated from Jewish homes to the Germans'

quarters. We women were drafted to scrub floors and to do the Germans' laundry. Entire city blocks were cleared of men. Hundreds were deported to labour camps, never to be seen or heard from again. Not only were they forced to work without pay for the Germans, but their families were left to fend for themselves.

The Gestapo employed many devilish techniques to destroy Jewish life. The Nazis introduced collective responsibility and punishment for Jews. When a Jew was accused of any transgression, the whole community was made responsible. They came to the kehilah (Jewish community office), to see our civic leaders. They ordered the latter to provide a list of all the well-to-do Jewish professionals, intellectuals and businessmen. Days later, they arrested many of them, demanding ransom for their freedom. We agonized over this new threat. In the end the ransom money was paid.

One day, Pearl rushed in and blurted out, "I just heard that many innocent hostages were shot, despite the cooperation of the kehilah." Tauba had already heard the news. She cried, "I know many of the victims." We were all stunned by this new revelation. The Gestapo terrorized us. The German capacity for deception and the practice of extorting large sums of money and valuables gradually drained the Jews of their remaining assets.

The occupying forces confiscated a complex of modern buildings on the outskirts of Siedlce, called Novo-Siedlce, as their headquarters. They journeyed to Novo-Siedlce by foot or car along Jatkowa Street, through the Jewish neighbourhood where we had had our business. I could observe from my aunt's window how the Germans would harass Jews. A Jew passing a German in the street had to doff his hat and step aside to allow the representative of the "master race" to pass by. Despite this demonstration of humility, they were often dealt a kick or a blow. We had to learn to accept humiliation, provocations and beatings. We lived in hope that some day the situation would change. The horror could not last forever.

But it got worse. Our beautiful synagogue, famous throughout Poland, was destroyed on Christmas night of 1939. The Germans threw kerosene on it and set it on fire. The fire could be seen from

quite a distance. Many people gathered around the burning building and some attempted to extinguish the flames with buckets of water, but those who did were shot. Their crime: interfering with the fun of the German soldiers.

That winter, violent storms blew heavy snow over the roadways. The bitter cold reflected the misery in our hearts. We did not travel much, not having proper clothing, and, as a result, we could not earn any money. During the days we stayed with our stepmother. However, the severe cold at night drove us to the relative warmth of our aunt's home. We had to trudge through deep snow to get there, but it was better than remaining where we had no heat and not even a single blanket. At our aunt's, the four of us shared a single bed. When we awoke in the morning, we would be in the same positions as when we lay down.

The Bug River served as the border between western, German-controlled, and eastern, Russian-occupied Poland. The city of Brest-Litovsk was on the Russian side. Refugees numbering in the thousands had settled on the eastern side. In Brest-Litovsk alone, there was a sizable group of young Jews who had come from German-occupied territory. Because of the influx of refugees, there was a shortage of accomodations. People slept on the floor in public buildings, trying to survive until they found a place of their own.

When the Russian soldiers left Siedlce, my cousins Chaim, Tauba, Pearl and Kopel as well as Chaim's wife and Tauba's husband went with them. When I returned from Mordy, they had already gone. During his military service, Chaim had been stationed in Brest-Litovsk, so, being familiar with the place, he and his relatives settled there. They got involved in business, but not everyone was as lucky. Many people were forced to look for employment elsewhere. Kopel left Brest-Litovsk with a few friends. They travelled deep into Russia, where they found jobs in a match factory. A few months later, he began to feel extremely lonesome and homesick. Friends informed his sister Pearl, and she took her brother's pain to heart. With her sister Szejwa's boyfriend Josef, she travelled to bring Kopel back to Brest-Litovsk. The journey into Russia and back was uneventful. Once Kopel was back among family, he recovered.

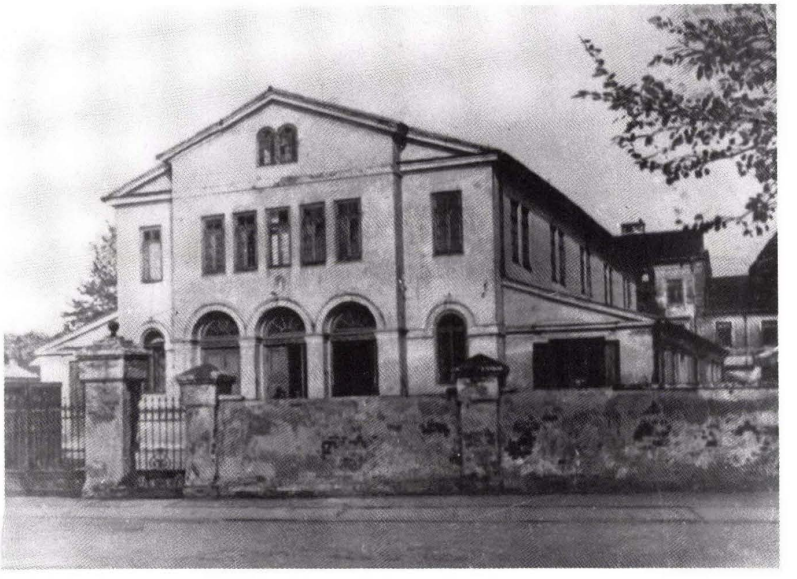
Although the frontier was under constant surveillance, many people managed to flee from the Germans. They took whatever they could carry, making their way to the Bug River. There were many obstacles. Sometimes, people had to sleep outside in the cold for days before they could be taken across by a guide. At times, the surveillance of the border by the Germans was very tight and no boats would dare to cross. Later in the season the river was not sufficiently frozen for people to venture out by foot. Many were cheated; swindlers took them for a ride in the boat but dropped them off again in German-occupied territory.

Just before New Year, my cousin Pearl crossed the border and returned to Siedlce to recover some clothes. Later, with her sister-in-law's mother, Sara, she attempted several times to sneak back to the Russian side, but to no avail. They were forced to return to Siedlce. Eventually, my cousin Szejwa's boyfriend Josef left the Russian side for Siedlce. He stayed with Szejwa and her parents for a short time, before he returned with Pearl to the Russian controlled territory. Sara, too exhausted to make the journey, opted to stay in Siedlce. With the arrival of 1940, the surveillance on the German side of the border was increased. People continued crossing, but many were turned back and forced to remain on the western side.

In the Russian occupied area, rumours spread that numerous spies were mingled with the refugees. Although the Russians ordered all refugees to register, very few obeyed for fear of being sent to Siberia. One day, the Russians rounded up all the refugees who had failed to register and transported them to Siberian camps. The lucky ones were assigned relatively easy work and received adequate food. The majority, though, were sent to work in the forests cutting trees or working in kolchoses, large-scale communal farms run by the government. They received small food rations and had to make do with whatever resources they had.

My cousins in Brest-Litovsk failed to register and did not apply for Soviet citizenship. They were among those picked up from the street and sent to Siberia. Kopel, who was registered, remained in Brest-Litovsk. The others wrote letters from Siberia to my aunt, describing their primitive living conditions. They worked extremely

hard, but the food they were given was black bread and coffee without milk or sugar.



Siedlce Synagogue
Burned down Christmas night 1939
Courtesy of the Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw

CHAPTER 4

SEIZURE OF MERCHANDISE

The defenceless Jews of Poland lost all the rights and privileges they had previously enjoyed. Poles who wanted to take over a store owned by Jews could simply ask for it at any time, without any pretext, justification or compensation. There was no appeal. It was the same story with housing. When Poles or Germans chose a house, the Jewish family living in it had absolutely no choice but to vacate. Even the furniture had to be left behind.

Many Jewish families used their living quarters for doing business. The Germans somehow got wind of this practice and began raiding private Jewish homes, seizing merchandise and other valuables that caught their attention. A few days later they would return to make sure they had not left anything of value behind.

One evening in January 1940 two German policemen knocked on the door of my aunt's house above the store. They ordered us to open the back room where they found and confiscated two large rolls of leather. We were, of course, powerless to resist. More importantly, we could not understand how they had found out about our business.

Sure enough, a few days later, as was the practice, one of them returned with a companion and demanded more leather. We were determined to stop the theft of our merchandise, but we knew we were dealing with immoral people and so our problem would not be easy to solve.

Desperate, we went to see the commanding officer of the Ger-

man police to complain about the behaviour of his men. We joined a long line of people with similar complaints. After a long wait, an officer emerged to announce that the commanding officer would not see anyone else that day.

It took a number of tries, but Pearl and I finally got the ear of the commanding officer. Cautiously, we tried to appeal to his conscience. We explained that we were orphans and in a desperate financial situation. We mentioned that some of his men were not making it any easier when they took away our leather. He responded that he had one hundred and sixty men under his command and it was impossible to know which ones were responsible. He asked us to identify the policeman. While we were waiting I recognized one of the men standing guard as one of the unwelcome visitors to our aunt's house and told this to the commanding officer. Orders were given to have him brought in. We were told to leave.

CHAPTER 5

THE WEDDING

In March, I went back to see my friend Rachel and her family. They were still living in their make-shift shelter.

Rachel opened the door. "Good morning," I said.

"Good to see you," Rachel replied.

"How are you and your family coping with the chilly weather?" I asked.

She responded, "It could be better. It is very cold here. But summer is arriving soon and it will all change."

There was something about her that I couldn't understand.

"Rachel, you seem to be in a good mood. Is anything new?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'm engaged to marry Josef."

"You're kidding! Congratulations!" I said. "How soon?"

"In a few weeks. I would like to invite you now to come to the wedding."

I knew that the two of them had been in love long before the war, but I was surprised that they were going to be married under these circumstances.

I tried to share in my friend's happiness, but I simply could not understand how one could get married in these uncertain times. No one knew what the next day would bring. I saw it as sheer foolishness for Rachel to undertake the responsibility of marriage. She had two married sisters. She was the youngest in the family and had parents to look after her. So Rachel looked at things differently.

Josef had gone out with us often before the war and I knew him

well. He and Rachel were clearly made for each other.

They decided that the wedding would take place in the house of Rachel's cousin, on a part of Pulaskiego Street, where the houses remained untouched by the bombing.

On the day of the wedding, I put on my best dress in the hope of appearing festive. I walked to Rachel's cousin's where I met other friends.

I could see that Rachel's parents and sisters had spared nothing in their effort to prepare a happy celebration. They were determined to make their guests forget reality for a while and simply enjoy the party. The bride was dressed in a simple, pretty dress. Slowly, the guests began to arrive, settling down in their places. Finally, the only one missing was the groom. Time passed, but he did not appear. The guests were becoming impatient. A wave of panic had descended over Rachel's face. More time passed before the bride's parents decided to look for Josef. We all waited anxiously to see what would happen. When her parents returned, they told us that the groom's mother was very sick and he therefore was unable to attend the wedding. Rachel and her family decided to postpone the ceremony until the groom's mother had recovered.

Afterwards, my friend Ella confided in me the real reason for the delay. Josef's mother did not like Rachel and preferred Itka as her daughter-in-law. Itka worked in a shoe store next to the house where Josef and his mother resided. She was a frequent visitor and had become close with Josef's mother. On the day of the wedding ceremony, Josef's mother was sick and convinced him not to go ahead with his marriage plans. This entire episode surprised me, for I had no idea of the barrier facing Rachel in her love for Josef.

My attention, however, did not remain focussed for long on the wedding. The struggle to provide food for my family did not leave me much time to dwell on her misfortune and I soon forgot about my friends Rachel Blusztejn, Ella Steinberg and Itka Komar.

CHAPTER 6

THE SEIZURES ACCELERATE

One Friday afternoon, in April 1940, I had finished in the store earlier than usual. It was the day before Passover and I did not expect to sell any more merchandise. I told my cousin that I had finished for the day and left.

About fifteen meters away, almost at the gate to my aunt's building, I stopped suddenly in my tracks, appalled at what I was seeing. A black limousine followed by a large truck was slowing down right in front of my cousin's store. It came to a halt. I was frightened but also curious about this strange sight. The door opened, and out stepped a slender man in his thirties, over six feet tall and sporting a German military uniform. An older man accompanied him, elegantly dressed in a black suit and white shirt. They glanced around, talking to one another. Then they entered my cousin's fruit store.

I turned and began walking back towards the store. My intuition told me that something peculiar was about to happen, but I was convinced that I could handle the situation. My suspicion proved correct. There stood my cousin flanked by the Germans who apparently were looking for me. Trying to hide my anxiety, I asked how I could help them. The man in the military uniform identified himself as the lieutenant and commander of the German garrison in Siedlce. His demand was straightforward: the leather. He wanted to know to whom it belonged.

The Germans were obviously well informed. Taking a deep breath, I replied that the leather was mine. I asked him for the source of

their information. He replied that it was confidential. They seemed surprised that I was the owner. They had expected an adult, not a teenage girl. They also expected my cousin's fruit store to be a coverup for a large-scale backroom leather business with lots of merchandise, hence the truck they had brought along.

The lieutenant informed me that it was prohibited for Jews to deal in leather and as a result, they were forced to confiscate my merchandise. They called in the truck driver and loaded up not only the leather, but also the rubber and all the trimmings for shoemakers. He said he would return on Monday. I was shocked and completely at a loss as to what to do.

True to his word he returned on Monday, but only to lock and seal my cousin's fruit store, and to take away the keys. I found myself in a uncomfortable situation. Not only had our source of income been eliminated, but I had to come to terms with the fact that I had brought misfortune to my cousin and her family as well.

To find a way out of the dilemma, I tried to see the lieutenant so I could impress upon him the injustice of having locked up my cousin's store. Just at that time, I happened to learn of a woman who had suffered a similar experience at his hands. She was a business woman in her late thirties, whose knitting factory was confiscated. She eventually recovered some of her merchandise and in the process had come to know the lieutenant. I approached her for help. She promised to intercede on my behalf. She was as good as her word, for not long afterwards the lieutenant showed up with her at the store and handed over the keys. To say that I was relieved that my cousin could reopen her store was an understatement.

After that incident I considered it foolish to even ponder bringing in other goods. I spent many sleepless nights wondering what to do next. After much soul searching I became convinced that the best plan would be to approach the lieutenant himself for the return of my merchandise when he walked past the store on the way to his quarters in Novo-Siedlce, as he did regularly.

A week later I spotted him. Excusing myself, I asked if he would mind if I spoke with him. He slowed his pace; he seemed willing to listen. I explained my dilemma and pleaded with him to return my

merchandise and permit me to resume dealing in leather. I told him that my father was missing and I had to support a family of six. Occasionally, he stopped and asked questions. We were in Novo-Siedlce by the time he told me that he would consider my request and inform me of his decision. Two days later, I saw him on the street again and asked for his decision. He gave me his address and told me to come to his quarters in order to retrieve the merchandise. I was elated. One afternoon, I gathered my courage and walked to the address he had given me. I knocked. He was apparently sleeping at the time, but my repeated knocking eventually roused him. He opened the door, dressed as usual in his uniform. He inquired as to my current situation, apparently in no hurry to return my goods. When I finally asked for the leather, he turned around and looked for some keys in his pockets. He went down a staircase, and left me wondering whether he had any intention of keeping his promise. Eventually, he did emerge, but all he handed me was two small strips of rubber.

It was obvious that further pressure would be counter-productive and I had to absorb the fact that this was all I was getting back. As I turned to go, he promised that he would not carry out any further seizures. He also said that I was allowed to deal in leather once again. I didn't trust him. Consequently, I waited for quite some time before resuming the business, although the confiscation of our merchandise put us in a squeeze that threatened our ability to continue. But it seemed impossible to come up with a new strategy for solving our problems.

One day, while I was out for a stroll, I suddenly felt hot tears rolling down my face. Glancing around me, I realized that I had unconsciously walked back to where our store had stood. The last time I had been in that area was on that terrible day of the bombing, when I had seen the store in a state of partial collapse. Now, there was not even a hint of the wooden building that had housed our business for all those years. I gazed around dejectedly, wondering at the difference. In a million years I would never have conceived of this happening. I began kicking the debris that had settled on the ground, letting my tears mingle with the dust. Suddenly, I noticed piles of rusty iron horseshoes. Kicking at them, I came upon our storage

cellar. I had totally forgotten about it.

In 1930, when we opened the store, my parents found that they did not have enough storage space. One solution was to build a cellar, but it was easier said than done. The landlord had passed away just before our family arrived and the numerous heirs were in disagreement as to the future of the building. There was no chance of getting permission to dig a cellar, so my father built one secretly, informing no one of his intentions. The digging of the cellar had, of course, presented a problem of how to dispose of the earth that was dug up. With the help of my mother's family, my father began working each night. Each morning he carried the earth away. The cover he had constructed was not noticeable; it hid the cellar well. Excitedly, I removed many of the horseshoes which were bound together with wire, and found something underneath them which lifted my spirit: leather! The horseshoes had protected the leather from the flames. Thrilled with the discovery, I ran home to tell my brother and sisters. The surprise on their faces was surely something to see, and their hugs made me happy. That night we returned to the cellar of the demolished store and moved the leather into the cellar of our aunt's house. We did not use the back room because we had learned never to trust the Germans.

The month of May brought warmer weather and thankfully, we heard of no further incidents. Little did we know, however, that this was merely a temporary respite.

One sunny day my cousin Szejwa and I were standing in front of her store when suddenly we became aware of a commotion in the street.

"Gitel, go and take a look," Szejwa urged.

People were running helter skelter, and in no time the streets were deserted. I walked cautiously to the corner of Jatkowa and Dluga Streets in order to investigate.

The streets were surrounded by German soldiers. Some of them moved forward to Jatkowa Street, while others began forcing their way into private Jewish homes. They emerged from the homes with all kinds of valuables, carrying them away amid the tears and pleading of the owners. They seemed to be taking anything that caught

their fancy. Across the street I recognized the tall German lieutenant who had confiscated my leather. He was supervising. I scurried over and asked what was going on. He replied casually that it was no concern of mine, obviously aware that my merchandise had already been seized. I did not reply and went to my cousin to report on the situation.

The soldiers made their way along the street, searching every building. My cousin suggested that I leave the store before the Germans searched our place. Overwhelmed with bitterness, I went out and stayed in the street to observe. Sure enough, they headed for my aunt's building. The lieutenant disappeared. Inevitably, the Germans discovered the leather in the cellar and seized it. I stood immobile and helpless, as once again the Germans carried away our goods. So much for our miraculous discovery.

CHAPTER 7

NEW LIFE AMID THE DESTRUCTION

Several months later, on a summer day, I unexpectedly bumped into Rachel. The last time I had seen her had been at the hastily postponed wedding. Now her pained expression was gone; she was obviously expecting a baby! She noticed my shock and laughingly told me, "I married Josef and we're expecting a baby soon. My husband, my parents, my sisters and I moved to this building." She indicated a nearby house. Her humour and positive attitude were rare in those uncertain days and it really surprised me that she had the courage to become pregnant. She seemed prepared to tackle her fate.

I had many things to discuss with her, but my time was limited. I promised her to visit soon. Before I left, Rachel told me that Ella's family had moved. They had been fortunate in finding a large room vacated by people who had left for Russia. She told me, as best she could, where I could locate them. As I walked away, I promised myself that I would take some time to visit Ella.

A few days later, I followed Rachel's directions and found myself searching among decaying structures until I spotted them in the yard of one of the buildings. They were sitting on broken chairs at an old table; all were busy doing different things. Ella's mother held a tiny baby; I could see that it was just a few months old. When I came into the yard they jumped up to greet me.

"We're delighted to see you," Ella's mother said.

"How is everybody?" I asked.

There was a lot to catch up on and we sat down to talk. They explained the difficulties they had been encountering and how the birth of the baby had eased their pain. It brought them joy and new hope, instilling them with a confidence they had not thought possible. A little girl, she was the centre of attention and all were held captive by her smile and shining eyes. Despite the fact that all five of them lived in cramped quarters, they seemed happy. Their furniture and utensils were all home-made. In a shed parallel to the room they had set up a kitchen. As much as possible they spent time in the freedom of the outdoors. Ella's father worked a few hours a day, and her mother hoped soon to be able to continue her work as a seamstress.

I did not have to ask any questions. I simply sat and listened to them describe their life. Up to this point they had not lost any loved ones, but in fact had added a fifth member to the family. When they finished telling me their happy news there was a lapse in the conversation, for no one wanted to bring up the bleak future that confronted us. I thanked them for the lovely afternoon and left.

I could not visit my friend Itka, because I did not know where she lived.

CHAPTER 8

MOVING TO WARSAW

As a result of the restrictions placed on train travel, buses came into use in the summer of 1940. Pearl became a frequent traveler to Warsaw, buying shoe trimmings which we sold in Siedlce.

She also took kosher meat from Siedlce for our relatives in Warsaw. The ritual slaughtering of animals was performed secretly in the middle of the night. Whenever Pearl went to Warsaw, Chaim and I woke up early to get the meat from the butcher and carry it to the bus, which left at five in the morning. My brother and I waited until the bus pulled away, then we went back to our aunt's house to catch up on our sleep.

One such morning, as I climbed back into bed and tried to fall asleep, I found myself unable to relax. I wondered what the future had in store for my family and my friends. An hour passed, and suddenly I heard a knock on the door. I rushed out of bed and found an acquaintance standing on the doorstep. He presented me with the news that the bus which had just left had been stopped by the Germans. I dressed quickly and went out. The shutters on the neighbours' houses were still closed and the streets were deserted. I walked to the bus depot where the worried relatives of the people on the bus were congregating. They told me that the Germans had stopped it near the town limits and ordered the driver to return to the bus depot. The passengers were ordered out and the Germans seized all their parcels. After a short delay, the passengers were ordered back on the bus, and the Germans set forth with them to an

unknown destination. I waited an hour, not knowing where to turn for help. At nine in the morning another acquaintance came into my cousin's store to tell me that for each passenger on the bus, an identification card issued by the Judenrat (the council of elders of the Jewish community, appointed by the Germans for their administrative convenience) must be delivered to the Gestapo. I had seen Gestapo members walking towards Novo-Siedlce and assumed that their office was located there. However, the thought of going to where I knew that torture was being inflicted on innocent people, was absolutely horrifying. Not having any choice, I got Pearl's identification card and left for Novo-Siedlce. It was still early morning. In one of the buildings I noticed light streaming from an open window and turned there to inquire. A uniformed German standing at a window told me that this was indeed the office I was looking for. I took a deep breath and entered, proceeding to a table where a Gestapo agent was sitting. After explaining that my sister was aboard the bus traveling to Warsaw, I handed him her identification card, which he examined carefully before he glanced at me. He promised to release her shortly. With a sigh of relief, I left the building.

Hours passed and I began to feel foolish for believing him. But at four o'clock in the afternoon I was hugging Pearl. I felt as though she had been gone for days. Pearl described what we already knew. It was obvious that the Gestapo, having succeeded in getting hold of merchandise, would repeat these acts of robbery on a daily basis. It was no longer worthwhile to take trips to Warsaw. We decided to change course. Pearl left to stay in Warsaw and began to send parcels of shoemaker's trimmings to us via a Polish transport company. The trucks left each morning from Siedlce to Warsaw and returned in the evening. Other Jewish merchants also took advantage of this opportunity to get goods from Warsaw. For a while, this operation met our needs.

One evening, my brother and I went to pick up our parcels. Although it was late, the truck had not yet arrived. The owner announced that his truck was delayed. We decided to wait and made ourselves comfortable. Then came the news that an officer of the German garrison in Siedlce had stopped the truck and confiscated all the

merchandise. It was only then that we found out that this was not the first confiscation. This filled me with an overwhelming surge of frustration. How were we to survive with the persistent robbery of our merchandise, leather and rubber, and now, even the shoe trimmings?

It was intolerable, but from somewhere a new willingness to fight back emerged. In desperation I decided to intervene in the seizure of our merchandise. I knew that all seized goods went to the German military headquarters on Warszawska Street under the authority of the lieutenant. I went to headquarters to speak with him. The first day I wasted many hours waiting for him to appear. He did not show up that day. The next morning I got up early and began a vigil outside his office. When I finally got to see him, there was always some excuse. One day he claimed to be busy; the next, he said that he did not have the keys to the stockroom and that I should return another day. His repeated excuses finally made me realize that I was fighting without any hope of success. I had been naive even to appeal to him in the first place. I suppose I was still clinging to the illusion that the lieutenant had some civility in him.

When I was a child my grandmother used to tell me stories about bandits -- primitive, uncivilized people who did nothing but attack, rob and kill. They lived in the woods, ignoring the laws of civilization. It had never occured to me that a modern, civilized world could become so perverted that laws would permit bandits to rule over the land. True, many of these bandits were elegantly dressed, wore white gloves and maintained a polished culture, but they were thieves all the same.

I began to understand the futility of resisting. Day and night I pondered what we could do that would steer us clear of the Germans. Realizing that it was a no-win situation, I gave up hope of carrying on a business in Siedlce. I determined to go to Warsaw to consult with Pearl about future plans.

Following the occupation of Siedlce by the Germans, we received information about our father on several occasions, but unfortunately we were never able to investigate what we were told.

In the spring of 1940, a Polish woman visited our stepmother

with the news that our father was alive. She told Tauba that her husband had recently been released from a prisoner of war camp, Stalag 2D, and had met our father there. Upon her husband's release, he had immediately sent her to give us the thrilling message that our father had managed to survive. My stepmother was so taken aback by the dramatic news that she neglected to take the name and address of the Polish woman so we could contact her for further information. We were thus at a loss as to where to find our father. Our sole clue - prisoner of war camp Stalag 2D - did not tell us where it was or where we could find him. I decided to look up the Red Cross in Warsaw. Now I had one more reason to travel there.

It was a beautiful summer day when I arrived in Warsaw. The weather filled me with strength and restored my hope. I asked someone for directions to the Red Cross and, although it was quite a distance, I decided to walk. There were Polish girls my age walking the streets. Their happy faces seemed to reflect a carefree attitude and cheerfulness. I envied them. Here I was, depressed and worried. Even though I had tried to resist, the harsh realities of the war and the constant persecution were wearing on me. I did not have the time to brood over such thoughts for long, for I was approaching the Red Cross. With high hopes and a sense of optimism, I entered the building. With modern furnishings and many floors all occupied by the Red Cross, the building looked new. I was sent from the information desk to the top floor. I described the circumstances surrounding my missing father and the surprise visit of the woman who had told us about Stalag 2D. The clerk took out a list of prisoners of war and looked it over. Not finding my father's name, she sent me to the next office where I went through the same story again. The clerk in that office searched his list and sent me on to yet another department. They couldn't help me either.

Finally, a female clerk took a real interest in me. She asked questions. She wanted to know the fate of my mother and my family and I responded by describing my plight. She remarked on how well I looked after all the pain and suffering I had gone through. She entered another office and looked over the information bulletins. My father's name did not appear anywhere. Finally, she took my

address and promised to notify me the minute she heard anything.

As I walked down the broad concrete steps which extended across the entire length of the building, the remarks of the Red Cross clerk echoed in my mind: "The pain which you are experiencing is not visible on you." People who knew me said I resembled my father. Whenever he went through turbulent times, he always concealed his suffering, not letting it get the better of him.

Disappointed, I slowly walked towards the home of my Aunt Gitel at 2 Przebieg Street. She was a very caring person, always as helpful as a mother. We now turned to her for advice on how to find a new source of income to provide our family with basic necessities.

CHAPTER 9

A NEW ENDEAVOUR

Aunt Gitel encouraged us to start a business in Warsaw. She was excited at the prospect of our renting a store on Frantiszkanska Street to sell wholesale shoemaker's trimmings. With the skills I had acquired in the business, she foresaw a bright future for us at the end of the war when we would own an established enterprise and could take pride in our accomplishment. She became actively involved in choosing the store.

Frantiszkanska Street was only a few blocks away from her house. It was one long block with three- and four-story buildings with adjacent yards where trucks moved in and out through large iron gates. The buildings in the yards had stores on the ground floor and offices and dwellings on the upper floors. Numerous long established wholesalers of leather and trimmings for shoemakers were located there. One section of the two-part door to each store fronting on Frantiszkanska Street was always closed during the German occupation. If the Germans arrived unexpectedly to round up people or to seize merchandise, the store could be locked up quickly.

Despite the tense environment, people continued to move around freely in the business district. Most were from outside Warsaw. They had to be bold to travel to the capital under the circumstances. Doing business on the run, they were always in a hurry to get their goods and return to their families.

After lengthy discussions, we rented a large store at 22 Frantiszkanska Street, on the right side of the yard, close to the gate.

Leather had been sold in that store before the war, but it had recently been closed. As had been the case in Siedlce, it was illegal for Jews to trade in leather once the Germans occupied Warsaw.

Now we faced the challenge of how to get shoemaker trimmings supplies. Many factories had been destroyed, some had moved away and others had gone out of business. It was nearly impossible to learn the addresses of the existing factories. There were few telephones. To find even a few sources for the goods that we needed took considerable time and effort.

Most of the Jewish business establishments in Warsaw had been confiscated without warning. The German occupational forces installed their lackies in many Jewish factories. After forcing the proprietors to teach them how to operate the equipment, the Germans threw them out. Some establishments were taken over by Poles. They were assuming positions in the professions, industries and businesses which the Jews had been forced to relinquish. The Poles were content with this turn of events which had long been their aim. Jews could not get licenses to operate enterprises. In order to save their establishments, some Jews had acquired Polish partners. Despite the many obstacles, a small number of Jewish manufacturers, tradesmen and merchants still continued to operate.

We encountered a whole new set of difficulties when we finally made contact with manufacturers. The wholesalers in Warsaw were a powerful group which maintained a virtual monopoly over the trade in rubber and trimmings. Before the war an agreement had been signed in Warsaw between the manufacturers of rubber and shoe trimmings and twenty-seven wholesalers. The manufacturers had agreed not to sell any merchandise to new establishments. If they did they could be boycotted. However, with persistent effort we finally succeeded in getting a trickle of merchandise from the manufacturers.

One article needed by shoemakers were wooden nails that were used to cobble good quality shoes. They were produced only by one company, Rabbi, in Warsaw. Before the war a few had tried to compete with that company, but none had succeeded.

My father used to say, "Rabbi is an old, reliable firm." It took us a long time to get hold of their address, and even more time to find the

place where they were located. When we finally did, the employees bluntly refused to sell to us. But Pearl and I did not give up. We went to the office building next door, looking for somebody to help us. There we met a young man in his thirties, impeccably dressed in the traditional Jewish garb of the time. He was one of the owner's sons. He was kind and patiently listened to our story. When we were through, he explained to us that he was prohibited from selling merchandise to newcomers. However, moved by our plight, Mr.Rabbi grudgingly agreed to make an exception in our case and to sell us wooden nails. This was a great breakthrough.

Finally, after a few weeks, we had most of the merchandise we needed to open the store. We learned as we went along. Not only did our customers tell us what articles we were missing, but over time we learned what was in demand.

Among the items that were avidly sought were two brands of rubber, Sumatra and Sanok. We could not persuade our clients to make any transactions that did not include such rubber. To keep rubber in stock we were forced to buy from a competitor at retail price, hardly a worthwhile exercise. But we had to keep the clients happy. We had to keep on searching for access to the manufacturers. In the rear of the yard where we had establish our business was a wholesaler of shoemaker's trimmings The owners, two partners, had been in business from before the war. I used to stand in front of our store and observe the people who frequented our competitors. Eventually, I learned to differentiate between a client and a supplier. From the shape of the parcels being delivered I guessed that they contained the brands of rubber that we needed.

There seemed to be two main suppliers. One of these suppliers seemed to be run by two brothers, one in his early twenties, the other in his thirties. Both had moustaches and they resembled each other; both made regular deliveries to our competitor's store.

One day I stood in front of our store as the younger man went by. I stopped him, but when I inquired about the rubber, he fled. I decided to wait for a second opportunity. A few days later the older brother passed near our store and, again, I approached him to sell us some rubber. He too refused to even acknowledge me and disap-

peared as fast as he could run.

In the meantime, we succeeded in obtaining information about the manufacturer of the other kind of rubber that we needed. They were also two brothers in their late twenties, named Minsky, one of whom walked with a limp. Both came often, on bicycles, carrying parcels to our competitor. I approached them as well, but they too turned me down. Their contracts restricted them from selling to new dealers; there was nothing they could do. We did not become discouraged and we continued to pester them at every opportunity.

Once, I succeeded in convincing one of the Minsky brothers to enter our store. He told us that he could not produce enough black rubber due to the shortage of an essential ingredient, white rubber. It had to be imported from India which was now impossible. From our conversation I clutched at one kernel of information, white rubber soles from old shoes was just as good as new imported rubber. I promised to deliver a sizeable amount of white rubber; Mr.Minsky agreed to furnish us with black. But he insisted that we would not get the black rubber until we delivered the white.

That same week, on Friday afternoon, standing in front of our store, I noticed the older brother of the other manufacturer, as he went into our competitor's store. On his way out of the yard I placed myself squarely in his path. I told him that I could get used white rubber and asked whether he would be interested. A benign smile lit his face as he quickly expressed his willingness to take any quantity. I said that I was expecting a shipment the following week and would be willing to exchange some for black rubber. If anybody should ask, he could simply reply that he had traded the black rubber for old white rubber. I was pleasantly surprised when he wrote down his name, Rubenstein, and his address, and said, "Ask for my brother and he will serve you." Not long afterwards, I went to the address. I was surprised to find that it was a private home. Clearly, the Jewish businessmen who were still active were trying their best to limit their exposure to the outside. The younger Rubenstein brother opened the door. I could see confusion on his face when he recognized me. Stammering the reason for my presence, I explained that his brother had referred me to him. He was doubtful of my honesty so I showed

him his brother's handwritten note containing his address as proof. I thought that would be enough, but even that did not manage to erase the doubt in his eyes. His manners were deplorable. Unfriendly and arrogant, he refused to deal with me. I was not going to retreat without a fight. I stood my ground, making a commotion until his sister-in-law, hearing our quarrel, appeared and intervened on my behalf. She finalized the deal and I left. As I closed the door behind me, I could still hear the younger Rubinstein fuming. He had been hostile throughout the entire transaction, but he could not dampen my happiness at having finally succeeded in obtaining Sumatra rubber. I did not let his behaviour offend me; I saw it as a reflection of immaturity.

Strolling back home, I felt as though I was walking on air in spite of being burdened with the heavy parcel of black rubber. Contemplating how to buy white rubber in Siedlce, even in my excitement, I realized that bringing it to Warsaw would not be easy.

One Monday morning, I awoke early and went to the bus depot. There I met people who let me know that the sole means of transportation to Siedlce was a horse-drawn vehicle; I had to reserve a place in advance for a trip that evening at seven. I prepared a few parcels with leather and trimmings to take with me. Long before seven o'clock I carried the heavy parcels to where the horse-drawn vehicle was stationed. I got a good seat and stashed the parcels on the bottom of the rig. Looking around at the passengers and the merchandise they were taking with them, I realized that we were all sharing the same thought: the merchandise would almost certainly be confiscated if it was uncovered by the Germans at the checkpoint.

We had a long trip ahead of us, ninety kilometres. At the slow pace that we would be traveling, the journey would take a whole night and day. At precisely seven o'clock we left Warsaw; it was still bright daylight. Not far from Warsaw, at a place called Milosna, the road wound its way deep into a forest. The forest was very dense and even in daylight the woods were dark. The sun sank beneath the horizon and darkness started its reign over the night while we were still on this dangerous part of the road.

Before the war our father used to tell us stories about bands of

robbers who hid in those forests and ambushed travelers. Even passengers on trains in daytime were at risk. The doors of the train would open suddenly, the thieves would enter and before anybody could realize what was happening, they would return to the woods with the stolen goods. They managed this feat even when the train was traveling at high speed. By the time the train stopped and the police arrived, the robbers would have disappeared without a trace. Just thinking about this sent shivers down my spine.

As we emerged from the forest we breathed a collective sigh of relief. We continued at a slower pace, passing through different villages on a schedule, for the coachman wanted to arrive in the town of Minsk-Mazowiecki at midnight. This was thought to be the best time to pass through the checkpoint where German officials searched every vehicle. It was the hour that the guards changed shifts.

The night guards were always too tired and grumpy to perform a thorough inspection, but I had been warned to be very cautious at the checkpoint. The night was pitch-dark when we arrived in Minsk-Mazowiecki. It was not cold, but we shivered nonetheless. In the distance we could see lights and as we came closer we could make out the building which housed the German military post. On evergreens ringing the building hung spotlights which illuminated the area. The guard hut was in front of the building. In the stillness of the night the steps of the guards were frightening. We quickly glanced around to assure ourselves that our bundles were well hidden. Soon we heard a scream: "Halt!" The guard barked an order to us to follow his orders. He asked what we were carrying. Each of us, in turn, tried to suppress our nervousness and blurted out that the items they had taken with them had no value. The guard made a pretense of searching the vehicle, but he was tired and let us go. I was still afraid that we might encounter new dangers, but finally, calmed by the rhythm of the moving vehicle, I fell asleep.

Evidently I slept a long time, because when I awoke the black of the night had already changed to a softer gray. On the horizon were the first weak rays of the sun. The grass was covered with dew and morning fog rose slowly over the fields and meadows. Wide awake, I watched the rapid appearance of daylight. The misty clouds rose,

broke and rolled away, allowing the sunshine to reach down and warm the earth.

The next landmark we passed was the little town of Kaluszyn. We stopped for a while to refresh ourselves, and I decided to take advantage of the opportunity to visit my father's cousin Yospe, whom I had been wanting to see for a long time. Although I had never been in Kaluszyn before and had not seen her for years, I found her quite easily. Yospe recognized me at once. She was surprised.

"How good it is to see you!" she remarked as we hugged each other.

"What a coincidence! Your father was here several months ago. He stopped at my house on his way from Warsaw to Siedlce," she said.

I got excited. "So he was here? What day was it?" I asked. She thought for a minute and declared it was Thursday, September 7.

"He took a bite here and hurried to go to Siedlce," she added.

"You know," I said, "he is missing. We don't know what happened to him. He never returned."

Yospe had not realized that he was missing and tried to comfort me by contending that he would soon return. She mentioned that there had been heavy fighting that evening around Kaluszyn. Many casualties had resulted

From all the information that I had gathered about my father, I still had not unraveled his fate. The memories were still fresh. I could not rest. I had to learn what had happened to him. If he was alive and free, I knew, he would be doing everything in his power to return to us.

I left Yospe's home more depressed than when I had arrived. I regretted not having more time to spend with her. This was to be the last time I would see her alive. For a few minutes I also visited my cousin Mindel. She had married and moved from Siedlce to Kaluszyn before the war.

For the rest of the journey I brooded over the fate of my father. When we finally arrived and I saw Rifka, Chaim, Tauba and my baby brother, I was elated. They were surprised that I had returned without notifying them. We all sat down and I gave them an account of the

progress in the store and the reason I was back in Siedlce.

The next morning my brother and I went to a rag dealer, Mendel, whom Chaim knew. Rag collectors went from house to house, picking up old clothing and old shoes. After gathering a large amount of a certain item, they sold it to the rag dealers, who stockpiled these items in large warehouses. I explained to Mendel that we were looking for old white rubber soles from worn sandals. He offered to sell us all of the six and a half kilograms he had for the price of three zlotys a kilogram. The rubber had no market price as there were no buyers for it. I considered the price fair and we shook hands. For all the white rubber he had the total bill came to 19.50 zlotys. I paid and told Mendel that I would come by later to pick it up.

From there, my brother and I headed to other rag dealers to buy more old rubber. They all demanded a higher price. It seemed that the news that there were buyers for the old rubber spread rapidly. The price skyrocketed and some dealers even hesitated to part with their rubber at any cost. When I returned to Mendel to pick up the parcel of rubber he refused to hand it over to me, returning the money instead. This was a lesson for me. Always collect your goods as soon as you pay for them.

For a week I stayed in Siedlce in order to allow the expectations of the dealers to dwindle and to prove to the dealers that there was no great demand for old white rubber, for I was the sole buyer. The price stabilized. I bought all the rubber available. I left amid promises from the rag dealers that they would sell my brother any used white rubber they could find. We learned from one of the dealers that large quantities could be found in the cities of Miedzyrzec, Radzyn and Lublin. Dealers with huge piles of assorted items lived in these cities and stored them in warehouses.

When I was ready to return to Warsaw, there was a bus going from Siedlce to Minsk-Mazowiecki. From there, I could look for transportation to Warsaw. As I prepared to leave Siedlce, Chaim decided to travel by horse-drawn vehicle the forty-two kilometres to Miedzyrzec, to explore the area for old white rubber The bus to Minsk-Mazowiecki was stopped by the Germans on the outskirts of Siedlce. They confiscated all the merchandise they liked. Inspecting

the contents of my parcel containing old white rubber, they kicked it to indicate no interest in it. After arriving in Minsk-Mazowiecki, I grabbed another bus to Warsaw. I arrived there late in the day. I immediately contacted the Minskys and traded the used white rubber for black rubber.

As our business expanded, our schedule became busier. Each morning, we replenished the inventory. Among our early-morning customers was a lawyer from Lodz, Mr.Halperin. The Germans had confiscated all his holdings, including his personal effects, and had expelled him together with his family from Lodz. He came with his wife to buy black rubber and trimmings to resell to shoemakers in Warsaw. Another customer was a former teacher who had become a peddler and who had to travel far out of the city to service his clients. During business hours we served customers who came from the provinces and nearby towns. At other times of the day we prepared packages for clients to take with them. Parcels with trimmings and black rubber went by mail to Siedlce, to be sold by my brother and sister.

We built a partition in the store and began to use the back room for sleeping. A typical day saw us rise at five or six in the morning only to crawl into bed at midnight.

We all believed that things would soon return to normal. This hope was our inspiration and our reason for refusing to submit. In the meantime, we became entangled in the complicated new rules and regulations. Despite the ban prohibiting Jews from traveling by train, the Warsaw business district was packed with people from the provinces. It was a beehive of activity. Everyone was trying to make a living, always keeping an eye open to avoid an encounter with the Germans.

Many Jewish families in Warsaw supported themselves by selling out merchandise, like dry goods, leather, etc., they had managed to save. By selling their merchandise people kept hunger at bay. Often though, the Germans got wind of impending sales and seized everything of value.

One day in September 1940, a neighbour of my Aunt Gitel called me to come quickly to my aunt's house. I ran the few blocks, arriving

out of breath. German soldiers were ordering workers to carry down from my aunt's flat the furniture and the leather my father had left there a year earlier. There had been no transportation available to Siedlce, so my father had left it there. With a growing feeling of helplessness, I looked on in horror as the Germans carried away the leather. It symbolized the last effort of my father. My aunt apologized, regretting calling me from the store. She had not known what else to do. She was distraught when the Germans confiscated her furniture and discovered the hard leather that was stuffed under and beside it. She felt guilty. In reality, however, there was nothing she could have done. We were all powerless against the Germans.

Confrontations were a daily occurrence. Our landlady in Warsaw, who lived above our store, was visited regularly by the Gestapo. They never left empty-handed. The Germans were well informed about the leather business which her late husband had carried on before the war in the store where we were presently operating.

Despite the uncertain times our store did well. Our brother regularly bought used white rubber in Miedzyrzec and Radzyn and mailed it to Warsaw. We were no longer pressed for money. Even our competitors in the yard were surprised by our rapid progress.

After a brief period of calm, the Germans descended with four or five trucks on 22 Frantiszkanska Street, unexpectedly, in the middle of a busy day. About forty men in full military gear dismounted. The area was crowded with businessmen as the German soldiers emerged from their trucks. Chaos reigned. Some people fled and others scrambled for a nearby hiding place. Those who did not vanish fast enough were brutally beaten and pushed into the trucks. In no time at all, Frantiszkanska Street and the neighbourhood was deserted. I had glanced out the store window just in time to notice people scurrying around the yard and I knew it meant that the Germans were close by. We closed the door, locking ourselves and the customers inside. We turned off the light. Through cracks in the door, we observed what was going on in the yard. Because many stores had closed at the same time, our store did not arouse suspicion.

The Germans began to search the buildings. A group of men was discovered. I could see them being beaten and dragged away. Among

those in the yard were porters who worked in the area. They were robust, muscular men who possessed great strength and carried heavy bales of merchandise. They also had a certain pride. In anger, they were able to crush a human being with their bare hands. People who dealt with the porters did so carefully, avoiding any provocation. I watched them surrendering meekly to the Germans who were yelling and screaming at their powerless victims. As the Germans filled their trucks with the bloodied Jewish men of various ages, and left, the chaos subsided. As the silence continued, our distress eased. We re-opened the store. People emerged from their hiding places and the traffic on the street normalized.

Even in this chaotic, belligerent atmosphere we still made progress. The time passed quickly, for we were always busy. For a change, things seemed to be going our way. But in fact our prospects were worsening with each passing day because new restrictions against Jews were continually being imposed. Jews could no longer conduct business deals with Gentiles and Jewish doctors were forbidden to treat non-Jewish patients. We were even prohibited from traveling by streetcar. In German eyes, if a Jew was guilty of a crime, hundreds of other Jews had to be punished. There was a growing threat of innocent people being dragged from their homes and shot. Panic spread as injustices grew and the horrors multiplied.

Pearl's friend Fela Aizenberg had a married brother, David. He was quite well off and lived in a Gentile neighbourhood of Warsaw, in the vicinity of Marszalkowska Street. One night the Gestapo came and abducted him. Fela came from Siedlce to Warsaw to help her sister-in-law search for him. Lengthy inquiries brought to light that David was in prison. I visited Mrs. Aizenberg and Fela a few times to learn how things stood. In the beginning, they had hoped to have him released. They worked diligently to this end and were promised that he would be out soon, but eternal postponements followed. Their hope slowly vanished as the Gestapo eventually refused to free him.

Prominent members of the Jewish community, intellectuals and doctors, were thrown into prison without explanation. Every day there were roundups of young people. They were dragged away with the promise of work, but none of them, prominent or not, ever

returned and no one knew what had become of them.



My father (before the War)



My sister Pearl (1944)



My sister Rifka (1946)

CHAPTER 10

LIFE IN THE WARSAW GHETTO

Rumours began to spread that a ghetto would be erected in designated areas of Warsaw. Sure enough, orders were proclaimed by the Germans and large maps were plastered on walls around the city displaying the areas that would be part of the ghetto. At a feverish pace brick walls went up, three meters high and topped with layers of clay from which glass shards protruded. The Poles who lived within the boundaries had to move out, while the entire Jewish population was herded inside. For better or worse, our store and our aunt's premises were within the boundaries.

Jews whose families might have lived in the same house outside the ghetto for generations could take only basic necessities with them into the ghetto. The rest had to be left behind for the Germans and the Poles to help themselves to as they pleased. Jewish companies located outside the ghetto territory had little likelihood of finding transportation for equipment to bring into the ghetto and even less probability of finding storage space there. Even if one succeeded in overcoming these two obstacles, it was nearly impossible for owners to move their things under the watchful eyes of the plundering Germans. We were very angry and worried, but what could we do? We had no choice but to comply with the German regulations. Naturally, the area of the ghetto was much too small to house the half million Jews who surged into it.

By November 1940 we were confined within the massive walls. At

this point our only aim was to retain the will and courage to survive and never, under any circumstances, to surrender our desire to live.

On November 16, 1940 the ghetto was closed. The Jews were completely isolated.

Simultaneously, Hans Frank, the Germans' highest ranking officer in occupied Poland, issued a decree that any Jew caught outside the ghetto boundaries would be shot on the spot. In order to govern the Jews and to carry out the Gestapo's orders, the Germans appointed a Jewish council, the "Judenrat," under the charge of a "Judenaelteste" (Jewish elder).

What had been once a sector vibrant with life, now stood deserted. Merchants from other cities and provinces simply could not enter the ghetto to reach our store. At first some of our Warsaw customers still came to our store for merchandise. But slowly they too stopped coming. Everything around us died down. I would stare in horror at the deserted business district. The street in front of our store became shockingly quiet. After our hard work and remarkable success, our business disintegrated. Our pride, our hopes and our dreams faded away. We kept on mailing parcels with shoemakers trimmings to Siedlce, but that did not earn us enough to support the family.

Each day less and less food was permitted into the ghetto. The cost of food and fuel soared. Somehow we had to find support from outside. Our brother and sister in Siedlce helped by sending us parcels of potatoes, which we shared with our Aunt Gitel's family and with our Uncle Jedwab and three orphaned cousins who lived on Pokorna Street.

Masses of starving people had to learn to live on a bowl of soup from the public kitchen and a slice of rationed bread. The high cost of fuel and the bitter cold forced many to dismantle their remaining furniture for firewood. The children were particularly pitiful. They roamed the streets, begging and crying for food. Their parents simply had nothing left to give them, and they could not understand the hunger. Some tough youngsters rebelled against the confining limits of the ghetto, climbed over its walls or slipped through secret openings. When they were able to, they smuggled in food to save their starving families. All the smugglers, young and old alike, knew they

were risking their lives and prepared themselves for the worst. Among them, many children sacrificed their lives.

As the population weakened from lack of food and exposure to the cold and elements, resistance to diseases diminished. Hunger, cold and a multitude of diseases took their toll.

With no remaining clientele there was no purpose in maintaining the store. We closed it and moved to our aunt's house. In fact, there was now no reason for Pearl or me to stay in Warsaw at all. Besides, I felt guilty about taking advantage of our younger sister and brother in Siedlce who were supplying us with parcels of potatoes. I desperately wanted to return to Siedlce to help out my siblings there.

I made inquiries. In a neighbourhood grocery store, I got to know an energetic young man known as Wojak. In Polish his assumed name meant "fighter". Blond, with blue eyes, he looked like a Pole. Mr. Wojak frequently left the ghetto and was accustomed to the risks involved. After hearing that I was interested in leaving the ghetto, he left a message in the grocery store for me to be there the next day at two o'clock in the afternoon. I was frightened, nervous and impatient. I wondered whether I could trust him. After spending a sleepless night, I said good-bye to my aunt, uncle and cousin Faiga, hugging them tightly and whispering that I hoped to see them again as soon as possible. Pearl accompanied me to the grocery store where we waited outside. As the clock moved to three o'clock and Mr. Wojak did not show up, we became restless.

The store owners assured me that he was reliable; they could not understand what had happened. Finally, at five o'clock we figured that something had gone wrong. We returned to our aunt's house. The following day Mr. Wojak arrived at our aunt's house, apologizing for not keeping the prearranged rendez-vous.

"I was confronted with a dangerous situation," he said, "and could not show up."

He offered to take me out of the ghetto the next day at the same time and bring me to Siedlce. But the next day the journey to Siedlce was postponed. This happened several times until, finally, three weeks later, he came to my aunt's house and said he was ready to get me out of the ghetto. Without hesitation I agreed, not giving my aunt

or sister a chance to air their opinions. I felt I was a burden and the only alternative was to leave. I was aware of the risks. But being imprisoned and not being able to help my siblings in Siedlce was unbearable.

Before three I left my aunt's home. I successfully contained my intense feelings as I left to meet Mr. Wojak. We met at the pre-arranged meeting place. From there he and I walked for quite some time. We reached a narrow side street that brought us to the ghetto wall. Mr. Wojak climbed the wall and looked around to see what was going on outside the ghetto.

He jumped back down and reassuringly said, "Everything is normal. Let's go through the wall."

Looking around, I could see that there was a hole in the wall concealed by a nearby building. He went through first and I followed him. A hundred meters away I noticed a car with a man sitting inside.

"Don't worry," he told me. "He will take you to Siedlce. Good luck!"

I stepped into the car. We began moving immediately. At first I was uneasy, but when we reached the outskirts of Warsaw I became more relaxed After a few hours I arrived safely in Siedlce. I received a joyous welcome from my sister, my brothers, and Tauba. We had not seen each other for a long time and it was great to be reunited. I described life in the Warsaw ghetto and listened as they related what was happening on locally.

Chaim explained that the search for white rubber had brought him to Miedzyrzec, Radzyn, Lublin and other towns. On his last trip to Lublin, he got trapped in an area surrounded by Germans. They were grabbing men off the streets for deportation. Fortunately, a stranger led him away from the area and he was able to avoid deportation. It was amazing how lucky we were to have our beloved brother still with us. We appreciated his presence all the more.

CHAPTER 11

RETURN TO SIEDLCE

Youngsters like Rifka and Chaim had to have courage to fight the daily frustrations and disappointments of the adult world. To make their lives less strenuous I began to take over the sale of shoemakers trimmings with the dealers in Siedlce. To shield my brother from the persistent danger of being seized by the Germans, I looked after mailing parcels to Warsaw. Each treasured parcel contained twenty kilograms of potatoes, the food that kept fresh longest. It usually took three weeks for a parcel to reach its destination.

To send a twenty kilogram parcel required two people not only because of the weight of the parcel, but also because it was necessary to carry the parcel for several long blocks to reach the post office. Having arrived with a parcel, my brother and sister stood in line for hours outside the post office, waiting to be served. The counter was opened at eight in the morning and closed at six in the evening. Shortly thereafter the post office instituted new early closing hours: one p.m.

It seemed the cold winter days would never end. Frequently my brother and sister had to replace each other in line while one ran into a nearby building to warm up. After waiting in line for hours in the numbing cold, my brother and sister repeatedly found the service counter closing just before it was their turn to be served. Often they ended up carrying the parcel back home, only to return the next morning to wait in line again.

When I took over, it puzzled me why it took so long for the Polish postal employees to expedite a parcel. I wanted to dispatch two parcels weekly, the way Chaim and Rifka did before my arrival, but the circumstances did not allow it. Before very long, unexpected visitors started to turn up at the post office. They were Hitler youth from the German "Arbeitsdienst", a branch of the Nazi party. They wore riding pants, high boots and yellow shirts with brown ties. People waiting in line were dispersed with whips. We had to grab our parcels and hurry away. Sometimes they came with dogs and when this happened we had to abandon our parcels. We could not stop mailing packages of potatoes to our aunt, as this was their only source of food. It was clear to us that people in the Warsaw ghetto were slowly starving.

At the same time as I returned to Siedlce, fifteen hundred Jewish refugees arrived from the Russian-occupied Polish territories. Many of these refugees were homesick and wished to go home. They were mostly alone: husbands, sons or daughters. They had been compelled to live in public halls with no privacy as a result of the shortage of accomodations. Families were favoured for the few apartments that were available.

Meanwhile, the Russians rounded up many unregistered refugees and sent them deep into Russia. My cousin Kopel had registered and remained in Soviet-occupied Poland. The refugees whose dream of returning to Siedlce was fulfilled considered themselves the lucky ones. They realized their misjudgment when they began the struggle to survive like the rest of the Jewish population. By the time they realized their mistake, it was too late to do anything about it.

All the anti-Jewish laws applied to us in Siedlce as well, even though we were not yet enclosed within the physical walls of a ghetto. Now another source of worry arose. In the late spring of 1941 the German soldiers organized a new campaign of terror. At first we thought it might be isolated, spontaneous acts of savagery against Jews. But the violence got worse every day. German fury against us was coordinated. Murderous rampages were carried out by gangs of soldiers.

The Jewish population tried to reinforce the entrance gates to

their homes with iron bars, and barricaded their doors and windows. It was to no avail. At twilight, brigades armed with iron rods, rubber truncheons and clubs roamed the streets of the Jewish section. They whipped themselves into a frenzy, whistling, hooting and clapping. A climate of terror set in. It became a nightly routine. Soldiers pounded on Jewish houses and threw stones through the windows. Inevitably, the doors gave way. The tinkling of broken glass, the sound of rending wood, and unbearable cries of terror were heard all over. We shivered in our inadequate homes, waiting, wondering whether we would be next. No one was able to put up a hint of resistance. Indiscriminately, the hoodlums thrashed men, women and children. Every morning we would wake up to twenty-five to thirty people dead. Many more were badly wounded.

To escape this mob violence, my uncle took my brother and left Siedlce for a few days for the city of Vengrov, only to face similar nocturnal visits by the Germans of that area. After seeing that there was no escape, they returned to Siedlce.

One night it was our turn. Around seven o'clock we heard the crash of a stone thrown at the window. Standing beside the window, unseen from the outside, we trembled with fear as we observed a group of soldiers approaching. They pushed the gate to break it in. After a while, for some reason which we were unable to discern, they suddenly gave up and melted away into the night. The following days were nightmarish.

Several women worked up enough courage to pay a visit to the local military commander. He met with these women and, to our surprise, the attacks stopped.

After the war I came across news reports from the Polish underground that in June 1941 the Germans organized a pogrom in Siedlce. The acts of violence executed by the German soldiers were described in those reports. Witnesses spoke of horrendous scenes. Children were held by their legs and swung against the wall to smash their heads. Women and men were tossed from the upper story windows of their homes to the ground. Bodies lying on the street were ripped open with bayonets.

On Friday, June 13, 1941, Chaim and I were in Mordy and

decided to visit the town of Losice, thirteen kilometres away on the road to the German-Russian border. The road was free of traffic. Not a soul was visible. We reached Losice in the evening after walking all the way from Mordy. It was our first visit to that small town. We had relatives there, including the younger sister of our mother, her husband and their four children. The several hours we spent becoming acquainted with our cousins was a pleasant interlude.

Afterwards, we went to visit our father's cousins. They had visited us in Siedlce many times before the war. During the night which we spent in their house, my sleep was disturbed by the loud clamour from a steady movement of trucks and other heavy equipment. My cousins, in deep sleep, were not awakened. The next day German vehicles continued moving on the road toward the Russian border at Brest-Litovsk . My brother and I were convinced that new hostilities would soon break out between the Germans and the Russians. But our cousins were not of the same opinion.

Several days later, back in Siedlce, we saw large columns of German soldiers, fully equipped with tanks and artillery, again moving towards the Russian border. The atmosphere was tense. Everyone was frightened by the signs of a new war in the east. The Germans seemed to be well prepared with fresh military hardware.

On Sunday, June 22, 1941, Germany attacked the Soviet Union without declaring war. They unleashed all their fury as they pushed through the Russian lines with ease. The attack surprised not only the Russians, but also the Poles and Jews living in the Russian-occupied territory of Poland. News about the German attack on Russia spread quickly.

This outbreak of a new war horrified us all. My cousin Szejwa, terrified at the possibility of more bombing in Siedlce, went to a nearby village and rented a shelter from a peasant. It consisted of a single room with an earthen floor. The peasant took his belongings and moved with his family to the attic. Szejva rented a horse and vehicle and transported all of her family's possessions which had been recovered from the German bombing in Siedlce -- beds, blankets, linen, pillows, clothes and other personal effects. She took her parents and the five of us, including my stepmother and baby brother,

and we all moved to the village. Szejwa and I regularly went into Siedlce. Things seemed to be calm, so my aunt, uncle and cousin returned home after a few days. My family and I stayed in the village. Each morning, for two weeks, I walked the seven kilometres to the city, returning in the evening. Chaim and Rifka sometimes accompanied me.

One morning we all went together because our stepmother had to bring the baby to the doctor. That evening we returned to the village to find the room emptied of my cousin's belongings. Everything was mysteriously gone. We had been suspicious of the peasant from the beginning. Szejwa and I tried to find him, but he was nowhere to be found. Even his sister who lived in the same village did not know his whereabouts, or at least claimed that she didn't. The peasant's sudden disappearance made it seem obvious that he was involved in the theft.

Not every village had a police station. The closest one was twenty-one kilometres away. After much pondering, Szejwa and I decided to walk the distance to report the theft. We were not sure what this would accomplish, but were willing to give it a try. That day we were out of luck as the policeman conducting investigations was not on duty.

We went back the next day. When he heard our story the policeman said that the peasant was a known crook and quite possibly the culprit. The police called him in for questioning, but he did not show up. A few days later, the police caught him. They held him for a few days and under pressure he revealed that he had stolen the goods and taken them to his mother in another village. The police released him on the condition that he return the goods. He did. The very next day we took our things and left the village back to Siedlce, even though the rent had been paid for two months in advance.

From the war front news filtered back that the Russians were unable to stop the advancing German army. As they retreated, many were left dead or wounded and many were captured by the Germans. The Germans occupied not only the Russian-occupied territory of Poland, but also the three Baltic states - Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. They continued moving into the Ukraine and deep into Russia

itself.

To flaunt their military success the Germans erected in Siedlce a giant billboard on Warszawska street, across from what was left of the city hall. It was a map of Poland and Russia. They pinned small flags on the map to indicate the military advances as they invaded Russia all the way to the outskirts of Moscow. It seemed as if they would soon capture the Russian capital itself. The Jewish refugees who had originally considered themselves fortunate to be able to remain in Russian-occupied Poland were the first victims when the Germans pushed through the border on June 22nd, 1941. One of them was my cousin Kopel, who fell into their hands.

Allying themselves with the Germans, the Lithuanians and Ukrainians showed that they were a match for their conquerors in exercising terror against their innocent Jewish populations. They rounded up men, women and children, shot them in cold blood and dumped their bodies into mass graves.

CHAPTER 12

EXPLORING MIEDZYRZEC

Weeks before the outbreak of war between Germany and Russia, rumours began to circulate that the Germans were planning to erect a ghetto in Siedlce. On August 1, 1941, proclamations were posted all over the city. They spelled out, in unmistakable black and white, that a ghetto was being raised in the old quarter. All Jews had to relocate there. There was a map showing the ghetto boundaries and gates. It was forbidden under pain of death for any Jew to leave the ghetto. The last thing we needed was to be incarcerated and to surrender to more oppression. Chaim and I were determined to find an alternative.

During his travels in quest of used white rubber he had befriended two young men, Luza Gurmantl and Berl Singer, in the town of Miedzyrzec. They invited him to visit whenever he had a chance. Chaim was fond of his new acquaintances and I felt comfortable with the description of Miedzyrzec. We decided to visit and become familiar with its Jewish population. We sent a letter to Pearl in Warsaw to inform her about our plan. We left as soon as we received the address of Uncle Alter Rowak's acquaintance, Mr. Winer, in Miedzyrzec. It was a long, bumpy journey at night by horse-drawn cart.

At the half-way point we stopped at a restaurant to rest and have a bite to eat. The news of a ghetto in Siedlce distressed the other travelers we met as well. After a few hours we hit the road again. By early morning we were in Miedzyrzec. We went looking around the old part of the city, now inhabited principally by Jews. We visited Chaim's friend Luza and met his family. Luza's father had been a supplier of pig bristles to brush factories and now Luza had taken

over the business. I could see that the quality of their lives was slowly being eroded by the harsh conditions. They were well known in the city and received us warmly as friends. Encouraging us to discuss our problems with them, Luza promised to help us if we moved to Miedzyrzec. We also took the time to visit Mr. Winer and Berl Singer, who suggested that Chaim and I visit his family on our next trip.

That night we returned to Siedlce with the feeling that our trip had been worthwhile. We were inclined to move there, but we needed to discuss it with the rest of our family.

In the meantime, the mood among the Jewish population in Siedlce went from discouragement to despair. We needed extraordinary strength and willpower to go on. Hopelesness was reflected in people's faces. We began to believe that the Germans were obsessed with wiping us out, slowly.

Arriving at the decision to leave Siedlce was hard, but we finally concluded that there was no time to waste. With its population being ninety percent Jewish, there seemed to be less risk of a closed ghetto being created in Miedzyrzec.

Chaim and I decided to return to find a place to live. As before, we stopped halfway at the restaurant. This time there were more people and it was harder to find a corner to curl up for a short nap. People we met in the restaurant gave us an address on Brzeska Street for overnight accommodation. When we arrived in the morning we went straight to Brzeska Street in the middle of the old quarter. The address was that of an old corner building, whose front entrance was conveniently located near a grocery store. Without knocking I opened the door and met a young girl, around nineteen years of age, with a slim figure, blond hair and blue eyes, casually dressed and barefoot. Approaching us with a smile, she asked us who we were and how she could help us. I told her that we were looking for accommodation for a few nights. With a sweep of her hand she showed us a big room with many beds. She offered us two beds for as many nights as we wished. We bought food from the grocery, had some breakfast and left to search for a dwelling. All day we searched, but we found nothing.

The main square in Miedzyrzec was also the market place. On one side was the city hall and across from it were stores. Nearby were large attractive homes which shortly before had belonged to Jews. Jewish families had been forced to vacate these homes and move into the old quarter. Now Jewish activities were concentrated along Brzeska Street. People ran their businesses in the same premises where they lived. On one of the narrow side streets, Szkolna, in an old building, was the Judenrat, the Jewish police and the Jewish post office. A few Jews still lived in other areas of town, but their numbers were being rapidly reduced. A large number of Jewish families from German-annexed cities like Lodz had been resettled in the old quarter, so it was not surprising that few accommodations were to be had.

By evening we were exhausted. We returned to our guest house where we met the mother of the girl that had offered us the beds for the night, as well as a younger brother and sister. It was easy to see that they were members of the same family since they all closely resembled each other. Clearly, the mother, Mrs.Liberman, was worn out from the strenuous work of providing for her children. Still, they were humble, pleasant people.

The next day Chaim and I questioned everyone who might be able to help us. We searched everywhere until late afternoon. Again disappointed with the day's results, I went to the grocery store to ask for more addresses. The next morning we visited those places. On the way we met a local resident who told us that we were breaking our backs for nothing because there were simply no vacant quarters in the old section. However, he did know of a flat which was available. We found it by walking along Pilsudskiego Street until we came across a new building which could not be missed. I inquired inside. A young woman replied that she had an apartment for rent on the third floor. We liked it. We immediately signed a contract and paid the rent for two months.

Having accomplished what we set out to do, we returned. Moving from Siedlce was a very sad moment. We had spent most of our lives there and we regretted leaving family and dear friends behind.

For twenty zlotys we made arrangements with a Pole, recom-

mended by our uncle, to transport our belongings on his horse-drawn cart. All we had were two old bed frames, an old table with chairs and an old trunk. Everything was in pretty bad shape. They had belonged to Tauba's mother. There were also a few pillows and covers that Tauba had received from her sister, and some old dishes. The only clothing we had we were wearing. Early one morning, Tauba, the baby, Chaim and I left for Miedzyrzec. As we drove out of town we walked a distance behind the cart on the side of the road, as though we had nothing to do with it. We took this precaution to ward off any harassment by the Hitler youth who made regular rounds at the outskirts of the city. Only when we reached the city limits did we climb aboard the cart.

The day passed without incident, but we were not as lucky that night. As the horse and wagon moved slowly through the pitch dark night, suddenly, before dawn, we were confronted with a glaring light. Unable to see what was going on and exhausted from the prolonged journey, we were scared to death. My baby brother woke up and started to cry. Soon we realized that we were surrounded by three or four youths from the German Nazi party. They were in their late teens, intent on demonstrating their sadistic skills. They hit my brother again and again and taunted all of us. They demanded that we produce a travel permit. When we could not present one, they ordered us to return to Siedlce. We were completely at a loss as to what to do. With great effort and determination, by pleading and begging, our stepmother persuaded the Nazi youth to let us continue our journey. We were shaken and terrified by the thought that they could return.

Finally, the morning sun crept over the horizon and as the sun returned, so did our hope. We arrived in Miedzyrzec half frozen. Instead of unloading at our rented flat, the driver dumped our things in his farmyard. Then he demanded an additional two hundred zlotys. All our possessions combined were not even worth the twenty zlotys we had originally agreed to pay. I was disgusted by his demand for more money; it was outright blackmail. He certainly knew that we were not authorized to move to Miedzyrzec. This had become painfully obvious during the abuse that we took from the Nazi youths. Aware of our shaky position, he was trying to profit from our vul-

nerability. I tried to reason with him, explaining that we simply did not have that amount of money and couldn't even get twenty zlotys by selling the old things. As we mulled over our options, he sat on the empty wagon, waiting for our decision. A few hours lapsed and we were no closer to a solution.

All of a sudden I recalled something my uncle told me. He had warned me not to speak Yiddish in the presence of the Polish driver because he understood the language. Turning to my brother and Tauba, I said quietly, "I have an idea, listen and do not ask questions."

Making sure the driver could hear, I said loudly in Yiddish, "Chaim, Tauba, listen! Chaim and I will return to Siedlce right away. We can go to the Judenrat for a travel permit and then we can go to the German military command. We will inform the Germans of our move to Miedzyrzec and tell them that a Polish driver is blackmailing us. That way the driver will have to face the Germans and their wrath."

I noticed that the driver was paying attention. When I finished, he came over to me and said, in Polish, that he had a suggestion. He would accept twenty zlotys if we picked up our things from his yard and brought them ourselves to our dwelling. This was more reasonable. Pleasantly surprised that the trick had worked, we accepted. It took us all day to carry everything from the farm on the outskirts of Miedzyrzec to our flat on Pilsudskiego Street. As soon as we finished moving in, we were curious to meet our new neighbours. On the same floor lived two other Jewish families. One was from Naszelsk. They were a couple with five children in their twenties. The man and one of his sons worked as shoemakers. His wife and a daughter helped out. They could not even afford to buy bread and had to make do with potatoes three times a day. The other family consisted of a young woman with her mother and two small children. They had been resettled by the Germans at the time Lodz was annexed to the Third Reich. They too lived in hardship.

The second floor was occupied by three German soldiers who manned telephone installations. The oldest, in his thirties, was some kind of junior officer. An introverted man, his hatred of everything

not German blazed from his eyes. The second was a blond fellow in his mid-twenties who screamed all the time. The third soldier, about twenty, with black hair and large eyes, was the only friendly one of the bunch. On the main floor lived the owner of the building, a Polish man with his wife and child.

CHAPTER 13

LAST LOOK AT SIEDLCE

After helping the family settle into the new quarters, I went back to Siedlce to help Rifka improve our earnings. I planned to stay there as long as the ghetto remained open. Chaim stayed behind to familiarize himself with Miedzyrzec and make some connections.

Reluctantly, the Jews of Siedlce were resigning themselves to their fate, accepting the idea that worse was to come. There was little anyone could do. Any resistance carried with it great risks. The thousands of Jews who lived in the area outside the ghetto moved through the streets with their belongings to comply with the German resettlement edict. Pushcarts were the only vehicles at hand and they were piled high with belongings. German soldiers amused themselves by wandering the streets and overturning the push-carts at their whim. The situation was chaotic. Throngs of people were running around to find a shelter for their children and their own tired and hungry bodies. Hardly any places were available, yet people kept arriving from smaller Jewish settlements around the city. The narrow streets of this most neglected, poor part of Siedlce were swamped with people and carts, and the sidewalks were covered with household goods. Pandemonium reigned.

In the days before the closing of the ghetto I visited many of my relatives to say good-bye. We cried bitterly. I visited Ella and her family. They already lived inside the ghetto, so they did not have to move. Ella and her mother got up and greeted me with a smile.

"What a pleasant surprise to see you! You are kind to remember us

in these depressing times. Make yourself at home," her mother said.

Uncomfortable and nervous, I felt that I lacked the moral strength to give them encouragement. I could not ignore the fact that it would be a long time before I would see them again. I tried to smile and reassure them, "Don't lose hope. If we lose faith, we lose everything. Jews have lived through many rough, unstable times and survived."

Ella and her parents had changed a lot since my last visit. When the baby girl was born, they were enthusiastic and filled with hope for the future. The baby seemed to be making normal progress; at this point she had already reached the crawling stage. Ella's sister had also grown; she was already a young lady. But the family's confidence had disappeared. Looking tired and much older than when I had seen him last, Ella's father's face revealed his daily struggles. He was prone to short bursts of fury, borne presumably out of helplessness. The entire family bemoaned their fate. With this change of outlook the steady smile that graced the face of Ella's mother had also vanished. In its place was the appearance of constant tension. Up to now, Ella's mother had maintained a few clients as a seamstress. Her father was able to earn very little, because frequently he was snatched away by the Germans and forced to work for them. They were terrified by the prospect of life locked up in the ghetto.

From recent experience I knew that it was not easy to accept the strain of being in a closed environment. I tried to comfort my friends with the inspiration that as long as we managed to draw breath, we should not lose hope. We exchanged wishes that we would all survive and live to see better times.

It was difficult to say good-bye to these desperate people whom I had known for so many years. They foresaw only horror in their future. By the time I left I knew they felt better, for our discussion had caused them to voice their concern and despair, thus freeing them from some of the baggage that they had kept bottled up for so long. As I walked away I explained, "Chaim has friends in Miedzyrzec. He, Tauba and Hirsh are already there. I'm leaving Siedlce before the closing of the ghetto. Rifka is staying behind with our aunt."

I regretted not having time to visit my friends Rachel and Itka. Parting with Rifka even though it was only for a short time was painful. I choked with tears. I knew that my aunt and her family liked Rifka and would take care of her until she could join us in Miedzyrzec.

Shortly before the gates of the ghetto closed at noon on October 1, 1941, I walked away. It was the day before Yom Kippur. I took a last look at the city in which I had suffered much grief and enjoyed great happiness. A sense of guilt and loneliness washed over me and I wondered whether I would ever see my relatives and friends again.

I was carrying a five-liter can of shoe lacquer that was promised to one of our customers. As I reached the road to Miedzyrzec I threw my wide coat over my arm in order to conceal the armband. To avoid encounters with the Nazi youth, I walked far out to the outskirts of the city. Beyond the city I stopped a military truck and asked the driver, a German soldier, whether he would give me a lift to my family in Miedzyrzec. He agreed. Obviously, he did not realize that I was Jewish. And so I arrived in Miedzyrzec.

CHAPTER 14

LIFE IN MIEDZYRZEC

Before the war Miedzyrzec had been a prosperous city. It was known as a city of brush factories. Most of the Jewish population had been employed in the brush plants, although there were Jews who also worked in tanneries. When the Germans invaded they took over all the factories and made themselves the bosses. Jews who had jobs in these enterprises were now forced to work without pay. One of the German bosses was a man named Kordilej.

It was no longer possible for Jews to send mail directly into the Warsaw ghetto. Sending parcels from the ghetto was also severely restricted. Pearl was using a Polish transport company which had permission to ship in and out of the ghetto. Chaim engaged a Polish shipper in Miedzyrzec to deliver our food parcels to the transport company in Warsaw. On his return trip the shipper picked up merchandise from the transport company and brought it back to Miezyrzec. Occasionally, Chaim bought old rubber and sent it to Pearl. We sold the trimmings sent by Pearl to local dealers. For a while it worked smoothly, as could be expected, given the circumstances.

However, after a few weeks a whole new set of worries beset us. We received an order that we together with the two other families living on the top floor of our building had to move out. It hit us like a sudden storm on a bright day. We did not know what to do. It was practically impossible to find accommodations because so many new people had been resettled in Miedzyrzec. In particular, during the summer large numbers of Slovakian Jews, both unattached singles

and families, had arrived.

In desperation, my stepmother and I went to German headquarters to plead for them to let us stay in the flat at least through the cold winter months. A German officer in charge promised to investigate and advise us of his decision.A short time later we were notified that we had to leave the flat at once. We were determined not to give up. Again we presented ourselves at the headquarters and spoke to the same officer. He said we could stay until he inspected the building. On a Saturday morning he arrived and listened to the grievances of the three families. He told us to come the following Saturday to headquarters for a reply. After inspecting the interior and exterior of the building and talking with the soldiers who occupied the second floor, he left.

All our efforts were to no avail. The next Saturday the officer ordered us to vacate the premises within two weeks. We were barred from dwelling in the same building as German soldiers. Again I appealed to his conscience to let us stay over the winter months.

He looked at us and said, "You see what is written on the belt of a German soldier? 'God with us'. He is with us and not with you. How can I help you when God does not help you?" He did not break my faith -- and nothing ever has -- but we were facing serious trouble. Our neighbours faced the same predicament. The young woman who was looking after her mother and two children lamented that they had no place to go in this cold weather. Understandably, our other neighbour felt just as miserable.

Restlessly, I scanned and searched. Finally I learned from a woman who lived in the neighbourhood that a new building had recently been built at the end of town on Warszawska Street. It was the last residential building before the open country. It was a wooden one-story structure, with the front on Warszawska and the side on Lubelska Street. There were three units. The Polish owner and his family occupied a flat in the rear. In front lived a Jewish woman with her daughter. We rented the third dwelling which was accessible only from the back yard. The owner was keeping hay and straw there to feed his cow. He emptied it and we moved in. The flat consisted of a nice large room with a picture window looking onto the yard and a

kitchen with a window overlooking Lubelska Street. In the back was an old building with two dwellings. In one lived the owner's sister. A healthy looking Jewish couple in their thirties from the countryside, Rifka and Biumke, lived in the other unit.

Across Lubelska Street, visible from our kitchen window, was an office building. It belonged to Stuart, a German road building company. Each morning trucks arrived to pick up workers and take them to the worksite. On the other side of Warszawska Street resided a few Jewish families. Nearby were houses inhabited by a few Polish farmers and their families. Their farms were in the back of the buildings. Behind the farms we could see a meadow and a small bridge.

The winter of 1941-1942 was particularly harsh. The windy, cold weather stubbornly refused to moderate. People were forced to stay indoors. As if getting shoemakers trimmings from the Warsaw ghetto were not enough of a challenge, the weather brought our few remaining transactions with the dealers to a standstill. Because they had managed to save some of their property, the local dealers were better able to withstand the hard times. We newcomers were less fortunate, as we had lost our possessions. Without selling shoe trimmings we were penniless and unable to buy so much as a piece of bread.

Since there was no possibility of getting shoe polish, lacquer and other supplies from Warsaw, these items became scarce in Miedzyrzec. One local dealer had dozens of tins of dried-up shoe polish. At his urging I took it home, melted it, added turpentine, and poured it back into the empty containers. It became a product for the dealer to resell. This experiment gave me the idea of producing shoe polish and other articles. I spent a lot of time looking for the necessary ingredients, but could not find enough to get started.

Meanwhile, the harsh winter was having its effect on the German army. We learned that Hitler's troops were suffering from the severe cold on the Russian front. It was the Germans' first setback. This news bolstered our determination not to give up our glimmer of hope.

However, at the same time news began to reach us that the Germans who had invaded the Russian-occupied Polish territory had,

with the help of Ukrainians and Lithuanians, massacred thousands of Jewish inhabitants. We also learned that Jewish settlements in that part of occupied Poland had been erased from the map.

On a cold Saturday afternoon the Gestapo came to Miedzyrzec from its headquarters in nearby Biala-Podlaska. They picked forty men from the streets, assembled them in the marketplace, and drove them away in trucks. Among them was the fiance of my good friend Golda Gurmantl. This action caused panic and hysteria among the Jews. Intense grief descended on the families who lost husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. To cope with the strain and anxiety, the families nursed wishful thoughts that their dear ones had been taken away for work and would surely return. But those men disappeared without a trace. Later there were rumours that they had been taken to a concentration camp, Kartiz-Breze.

CHAPTER 15

REUNION WITH MY SISTERS

Despite our best efforts our living conditions changed for the worse. We were penniless and could not buy any food. It was traumatic not to have even a small piece of bread for our three-year-old brother. We decided to bring Rifka to Miedzyrzec. Since the closing of the Siedlce ghetto we had not been able to contact her. News had reached us that it was heavily guarded by Ukrainians and Lithuanians. My brother combed the restaurants for someone with contacts. He finally learned that a young man, named Bialilew, a good school friend of Pearl, came occasionally from Siedlce to a restaurant in Miedzyrzec. Bialilew had a permit from the Germans to operate a taxi between Siedlce and Miedzyrzec. Every day Chaim visited the restaurant. Finally he got lucky. Chaim collared Bialilew and appealed to him to bring Rifka to Miedzyrzec. After promising that he would do his best, he told Chaim that we must be patient, because it would take some time to find the right opportunity to get Rifka out of the ghetto.

After weeks of nervous waiting, we were finally rewarded. We were thrilled to be reunited. Her arrival restored our courage as well as our spirits. We peppered her with questions about life in the Siedlce ghetto, but she had nothing good to tell us. About seventeen thousand people had to move into the ghetto. Space which had been occupied by one family now had to be shared by as many as four. The food supply was limited. Shortages of staples like bread and potatoes developed, and some people took to smuggling despite the

risks. If they were caught they were beaten or shot. Their crime--leaving the ghetto. Prices skyrocketed. Starvation was not uncommon. Overcrowding, hunger, and unsanitary conditions allowed typhus and other illnesses to breed.

Four Germans were reputed to be in charge of the ghetto. One named Fabisch was head of the SS. The others were Gestapo chief Duba and employment inspectors Sorge and Sontag. The latter two were always short of manpower and spent most of their time hunting for Jewish slaves. The notorious Fabisch ordered the Jews to surrender furs, gold, silver and money to him, rationalizing that all Jewish possessions belonged to the Germans. A merciless thief and murderer, he stole with the conviction that what he did was for the benefit of the Reich.

As the excitement subsided following Rifka's arrival, we started to think about getting together with Pearl, at least for a few weeks. Chaim and Rifka had not seen her for nearly two years and we all missed her. We did not expect it to be easy.

After I left the Warsaw ghetto, further restrictive measures were implemented. I became preoccupied with overcoming the enormous obstacles that stood in the way of getting Pearl out. The risks were great. In addition we knew very little of what was happening in the ghetto. We had heard that there was considerably more danger now from hostile Poles and the ever present Polish police than before. Hunts for Jews outside the boundaries of the ghetto were on the increase. Young Poles, aware that some Jews were escaping from the ghetto, lost no time in demanding money. If they failed to find enough, they stripped the Jews of anything of value or gave them over to the Germans. If a Jewish man, woman, or child was caught, he or she was never seen again.

Thinking about it made me uneasy, but we had to find a way. As fortune would have it, the break came during a rather mundane conversation with my brother. Looking back, it was obvious, but in the face of the difficulties it was almost miraculous. Chaim and I were talking about the white rubber business and about the Jewish rag dealers who received permits to travel. Something clicked in my mind: we could get a permit to bring Pearl to

Miedzyrzec.

To satisfy the serious shortages that arose for the Germans, they provided, through the Judenrat, permits for Jewish rag-peddlers to travel and to collect used rubber and other substances. I heard all this from Chaim who in turn had heard it first-hand from rag collectors who had actually received permits. To obtain these permits, the rag dealers had to apply to the Judenrat, who would pass on the application to the Gestapo.

In Miedzyrzec, the one who dealt with these applications and acted as intermediary between the applicants and the Gestapo was a member of the Judenrat by the name of Lichtenberg. Through his dealings with the rag traders Chaim had gotten to know him. He lived with his brother, a physician. Both were considered honest and respectable people. I remembered meeting him, a short, slim man, friendly, probably in his fifties. He had left me with the impression of being willing to help others in need. All this flashed through my mind as I wondered whether he could obtain a permit for Pearl even though she did not work for the Germans. At first I rejected the idea as being foolish and impossible, but nothing else came to mind and this particular idea kept resurfacing. I finally broached the topic with Chaim. His first reaction was skepticism. However, when I persisted, he slowly came around.

Making initial contact with Mr.Lichtenberg proved more difficult that we had anticipated. Chaim could not find him in his office and thought it would be inappropriate to visit him in his quarters. It was my idea to try to reach Mr.Lichtenberg through his brother, the doctor. Chaim was not very excited about the idea, but at my urging he went anyway. Waiting until all the patients were gone, he approached Dr.Lichtenberg in his office. Of course, he had to tell the doctor the reason for his inquiry. The doctor expressed some interest in our predicament, but told Chaim that his brother was out of town. He suggested that Chaim come to see Mr.Lichtenberg when he returned.

My brother's first meeting with Mr.Lichtenberg left us unsure as to our next step. He listened politely to Chaim's plea that we would like to be reunited with our sister. As the conditions in Warsaw were

frightening, Chaim described our urgent need of a permit. Mr.Lichtenberg replied that it could not be done, but then added that he would have to think about it. Clearly, he was not thrilled with Chaim's visit nor with his request.

Determined not to let Mr .Lichtenberg forget, Chaim reminded him at the next possible opportunity. He was non-committal, but for us that was encouraging. Apparently, he felt that the Gestapo would not issue the permit, but he would try; he certainly could not promise anything.

The process of applying for a permit was not a simple one. First, Mr.Lichtenberg had to commute to the town of Radzyn, where the regional headquarters of the Gestapo was located. He had to file the request and await a reply. If the timing was right and if he was lucky, he might just get what he had come for.

We could not believe it when about three months later we received the permit. Mr.Lichtenberg himself expressed astonishment at his own success. He would not hear of any reward for his services. Our heartfelt gratitude was enough. He was delighted to have helped reunite our family. In April, shortly before Passover, we were overwhelmed with happiness when Pearl arrived. Our hearts were bursting and we alternated between laughing and crying. We were jubilant and for a while we celebrated despite our bad situation.

With no customers, the store in Warsaw had remained closed. Still, Pearl paid the rent, hoping for better times. Before leaving the ghetto, she sent out many parcels containing shoemakers trimmings through the Polish transport company. The permit was valid for a few weeks and Pearl could return at any time within the period it remained in force. Initially, we planned to have her stay for two weeks. After two weeks we persuaded her to stay for another week.

One morning I awoke with vivid remnants of a dream. I was on a mountain and from my towering perch I observed individuals, unmistakably Germans, running in a valley, barefoot, in tatters, like vagrants. When I recounted my dream, my brother and sisters laughed at me.

"A hungry goose dreams of corn," was their response.

I could not dispute it, but I could not help feeling that there was more to it than wishful thinking.

That same week we learned that something strange was going on in the Warsaw ghetto. The Poles who traveled between Warsaw and Miedzyrzec brought disturbing tidings. No one could explain what was happening. We decided that Pearl should not return to Warsaw until we could be sure about what was actually happening.

We continued to send letters to our aunt, but received no replies. Our last link with Warsaw was suddenly cut off. We could not paint a clear picture with the tidbits of information we collected from the traveling Poles, but whatever it was, we could not help feeling that it boded ill.

During the spring of 1942, many German trucks, returning from the east, stopped on the outskirts of Miedzyrzec. Their vehicles clogged the streets. The drivers were offering to sell all kinds of stolen merchandise.

With milder weather arriving and so as not to be dependent on the dealers, we rented a few shelves in a half-empty delicatessen store on Brzeska Street. We brought our supplies to the store and carried on the business directly with the shoemakers from there. We hoped that at least a few zlotys would come our way every day so we could buy a piece of bread or a few potatoes. Each morning I took the long walk to the store, four kilometres from one end of town to the other, returning in the evening.

CHAPTER 16

THE SUMMER OF 1942

The Germans' need for manpower grew every day. New decrees made forced labour compulsory for all Jews between the ages of twelve and sixty. Jews were seized to clean the streets, to clean the Germans' quarters, to haul and move, to load and unload. At gun-point Jews were forced to work beyond the point of exhaustion.

From the Judenrat the Germans demanded large contingents of labourers, compelling the Jewish police in Miedzyrzec to round up Jewish men, willingly or unwillingly. This also had the effect of dividing the community, the Judenrat and the police. Acting out of discordant interests and considerations, the Jewish population often found itself on opposite sides.

The Jews worked on farms or in mines. Some of these workplaces were filled with water where there were leeches which clung to the skin and sucked blood. Some Jews were detained for a long time, unable to inform their families of their whereabouts. Many of those whom I knew and who returned, did so with swollen legs, barely able to walk. All were malnourished and suffered from frostbite. Many died from exhaustion and hunger.

Without any advance notice the Jewish police rounded up Jewish men. They searched possible hiding places at any time, day or night. Moreover, the Germans themselves also conducted surprise manhunts.

I worried about our brother. Whenever I noticed a raid in progress, I left the store and waited some distance from our dwelling.

If it looked like the police were heading toward our quarters, I would run home to hide my brother across the street in a barn. Every sound at night terrified us and we promptly ushered Chaim off to the cellar. With the constant fear that they would pounce on Chaim and send him off to work, I had to bear the burden of providing for the family alone.

Very often we heard of Jews being beaten for no reason other than the sadistic pleasure of the Germans administering the beating. Germans deliberately chose observant Jews as special targets for abuse. They terrorized, beat and flogged them callously. Jews were publicly humiliated and forced to desecrate or destroy sacred articles.

The store where I had rented a few shelves was in the center of the Jewish area. Late one afternoon, after a heavy rain, as the sun started to break through the clouds, I went outside. I saw two men dressed in traditional Jewish garb passing by. Emerging from nowhere, two Germans soldiers started to yell at them. The Jews were caught off guard, forced to kneel down in the mud and then ordered to run around the block until they were completely exhausted and gasping for breath. Not yet appeased, the German monsters took off their belts and beat the Jews mercilessly, punching them and kicking them. As I watched this horrifying spectacle, I was paralyzed. Helplessly, I observed the terror unleashed by the Germans' wanton barbarism. A growing sense of frustration came upon me, as I looked at those two frightened people, who themselves would not have killed a fly. Resistance would simply have provoked the Germans further. Any attempt to intervene would have been fatal.

The observance of Judaic laws and traditions had permeated life for most of the Jews of Eastern Europe. Maintaining the Sabbath as a day of rest, observing traditional Holy Days and following the strict dietary laws became important symbolic acts of resistance. The traditions of Judaism kept our faith and hope alive in a sea of anti-Semitism. We had to maintain our belief if we were to survive.

The German "caretaker" of the city of Miedzyrzec, Franz Bauer, was from a military police unit. An evil wretch, ruthless and cruel, he was delighted in killing. He was known by the nickname

"Schlaeger", meaning "beater." He inspected every corner of the city as he strolled around with his vicious German shepherd. In one hand he held the long leash of his dog and in the other he carried a whip, ready at any moment to attack a Jew who happened to cross his path. The entire population lived in fear of him. He found it amusing to combine grave insult with psychopathic cruelty. He was often seen on Brzeska Street. Once he spotted a man trying to avoid him by crossing the street. Calling the frightened man back, the Schlaeger told him that he could not run away, took out his gun and shot him. When some unfortunate soul would pass him, he would shout, "How dare you pass me!" He would order his dog to attack the passerby and then he would put the person out of his misery by shooting him. If there was the least hint that the Schlaeger was in the neighbourhood, everyone immediately fled.

One day he walked into a Jewish bakery on Warszawska Street and noticed a half loaf of bread on the shelf. Muttering that he could not tolerate nor permit Jews to bake or eat bread, he shot the baker.

One afternoon my friend Golda Gurmantl's brother Simcha fell victim. Walking on Pilsudskiego Street, he suddenly encountered the Schlaeger. Understandably, he became terrified and ran. It was no use. The Schlaeger ran after him and killed him. It was another hard blow for the family that had already lost their daughter's fiance.

On a nice Saturday in the summer 1942, the Gestapo came to Miedzyrzec with the addresses of prominent Jews in hand. From house to house they went, leaving dead bodies in their wake. The news of this bloodbath soon reverberated through the whole city.

When the store on Brzeska Street closed, we rented a few shelves in a store on the corner of Brzeska and Warszawska Streets. The owner, Mrs.Grosman, was the mother of three teenagers. Her daughter Sara helped her out to the extent needed in the half-empty grocery store. While one son worked with Mr.Grosman, making saddles for horses, the other worked for a peasant in the countryside.

One summer day, as I was walking to the store, I was cornered by two Jewish policemen who had spotted me from afar. They ordered me to accompany them to the Jewish police station. Hoping to gain some time to evaluate this dangerous situation, I dragged my feet.

I knew I could not put up any resistance, but perhaps I could reason with them. They ordered me to keep walking. I complied, but soon stopped again. I had difficulty controlling my voice. Again, they cautioned me to continue walking. It was only then that it dawned on me that I was trapped. There was no one I could count on to rescue me. I was brought into the Jewish police station where I was locked up with a few other girls. I learned that we were to be sent to work on a farm far from the city. Looking around for a friendly face to carry a message to my family, I found none. I knew that Chaim and my sisters would be alarmed when I did not return home at the expected time. On top of the immediate problem that my family would not know what happened to me, I knew that my brother could not be involved in any activity outside the house; he too was apt to be dragged away by the Germans to work. My two sisters, who had only a short time ago arrived in Miedzyrzec, were strangers to the city and had to be warned not to be caught for slave work. My thoughts were in turmoil over this latest setback, when a policeman passed the room where I and the other girls were being kept prisoner. As he surveyed us, his glance fell on me and his eyes opened wide with surprise. We recognized each other.

He murmured to me, "Don't worry. I will be back soon."

He turned and left. A short time later he came back and told me I was free to go. Hurriedly, I left the police station.The policeman who had intervened on my behalf was Szyja, the younger son of the Gurmantl family.

I decided I would stay home until the seizure of women stopped. However, on the way home I went to the store and approached Mrs.Grosman for a few zlotys, anxious to buy some food for the family. As collateral I deposited my eighteen-karat gold half-moon earrings, the last valuable item I possessed. I had worn them since I was three years old. When I returned the money to Mrs.Grosman the next day, she tearfully related that Sara had been apprehended by the Jewish police and sent to work on a farm.

By this time we could no longer communicate with the Warsaw ghetto. All efforts to contact our aunt proved fruitless. The merchandise my sister had sent out before leaving Warsaw had all

been sold to relieve our hunger. We felt a storm was coming, although it was hard to believe that things could get worse than they already were.

CHAPTER 17

DEATH TRAP

On August 24,1942, we heard from Polish travelers that the Germans had moved Jews from nearby small towns and villages into Siedlce, confining them in abandoned buildings. In the afternoon of August 25, 1942, we were alarmed by the arrival of the Gestapo in Miedzyrzec. Their arrival had never boded well for the Jewish population. Already rumours had begun to swirl among the frightened residents of the city, but we had no idea what events were about to unfold. First they put some members of the Judenrat in prison. We could see no reason for this and yet we felt that worse was yet to come.

Chaim and I learned about their presence on our way home from the store on Brzeska Street. Terror dogged us with every footstep. The air was heavy and palpable almost as if it was trying to warn us of some impending disaster. Midway along Warszawska Street lived a member of the Judenrat and an acquaintance of my brother, Mr. Blaivais. We hoped that he would be able to tell us what was going to happen. Chaim went up to his front door while I waited in the yard. Nobody was home. We noticed that members of his family were milling around outside. Their faces reflected bad news and their words were even less comforting. They had no idea what was going on.

Our neighbour's son worked in the post office of the Judenrat. That evening he came to his mother's apartment to stay overnight. He lived in the city center and the panic there made him hope that an outlying area would be quieter. But it was far from quiet. We could

hear the echoes of shots emanating from the city, starting around seven o'clock and continuing well into the night. I bundled up in extra underwear and a sweater. Then I crawled into bed and pulled the covers over me. I just could not shake off the chilling fear which had enveloped me. I lay there shivering, my teeth chattering.

The full moon cast its bright, unwanted rays through our large, exposed and bare picture window. I tossed and turned while the moonbeams teased me throughout the endless night, implying an inevitable disaster. After midnight, the noise of trucks screeching to a halt assaulted our ears. Shortly after, the sound of nearby gunfire penetrated the walls. It continued without interruption. Whatever was happening was not far away.

As the sky turned gray with the approaching dawn, Pearl and I ran to the doghouse where Chaim was hiding, to release him. He could barely stand because his limbs had stiffened from lack of movement. The two of us rushed back to the house with our brother stumbling along behind. From our kitchen window we observed Warszawska and the side street. Usually there was heavy traffic at daybreak, with Stuart workers gathering outside to wait for the trucks that would take them to the road construction sites. But that morning there were no trucks and no workers. Not a soul could be seen. Even the flat of our Polish landlord was quiet. He seemed to have forsaken his daily chores of milking the cows, cleaning the stable and feeding the animals. Naturally, little Hirsh did not understand the abnormal situation. He wanted to play and move around, but we could not chance the possible noise.

The truth turned out to be much more frightening than our wildest imagination would allow. In the morning I met our neighbours in the yard, only to learn that during the night the Gestapo had shot and killed all the Jewish families who lived across the street. The news shocked us all; we had no idea what to do.

At nine o'clock a German policeman came to our yard with the disquieting announcement that every Jew had to assemble in the marketplace, the Umschlagplatz, near Brzeska Street. They were to bring only what they could carry. All Jews regardless of age and sex, he announced, would be resettled in the work colony "Tremblan."

Anybody trying to escape or avoid resettlement would be shot. Any Jew attempting to interfere or lingering in Miedzyrzec following completion of the resettlement, would also be shot.

But even then we had not yet come to a clear awareness of what the Germans had in mind. Confronted with the additional grim news that the Gestapo had already shot and killed many Jewish men in the city square, we were once again frightened for our brother's safety. We thought then that the Germans were mainly after men. The market place would undoubtedly expose our brother to danger. We searched our minds desperately for a hiding place that could accommodate us.

Our neighbour Rifka was not worried. She said she was not afraid of work and had decided to report for resettlement. She took all her valuable items in case she needed to barter for food. Tauba, our stepmother, was influenced by Rifka's decision.

I do not know what happened to the mother and son, our neighbours who lived at the front of the house, but the daughter, a girl in her twenties, had put on several of her best dresses, one on top of the other. Attired in this fashion she could hardly move. She had packed her other valuables into a bag and when I saw her last, she was dragging the bulging bag to the gathering point at the marketplace, several kilometres away.

Chaim came up with the idea of going to the two Furman brothers, scrap dealers, who resided with their mother about two kilometres from Miedzyrzec. They had a permit to live outside the city. Their property included a storage depot. Chaim had become friendly with one of them when searching for used white rubber. They visited us a few times and once I went with Chaim to their home. He thought that he would go into hiding there until the situation stabilized. We insisted on accompanying him, feeling that he would need us if he ran into trouble. Our stepmother declined to go with us.

We considered the routes out of the city. The small wooden bridge we could see from our kitchen window was the boundary between the city and the countryside. It was guarded by German police. In order not to be seen by the guard, we decided to leave through the back yard. We would cross the side street and walk

straight to the fields, thus circumventing Warszawska Street and the bridge. To allay suspicion, Chaim and Rifka took off their shoes and tossed them over their shoulders like Polish farm workers. Chaim put on a cap and Rifka covered her head with a kerchief. They left first. They said good-bye to Tauba and our little brother. They expressed the fervent hope that they would see them again soon alive and well. They crept out from the back yard, crossed the street and then walked briskly through the fields. Observing them through the kitchen window, I could see that they gave the impression of being Polish peasants.

When they were quite far out, Pearl and I bid farewell to Tauba and Hirsh. We choked back tears. We found nothing to say that would adequately express our emotions. We took off our shoes, donned kerchiefs and left the back yard, following the same route. Far beyond the city the four of us met. We continued walking through the fields although we felt that we were under constant scrutiny by the peasants working there. We made a desperate attempt to maintain our composure.

When we reached the Furmans' Chaim went in. We were unsure whether we would be welcomed. We girls stood at the open gate and looked around. In the front were many open sheds with piles of scrap metal, rags and bones. The Furmans' house was far away at the other end of the yard.

After a while we became impatient. Then we noticed somebody coming toward us and a moment later we realized it was Chaim. He rushed out from the cluttered yard and stopped. He gazed at us, speechless. The look on his face spelled tales of horror. It took quite a while to get a word out of him. Again and again he tried to tell us what had happened, but he could not bring the words to his lips.

As he regained his composure, he told us that the Gestapo had been there before sunrise and murdered the Furmans. Their Polish helper had described the bloody scene. The two brothers and their mother were dead. Chaim saw the three massacred bodies lying on the floor of the living room. They were killed in cold blood because they were Jews. The tragic news petrified us. We were surrounded by gloom. Hiding there was now unthinkable.

We forced ourselves to contemplate our next move. Finally, we hurried down the road, like criminals looking for a hiding place. We were anxious to be as far away as possible.

Then out of nowhere the daughter of Mrs.Grosman came to my mind. "A few days ago Sara Grosman and other Jewish girls were apprehended by the Jewish police and shipped to work on a farm. Let's look for that farm. Maybe she could hide us for a while," I remarked. My sisters and brother agreed. The difficulty was to find the farm, of whose whereabouts we did not have a clue. When we made inquiries, the peasants at work in the fields just looked at us disdainfully and shrugged their shoulders. Some of them asked about the shootings in the city. Our scared faces revealed the answer.

We kept inquiring along the way, hoping we were heading in the right direction. At last we came upon a peasant who told us that two kilometres away, on a side road, was a large farm. We followed his directions and eventually sighted in the distance a collection of buildings and barns. Coming closer, we noticed Jewish men and women working in the fields. Chaim approached one of the workers. The man insisted that we wait until they left the field. We hid in the nearby woodlot.

As the evening rolled in, the workers, young men and women, headed for the farm buildings. We followed them, lagging behind. Once the supervisor departed, we approached and asked if anyone knew Sara. They could tell something unusual had happened, as German rules prohibited us from leaving the city limits under pain of death. They asked for an update. We described what we had seen and told them why we were searching for Sara. When we appealed to them to hide us, they suggested we go to the Polish landowner and ask for work. We pleaded with them to speak for us, but they refused. It was up to us to approach and deal with him ourselves.

With pounding hearts, Pearl and I went to the landowner's office. He was in his mid-thirties and wore a big mustache. He stared at us for a while. We studied his face, trying to read his thoughts. He rebuked us for not coming forward the week before when police were taking people for work. Then he arrogantly turned down our request. When we tried to persuade him to reconsider, he became furious and

replied, "Today, when the Germans are shooting Jews like dogs, you are asking for work!"

He rumbled about the First World War and the assassination of Seymon Petlura, a Ukrainian anti-Semite, he considered a national hero. Our mother used to tell us about Petlura and his Ukrainian mob. They staged large pogroms during the war. Petlura was shot to death in Paris on May 25, 1926 by Shalom Schwarzbard to avenge his slain parents.

The landowner was a willing accomplice of the German tyrants. The Jewish workers on that farm had been abducted by order of the Germans and he made them his slaves. He said if we did not leave the farm immediately, he would notify the Germans. We scrambled to our feet and rushed out the door. His awareness of our presence obviously meant that we were in great danger of being pursued. The Jewish workers were waiting outside the office. They were bitterly disappointed at the outcome of our meeting.

We deliberated. We could not return to Miedzyrzec, but on the other hand it was risky for us to hang around the farm. We frantically tried to figure out how to find shelter in the darkness of the night. The young men and women were sympathetic to our dilemma, but were afraid to hide us because of the possible consequences to them. But then they finally did agree to hide us. They took us to the hay loft above the barn, to the end opposite the entrance. Buried deep in hay, we slept fully dressed, ready to flee in case of a search. The women slept upstairs near the entrance and the men in the lower part of the barn.

My thoughts were preoccupied with that German who portrayed "Tremblan" as a resettlement colony where we would get quarters to live together as a family and work in peace until the war ended. It was an attractive image, but the shooting and violence of the previous night had convinced me that he was lying.

In the morning the workers agreed that we could stay for the day. Our trepidations subsided. As long as the girls were in the barn, we moved freely while they kept an eye for an unwelcome visitor. When they went outside to work, we had to remain out of sight in the hay.

In the evening a frightened eleven-year-old boy came running to

his father who was working on the farm. He brought terrifying news about the madness of the past few days in Miedzyrzec. While hiding under his bed, he watched how his mother and siblings were chased out of their home by the screaming Germans. Fear had pierced his body. On his way to the farm he had seen the deserted streets strewn with corpses.

At the height of the German tyranny, Jewish children grew up prematurely.

A few days later some Polish peasants brought news that the Jews assembled in the marketplace had been chased by the Germans to the railway station and loaded into boxcars. Those not able to walk were shot on the spot. The Poles believed that there was still shooting, as Germans patrolled the streets of Miedzyrzec. We and the workers were shattered by this news because we knew that our families might be among the deported.

Now the young workers were not so puzzled by our resolute decision to flee Miedzyrzec while the Jewish population was assembling in the marketplace. Irritated by their sometimes unfriendly remarks, we had tried to explain as best as we could that nobody knew what was about to happen. All we had wanted to do was to protect our brother. Their mistrust vanished.

A few days later some Poles mentioned that the shootings had ceased. The workers were desperate to find out what happened to their families. They all believed that the boy could venture safely to Miedzyrzec without attracting any attention. He was sent by his father to the city to get us an update on the situation in the Jewish quarter. With impatience we waited for his return. He came back to the farm the following day, bringing word that there were no guards and no more shooting in the Jewish area. But he also said he did not notice any people in the streets. We doubted if it was the right time to return. Eventually, peasants brought news that some Jews had been seen in the streets. The workers received permission to check on the fate of their families. A group of us walked to town.

We noticed that the German guard was no longer posted on the small bridge. The office building of the Stuart company seemed to be closed. We could see no trucks and no workers. We learned later

that from the beginning of the deportation the company kept its employees overnight at their work- sites.

At home we were overwhelmed by emotion and sadness. Tauba and our little brother Hirsh were missing. Our neighbour Rifka and the young woman with her mother from the front building were also gone. We assumed that Tauba and our baby brother had left with Rifka for "Tremblan", hoping to work there and survive. Tauba had obviously taken our few valuables with her, in case she needed to barter for food.

We cried our eyes out. Our landlord got wind of our return and came to see us. He was surprised that we were still alive.

"You are smart girls," he said, laughing. He mentioned that Biumke, Rifka's husband, had been released from the deportation. He had a permit to be employed by his brother-in-law, a furrier who worked for the Germans.

Ravaged with pain and sorrow we stayed home that day. The next morning Pearl and I went to the Jewish quarter. Deep silence hung over Brzeska Street, which used to swarm with people. The Jewish sector looked like a ghost town. We did not see a soul. It was heartbreaking to see that all the Jews were gone. The doors of the dwellings were open, permitting everyone to walk in and plunder. We looked into one house and saw a shocking picture. The place had been ransacked by Polish thugs. Belongings were strewn on the floor; even the pillows were split open and their feathers were floating in the air. If all those things could have spoken, they would have told bitter, anxious and sad stories about these unfortunate people trying to prepare for their last journey.

We met the young man from the grocery adjacent to the Libermans. Because he had a permit from Kordilej brushes, he had been released from the deportation. He said that about eight hundred workers had been released. The German bosses from various enterprises like Kordilej, the Stuart Company, the tanneries and other German companies picked their workers from the Umschlagplatz and sent them to work. At the end of the day when the workers with permits poured into the streets, those who had defied the Germans by hiding emerged and mingled with them. As the days passed, more and

more people risked coming outside.

The young man described what he had seen on the tragic day when the Germans announced that all Jews had to assemble in the market square for "resettlement" to "Tremblan."

People had been dumbstruck. They did not know what to make of the ordeal. Terror caused by the prolonged shooting had spurred people on to hasten to the marketplace, taking whatever was handy. Those who took their time were driven with brutality from their homes by the German police. The possessions for which they had worked all their lives had to be left behind. They took only the valuables which were easy to carry. The terrified people were tormented by the merciless August heat. They had to sit in the marketplace without moving and the rays of the sun were like fire coming from the sky. They were denied even a drop of water. Many fainted and collapsed. Excited voices in the crowd were silenced by German beatings. Guards shot anyone who tried to escape, as well as the sick, the elderly and those who were too frail to march to the train station. Finally, everyone was loaded into cattle cars.

We were not long left in the dark about the truth regarding their destination. A few days later I met David Weinberger, a tall, broad-shouldered fellow of boundless energy. Before the war he and his brother operated a public bath in a large building on Lubelska Street. The Germans had made him chief of the Jewish police, despite his having a noticeable human touch in relations with his fellow Jews.

The Jewish police had orders to help assemble people for the deportation.

Before they locked the boxcars, David himself was pushed by the SS-men into a car and deported together with the others to "Tremblan", which turned out to be the infamous death camp Treblinka. David in his uniform as chief of the Jewish police was able to break off from the other deportees. He was one of the few individuals who got informed about the Treblinka gas chambers and successfully escaped. He returned to Miedzyrzec with the news that the majority of the Jews from Miedzyrzec had been sent directly to their deaths.

It was by no means easy for people to escape from the cattle cars.

The train, pulled by two locomotives, was running fast. Squeezing through a small, boarded-up window, they had to jump in the same direction as the train was going or they might fall under the wheels. Germans and Ukrainians sat on the roofs or in the brake huts between the cars, eager to prevent escape by shooting anyone who fled. Many were killed or seriously injured. Some courageously made the jump, only to be captured by Poles who turned them over to the Germans to be shot. A few managed to return to Miedzyrzec.

On that tragic day, August 26, 1942, my little brother Hirsh, three years old, and Tauba perished. Many members of my family and my friends were among the fourteen thousand Jews who left with that first deportation. It set a precedent for brutality on a horrific mass scale.

CHAPTER 18

GATHERING THE REMNANTS

Rumours of atrocities in Warsaw caused great concern, but we were helpless to do anything. We also could not get in touch with our Aunt Brucha in Siedlce. We were isolated, with no mail and no communication with any place in Poland.

Those who survived the deportation had to gather the shattered remnants of their lives. We had grown accustomed to horrendous reports and we knew from experience that the Germans were capable of mass slaughter in cold blood, but it was nonetheless beyond our wildest nightmare that they would send innocent men, women and children to gas chambers only because they were Jews.

We survivors were psychologically numb, drained of any feelings. We were in mourning without consolation. Fear embraced us all and followed us day and night.

Our New Year Holy Days, Rosh Hashana, were approaching. This period should have ushered in happiness and joy. Instead we were wretched and full of unanswered questions: what was happening to the Jews and what was going to happen to us?

Some members of the Judenrat with their families and the Jewish police with their families were not affected by this deportation. Rumours spread that Jews who had special skills would be spared. These sparks of hope spurred us to a near panic to register and get a permit to work. Since it seemed that a job permit meant survival, it did not matter that it did not pay. The number of Jewish workers assigned to each factory was determined according to the needs of

the German war economy, so the number of work permits was limited.

The newly formed employment office of the Judenrat allocated the permits. Unfortunately, bribery was the key, and we had no connections and no money. People unable to get permits by these means looked for other ways to survive. Some opted to hide. Ingenious bunkers were constructed to conceal people. Some Jews with Aryan characteristics managed to obtain false papers enabling them to pass as Aryans and to live amongst them. My sisters, my brother and I joined most of the other newcomers to Miedzyrzec in hunting for work. We needed those precious work papers and we were in immediate need of food.

Our neighbour Biumke was acquainted with an ethnic German family of four who had come to Miedzyrzec one and a half years before and lived across Warszawska Street. They became the owners of a dairy, confiscated from a Jewish family.

"Gitel," Biumke said, "you could get a job without pay in their house. You'd be relatively safe as their employee. You could perhaps even protect your sisters and brother."

I made a quick decision and accepted his promising offer. Biumke made the arrangements and I went to work. It was a strange feeling to give myself up as a servant to the Germans. I washed walls, scrubbed floors, did the laundry by hand as no washing machine was available, and helped out with the cooking. I worked like a slave and in return received barely enough to eat. After eight or ten days of this I heard that a Jewish girl working for ethnic Germans had been shot by one of their German guests. After that I felt unsafe. I decided my best option was to quit and try to survive on my own.

It looked for a while like the Germans had become lax following the deportation. It did not last long. A decree was issued that the survivors had to move into a sealed ghetto. Obviously, they wanted us to be all together within reach for another deportation. We were again beset by feelings of utter helplessness. We faced the unwelcome reality of being trapped. We did not know if our lives would become more wretched there, but we seemed to have no other choice.

Fences went up around the oldest, most rundown part of town. The dwellings were mostly dilapidated; some were in ruins, with rotten floors and caved-in ceilings. There was no heat and no water and few houses had stoves. On pain of death for failure to obey, we carried our bundles into a room in the attic of an old wooden building on Warszawska, close to Brzeska Street. It was a dark and unfriendly place. Life became more depressing. With no food and no heat in the house, we had little desire to wake up each morning and spend our time milling around our damp, cold surroundings.

We felt what little was left of our dignity was being eroded. Exhaustion stalked us. The survivors were burned out by the unbearable tension and the constant mourning for loved ones.

Hunger forced Rifka to sneak out of the ghetto to go to our former landlord to buy milk. We sold it to people in the ghetto.

On one of those bleak days we heard of the possibility of getting work. There was an enormous line of people waiting to enter the employment office. My brother struck up a conversation with two youths of his age and learned that they had found jobs cutting logs to be used as supports in mines. They suggested that Chaim come down to the employment office the next day in order to meet their manager, a very sympathetic Pole by the name of Malczyk. He was a former school principal who lived with his mother and sister, and whom the Germans had enlisted as head of an enterprise which shipped lumber by rail to distant mines. The work- site was located near the railway tracks, a short walk from Mr. Malczyk's home.

We all went to the employment office. Mr.Malczyk offered Chaim a job without pay and made him a working permit. He told Chaim that from time to time he would have to work in a nearby village. Seizing the opportunity, Chaim suggested to Mr.Malczyk that I might work as a cook for the group of boys when they went to the village. He agreed and obtained a working permit for me as well.

It was autumn, time to harvest crops. Since there was no need to reimburse Jews, the demand by farmers for Jewish workers was enormous. My sisters quickly found jobs digging potatoes.

About this time rumours circulated that new transports of Jews from the outlying towns would be arriving. Sure enough, at night

we began to hear cries of agony from people rumbling by on horse-drawn carts. Shouting from Germans resounded through the darkness. They had brutally rounded up the Jewish inhabitants from their homes in the towns and villages of Biala-Podlaska, Pinczev, Janove, Konstantynov, Visnice and many others. Robbed and beaten, shattered and half frozen, the Jews were herded into Miedzyrzec, which became a transit ghetto.

We learned from the new arrivals that the Germans had cleared all these places of their entire Jewish population and made them "Judenrein,"-- "cleansed" of Jews. En route, they killed children, old and sick people and anyone else they disliked. The forced migration presaged a new deportation. It could come any time. The atmosphere became panicky. Rumours spread like wildfire. Many Jews fled to other towns to escape the danger. Some managed to hide among the Poles.

CHAPTER 19

SOKOLE

Chaim assembled with the other boys every morning near the ghetto gate to be escorted by a Jewish policeman to the workplace. After a few weeks Mr.Malczyk requested that the boys and I leave for Sokole, a village thirteen kilometres from Miedzyrzec in the direction of Biala-Podlaska. The work site was beside the railway on the edge of the village. We could have crossed the tracks near a construction site where Jews were at work, but we opted for a longer route because we heard that the Polish supervisor was a mean, despicable character.

During the first week we slept in a peasant's barn and used the kitchen for cooking and eating. The peasant women spoke in hushed voices about the nightly intrusions of the partisans into their homes in search of food. Partisans were sympathizers with the Soviet Russian regime who fought the Germans within German-occupied territory. It was hard to believe that there were partisans in that area. My brother and I thought that they were making it up.

Mr.Malczyk got permission to transfer us into a vacant one-story building with boarded-up windows. We were told that the building was vacant because the owner had been killed by Russian and Ukrainian partisans. Following her husband's murder, his wife had fled. Our group moved in with the straw bags which we had received from the peasants to be used as mattresses. The yard of our new shelter was dotted with mounds of earth in which carrots and

potatoes were stored. In daytime the owner's wife would venture back to retrieve some carrots or potatoes. It looked as though the women's story was true.

In fact Russian-Ukrainian partisans exercised tremendous power over the village. Initially, the peasants stood up to them and reported them to the Polish police who in turn informed the Germans. The Germans encircled the forest where the partisans lived and shot at random into it, but they were afraid to enter the depths of the woods. That meant the partisans could manipulate the peasants without fear of repercussion. After a few surprise raids the peasants surrendered to their demands.

A few days after we had moved, peasants returned from Miedzyrzec with disturbing news. The Germans had surrounded the ghetto and Jews were being rounded up once again for a new deportation.

The boys working near the tracks were at great risk of being picked up by the frequent German patrols. They decided not to go to work and stayed in their quarters. One boy stood guard outside to warn the others to dive into the woods if the Germans appeared.

Chaim and I were totally obsessed with the whereabouts of our sisters. We had not heard from them since they had begun working in the potato fields. We had no idea if they had stayed there or had returned to the ghetto. Days passed in silent despair until news arrived with returning villagers that all was quiet again.

Determined to look for Rifka and Pearl, we walked many kilometres over unknown paths, asking for directions to the fields where they were working. The peasants gazed at us, astonished that there were still Jews in the area. We prayed that the Poles would not give us away. We could have been apprehended at any time, as we were violating the restriction to stay within our work area. We were doubtful if we would ever reach our sisters.

In the late afternoon we came to a field where women and children were preparing their evening meal. A huge pot filled with potatoes was steaming over a small fire built between a few bricks. Children screamed for food.

At first we saw only strangers. After a long search we found

acquaintances who knew where we could find Pearl and Rifka. We finally met. We hugged and kissed each other. It was a great relief to know that all of us had survived the second deportation. Tears of happiness mingled with tears of fear and frustration. We stayed with them overnight. Parting made us sad, but in the early morning we returned to Sokole.

As we walked through the countryside Chaim and I were fascinated by the early fall colours of the leaves, accentuated by the glistening sunlight. They contrasted with the meadows which were still green. Smoke rose from the chimneys of the farmhouses which were surrounded with gardens full of flowers and fruit-laden trees. It was quiet and peaceful. The beauty of this pastoral scene was unbelievable in the context of the atrocities that were being inflicted at that very moment upon Jews. The country folk with their children nearby followed us with their eyes. How could the Gentiles understand our tragedy or our aimless trek? How could they know what it was like to have hearts full of fear and minds preoccupied with past horrors and dread about the future?

No one seemed to have missed us when we returned to resume work in Sokole. Occasionally by doing some work for a peasant we got some scraps of food. Despite the low cost of food in the village our lack of even a few Polish groszen often left us hungry. The boys who had been inhabitants of Miedzyrzec were better off because they had some money to buy food.

A family of three--husband, wife and adult daughter--came to stay with us. They had been deported from Krakow to Biala-Podlaska and they hid during the subsequent deportations there. When they could not hold out any longer, they decided to set out on their own for the Miedzyrzec transit ghetto. Passing through Sokole they heard from peasants that Jewish adolescents were working there. They paid us a visit. The husband went to work with the young men and the women stayed with me in the house. The man slept with the boys on the floor of the big room, while we women slept on the entry-way floor.

With the cold weather approaching, our sisters' employment in the potato fields came to an end. They took remote roads to evade

Poles and Germans and with difficulty found their way to Sokole. The first night we women slept squeezed together. The next day Chaim made arrangements with a peasant in the village to allow Rifka and Pearl to sleep in his barn.

One night they awoke, as the peasant, carrying a lantern, rummaged through the barn. Other nights they heard voices in the yard; they came from partisans. In fact their host went into the woods every night to deliver food to them.

One evening Pearl was surprised by the Polish construction supervisor as she left our shelter. He grilled her with all sorts of questions. She broke down, trembling. Her replies infuriated him and he smacked her twice in the face. He told her to return to Miedzyrzec, threatening to report her to the Germans if she disregarded his order. Horrified, sporting a black eye and a swollen face, she was too frightened to come to stay with me for the day. She and Rifka remained hidden in the peasant's barn. When they didn't come to our place, we went to see them.

We concluded that the barn was not a safe place because if the Germans discovered the peasant's activities they would come looking for him and my sisters would be at risk. Chaim and I were infuriated at the helplessness of our situation. Our intention was to avoid the ghetto as long as we could, but the insecurity of our sisters did not give us any peace.

Because we were unable to come up with a safe shelter for Pearl and Rifka, all four of us decided to return to the Miedzyrzec ghetto. We notified Mr. Malczyk. He provided us with a permit. We did not really believe that a permit would safeguard us, so we avoided the main road.

The Germans had reduced the size of the ghetto after the second deportation. Our shelter in the attic was now outside the boundaries. While searching for another place, we ran into our former neighbour, Biumke. His surprise appearance improved our mood. Although it seemed as if we had not seen him for a long time, it was in reality only weeks. We talked about the pain, the anguish, the losses of our friends and family, the radical change in our circumstances and our mounting concern to find a shelter in the ghetto.

Biumke was staying with his sister-in-law and let us have his quarters which were next to the ghetto fence. On the other side of the fence was the village of Stoupce. Nearby was a meadow through which ran a brook named Kezna. Biumke visited us often, bringing food and one day even some meat, something we had not eaten nor even seen for a long, long time. We enjoyed a delightful meal with a real meat soup. His generosity was astonishing. We wondered what had happened to evoke such a response. We had never known him to be so charitable and so interested in our welfare.

One day he asked me to join him for a walk. He talked about his wife Rifka, who had perished in the gas chambers of Treblinka. He told me she left many dresses: blue dresses, red dresses. I could have them all and many more.

Not long thereafter he came again, this time with a nice dress that had been Rifka's. I refused to accept it. I was beginning to understand what he had in mind, but I was not in the mood to contemplate a relationship, without even considering for the moment that he was at least fifteen years my senior.

Another day, while we were out for a walk, he proposed marriage. I pretended to be surprised and stalled by saying that I had to think it over. As much as I appreciated his willingness to help us, I could not think about marriage.

In the days that followed there were mounting rumours of another deportation. I told him that my aim was to survive the war. I would not contemplate marriage until times had gotten back to normal.

In the meantime, Mr.Malczyk sent word to Chaim and me to return to Sokole, as there was a lot of work and a shortage of manpower. This gave me an opportunity to distance myself from Biumke.

CHAPTER 20

THE PARTISANS

Upon our return to Sokole we discovered that our hunch was correct. The peasant who had hidden our sisters in his barn had been discovered by the Germans as a supporter of the partisans and was killed.

The night we returned to Sokole, the partisans tore open the window of the room where the boys slept and came in with flashlights and guns to look for money. Coming up empty-handed, they left without a trace. The boys were outraged. Although we knew the peasants had problems with the partisans, nobody thought that they would hurt us. But now they refused to leave us alone.

A few nights later they forced the door open, searched for money and began to beat up the boys. It was pitch dark. As best they could, the boys retaliated, following the partisans through the window to continue the battle outside. In the dark we could not see them and wondered where the boys had gone. They later reappeared, badly bruised.

One night, three strong men, amply nourished, burst into our living quarters. They had guns and were ready to instigate a brawl. The slender boys ignored the guns and attacked them. Chaotic fighting erupted. The boys, gasping for breath, had to give up after a while. The partisans' relentless conduct degenerated further. One night they grabbed the tall, beautiful daughter of the couple from Krakow, raped her repeatedly, and left. The nights which should

have allowed us to forget our misery were turning into nightmares.

News of an impending deportation filtered in again. The peasants confirmed that the ghetto was again encircled. We were astonished by the speed of this third deportation. My brother and I realized we had made a serious error in judgment by leaving our sisters in the ghetto. We were plagued with visions of their fate. There were rumours that the Germans would soon be coming for us. There was no time to lose. Following our instincts that evening, Chaim and I went to the peasant's place where we had stayed the first week. Without his knowledge, we climbed up the ladder to the loft to hide in his chicken coop. The chickens became noisy and even after they seemed to go along with our presence they flew around for a while before they calmed down. From time to time a new commotion arose, as they started fighting and fluttering around the coop. Thankfully, nobody on the outside noticed anything out of the ordinary.

After spending a night and a day in the coop we had enough of the noise and the chicken droppings and returned for the night to our quarters in the village. We discovered that the construction site near the tracks had been abandoned. It looked like the Polish foreman had taken the Jewish workers to Miedzyrzec for deportation.

The third deportation lasted a few days. With surprising speed and efficiency the Germans sent the victims to Treblinka. When it looked as if the action had ended and the danger subsided, people emerged from their hiding places.

Without delay the Germans organized a fourth deportation. They pounced on the survivors, systematically eliminating all those who had escaped the previous roundups and were in hiding. They seized people from the street and searched for hideouts. They cleared the ghetto with great ferocity and brutality, indiscriminately shooting in the streets and into houses. Everywhere corpses of Jews were lying around.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, we longed for an end to being hunted like animals. We longed for freedom to roam the streets without risk. We felt we could not cope with further hardship.

Desperately we tried to keep fear and panic at bay, to stay calm and think straight.

While Chaim and I waited for news that the situation in the ghetto had calmed down, we prepared to return there to look for our sisters. Then, almost miraculously, a Polish man came looking for us. He brought us a letter from Rifka and Pearl! We could not open it fast enough. They had survived. This news lifted our spirits. The Pole also mentioned that the crisis in the ghetto had subsided.

CHAPTER 21

AFTER THE FOURTH DEPORTATION

Tears streamed down our faces when Chaim and I saw Pearl and Rifka again in Miedzyrzec. Embracing each other, we sobbed like little children. Our being together was a single ray of light in an otherwise bleak landscape. They vividly described the recent deportation. They hid in Biumke's attic, near the heavily guarded fence. Rifka had a bad cold and her coughing provoked complaints from other people in the hiding place because the noise could easily expose them. As it persisted, the complaints of the people in the attic became more adamant. When soldiers' footsteps were heard nearby, people insisted that Pearl silence Rifka's coughing. In desperation, Pearl used a pillow and nearly suffocated her. To this day Pearl does not understand why or how, but Rifka suddenly stopped coughing.

In a nearby hiding place the same scenario came into play with a crying baby. Unfortunately, the end result was tragic. To suppress the constant crying, the mother ultimately had to suffocate her child to spare the lives of the others.

The majority of the people brought in from other towns and villages had been whisked away in the second, third and fourth deportations. Only people with permits from German enterprises were exempted, although like other survivors they too lived with constant fear that their turn would come soon.

After the fourth deportation the Germans reduced the size of the ghetto. After all, with fewer Jews, there was less need for space.

This time Biumke's quarters were outside the boundaries so we were compelled to search for another shelter. We found a nice empty room on the second floor of a building in the middle of the ghetto. We had to act quickly to make sure nobody else would claim it. We immediately dragged in our straw bags.

Days later, the Jewish police brought a family of three, named Dzik, to share our room. We could not afford to be choosy. Mr. Dzik was from Siedlce, the son of a once well-to-do leather dealer. Mrs. Dzik was a physician. They were in their thirties. She was heavy-set, with long, black hair and masculine features. Her husband was handsome with dark hair and black eyes.

Chaim and I left for Sokole, leaving Pearl and Rifka behind to share the room with the Dziks. In Sokole conditions had deteriorated. The village was swamped with German military police, armed to the teeth. Often joined by the Polish police, they would circle the forest and shoot at random into the woods, hoping to eliminate the partisans. Sometimes they would hang around near the track where the boys were working. There was an alarming chain of events. A sixteen-year-old from our group went to the work site after work to pick up his jacket. He did not come back. He was shot by a German. The next day two young Jewish men came from hiding in Biala-Podlaska to seek refuge in the forest of Sokole. They came upon the boys working near the tracks and asked them for shelter. They stayed with us for a couple of days, then headed for Miedzyrzec. On the way they encountered a German patrol and were shot.

A few days later, three young men who had been hiding in the forest came by to inquire about their friends, the two men who had been shot. We warned them to be cautious. They spent a night with us and left early the next morning, retreating back into the forest. Some Poles pointed them out to Germans who were patrolling the edge of the forest. The Germans shot them.

It began to seem that we were more vulnerable in Sokole than in the ghetto. Our group was regretfully forced to say good-bye to Sokole. For youngsters like us to cover the distance of thirteen kilometres from Sokole to Miedzyrzec was no problem in normal times, but we were scared to death of running into Germans. Mr.

Malczyk's permit would be considered just another piece of paper.

That late autumn day the wind was whipping the dry, fallen leaves through the air and filling our nostrils with the smell of decaying flowers. A thin dusting of snow covered the ground. We figured that it would be safest to walk through the woods, avoiding the edges where we could be visible. We slipped between the trees like shadows, pausing from time to time to check that all was clear ahead. Sometimes we hurried. Sometimes we walked slowly in silence, pausing at the slightest sound to investigate its source.

When we finally reached Miedzyrzec we stopped at Mr. Malczyk's house and explained the situation in Sokole. Chaim asked him if he could work in Miedzyrzec again. Mr. Malczyk promised to look into it. We returned to the ghetto through back alleys. It was getting dark as we approached the building where our sisters were staying. Our hearts stopped when we saw a wide trail of blood in the snow near the front door. We went in and were happily reunited. The previous evening the Germans had chased and shot a young man as he ran into that building.

We four shared the room with the Dzik family. Rifka and I shared a straw bag. The Dziks occupied the larger part of the room. They put in a bedroom set and converted a section of the room into an office by hanging sheets from the ceiling to create a partition so Dr.Dzik could receive patients from the ghetto.While she attended to patients or visited sick people, Mr.Dzik's responsibility was to take care of their child.

Two large logs had been left by the former occupants. Mr.Dzik borrowed a saw and we cut the logs to heat the room. He was clumsy and pushed the saw into my left index finger. It bled heavily and became infected. It took a long time to heal.

One night we were awakened by knocking. A man begged Mr. Dzik to wake up his wife, the physician, so she could come and help his sick wife. The plea did not move Mr.Dzik to interrupt his wife's deep sleep. The next morning when he told her about the case she grabbed her physician's bag and ran to the sick woman. But she arrived too late; the woman had died. Dr.Dzik was upset with her husband for denying her the opportunity to make some money. I was

dismayed at her lack of feeling for her patients. She sensed this and became irritated by our presence. Her position as a physician gave her special status. As a result, when she complained to the Judenrat that her office was too cramped, we were thrown out. The fact that we were there first was of no consequence.

When I began hunting for another shelter someone suggested that I visit the one-story building of the Jewish police. I was surprised to find that there were rooms occupied by ordinary people. One room seemed particularly crowded. I learned that it was occupied by a single man who had numerous visitors. One of these visitors was a cousin who lived in another part of the ghetto, but came to do some baking in an oven that happened to be in the room.

CHAPTER 22

IN THE NEW QUARTERS

The following day we left the straw bags with the Dziks and went to live in the building next door to the police station with the single man. It had two bunk beds, warm covers, a table and two benches. They were old, but the furnishings, given the circumstances, seemed luxurious.

Chaim returned to work near the railway tracks in Miedzyrzec. He was able to get flour from the peasants who lived nearby. He smuggled it into the ghetto and I baked rolls. At eleven each evening I left the dough to rise. I got up at three in the morning to knead the dough and bake the rolls. In the morning Pearl and Rifka went out into the streets to sell them. It brought us a little money.

Among the many hungry people in the ghetto were a number of young single men from Slovakia, recent arrivals, dragged from their homes and streets and deported without any resources. Squeezed with many strangers into one room and with no chance to work, they spent their time wandering through the icy streets. Sometimes they got some money for odd jobs. They bought rolls from my sisters and befriended them.

This business let us make our quarters comfortable in those cold winter days. The young Slovakians gravitated to our place to warm up and to have a chat and a hot drink. They were grateful for any scraps we could provide, some soup or a piece of bread. Among them were three young men with the name Weiss. Two were cousins, one of them a Jewish policeman. The third was a physician. Among many others I remember men named Hershkovic, Schwarz and Jerovinsky,

who was from the small town of Michalovce in Slovakia. He had been taken from his home, wife and child.

The Germans continued to bring people to the Miedzyrzec ghetto, declaring each of the evacuated areas "Judenrein"-- clear of Jews. While visiting the Libermans on Brzeska Street we met a family of six siblings who came from the town of Nasielsk. Their parents had been killed by the Germans. The oldest, Srulik, in his early twenties, was followed by four sisters of various ages with the youngest a boy of twelve. From the moment we met, we enjoyed their company. They were simple and candid adolescents.

Between August and November 1942, we had gone through four deportations. It seemed that the most feverish stage of deportations to the death camps was completed. The vast majority of Polish Jews had been slain.

On a cold day in December 1942 a rumour spread among the remnants that there would be another expulsion. The streets became crowded with people desperately trying to figure out how to escape. Although aware that any precaution was useless in this game, I went to the Libermans. The younger Liberman said that Srulik knew of an abandoned decrepit house outside the ghetto near the tanneries. Srulik and his brother and sisters were going to hide there. He proposed that we join them. We took warm covers and food, crawled through a hole in the ghetto fence, and reached the dilapidated building to join the siblings from Nasielsk. It was in a desolate area. The main floor was exposed so we climbed to the attic, hoping that the building's condition would deter anyone from exploring it.

Covered with blankets, we retired. The view was unobstructed and we could observe the outlying area. We spent three full days isolated from the events taking place in the ghetto. To find out what was going on, one of Srulik's sisters went to the ghetto. When she returned we learned that the deportation had not taken place after all. We returned to the ghetto and went back to the daily hardships.

Hunger destroyed normal existence. It affected our ability to work and think. Nutritional deficiencies brought fatigue, depression, dizziness and disease. Overcrowding resulted in totally unsanitary

conditions. We could no longer observe the normal conventions of modesty and privacy. Misery and filth spawned a plague of typhus. Tuberculosis, dysentery and other illnesses were common. With no resistance, scores of people died.

The man with whom we shared the room had once been a porter. He was a strong, vigorous man. He fell ill with typhus. His cousin took care of him throughout his illness. However, his condition worsened from day to day and he died.

We became terrified when Chaim got infected with typhus too. There was no medication available and we watched helplessly as he struggled for life, burning with fever, breathing heavily and barely conscious. Dr.Weiss came often, but he could not do much without medicine. We cried and prayed to the Almighty to help our brother get well. Finally, after eight or ten days he started to sweat, his temperature fell and he began to respond to his surroundings. He was weak and needed time to regain his strength. The typhus epidemic did not miss a single family.

Late on Christmas eve we were awakened by screaming and the clamor of boots trudging up the stairs. We could hear loud laughter and cursing by men with German voices. Paralyzed with fear, we listened, trying to discern where the footsteps were going. The heavy boot steps barged into the next-door quarters of the Jewish police.

We could hear Germans screaming, "Los! Los! Los!" ("Get going!")

Pandemonium continued through the night. We were terrified. Instinctively, we remained silent. Without a word we got dressed in the dark. We had no idea what to do. Chaim, still recuperating, could not move. Each minute stretched out and time seemed to stand still. We thought about crawling through a small window which opened to a narrow lane. Eventually, we heard the Germans departing. A while later they returned to the quarters of the Jewish police, this time even more boisterous. We huddled in the dark as the rage of these hooligans exploded. The most shocking thing was their joviality. Somehow they had become so dehumanized that behaving brutally was their idea of having a good time.

Early the next morning, we heard what happened: the Gestapo

from Biala-Podlaska had come into the Miedzyrzec ghetto to amuse themselves! They broke into houses and shot fifty-six people at random, simply killing without mercy. It was our unbelievable good fortune to have been spared during that bizarre night of terror. We were mystified why it was that our swinging door, which opened with a light push right beside the door to the police station, had been overlooked.

Among the victims were our six friends from Naszielsk. I had become very close with them in the few days that we had spent hiding together. I cried all day.

It was not the first time I crossed paths with people with whom I found comfort. When they were torn from life with such meaningless cruelty, I became engulfed by a sense of deep sorrow and loss. One such incident did not prepare me for the next. Each event simply added to the burden that I was forced to bear. Somehow it added fuel to the fire that burned within me to survive.

The young Slovakian Jews came by often. They brought all kinds of news. One time they described a hiding place they had recently constructed in the ghetto for a baker and his family. In the entryway of the house they built a wall with an invisible door. Inspired by that idea, we got them to build a similar contraption in our room.

I often visited the Libermans. I liked to listen to the young men who gathered there. The discussions focused mainly around resistance. They spent hours discussing possible ways to fight German barbarism. One of the men reminded us that before the first deportation we were afraid to fight the Germans because we thought resistance would risk reprisals that would be taken out on the women and children. Now our basic objective was simply to survive.

Someone suggested that we undertake systematic sabotage operations. Another was skeptical. He said fighting the Germans was senseless. Organized Jewish resistance seemed inconceivable without help from outside. Another said that in his mind it was illogical to wage war against the Germans because our numbers were now too small and we were weak and unarmed. The Germans had the best modern weapons. They were strong, riding the crest of their successful war against most of Europe.

Opinions were divided between those in favor of defense and resistance inside the ghetto and those who thought they should escape. Many positions were debated, but they all seemed to bog down in frustration and anger. Basically, any plans to organize acts of resistance were rejected because we felt that German retaliatory measures would wipe out the last survivors.

CHAPTER 23

THE JEWISH POLICE

The Jewish police served dual yet contradictory purposes: to protect the Jewish community while enforcing German orders. The Germans skillfully created animosity between them and the ghetto inhabitants, employing fraudulent and intimidating tactics. The police were coerced by German terror to comply with beastly decrees, but much depended on each policeman's conscience. Among their tasks were to ferret out forced-labour dodgers and to call up recalcitrant taxpayers. It was their duty to enforce our isolation. They had to check every individual who entered or left the ghetto. They verified all identity papers and frisked those they suspected of smuggling food, sometimes asserting their authority with force. They had to repress the activities of the resistance movement. The Germans tended to eliminate the softer, more humane members.

In the midst of our fall holidays in 1942, the Gestapo carried out a massive purge of the Jewish police in Miedzyrzec. The chief of the Jewish police at that time, a middle-aged man named Brukarz, received a summons to appear with his forty policemen at the Gestapo office. Among them was our next-door neighbour who had just become a policeman. He was a watchmaker from Biala-Podlaska. A few days after the summons the Gestapo accused the whole group of subversive behaviour and shot them all. Despite our occasional friction with the Jewish police, we were stunned by this massacre.

A new chief, Srulejski, was installed by the Gestapo. He was a tall, strong, handsome man in his mid-thirties, a native of

Miedzyrzec, who as a young boy had been arrested for petty theft. He stole from the peasants anything he could get his hands on. His criminal record was known to the Polish police and subsequently to the Gestapo.

Srulejski was a shameless tool of the Germans, one of their collaborators. He recruited agents from the underworld to spy on people. It was no surprise when the Germans made him leader of the Jewish police. The Gestapo, however, harboured a certain distrust toward the man. After being chief for three or four months, he was summoned to the Polish police station. As he was led from room to room, he was surprised by the sight of the Gestapo with their guns drawn. They searched and questioned him, then put him in chains and locked him in a cell.

The following Saturday at noon they brought him, shackled, into the ghetto. There was talk that when the homes of the deported Jews had been abandoned, he had rummaged through them to plunder the valuables. The Gestapo took him to the yard where he resided, and ordered him to show them where he had buried the gold and jewellery which he had amassed. They took the valuables for themselves and led him back to jail.

As chief of police Srulejski had become influential and bold. He went out with an educated woman named Hela Rubinstein. Hers was one of the most respected and wealthy families in pre-war Miedzyrzec. After he became police chief, somehow his affair with Hela became known to his wife, an attractive woman from the same background as he was. She sought revenge by betraying him to the Gestapo. The scenario provided the ghetto with bizarre entertainment.

A week later, on a Friday, two Gestapo agents, Dieter and Bock, brought him into the ghetto once again. Srulejski knew that the Gestapo had him trapped. But he was aware that they were looking for the employment officer, Mr.Finkelstein. Hoping to regain some of his lost influence, he directed the Gestapo to a wall in the house where Finkelstein was hiding. While they were breaking down the wall, Srulejski inconspicuously slipped away. The Gestapo searched, but could not find him. However, Mr.Finkelstein was taken away and

never seen again. Soon the news spread through the ghetto that Srulejski had escaped. The Gestapo issued an ultimatum that unless Srulejski was brought forth, five hundred people would be shot. That caused great panic. The Jewish police announced that whoever knew the whereabouts of Srulejski must report it immediately.

The next day a woman revealed that Srulejski was hiding in her attic. The Gestapo ordered the Polish police to arrest him. They fired shots into the attic and threw up a hand grenade. Assuming he was no longer alive, they went up to get him.

Srulejski, with chained hands, had hidden between boxes of sand which had been there since the beginning of the war. He was not hurt. Hauled down, he was shot by the Gestapo.

On a Saturday evening several weeks later a Jewish policeman named Goldman was shot in the back while walking to the store across from the Jewish police station. The people of the ghetto fell into an uproar. The shooting added to our horror because it indicated to the Gestapo that there were weapons in the ghetto. It was rumoured that Goldman was a traitor and that someone had shot him in revenge. Three members of the Gestapo, Dieter, Heine and Bock, came to investigate, but the person who shot Goldman was never found.

Across from us lived the Krawiecki family, a mother, two sons in their late twenties, both policemen, and two teenaged daughters. With the death of Srulejski, one of the brothers became the chief of the Jewish police. I began to notice that the family no longer seemed to be touched by the miseries of life in the ghetto. The sisters in particular were full of excitement, with constant smiles on their faces. They felt intoxicated with power. Their distorted vision made them feel invincible. It was obvious to me that they were deluding themselves. Their home was sometimes lit up, as if they were celebrating. The mother too looked carefree. I used to wonder how anyone could be so cheerful and be dressed as if ready for a party at a time when we were stricken with hunger and typhus and the German savagery continued ruthlessly. They seemed oblivious to the horrors that were threatening to eliminate us.

CHAPTER 24

A LIVING HELL

Cold and hunger turned hundreds of law-abiding ghetto residents into 'criminals.' They violated curfew, shed their arm-bands and left the ghetto illegally. Even the death penalty did not scare them. People snuck out to smuggle in food. Some stole wood for heat or potatoes to avoid starvation. People sold dirt cheap whatever they owned to buy food at skyrocketing prices.

During Chaim's prolonged bout of typhus, the little money we earned by selling rolls dwindled because we lost our supply of flour. Among the smugglers were my two sisters. Their faces and hair were less prone to arouse suspicion that they were Jewish than mine. Pearl used to take off her armband and crawl through a hole in the barbed wire to sneak to a Polish bakery to buy a few loaves of bread. Rifka would go to Warszawska Street to buy a few liters of milk from a farmer. Most of the bread and milk we sold to others. Every time either one of my sisters went out to the Aryan side, it seemed an eternity until we saw her back.

The Polish police were recognizable by their navy blue uniforms. They were called the 'Blues'. They used to wait outside the ghetto to apprehend Jews who dared to trespass beyond the borders. Smugglers were taken into custody and delivered into German hands to be shot. Countless executions took place. Each evening horse-drawn carriages pulled into the ghetto bearing the bodies of the unlucky victims who had been caught that day in their battle for survival. But not even the severity of this repression held us survivors back, and smuggling

continued.

The harsh conditions taught us to evade and outwit the Germans. The Germans encouraged shady characters, like known blackmailers and informers, by-products of life in the ghetto, to spy on us. An insidious campaign of propaganda and lies meant that confusion was ever present and anxiety was always high.

All winter rumours of new deportations plagued the ghetto. Young people made hurried decisions to get married. Marriages of convenience were common. Sexual desire replaced tenderness and affection. There were even rash marriages between surviving widows and widowers because everyone felt that we had little time left.

At the same time, the years of being persecuted and enslaved and the awareness that deportation to the gas chambers might occur any time, created a spirit of resistance among the survivors.

People fled to the forest. Some families lived in caves. At night they would go out to the peasants to beg for food. Young people escaped and joined the Jewish armed resistance which had formed a considerable number of partisan groups. The impending threat of a new deportation kept us awake at night. My brother, sisters and I talked about taking refuge in the forest or joining the partisans. The severity of the winter, the difficulty of getting food and the hostility of the Polish population discouraged us. We remained undecided. Some Jews thought that they stood a better chance of surviving in the ghetto than as hunted prey in the forest.

Most of the non-Jewish partisan groups were hostile to Jews and refused to accept them. Jews outside the ghetto endured vicious anti-Semitism from Russian and Ukrainian partisans.

The Jewish fugitives in the forest were at an additional disadvantage in that they were city dwellers, unfamiliar with life in the open land. Some lacked the physical stamina to sustain the hardships of nature, particularly after life in the ghetto. Few could read maps or handle guns.

Many peasants participated in raids organized by the German police against the Jewish partisans. They pinpointed possible sites in the forest which they knew better than the Germans. In some

instances the Germans rewarded them with allotments of sugar or salt and let them loot. It often happened that peasants would murder or betray Jews.

A number of Jews returned to the misery of the ghetto even though they were aware of the possible consequences.

We abandoned the idea of escaping to the forest, thankful to have at least a roof over our heads.

In the ghetto news about the progress of the war was scarce. However, we did hear about Allied victories and German setbacks, and anticipation of an ultimate German defeat helped sustain our will to go on. But we also realized that the Germans would not hesitate to exterminate us first at any cost.

CHAPTER 25

TRAVNIK

The month of February 1943 was upon us and snow squalls driven by high winds whipped through the nearly deserted streets of the Miedzyrzec ghetto. The sky was gray and somber; there was no sign of sunshine.

As if the difficulties of ghetto reality were not enough, new developments continued to demand fast, critical decisions. Notices appeared for volunteers to go to Travnik in the German-occupied Polish territory. The Germans called it an industrial compound. They began a campaign for prospective workers to register at a temporary office in the Miedzyrzec ghetto for voluntary evacuation. They painted an incredibly idyllic picture to entice us. There were supposed to be factories of the Kordilej company, making articles from hog bristles. We had three days to decide.

In the meantime, the local Kordilej factories were being dismantled. Up to that time we had understood our survival as largely being due to the Germans' manpower needs. The evacuation of workers to Travnik and the dismantling of the Kordilej factory perturbed us, but a number of us refused to register. The horrible past had taught us survivors not to believe German propaganda. However, we knew that taking people away might be a sign that the ghetto would be liquidated so this part of the world could be added to the list of places that were cleared of Jews.

The Germans categorically denied all rumours about an imminent deportation, but the population of the ghetto sensed that

something unimaginably terrible awaited us. People talked about it obsessively. It was hard to go along with the announcement about Travnik without becoming totally confused or going mad.

I went for consultation to the Gurmantl family, who lived on Zelazna Street. They always treated me with kindness during my brief visits. They were humble and patient. We were fortunate to have come across such friendly people. After all, we were strangers in Miedzyrzec. We had the feeling we could count on them. Mrs. Gurmantl, a warm-hearted woman, always had a sad but loving look on her face. She comforted me and invited us to share their hideout. It was a cellar with a hidden trap door. I went back to our quarters to get essential things and brought my brother and sisters to the Gurmantls. The streets were deserted except for Jewish policemen. We spent the night down in the cellar-bunker. During the day we sometimes ventured upstairs. We remained there three days and two nights. The Gurmantls' son Szyja, the policeman who had arranged my release from jail the previous summer, brought us reports on the latest developments.

Once the "volunteers" were evacuated to Travnik, we were surprised to see the ghetto start to function again. We heard later that those "volunteers" had made a poor choice. They were mistreated on their journey. Travnik turned out to be just another concentration camp under the steady watchful eyes of the Gestapo and their Ukrainian and Lithuanian collaborators. It was part of a covert deception to mislead their victims and abate suspicion.

At this time encouraging news filtered through to us about Allied bombing raids over Germany which apparently caused huge losses to the German war machine. Allied bombers were attacking the Reich day and night. The air raids targeted industrial cities. The damage was enormous and German morale was shaken. For the first time in the war the German civilian population got a taste of what we had gone through during the bombardment of Siedlce.

The course of the war seemed to be turning more and more against Hitler's Germany. The news that Germany was losing lifted some of the clouds of despair that hung over us and brought a small wave of optimism into the ghetto.

Unfortunately, as the tide of the battle began to turn along the eastern front and the Germans retreated before the victorious Russian armies, they were more determined than ever to exterminate the remaining Jews.

We hoped that the Allied forces would come to our rescue, destroy the death camps and put an end to our hellish life. The Americans and the British were fully aware of the German terror and atrocities inflicted on us. However, it seemed to us that the so-called "civilized" world was oblivious to our struggle. Our cry for help went unheard.

CHAPTER 26

LOST OPPORTUNITY

The spring of 1943 brought another disappointment. We were ordered by the Jewish police to vacate our quarters next to theirs. They helped us find a room, which we had to share with a woman and child. It was in a dilapidated one-story corner house at the other end of the ghetto. On two sides of the house was the boundary fence.

Our situation was deteriorating in other ways. There was no more work cutting logs so Chaim was staying home and could not bring any more flour from the peasants. We were deprived of the earnings from baking rolls and lost the hiding place made by the young Slovakian men. Being hungry, the days were rare when we had a potato or a piece of bread. Pearl and Rifka were again forced to risk smuggling bread and milk into the ghetto so we would have something to eat.

One day a family of three who had been forced to leave a nearby village were placed with a neighbour who had only enough space for two. The husband, Victor, was assigned to share our room at night.

Our lives were so unpredictable that at times I went into deep despair. When I was overwhelmed with desperation I went to the Libermans or to the Gurmantls to get some encouragement.

In Sokole, Chaim and I had learned that railway cars loaded with logs went to mine sites faraway. Mr. Malczyk assumed that they went to the Slovakian border. We began to consider fleeing and speculated on the route those trains might follow. It would be a

perilous journey to an unknown destination, but by almost any measure we thought we had a good idea. We figured that while the train passed near the border of Slovakia we would jump off and make an attempt to get to Hungary, where we hoped the situation of the Jews would be less critical.

Chaim smuggled himself out of the ghetto and detoured through the fields to ask Mr. Malczyk if he would prepare a hideout among the logs. He agreed and told my brother to come back the following Thursday afternoon.

On Thursday Chaim returned to make sure that the freight car was ready. But the Gestapo had made a surprise visit to check the loaded freight cars. They discovered the empty space among the logs and jokingly remarked that they hoped it was not intended for hiding Jews. Mr. Malczyk's encounter with the Gestapo ruined our attempt to escape. Our lingering hopes were dashed.

But he promised to keep in touch with us. He was willing to prepare another railway car for our escape.

In April 1943 news reached us about the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. Resistance began in January that year and was, as far as we knew, the first act of collective Jewish armed struggle against the Germans in Poland. The inhabitants were determined not to give in easily. Realizing that deportation was a death sentence, a number of courageous Jews started a revolt. It was a heroic struggle. What happened in the ghetto exceeded all expectations. It was the first time that Hitler's men were opposed by Jewish armed resistance. Not unexpectedly, the Polish public was unsympathetic to the Jews and indifferent to their fate.

CHAPTER 27

THE FIFTH DEPORTATION

The threat of deportation hung over our heads. There was no way of guessing when the next expulsion would take place. Attempting to identify signs of approaching danger became part of our daily lives. We learned to identify various danger signals, whether it was a certain indefinable tension in the air or an unusual period of inactivity. The last day of April 1943 was particularly harrowing. A rumour circulated that a Gestapo agent had hastily picked up his girlfriend's finished and unfinished dresses from a Jewish dressmaker. Apparently he had intimated that there would soon be a deportation. A neighbour had also heard that a nearby shoemaker had an unscheduled visit from members of the Gestapo. Eight days ahead of schedule they came to get their unfinished boots. As they departed they related to the shoemaker that they would no longer be coming because the Jews were going to be deported.

Naturally, these scattered events raised the level of disorientation and turmoil among us. Suspense enveloped the ghetto like a shroud. Aware that the region around Miedzyrzec was already Judenrein, we perceived that we were destined to be liquidated to the last person; it was only a matter of time. From past experiences we also knew that in their sadistic fashion the Germans scheduled their villainous acts against us on the Jewish holidays. Since the next day was the first day of Passover, a deportation seemed imminent. All it took was one person to reflect aloud on the possibility before the rumours spread like wildfire among the survivors. Some even said

the Gestapo had already arrived.

It was a terrifying day, and Rifka became hysterical. Trying to hide our own anxiety in the process, Pearl and I had to calm her down. That evening, before going to bed, we prepared our clothing so we could dress quickly in the dark in case of a disturbance. Fear kept prodding us awake, but the night passed quietly. We were puzzled. The next day also came and went without incident and our anxiety ebbed. But that night our roommate Victor returned with depressing news, "I heard from some Judenrat members that the situation has deteriorated," he told us.

After midnight, we heard heavy steps reverberating on the other side of the fence behind our quarters. It was obvious that the ghetto was being surrounded by Germans. Impulsively, we dressed quickly in the darkness, ready to flee throughout the night. Single shots reverberated from time to time. Taking advantage of the dawning day, Victor decided to rejoin his wife and child at a neighbour's, but the moment he stepped out of the house, a bullet struck him in the left elbow. He dove back in. As best we could, we stopped the bleeding, bandaged his elbow and put his arm in a sling.

Our house backed directly onto the ghetto fence and was in an extremely dangerous and exposed position. Our muddled brains tried to formulate a plan, but there was nothing we could think of but to brace ourselves for the worst. In the light of day we could see that the ghetto was indeed surrounded by German guards. They were stationed every few feet along the barbed-wire fence. Our every move was being watched.

However, as the day progressed, the Jewish police and people began to move in the streets. Victor left to rejoin his wife and child. Our other roommate, Sonia and her child, were picked up by her boyfriend, presumably to go into hiding.

A not unexpected announcement by the Jewish police informed the ghetto inhabitants that the Germans had ordered everyone to appear at the Umschlagplatz. Now the nightmare began again in earnest. All our efforts to flee the German trap seemed as if they had been futile. Almost blinded by panic, we instinctively ran up the ladder to the attic. But the loft was too exposed. We knew from

previous deportations that those who had not found a hiding place were quickly nabbed.

Alternating between hope and despair, we finally decided to retreat in the opposite direction by going deeper into the ghetto. This, we hoped, would be the key to our escape. In front of our quarters was a narrow street. To our right was a wider street. It bordered the ghetto fence and not far away was the gate through which we were supposed to go to the Umschlagplatz. Near the gate the street swarmed with Germans. The Jewish police had been ordered to seize anyone who tried to wander off. Even in crossing the street we would be extremely vulnerable. Praying for good luck, the four of us looked both ways along the street and at a moment when no one was looking we dashed across the narrow street and dived into a deserted house a few doors down. Losing no time we moved quickly to the back of the house, opened a window and climbed out. We crossed the street behind that house and entered a house a few doors down, so as to put as much distance as we could between ourselves and the Umschlagplatz. We went in the door and again climbed through a window in the rear to another street and another house. Thus we moved diagonally deeper into the ghetto. In one dilapidated house we bumped into a ninety-year-old woman. She began to cry bitterly, bemoaning her fate. We forgot our own plight for a while and wept with her. What a pity that at that blessed age she would not be granted a natural death, but was to be murdered by barbarians. Sorrowful, but unable to help her, we moved on.

In the next house a gruesome sight awaited us. The doors were ajar, mirrors smashed, dressers and drawers open. The walls were spattered with fragments of brain and other body parts. On the floor, among silk underwear, lay a crushed human skull. In another room was the body of a woman, legs and arms severed, clothing soaked in blood. Hebrew and Jewish books about the civilisation of the Jews in Poland, spanning a thousand years, were spattered with blood. We were racked by uncontrollable chills, but we kept moving.

For the time being, we had avoided the Germans and forged our way deeper into the ghetto. We continued in this fashion, going in through the door of each house and jumping through the window

at the rear to the next street. As we fled I recalled the hideout that had been constructed by the Slovakian Jews for a baker's family. We had never visited that part of the ghetto before. It was called Szmulewizna. We had no idea which house it was.

Standing at the entrance of a house that looked like all the others we had passed, I was for some inexplicable reason drawn to the left wall. I brought it to the attention of my two sisters and brother, but they did not notice anything unusual. However, there was no doubt in my mind that behind that wall was the hideout described to us by the Slovakian Jews. Without hesitation, I knocked on the wall and called out in Yiddish, "Can you open ?"

A small door, its presence well camouflaged, opened, and we were let inside. In their haste to close the door behind us, the occupants caught Rifka's small finger between the door and the frame. We had no bandages to stop the gush of blood, so we had to ignore it.

Our anxiety abated, but we were not fooling ourselves. We had perhaps bought ourselves a temporary reprieve. There was no guarantee that this hiding place would remain undiscovered. If the Germans realized that people were defying their orders, they would search for more victims. Certainly, this would be the case, if, as we had heard,they were now planning to make Miedzyrzec "Judenrein."

In the late afternoon we heard voices and footsteps entering and leaving the house. The sound of boots and spoken German led us to believe that it was the German police. Later, spoken Polish and the heavy thud of boots suggested that the Polish police were also paying a visit. When we heard a woman speaking Polish with her children, we assumed they had come to loot the abandoned houses. So it went all day long; every noise made us quake.

During the night we left our refuge for a while, stepping out to the yard to breathe fresh air and to stretch our limbs. There we met other people from a hideout in the attic of the same house. Some of them came to our hiding place because they considered it safer. The night went by quietly. Few of the people in the hiding place had any family members left. Brothers were without sisters, sisters without brothers, wives without husbands, husbands without wives and little

children without mothers and fathers. Each step on the road to our deaths had been carefully planned by the Germans. The devil himself could not have devised a better plan.

Fewer people came forward to fill the trains than the German authorities were expecting. As they realized that people were not complying with their orders, they pretended ignorance at first. However, with the first transport gone, they started to hunt for those in hiding. First the Jewish police were ordered to ferret us out.

Dissatisfied with the effectiveness of the Jewish police, the Germans brought in 'Einsatzkommandos' or so-called 'Einsatzgruppen' (specially trained German reserve troops, mobile killing units), to do house-to-house searches. Nazi Germany had created, under the auspices of the SS, a special task force, whose primary purpose ultimately became the killing of Jews in the German-occupied territories.

In the morning of May 4, 1943, the action became more intense. We heard the voices and heavy footsteps of approaching Germans. They stormed through the house, smashing objects as they passed. As we lay there in the stillness of the hiding place, we listened to them demolishing walls, floors and ceilings, looking for hidden Jews. The continous banging was horrible to hear in the darkness of our refuge. It grew louder and the steps came steadily closer. Then, at last, it stopped. We heard them leaving the house. They must have returned to the entrance of the house and stopped in front of the wall, because we heard one of them remark that the wall looked suspicious.

For a moment there was an eerie silence. I began to sweat. I was afraid even to think. I heard my own heartbeat and the pulsing of blood in my veins. The crunch came soon. Quickly, the Germans broke down the wall with sharp picks. I waited for the inevitable. The best we could expect would be deportation to the Treblinka gas chambers. We prayed for a miracle.

Prodding, pushing and cursing, they roared at us with venomous hatred, "Raus!" ("Out!") I felt a sudden sharp pain in my head as a German jabbed me with his rifle butt. Blood streamed down onto the white scarf I wore over my shoulders. I ignored the pain

and the blood. This was now of little significance.

As we entered the yard, we found that we had company. Another Einsatzgruppe had found the attic hiding place. They marched us all to Szmulewizna Square. The hideouts had given people only a short reprieve. We who had fled to them, living like animals huddling together in cellars and attics, in stench, fear and hunger, were now being rounded up.

Assisted by Ukrainians or members of a so-called "Ostlegion", the Einsatzkommandos uncovered a large number of hiding places. Our number swelled to a few hundred.

Men, women and children, shivering in the warm weather, were standing in wrinkled clothes, faces smeared with dirt and wet with sweat. Hungry, thirsty, ill, and with broken spirits, we looked a sorry lot.

A rumour circulated that we would be shot, as it was not worthwhile to transport a few hundred people to the death camp. It took an extraordinary effort to fight off the wave of distress that swept over us. Anguish and anxiety were slowly replaced by indifference. We seemed to have no choice but boldly to look death in the face and wait for our execution.

Across from where we sat was an old house with holes where there once were windows. Through the holes we could clearly see submachine guns aimed at us. Realistically, we simply could not avoid death. Life had become too hard to bear anyway. I had mastered the fear of death and was prepared to die. I only wished that it would be over quickly. There was no more escape from the German trap. Nevertheless, we kept an eye on the movements of the Germans and wondered whether they would shoot us directly or from the broken-down house.

I turned to Rifka beside me. "We have to be ready to die," I told her. "But as long as our eyes are open, let us keep hoping: miracles can happen."

I stressed that if one of us were to survive and be deported, he or she should try to jump from the train. Should we be imprisoned, we should try to escape. We should keep on fighting to the last moment. Hoping to boost her courage, I explained, "You are young.

You should not give up. You have the ability to overcome suffering and to escape this fate."

As we sat there, the infamous Schlaeger yelled that we would have to relinquish money, gold, silver and jewellery. The half-moon gold earrings which I had worn from the age of three were soon in the hands of the Germans.

As the Einsatzkommandos continued demolishing suspected hiding places our group grew larger. Among the new arrivals I recognized a young man in his twenties, an artist by the name of Czarnobroda. He was limping.

The Schlaeger greeted him with much excitement,

"I was delighted with your work: you rendered us a great service," were his words. "Thank you very much."

By the way the Schlaeger greeted him, we were convinced that he would be freed. Instead, the Schlaeger took out his gun. We heard a shot pierce the air and a loud scream.The young man fell to the ground, dead.

The strategy of demolishing buildings to find Jews worked well; more and more people were rounded up. When Szmulewizna Square was filled up, they forced us through the narrow streets of old Miedzyrzec, solidly flanked on both sides by German guards. We walked like mourners at our own funeral.

Crowds of Poles were standing near the ghetto gate to catch a glimpse of our misery as we passed by. They were clapping, joking, smiling, enjoying our suffering and delighted to see us marching to our deaths.

Memories of the prewar years came to mind. Marshall Josef Pilsudski dominated political life in Poland after the First World War. He was liberal and as long as he lived he opposed the spread of anti-Semitism. With the death of that Polish military hero in 1935, the impact of political and economic crises and the influence of Nazi Germany, anti-Semitism once more became widespread.

The significance of the Jewish contribution to Polish life was not appreciated by the Poles. On the contrary, the Polish Catholic church preached hatred against Jews. The result was a climate of hostility against Jews and a feeling of anti-Jewish sentiment. Concurrent with

the rise of the Polish National Democratic Party, the "Endecja", prejudice and discrimination spread. They championed the boycott of Jewish businesses, encouraged their supporters to chase Gentile customers out of Jewish stores and posted anti-Jewish slogans in the streets. Displays of merchandise in the markets were frequently thrown to the ground and trampled.

Even before the outbreak of the war, anti-Semitism was rampant in Poland. There were violent incidents in the streets and even organized outbreaks of rioting where Jews were beaten. In universities and colleges Jewish students and professors had to put up with anti-Jewish hostility on a daily basis. Attempts were made to limit the number of Jewish students. Jews were forced to sit on the back benches in the lecture halls.

Despite all this, Jewish life went on, but the Polish defeat and the German occupation sealed the fate of Jewish communities. Most Poles approved and volunteered to assist the German operations against Jews. On this journey to certain death, we could see that the Poles did not harbour any human compassion for us.

We stopped on Brzeska Street. Ordered to sit on the ground, we squatted six in a row. All told, a few thousand of us had been herded together in mournful silence. German guards patrolled with automatic rifles. There was not the slightest chance that resistance would help.

Survival seemed impossibly remote. A few of the foolhardy young kept up a glimmer of hope: perhaps they could have a chance to jump from the train.

A part of me revolted. How could I so easily surrender and not put up any resistance? I got up, not knowing what else I could do, but people pulled me down by my dress. After a while, I got up again, but Pearl warned that I would be shot. Finally, she pulled me down.

Eventually, lieutenant Seifert an officer of the German police arrived on the scene with his assistant. Politely, he announced that anybody who could identify hideouts of people or caches of valuable merchandise such as textiles or leather, should come forward. He or she would be sent to work in the ghetto. Near me a woman called out, claiming she could not save herself by betraying others, as traitors had

no chance of surviving. Admiring her remark, the German officer motioned for her to rise and join the group destined for work. Individuals came forward with various revelations and were accordingly taken to the same group.

Chaim turned to me, "Time is running out." He said that he had decided to tell the Germans that he knew the whereabouts of some leather. Without waiting for my answer he approached the German police officer and told him he knew about hidden leather. He was released to the group destined for work.

Nervously, I watched and reasoned with myself. Even if my brother was lucky enough to save himself now, he would not have sufficient tenacity on his own to continue the struggle to survive. He needed our help. Paying no attention to the dangerous consequences --the place was swarming with police -- I made a desperate move. I stood up and crossed to the small group destined for work. The few yards seemed like miles as I zeroed in on Chaim. Finally, I sat down beside him. At that point I did not fully grasp the risk involved in what I had done. Later, when I thought about it, I could not understand what made me do it. Trying to ignore my throbbing heart, I waved to my sister Pearl to join us. Reluctantly, she complied. She made it across without incident. I wasted no time in signalling Rifka to follow. She tried twice, but the Germans yelled at her and chased her back. On the third attempt she managed to reach us.

What was unthinkable moments before, suddenly, seemed possible. In our group were forty-two people. It was not long before they ordered us to get up and move forward. Before we had fully absorbed our unexpected luck, our short-lived optimism was shattered when the infamous Schlaeger glanced at Rifka. He pulled her away from us, exploding that she was too young and weak for work. Quickly, we were herded away. In seconds, right in front of our horrified eyes, Rifka was lost to us. With my last glance backwards I saw her weeping, her eyes riveted on us. Her tortured face, twisted with pain, left an indelible impression on me. I wanted to cry out in protest. Choking with tears at the thought of the imminent separation, I was awash with guilt. I felt as if my heart would explode. My mind went blank, refusing to function.

A few days earlier Rifka had sensed danger and been unable to keep down any food. Sick and undernourished, the miseries affected her more because she was still very young. My poor beloved Rifka had not had the benefit of being raised by a loving mother. When our mother died she was only two and a half years old. Naturally, she could not even remember our mother. Raising Rifka was a responsibility I had to assume. I did my best, but I could not replace a doting mother who would shower her with attention. My sister craved a substitute. By refusing to eat, perhaps she hoped that we would focus more attention on her. She had never been a good eater. When she was little I used to buy special pastry to feed her. Although her eating habits improved with age, she remained delicate. When she was old enough, we sent her to a summer camp. Now I pictured her as she was when she returned, tanned, with her plump cheeks having taken on a healthy, rosy glow. I remembered bursting with pride, as if she were my own child.

Left with the pain of her big tearful eyes begging me not to leave her behind, I trudged on, my heart hollow and empty. I found myself wrestling with my conscience. How could I have allowed my sister to be taken away to a certain death while I continued living? One thing was clear: I had to get my Rifka out of there. I tried to reassure myself that our separation was just temporary, that as soon as the guard escorting us left, I would retrieve my sister. But even as I reassured myself, I knew it was unrealistic.

So overwhelmed was I by my wrenching departure from Rifka, that I did not even realize that we were already in the marketplace near Mr.Klarberg's drugstore. Mr.Klarberg, in his fifties, was the president of the Judenrat in Miedzyrzec. Unlike the rest of the Jews, he had special permission to keep his drugstore and a residence outside the ghetto.

We stopped. The area was teeming with SS-men and both Polish and Jewish police. Our escort, a Jewish policeman, told us that only a short time ago Mr.Klarberg had been informed that his services were no longer needed; he was thanked and shot. It was ironic that Jews who thought that they might escape the fate of their brethren by serving the Germans, learned only too late that it was not to be.

We moved on, arriving at the jail of the Polish police, we were herded into a large, empty cell. As the door slammed behind us we had no idea what the Germans had in store for us. Would they really let us live? Were we to be shielded from deportation? And if so, for how long? We had no answers. Just questions.

In the past three or four days we had not even thought about food. Now that the terror abated somewhat, we became conscious of our hunger. Some members of our group asked the Polish guard to buy them bread.

I was still plagued by the vision of my sobbing sister. Guilt and frustration engulfed me. I tried to keep my head above the waves of sadness with the consoling thought that I could yet save her once I left the jail. How I would do this or how I would even get out of the cell, I had no idea. Who could I call on for help? Everyone I knew had either been among the deported, was trying to save himself, was in hiding, or was no longer alive.

I paced the large cell trying to come up with ideas, racking my brain for solutions to a seemingly hopeless dilemma. My head was spinning, my mind nagging me with the realization that time was running out, that something had to be done quickly. But I was locked up and helpless.

My anxiety turned into depression. My little remaining energy and hope became mired in despair and bitterness, and finally exhaustion. I felt totally incapable of assessing the situation. As the day came to an end, I lay on the gray wooden floor, seeing nothing except utter and desolate darkness. A few hours must have passed when I was awakened by noise at the heavy door of the jail. A Polish policeman brought in a man in his thirties with a crushed hand. It was a mass of flesh, blood and small pieces of bone. He looked around and then sat down on the floor. He moaned from time to time. Pearl and I sat down near him and asked what had happened. He claimed that he had jumped from the train and his hand had fallen under the wheels. Other prisoners approached and plied him with questions. He mentioned that this time the families of the Jewish police were treated just like other Jews and crammed into the boxcars like herring in a barrel. No special consideration was given to the vital

workers with permits from the German enterprises who had been exempted from the last deportation. All the people who had gathered on Brzeska Street were dragged to the train. It was heading towards Majdanek, the infamous death camp.

My thoughts wandered back to Rifka. I wanted to find solace in the fact that the train was going to Majdanek and not to Treblinka. In Treblinka the people were immediately taken to the gas chambers. In Majdanek they were temporarily used as slaves and then murdered. I fantasized that she might manage to survive. I knew she had been listening very carefully when I urged her not to give up.

The man with the crushed hand described the horrible conditions of the suffering people in the boxcars. He and a few others managed to remove some boards from the small window and squeeze through. After landing with a hand on the rail he lay there for quite a while unable to rise. He heard the clatter of the train moving further and further away. Disoriented by the pain, he finally got up. He stood a long time thinking about where to go and decided to walk towards Miedzyrzec. Asking some Poles for help, they turned him over to the Blues, the Polish police, who brought him to the jail. He moaned the whole night. It was heart-rending to see the man in agony without being able to help him.

Fear about Rifka's fate fell upon me again and I could not sleep. After midnight the prison door opened and the Schlaeger threw seventeen teenagers into our cell. Looking at the appearance of these helpless creatures, robbed of human dignity, one could just imagine the circumstances they had endured in a bunker. Their shirts hung in tatters. They were all filthy, perspiring and thirsty. A pail of water was brought in for them. They fell upon it like animals. A fight ensued and the pail overturned. It took many more pails of water till these youngsters satisfied their thirst. We tried many times to initiate a conversation with them, but they remained motionless, their spirit clearly gone. Although my situation was no better than theirs, I felt pity for them -- with some irritation.

Later on we got another companion, a young man in his twenties. His name was Brukarz. He was a nephew of the chief of the Jewish police who had been shot with his forty men by the Gestapo in the fall

of 1942. The young Brukarz, a student before the war, had become a Jewish policeman. That night he had tried to escape by train from Miedzyrzec using forged documents. He did not expect to encounter the Schlaeger, who recognized him and brought him to our cell.

The following morning a Polish policeman came and announced that the Schlaeger had ordered all of us to assemble in the yard. The name Schlaeger instilled panic. We prayed. In other circumstances, we would have run as far away as possible from that evil creature. This time we had no choice. We had to face him.

The Schlaeger stood a few yards from us and gave us orders to get in line. As I looked at this hideous monster my heart was filled with horror and disgust. The very sight of him made us tremble. We were confronted with death. We believed this was our last hour. He ordered the man with the crushed hand to come forward. He took out his gun and shot him. The victim fell to the ground. A deadly silence hung over the place.

After a while he ordered the teenagers who were herded into our cell the previous night and the young Brukarz to step out of the line and move to the front. He led them away. The fate of our group of forty-two was apparently not yet decided and we were ordered back to the cell. We were all bewildered and very agitated. We expected a visit from the Schlaeger at any time. Worn out, tense, tormented by questions, I lay on the floor. The next day we learned from the Polish police that the Schlaeger had taken the teenagers and Brukarz to the cemetery and shot them with dum-dum bullets.



"Undressing barracks" in Miedzyrzec.
German police forces Jews to strip in search of valuables.



Ghetto Miedzyrzec.
(Courtesy of the Archives of the Historical Institute in Warsaw.)





Miedzyrzec, May 1943.
The fifth deportation of Jews from Miedzyrzec to Majdanek
(Courtesy of the Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw).

CHAPTER 28

THE PLUNDER

A few days later the Germans took a few people from our group out to work. After several days Pearl and I were escorted by a German guard to the ghetto. The streets were deserted, except for the Jewish police who were loading corpses on hand carts to be moved to the cemetery. The cobblestones were stained with blood. The guard brought us to a house and ordered us to clear it of all contents, warning us that anyone found in the streets of the ghetto without a German guard or a Jewish policeman would be shot. During the night we slept in that house. The guards did not give us food and we ate what we could find in the house. Broken and torn objects littered the floor. Pictures were still hanging on some walls. One was a family picture of the parents with their five children, three boys and two girls. It reminded me of better times. I wondered if any of them were still alive. I stared at it and I had the feeling that the people were smiling at me.

Suddenly, I remembered my father waving to me when he left for Warsaw on September 6, 1939. I thought of the whole family on my father's side, including his sister Gitel, who wanted so much to help us to establish a business in Warsaw, her husband Avrom and their little daughter. I saw as well before me my Uncle Samuel and his four girls, Hana, Gitel, Itka and Basha, and my aunt Fajga with her two children. I recalled my mother's sister, Hana, with her husband and their five children.

And then I saw other members of my family, the brothers and

sisters of my mother and their families. I started to wonder whether any of them was still alive. My friends Ella, Itka and Rachel and their parents appeared before my eyes. What happened to all of them? Were they taken to the gas chambers? I hesitated to think so, but then I remembered the news from the Poles about "Judenrein."

I began to feel an unspeakable grief, but I knew we had to retain sufficient moral strength to keep going on. Those Germans intended to destroy us all. My thoughts were aimed at surviving. I think it was at this time that it became clear to me that I wanted to be a living witness to the German atrocities.

We packed clothing, dishes, furniture and other items for which the owners had worked all their lives and loaded them onto a horse drawn cart brought by the Jewish police to take them to the synagogue on Szkolna Street, which the Germans had transformed into a warehouse. As we worked we were often subjected to inspections by the Germans. When one house was cleared we were taken to another.

Meanwhile, Chaim was still in jail. They were pressuring him to disclose the whereabouts of the hidden cache of leather that he had earlier promised to reveal. I complained to a red-haired German soldier who came in to check on our work. He took us to the cell so that we could persuade our brother to reveal the concealed leather. We did not achieve very much because our brother did not know of any hidden leather. We approached the Jewish police for help. They said that they did not have much influence, but promised to try. Imprisoned in the house, we were left with one solution to persuade the red-haired German.

As he came in at the end of the day, I begged and pleaded with him, pausing frequently to search for words to play on his feelings. I choked with emotion. However, he soon had enough of me and left in haste. I was scared that I had offended him. For the rest of the evening I was even more miserable than before. But the following day we rejoiced when he brought Chaim to us. To say that we were ecstatic is an understatement.

Chaim was also forced to empty houses. When the allotted number of houses was finished, we went to work in the synagogue which

was overflowing with the possessions of the departed. It was a sorrowful sight. It reminded us of a once-living world of people who worked by the sweat of their brows to make a living for their families, a world filled with laughter, tears and worries. But this world was now extinguished, its inhabitants tortured and sent to a cruel death. When I touched a blouse or a dress, I sometimes became emotional. We were pursued with images of suffering people. I would pull out a child's blue dress with a pretty white lace collar and I could see a chubby little three-year-old dancing merrily in it on her way to the synagogue with her father or perhaps donning it with sleepy brown eyes on the morning of the circumcision of her new baby brother. I imagined her curly brown hair, her large curious eyes, her mischievous smile. What could she have known of this world? Where was she now? Who knew if she was still alive and even if she was, who would care for her now with her parents perhaps gone to the gas chambers, perhaps to a work camp, perhaps simply mowed down by the cold-blooded Germans?

There were women's shirts, dresses, even girdles. Each article evoked an image of life, of willingness to endure hard work to make their days on earth as comfortable as possible. Boys' suits slipped through my hands, each one able, no doubt, to tell a tragic tale about its master. Who knows how old they would have been? I guessed that the owners were perhaps nine or ten, barely able to discern good from bad, just a couple of years away from being inducted into manhood. Now, they would never reach that milestone.

Even women's stockings had been collected. On the other side of the synagogue children's shoes were lined up heel to heel in order of size. The smallest could not have fitted a child older than one. The sizes, the shapes were as varied as the people that had worn them. Some were scuffed, some badly worn. Some were brand new, perhaps waiting for the next religious holiday. They would never know their owners again.

Suddenly, I came across Rifka's green dress! It was made by a dressmaker shortly after our possessions had gone up in flames in the bombing of Siedlce. I saw the big tearful eyes and her contorted face begging me not to leave her behind when the Germans dragged

her from us. My pain got more intense as I choked with tears. A short time later I remembered that when we ran from our shelter near the fence to penetrate deeper into the ghetto we left our few pieces of clothing behind. Obviously the group which cleared that house sent our things to the former synagogue. Rifka's green dress passing through my hands re-opened the wound of losing her.

The piles of clothing and shoes had to be sorted into first, second and third categories. Even the clothing from the dead lying in the streets was taken off and brought in to be cleaned of blood and washed. There were also all kinds of furniture and household articles. The last remnants of this formerly thriving community were leaving for Germany. Soon there would be no reminder of the world which existed just a short time ago.

The Germans had taken all that belonged to us and they were determined to take our naked lives too. It was just luck that we had lived through the tragedies. Constantly on the threshold of death, we were among the last few hundred survivors in Miedzyrzec, where Jews from seventy cities and towns had been assembled and sent to their annihilation. So far we had survived the bloodiest tragedy to befall Jewry.

We were confined to the synagogue. At night we often woke up, tormented by fear and looking out to see whether the building was surrounded. The Germans came every day to check on the work. They loaded large trucks with the sorted items and drove away. It was clear that as soon as the last Jewish possessions had been taken from Miedzyrzec, the Germans would finish us off. They could not make us believe that we would be exempted from the death sentence they had imposed on all Jews. We knew we were deluding ourselves if we thought that we would not be deported. We had been forced to work, but we had not been supplied with food. Hunger forced the synagogue workers to ignore restrictions. Despite the potential risk, the workers took items from the synagogue to the ghetto fence, a few meters away, to display the item and to trade it for food.

When rumours spread that there were bargains, crowds of Polish women from the city and peasants from the nearby villages came running to look. For a piece of cheese, bread or eggs, they could

get a coat, a dress, shoes, or other items. Bargaining went on just like in a market. The Poles had the advantage and they knew it. When the deal was made the item was delivered with one hand over the fence and with the other the produce was picked up. If it was a dress, the woman might hold it up to her body to see how she looked in it. Then she would wait for another bargain to come along. This continued as long as the site looked safe. It was an act of defiance against our oppressors.

After several days we were permitted to move around outside. The ghetto now consisted merely of a few streets. People who were still hiding crawled out and mingled with our group. We survivors wandered around like shadows. We left the synagogue and shared a shelter with a couple and their daughter. The odds were overwhelming against anyone who attempted to escape. Nevertheless, in the absence of any other alternative, a number of survivors did try. There was talk that very few had survived the fifth deportation by jumping from the trains.

During that deportation Golda Gurmantl's parents suggested that Golda and her brother Luza should hide in another place that appeared to be safer. However, that hiding place was discovered by the Germans. Luza was immediately shot. His crime: hiding while he had a valid working permit. Fatally wounded, he fell into the arms of his sister and died.

Luza was one of our best friends. I liked his approach to life and his witty comments. Despite the prevailing pessimism he was often full of sparkling humor. His occasional nervousness was usually masked by a comic demeanor. He used to predict, "After the war wine will be flowing in the streets, but I will not survive to see it."

Golda was herded with the others from the hideout onto the cattle train for Treblinka. She was one of the daring few who jumped. She was injured, but she managed to hobble back toward Miedzyrzec. However, en route, Poles betrayed her to the Germans. She was ushered into the presence of the chief of the German police in Miedzyrzec, who ordered her back for deportation. But this time she was lucky and avoided being deported.

From Warsaw new rumours reached us even in our total iso-

lation, of the heroic ghetto fighters' last resistance. The Poles who conveyed the news could not believe that Jews had put up such a fight.

Our minds were occupied with all kinds of schemes for avoiding the gas chambers. My temptation to escape in a railway car loaded with logs was still alive. I urged Pearl and Chaim to reach a decision. It was our last chance.

My brother went to see Mr. Malczyk. He returned depressed. Mr. Malczyk expected another inspection by the Germans. A few days later Chaim went back. We were nervous lest he should be apprehended outside the ghetto. When he finally returned, once again he told us that Mr. Malczyk could not respond to our plea.

CHAPTER 29

THE ESCAPE

Friday, May 13, 1943, Chaim went to see Mr.Malczyk once again. I had not been able to sleep that night and just stared out the window into the darkness, afraid of a deportation. Chaim's delay in returning did not help matters. Finally he appeared and a light smile danced on his usually serious face. We strained with impatience before his words poured out with a triumphant ring. At last, some good news. A railway freight car had been readied for us and the train would be leaving Sunday at daybreak.

A landscape that had seemed totally bleak was suddenly sprouting some greenery. The one dark cloud was that Rifka could not share in our escape. As our excitement subsided, we realized sheepishly that we did not even know where we were going. Doubts welled up within us whether the train would take us in the right direction. But we decided to forge ahead anyway with nothing to go on, but our instincts for survival. We did not share our escape plan with anyone and began our preparations. We realized that we did not even have a change of clothing; still wearing the same clothes we had worn when we fled the fifth deportation. Although we had been able to wash our clothes, there was no assurance that we could continue to do so; we needed some extra things. Our work at the synagogue provided us with the opportunity. Pearl held up a few articles. They had obviously belonged to deported people.

"I wonder who owned these things? Where are they now?" Pearl asked.

"It's a tragedy they can not claim what is rightfully theirs," I said, "Let's hope they're still alive and manage to find replacements."

We took one change of clothing each. To celebrate our departure we decided that our Friday night meal should be as good as we could manage. We took a few items from the synagogue and exchanged them at the fence for a chicken. We feasted on chicken soup and chicken; we hadn't had such a meal for a long, long time. None of us slept. A deportation could take place any time and we were not willing to take the chance.

As if to mock us, Saturday was a beautiful late spring day. We went for a last stroll through the few remaining streets of the ghetto.We did not know what had happened to our friends, the Gurmantls and the others, as the area where they lived at the time was outside the current boundaries of the ghetto. En route, we met three sisters and the husband of one of them. From our excitement they gathered that we had found a way to escape. Not surprisingly, they asked us whether they could come along. We debated amongst ourselves and decided that they were sincere and sympathetic, so we invited them to accompanying us. We told them to prepare to leave that night. When we mentioned that they needed food, and we had no money to buy any, they offered us some.

Saturday evening, we fashioned and packed small cloth bags and attached wooden handles. As the night deepened I felt a surge of sadness. I wondered whether I would ever see my Rifka again. Tears welled up as I remembered the recent past, but there was no choice; we had to move on.

I cast a final glance on the things we left behind and bid farewell to the family in whose house we had slept the last few nights. We walked slowly and calmly. The last thing we wanted was to attract attention. We met our new acquaintances at the prearranged spot. One by one we crawled through one of the holes in the ghetto fence.

It was a bright night, as if to complement the magnificent day. There was no cloud cover and the light of the moon and stars let us observe the surroundings. Part way across we spotted shadows in the distance. We just stood there paralyzed. It could only be the infamous Schlaeger with his vicious dog. Our hearts beat faster, but

our feet were immobilized with fear. There was no point in trying to run or hide. Terrified and trembling, we decided to move closer. Our surprise was great when we discovered people smuggling food into the ghetto. Sighing with relief, we continued; it was still far to the railway tracks.

Just as we reached them, a passenger train entered the station. We dropped to the ground. The station lights switched on and the lights from the train itself made the situation even more risky. Roving German policemen and railway workers would have had an easy time spotting a group of seven people. When the train left and we were as sure as we could be that there was no one around, we crossed the tracks and continued a short distance farther till we came to a tall pile of logs. Chaim knew the place well and he directed us to a hideout. He warned us to be careful and quiet as there was a watchman around who would not hesitate to give us up to the Germans. While we waited, he made his way over to the other side of the timber yard where Mr. Malczyk lived, to pick up some bread, water and candies.

Nearby we could see a roofless freight wagon loaded with logs. When Chaim returned, we climbed one by one over the open top into the space among the logs. The metal walls of the railway car made noise as we climbed in. Echoes reverberated through the silent night like ripples in a quiet stream and we shivered with fear, praying that no one heard it.

After we settled into the wagon the pressure lessened, but our apprehension persisted. We assumed the worst was over. We sat tight together on the floor and remained motionless. I closed my eyes and drifted off.

As the sun slowly made its way over the horizon in the morning, we could see that a mist had settled over everything. Our wagon was hitched to the train. It set off with the locomotive hissing and straining, gradually picking up speed. To say that our emotions were high would not give an adequate picture; we felt like prisoners freshly released from jail, like travellers arriving at a destination after a long journey, like dying people who had been cured. Yet our joy was subdued. Not only were we afraid of being discovered, but we did

not even know where we were heading.

As we sped along, memories from my childhood began to flood my mind. My father was the eldest child in his family. He had two sisters and two brothers. When the sisters and one brother reached adulthood, they moved to Warsaw. The younger brother, Hirsh, stayed with my grandparents. They lived on Losicka Street, Mordy's main street.

To get to my grandmother's house you had to walk across a big lot. At one time there was a plan to put up a building there. Behind the house was a large yard. There was an outdoor toilet, a doghouse and a barn. In the summer the outhouse was emptied quite often by a farmer who lived in one of the surrounding villages. Naturally, this open latrine attracted swarms of flies, especially on hot days.

My grandparents had a very active dog of medium size, white with black spots. He was kept chained to the doghouse so he would not bother strangers. We called him Nerek.

The big one-story barn was at the back of the yard. In one part were horses and in the other part grain and vegetables were stored. The barn formed a wall from one end of the property to the other, except for a few feet where we could slip through to the meadow which stretched to the horizon. The green grass and the yellow flowers glowed brilliantly on sunny days. Strings of peas and poppies grew in the meadow. When I was a child I used to pick the peas and eat them raw. They were very tasty. I also picked the flowers and made small wreaths.

My uncle Hirsh worked with my grandfather. When my grandfather passed away, although Hirsh was not even nineteen, he carried on himself; he bought grain from the farmers and sold it to the millers. He had connections with all the farmers around Mordy, was honest and widely respected. He was quite successful in whatever he undertook.

One day when my uncle was away on business, the dogcatcher came to take Nerek away because he was old. My grandmother persuaded him to wait until my uncle was back. My uncle loved the dog very much and she was afraid that if she let the dogcatcher take

Nerek away, my uncle would never forgive her. When my uncle found out that the dogcatcher had been around, he knew that he would return to get the dog. So my uncle hitched up the horse and buggy, took the dog and left. He returned the next day without Nerek, having left the dog with a farmer some fifty kilometres from Mordy. My uncle was happy that he found a good home for Nerek. Three days later the dog wandered back! My uncle did not give up. The next night he took him to another farmer, who lived much further away. He had to pass through forests along a difficult road. He got lost a few times but at last he reached the farmer, whom he knew well. When three days passed and the dog did not come back, my uncle was very happy in the belief that now Nerek was saved from the dogcatcher. But eight days later who should wander into our yard but Nerek. My uncle did not know what to do to avoid having the dog fall into the hands of the dogcatcher. For the time being my grandmother kept Nerek in the house. But one day she had to go away and put the dog on a chain in the back yard. When she returned, Nerek was no longer there and there were signs that the dogcatcher had taken him away.

My uncle grieved after the dog and was very sad for a long time. At first opportunity he got another dog, a German shepherd.

Once, on a bright summer day Chaim and I were at our grandmother's house. The dog ran out and little two-year-old Chaim ran after him. They ran behind the barn and disappeared in the meadow. Suddenly gray clouds appeared in the sky and it became as dark as night. Heavy rain started to fall with lightning and thunder. My uncle came in and I told him that Chaim was somewhere with the dog in the meadow. He got a neighbour, and, pulling jute bags over their heads, they went out in the downpour. They searched for quite a while, but had to give up.They came back soaking wet. We were worried about Chaim and the dog. After a while the rain, the lightning and the thunder stopped. The sun came out and it was a bright day again.

Suddenly, the door of the house was pushed open and the dog, holding Chaim's shirttail in his mouth, pushed him through the doorframe. Both of them were untouched from the rain. Our joy was great.

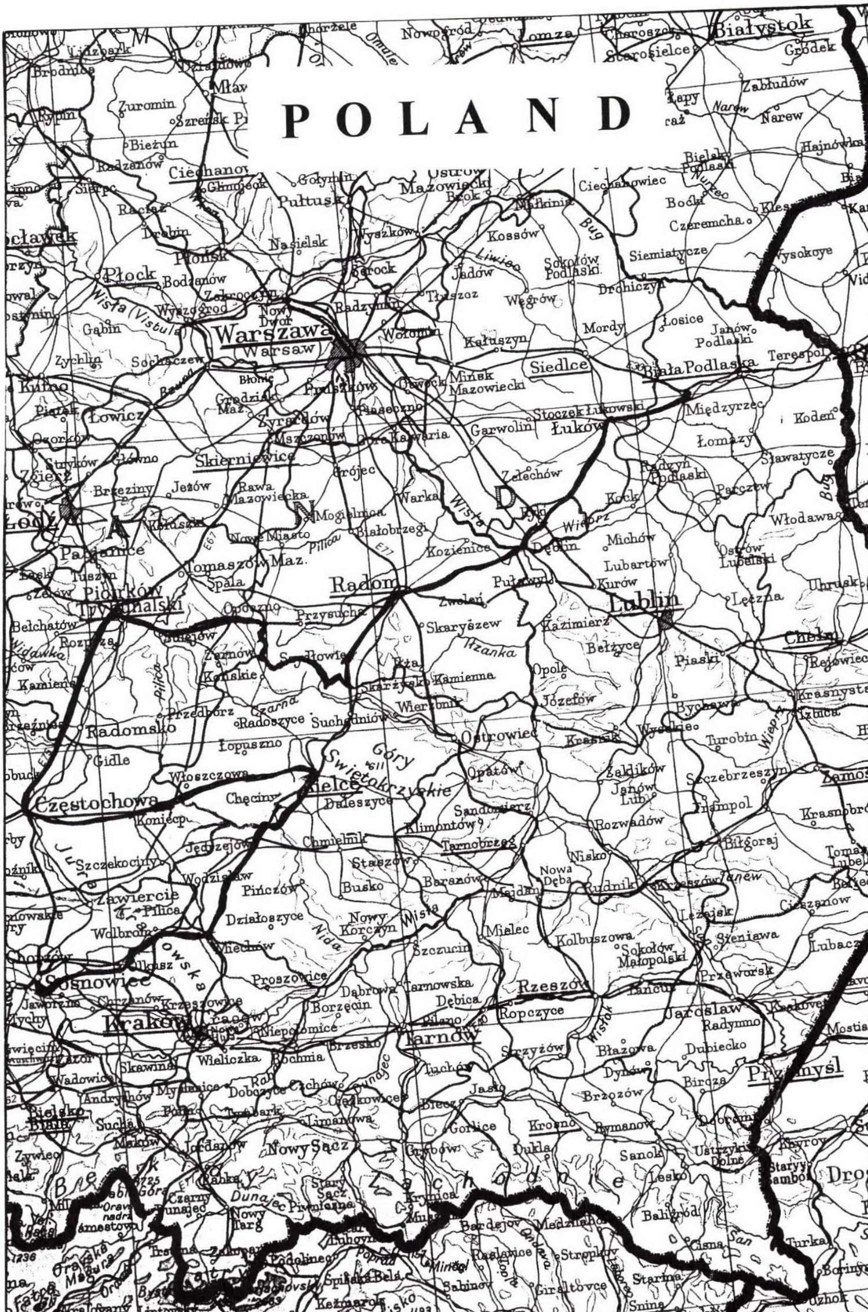
At the end of World War I the League of Nations, the forerunner of the United Nations, had conferred upon Britain the administration of Palestine as a Mandate. The Foreign Secretary, Lord Balfour, in his declaration of November 2, 1917 acknowledged that the British were obliged to make good on their pledge to establish in Palestine a Jewish national home, and would do their best to facilitate it.

However, the British adopted a restrictive immigration policy for Jews. Many young people around us were flocking to Palestine illegally to build a new life there. Despite good education and skills many banded together with the intention of living co-operatively in the new land. They knew of the harsh life and immense challenges confronting them. The land was full of swamps infested with mosquitos. The marshes had to be drained and the barrens made fertile. They were undaunted by malaria, drought, crop failure, hunger and frequent attacks by marauding Arab bands. They struggled with the ungenerous soil, but had the comforting reassurance that they were pioneers building a brighter future. They turned deserts into orange groves, vineyards and gardens.

My uncle decided to go to Palestine illegally. My grandmother's first reaction was a definite refusal to separate from her younger son. There were many tense moments, but she reluctantly suppressed her feelings and ultimately accepted my uncle's departure.

After many weeks a telegram came. He had arrived safely in Istanbul, Turkey. A few weeks later we received another telegram, telling us that he was in Palestine. Every two weeks a letter came. He described vividly what he went through -- the daily struggle, the loneliness and the heat. Every letter brought tears to the eyes of my grandmother.

Numerous young Jews whom I knew wanted to emigrate to Palestine, but the British government kept the gates closed and they all perished under the German occupation.



Escape route from Miedzyrzec, May 15, 1943

CHAPTER 30

JOURNEY'S END

The first night we were on the train it stopped at a station named Deblin. We stayed there all night. Now the cold became the enemy. We covered ourselves with whatever we had. People were constantly moving back and forth in the station and we did our utmost to avoid making any noise.

For several days the train continued on its journey through stations large and small whose names we were sometimes unable to see. As we passed through the city of Radom, people in buildings near the tracks looked down on us in disbelief from their high perches. We simply stared back.

The journey was amazing. We watched the silhouettes of the Swietokrzyskie Mountains rise from the plains. We stared at cultivated fields and meadows with thousands of flowers in full bloom. It had been a long time since we had an opportunity to sit back and marvel at the world around us; we had been too busy struggling to survive. The cities of Piotrkov and Radomsko came and went as we followed the train's course on the map we had brought along. By now we realized that it was not headed in the direction that Mr.Malczyk had thought it would. Cars were constantly being coupled and decoupled from the train, but ours remained untouched. As we passed through Czenstochowa, we felt bold enough to peer over the top to watch the traffic.

Suddenly, Chaim remarked, "Look! Look! A Jewish policeman is herding prisoners to work!"

"You know," I said, "something is pulling me to this area and I

don't know why. But we can't leave the wagon and look around."

"We haven't worked up enough courage yet to throw ourselves into a new fight for our lives here," Pearl remarked.

So we traveled on.

The train would often stop at sidings to allow others with more important cargo or passengers to pass. Sometimes it just crawled for interminable periods. When the train reached the vicinity of Mniechow at dusk, it jolted to a halt. Suddenly, shooting broke out and bullets pinged loudly against the metal cars. Sporadic shooting continued all night. Between whom and for what, we had no idea. All we knew was that it would be disastrous for us to be discovered. We could do nothing but wait, and wait we did, with bated breath and pounding hearts.

Just as suddenly as the shooting began, it was over. It had lasted till dawn. As the train started to roll again, we were climbing through a mountainous region, winding through tunnels and forests. Guards with rifles were clearly visible in the mountains. Later we learned that this was the border between the General Gouvernement (the part of Poland that was occupied by Germany) and Germany itself.

At one point the train stopped for no apparent reason. We were unconcerned until suddenly hands appeared along the top edge of the car. The head of a Polish railway worker appeared where the hands had been. Innocently, he asked us where we were going. Without thinking one of the three sisters responded that we were going to the mines to unload the timber. She added, "We want to live." Apparently he had seen us from the locomotive as the train rounded a bend. The price for his silence was two hundred zlotys. He told us that the German-Polish border was nearby and promised to let us know when our car finally reached its destination. We thanked him for the information and shortly thereafter the train continued on its way. Three nights and three days had passed since we left Miedzyrzec and still the train forged ahead.

One night our wagon was decoupled and we realized that we had reached the end of our journey. We were not too surprised when the Polish railway worker did not reappear. Pearl and one of the three sisters volunteered to climb down and look around. Just after they left

we received a jolt from some other vehicle and went careening down the track, coming to a halt some distance away. Now we were afraid that our scouting party would not be able to find their way back. Two more climbed down to look for them. Approximately an hour passed before everyone returned.

Not far from the railway tracks Pearl and one of the sisters had come to a fork in the road. Darkness prevented them from seeing very much, but they could hear wild shouting, cursing and the clamour of animated German talk, mixed with drunken laughter coming from somewhere down the road to the right. For a moment they were paralyzed by fear of being exposed. They decided to venture down the left fork. This eventually led them to some abandoned houses and then further on to a lighted window.

Arriving at a small house, they bravely knocked. A woman called, "Yossel, come in." Imagine her surprise when she swung the door open to find two strange young girls who had appeared in the middle of the night out of nowhere. In turn, Pearl and her companion were amazed that after some seven hundred kilometres of travel they had stumbled onto a Jewish woman. She immediately invited our whole group to her house. On their return to our wagon the scouts met up with the search party.

Just as we were about to climb down, a railway worker swinging a lantern came into view. We retreated and waited impatiently for him to move on. We hurried down and went over to the woman's house. It was May 19, 1943. We must have presented quite a sight, black with coal dust and grimy from the days of travel. She invited us to clean up and then we recounted our story. All night she listened attentively. We were in Upper Silesia in the city of Strzemieszyc, within the confines of a fenceless ghetto. The need for a fence had not yet arisen, because the Jews had complied with the rules and submitted to the oppressive German laws. The Gestapo knew the exact number of inhabitants, one thousand and fifty one heads. Without the knowledge of the Jewish police it was impossible for anyone else to stay in the town.

We absorbed this information slowly, trying to understand its implications. Succeeding in our getaway from Miedzyrzec with less

trouble than anticipated had put us in good spirits. Now we became even more optimistic. Early morning saw the arrival of a Jewish policeman, a Mr. Herszkowic. He let us get ready and then accompanied us to the police station. On the way people gaped at us. In the station we were given planks to sleep on.

As talk of our arrival spread, the inhabitants demonstrated their hospitality by coming to the police station and inviting us to their homes for meals. It was remarkable to receive human kindness after so much brutality and ruthlessness.

We became acquainted with a fellow by the name of Symchowicz, a member of the local Judenrat. He too invited us for lunch and listened attentively as we told him what we had gone through.

Life in the Strzemieszyc ghetto basically consisted of traveling to work in so-called "shops". In 1940 workshops had been set up to manufacture goods for the German army, mainly clothing and shoes. Jews were forced to work there in shifts of ten to twelve hours without pay. One evening not long after our arrival, as the night shift was preparing to leave for work, there was great confusion. An order was issued that they were not allowed to leave the ghetto. People said something was going to happen. Mr. Symchowicz came by to calm us. He must have guessed that we had lived through many such occurrences. He did not want us to become too alarmed at this turn of events.

I managed to fall asleep. I dreamed that I was in a large, empty room with high ceilings and big, shiny, brown varnished doors. Someone was chasing me. Who or what it was, I could not make out, but I was frightened and I ran from one room to the next looking for a way to escape. Just when it seemed that all hope was gone, when further progress was impeded by locked doors and there was no place to hide, I was suddenly free. I could not recall ever having seen such doors before. Nor could I even venture to guess what this dream meant.

Across from the police station lived an elderly woman from Zawiercze. She invited us to share supper with her. She had a son by the name of Somberg who lived in the nearby city of Sosnowiec and was a member of the Judenrat. If we needed any help, she said, we

could turn to her son for assistance.

The Jewish police in Strzemieszyc informed the central Judenrat of our arrival. They ordered us to come to Sosnowiec. After nine days in Strzemieszyc we bid good-bye to the wonderful people we had met there. They had treated us with a warmth and cordiality usually reserved for family members or friends of long standing. Everybody without exception had been friendly. We hoped for more of the same. In this area the presence of the Germans did not carry the same oppressive weight as it had in Miedzyrzec. Ridiculous as it sounds, even the air seemed different. Was it because these people were not yet aware of what lay in store for them? Many did not seem to know of the planned annihilation of the Jews.

CHAPTER 31

THE HORROR CATCHES UP WITH US

We were accompanied by the Jewish policeman Herszkowic to Sosnowiec by train. At the Sosnowiec station we met Moshe Merin, a slim man around five feet tall, in his thirties, wearing a beige raincoat and hat. He greeted us and introduced himself. He too marvelled at our incredible story. Our next stop was the Jewish police station, where we were put in jail. There we met people who refused to or could not pay their share of the taxes imposed by the Judenrat, money which was extorted by the Germans or used as bribes or gifts. Among them was a couple by the name of Reichler. They told us that before the war the Jews of Upper Silesia were well known for their large happy families. They had successful enterprises and lived in relative prosperity.

Before the Reichlers were released they told us that they lived in Srodula, at 27 Kalkzeile. They invited us to visit them.

After annexing Upper Silesia, the Germans proceeded with the establishment of a central Judenrat for the region, with Mr. Merin as its head. The Judenrat looked after forty five communities with a total population of one hundred thousand Jews. Bendzin and Sosnowiec were the two larger cities with a combined Jewish population of sixty-five thousand.

Merin was regarded as a forceful Judenrat chairman, exerting authority over the Jewish population. He was in favour of adopting a policy of obedience to the Germans by means of which he hoped to be able to soften the impact of the anti-Jewish decrees. He carried

out his task with great organizational talent and he enjoyed the confidence of his German supervisors. Many Jews in the district regarded him as a German collaborator. He had the help of the labour office and controlled the Jewish police. He vigourously enforced the German demands for Jewish forced labourers.

A short time before our arrival the Jews of Sosnowiec were transferred to a ghetto in a suburb called Srodula. It was located next to Kamionka, a ghetto for the Jews of Bendzin. All the Jews who had lived in Sosnowiec had been forced to give up their homes and move into little houses in Srodula. The Polish inhabitants of Srodula had been evicted, but were allowed to take over the better Jewish homes in Sosnowiec.

The Jewish labourers of Upper Silesia were commandeered by Schmelt, a German economic agency under the control of the Gestapo. Through it, the Germans, from October 1940 onward, also recruited young Jews for work in labour camps. The Judenrat and the Jewish police played an active role in organizing the transports. By May 1942 Schmelt had over six thousand Jewish labourers under its control in forty labour camps.

When Merin was ordered by the Gestapo to supply young women for slave labour in Germany, he advised the Judenrat to prepare a list of girls from the poorer families. They received written notices from Merin to appear for relocation, not knowing their destination. If the girls did not make themselves available, their parents were detained until they turned themselves in.

In contrast to the friendly natives of Strzemieszyc, the Jewish police and their chief in Sosnowiec were rude and inconsiderate, making us feel like criminals. Being locked up infuriated us. At every opportunity we tried to talk with the police chief, to find out what would become of us. What we eventually learned was disturbing. Since we were already in jail and therefore by definition undesirable, Merin would be able to dispose of us at his leisure. We were quite sure that we were scheduled to be sent with the next transport of slave labourers to Germany. There seemed to be little that we could do about it. Pearl and I would be separated from our brother, who

would probably be sent to a work camp for males. Once Merin's tricks were explained, the reason for the hostile demeanor of the chief of police became crystal clear. We asked the chief for a hearing with a member of the Judenrat. He refused.

The diminishing prospects of staying together played heavily on our minds. We were determined not to give up. After seeing and experiencing the cordiality and warmth of the Jewish community in Strzemieszyc, we had decided that we would like to stay with the Jews in Srodula ghetto and share their fate. Certainly we did not wish to end up as pawns on Merin's chess board. Our frustration mounted and so did our resolve to fight. We began a hunger strike. Our fists and feet became instruments for generating noise and through it all we demanded to see Mrs. Fanny Czerna, a member of the Judenrat.

For some reason the yard of the police station was crammed with people that Friday. We used the resulting commotion to pass two letters through the bars of our ground-floor jail window. One was addressed to the Judenrat and the other to Mr. Somberg, the son of the woman in Strzemieszyc who had invited us to her house.

Saturday afternoon we were told by the police that we could meet Mrs. Czerna at seven o'clock in the evening. We were astonished at the swift response. It was extraordinary for one of the heads of the Judenrat to agree to meet strangers from far away who had been thrown into jail. To us it signalled a partial victory, even though we knew we faced an uphill struggle to convince Mrs. Czerna to allow us to stay in Srodula.

At seven o'clock, all seven of us were escorted by a policeman to the Judenrat office. Mrs. Czerna was there with the other members. She greeted us warmly and fortunately, that set the tone for what was to follow. Other members of the Judenrat were then introduced. All were relaxed and there was a friendly atmosphere.

Although she shared the leadership of the Judenrat, she was dressed plainly. She wore no make-up and her hair was neatly combed to the back. Previously we had learned that she was married to an engineer and had a daughter about two years old. Humour was reflected in her manner.

Incredibly, the Judenrat genuinely seemed to know nothing about the mass murders of Polish Jews. Ordeal by ordeal we recounted our story of the horrors in the ghetto of Miedzyrzec. We told them about the deportations and the state of the few hundred Jews who remained when we left. As we continued with our account, there was a deadly silence in the room; all were listening intently and with grim curiosity. I began to suspect that the impact of our tale was not going to be to our advantage. It was only when I told them how Mr. Klarberg, the druggist and president of the Judenrat in Miedzyrzec, had been thanked by the Gestapo for his well rendered services and then shot, that I sensed a positive shift in the attitude towards us. In particular, I felt that our account had a profound impact on Mrs. Czerna. We asked her whether we would be allowed to stay together in Srodula. She would not give us a clear answer, but somehow we felt that the situation had eased. If we needed a sign, we received it in the form of a more cooperative attitude on the part of the police and their chief.

A few days later we were brought to a bathhouse and from there to a forced labour camp by the name of Arbeits-Kompanie, or AK, located on the outskirts of the Srodula ghetto.

Three hundred people were housed in the AK camp, all escapees from the General Gouvernement. They came from many different cities, mostly near the border between the General Gouvernement and Germany proper.

A young man of apparent German-Jewish ancestry with the name of Rubenlicht was the commandant. Tall, slim and blond, he dressed in riding pants and high boots even though it was the middle of a hot summer. The other camp official, the "Judenaelteste" or camp elder, was a fellow by the name of David Moshe Zukerman. Carrying on the overall supervision of the camp was the ever present Gestapo. Every inmate had a file and the Gestapo knew exactly how many inmates there were in camp and where they came from. In fact, we found out that when the Gestapo had consulted our file after our arrival, they were puzzled over how we had managed to travel seven hundred kilometres without being discovered.

Life in the AK camp was like in any other forced labour camp. At

the gate was a guardhouse, staffed day and night. All the inmates were required to wear an armband identifying that they were from the AK camp. No one was permitted to leave the grounds without a guard.

Breakfast and lunch rations were distributed once a week with the exception of bread which was parcelled out every second day. Blankets were issued on our first day in the camp and we were assigned a plank bed in one of the two large halls, one for males and one for females. Every day was pretty much the same. In the morning we were ushered into the women's shower. We dressed and assembled in the yard for roll call. The men went through an identical routine. We were divided into groups and escorted by a Jewish policeman to work.

The first day we worked outside the camp walls, digging ditches for sewers. The labour was strenuous. Other times we walked to Sosnowiec to clean homes that no longer housed any people. Furniture and other household articles had to be removed and the houses scrubbed. Among the inmates of the camp were a few who were lucky enough to have family members with them. It seemed that the majority had lost their loved ones to the gas chambers or to other schemes the Germans had dreamed up to annihilate the Jews. We were surprised how cooperative the Jewish people were in the AK forced labour camp. In Miedzyrzec the Jews took advantage of every opportunity to disobey orders or to botch a job -- anything to wreck the Germans' plans. It was the only way they could demonstrate resistance and gain some small measure of revenge. In Srodula people took pride in their work and were always ready to lend a helping hand so that the job would come out perfect.

We were often marched to another suburb called Klein-Srodula (Little Srodula), many kilometres in the opposite direction from Sosnowiec. There too we scoured houses that had the look of having been recently abandoned. Groceries were still lying around. Other times we worked in an enormous vegetable garden under the close supervision of a Jewish gardener, planting tomatoes and other vegetables. In the evening when we returned we were required to shower again before being allowed into the dining hall to eat. Jewish women, all volunteers from Srodula ghetto, came to the camp kit-

chen to help out.

After a few weeks in the AK camp, returning from work one evening, we were met by the alarming news that Mrs.Czerna was in conference with the Gestapo. It was June 21, 1943. A sobering mood swept through the camp. Everyone was of the view that as long as the Gestapo was around, trouble was brewing. It revived our memories of Miedzyrzec. Before going to bed we prepared our few belongings to be ready.

After midnight someone woke up and noticed that the camp was surrounded by German police. He awoke everybody. Finally we somehow decided that all three hundred of us would "hide" in the basement for the night and wait for the morning.

I was nervous. People were talking; there was too much noise and there were just too many people in one hideout. It was three o'clock in the morning when I discussed the situation with Chaim and Pearl. Together we went upstairs to the sleeping quarters. I donned my winter boots, the only item that I still had from home. For some reason I always wore these boots when the situation appeared bleakest.

We dressed, took our few things and went out into the yard. We tried to find an access to the ghetto that would let us avoid being seen by the Germans patrolling just outside the camp. The AK forced labour compound was enclosed on all four sides, with the three-story structure which we had just left taking up two of these sides. A barbed wire fence and some woodsheds completed the enclosure.

There was only one route to take. We crawled to the top of the sheds and descended on the other side. From there we climbed over more sheds until we reached a street in the ghetto. Despite the early morning hour people were already milling about in the streets. As we wandered from one block to the next, we overheard conversations about fear of an impending deportation.

We recalled the Reichlers whom we had met in jail and decided to look for them. It took a while before we remembered their address and even longer before people showed us how to get there. We confided to the Reichlers that we had escaped from camp and asked them for a hideout. At daybreak, the Reichlers with two other neighbours

and Chaim hid in the attic behind some old sofas. Pearl, a neighbouring girl and I hid in a yard shed which was then locked from the outside. We shared the shed with several large pieces of furniture and one of these, a large armoire, served as a hideout.

That afternoon we heard Germans in the yard talking, but thankfully they left without paying any attention to the shed. They did not search thoroughly, assuming that the Jews from that district had obediently surrendered.

We stayed in the shed all day. Even in the evening we did not dare to show our faces outside. At night we returned to the Reichlers' house. After a second day passed without further incident, we returned in the evening to the camp. A lot of people were missing.

After we had fled the camp that fateful night, a fellow by the name of Mager, a former memberof the Judenrat in the city of Olkusz, had persuaded one hundred and fifty of the three hundred inmates of the AK camp to surrender for deportation, warning them that their fate would be worse if the Germans found them hiding. He, his wife and his two daughters, Zelda and Jadzia, fourteen and sixteen years old respectively, gave in first. They were transported to Auschwitz.

We were not surprised. We had encountered the Mager family and came away with the impression that they did not fully grasp the predicament in which Jews found themselves. It seemed as if they believed that the present difficulties would evaporate if only they continued to deny that they existed. In the following days life in the camp returned to the old routine.

I was informed that in early 1942 the first group of several hundred Jews from Upper Silesia had been deported to Auschwitz. In May 1942 systematic extermination was launched. The first wave of deportations was mainly the result of a large-scale selection of the disabled, the sick, the elderly and the "unproductive". Also included in the first transports were many refugees.

That May about fifteen hundred Jews were sent to Auschwitz. In June another two thousand were deported. In August the Germans, after first misleading the Jews by saying that they were gathering to have their papers signed, ordered them to report to the large central square. They carried out a selection among the thousands of Jews

from Bendzin, Sosnowiec and Dobrowa Gurnicza. They deported more than a third of them to Auschwitz. Many did not believe that Auschwitz was a death camp. The others were declared to be essential workers, serving the German economy.

Occasionally there were moments when we forgot the nightmare. There were people who did not seem to let anything discourage them. One of these was a young man with the name of Kanner, a jovial fellow with a lively sense of humour, who went out of his way to share his wits when the right opportunity presented itself.

A Jewish policeman in the guardhouse of the AK camp was looking to make friends among the girls. With a pockmarked face and an insecure manner, he was not having much success. Seizing the occasion, Kanner decked himself out with a skirt, a blouse, high-heeled shoes and a kerchief to conceal his hair. He even put on lipstick. In this attire he would go out to the guardhouse to flirt with the lonely policeman. Overjoyed that finally a girl was looking his way, he naturally tried to approach the "girl". Kanner retreated, only to return to continue the deception. His impersonation was superb. People laughed so hard that neighbouring ghetto dwellers came to see whether the war had ended.

Some days our work brought us to Kamionka to empty and clean abandoned homes. As in Klein-Srodula the deserted homes bore witness to the untold fate of the former inhabitants. Prepared food still lay on tables ready to be eaten. We worked in stony silence, as these scenes repeated themselves over and over.

They brought to memory the stories I had heard about Merin and how he selected the Jews who would be deported. In my mind I pictured the poor, the sick and the elderly receiving notices that they had to appear at a certain time in the town square. I pictured them, grudgingly accepting their fate, haltingly packing a few things and trudging off with haste so as not to be late, somewhat comforted by the assurances that no harm would befall them. With the help of Merin and without fuss the Germans cleverly trundled off thousands of unsuspecting Jews to the death camps.

In one home we found some dry yeast and flour. Our food rations were not really ample, so one of the women decided to prepare

some bagels. While she worked in one of the many deserted kitchens, we assumed her cleaning duties. Those bagels brought back memories of prewar times in Siedlce.

Not far from our leather store there had been a bakery where bagels with poppy seeds were baked over an open flame. How we used to rush to that bakery in the morning in order to have hot bagels for breakfast! At the other end of the street was another bakery, this one specializing in bubalach, a concoction made from rye flour, also baked on an open flame. Some people put in special orders and had the baker add eggs and onions to the dough. Every morning, except Saturday, people would stand in line for their bubalach. Here too, people insisted that they be hot, fresh from the oven. Now, everything was gone.

For the next little while we worked in Klein-Srodula. The work was hard and tiresome and on top of it we had to walk many kilometres on the dusty road in the summer heat.

As we returned to the camp one July day, we were greeted by some good news. An uprising had apparently broken out in Italy and Mussolini, Hitler's ally, had been overthrown. We were elated and thought that perhaps this meant that the end of the war was near. For a few moments we forgot ourselves. However, the illusion was short-lived. It was only a matter of time before the Germans organized another deportation. In anticipation all the inmates decided to search for a place to hide in the AK camp, a place that would be safe for one hundred and fifty people, yet inconspicuous. It sounded like an impossible task. After surveying the entire structure of the building, we decided the only feasible spot was the cellar. We built a partition parallel to the existing exterior wall, flush against the two perpendicular walls. We hoped that anyone looking at the partition would believe it was the exterior basement wall. We made a hole in the floor above the part of the basement that was walled in and fitted it with a carefully concealed trap door.

Returning to camp one day we noticed some freight cars that were marked "Italy". Someone told us that they were carrying potatoes. We were tempted to flee to Italy. I figured that the best way to obtain more information was to make contact with a Polish railway worker,

but I did not know any and feared betrayal if I did contact them. I revealed my plan to the Jewish gardener in Klein-Srodula. He knew the railwaymen in that area and promised to find us someone we could trust. The next Friday, while we were working in the gardens of Klein-Srodula, we heard that Merin and Mrs.Czerna had been taken away by the Gestapo to Auschwitz. It seemed that the Germans had decided that these two were no longer of any use to them. It was an indication that our end was near. That Friday was our last working day in Klein-Srodula. We lost contact with the gardener and our hope of finding a Polish railway worker dwindled.

Our next job was in the shoe and tailor shops run by the Schmelt organization. We were to clean the now-empty buildings. By coincidence they also bordered railway tracks. On my way to work I could see more railway cars marked "Italy". They usually left after a few days. I could not let go of the idea of fleeing. Our efforts to contact someone were hampered because we frequently changed our place of work and were always guarded on our way to and from work.

CHAPTER 32

ZUZANA 24

On August 1 we assembled for the morning roll call as usual. The camp commandant did not show up. The Jewish guard announced that we would not be leaving for work.

The Germans had issued an order to make Upper Silesia Judenrein, and we, the prisoners of the AK camp and the remaining Upper Silesian Jews in the Srodula ghetto, had to assemble for deportation.

We were engulfed with panic. Although Pearl, Chaim and I had gone through this experience many times before, this time we had no confidence that we would avoid Auschwitz.

In Sosnowiec it had become quite clear to us that the German strategy was basically predictable. We noticed similarities with the operations against the Jews in Miedzyrzec. The one hundred and fifty inmates left from previous deportations, including us, gathered some food and climbed down to the basement hideout as the German guards patrolled the outside of the camp. I feared that our group would be discovered because it was impossible to enforce discipline among that size of gathering. People made no effort to cut down the noise.

On the third day we learned from the Jewish guard that the Germans had authorized one more day for the survivors to turn themselves in for deportation. Some people left the hideout; the three of us were among them. People were moving around and although turmoil persisted, we went out into the ghetto. Sadness and sorrow were etched on every face. Incredibly, there were still some who

failed to grasp that deportation was a one-way ticket to oblivion. We decided to see the Reichlers, but by the time we reached their house they were gone. We were upset because we assumed that they had left days before with the deportation. If we had come sooner we could have dissuaded them from leaving. We felt that perhaps it would have been easier to find a solution for our survival together, for they knew the surrounding area. Now we were on our own.

We reminisced about our visits to the Reichlers. They were friendly and caring. On two Sundays when we were not obliged to work we had smuggled ourselves out of the AK camp to visit them.

Through them we had become acquainted with their neighbours the Mendelsohns: a young man, his sister and their mother. We enjoyed their company. Mr. Mendelsohn, in particular, had an open mind and was both convincing and encouraging. We used to talk with them about the war and our perception that Germany appeared to be on the losing side, at least on the eastern front.

As we wandered through the ghetto, I recalled how we had talked about the fate of the Jews in Upper Silesia and what their chances were for survival. When we told Mr.Mendelsohn what we had gone through to reach this region, he said he was sure that we had put the worst of our struggle behind us. He was unable to comprehend how the Germans, an allegedly cultured and intelligent people, could send innocent people to their deaths.

We went to the area of the ghetto where people gathered and joined in the discussions of how to avoid the deportation. We came across a young man who offered to take us to a bunker and decided it was worth taking a look. On our way we met up with a woman named Rachel who joined us. She looked to be in her late thirties. Before the war she had a good position in a nearby town.

The hideout was at 24 Zuzana Street at the other end of the camp. Like most of the neighbouring houses it looked as if the owners had vacated the place some time ago. The ingenious hideout was under a closet in the kitchen. Wooden planks concealed a hole with barely enough room for two people to lie down and another three to sit. We made up our minds to hide there. We had no better solution.

So great was the confusion that we forgot we would need food during our voluntary imprisonment. As luck would have it, Rachel had a loaf of black bread. We were too exhausted and frightened to look for anything else. We figured we would be there for three or four days at most. The loaf of bread would be just enough to carry us through. The day we settled in, a stranger entered the house. He lifted the cover of our hideout.

"What are you looking for," asked the young man, "and what do you want?"

"I am a neighbour," he replied, "and I am looking for the owner."

Soon he disappeared. The young man who had led us to the bunker told us that apart from that Jewish neighbour no one else knew of our hideout. Nevertheless, we were concerned about being betrayed. Our instincts told us that it was not safe to trust anyone, least of all someone who came nosing around for no apparent reason.

After a while we forgot about that incident. We felt safer there than in the AK camp. We could hear sporadic shooting. It would stop abruptly and silence would drag on for quite a while. Then it would start again. Each shot made me feel as if one of those bullets was going through me. We lay there for days. Sometimes we heard people entering the house and then leaving. My eyes soon got used to the complete darkness. Day or night had no meaning in the bunker.

Despite our careful rationing, the loaf of bread did not last long. We ventured out to search for food in the house. We found some raw potatoes and beans and we kindled a fire in the stove and cooked them. In the middle of our efforts we heard footsteps outside. We quickly doused the fire, threw out the food to erase evidence and crawled back into the bunker. The next day our unbearable pangs of hunger forced us out again. This time we managed to cook a few potatoes.

The third time, as we cooked a few potatoes, Chaim went up to the second floor and looked out the window. He saw two people excitedly pointing at the chimney. As they approached the house we put the fire out and carried the pot of half-cooked potatoes down into the bunker. Just as we replaced the planks we could hear footsteps.

They searched the entire main floor, stopping at the stove. The receding sounds finally suggested that our unexpected guests had departed. We were surprised a short while later by the sounds of a German conversation that came through a wall from the cellar adjoining our hiding place. One was telling the other that there must be people hiding in the house since smoke had been seen rising from the chimney and the stove was still warm. Fortunately for us, the other responded that perhaps labourers clearing homes in the ghetto had cooked some food and then left.

After that we were not inclined to take chances.

Our confinement seemed endless. Our hiding place was stifling. There was no possibility of cleaning ourselves or changing our underwear.Days and weeks passed. We were completely cut off from the outside world. We did not have the slightest idea what was going on, even in the immediate vicinity of the house.

As long as the shooting continued we did not venture outside. We did not know the surrounding area. One wrong move could result in our being shot. One day the shooting stopped. Finally, there was silence again. Chaim went up to the second floor. He could still see German guards patrolling the streets. It seemed the best thing to do was to stay put. He discovered a bottle of vodka on the second floor. This, together with some sugar and flour which were lying around in the kitchen, became our nourishment for the next few days. It was Rachel's idea to use these things to make something edible. We had a small metal pot. We poured flour, sugar and vodka into it. We heated the mixture over the flame of a candle. Each of us would receive a spoonful of this concoction daily. Another time, Chaim found upstairs a few small pieces of black bread covered with mildew. It proved to be a welcome addition to our meagre rations.

Day and night we studied the noises coming from the outside. Sometimes it was frighteningly quiet.

We were continually engaged in a mental exploration of possible methods of escape, but paralyzing fear kept us in the hole. We were afraid to leave its relative safety at night, and in the daytime we might have to contend with German guards. We could not minimize the threat posed by the Poles, who usually identified us easily and did

not hesitate to betray us.

Our situation deteriorated daily. With the barest of necessities, we were five people imprisoned in a dark, tiny crawl space, without fresh air, without food and without sanitary facilities. We had become little more than animals.

My body developed painful blisters. I was fortunate that my brother found another bottle of vodka. I used it on my sores. When they healed in one place, they would break out elsewhere. Eventually, my whole face, head and body were covered. Healing did take place later, but visible scars still remain to remind me of this ordeal.

Every now and then the sound of shooting continued to filter through the impenetrable darkness.

We spent a long time in that bunker and many childhood memories welled up in me.

Once, on a summer day, I was thrilled as my Aunt Gitel arrived in Mordy from Warsaw with three pretty new dresses for me. I was impatient and anxious to put them on. I was about four years old. On Friday of that week the sister-in-law of my grandfather visited her relatives' graves in the local cemetery. When she returned, she complained about not feeling well and quite unexpectedly died shortly afterwards. It is the custom not to put on new clothing when there is a death in the family, so I was not allowed to try on the dresses. A few days later, I began to suffer from a continuous headache. The doctor diagnosed scarlet fever and I had to stay in bed. It was contagious, and my little brother Aaron, not yet three years old, was told not to go near me, but he was too young to understand. He was a healthy, chubby, playful and very active child. One day, before I knew what was happening he jumped up on my bed and wanted to play with me. It was almost impossible to prevent him from physical contact with me. As I got better, he got the disease. Our mother took him to see a doctor in Siedlce. Complications arose and he was moved to the hospital. His kidneys failed and after eight days he passed away. He had elated us all with his cheerfulness. We all missed him in every corner of the house.

My mother, Szejwa Deborah Rowak, had lost her parents before she married. She had four sisters, two brothers and one stepbrother.

They were all married with large families and most of them lived in Siedlce.

One day I found at the bottom of the family wardrobe a bundle of colorful banknotes. I asked my mother what it meant. She told me that she often visited Siedlce in the hope of buying a building with a store and living quarters in a good business section. For a long time she had wanted to move there. She found a place to her liking, and left a deposit. When the papers were ready to sign at the notary's office she returned to Siedlce. She asked her older brother Alter, a businessman, to accompany her. My uncle was not impressed and persuaded her to withdraw from that deal, which she did.

Those colorful banknotes were a reminder to my mother of my uncle's misguided advice. Now she not only had no building, but the money was out of circulation and had lost its value. After we moved to Siedlce, my mother pointed the building out to me one day, as we were walking past. After that, every time I passed it I would wonder why my mother had let her brother influence her to go against her own considered judgment. It was a lesson to me for the future.

Later my mother had learned about a store on Pienkna Street in Siedlce which was for sublet. She made a deal with the tenant. For the key to the store she paid one thousand American dollars. This had to be handled discreetly so as not to alert the landlord until we began to occupy the premises. Had the landlord or any of his family members found out about the deal, my mother could have lost the store and the money.

On a cold night in December 1930 we moved to Siedlce. The store was in a wooden building with two other premises. It was part of an estate and belonged to a Mr. Rafael and his two sisters. He occupied one of the front premises with his grown daughter and son. In the other lived one sister. The second sister lived in the back-yard building. It was after midnight when we arrived. The occupants were all in deep sleep. Some male members of my mother's family were waiting impatiently near the building to help with the moving. We took every precaution not to awaken any of the neighbours.

In the morning, when the landlords discovered that they had an

unknown tenant, they seemed stunned. When their discovery sank in, they erupted in outright anger. All the heirs took an aggressive stand against us. They burst forcefully into our rented premises, harassing us and yelling insulting remarks and allegations. They tried to make our lives miserable. My parents made great efforts not to say anything. Not getting a response, the owners left. Shortly after, Mr.Rafael died. Customers told us we were lucky people. Apparently he would have made our lives a hell. My parents tried to reconcile with the daughter, who became the boss, but to no avail. She was bitter and inflexible. They were all tough and tenacious, fighting with each other. Numerous times they all barged into the store with nasty outbursts, even after my mother's death. They made sure to do it only when there were no customers present so as not to have witnesses against them in any legal proceedings.

By law, as long as we paid the rent on time we were not obliged to tolerate their abuse. We got tired of their behaviour and threw them out, one by one. Slowly, the hostility stopped and we made a rule that they could only enter our premises for a good reason. Usually the daughter came in alone explaining her reason for coming.

The reverberations of the great economic depression caused by the crash of the stock market in the United States reached Poland at this time. The whole economy was affected. The living standard in Siedlce was low and people with large families had to struggle to make a living. Tuesdays and Fridays were market days. They were the best business days of the week. The farmers sold dairy products, poultry, eggs, vegetables and fruit, and bought what they needed. Shoemakers from the villages came to buy leather and other supplies. There was a lot of competition in our trade and we had to have a wide inventory.

A serious aggravation were the Polish tax authorities. Business taxes were based on the quantity of merchandise in the store. Tax officials would come around, often on the market day, at the busiest time, when we would display our whole broad selection. They would make a quick calculation of the value of the merchandise on display and issue an assesment. The less inventory visible, the lower the assesment. When there was a rumour that the assessor was on the

block, storekeepers hid their merchandise.

One of the tax assessors, Jerzinski, a Pole, a small, stocky man with a mustache and a shaven head from which blond stubble grew, made particularly elaborate searches. Sometimes he would only go into one store and then disappear. Other times, when he realized that the people knew he was in the neighbourhood, he would pass them over. He was the terror of the storekeepers.

One market day my mother and I were minding the store, when suddenly the rumour spread that Jerzinski was on the block. My mother forgot that she was in the late months of her pregnancy. With all her strength she pulled a great bundle of leather out of sight. Jerzinski came in and introduced himself. He looked around, wrote his report and left as quickly as he came. Despite the valiant efforts of my mother, his assessment was double the value of the merchandise in our store. His visit created a nightmare. My mother began haemorrhaging. A doctor advised her to stay three weeks in hospital, but she refused, as there was nobody to take care of us children.

In the beginning of June my paternal grandmother arrived from Warsaw to visit us for the Shavuot holidays. We were very pleased to see her; it was the first time in two years. The holidays started on Thursday and continued Friday and Saturday.

Sunday, June 7, was bright, sunny and warm. My mother sent me for milk to a farmer who lived far out of the city. I enjoyed the walk. It was afternoon when I returned. But while I was gone she had begun haemorrhaging again and we did not know how to stop it. It took hours to get word to a doctor. He told us to take her to the hospital. On the way she lost a lot of blood. The physician came in the late evening to see her. The whole night we waited tensely for good news, knowing that she was to give birth. Late at night our father came from the hospital and told us that her condition had improved and we should go to sleep.

At eight in the morning we got the news that our beloved mother had left this world. The baby died soon afterwards. I was about nine, ten years old. My whole life was shattered. My mind could not absorb the reality that my mother was not alive anymore. I could not understand how the world around us went its usual course. I lost my

childhood. I saw life through different eyes than other children of my age.

Our grandmother remained in Siedlce to take care of us and to keep house My daily life became more demanding. After school I had to help in the store. I saw other children playing, but I had no time to play. When I heard other children calling out the word "Mama", I was jealous. It was like a horrible dream. I would wake up in the middle of the night and see my mother alive. I resisted the thought of being motherless. I lost a lot of weight and did not look well.

With the passing of time, I accepted the loss. It did not seem to affect our brother as much as it did Pearl and me. Rifka, two and a half years old, did not yet grasp the loss. Several years later my father married again. It was another bitter blow. My heart was still full of pain of losing my mother so early in life. Getting a stepmother made it worse. With my heart overflowing from sorrow, I often visited my mother's grave to relieve my deep pain. After a while Tauba gave birth to my brother Hirsh, but before I had time to get used to those changes, the war broke out.

Chapter 33

TRANSPORT TO AUSCHWITZ

Four weeks passed in the hideout at 24 Zuzana Street in Srodula. The conditions were terrible. We were starving and desperately afraid. We finally made up our minds to leave. We waited until nightfall. Chaim went upstairs to observe the outside from the second-story window. The streets looked deserted. The time seemed ripe to venture outside and then decide on our next move. But when darkness fell, our nerves failed once again.

Early next morning we were alerted by the disquieting sound of footsteps in the house. Suddenly, the cover of our bunker was lifted. Three German soldiers stared down at us. They ordered us to get out. Panic-stricken, we obeyed. I got chilled to the bone when I saw the neighbour who had come the first day to scrutinize our hiding place. We grasped immediately that he had betrayed us. It hurt our morale and shook our faith to realize that he decided to trade his life for ours. Little did he know that in the end no one would be spared.

Pushed by the screaming Germans, dragging my feet, I was intoxicated by the fresh air and blinded by the bright sun. My head was pounding and my legs felt wobbly. I was dizzy. The prolonged inactivity in the hideout made me stagger like a drunk. With no blood circulation in my legs, I lagged behind. I was afraid that the soldiers would shoot me. Thoughts of death made the desire to live grow stronger. Out of breath, my heart pounding wildly, I strove with my

last strength to reach my brother and sister.

None of us could even guess what our destination was. After a long march, we arrived in a meadow next to the ghetto. Other escapees were there under the watchful eyes of two German policemen. One was a tall, slim, blond fellow with glasses, who appeared to be in his twenties. The other was also tall, but he was heavy and seemed to be in his late forties, with a full, round face punctuated with watery, colorless, but bloodshot eyes. He wore a devilish smile and reeked of cruelty. He glanced at us contemptuously and ordered us to sit near the others. Exhausted, we slumped to the ground. The dullness of the eyes of the doomed was unmistakable. We were facing imminent death. We had no one else to blame but ourselves, because we had missed an opportunity to leave the bunker the night before out of fear.

We were lined up in rows of five and escorted through fields and streets past the deserted ghetto and up to the third floor of a large building. There we were handed into the custody of the Jewish police. In the foyer a Jewish policeman guarded the stairs. The building had previously served as a hospital. It had bare walls and large windows. The only other feature of note was an outdoor balcony at the back. The entire building was guarded outside by Germans.

I remembered having seen these very same rooms before; unusually large, empty rooms with high ceilings, enormous brown varnished portals, and bright sunshine streaming in through the windows. I racked my brain to recall where I had seen rooms like these. Finally it came to me. They had appeared in my dream in the Jewish police station at Strzemieszyc. Then I remembered that in the dream I was locked up with no means of escape, but somehow, miraculously, I got away.

In one of the halls others were waiting in line for food. The former member of the Jewish Council from the camp, Moshe Zukerman, was distributing bread and jam. As our group fell into line, there was talk of a shortage of bread. I noticed some shower stalls on one side of the hall and without pausing to consider anything else, I rushed over there. I was exhausted and famished, but

the delight of a shower enticed me more than either rest or food. Perhaps this would be my last pleasure. I entered the shower, undressed and turned on the water. It was wonderful. It was more than a month since I had seen or felt water and I took advantage of every bit of it, luxuriating in the steady stream that massaged my sore, blistered body. I was so taken up with the shower that I entirely forgot about my hunger. By the time I got back to the line there was nothing left to eat.

Pearl and Chaim had learned some bitterly discouraging news. The next morning at ten, the Gestapo was coming with trucks to take us to Auschwitz. The only thing that mattered was how to escape, as we were trapped like animals in a cage. We tried to make contact with the Jewish policeman, but to no avail. We explored the surroundings. As we were on the third floor, leaving by a window was next to impossible. We approached another Jewish policeman who was on guard, but he rebuffed us. We were with two hundred and forty other people in similar straits. The Jewish police were accountable for the number of captured people handed over to them by the Germans. They were not concerned with our fate. A change of the Jewish guard made no difference.

Even the few steps that led up to the attic were under constant surveillance. We were a bit surprised, however, when two young men climbed those steps and disappeared. We had no idea whether they were workers or whether they had bribed or otherwise convinced the Jewish policeman to allow them to escape. Chaim felt that if we could just get up to the attic we might be able to get away over the roofs of neighbouring buildings. The whole night we stood near the steps, waiting for a moment when the guard would be distracted. When the first chance came, my brother sneaked up to the attic. He came back and said that the attic was in total darkness and he could not see any opening or exit to the outside. We gave up on that route.

The night was sleepless. In the early morning the sun's rays filtered through the large windows. Two Jewish policemen brought coffee and bread with jam, the last breakfast for the condemned. One of the policemen was Mr.Herszkowic, whom we knew from

Strzemieszyc. He said that Strzemieszyc had become "Judenrein." Its Jewish population had been deported together with the people from the Srodula ghetto to Auschwitz. He hinted that if possible, he would help us. We knew there was little he could do.

We were reminded that at ten o'clock the Gestapo was coming to take us to Auschwitz. A few people stood on the balcony. Among them was Miss Wajcman from the AK camp. She was determined to jump from that third floor balcony if the Gestapo forced her to go down to the trucks.

Although there was no prospect of getting away, I could not give in. I thought of my dream. It was still crystal clear in my mind; there was no hideout and no escape and although it did not make sense, I was freed. I was desperately looking to transform my dream into reality. I walked around, peering everywhere in the belief that I might have overlooked something. I passed the bathroom and glanced in. My attention fell onto the floor. It was covered with filth. Across from the entrance, to the right, were the toilet cabins. The doors were open and dirty paper was strewn on the floor. To the left was a tall, old-style bathtub, approximately one and one-half feet from the wall. Near the entrance someone had laid two long, heavy boards so people could avoid stepping in the filthy water.

Something hit my mind. I called my sister and explained my idea. She agreed with me and went out to get Chaim. I told him to take the two heavy boards and put them between the bathtub and the wall, one board on top of the other, so that the filthy water would not reach the top of the second board, and to lie down on the top board so that the bathtub would hide him from sight. Hoping the nauseating look of the bathroom would deter the Germans from entering, I wished my brother good luck and passionately said good-bye to him. It was a painful separation.

Before long it was ten o'clock and the Gestapo arrived. When the people saw from the windows that they had encircled the building, panic broke out. Stepping out from the bathroom, I began looking for my sister. The Gestapomen came up the stairs. They shoved us out and I was not even able to say good-bye to Pearl.

"Surrender! surrender!" a voice called in me. "It is useless to fight

any longer!"

As I was hurried down the stairs, Germans with rifles guarded the curved stairway.

Before I reached the ground floor I noticed Herszkowic standing inside the entrance. Outside stood a German. I hesitated for a moment, looked behind me and recklessly ran down to the cellar. The moment I sat down in the entrance to the cellar, I heard footsteps running after me. Shots were fired. I crawled deeper into the pitch-dark basement. I felt huge glass bottles from which a bitter smell of some liquid escaped. I had to move very slowly in the darkness to find a way around the bottles. I hid among them, scurrying to find a safer place in the darkness.

Straining my ears, I heard the echo of footsteps coming closer. A while later somebody struck a match. I lay quiet as a mouse. In time the footsteps turned back. Perhaps the monster bottles with the liquid inside kept him from shooting in the darkness. Time stretched endlessly. It seemed an eternity. I was afraid to make the slightest move. I could hear noises outside and the yelling of the Germans. This continued for a long time. The sounds came to an abrupt end, then began again until some time later when stillness returned.

Later I heard sounds on the cellar floor. I listened carefully, but could not tell what it was.For a few minutes there were strips of light on the wall as the last rays of the setting sun filtered through the small barred windows. It became dark again as evening settled.

Suddenly, I heard a sound, barely audible. I strained my ears. From the dark, deep cellar the sound grew. I wondered if I was hearing things. Was I insane after that excruciating day of horror? Was I dreaming?

But I heard Pearl's voice calling my name. Dumbfounded, I did not know what to make of it. I had no idea what occurred to Pearl. But the voice kept calling to me and when I responded, I realized that she had made it into the cellar as well. Large burning tears rolled down my face.

We hugged and kissed each other, smiling bitterly through the tears. She said that after she saw me leaving upstairs, she too was

pushed to go down to the courtyard. She lined up with the row of people waiting to get on the truck. Herszkowic emerged and told her that I was in the cellar. It gave her new confidence and courage. When the German guards were distracted for a few moments, she hid behind the door of the entrance to the building. There she noticed a door and sneaked into a room where a few sick people lay in beds. She hid behind a night table. Then someone entered the room to help the sick people and threw a rag over her head so she would not be in view.

In the meantime, the first transport of people left. The Gestapo returned with other trucks and took the remaining people away. When the second transport left, policeman Herszkowic came into the sickroom and told Pearl that she could go down to the cellar, hinting that our brother was still upstairs and would be safer if he remained there for the time being.

Later Chaim joined us. We were grateful to Herszkowic for his help. While he was hidden behind the bathtub, Chaim learned from a Jewish policeman named Galinski, that not far from the detention place --"the hospital"-- the Germans had opened a camp to process Jewish possessions. From there the next morning someone would deliver large pots of coffee and bread with jam for the newly rounded-up people. Galinski was willing to help by letting us carry the empty pots back to the camp, thereby deceiving the German guards. We spent the night in the cellar among the bottles. The next morning the events unfolded quite differently than we hoped. We heard footsteps coming down to the cellar and expected to see Galinski coming to help us get to the camp. Instead we were surprised to see Germans in civilian clothing, entering another cellar room. We acted with feverish haste and ran up to the ground floor to a washroom. Pearl jumped through the window into the yard. I followed. But Chaim stumbled and didn't get out. From outside we could see a German apprehend him and we assumed that he was taken upstairs to join the newly gathered detainees.

The joy of yesterday evening was soon forgotten. We ourselves were in danger and couldn't do anything for our brother. We blamed ourselves for our nervous haste in escaping from the cellar.

We discovered some sheds where piles of coal and wood were stored for the winter. We hid in there, unable to sit or lie down.

Meanwhile, we heard the sound of aircraft. We wondered whether they were planes of the Allies. We prayed for a miracle, hoping the Allies would drop some bombs so we could die, together with the Germans. The planes returned and cruised over our heads. We hoped our prayers were heard. But as they left, we became disappointed.

We stayed in that shed all day, hoping eventually to make contact with Herszkowic or Galinski. We could observe a section of the street which ran close to the hospital building. In the evening we saw groups of women labourers marching in columns. We assumed they were being taken to the camp. We had a sleepless night.

The next morning we noticed groups of workers passing that section of the street on their way to work. We spent another day in the woodshed, without food, pondering what to do next. We were unable to avoid getting black smudges on our faces and hands. To get rid of the smudges we risked bringing water from the washroom.

In the early evening, before the labourers returned, we ran from the woodshed through the yard to the next street into an empty building and hid. When the women marched by, we slipped into their column and joined their march into the camp, keeping pace with the rhythm of the group.

Chapter 34

CAMP SRODULA

With the women prisoners we marched through the camp gate. Located in a valley, two blocks from the hospital, Camp Srodula contained a complex of industrial buildings that the Germans had set up in 1940 to manufacture shoes and clothing. Those were the factories where thousands of Upper Silesian Jews were forced to work for the Schmelt organization, before they were gradually dispatched to Auschwitz.

Armed German guards patrolled the hills above the camp. They had a perfect view of what was going on. As the Srodula ghetto became "Judenrein" in August 1943, the Germans transformed the tailor and shoe factories into a guarded camp to process the possessions of those who had been deported. Of the four entrance gates to the complex three had been walled in. In the rear of the "Camp" were railway tracks. These tracks formed the constantly guarded boundary between the camp buildings and the Aryan side. We, as prisoners of the AK camp, had cleaned these buildings before Upper Silesia had become "Judenrein".

For the time being we at least had shelter. Outside the camp with nowhere to go, we would have been in danger of being betrayed by Poles. Whatever move we made, we were still in the Germans' trap, with no way out. Here, at least, we gained time. But time was an important factor in our struggle of survival.

In the camp we found Galinski, insensitive, belligerent and unhelpful. Imagine our surprise then at his willingness to help Chaim. He told us that he had promised the previous day to bring our brother

to the camp. In general, the Jewish police had garnered a bad reputation, but everyone would have admitted that in these grave times and dire circumstances it was difficult to judge them.

Hoping to see Chaim soon, we went looking for a place to sleep overnight. We mingled with the people in the camp and surveyed the setting. There were long halls in the dormitory building with rows of wooden bunks, two tiers high, packed tightly together. We went from one hall to the other looking for vacant bunks, but there were none.

A kind-hearted woman, Mrs. Rosenblum, showed us an available place on the floor. We had to settle for it. At least it was better that the bumpy pile of wood and coal in the woodshed or the hospital cellar among the monster bottles.

The next morning Chaim carried empty coffee pots into the camp with Galinski. We did not understand why Galinski suddenly was inclined to help.

Getting us into the camp registry without the knowledge of the Germans took a few days. Meanwhile, we could not be sent to work and did not receive any food rations. We stayed hidden each day until the other captives returned from work. Each morning after the people left for work, the German guards inspected all the bunks to make sure everyone was gone. Those who were found were sent to Auschwitz.

Two members of the camp committee, Mr. Haskielewic and Mr. Szpigel were instrumental in trying to resolve the problem of our presence in the camp. With their assistance our names suddenly appeared on the list of inmates. As for the third member of the committee, Mr. Lerhof, he collaborated with the Germans and was the source of a good deal of our fear.

A few people from the AK camp remained. Miss Wajcman had broken her legs and arms when she jumped from the balcony and was recuperating. Mrs. Rosenblum used to come to the AK camp to help in the kitchen. A tall, gracious woman, she distinguished herself by helping others. Her husband, who before the war had been a professional, was now a policeman. He too was ready to lend a helping hand wherever possible. They were the parents of an eleven-year-old seemingly well mannered boy. He slept with his father in the

men's section. Also in the camp was Mr. Rosenblum's mother. In her sixties, she looked, despite the circumstances, ladylike. This family, previously one of the more prominent families in Sosnowiec, were very close to each other.

Next to Mrs. Rosenblum was the bunk bed of her friend, Mrs. Schollenberg. A friendly and helpful woman, she worked in the kitchen.

I learned that it took the Germans three to four weeks, instead of the three to four days they had originally alloted to purge the remaining survivors to make Upper Silesia "Judenrein". Many had gone into hiding and had to be flushed out. Some of the Jews were armed and opened fire on the Germans.

The boundary of the evacuated Srodula ghetto was guarded by Germans. Working to liquidate the Jewish possessions near the boundary of the ghetto, I came in contact with the German guards. Sometimes I chatted with them. A young blond fellow with eyeglasses complained that he had not had any vacation for a long time. In the course of our conversation he asked why I didn't run away, saying if I stayed in the camp, they would make soap out of me. I should at least take a chance and try to escape, as I had nothing to lose. I knew it was true, but there was nowhere to run.

A frequent visitor was a German officer. He seemed to be the camp commander, often accompanied by a pretty Jewish woman who looked to be in her late twenties. Sometimes, her mother was also part of the group. Naturally, there was a lot of gossip about the relationship between the couple. A favorite past time of his was to play with his gun, shooting at birds. On one occasion one of the bullets grazed the side of my brother's body. Luckily, the injury was slight.

While the days for us surviving souls were numbered, we were encouraged by news of German failures on the Russian front. After early advances in 1941 the Germans had come to a stop not far from Moscow. The Russians' good sense in relocating their factories east of the Urals helped them maintain their war supplies because the Germans could not reach the munitions plants to destroy them. The blizzards of the severe Russian winters of 1941-1942 and 1942-1943

halted the German advance. In the sub-zero temperatures the German equipment froze and the troops suffered from hunger, exposure and sickness. Better clothed and accustomed to the weather, the Russians and their partisans destroyed German supply lines, demolishing roads and railway bridges.

Hitler encountered his first major defeat on the shores of the Volga river, as the Russians recaptured Stalingrad. Thousands of German prisoners wandered off into the unknown wastes of the Soviet Union. The legendary German power was starting to crumble. Hitler's armies, like those of Napoleon, found Russia unconquerable.

Hearing of the blows the Germans sustained made us more than ever determined to come out of this nightmare alive. We began to hope that the Allied armies would intervene in our behalf to bomb the gas chambers. But as so often in the past, we were bitterly disappointed. There was no reaction from the outside world to save us. Instead, the Germans stepped up the deportations to Auschwitz as if to annihilate the Jews so that they would not be able to witness the eventual collapse of the German Reich.

On mornings when the camp was surrounded with extra German guards, we knew that another deportation was about to take place. Inmates gathering at the gate to go to work were instead transported to Auschwitz. With the daily deportations, there was more room in the camp. We got bunks to sleep on, but at the same time the threat to our lives became more imminent.

Some people obtained Aryan documents in the hope of surviving among the Poles. In our room were two sisters who had connections with people who issued Polish identity documents. Various people approached them to acquire such papers. Conversations about these dealings caught my attention even though I was on the other side of the partition that divided our room. I solicited their help and asked if they could make Polish identity documents for me. The girls burst into laughter. They said that Aryan papers would not eliminate my Semitic features or my accented Polish. Always uneasy about my Jewish characteristics, I knew myself that Aryan documents would not work for me. Nevertheless, their observation dealt a severe blow to my illusions. I envied them. Those girls had every chance to survive. They

had perfect Polish diction and Aryan looks, but still they lived in the camp, waiting until the last moment to escape.

Mrs. Schollenberg, now my bunk neighbour, was transferred from her kitchen job to work in newly erected barracks in Sosnowiec.

The best furniture, clothing, porcelain and other objects of any value had been transported to Germany, while we were still hiding in Zuzana. Other Jewish goods, not worth enough to ship, were sold to the local ethnic Germans. Every morning Mrs. Schollenberg went to sort and sell the items. After obtaining permission from the Germans for an assistant, she asked me to help her. I agreed. Mostly dishes and kitchen utensils with flaws were placed by us in front of the barracks for viewing in the morning. When I had time remaining after sorting, I helped out in selling. There were customers for all the items. We both knew that our jobs would not last long.

Chaim, Pearl and I hoped to survive, but sometimes a wave of sadness would sweep over us. Desperately we were searching for any way to break loose from the German trap. Our minds were constantly focused around devising a feasible plan. Often, we tried to start a conversation with anyone who could come up with a proposal. The majority of the Jewish inhabitants of Sosnowiec, even though they knew the terrain, did not have any solution. They did not have any Polish friends or acquaintances who would help them if they fled from the camp. Even the ones who thought they had some prospects were not sure whether their Polish friends might not change their minds when the need arose.

As we marched to work or returned to the camp we noticed more freight cars on the tracks with the marking "Italy". They could be a means of escape, but we were constantly under guard. It would be difficult to find a railway worker who could help us. At around this time Pearl and I were sent to a new job, digging potatoes. The supervisor was a Pole named Kowalski. With a face full of scars, he did not give us the impressions we could trust him. For a few days I hesitated to confide in him. Finally, I approached him and asked if he could put me in contact with any Polish railway worker whose job included travel over long distances. He listened and assured me he would inquire. From him I found out that he was the supervisor of the

street cleaners in Pogoni, a suburb of Sosnowiec and I could reach him at the corner store No.13, in the city hall of Pogoni. For eight to ten days we dug potatoes under Kowalski's supervision. During that time he was unable to come up with any information, Then, we were sent to another job cleaning and we lost contact with him.

We lived in constant fear, but we had no choice and stayed in the camp. As usual, the Germans employed all kinds of tricks, fooling the people all the time. They often used surprise and their deceptions kept us on edge. Despite keeping a low profile, many people knew we were looking for a railway man who might help us to escape. We were afraid someone might betray us.

One day in November, as we returned from work, a woman approached us and said that she knew someone who might help us. My brother and sister went with her to meet the individual in question. By coincidence his name was also Kowalski. He lived around twenty kilometres away, behind the city of Bendzin. Walking over fields and back paths, it took a long time to reach his place. He worked in the railway station and had offered to hide us. His offer sounded interesting. My brother was in doubt about his integrity and so was I, but with no other prospects, we went along with Kowalski's proposal. Our previous experience made us realize that in all likelihood he would retract his offer when the time came.

Of course, he wanted something in return. He hinted that he needed blankets and warm clothing for his daughters. My sister and brother went every so often and brought clothing for the whole family. We hoped that in case of an emergency we could at least hide there for a few days. Pearl and Chaim's mission was risky because of the danger of being caught outside the camp and because they left with clothing that the Germans considered theirs. Every time they left, I was nervous until I saw them safely returned.

CHAPTER 35

NO GOOD-BYE FROM MY BROTHER

Encouraging news about German losses and defeats reached us through various channels. The more defeats they suffered on the eastern front, the stronger were their reprisals against us.

Reports began to filter through that Camp Srodula was to be liquidated on December 15, 1943. December 15 came and the working groups left as usual. The day went by without disturbances. This lulled us into believing that the rumours had been misleading. A few acquaintances came and told us of a late evening visit of the Gestapo to the camp office. We didn't make much of the visit. With the Gestapo in the camp, we should have known there was something brewing, but we failed to see the threat hanging over our heads. Unworried, we went to sleep. The presence of the Gestapo did not become apparent until the next morning.

On December 16, the unthinkable happened. Early in the morning we were awakened by a commotion. Someone said that the camp was tightly guarded with additional German guards positioned every few feet around the perimeter. The work crew was held back at the gates. The guard stationed near our window was replaced. Nobody seemed to know what was happening. It turned out that the rumour about December 15 was a lie spread by the Gestapo. It deflected our attention away from the actual date and put us all off guard. Chaim dressed first and went out to the yard to find out what was going on. Quite a bit of time went by

as we waited for his return. We became concerned and went looking for him, but could not find him. We thought he might have gone back to our sleeping shelter, but he was not there. We always planned together and consulted each other on everything, no matter how unimportant it was. This time he did not come back to consult with us. Not wanting to lose each other in the confusion, Pearl and I went out again together to search for him. When we asked acquaintances whether they had seen our brother, some said that they had, but could not recall where. They tried to reassure us by saying that he was probably hiding. We thought that maybe while we were looking for him outside he had returned to our quarters and not finding us, he had gone to hide.

The German intention seemed clear enough. We were ordered to assemble in the yard. People had resigned themselves to their death, but they panicked when they learned that the camp was sealed off. The sudden events pushed us into a frantic search for ways to survive. The uproar was so loud and prolonged it felt like the walls were going to cave in on us. We were terrified of what loomed ahead. We were becoming panicky because we could not find Chaim. We returned to our shelter, but he was still not there. Our bunks were on the ground floor. The window was on the side where the railway tracks were located. A guard was checking on us at the window. I recalled chatting with that particular German when I was cleaning the ghetto houses and he was guarding the boundary. We had to make prompt decisions, but untested ideas required careful thought.

We went to the window and initiated a conversation with him. I asked if he would give us a chance to crawl out the window and let us vanish. With a friendly voice he assured us he would not shoot at us. He would give us the opportunity to get away. But something inside told me not to trust him. The more we contemplated the idea, the more mistrustful we became. We gave up the plan. A few minutes later the two sisters who arranged Aryan documents had a conversation with that same guard. We watched. They suddenly jumped out the window and ran along the tracks. Before we realized what was going on, we were stunned to see the guard lift his rifle and shoot them both. They were around

eighteen years old. Just a few moments earlier they had been alive, with hope. Now we saw only a mass of flesh and blood. With Polish identity documents in their possession, they could have escaped any time. However, they waited because they felt it was safer to be in the camp than to move with false papers among the Poles. Obviously, we would have met the same fate, if we had trusted that German.

We were convinced that Chaim had gone into hiding and decided to hide ourselves in the cellar. One of our acquaintances came and said the Germans were giving us more time to get our hidden valuables. It was obvious to me that this was to make it easier for them to get hold of the precious Jewish possessions.

We left the hideout and looked around frantically for our brother, but our search proved futile. In the process, however, we found a hiding place in another building which looked safer. Other people were already there. For a while we thought we could hear the voice of our brother calling us. We strained our ears to catch the sound. Thinking the voice came from the door, we went there to listen. But there was only silence and darkness. The rest of the day we were tyrannized by our minds as they spun around in circles.

In the evening, once the transport was gone, selected workers were released to the camp compound. People assumed the day's hunt was over and let themselves be lured out of hiding to mingle with the workers. Pearl and I joined the others in the camp yards. Again we looked for Chaim. We questioned his acquaintances, but could not get a clear answer. We went to see Mrs. Rosenblum, our former bunk neighbour, and her husband. As a policeman he should have known what happened. They were now in a shelter in the third camp yard on the third floor. We went up and asked if they knew where Chaim was. They seemed confused and quiet for a while. Then Mrs. Rosenblum said that they had not seen him. She said that she believed that he must have left with the transport to Auschwitz. She tried to raise our hopes by saying that even there he had a chance of survival. But on our way downstairs we met another Jewish policeman. He stopped us and openly asked why our brother was shot. We had sensed that something terrible had happened, but all

we could do was stare at him in disbelief. We managed to ask him how he knew it was Chaim. There could be a mistake! He insisted that he knew our brother well. We were filled with horror. We could not stop crying. I felt as if my heart would burst from the pain and love I felt for him.

Getting to Upper Silesia had let us hope for a while that we might all survive. Now I began to believe that we were fighting a losing battle.That morning Chaim had left us to find out what was going on in the camp, and now he was dead. The loss gnawed at us. There was no solace for us grieving sisters. It was no comfort for us that innumerable others had been slain by the Germans.

We suspected that the Rosenblums had known about Chaim's tragic end, so we went back to see them. They thought for a while and then admitted that they had not wanted to convey the tragic news. We returned to the yards to look for our brother's friends to find out what they knew. Some of them had met with him in the fourth yard in the early morning to talk about how to avoid the deportation. They told us that Chaim had returned to our sleeping shelter to tell us how the situation looked, but as we were outside looking for him, he went back to his friends.

Chaim worked laying big pipes in the ground. He knew that one large pipe led outside the camp. He proposed to his friends that the best way to escape was through such a pipe. I think he was perhaps too eager and was the first to crawl into the pipe. The friends were to follow him. A guard on the hill noticed my brother's move and shot him. It happened suddenly without any warning. The friends ran away and left him. We never learned whether Chaim died immediately or if he had suffered before he passed away. Maybe we could have saved him if we had known where he was.

That evening while we were weeping, our friend from the next room, Hella, came to tell us that two German policemen were going from room to room. She urged us to compose ourselves, not to show our agony. She was right. Those German villains could bring more evil on us when we least expected it. It was difficult to pull ourselves together, but we had to. Before long the Germans came in. While they were searching us for valuables, they

asked us ironically how we felt. Their curiosity satisfied, they left, smiling.We concluded that they were trying to count how many people were still left in the camp.

Next morning, the people appearing for work at the gates were taken to a collection point near the city of Bendzin for deportation. There was talk that the transport from the day before had been held up in that vicinity, which became a temporary collection point. This rumour suggested that the Germans had not yet finished the planned action and were waiting to get more victims. Lerhof, who collaborated with the Germans, ordered us to gather near the gate. He said that anyone avoiding the order would be punished. We struggled in heart and mind to decide whether to go or stay put. Some people thought it would be wiser to go to work than to hide again. The fact that Lerhof and the two German policemen who visited us the previous evening were waiting at the gate troubled us.Many decided to stay where they were, as we did.

The next few days were bizarre. The Germans hunted for more people to add to the group in Bendzin. People who left for work were divided at the gate into two groups. One group was sent to work and the other to the collection point for deportation.

On the fourth day my sister and I went to the office to ask committee members Szpigel and Haskielewic, who still possessed some human feeling, if we could catch a glimpse of our brother's dead body. They told us to be patient until things settled down. Tension and confusion were visible on their faces. We knew further pressure would be counter-productive. We needed to give them a chance.

Certain individuals had plans to escape. Stefa, a roommate of ours, had long blond hair and looked Polish. She had obtained false papers. She left the camp a few times to find a shelter. She was detained once, but with luck was released. She was wearing a thin trenchcoat and was obviously freezing in those December days. On the evening of December 17 she exchanged her trenchcoat for a warmer coat left behind by one of the deported women. The next morning she succeeded in slipping out of the camp gate to join the group selected for work. Lerhof spotted her and moved her to the group destined for the collection point. Later there was talk that the

warm coat did not bring luck for Stefa.

Two other roommates were a young woman, Miss Wainberg and her boyfriend, former inhabitants of Sosnowiec. They had arranged for a place to stay among the Poles. However, life outside was also fraught with dangers and as long as it was still quiet in the camp, they decided to stay. They were familiar with the guarded camp and its surroundings and knew how to get out of it. Sometimes they left and returned a few days later. The boyfriend had decided to leave on December 13, to find out whether the shelter was ready. It was seven o'clock in the evening, but the camp was well guarded and there was no possibility of getting out. Just before midnight he got an opportunity and left.

Miss Wainberg was in the bunkbed next to mine, so I kept her company. She was talkative and enthusiastically told me that they planned to leave the camp, get married and start a new life in Sosnowiec. She did not mention whether they would be hiding or living on Polish identity papers. I comforted her, as she became impatient when her fiance did not return as planned the next night. It turned out that he had been outside the camp around seven o'clock, but had encountered difficulties getting in. He walked around the walls all night, but they were heavily guarded. After several unsuccessful attempts, he had to give up and went back to his hideout. When he returned the next day, it took him until after midnight to get into the camp. He excitedly told his girlfriend that the place in Sosnowiec was prepared. They were ready to leave for good. But it was late at night and he was too tired to leave. Full of hope for the future, they postponed their departure for the following night, December 16. Unfortunately, they waited one day too long. They both left during the day on December 16 with the deportation.

Trying to find a way out felt like indulging in wishful thinking. The Germans knew when they did not get us one time they would get us the next. Our desperate effort to break out of the enemy's trap was fruitless.

On December 19, the atmosphere was still very tense. We learned from the Jewish police that the transport was still waiting at Bendzin. Nobody reported for work. When Mr. Haskielewic ran

along the hall close to our shelter, I asked him again if we could see the body of our brother. He told us to wait and stay inside. In the evening we learned that the transport was gone.

Early next morning we were accompanied by a German guard to the hospital yard. There we looked in horror and disbelief at the frozen body of our brother Chaim. We still could not believe he was dead. In the breast pocket of his jacket he had a picture of Rifka. He was liked by everybody. He was well mannered and always ready to help. His strength and courage were contagious and had served as an inspiration to us in the most difficult hours. Now he lay on the ground motionless. I saw all the pain and misery in his face.

He did not have to worry any more. His fate was sealed. He had found a kind of peace, an end to struggle and uncertainty. We just stood helpless, our eyes cast on our brother who vanished forever. After so many battles, troubles and endeavours together, we were now witnesses of his death. Pearl and I opposed burying him in a field. We intervened with Mr.Szpigel who used his contacts to get permission from the Germans to bury him at the Jewish cemetery in Sosnowiec.

Chaim's friends Mocny and Herszkowic nailed together a box from old boards. Sunday afternoon they put the box with Chaim's body on a horse-drawn cart that we were allowed to use. We four accompanied the mortal remains of our brother on his last journey to the cemetery. The guard who escorted us was an ethnic German from Rumania, serving in the Einsatzkommando. I knew from the Jewish police that this was the man who had actually shot our brother.

A mournful silence prevailed in the cemetery. Into a freshly dug grave we lowered the casket sending our beloved brother to eternal rest.We put up a board at his grave with his name and date of death. Chaim was now among the multitude who had perished for being Jewish. We stood in the cemetery staring at his grave. I could not ease the aching in my heart. Events had caught up with us. We wept bitterly over the horrible fate which had befallen Chaim, Rifka, our family and all the people who belonged to our faith. We stood there for a good length of time. Wailing and moaning, we poured out all our bitterness. The guard stood and watched. Our cries of

lamentation floated in the solitude of the cemetery to the sky above us. We searched the skies for justice. There was blackness above, around and deep in us. In our prayers we begged to stay alive and to return to visit his grave. We wished to see revenge on Hitler and his German people for our brother's innocent blood. I decided at this time that if I survived I wanted to tell this unbelievable story to the world.

A few days after the burial was Chanukah, the Jewish festival of lights. The Chanukah lights proclaim the miracle that occured at the time of the Maccabees. It is an ancient Jewish custom to light candles for eight days. We who were still alive lit candles and hoped for a miracle. This time the burning candles burned my heart, because it reminded me of the time when Chaim had lit the candles for the last time.

One man, who was with us, lit Chanukah candles and celebrated with a glass of vodka the arrival of his Polish identity papers at a cost of around one thousand zlotys. He was in his fifties. He had a mustache, resembled a Pole and spoke Polish without an accent. He was familiar with the mentality of the Polish people, their attitudes, their religion and their customs. He was promised a job in a city where he was not known. He was all excited and set to leave the camp shortly. After the war I learned that he had been recognized by Poles and killed -- for the crime of being Jewish.

CHAPTER 36

THE FINAL DAYS IN CAMP SRODULA

The year 1943 with all its grievous calamities came to an end. 1944 began with despair and no trust in the future.

Hitler had already succeeded in getting rid of most of the Jews in Poland. The thousands of Jews from Upper Silesia had shrunk to a few hundred souls in Camp Srodula. Open sores covered our bodies. Sickness haunted us and our faces were lined with grief. We were not only outcasts in the eyes of the German torturers, but we ourselves had to struggle against believing the lie that we were inferior. Our world was coming to an end. We, the condemned, had to face the bitter reality that the sentence would be soon implemented. We berated the nations who maintained their cynical indifference to our plight.

Pearl and I found our minds wandering continuously to Rifka and to Chaim's graveside. They were inseparable from us. Our eyes often filled with tears. We felt guilty for not having known how to help them.

That the last frenzied deportation would soon be upon us was not in dispute; the only uncertainty was the timing. The hope of not being snatched away was only a pitiful illusion. We had no way out. Some said that the chances of avoiding deportation were not worth the risk. The cordoned ring around us tightened. Few were willing to make a move, yet anyone determined to

survive had to make crucial decisions.

Friends of my brother brought me a small amount of alcohol and persuaded me to drink in order to relax. It did not comfort me. Instead it burned my throat and made me cough all night.

Mocny and Herszkowic searched for a possible escape. Through a former Sosnowiec inhabitant they learned of a Polish railway man who worked on long-distance trains that went to the borders of the enlarged Germany. They approached me so we could figure out a joint plan for escape with the railway man's help. We had no idea when would be the best time to go to see him. One evening we decided to visit him at the hour we hoped he would be coming home for the night. Mocny and Herszkowic bribed a German guard to accompany us to the railwayman's house so we would not be exposed to blackmail by Poles. We left the guard outside and we three went inside. His wife told us that he was at work. She could not come up with a specific time to find him at home, as he worked at odd hours of the day or night. It had been an enormous undertaking for us to leave camp and reach the railworker's home and yet we returned empty-handed. We did not foresee any possibility of further contact and we became depressed.

Conflicting rumours of what the morrow would bring compelled my sister to go back to see Mr.Kowalski. She took some clothing for his family and succeeded in getting them to promise to hide the two of us in case we needed.

In the meantime, the Germans kept us busy cleaning abandoned houses in Srodula. Some former inhabitants of Sosnowiec left the camp, despite the strict patrols, to look for a hiding place in the city. They decided not to return. Others who had hidden in Sosnowiec or been outside on Polish identity papers, could not stand the tension and the fear of being discovered and returned to the camp.

Nobody knew where it was safe. Many looked enviously at people like Mr.Goldenberg, a member of the Sosnowiec Judenrat, who was one of the lucky ones to have emigration papers. Rumours had it that the Germans were going to permit such document holders to leave Germany. When the Gestapo came to pick them up, many inside the camp assumed that these fortunate ones were being

escorted to freedom. Later we learned that those who were so envied were sent to a special section of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where they, like many others, perished.

Early one morning, in the middle of January, four weeks after my brother's murder, the camp was encircled with additional guards. The Germans proclaimed that the camp was to be liquidated. This was the final deportation to Auschwitz for the Jews of Upper Silesia. All the inmates had to appear at the campground.

Again we stood at the threshold of death. Pearl and I decided to continue the struggle for survival. We clung to the shreds of life, even as family and friends were gone. We started to look for a hiding place in the camp. We knew the German guards would soon come to check whether everyone had left the building. Our sleeping shelter was a one-story building with partitions and a long corridor with one entrance. If we looked for a hiding place outside, we would have been easily apprehended by the German guards who were swarming all over. The cellar we had used in the previous expulsion was now out of our reach. Besides, we felt that it was no longer safe and suspected that the Germans were aware of that place of concealment. Soon the building was nearly deserted. Those of us who remained were petrified, but unwilling to give up. We ran from room to room. I recalled a room filled with rags at the far end of the corridor. We decided to go and have a look.

The room was piled high with rags. We had cleaned the building before, unaware that these shops would be reconstructed into a camp. We had thrown all the scraps from the tailor shop in there. Fully clothed, wearing our winter coats, we crawled beneath those dirty and dusty rags. It was hard to breathe. We strained to catch every move and word from the outside. We were soon soaked in perspiration. It trickled into my eyes and burned my face. For a long time the noises from the outside and the commotion intensified. Shouts and screams, bursts of rifle and machine gun fire reached our ears under the rags. Again and again we heard guards coming into the room where we were hiding. We were afraid to move. Every time they entered the room, I felt terror crawl up my spine. Our throats were tight as tourniquets.

Later it became suspiciously calm. We could tell that most of the people from the camp had been led away. We could still hear guards making rounds from time to time, a sure sign that the action was not finished. We had the urge to run to a safer place, as this room was adjacent to the wall patrolled by the guards. We stayed there in a cramped position for a full day. We were afraid to make the slightest noise. During the daylight hours, with the guards patrolling everywhere, it would be suicide to move. In the dark of the night it was impossible to find a better place. We eventually decided to stay put.

During the night we crawled out to stretch our limbs and to breathe fresh air and listen to what was going on outside. The next morning the guards searched through the rooms again. The dust from the rags made it difficult to breathe. Pearl made a desperate effort to hold back, but she started to cough. Within moments the German guards came into the room and poked through the rags with their bayonets. We were petrified. My heart was pounding wildly. They methodically searched every pile. We were trapped. Pearl crawled out from under the rags just as a German was about to strike her. Frightened, I came out too.

"We are not going to make it, we will never survive," I thought. It always brought me back to my obsession to survive and to tell how the Germans murdered our people. Any Jew who could be traced was ultimately rounded up to meet his fate. Just managing to stay alive till now was a miracle, but it was clear to me why most people did not put up resistance. Why try to be a hero and live through so much suffering, only to give in at the end?

A sobering wave overcame me, and gradually my indignation died away. My defenses dropped completely. Now I too became resigned. We were led outside and I saw we were not the only ones to be rounded up. A guard watched over a group of young people. The lines on their tense faces reflected their agony. They too had tried to stay alive. Now, there was no chance to avoid the end.

After the Germans ceased finding victims, they led us away. We passed a bakery, where we stopped. A Jewish baker was still there making bread for the Germans. We got a thin slice of ginger-

bread, as there was no regular bread at that hour, and some water to drink. We were force-marched to the outskirts of the deserted Srodula ghetto. We reached the German police station and were incarcerated with other Jews in a connecting building that consisted of a big room with straw bags on the floor. Crying children milled around. The people were passive and no longer concerned with what might happen to them. Two German policemen stood guard in the kitchen with bayonets on their rifles. We heard that we were to be transported to Auschwitz the next day.

CHAPTER 37

FLEEING FROM THE GERMAN POLICE

In the afternoon we had a visit from two German policemen. One of them, a young, bespectacled man with whom I had had previous encounters, recognized me. He stopped and with a laugh repeated "Soap! Soap!" meaning that as I missed the chance to escape, his colleagues would make soap out of me. I leveled an icy glare at him. Feeling a strange sensation, I shifted uneasily, saying to myself, "I am not yet dead. We will see who laughs last!" I somehow felt a new determination not to retreat without a fight, so that our bodies should not rest in Auschwitz. When they left, I started looking around for a way to escape. In the big room the large window was boarded up from the outside. I noticed that the kitchen window was covered with a black blind to prevent light alerting Allied warplanes. That window blind caught my attention as being worth further examination. The washroom had no window, but on the floor I found an Austrian gold piece the size of a dime. I took it as a sign of good luck.

I tried to influence the others. I spoke with the young men who were with us and made suggestions about how we could save ourselves. One was a nineteen-year old who had given up. Nothing mattered to him anymore, as none of his family was alive. His parents, hidden by Poles near Bendzin, had been robbed and murdered. However, my suggestions gave some of the others a glimmer of hope. We decided to work together. I suggested

that when there was only one guard we should lure him into the large room and distract him, so we could check whether the kitchen window could be opened, as it was our only means of escape. Much to our delight it did open.

The guards changed often. With every change we were counted. Those who did not want to bother trying to escape were willing to help. In the evening, at the first opportunity, we distracted the lone guard to give two young men the chance to jump through the window. It was a close call. Just as they disappeared, he returned to the kitchen.

We waited for the next change of guard. Pearl or I would be next to leave. The guards knew we were sisters. We had to be especially careful not to alert them that one of us was missing, as the other could suffer dire reprisals. We agreed to meet at a neighbouring building not far from the police station. It was a three-story building on the border of the ghetto. We had cleaned it earlier from top to bottom.

When the guard changed, we were counted again. We were only twenty-five instead of twenty-seven. To make up for the two boys we counted some of us twice. The new guard was enticed to go to the other room. I jumped from the kitchen window together with a young man. It all took seconds. When I landed on the other side I decided that to meet my sister in the prearranged building was too risky. Silken, fluffy white snow flakes brushed across my face. My footsteps left a trail that could give us away, so I was scared to go across to the building. If the Germans discovered that some captives were missing, it would be the first place they would search. In order to let Pearl know the change of my plan, I walked over and knocked on the boarded-up window to attract her attention. No one heard me. I could not risk returning to the kitchen window. The blind was down. For all I knew, the guard could be there. There was also the possibility that a German policeman might come out of the station nearby and see me.

I decided to go with the young man into the abandoned ghetto, as he knew a hiding place. The streets were deserted and so were the houses. A threatening silence prevailed, broken only by a cat run-

ning by. We went into a house where a sparse shimmer of light beckoned us through the windows. We had not eaten for two days and looked for food. The movable property had not yet been cleared. Inside was a mess. Intruders had ransacked the place. We found potato skins mixed with garbage. Broken utensils and torn rags were strewn over the floor. We hid in the cellar. I was exhausted and fell asleep. When I woke up Friday morning and some of the excitement was gone, I realized how wrong I had been not to wait for Pearl at the prearranged place. I had lost my sense of direction. Now I did not know where she was. I pondered what I would do next. It was unthinkable that we should be separated.

Later we heard people come into the house and then leave. This went on all day. On Saturday, we heard the heavy footsteps of people moving furniture. We were fearful that somebody might come down to the cellar and discover us. In the evening, forty-eight hours after our escape, we left the cellar and went deeper into the ghetto. We could see that some of the homes were once again occupied. The streets were covered with snow and ice. At one point I stepped into a pothole and got splashed with dirty freezing cold water. I was lucky to be wearing my winter boots from home. They had served me very well for a long time.

The street lamps were giving off a gloomy light. The neighbourhood created a frightening impression. We stopped at a small house. Although it was obviously deserted, shadows were moving on the walls. We crawled inside through a window. In a small clay stove a fire was burning, producing those shadows. We found a torn wire mattress and a pail with rags and some cleaning material, indicating that somebody was in the middle of cleaning. We warmed ourselves at the stove and looked for a place to rest. The floor was filthy, so I lay down on the wire mattress. Even though I was wearing a heavy coat, I felt constant pain from the wretched mattress no matter how I shifted my position.

By Sunday nothing had changed. In the evening I could not contain my hunger any longer. I had not eaten since Tuesday other than the thin slice of gingerbread on Thursday. My stomach ached and my throat was dry. Hunger drove me from the hideout and made

me forget the danger. I struggled to make up my mind whether to endanger myself by knocking on a Polish house and begging for a piece of bread. Past experience reminded me not to trust the majority of the Poles. One way or the other my life was at stake. Dizzy and feeling faint, I decided that regardless of what lay ahead, I had to look for food.

The renovated houses occupied again by the Poles were brightly lit. In one place chandeliers with bright lights made me assume there were visitors inside. The smell of baking reached my nostrils. I could hardly restrain my burning desire for a piece of bread. I stiffened, gathered my strength and started walking up the outside steps. Fear soon overtook me and I became worried that the Polish owner would deliver me to the Germans. I backed up and ran down the stairs. It was hard to get rid of my fear. I made up my mind to knock on the door after the guests had left. But I thought it was past ten o'clock so I was not sure whether the visitors hadn't already left. I was afraid if I waited too long that the owners would go to sleep.

Eventually, my young companion went and knocked on the door and asked for something to eat. The Poles recognized us. Nevertheless, they invited us in and gave us a piece of bread and some hot tea. I was surprised by the peaceful atmosphere in that house--light, warmth and cleanliness were things which we had not known for years. As soon as we ate the few bites with the tea, we thanked our hosts and left. I was still afraid, but felt better. We returned for the night to the small house with the twisted mattress.

In the next few hours I had to figure out my next step. I seemed to have the choice of dying of hunger or being betrayed by Poles, but regardless of that, I had to find Pearl.

CHAPTER 38

FACING THE HOSTILE WORLD

Monday morning we were pretty sure that the new Polish occupant of the house would return to finish cleaning, so as the first gray streaks of dawn filtered tenuously through the window, I got ready to leave. I was being hunted, and I had nowhere to go. My companion decided to hide in his former neigbourhood in Sosnowiec. He invited me to come along, but I turned it down. He was wearing a suit and a woman's fur coat, his only remaining family possessions. He had turned the black lining out to attract less attention. There was no traffic in the early morning so he hoped to reach the hideout without difficulty. We wished each other good luck and good-bye. With no hope of ever meeting again, we parted in opposite directions.

I felt more alone than ever. A time of danger even more critical than that of the past had begun. My thoughts revolved constantly around Pearl. I was most upset by my ill-considered action in not meeting her. But I could not reverse what had already taken place. The only thing I wanted to do was to go and find her. My intuition told me she got out of detention. I assumed she would go to Mr. Kowalski. She had brought him all kinds of clothing and she would hold him to his promise to hide her.

I did not know how to locate him. I had never been to his place. When Pearl and Chaim returned from their first meeting with him, I had asked for directions. It was twenty kilometres past Bendzin,

over fields and across several bridges. But I certainly never assumed I would have to walk there by myself. The only option was to try to find it. Asking the Poles for directions would be foolhardy.

I tried to dismiss my fears and to forget about the awful possibility of getting caught. I was dressed in a gray winter coat and had a white silk kerchief with black flowers on my head. I decided to avoid the city. After a long walk across the fields I came to a road. It was still early and so far I had not come across anyone. On one side of the road a walled fence extended for a long distance. The building of the German police was on the other side. I passed it nervously, but without a problem.

At a crossing I turned left over more open fields until I came to a small bridge. I crossed it and turned to the left. I skirted a village and came to a junction, but could not decide whether to go left or right. I found it tough to make a decision. I took the road on my right. Sunk in dismal thoughts, I avoided another village and came to a large field which was fenced in with barbed wire. The presence of guards and people in striped uniforms indicated that it was a labour camp. Fearing that I might raise the suspicion of the guards, I walked briskly away, looking over my shoulder to make sure that I was not followed. As it dawned on me how easily I could have been recognized a shudder went through me.

On one of the buildings a clock showed that it was already one o'clock in the afternoon. Exhausted, depressed and hungry, I pressed on. I kept glancing back and around me, continuing more by instinct than by sight. If I had anything going for me, it was my will to find my sister.

I came to a woodland where the road divided into several directions. I began to realize that I was lost. Two women showed up at the edge of the forest. I had no patience left, so I risked asking for directions to Mr. Kowalski. They knew him well, but I did not understand the directions they gave me and I left because of their hostile looks.

I walked along the edge of the forest and turned right. I caught sight of a little gray house standing alone by the roadside. I went up and knocked on the door. For a while there was silence. I knocked

a second time. After what seemed an eternity, I heard footsteps. The door opened a few inches and the face of a frightened older woman peered out. The door slammed shut. I waited. A few minutes later she opened the door again, looking annoyed. I excused myself and asked for Kowalski. Wearing wooden shoes that made a strange sound when she walked, she took me to the top of a hill of sand and pointed in the distance to the Kowalskis' house, near some railway tracks.

I hurried over and knocked on their door. A middle-aged woman opened it and asked what I was looking for. When I asked her if this was the house of the Kowalskis, she invited me inside. I introduced myself and asked whether Pearl had been there. The woman, whom I took to be Mrs. Kowalski, replied that she did not know anyone by that name. She said she was alone. When I pressed her, Mrs. Kowalski just repeated that she was by herself.

I had no idea what to do next or where else to look for Pearl. Despair clogged my mind. My strength ebbed. I turned to leave. With a lumbering heart, I walked through the first door. Stopping to marshal my thoughts as best as I could, I reached for the outside door to leave.

Suddenly, she called me back. She suggested that I climb the ladder to the attic. I did so. There was Pearl! I was hysterically happy to see her and to get rid of the gnawing feeling that I was alone in this fight for survival. When she heard my voice and footsteps, Pearl too was overjoyed. She told me that after I left the detention centre, the guards changed again. The detainees were eager to help her escape. The new guard did not want to leave the kitchen, so she had to wait. After midnight there was an opportunity. Only one guard was on duty. He was lured into the room and at that moment Pearl jumped through the kitchen window. She went straight to the building where we said we would meet. She called my name again and again in the darkness. She went up to the third floor to check if I was there. Finally, she gave up. She walked in the middle of the night to the Kowalskis.

We felt incredibly lucky. After a long, cold January day on the road it felt good to be in the warm attic. Mrs.Kowalski was nice

enough to bring us some pea soup. We hoped they would keep us for a few days so we could plan our next move.

Before long Mr. Kowalski returned from work. He was so angry his eyes were bulging. Rumours were spreading among his neighbours that a Jewish girl had asked for directions to his house, he said. He ordered us to leave immediately. We were speechless as our hope of a temporary hideout vanished. We had to go out into the cold winter night with nowhere to go. Sleep was our only relief from the relentless misery, but now even that small hope was dashed.

We became creatures of the night. We ran wildly along the deserted main road. We strained to listen to the sounds of the night, a dog barking here and there, voices coming from somewhere. We thought our end had come. We walked not because we had a destination, but because it was cold and we did not want to arouse suspicion by staying in one place. We decided to hike the twenty kilometres back to the former ghetto.

So as not to get lost in the dark we stuck to the main road to Bendzin. From time to time the drifting clouds let the light of the moon shine through and we could recognize where we were. The moon was full and its brilliant bluish light created strange shadows on the snow. We shivered and our breath turned into steam, forming mysterious clouds.

We passed the German police headquarters. It was quiet. At dawn we reached the former ghetto. We found a house that had not yet been cleared of the Jewish family's possessions and took refuge in the cellar all day. Sometimes we heard footsteps and moving objects and were afraid that someone might come down. In the evening, hungry, we began to walk along the main road back toward the Kowalskis.

Near the police station we saw German police leading Polish women, probably smugglers, to the station. Suddenly we heard the women yelling "Jude!" We became scared.

We turned around and went back to another empty house in the ghetto to spend the night. In the morning we were afraid the new owners would come, so we left and looked for the house where we

had spent the day before. But when we thought we reached it, it proved to be the wrong house. Through a window we could see a woman inside cleaning. We went to the outhouse, hoping that she would not need to use it. It was a long, tiring day standing on our feet. Finally in the evening the woman left.

Hungry, we did not know what else to do so we walked back to the Kowalskis. At first he refused to let us in. However, with great effort we persuaded him to let us stay overnight. When we left in the morning, he said he would not grant us further access to his house.

CHAPTER 39

NOWHERE TO RUN

In the morning, as we walked nervously through Bendzin, avoiding busy areas, we passed a house under construction with the windows boarded up. It looked like it might be a good hideout for the day. We snuck inside and discovered a cellar. We crawled down a ladder. The basement turned out to be a chicken coop and the frightened birds made quite a racket as they flew over our heads. As our eyes got used to the dark, we explored cautiously so as not to stir further panic. There was only a faint ray of light, not enough to help us avoid stepping into chicken waste, so we decided to leave. Just as we were starting to climb out, we heard a rustling sound and scurried away from the opening.

Polish children's voices were approaching. They talked about a trunk full of toys which had to be in the cellar. They looked in, but they got scared and argued that it was too dark to descend. Afraid of the darkness, they left to get candles and matches. We sighed with relief. Polish children and teenagers could easily betray us.

In the darkness we had trouble finding the ladder. In our hurry we squeezed out through the narrow opening. Our coats were covered with feathers and our boots caked with chicken waste. We hurriedly cleaned up and left.

On that sunny winter day we could not avoid the busy main streets of Bendzin. Finally we reached the fields. In the distance we saw a huge hay stack that looked like a good temporary hideout. Coming closer, we noticed that the hay had been trampled. A

discarded yellow star of David lay nearby. We assumed that a Jewish fugitive had been apprehended there.

Fear kept us constantly on the move over the snowy fields until dark, like lost sheep. For the night we went to the former Srodula ghetto to find a vacant house where we could rest. We started to lose track of time. Numbed by hunger, exhaustion, fear, despair and grief, I thought it was unlikely that we would survive. Sometimes we nearly went out of our minds because we felt that there was no way out. Every footstep, every rustle made us shiver.

More of the houses were being released to their former Polish inhabitants, so the possibility of finding overnight refuge was diminishing. We were afraid to knock on any door. It was horrible. We felt like we were surrounded and vulnerable to attack by wild animals. Prejudice against Jews made it risky even to enter a Polish bakery to buy a piece of bread.

Before the liquidation of camp Srodula the good news had reached us from the eastern front that the Germans were losing the war. But it did not matter to us any longer, as we were facing a tragic end.

We needed an inspiration, something to help us overcome the deadly reality. I wanted to leave Sosnowiec and all the territories inhabited by Poles.

CHAPTER 40

VENTURE INTO GERMANY

To survive, some Jewish girls who ressembled Poles and had false documents, volunteered to replace Polish girls, who had been called up for forced labour in Germany. Many Poles had refused to report for forced labour and were in hiding. With employment papers from the "Arbeitsamt" (Employment office), those Jewish girls went with groups of Poles to report for work in Germany. It was a risky proposition. Often recognized and betrayed by their Polish co-workers, they were killed by the Germans.

When Pearl happened to mention that one of Kowalski's daughters had returned from work in Germany, it hit me. I broached the idea to Pearl and suggested that we leave disguised as Polish girls to work in Germany.

"Let's get away from the Poles," I argued.

Pearl asked me, "Are you crazy? How do you want to do it, with no Polish documents and no employment papers from the Arbeitsamt? Add to that that we know nothing about the Christian religion and that your Jewish features are sure giveaway?" She was full of objections.

I admitted that it was a farfetched idea and I did not have the faintest idea as to how to implement it. But the idea blossomed rapidly in my mind. It was unbearable to do nothing. I said, "We have to be bold and go forward and not wait to die of hunger or betrayal."

I proposed that we return to the Kowalskis. "We must persuade them to let us stay overnight and find out from their daughter

how she came to work in Germany," I said.

That same evening we went. Mrs. Kowalski did not open the door. She came to the window and told us to look for her husband near the tracks. When he saw us, Mr.Kowalski ignored us. But we did not give up and followed him to his house, appealing to him to let us stay in the barn for one night. He refused and warned us that if we did not leave immediately he would call the German police. He entered his house and left us standing in the yard. We did not budge. To persuade us to leave once more he came out again. We reminded him that since he did not have neighbours, nobody would see us.Finally, he relented.

In the barn, we slumped into the hay, but could not fall asleep. Then I remembered that I wanted to speak with the daughter who had returned from Germany. I entered the house and asked for permission to wash myself and some clothes. Since the liquidation of Camp Srodula I had been wearing the same things. While cleaning up I talked with the daughter. I learned that she and a group of teenagers had been dispatched by the Arbeitsamt to work in Germany for several months. I asked whether there were border guards between Upper Silesia and the German Reich, but she did not know. It was after midnight when I returned to the barn.

Sosnowiec was a large city, but we never had the opportunity to explore it. During our eight months in Upper Silesia we had always been confined in one way or another. First it was the AK Camp, then the hole at Zusanna for a month, and later Camp Srodula. The idea of fleeing to Germany kindled a tiny flame of hope. I became enthusiastic. Even if it was only a fantasy at this point, it seemed to be our only chance.

It was still pitch dark and not yet four o'clock in the morning when the daughter woke us up, brought us a pitcher of water and told us we should get dressed and leave. As the daughter was leaving Pearl lamented that she was exhausted, ill and unable to walk. I tried to instill in her some courage and hope. I had to talk her out of her despair.

"Pearl, this is a good idea," I said. "It may work. We can't give up now."

I was not surprised at her behaviour; I too felt weak both in body and spirit. But we could not allow ourselves to lose any more time of resting in the hay. It took all my strength to stand up. I could not afford to lose my nerve now and I fought to regain my composure. When Kowalski's daughter returned to the barn to remind us to leave, we asked if we could come into the house to pick up the few pieces of clothing we had left there to dry. I donned an undershirt, a skirt and two half-dry blouses to avoid carrying packages which could attract attention. Finally, I struggled into a sweater, the winter coat and my boots. From the Kowalskis we received a piece of bread and a cup of tea. Before leaving at the break of day, we had decided to stop at the town of Pogoni. Mr. Kowalski gave us directions. The road to Pogoni ran parallel to the road to Sosnoviec for much of its length. We said good-bye and told them not to worry, we would not come back. With faith in our fantasy we left.

When we arrived at a small wooden bridge, we stopped. I removed the golden star of David from my necklace and threw it down into the brook flowing underneath the bridge. As I put the necklace back on I said to Pearl, "Now let's forget the past and walk to the future."

I had found the necklace and three American dollars while cleaning abandoned houses in Srodula. For good luck I kept the three dollars hidden in my boots.

As the sun rose to escort us, we passed lumber yards, but did not meet any people. Before noon we reached Pogoni. We looked for the other Kowalski, our supervisor, during the time we had dug potatoes in Camp Srodula. At store No. 13, in the city hall building, we found him. He seemed stunned to see us, but once he overcame his surprise, he was friendly. We inquired if there was a border between Sosnowiec and Germany. He did not respond, but instead he offered to find us a hiding place. Telling us to wait, he left to inquire. For what to us was an eternity, we waited. We walked around, alert, scanning the street. Thinking that someone might pass by and identify us, scared us to death. Finally he returned and told us that he had visited a few places to seek a hideout, but no one was willing to offer one. For the last few days the German murderers had

been on the rampage, conducting house-to-house searches and many Jews had been caught. Rewards had been offered for betraying Jews. Kowalski was even surprised at how we had managed to stay in the street without being spotted by the Gestapo. After all, Pogoni was their headquarters.

He advised us to leave as quickly as possible and in response to our previous query, mentioned that there was no border crossing between Upper Silesia and Germany. Thanking him, we left.

Having the sinking feeling that we were among the last survivors of our people, we were determined more than ever to head for Germany. This intention lent us the strength to move and gave us an infusion of vigour. If we were to get to Germany, we had to disregard additional risk that was posed by traveling. Suspicious of nearly everyone, I took my kerchief and folded it so it covered half my face to make my features less visible. I tried to look as if I was suffering from a toothache.

A swift look around and we were on the road to Sosnowiec. We were soon walking through the city. The sunlit streets were busy, the sidewalks crowded and shops filled with people. Pedestrians wove recklessly through the traffic, ignoring the outraged hooting of cars. German echoed in the streets.

We intended to walk all the way to the city of Katovice to avoid being recognized by informers on the streetcars. There were many signs giving directions. Although the streetcars were packed with people traveling to Katovice, few walked on the road.

Finally we reached Katovice in the early afternoon and asked for directions to the railway station. Told that it was at the other end of the city, we headed there. Our stomachs were used to hunger and it no longer bothered us much. But thirst was harder to bear. Pearl went to a house to ask for a glass of water. The Polish woman wanted to know what she was doing in Katovice. Pearl replied that she was going to work in Germany. The woman saw me through the window and asked my sister who I was, remarking that I looked like a Jewess. She mentioned that the Jews of Katovice were long gone, but the Germans were still hunting them.

"Your sister should be careful not to be mistaken for a Jewish girl

by the Germans. She could be in trouble," she advised. That she had been able to recognize me at that distance with my face half covered was frightening. We hurried away and after a long walk we reached the railway station. However, it was not operating! The railway station in service was at the end of town where we had just been.

It was late afternoon by the time we reached it. In the waiting hall hung a map of Europe with small flag-pins showing where the Eastern front was. Sarna, a small city in Eastern Poland, seemed to be where the conflict was now concentrated. Before the liquidation of Camp Srodula the Eastern front had been along the Dniepr River. Clearly the Russians had made considerable territorial gains. This bolstered our spirits. From Sarna it would be a few hundred kilometres to Sokole, where Chaim had cut logs. Should we be questioned by the Germans about our origins, we decided to tell them we were from Sokole. We expected that it would soon be in Russian hands; this would make it more difficult to investigate us.

The Katovice train station was jammed. Some people were obviously Polish smugglers; they carried tell-tale straw baskets. German police patrols seemed to be all over. From time to time they made inspections. It would be very easy to fall into German hands.

Whispering, we stood aside and watched the ticket window. We noticed people presenting identification papers to buy tickets. In order not to arouse suspicion we decided to buy short-distance tickets. Fortunately, railway tickets were inexpensive and we still had the money we received from the family who escaped with us to Upper Silesia. In Sosnowiec we had exchanged it for German marks. I hid it in my underwear.

From the map we picked the nearby city of Rybnik, west of Katovice. Pearl, in a blue coat and kerchief, looked more like a village girl than I did, so she boldly went to the counter and bought two tickets to Rybnik. Stairways leading right and left to the platform confused us. We were afraid to ask which one led to our train. Something held us back from passing the ticket barrier and we decided to wait in the corridor under the staircase for the announcement of the train's arrival. Moments later, German patrols barged into the station and went straight up the staircase, returning with a group

of Polish women smugglers. We could have been among them.We had sidestepped another dangerous situation.

In all the occupied territories and in Germany itself there were shortages of all kinds. Food and clothing were rationed, distributed only to holders of cards. People who had money and were willing to pay more could buy food on the black market. However, the German police cracked down harshly on this trade.

At sunset the train was announced and we went up to the busy platform. We pushed our way into the car and found a place to sit. At long last the engine started puffing, the wheels began to grind, the locomotive whistled and we finally left. The conductor passed and checked the tickets.

We were heading for the unknown. There were no lights in the train and the faces of the passengers were blurred in the semi darkness. Nevertheless, a German woman who sat across from me noticed my covered face. Believing that I must have a toothache, she offered me a tiny piece of cake, remarking that perhaps I could not eat bread.

We arrived in Rybnik. We had embarked without food, documents or a clear vision of where we were heading. The only reliable feeling for the moment was the conviction that getting away from the Poles would save our lives. We felt strange mingling among Germans. Meeting the enemy face-to-face, I felt like a stray dog in a pack of wolves.

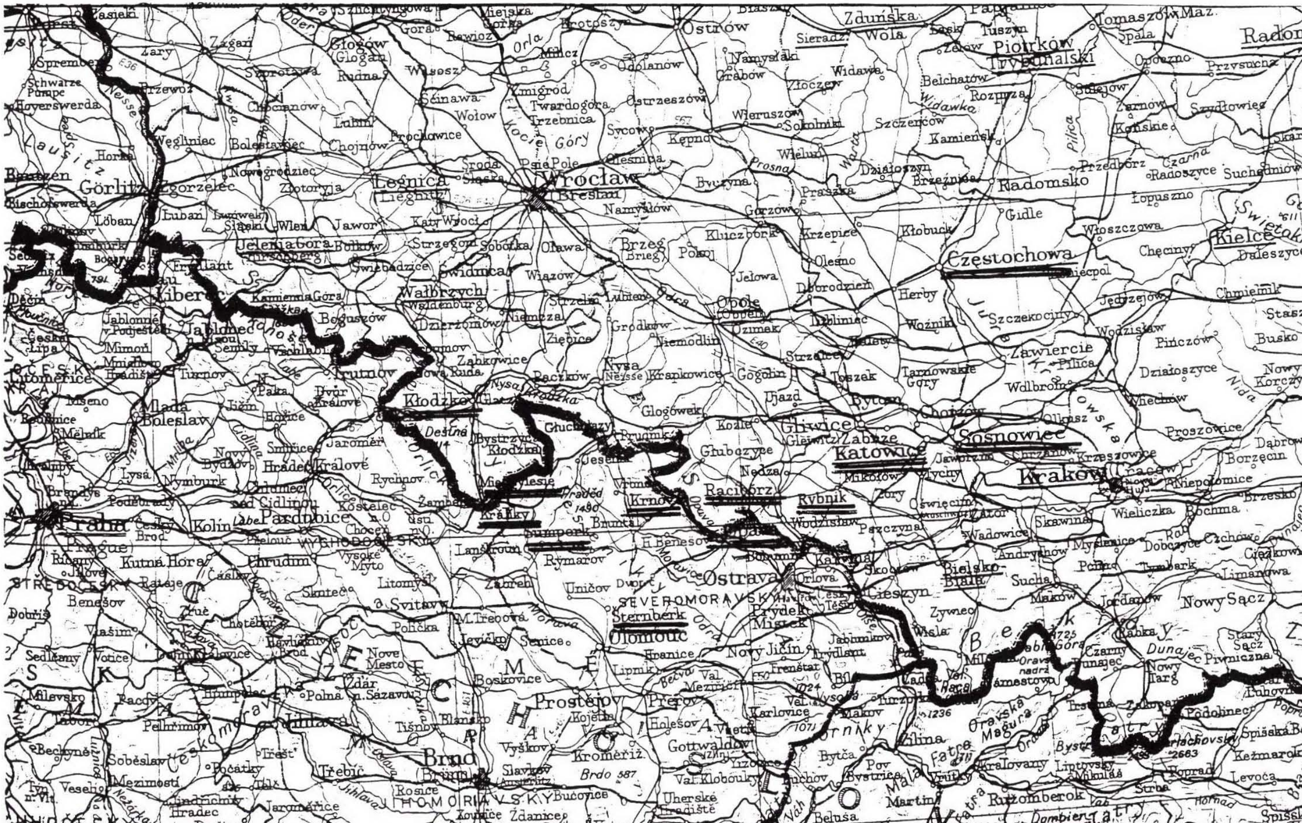
When I recalled that only a few days ago it had been unthinkable to even show my face, I marvelled at how lucky we were to pull off such a small miracle. In the Rybnik station we studied the map and found the nearest locality was the city of Ratibor. As before, Pearl bought tickets and we rode the train. In the Ratibor train station we chose Troppau (Opava), a city which before the war had belonged to Czechoslovakia, as our next destination. Again, Pearl bought tickets and we waited for the train.

Suddenly, a young man approached me, curious about my face, half-wrapped in a kerchief.

"I have a toothache," I groaned. He offered to wrap my face with cotton. I turned him down, but he was persistent. His kindness was turning into a nuisance. Anxious to rid ourselves of this mysterious

stranger, we lost ourselves among the travellers in the waiting room. But he surfaced again. We hurried away, but after a while he spotted us yet again and insisted on bandaging my face. Finally, I asked him to give me the ball of cotton in order that I could do the bandaging myself. That got rid of him.

It was very late at night when we arrived in Troppau. Once there, we learned that it was an important transportation center. Trains filled with military personnel arrived and left. German soldiers, wounded or on leave, crowded the platform. The atmosphere was tense. Trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible, we strolled through the busy station. We were the only girls. The map here was much more detailed then those we had seen in previous stations. We presumed that this was a result of the importance of the station. After some discussion we chose Jaegerndorf (Krnov), which had also belonged to Czechoslovakia. We bought tickets and waited. But no trains were moving and gradually the platform became deserted except for the stationmaster. I had taken off my face cover and went to inquire as to when the next train to Jaegerndorf would be leaving. He asked us who we were and where we were going. We explained that we were Polish girls travelling to Germany to work. All trains remained in the station overnight, he said. There would, however, be a train leaving for Jaegerndorf before daybreak at 4:30. He told us to stay in the waiting room.



Venture to Germany, January 1944

CHAPTER 41

THE INEXPLICABLE

In the last two days we had made large strides. We were now among the Germans. We, Jews, had dared not only to survive this far, but to challenge the German death machine by living and working in the "Fatherland" itself. Although we were no closer to freedom or further from death, we were pleased that we had managed to come this far. We headed for the brightly lit waiting room. It was packed with civilians and military on the way to and from the Eastern front. A seat beckoned from the only unoccupied table.

At midnight, everyone's attention turned to the entrance as three black-uniformed SS-men entered. A chill went through me. Everything was hushed. Only whispering was audible. One of the SS-men stopped next to the exit door. The others went from table to table demanding to see papers and interrogating military personel and civilians alike. My pulse increased and fear sent a sharp pang to my heart. It seemed inevitable that they would also come to investigate us. We had no documents and no employment papers. What would we tell them? That we were going to work in Germany? Where? Who sent us? How did we come here?

The seconds ticked away. I mustered, as best I could, a serene face as they approached our table. Before I could stammer a word, the stationmaster spoke up, explaining that he knew us, that we were Polish girls traveling to Germany to work. Accepting his explanation at face value, without further ado, they left for the next table where an attractive looking woman sat, her shoulders covered

with a white shawl. On demand she offered her documents, but the SS-men were not pleased with what they saw. For what seemed like an eternity they continued to grill her. We were worried that they might return to us. Finally they left. There was a collective sigh of relief. The travelers looked warily towards the corridor where they disappeared. To this day we cannot explain or understand why the stationmaster suddenly appeared nor why the SS-men accepted his explanation.

At 4:30 a.m. we boarded the train to Jaegerndorf. It was still early when we arrived since it was only a short trip. The crisp winter air was giving us an appetite and I asked a German woman standing near me where we could buy something to eat. Without ration cards, she said, we would not be able to get anything, but as she was close to her home, she offered us her two thin sandwiches, with the margarine barely visible. We were grateful for this.

Jaegerndorf turned out to be the last station before the border between Germany and the Reichsprotektorat Boehmen-Maehren, the former Czechoslovakia. It was too dangerous to attempt to cross the border, so we returned to Troppau. There we checked the map and decided to go to Mittelwalde (Miedzylesie). We arrived around noon on a cloudy winter day in January 1944. At the station restaurant, crowded with diners, we asked if we could buy food without ration cards. Apparently, only sauerkraut and beer was available. However, when we went to buy some, there was none left.

We were getting uneasy so we went out to look at the city. Just a short distance from the station, we were surprised to see a yard where chicken, geese and ducks waddled around without hindrance. We envied their freedom; we humans lived dogged by fear, hunger and terror at every step. Clearly, we needed food and a place to rest our tired bodies. Was it madness to undertake such a journey, I wondered. We needed a cover story that would convince both the ordinary German and the authorities that we were Polish girls. As we wandered through the city, I began to weave together the threads of the tale that we would tell.

Besides the snow and the signs to Gestapo headquarters, no-

thing in particular drew our attention. At one point we thought about going to the Gestapo to tell them that we were Poles. With this plan we walked toward an impressive white stone building with its wide steps. Large letters on the front wall identified it. As we began climbing the steps, I hesitated at the idea of entering the lion's den. It suddenly occurred to me that once we set foot inside, we would never come out alive. I remembered their cruelty and I realized that it would have been an error, perhaps a fatal one, even in our desperate situation, to approach them. After all, up to now we had vigourously resisted giving up control of our destiny. Life taught me never to surrender even when things were tough and the obstacles large and menacing. We left the place as hastily as we could.

On the way back to the train station we passed the poultry farm again and thought about asking for work. But we dismissed the idea. My sixth sense warned me that this was not the place for us.We consulted the map again and asked about the next train to Glatz (Klodzko). With some time on our hands before the train would arrive we went to the washroom to refresh ourselves. On the way, Pearl passed a table where she overheard a conversation in a familiar language.

CHAPTER 42

FACING THE CHALLENGE

Two women were speaking a language that sounded like Polish. Curiosity drew us close to listen. We had expected everyone here to speak German. This area was called Sudetenland. Before the Second World War it had belonged to Czechoslovakia, but it was inhabited mostly by Germans. In 1938, Hitler had invaded and annexed it into the Third Reich.

The language turned out to be Czech. Pearl started a conversation with them in Polish and they replied in Czech. In this manner we managed to communicate. After joining them at their table, we learned that their name was Langer. They were a mother in her fifties and her daughter in her late twenties. Naturally, they were curious about why we were in Mittelwalde and where we came from. In keeping with our cover, Pearl told them we were Polish girls looking for work. To any questions which might cause them to suspect our story, we responded that we did not understand. The women said that they needed help on their farm, as did other farmers in their village. If we bought our own train tickets, they would take us with them. Uneasily, we looked at one another. With no real alternatives we decided to accept their offer. We gave them money to buy tickets for us.

On the train our initial doubts began to give way to exhilaration. Still, none of this seemed real. I tried to look calm, but I was petrified about what might happen in the next few hours. Would the people in the village accept us? How would we handle their questions? Would they believe our story? Would we have the courage

to pretend to be Polish girls and hide among our enemies? To the Langers we had introduced ourselves as Jadzia and Gustava Sokolowska.

After half an hour's journey the sign ROTFLOSS appeared on top of a small railway station. It was a long walk to the village. The daughter accompanied Pearl to a neighbouring farm family, the Noseks. In the meantime, Mrs. Langer brought me to her farmhouse. It was a typical one-story structure which served as a bedroom, dining room and kitchen. When the daughter arrived she helped herself to two large slices of poppyseed cake with coffee. I was given cold cooked potatoes which had been prepared for the pigs. After many days without food I was grateful for this. It tasted quite good. After I finished eating I began to work at once, repairing torn jute bags. That evening I helped feed the pigs and chickens. For supper we had mashed potatoes and coffee. Afterwards I washed the dishes and cleaned poppyseed with Mrs. Langer. I did not see Pearl again that evening.

When we had finished the daughter took out a map and asked me about the long journey from Sokole, which I had claimed as our home. She was curious about what life was there, as were Mr. and Mrs. Langer. Attentively, they listened to my story. I began to talk about the route we had taken, but I soon regretted it. Miss Langer wondered how I knew so many details about it. Suddenly I realized I had been careless. I knew too much about the countryside we had supposedly passed by train.

I attempted to divert their attention, but I spent the rest of the evening fearful that I had talked too much. Exhausted from days without sleep and food, I fell asleep on a straw bag on the floor.

The next morning I felt better. Miss Langer told me that she had already spoken to the head of the local farmers, a Mr. Schoen. After breakfast Pearl and I would have to go to the employment office in the town of Grulich (Kraliky). She did not know whether the employment office would authorize them to keep me.

As she had indicated, once breakfast had been cleared away, Miss Langer took me to the road to meet Pearl and Mrs. Nosek, a robust farmer-woman in her thirties. With Mrs. Nosek Pearl and I went to

Grulich (Kraliky) on a horse-drawn cart. Although we were worried about the visit to the employment office, we didn't seem to have any choice. The stakes were high for us.

Pearl and I were called into the employment office and told to wait for a translator, a Polish girl. Paranoia overwhelmed me as I thought of having to face a Pole after fleeing from them. My labouring heart pounded like a drum. I feared that my nervousness would give me away.

The translator arrived. Choosing my words carefully and trying to keep tension out of my voice, I replied patiently to the German clerk's questions, as relayed to me by the Polish translator. I told them that I, Gustava Sokolowska, and my sister Jadzia had lived in Sokole, a small village between Miedzyrzec and Biala-Podlaska. Our parents had an inn, a small farm and some cattle. We attended a city school. Partisans hiding in the deep forests around Sokole often came and demanded food. If they were not satisfied with what they received they beat up the farmers. It was not uncommon for them to murder farmers who were uncooperative. Several days before they had insisted on taking our pigs. When our parents resisted, the partisans had dragged them into the forest.

Terrified, Jadzia and I crept onto a railway wagon loaded with logs that stood nearby. We were exhausted and fell asleep. When we woke up, we realized that the wagon was attached to a freight train that was rolling away. We yelled to attract attention, but, of course, nobody heard us and, after a long journey, we arrived in Katovice. I kept on telling the translator that we had a sister working in Germany. We could not recall her address and we were trying to find her. In the meantime, we wanted to work. I hesitated as I spoke, nervous of overplaying my story.

Finally, the questions came to an end. The Polish translator was in her twenties and had worked for about three years in a restaurant in Grulich. Having had no contact with her homeland, she was happy to meet other Poles. She inquired about the situation in Poland and invited us to visit her in the restaurant. When she finally left, relief washed over us.

The employment office accepted our tale -- for now. The clerk

called Mrs. Nosek in and informed her that my sister would be working for her. No sooner had she received permission than Mrs. Nosek left with my sister for Rotfloss. Then he called in Ferdinand Skalitzky, a man in his seventies, and told him that I had been assigned to work for him. With no reason to stay, Mr. Skalitzky and I also headed for Rotfloss, about three kilometres from Grulich. Whereas I had come to Grulich by horse-drawn cart, I was returning by foot. On the edge of the village we made a left turn onto a side road near a forest, walking a long distance through deep snow. Passing some railway tracks, we turned right into a field and continued on a well beaten path until we reached the Skalitzky farm house. It stood alone in the field, accessible only by the path.

During the last weeks of our wandering we had lost our sense of time. As I stepped inside my first glance fell on the calendar. It was January 23, 1944.

The house was similar to that of the Langers. On the left was the stable and on the right were living quarters, consisting of one large room. A wood burning oven and stove served for cooking, baking and heating the house. Two wooden tables graced the living quarters, one with chairs for every day tasks and eating and a fancy one covered with a tablecloth for special occasions. In the right corner of the room was a breakfront with fancy dishes. The other corner was the bedroom, with two single beds where the Skalitzkys slept. Near the oven was a bench. There were pictures on the walls. Between two windows opposite the entrance door hung a decorated picture of Hitler. Next to the big room was a small alcove where I was to sleep.

Mrs. Skalitzky was in her late sixties. They had a married daughter, Anna Katzer, who owned a farm in Grulich. Their son-in-law, their son Ferdi and all the young men from the village had been conscripted to serve in Hitler's army. Young Polish and Ukrainian men and women had been brought to replace them on the farms. With eight acres of land, the old couple owned two oxen, three cows, several pigs and chickens, but no horses. A hundred meters away from the house was a hill covered with dense clusters of trees. It formed the boundary of the Skalitskys' land. The hill ran for nearly a kilometre

toward Grulich and in the other direction reached the village. The Rotfloss train station was behind it, a small way station between Mittelwalde (Miedzylesie) and Hansdorf (Hanusovice).

The next day I began to work. In the evening, Mr. Skalitzky and I went to the mayor of the village to register. It was a lengthy walk on the icy road and it took us quite a while to reach the place. Once I was registered, I was given a yellow tag, two inches by two inches, with a large black "P" (for Pole) marked on it and was told the rules for Polish workers.

The regulations stipulated that at all times I had to have the yellow tag pinned on the left side of my chest. Poles were not allowed to leave the village without a permit from the mayor. We could not go to movies and there was a curfew after ten in the evening. Furthermore, Poles were not allowed to travel by train.

On the way back I went with Mr. Skalitzky to the Nosek house to see Pearl. In the kitchen I met Mrs. Nosek's mother-in-law, a rugged older woman. I also met a strong-looking German girl, a head taller than Pearl. It turned out that Pearl was replacing her. She had quit because the work was too exhausting. There were also three young Ukrainian men who worked for Mrs. Nosek.

In general, the Ukrainians were more privileged than the Poles, because they had collaborated with the Germans against the Russians. As a result they were subject to better treatment. The restrictions imposed on Poles, including the tags, the curfew and the prohibition on train travel, did not apply to them.

Mrs. Nosek's mother-in-law sent me up to the attic to see Pearl. There I also met one of the Ukrainians. In his twenties, he was sharp-witted and curious about our past.He disputed our story and I became annoyed, although I tried not to show it. He instilled in us fear.

With a lot of acreage devoted to growing grain, the Nosek farm was sizeable. Mrs. Nosek, her mother-in-law and my sister had to milk three cows each three times a day. In addition Pearl had to clean the stable and feed the cows. Between milkings she had to work at the threshing machine and carry heavy baskets filled with grain from the thresher to the storage room. She had never done such heavy physical work before. Even if she had been in excellent health, it

would have been unbearable.

Although the Skalitzkys' farm was smaller, there was also a lot of work for me. The routine was tough. In winter the day started when it was still pitch dark and my work did not finish before eleven at night. They taught me how to milk a cow and were surprised at how quickly I grasped the technique. Feeding the cows was more difficult at first because I was scared to walk between them. In time, though, I got used to them. To clean the stable I had to use a fork to lift the wet straw and manure into a wheelbarrow, push the load around the building to the manure pile and stack it evenly. Then I spread fresh straw in the stalls.

Usually, Mrs. Skalitzky fed the pigs and chickens. There were some big snowfalls, and it was my job to clear the snow around the barn and the house. On very cold days, once the animals were looked after, I cleaned the house and mended jute bags. It was also my job to cut straw on a machine into tiny pieces and then mix it with other feed for the cattle. In milder weather we went to the barn to thresh grain, keeping the door open to let the dust out. Once a week I washed the laundry by hand. Then I ironed. Every Saturday, besides attending to the animals, I cleaned the house.

Late one evening, a few days after my arrival, the persistent barking of the dogs kept us awake. It was a sign that some stranger was in the neighbourhood. Farmers, after a day of hard work, usually avoided late-evening visits. I was afraid the police had uncovered our false identities and had come to pick me up. There was a loud knocking at the door. My heart raced. Sweat beads broke out on my forehead even though it was cool. Even the Skalitzkys were nervous. When Mrs. Skalitzky opened the door, Pearl came in, accompanied by two men in dark civilian suits. One was tall, around thirty, the other short and older. Questions raced through my mind. "Who are these men? What do they want at this hour? Are they the Gestapo in plain clothes? Will they interrogate us and find out that we are Jewish?" I was terrified. The Skalitzkys were astonished, as they had not met my sister yet and they did not know the two men.

Pearl broke the silence with a "Dobry wieczor!" (Good evening). The smile on her face had a calmimg influence on me. She introduced

the two men and herself to the Skalitzkys. The men were two of Pearl's Ukrainian co-workers. When the Skalitzkys learned who they were, they began a conversation with them which lasted late into the night. Although the Ukrainians did not speak German well, we sensed that the shorter one was particularly sharp and suspicious. We had to be careful when talking with them. The constant fear of being identified was terrible. As if it were not enough that we were strangers, there was a natural mistrust towards us. The Ukrainians intimidated us. They wanted to know all about our past. They were even curious if we had written home yet. To allay their suspicion, we wrote a letter to Sokole which they offered to drop into a mailbox.

News of our presence spread quickly. On the very first Sunday morning, after I had taken care of the animals, Mr. Skalitzky came into the house and said some Polish workers from the village were waiting outside to see me.

I began to think how useless it had been to run away from Sosnowiec; the Poles were everywhere. I had to face them. How would the Skalitzkys react if I refused to see them? I could imagine the Poles rejoicing as they cornered me. I felt miserable. Forcing myself to go to the alcove, I donned my red sweater. I tied the white kerchief with black polka dots on my head of black, curly hair, covering a little bit of my face on both sides. It was the best I could do.

After delaying as long as I could, I went out, shivering inside, but putting on a cheerful face. They were glad to see me and anxious to know all about me and the situation in Poland. Talking about the other Poles who were working in the village, they invited me to come with them that afternoon to the "Gasthaus" (tavern). It was on the main road at the edge of the village, in a small hotel owned by a man named Henschel. Not only was I not in the mood, but I had not come to Germany to surround myself with Poles. In addition, I still had to take care of the animals and the stable, prepare meals and wash dishes. All I had was a few hours in the afternoon to relax.

Totally unnerved, I somehow managed to respond. Later that afternoon, Pearl came with the two Ukrainians and asked me to join them at Henschel's. I surrendered and grudgingly went to meet

the other Poles and Ukrainians. To my chagrin they peppered me with an unending stream of questions. Finally, they began to leave, inviting us to meet them again. We could not shake off the two Ukrainians, so Pearl and I were unable to confide in each other.

The following Friday evening, Mr. Skalitzky had to visit somebody in the village. I asked him if I could come along so I could visit my sister. When I got to the Noseks, I was disturbed to see Pearl crying. Because of the pain in her arms and hands, she lamented that she was unable to sleep. She felt she could not carry on. She was sick and too weak to perform her daily chores.

The fear of what might happen to her if she could not continue haunted me. Where would she find a refuge? What could I do to ease her pain? That night I could not sleep.

The next day she was sent to a doctor. There were no telephones and I had to wait till Sunday to learn what happened. The doctor diagnosed that her arms and hands were overstrained. Mrs. Nosek informed the labour office that my sister was not suitable for the work. She wanted her out and requested other help.

CHAPTER 43

WRESTLING WITH THE ODDS

Grulich was inhabited mostly by Germans. They had agitated vigourously to be annexed to the German Reich and in the fall of 1938 their wish was fulfilled.

In the middle of the main square was a hotel with a restaurant, managed by another Mrs. Nosek, unrelated to the farmer Nosek. Her husband was active in the local SS. They had two boys, seven and nine years old.

The labour office sent Pearl to the Nosek hotel. There were probably notes in our file that our parents had a restaurant. She was to divide her time between cleaning guest rooms and the kitchen. I thought we were fortunate that she got the hotel job, assuming it would not be as strenuous as the farm work.

An aunt of Mrs. Nosek was the cook. She was an older woman, short and heavy, hardly able to move. Working in the kitchen were two Ukrainians, Katie and her sister, and a German girl who was learning to be a cook. A red-haired German girl from Berlin took care of the rooms.

Obviously, I missed Pearl when she left Rotfloss for Grulich. I felt lonely. The struggle was easier to bear together.

The Poles in Rotfloss gossiped a great deal about us. I was frightened that we aroused suspicion among them. Now it was easier for Pearl to avoid them. But I was under such constant stress that my eating habits changed. Even in a brief conversation with a Pole it was possible through a slip of the tongue to endanger our lives.

I tried my utmost to avoid them.

Pearl had every second Sunday and every second Thursday afternoon off. The Sunday after she left for Grulich, I went to visit her. I was impatient to find out how she felt and how she was fitting into the new surroundings. This was also a good excuse not to keep company with the Poles in the Henschel tavern.

I found her washing dishes in the kitchen. To be close to her, I took off my coat and helped. It was busy that afternoon and my help was appreciated. Mrs.Nosek, the owner, active and alert, often came into the kitchen to check if all was in order. She was slim, well dressed and acted like a lady.

Pearl introduced us. She gazed at me and right away made a remark to her aunt that I looked Semitic. Pearl and I understood although they spoke German. Her remark took me by complete surprise, as I believed that the Germans would not take notice of my characteristics. My sister looked at me and I looked at her -- in silence. Then Mrs. Nosek rushed out. Her observation touched the ever-present raw wound of our awareness that we were at great risk. The German police could find us and pick us up at any time.

I continued helping with the dishes for a while and said to Pearl, "I will not visit you during working hours."

Being an ardent nationalist and the wife of an SS-man, Mrs. Nosek must have been aware that the Germans were exterminating the Jews of Europe. But I was sure that she could not have believed for a moment in her wildest imagination that Jewish girls would have the gall to come to Germany in 1944, disguised as Poles, and actually stand in front of her.

Nevertheless, her remarks lay heavy on my mind. I was glad to be working on the isolated farm, secluded from people.

On a Sunday when Pearl had the afternoon off, she came to visit me. We walked over pathways under the open sky. Finally we could speak freely. We reminded each other to be on guard all the time.

On the Sundays when Pearl worked, I rested in the afternoon.

One Sunday afternoon Mrs. Skalitzky asked me to deliver a

parcel to her daughter in Grulich. Walking through the streets, my attention was attracted to posters that had gone up on the walls of public buildings. On a yellow background was a sketch of a man with the text, "Der Feind hoert mit!" "The enemy is listening!"

Just as I entered the house of the daughter, there was an announcement over the radio. I caught the last part of the news that the Germans had lost some battles. It comforted me considerably.

The daughter, Anna, had two employees, a young couple, to help on her farm. Both were Czechs. Czechs enjoyed many more privileges. I liked the couple and when they invited me to go out with them for a beer, I accepted.

In the restaurant I was stunned to see the Polish girl who served as translator in the employment office. I had no idea this was where she worked. She was happy to see me. She told me she had heard that my sister was working in the Nosek hotel and they were pleased with her.

She introduced me to her employer, who expressed her readiness to hire me; she was willing to go the next morning to the employment office to ask them to assign me to her restaurant. As a Pole I had no legitimate right to choose my place of work. The parties who wanted me to work for them had to fight it out among themselves.

As I returned to Rotfloss, I stopped at the Nosek hotel and had a chat with Pearl for a few minutes as she was rushing back to the kitchen. The German girl who was learning to cook had been assigned to ordinary tasks and now Pearl was helping with the cooking and baking.

Mrs. Nosek was impressed with my sister and realized that she could use her for more challenging work. She was determined to get me as well and told Pearl that she had applied at the employment office to have me assigned to her. The officials of the employment office dined in Mrs. Nosek's restaurant. To influence them to supply her with good cheap labour,she bribed them with extra-large portions of meat.Other guests were served food on ration cards.

Although it would have been easier to work in the kitchen than on the farm, I thought I was safer with the Skalitzkys.

One Sunday afternoon I did not know what to do with myself.

I felt a need to get rid of my misery. I decided to go to a movie in Grulich. In the entrance hall two German policemen watched to see who came in. They demanded that all the East European workers identify themselves.

The Ukrainians were permitted to go to the movies. Poles who tried to get in and got caught had to pay a fine of two marks and were refused entry. I took a chance, bought a ticket and went in without being stopped. I missed the title and was too wrapped up in pictures of my own troubled and restless life to follow the story. But after two hours I felt better, my mind cleared up.

When I had left Rotfloss for Grulich that afternoon it was sunny with just a few clouds in the sky. It had been a pleasant February day. There was no wind and the temperature was above freezing.

Leaving the cinema, it was snowing. As I walked out of town I realized that there was a real storm. The snow was blowing over the farms, forming deep drifts on the roadways. It would be easy to get lost because I could not find the road. As it got dark the brisk wind dispersed the snow clouds and the moon shone brightly in the cold evening sky, its eerie light glistening on the smooth surface of the fresh snow.

I still was wearing the boots which Pearl and Chaim had brought to the orchard from our home in Siedlce. When I took a step I sank in snow up to my knees. I had trouble pulling my feet out from the deep drifts. I became exhausted, although I still had a long distance to go. I began to realize that I would not reach the farm that night. I debated with myself for quite a while and decided to return to Grulich to the Skalitzkys' daughter, although it was already late.

The daughter was asleep, but the young Czech man opened the door and let me in to stay overnight. I was surprised at his kindness in creating a comfortable sleeping place for me with pillows and blankets on a table. I never forgot his hospitable gesture.

The next day I waited till afternoon when the road was partially cleared. I thought the Skalitzkys would worry when I did not return for the night and was not surprised to meet the old couple half-way to their farm. They were searching for me! We returned to the farm together.

After we got back to the house, a Polish woman who was sent by the employment office showed up to replace me. In the morning while I was away the Skalitskys had been notified by Mr. Schoen, the leader of the local farmers and the future father-in-law of their son, that Mrs. Nosek from the restaurant had applied at the employment office to have me work for her.

In the evening Mr. Skalitzky went to Mr.Schoen to ask him to intervene on their behalf at the employment office. They did not want a replacement. The next morning Mr. Schoen went to the employment office and asked them to remove the Polish woman. She left the next day. The following day another female worker showed up, but the Skalitzkys sent her right back as well.

On Thursday Mr. Schoen returned to the employment office to demand that I remain with the Skalitzkys. The clerk offered to exchange me for a male worker. Originally, they had asked for a male because at their advanced age they needed a young, strong man to help. But now they rejected the proposed replacement.

The employment office persisted for a long time, but Mr. Schoen argued that food-growing was more essential to the economy than the restaurant business and warned them that if they did not approve my working for the Skalitzkys, he would protest to higher authorities. That intervention enabled the Skalitzkys to keep me.

Mrs. Nosek was not happy that despite her influence she had to give up. It gave me some satisfaction that she did not succeed.

One particularly mild winter day the Skalitzkys decided to thrash grain. Around ten o'clock in the morning the choking dust sent me outside for a moment for some fresh air.

Suddenly I spotted a silhouette walking toward us. I tried to figure out who the surprise visitor could be. The shape of a man became distinct. A mist came over my eyes and I felt faint as fear spread through me.

I thought I recognized the familiar uniform of a German policeman, a hateful sight. As he came closer I could see that I was right. I braced myself.

I had expected an interrogation by the police. Now it was coming. The Skalitzkys also noticed him and wondered what he was looking

for. But I knew I was the reason for his visit.

I ran into the house to pick up the yellow tag with the black "P" and pinned it on my chest. I returned to the barn with an innocent smile. I went right to work to give the impression that I was not disturbed by his presence. The Skalitzkys greeted him in a friendly way. They chatted for a while, but I was not able to catch a word.

Then the policeman turned to me and began asking questions. Forcing a calm tone, I replied as best as I could. He ordered me to come to the police station in the neighbouring village the following Sunday morning. This was scary. The Skalitzkys kept quiet and I was afraid to ask them if they had some hint about the reason for my summons. The next few days were filled with suspense.

On Sunday I pinned the tag on my chest and set out for a long walk to the police station in the neighbouring village. I wanted to get it over with, for better or for worse. I stopped near the building, my heart pounding and my knees shaking. I gathered all my courage to get control of myself. I took several deep breaths and walked into the office. I went through the first room and the next, but nobody was in. When I stepped into the third room, there was the policeman.

I looked at him and said, "I am Miss Sokolowska and came following your order."

He interrogated me for a while about where I came from. Then he took my fingerprints and told me to get back to the farm. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I did not feel comfortable wearing the "P" and as soon as I returned to the farm I took it off. The Poles in Rotfloss got used to me not wearing it. Not having it on meant that I did not attract the attention of the Poles and Ukrainians from outside the village, enabling me to leave Rotfloss without a permit from the mayor. Sometimes I ignored the curfew, as I usually returned on Sundays from a visit to Pearl in Grulich well after ten o'clock.

The next Sunday afternoon, I went to see Pearl and told her about the summons and my trip to the police station. She listened and then revealed her own new worries. Her roommates, the two Ukrainian sisters, told her that she was talking in her sleep. They wanted to know what she was saying.

I recalled scenes from before the war. We all slept in one room. Pearl and Chaim, both in deep sleep, sometimes sat up in bed and actually had a conversation with each other! Then it was funny and we laughed. Now we were worried that Pearl might reveal the secret of our identity in her sleep. There was no way to change the sleeping accommodation or her behaviour, so we had to live with the risk.

Pearl's and my attachment to each other had never been as deep and strong. We lived for each other. We needed each other. We clung to an unshakeable belief in our ancestors and family, whose strength and protective merit could help us transcend the bitter reality.

In 1944 the spring weather was unusually mild. The sun stripped the surrounding land of its snow and the countryside changed. The farmers came out to the fields to plant. We put in potatoes, beets and oats. The Skalitzkys' future daughter-in-law and two other women from the village came to help. The work in the fields was on top of my regular work in the stable and the house. In the warm weather the smell of the stable always followed me. I felt filthy. There was no soap. I had to use laundry detergent to wash my body and even my face. After days in the hot sun my face dried out. Dark spots showed up.

We seldom had visitors, especially on working days. One fine spring day as I came out from the stable I saw a tall young man in the entrance of the house. He looked at me and I looked at him. I wondered where he came from. After he left, the Skalitzkys explained that he was a Pole by the name of Zygmund. I was sure that I knew all the Poles in the village. It was a surprise to find out that there were others.

Later I learned that along the right side of the main road into Grulich was a large, secluded farm where Zygmund worked. Mr. Schoen had arranged with that farmer to loan Zygmund and a horse to help Mr. Skalitzky to plow the fields. Sometimes Zygmund picked up bags of grain from the Skalitzkys at the same time as he was delivering grain from his farmer to the mill and then to the bakery in Grulich. They liked Zygmund for his willingness to help.

A week later he came, unexpectedly, to plow. He introduced

himself and asked me if he could see me on Sunday afternoon. He seemed decent and I agreed. I thought it would give me a chance to become friends and convince the Poles that I was socializing with them. I also wanted to show the Skalitzkys that I was not shunning the Poles.

The Poles knew more or less what was going on at the war front. When they and the Ukrainians gathered they discussed the news. I was glad to meet Zygmund from time to time to receive reports from the Russian front. Scraps of information about the Allies' progress served as a welcome consolation and an important lifeline.

CHAPTER 44

THE SUMMER OF 1944

At the end of April it got cold and in the first days of May a heavy blizzard brought an accumulation of four feet of snow, so I had quite a bit of shovelling to do. Even though I cleared the snow around the farm house, Mr. Skalitzky was not able to deliver the milk to the village because the long path through the meadow was blocked. It took several days for the warm spring sun to melt the snow in the fields.

Soon the meadows became green again. The grass shot up and Mr. Skalitzky and I went out at five in the morning to cut it for the morning feeding of the cows. At six I went to the stable to milk, feed and clean. Between seven and eight we had a short recess for breakfast. Then back to the fields to cut grass for hay. Under the hot sun it dried fast and we shaped it into bundles and bound it.

At noon Mrs. Skalitzky would go in to prepare lunch while I took care of the cows again. The minute we finished swallowing the last bite we returned to the meadow. As evening approached we moved the bundles of hay on special carts to the farm. We unloaded them and lifted them to the loft. Then I still had to do the regular chores which took until eleven at night. This was the normal work day all summer long.

The good weather brought also lots of weeds. Pulling them out was additional back-breaking work.

One afternoon I got pains in one side of my body. They became so intense that I was moaning and could not work or

eat. On the third day it subsided enough for me to go to a doctor. He gave me a rubbing compound. I was weak from pain and lack of nourishment, but I forced myself to resume work. The long hours in the fields under the hot sun with no rest were very hard on me. I had trouble sleeping; I would wake up in terror, covered with sweat and exhausted, dreaming about the deportations and hiding from the Germans. I saw columns of people destined for deportations passing by. Germans were screaming and shooting. The frightened faces of the victims loomed before me.

One night I dreamed about Rifka. She was in the forest surrounded by small animals who would not let me get close to her. I cried and begged, but they were unyielding.

When I arrived at the Skalitzkys my clothing consisted of what I was wearing - two blouses, an undershirt, a skirt and a red sweater. I had no work clothes. I had to put on a badly torn dress, full of holes, which was hanging in the stable. Mrs. Skalitzky requested a ration card for material to sew a working dress for me, but she could not get it. She did receive a ration card for herself and used it to buy some thin denim material, which was the only thing available. In the attic she found an old oversized cotton dress with small flowers that had been her grandmother's. She gave the denim and her grandmother's dress to the village dressmaker to sew a working dress and a summer dress for me.

One Sunday morning, on the way to the dressmaker, I met a few Poles. As we chatted they expressed their unhappiness about the long hours and hard work. Then they hit me with penetrating questions. In other circumstances the questions would have sounded simple. First they wanted to know why I did not wear the tag with the "P" for Pole. I justified myself by saying that I found the German rules unacceptable. Why was the crucifix on my neck chain missing? I explained that I had lost it on my journey to Rotfloss and planned to buy one next time I was in Grulich. But I never did. Why did I not show up at the evening dances? I said I was too tired and too far away from the village. I promised to come to the next one. I knew they gossiped that I did not look like them. On the way back I met Stefa, a Polish girl who worked at a

farm near the dressmaker. She invited me to visit her attic quarters. As we walked she also complained about the working conditions, but admitted that her boyfriend helped her out. He was a Ukrainian ten years older who worked on the same farm. She felt obligated to sleep with him. When she learned that he was unfaithful, she suppressed her feelings and did not react because she was afraid he might beat her.

The Germans of that village completely embraced Hitler and his ideas. Everything had to work for the war effort so the Reich could conquer the world. The farmers had to deliver a quota of their harvest for Germany and the Fuehrer, so as summer approached the pressure on the foreign workers intensified. The severity of the work was alarming. The Poles who had been forced to come there were mostly from villages and were accustomed to farm life, but they felt miserable under the tough conditions. To release their frustration, like Stefa and her co-worker, they got into love affairs with each other. There were pregnancies and births. Most of these people corresponded with their families and they were usually optimistic that at the end of the war they would return to their own loved ones and forget all about these affairs.

The Germans lived frugally. Clothing was scarce.Everyone had to mend their things. Factories produced very little for the civilian population; everything was for the military. The farmers had no problem with food since they could produce it themselves, but city dwellers suffered from shortages because the food allotted on ration cards was not sufficient. Nothing was thrown out. Even the sweepings on the Skalitzky farm were used for fuel in the stove.

At one point, quite unexpectedly, the Poles in the village, including me, received ration cards for clothing. We got time off and went to Grulich to shop. We were amazed to see the store windows decorated with men's suits and women's clothing. It looked as though we could even get a choice of material. But inside there was no merchandise and the clerk told us to come another time. After a long wait and a few return trips, I was finally offered some old clothing. I got a second-hand black sweater with mended sleeves. I had strong suspicions about where it came from. I saw

myself in May of 1943 in the synagogue in Miedzyrzec where mountains of clothes, shoes, dishes, furniture, all confiscated from deported Jews, had been sorted and packed to be shipped to Germany.

In Upper Silesia I had also witnessed the confiscation of Jewish possessions, which were sent to the "Wirtschaftsamt" (the Economy department) in Berlin for distribution. The very good and the good items went to the Germans, the mended ones to the foreign workers. As I recalled those scenes there were no more tears in my eyes but a deep pain remained in my soul.

One hot day as I worked in the meadow with Mrs. Skalitzky, a Pole whom the others called Vladek "the Fool", called to me from the adjoining field. To avoid being harassed by him, I stopped to listen. Mrs. Skalitzky became outraged at my daring to stop work for a moment. I was shocked, but I controlled myself. I never forgot who I really was. But I felt dismayed after working so hard and trying to please them. She did not realize how deeply she had hurt me. I knew it was safer to keep my mouth shut. However, to let them know I was upset, I went on a hunger strike. I was used to hunger so it did not really bother me, but the Skalitzkys were concerned that I would not be able to carry on the work. In a few days I began to eat again, but anger still seethed in me.

Saturday was cleaning time in the Skalitzky household. One day as I dusted the picture of Hitler my rage erupted. Nobody else was in the house so I slammed it and cursed the murderer. My whole body shook. I did not lose control, however. I had to restrain myself so as not to damage the picture.

On a Saturday while I was scrubbing the floors Mrs. Skalitzky mended a brown sweater. She remarked that it was a very good sweater that she had bought from Jews in Grulich. She mentioned that they were good people, but nobody knew what happened to them. Another Saturday, as I was cleaning the house she showed me a nicely decorated silver box in which she kept coffee beans. She said that it had also been bought in Grulich from Jewish people who had disappeared without a trace. I stood rooted to the spot, wondering whether her mention of Jews was entirely accidental. It crossed my

mind that perhaps the Skalitzkys knew our secret and were simply toying with me. My instinct told me to be very cautious, not to show my feelings and not to let them know my thoughts. I shrugged and said nothing. In general I tried never to make any comments about Jews to show that I did not care. But her comments nagged at me.

One hot day, after we weeded the vegetable patch as usual till the bright sunlight surrendered to dusk, I went into the stable to take care of the animals. The cows were resting and swishing at the flies with their long tails. Mrs. Skalitzky went to prepare supper and Mr. Skalitzky went to rest with his pipe at the kitchen table.

Suddenly through the open stable entrance I caught a glimpse of a man. It was unusual to see strangers moving in the barnyard. I rushed to the door. The man stopped and stood for several moments without uttering a word. He looked deranged, like a cornered animal. His eyes moved swiftly from side to side. Finally, with an expression of determination on his face, he ran up the hill and disappeared into a cluster of trees. A short time later German guards came into the yard. They knocked on the house door and asked the Skalitzkys whether they had seen an escaped convict passing by. They had not noticed him. I said nothing.

I gave a great deal of thought to the scene I was watching, because it mirrored my own situation. I was convinced that the escapee had little chance of surviving. It looked like he intended to hide in the forest. I had the feeling that he was as innocent of any crime as I was. The guards went straight to the hill and searched the forest until late into the night.

On the Sunday afternoons when Pearl was busy working Zygmund would come to visit. Eventually he introduced me to his Polish friend Stefan and his co-worker Irene, a Ukrainian girl. They worked on a farm on the other side of the road to Grulich. The owner was a young woman who was running her farm while her husband was in the army.

Zygmund usually brought encouraging news of new German defeats. Foreign workers told and retold each other the news that came to them through unofficial channels about German losses

and retreats. By these means I learned about D-Day.

In the spring of 1944 the Germans were on the defensive in Eastern and Southern Europe. In the West the Allies dominated the airspace and hammered the German supply lines in France and Germany itself, all in preparation for an expected massive invasion. On June 6, 1944 the Allies invaded Normandy.

I learned of the Allied advances in France, as city after city was liberated and also of the important offensive for Bielo-Russia in the middle of the long Eastern front that the Soviet army began in June 1944, the third anniversary of the German invasion of Russia.

In July, the Russians invaded the western Ukraine, capturing Lwow and Vilno in the north. The Soviets then crossed into Poland, taking Brest-Litowsk without any significant opposition from the German army. They halted at the gates of Warsaw. Other Russian forces crossed the Bug River and entered Lublin.

Meantime, my high-risk relationships with the Poles took a dangerous turn. At first Zygmund had behaved like a gentleman, but as time progressed, he began to make demands for greater intimacy. Friendship was all I was willing to offer. He was annoyed that I did not want to understand his burning desire. Sensing my lack of experience in these matters, he explained that my coolness infuriated him. I was in a real dilemma. I had to distance myself from him, but I was uneasy about how to do this without creating animosity. I tried to explain that we had different values and that I was waiting until the end of the war to plan my future. I understood his situation and attitude. He was lonesome, far away from his family and working hard.

After one friendly conversation, I slowly and cautiously came forward with a suggestion. Irene was strong, robust and tall, like Zygmund. They had the same needs. Besides, I could see that she had a liking for Zygmund. I told him that he deserved a better girl than me. I was another type. I had different dreams. I tried to convince him more and more that she would be a better match. As he considered my suggestion, I noticed a significant change in his relationship with Irene. My friendship with him wound down

without any bitterness. I let him know that he had made a good choice. I was glad that he was able to find someone else on whom to lavish his attention. Stefan told me later that Irene was jealous and afraid I would steal Zygmund from her.

One Sunday I overheard a conversation between the Skalitzkys about an unsuccesful plot to assassinate Hitler. I was unable to ask questions because I could not let them know that I had overheard their conversation. In the afternoon I went to the farm where Stefan and Irene worked. The young farmer-woman was at home. She had heard about me and was curious to get to know me. Stefan and Irene were there as was Zygmund. From Zygmund and Stefan I found out the details about the conspiracy against Hitler.

It was the only active German resistance during the Nazi regime that I heard of. Graf Stauffenberg, a general staff officer and leader of the conspiracy, believed that it was his duty to overthrow Hitler. Out of love for his country he had acted together with a group of other Germans to destroy the tyranny which was enslaving nearly all of Europe. He and his friends were exposed and condemned to death.

Some time later, the Skalitzkys' son Ferdi came home on leave. Suddenly we had a lot of visitors, including his fiancee and her parents and sister. Ferdi had been home before, but this time he and his parents spent a lot of time in the attic, talking about the failed plot against Hitler. When I was not around they talked freely, but as soon as I entered they usually fell silent.

During Ferdi's stay he did not utter a word to me. He ignored my presence as if I did not exist, although we were frequently in the same room. As he left to go back to the Western front, it puzzled me when he stopped and yelled, "Auf Wiedersehen, Gusti!" ("See you again, Gusti!") I did not understand his behaviour.

CHAPTER 45

HARVEST TIME

For six months I had succeeded in my disguise. I had made mistakes, but my luck was holding out. While many thousands of young, bright, resourceful Jewish women were being gassed in the crematoria, I, at least, was still alive.

With the onset of the harvest the sound of grain being cut could be heard all around. I had to move swiftly behind the machine to bundle the stalks of grain, working all day under the blazing sun with no rest. I had been able to walk barefoot all summer long without difficulty, but it was nearly unbearable when I had to run across freshly cut grain fields because the stubble pierced the soles of my feet. My right foot started bleeding and later swelled up. I could hardly walk, but my work would not wait. Limping or hopping on one foot with great pain I carried on. Late at night I soaked my foot to get some relief before going to sleep.

Once in a while the Skalitzkys hired a woman from the village, but she worked only half a day. That left them and me with my sore foot to move the bundles of grain into the barn. Those were weeks of agony until my foot finally got better.

Mercilessly pushing myself, I lost more weight than I had gained since I had come to Rotfloss. The Skalitzkys had requested a robust young man from the employment office and really did not want a slender girl like me. I felt at times as if I were on the verge of falling apart from the heavy workload on top of the constant fear of exposure. The few hours of sleep each night did not give me enough

time to recuperate. Even in sleep my body was working and the terrible pain persisted. I was afraid to complain, as this work-place had to be my salvation. Each morning I crawled out of bed, still tired from the previous day. It required an enormous effort to maintain appearances. There was nothing for me to look forward to. Should I survive, I had no home to return to and no family. Even the graves of my nearest and dearest were unknown. I knew there would be no sign where the victims' ashes had been strewn after they were gassed and burned.

One Sunday afternoon, after my foot finally felt better and I was more rested, I went to see Pearl in Grulich. As I passed the train tracks I heard my name being called by Vladek the Fool. While I was talking to him I heard someone behind me say "Good day" in Polish. I turned around and saw a handsome young blond man in a nice Sunday suit with a "P" pinned on his lapel. He was quite excited to meet other Poles. He came from the city of Krakow, whereas most of the Poles I met in the area were from villages. His name was Josef and he worked for an old couple on a farm in a village near the city of Hansdorf. (Hanusovice) He looked keen and alert and was interested to know much more than I wanted to divulge. After I told him where I worked, he took it for granted that he would be welcome from time to time to visit me on Sundays. To avoid him I left the Skalitzky farmhouse when I thought he might come.

Once he came when I was away and mentioned to the Skalitzkys that where he worked and on neighbouring farms were orchards. He could get apples at a fair price. The Skalitzkys did not have any apple trees and apples were not easily available. When I got back later Mrs. Skalitzky asked me if I would be willing to go by train to bring apples from Josef's village. I agreed, as it would be a diversion for me.

I went the next Sunday after completing my work. Before I left Mrs. Skalitzky paid me a strange compliment. She said that there was talk in the village that I looked and dressed like a German girl. I thought it was a joke.

There were few people on the train and as I listened to the

turning wheels all kinds of thoughts rushed through my mind. The conductor came and checked the ticket without comment. After a while the train rattled into the station. Josef was waiting for me. I met the old couple he worked for. He showed me around the village and wanted to introduce me to a Polish family who lived nearby. I declined because I did not want to draw attention to myself.

It was a nice summer day and I enjoyed walking through the meadows and alongside the woods. Josef was pleasant company. He told me about the progress of the Allies on the Western front. We also joked around and for a few hours I forgot my misery. The Skalitzkys were delighted with the apples and said that they would like to get some more later.

During the apple harvest, on Sunday afternoons when Pearl was working I sometimes went back to Josef's village. On one of my visits he said to me, "Gusti, you know the police identified a Jewish girl disguised as a Pole, working in the neighbouring village. They took her away."

A chill went through me. I could not believe it. If it was true, I knew she was no more among the living. As it registered my mind shifted gears and went into overdrive. I could not let him know the emotional impact that his story had on me. His tone did not change, but I studied his face. I was not sure what was going on behind his smile. I was not convinced about his sincerity. He could have been trying to provoke me. I forced myself to smile back. With as little nervousness as I could muster I said, "I don't believe it. It is impossible. No one would have the courage to do that. Under the strict German rules no Jewish girl could possibly pose as a Polish girl."

Once again it came home to me like a heavy blow how dangerous this adventure was. I wondered whether I had been careless. Was I too playful? Should I have avoided him altogether from the first moment on,disregarding the fact that I had to detach myself from the misery once in a while? He seemed understanding and decent, a city type with no temper. But I was not about to trust him with my life. I assumed I was his friend only for as long as he thought I was one of them. I slowly shifted our conversation to less charged topics.

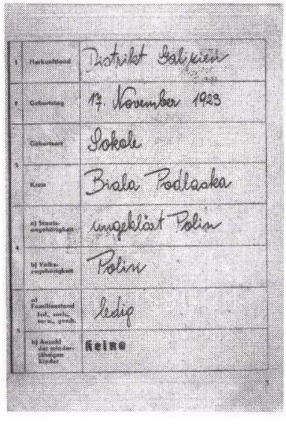
Although he did not bring the subject of that Jewish girl up again, I remained tormented and uncomfortable. Josef could be dangerous. On one or two following Sundays I went back, mainly to prove to him my outward indifference. I went again at the end of the apple season to bring enough apples for the coming winter.

After that I decided to keep away from Josef. To avoid him, I carried on an exchange of letters. After a few months his letters suddenly stopped coming. I was not sure why, but I soon became preoccupied with other things.



The author (1946)





1.	Herkunftsland	Distrikt Galizien
2.	Geburtstag	17 November 1923
3.	Geburtsort	Sokole
4.	Kreis	Biala Podlaska
5)	Staatsangehörigkeit	angeblich Polin
6.	Volkszugehörigkeit	Polin
7.	Familienstand led., verh., verw., gesch.	ledig
8.	Anzahl der minderjährigen Kinder	keine



My German working permit as Polish girl (1944)



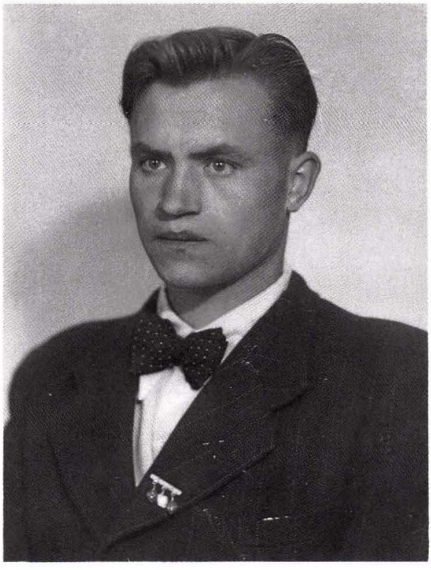
Mrs. Skalitzky.



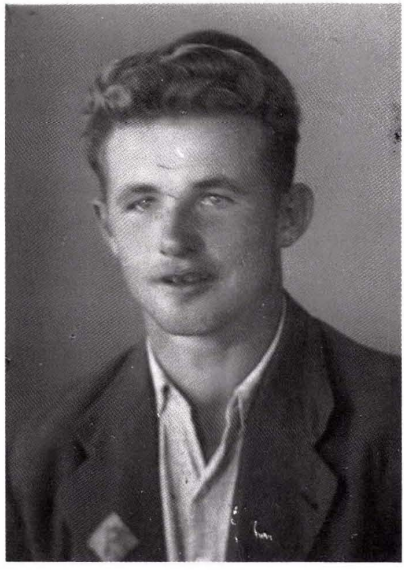
Mr. Skalitzky.



Skalitzky farmhouse



Josef (1944)



Zygmund (1944)



Josef and "Gustava" (1944)



Stefan, Tom, and Tom's girlfriend (1944)

CHAPTER 46

BETRAYED ?

One Sunday afternoon I set out to visit Pearl. On the road I ran into a Ukrainian worker from the village. He persuaded me to accompany him to see a Polish family. The invitation came so suddenly that I could find no excuse not to accept. When those Poles arrived to work in Rotfloss they had not known each other. An affair had resulted in pregnancy and a child had been born. The farmer they worked for supplied them with a shelter.

That afternoon I met many Poles and Ukrainians from neighbouring villages. In high spirits, laughing, yelling and fighting just for the fun of it, they made me feel horribly uncomfortable. Still, I had to pretend to enjoy their company and I laughed with them. A Pole named Tom, about eighteen or nineteen years of age, a real mischief maker, climbed on a table and began cracking dirty jokes. I resented the boisterous, obscene language and despised him for his rough talk. The others screamed and roared with laughter.

It was chilling to be in the midst of my enemies as they partied. When I had enough I told them that I was going to visit my sister.

When they offered to accompany me, I could not refuse. Tom played the leader and continued his disgusting jokes. His talk buzzed in my ears. I was terrified of that scoundrel and I imagined what could happen if they knew my true identity. To do my part to maintain the cheerful atmosphere, I tried to find words to boost his ego and paid him some compliments. I was angry at myself for getting mixed up in something that I could have avoided.

The group stayed with me to the village limits. They wanted to know what I was going to do in Grulich. Besides visiting my sister, I replied, I might go to a movie. Finally, to my great relief, we parted company.

That evening, Pearl and I did go to a movie to forget our troubles for a little while. She bought tickets at the box office. Although two policemen stood at the entrance, they did not pay us any attention. It was a good place to relax, to ponder our lives and sometimes even to watch the film. At eleven, I returned to Rotfloss. On the road I met some Ukrainians who were also on their way back from the movie.

The next afternoon Mrs. Skalitzky and I cut wood for the coming winter. As we worked I caught sight of a figure approaching the house. It was a German policeman. Before I had time to collect my thoughts, I hurried into the house and grabbed the tag with the "P", pinned it to my chest and returned to the wood cutting. I tried to calm my frayed nerves. As the policeman came closer, my heart pounded furiously. He gazed at me intently and began questioning me. It was not long before he got to the point of his visit; he asked where I had been yesterday. I responded that I was visiting my sister.

To my surprise he knew I had been to Grulich without permission from the village mayor. He was also aware that I had not worn the yellow tag, that I had gone to the movie theatre and returned after curfew. How did he know my every move? I was very nervous. How much did he really know? I was frightened that I would be taken into custody for interrogation. Impatiently, I waited for the outcome of his talk with Mrs. Skalitsky. At last, he told her that I had to pay a penalty of three marks. She paid the fine. When he left I was still in shock. I was completely baffled as to how he knew every move that I had made on that Sunday.

It was clear that I had been betrayed, but by whom? I reviewed the events of the past week. I tried to concentrate on identifying the informer, but I had no clue.

The next Thursday afternoon, Pearl came over to see me. This was unusual, as she knew that I was very busy. She could not have known how badly I wanted to see her and tell her about the

incident with the German policeman. She looked frightened. Before I had a chance to tell her what happened to me, she mentioned that a German policeman had come on Monday to the hotel kitchen and talked to Katty, the Ukrainian girl who worked there. He had then gone into the dining room to look for someone and then left. Later he returned and spoke to Mrs. Nosek, who began to look at Pearl with irritation.

On Tuesday afternoon the policeman had come to the hotel again and questioned other dining room personnel. On Wednesday, before noon, he had come a third time with new questions for Pearl. After I told her about the surprise visit to me by the German policeman, we decided these incidents must all be related. This succession of visits by the policemen cast a dark shadow and emphasized again how vulnerable we were. We did not know where danger lurked.

I had to cut short the conversation with Pearl and return to work to avoid annoying Mrs. Skalitzky. The only idea that came to mind was to get in touch with Zygmund. Maybe through him I could find out something. The days and nights went by slowly. By good luck he came the following week to help Mr. Skalitzky. I invited him to come with Stefan on Sunday before noon. They were surprised that I had invited them, and both came. I raised my concern with them, but they were unable to help. However, they were sympathetic and promised to find out who the informer was.

A week later Zygmund came by and revealed that Tom's sweetheart had been in the group which accompanied me to the village limits. When I paid him compliments, she became jealous. It was she who had tipped off the German police.

A few days later, I went to Grulich to pick up bread. I stopped at the hotel to see Pearl. Thankfully, there had been no further developments. We were both relieved. On the road back to Rotfloss I met a German woman heading in the same direction. For a while we walked together and chatted. As a result of my accented German she realized that I was a foreigner and inquired who I was. When I answered that I worked for the Skalitzkys, she was surprised. "You're the one," she exclaimed. " I am from another village, but you sisters are known in the whole region." She knew the story of how

we had come from Mittelwalde and how the Skalitzkys were struggling to keep me at their farm. "Is it all true?" she queried. I nodded my head. She confided in me: "Many farmers envy the Skalitzkys having a helper as good as you." She wanted to know more, but I was evasive; she already knew too much.

CHAPTER 47

ARE WE UNMASKED ?

One Sunday late in the fall, I went once again to Josef's village for apples. As I returned the sun was sinking like an orange ball behind a ridge of hills to the west. As usual, I went straight to the stable to milk and feed the cows.

In the midst of my work Mrs. Skalitzky came in and remarked that my sister had been by looking for me. Pearl had to work all day that Sunday, so it was a sign that something unusual had happened. I rushed to finish, so I could go to Grulich to see her.

I went straight to the kitchen and called Pearl, but she was busy. Finally she got away for a moment. I could see the confusion on her face. She told me it had been discovered that she was Jewish. Scarcely believing her words, I asked how it happened. Apparently. the two Nosek boys came to the kitchen door with several friends. They pointed at her, talking and laughing. She became convinced that they had heard from their parents that she was Jewish. She was terrified and tried to persuade me that we had to escape. I tried to find out more, but she was unyielding and just kept saying there was no time to lose. As I struggled with the impact of her revelation, the thought flashed through my mind that our fate was inescapable. But at that moment I felt that we were too emotional to be rational. I told her that we had to think about such a big decision.

Since we were playing with our lives we could not allow ourselves to be hasty. I needed to be alone and undisturbed to grasp the significance of what had happened in order to decide what to do.

Clearly, the best place to reflect on the latest occurences would be the movie theatre. Alone I would be able to calmly pore over our situation. Afterwards I would stop at her place and let her know what I thought.

An escape attempt was highly risky. Zygmund had told me about one of his Polish friends who had worked at a neighbouring farm before my arrival. Not happy with the work, he tried to escape. He was caught and hanged by the Germans in a woodland I passed on the road to Grulich. I shuddered whenever I passed that spot.

Only two weeks before this incident with the two Nosek boys, I heard Mr. Skalitzky tell his wife that there was a rumour in the village that one of the farmers had caught a Jewish man trying to hide near his barn.

The German woman I had met on the road came to my mind. According to her we were known in the whole region. Moreover, the German police had our pictures. If we tried to escape I felt sure we would be caught and interrogated by the Germans. They might then discover that we were Jewish. With the cold weather approaching, where would we get shelter and food? There was no escaping the reality that we were in Germany among Germans and there was nowhere to go. I could not think of a solution that made any sense. Besides that, the fact that Pearl and I were still working convinced me that her story did not add up. In all probability if anyone had penetrated our cover, we would already have been arrested. Common sense told me that the alarm was a product of my sister's fevered imagination. It was not surprising, as we lived in constant tension, swinging between hope and despair like a pendulum, depending on the events of the day. I concluded that we should stay and keep on working. After the movie I went back to see Pearl. I calmed her down and persuaded her that by escaping we would not avert our fate. It might be wiser not to do anything and simply keep up with our work. I pointed out that she lived under constant stress, in a state where every passing minute brought with it new dangers. That had heightened her suspicion about the Nosek boys. On my way back to Rotfloss my mind was preoccupied with the incident. One thing was clear to me: I had no strength to start another dangerous venture.

CHAPTER 48

THE SKALITZKYS

In the autumn of 1944 Ferdi came home on leave once again. I was surprised to see him so soon after his last visit, but the reason was clear. Anna and Ferdi were getting married. Two weeks before his arrival, the Schoen family and their two daughters, Anna and Hilda, had been guests at the Skalitzkys'. Because Mr. Schoen was the leader of the local farmers, the daughters acted like they were something special. The wedding took place in the bride's house. With extensive preparations, they put on a lavish party with lots of food and drink.There was music and dancing until morning, picture- taking, and lots of fun for the participants. I was there on my feet all night, washing dishes. In the morning the young couple, the parents and the guests went to church. The Skalitzkys invited me. I decided not to go since I had never been in a church and did not know how to behave there. It was cold and windy. I was shivering from a sleepless night and preferred to go to sleep for a few hours. The Skalitzkys were excited during the next few days. Then Ferdi returned to the Western front. His wife stayed with her parents. Everything went back to the old routine.

In the early months of 1945 Ferdi Skalitzky complained in his letters about the hardships he endured as a soldier on the front. The Skalitzkys worried about him, their only son. He wrote something touching to everyone; he even sent regards for me. Mrs. Skalitzky shed many tears when the letters arrived. Then many weeks passed and no letters came. Mrs. Skalitzky was terribly upset and so were the young Mrs. Skalitzky and her family, who often visited to

inquire whether any letters from Ferdi had come. Many weeks passed and there was no word from him. Then quite unexpectedly a letter arrived and the whole family was thrilled. However, as the front moved further into German territory, more weeks passed without a word from him. They assumed he was missing.

Nearly every evening Mr. Skalitzky went to his in-laws to listen to the news on the radio. I overheard Mr. Skalitzky talking to his wife about a new German strategy. In December 1944 Hitler started another offensive on the Western front. Under the command of von Rundstedt the German army with a reserve of two hundred and fifty thousand men struck near the Franco-Belgian border in bad weather to minimize the Allied air forces' response. At first the Germans were succesful. They hoped to capture Allied fuel stores near Bastogne and break through to the port of Antwerp on the Atlantic ocean. Later I learned that this would go down in history as the Battle of the Bulge.

I was no longer in contact with Zygmund or Josef, so I lived in the dark and longed for good news.

Then one day I got the idea of calling on Stefan. He was a simple, modest young man with an artificial eye. He respected me more than the other Polish girls in the village. I had asked him to visit me sometimes on Sunday afternoons. He was quite happy with my invitation and came from time to time. Mrs.Skalitzky wondered why I chose him from all the other foreign workers in the village. I laughed and replied that he was simple and I liked his presence. Through Stefan I got the news from the English and German radio broadcasts, filling in the blanks from Mr. Skalitzky's story and the gossip that circulated among the Poles in the village. News of the Allies' progress delighted me.

Stefan told me that his employer, the German farmer woman, had mentioned that I looked and dressed differently from the other Polish girls. She had noticed that I did not blend into the Polish crowd. I did not like to be singled out, but did not know how to avoid it.

CHAPTER 49

THE WINTER OF 1944-45

Cool autumn days followed the long, hot summer, but the browns and rusts that beautified the countryside were soon blown away by the autumn winds. I could not imagine when those sad and tiring days would end. How would we manage to outlast our enemy? One strenuous day dragged on into the next. I felt that I was running out of strength to carry on the work.

Christmas was approaching and the Skalitzkys started to prepare far in advance. Saturday after cleaning the house I baked cakes and cookies from recipes from the Nosek hotel kitchen, which Pearl knew by heart. Mrs. Skalitzky was pleased with the baked goods and took some to her daughter and daughter-in-law. At Christmas there was more baking. Around New Year's a butcher came from another village to slaughter a pig. The daughter and the daughter-in-law with her parents, sister and some other acquaintances were invited to a real holiday feast. They were delighted with the delicious meal. Their mood was lighthearted. They still firmly believed in the Fuehrer's miracle.

The conversation started with domestic matters, but swung to the war and the Russians. Each one pretended to know more than the other, showing off his or her knowledge about the war. The in-laws were not too concerned about Russian soldiers, but they were preoccupied with "Russian-Jewish commissars", who, they said, would certainly hang all the Germans. They must have had some knowledge about German atrocities to the Jews.

This was not the first time that I had overheard the Skalitzkys

talking with their in-laws about "Jewish Soviet commissars".

I had to move away from the table to serve food and could not keep abreast of the whole debate. Someone said that the Russian forces had advanced all the way to the mountains around Troppau and Jaegerndorf, where they were stalled. From the vicinity of a mountain called Eisberg, we regularly heard the echo of heavy artillery. Mrs. Skalitzky said the mountain was about one hundred kilometres away from the farm.

There was some talk that the Germans were putting up stiff resistance. The prospects for an end to the war were slim. The apparent stalemate on both fronts added to Pearl and my frustration. Fear haunted me. The only light moments were when we could be alone and share the good news about German losses. Sometimes late in the evening after work, I was granted permission from the Skalitzkys to go out. Whatever the weather, I ran the three kilometres to Grulich to see Pearl. I would stay for a short while and then return to Rotfloss. Even icy roads did not keep me from bringing her good news.

On my way back one night, around eleven o'clock, the road through the woods was like a skating rink reflecting the light of the moon. Nature did not scare me and I felt at ease, with fresh hope, like a bird flying free. On the entire length of the road I met only one tall man. He expressed surprise that I could walk in those conditions. With my boots I was making two steps to one of his.

Another night on the same road, I met a young Czech, a neighbour of Stefan's boss. He was surprised that I was not afraid of walking alone late at night. In normal times I would have been scared to death to walk on a deserted road at that hour.

The last months of the war were in some ways the most trying. Fear of being identified was making me depressed and thoughts of death got hold of me.

In January 1945, I got a postcard from prison.It was from Josef! I was shocked. Why was he imprisoned? A nightmare began. I feared being mixed up in his affairs. I expected to be interrogated, as I remembered the bunch of letters I exchanged with him. He had also a photo of me. In Rotfloss we had run into a photographer.

Josef insisted that I have a picture taken with him. I tried to talk him out of it, but to avoid suspicion, I gave in.

I decided to destroy the letters, fearing that the German police could get hold of them. They could suspect me of being an accomplice in Josef's crime, whatever it was, and might discover that I was not the Polish girl they thought I was. A few weeks later I received from prison another postcard.

The suspense was unbearable for quite some time, as I feared that the police might visit me. Weeks later a letter came from Josef, letting me know he was released from prison. He had been arrested because he bought a coat which turned out to be stolen. He had a hard time in jail. Now he was back with the farmer for whom he worked before. He wanted me to visit him. Although I was happy he was released, I was not in the mood to see him. Shortly after, he sent another letter with a proposal of marriage. He wanted to have the wedding at his farmer's house. Utterly surprised, I wrote back that the war would soon end. Any talk of future plans should wait.

CHAPTER 50

WINTER STRETCHES ON

On a late afternoon, in February 1945, a German nurse passed by the Skalitzky farm and asked me about a village which she thought was nearby and where she could find a place to stay overnight. Without hesitation I brought her to the Skalitzkys. She told them that she was from Dresden, where aerial bombing was going on day and night. The city lay in ruins.Thousands had left. Dresden had been considered safe until the beginning of the year. It had been the largest German city untouched by Allied bombs. It sheltered thousands of German refugees from the Russian-occupied areas. It was also the center of communications for the army and a city of considerable industry. It was attacked by hundreds of British and American bombers. Thousands died.

The morale of the German population dipped very low, as that blow had reverberated all across the land. At the same time the British and American planes suffered heavy losses from German anti-aircraft fire. Listening to the nurse, I recalled our horrible experience of September 7, 1939, when Siedlce was destroyed by German bombs. Now the Germans were getting a taste of their own medicine. The Germans had aimed not only to destroy our property, but also to inflict civilian casualties and to decimate our morale. A desire for vengeance burned inside me for the barbaric murder of my people. As she spoke, I thought of the ghettos, the death camps and the long,

hard days and nights of labour which were stretching into years without hope.

The good news that the Germans were losing the war was overshadowed by the ever-present possibility of sudden disaster that loomed constantly over our heads. We could not see the end of the dark tunnel in which we were trapped. It was vital to remain silent and maintain our patience, but frustration made it difficult to restrain our emotions. I learned to harden myself against tears, but Pearl let them out at times.

On a Sunday, in February, I went to Grulich to see her. She had to work all day. Everyone knew that the Russians were standing in the mountains nearby. Pearl and I met for a few minutes under the steps of the hotel. She was extremely agitated. Her whole body was trembling and she burst out crying. It was as if all the pent-up frustration and tension was coming out at once.

The situation was dangerous. Her eyes were flooded with tears and she was sobbing. People came close to listen. She complained that she did not have strength to carry on working every day in the hotel from nine in the morning until after midnight, seven days a week. I took her to her room and told her, "Pearl, the liberation is very close. We must not endanger our chances of survival. Don't give up!"

It took quite a while for her to calm down. She accompanied me outside and returned to her work. I was upset, but it was a beautiful afternoon and I decided to take a stroll through Grulich to calm down.I mingled with the German pedestrians.

Grulich was untouched by the war; it was tidy and its people lived in tranquillity. Youths in uniforms with yellow shirts and brown ties were still marching in the streets, singing warlike songs. "Sieg heil! Sieg heil!" ("Hail victory!"), the youngsters shouted, carrying enormous flags, pennants and swastika banners. On some of the walls posters emphasized the promising future of the "Thousand Year Reich" or proclaimed "Raeder muessen rollen fuer den Sieg" -- "Wheels must roll for victory".

My despair grew as I listened to the " Hitlerjugend" (Hitler youth) and their slogans. They were still nearly children. Their

instructors were SS veterans. They lectured them that the Jews, the Communists and agents of plutocracies were the enemies of the German Reich.

Every morning Mr. Skalitzky carried the milk from three milkings of the previous day to a collection point in the village. A driver with a horse-drawn cart delivered it to the dairy in Grulich. Each afternoon Mr. Skalitzky picked up the cans with payment for the milk and sometimes a piece of butter inside. I never heard that there was anything missing or stolen from those cans, even though they were left standing on the side of the road until he picked them up.

During the early winter of 1945, every so often when Mr. Skalitzky returned from delivering the milk he mentioned to his wife that he had seen columns of prisoners in ragged clothing and shoes marching through Rotfloss. Under heavy German guard, they were moving to the interior of Germany before the advancing Russian army. Shivers went down my spine. I was sure that very few would return alive from that march.

I thought about my family. My brother was dead, but what about Rifka and other family members? An intuitive feeling that Rifka was alive had been growing in me. I began to think that she might be among those prisoners. I had to suppress the pain that sought to cry out in me. With an immense effort I kept silent.

As late as March 1945, the Germans were still clinging stubbornly to an illusion of power. Nazi ideas of the Aryan race were confusing, but they concentrated essentially on the purity of their German compatriots, checking carefully for descendants of Jews. Anyone with any Jewish ancestry lived in constant fear that the Gestapo would come knocking on the door.

One day Pearl heard Mrs. Nosek telling her aunt, the cook, that the Gestapo had come the night before to one of her neighbours and arrested some people of Jewish-German descent.

Everyone was becoming nervous about the outcome of the war. Zygmund expressed his fear that in desperation the retreating German forces would annihilate the foreign workers.

CHAPTER 51

CHURCH SERVICE

On a Sunday in March 1945 the Germans permitted the Poles to attend a special church mass in Grulich. Until then, they had not been allowed to go to mass. They were excited by the surprise announcement.

As Pearl worked Sunday mornings, she had an excuse to avoid it. To my complete surprise Mrs. Skalitzky, a devout Catholic, offered me Sunday morning off. She would look after the cattle herself. I felt ill and tried to use that as an excuse not to go, but she argued that my malaise was not serious and I had gone out in worse weather to see my sister. She insisted that I go to church. Trying to figure out how I could avoid the church service, I lay awake Saturday night. I was not familiar with the Christian prayer or the service. Now was not the time to get acquainted with Catholic practices. I had a premonition of trouble.

Mrs. Skalitzky took it for granted that I would attend. Sunday morning came and I had not come up with a better excuse. I decided to go to the earlier German mass to observe. The experience only confused me. Later I was told that the Poles did it altogether differently.

To see if Pearl had any ideas, I visited her. She took me to the room in the attic on the third floor where she slept. She was tired, but she had to go back to work. I was left gazing out the window with a good view of the street below. I could see the Poles entering the church. I tried to decide when would be the best time to go -- at the beginning, the middle or the end of the

service. Regardless, I felt that all eyes would focus on me. I would not only be embarrassed, but I was risking our lives.

I decided to enter the church after the mass started when everybody would be busy either praying or listening to the priest. I left the hotel and went to the church entrance. I pushed the door, but it would not open. I pushed again, but it did not move. Why was it locked? I had a chilling feeling. I stood there transfixed, uncertain what to do. I tried again, but the door did not give way. It must have been locked as soon as mass began.

Turning away, I wandered through the streets until I found myself outside the town. I walked along a path between two wheat fields. I plucked a stem of wheat which was probably left from last year. I tried to think, but there was nothing I could change. When I thought that the mass might be finished, I walked back and went unnoticed up to Pearl's room. Lunch time was approaching and everybody was busy in the hotel. From the window I looked down. Obviously the mass was over. The Poles were leaving the church and passing by the hotel. Many of them I knew and as the throng started to thin out, I went down and mingled with them. The people who knew me asked where I had been. They remarked that they had not seen me in church. Trying to be as nonchalant as possible, I said I was there and to prove it I named some of the Poles I had seen coming out. That afternoon Stefan came to see me and asked if I had gone to the mass. "Of course," I said. Again, I named acquaintances who had been there. To make matters worse, Mr. Skalitzky asked whether the priest was young or old. I thought for a while and said he was middle-aged. One thing I knew; if Stefan believed my story, all the other Poles in the village would believe it too. I just kept saying that they must have failed to notice me in the crowd.

CHAPTER 52

PROGRESS OF THE WAR

In the east the Russian advance had ground to a standstill against stubborn German resistance. It looked like the war would not end soon. The Germans had their blind faith in the "Fuehrer". Military fanaticism was evident. The Germans around us tried not to see and kept silent about what they did see.

In the middle of January 1945, the Russians encircled and entered Warsaw, but on the whole the winter was quiet. The Allies in the West were resting after the battle of the Bulge and built up their arms for the final onslaught. The Allied war machine was by now far superior to Germany's. The Russians were prepared to fight regardless of the cost, but remained behind because Stalin wanted the Allies to do more fighting in the west.

In the spring of 1945, the news was relatively hopeful; we were hearing that the German armies were in a state of chaos. Even on the home front the "master race" seemed to be in disarray.

The Germans fought hard to hold on to their territory, but cracked as the Soviet fighters finally liberated their own homeland and drove west. Thousands of Germans were taken prisoner and many were killed. Then Stalin ordered a halt to the Russian drive towards Berlin, to clean up pockets of resistance, build up their supplies and prepare for the final fight to carry them into Berlin. The Germans could no longer withstand the power and ferocity of the Allied attacks in the west as well as in the east. News of German defeats was slowly seeping through to us. In the west the

Germans retreated. Fanatical SS units fought for every inch and died. The Americans reached the Rhine River and crossed it at Remagen. In the rear Germans mounted unsuccesful counterattacks. Germany, in ruins from the bombing, lay open to the Allies.

Confidence in Hitler was unshaken and the Nazi high command waited for the moment when the political leadership of the Allies and the Russians would be thrown into disarray. But it did not happen.

The Russian forces massed around Berlin. On April 16,1945, the Red army finally started the offensive to capture the German capital. The Germans defended Berlin in fear and desperation, fighting no longer for Hitler, but for their own lives and future. On April 20, 1945, the Russians entered the suburbs. The same day Hitler celebrated his fifty-sixth birthday in the chancellery, fifty feet underground in the air raid shelter. He ordered an all-out attack on the Russians surrounding Berlin. All available forces and material were to go into the fateful battle to repel the enemy and preserve the German fatherland. But the counter-attacks which the Fuehrer envisioned were never launched, as there were not enough troops left.

CHAPTER 53
THE DEATH OF TWO ADVERSARIES

The Germans did not allow any let-up in our labours even as the fighting front moved toward Rotfloss. The Germans around me did not believe it was possible for Germany to lose. It was good enough for them when the German newscasts announced that the front had stabilized.

One cool day in April, we did not work in the fields. Instead, I was sent to Grulich with a hand cart to get bread, round loaves weighing about five kilograms each. I also had to deliver a parcel to the Skalitzkys' daughter Anna.

As I neared Grulich I noticed Anna approach a house at the edge of town. She called to a woman, who came out. Anna was gesturing and beaming with such great joy that I thought the Germans had won the war. As I passed I heard them mentioning the name "President Roosevelt" and I heard them saying, "We will win the war." I was eager to find out what happened. I was not far from the Nosek hotel, so I went to see if Pearl knew anything. President Roosevelt of the United States had died. This raised the Germans' confidence.

To us the news was confusing. It made it harder to imagine that one day all the awful things that we were experiencing would pass. Pearl worked with a red-haired German girl who cleaned guest rooms and who had escaped from the bombing of Berlin and landed in the Nosek hotel. While we were talking about Roosevelt, she showed us a beautiful red sweater which she had received from a social agency in Berlin. She explained that it was like new, except the elbow was mended, though not visibly. I

looked at Pearl and she looked at me. We both realized that this sweater came from some unfortunate Jewish victim.

A few weeks later, on May 1, 1945, the radio announced that the Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler, fighting to the last breath against the Bolshevik arch-enemy, had died for Germany in the operational headquarters of the Reich chancellery. He appointed Admiral Doenitz as his successor in carrying on the struggle. It was later revealed that on the day before he died, he married his mistress, Eva Braun, and together with the propaganda minister Goebbels and his family had committed suicide.

Everybody was stunned. My spirits rose. For so long my main objective had been to survive Hitler. I could hardly imagine the enormity of that significant event -- Hitler was dead! The impossible dream happened. I was witnessing the tyrant's downfall. Finally, the day of vengeance had arrived, but not for Rifka, Chaim, our father, or the millions of other victims.

As the news became known the Skalitzkys put a black ribbon around Hitler's picture. Mrs. Skalitzky went into Grulich and when she came back she said that in every store window was a picture of Hitler with a black ribbon beside one of Doenitz.

The SS was still in full control. Wild rumours circulated, but we had no way of knowing what was going on. At this point the only source of information was the government radio station with its heavy propaganda.

Within a few days I heard a distant rumble of artillery fire. The front was moving closer. The Germans began to lose their courage. Hitler's death was demoralizing. Work was neglected. Even in the Nosek hotel there was a feeling of change.

In the first week of May we saw long columns of terrified German refugees, their possessions loaded on horse-drawn carts, heading west through Rotfloss to escape from the onrushing Russians. Rumours circulated among them of terrible acts of revenge committed by Russian commissars. Some Germans hoped to join the so-called "Volkssturm", a people's army that was to stop the Russian onslaught.

CHAPTER 54

THE LAST DAYS OF THE WAR

Saturday, May 6, 1945

Time dragged on. Saturday, May 6, gray clouds hung low over the land around Rotfloss and a cool wind blew. When the news came that the Russians were in Sternberg, about sixty kilometres away, the Skalitzkys were in quite a panic. They went to their in-laws for advice, then returned and started to pack. The villagers were getting ready to flee before the Russians arrived. After more deliberations, they decided to remain.

The only work we did was to milk the cows and feed the animals because everyone was too tense and confused to worry about work. Things seemed to stand still for them as the Russians came closer. After my chores I visited Pearl. Normally at this time of day the restaurant would be humming. The dining room and kitchen were empty, no cook, no helpers and no service. It was bizarre to see the stove and oven cold. Mrs. Nosek was nowhere to be seen.

Sunday, May 7, 1945.

Sunday morning I went back to Grulich to see how Pearl was doing. Motorized military units of Germans were streaming into town to defend the region. The local Germans were dazed. The military recruited older men and youngsters to take up hopeless positions on the front line. They were sacrificed at the end of the war on the altar of Nazism.

The local leaders, including Mr. Nosek, incited the population to resist the Russians. People had agitated discussions about how to defend the area. Many were ready to fight, but many men disappeared. We had expected to see a pitched battle between the Germans and the Russians. German army vehicles created an enormous traffic jam. Long lines of German refugees with horse-drawn carts clogged the roads. Chaos reigned. Some German foot soldiers and even some of the officers threw away their uniforms and tried to disguise themselves as civilians.

In the evening Pearl decided to come with me to Rotfloss.

Monday, May 8, 1945.

Monday morning we sat in the entrance of the Skalitzkys' house. Now we faced the painful truth that even if we were liberated, we did not have anywhere to go. As long as we were fighting our enemies to stay alive, we had to suppress our feelings, including the grief we felt for our loved ones. Now it was getting harder to control the pain of buried memories.

The Poles were joyful to be able to return to their families. We dreaded the thought of returning to the inhospitable Poles and to the graves in Poland. All we could do was look for survivors. Pearl broke down and wept bitterly. At that moment Mr. Skalitzky came back from delivering the milk. He was astonished to see Pearl sobbing. From that moment on Mr. Skalitzky could not look us straight in the eyes. He lowered his head when he passed near us.

English prisoners of war who had been moved to a camp near Rotfloss a week earlier were freed on Monday. They boarded trucks and left.

The German military in Grulich suddenly retreated. There were rumours that the town of Maehrisch-Schoenberg (Sumperk) had been captured by the Red Army. From there it was not far to Hansdorf (Hanusovice), Rotfloss or Grulich (Kraliky). The intermittent roar of artillery was getting close.

Pearl and I were scared to remain at the Skalitzkys', because it was not far from the road. We crossed the village to the farm where Stefan was working, which was further back. The son of the Czech

family who lived on the upper floor of that house suggested that we all go way out in the fields to a higher elevation. We reluctantly agreed and climbed to the top of a hill which gave us an excellent view of the surrounding area. I could see clouds of dust rising from the valley floor. Through the dust we could see the ragged soldiers of Hitler's once mighty army. They were running as fast as their feet would carry them. They were exhausted, dirty, unshaven, without helmets, some without shoes and without rifles.

What a contrast! No longer were the proud, arrogant conquerors marching in goose-step with their heels clicking in precise cadences on the pavement.

As I stood on that hill I had an odd, persistent sense that I had witnessed this scene before. Suddenly I recalled the dream I had in Miedzyrzec. I told Pearl that this was exactly what I saw in my dream three years ago. Now I was witnessing with my own eyes the reality of the defeated Germans running from the front, their uniforms in tatters. We stood there for a long time. It was hard to believe what was unfolding in front of us.

When we walked back to the house we met German soldiers and one asked for a drink of water. He greeted us with "Heil Hitler!". He said that the Germans would fight to the last. Even his compatriots laughed at him.

Late in the evening we returned to the Skalitzky farmhouse. The thunder of artillery continued through the whole night. In the morning it became quiet.

Tuesday, May 9, 1945

Tuesday morning's bright sunshine gave me new hope. I washed my clothes and waited to see what the day would bring. At exactly ten to ten in the morning a German woman came running to say that the Russians were only ten minutes from Rotfloss. I could not believe it, but at ten o'clock Pearl came to tell me that she had seen the first Russian soldier. He was driving a motorcycle with a little red flag near the railway station behind the Skalitzkys' place. As he greeted her, he said she was the first human being he had met in the village.

For years we had longed for that moment. Now the impossible dream was coming true. We went out into the road and greeted our liberators with enthusiasm. Russian cavalrymen, young soldiers on horses, swept from all directions through Rotfloss and on to Grulich. Moving on the unobstructed road, the Russian advance was like a mighty river that knows no barriers and pushes away all obstacles.

The great tyranny and the "thousand year" reign of the Third Reich came to an end.

We went along the side road to Grulich, as the Russian army was clogging the main road. The expressions on our faces reassured them that they were our liberators.We exchanged a few words in Russian.

In Grulich every store and house was locked up tight. It seemed that the whole German civilian population had vanished. The market-place in the center of town was jammed with vehicles and Soviet troops, many of them drunk.

For the moment we were still dominated by the need to survive. We went right back to Rotfloss. Zygmund and Stefan came and told us that they and Irene were planning to depart the next morning. They had no reason to wait and wanted to go home. They invited us. We had been thinking of staying for another week. However, who knew when we would have another chance to leave Rotfloss? There were already rumours that Russian soldiers were going after German women and the fact was that we could also become victims. We decided to go. Mrs. Skalitzky gave me a small wooden trunk, which was actually heavier than all the possessions Pearl and I put in it.

The Polish male workers got paid twenty marks per month. However, the money would not buy anything. We could not even get a piece of bread for the Reichsmarks. The Skalitzkys had originally offered to pay me fifteen marks per month, but I told them to keep it. When I left them I did not demand any payment and did not get any.

Wednesday morning Zygmund showed up with Irene and Stefan. He was driving a husky gray horse and a wagon, saying he had well

earned it for the time he laboured.We took leave of the Skalitzkys. I did not feel any animosity toward them. We decided it would be unwise to tell them that we were Jewish. We climbed on board and left Rotfloss.

CHAPTER 55

THE JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

That the course of our journey to our former homeland would not be smooth was obvious even before we got to Hansdorf. Russian soldiers stopped our cart to look through our things. They liked Irene's nice trunk, so she emptied it and they took it away.

By the time we left Hansdorf we realized that we would need a strong rope to secure the sides of the wagon for the long journey. We were about two kilometres from Josef's village, so I offered to go and get a rope; at the same time I wanted to say good-bye to him. The others rested while I walked to the village. Josef was surprised to see me. He wondered why we were leaving so soon. He gave me a rope and walked back to the wagon with me. As we parted, I had the urge to tell him the truth about myself, but I decided not to. I had always had the impression that he thought I was not Polish, but lacked the conviction to say it to my face.

We traveled all day, stopping to rest now and then. Our journey was interrupted a few times by Russian soldiers. They inspected our luggage, looking in vain for watches and other valuables. Pearl and I had no problems with them because we were in the company of men. The first night we stayed in a partially destroyed building standing in the middle of nowhere. Outside it appeared intact, but inside only the walls were till standing. We felt safer sleeping there than in the field. Russian soldiers stationed nearby came to take a look,but when they saw the men, they left us alone.

The next day we could see that the retreating Germans had burned

everything they could not carry with them. The ground was littered with wrecked vehicles and burned-out tanks. The fields were neglected and there were mountains of rubble. In some places the road was clogged with dead animals and the stench of rotten cadavers was in the air. Everywhere there was the awful smell of gunpowder and smoke. Empty artillery shells lay on the roads, in the ditches and fields. That night we slept in a barn.

In the morning we passed through abandoned villages and towns. We saw no civilians and few Russian soldiers. Some roads were closed because they had not been cleared of mines, so we had to make time-consuming detours.

The fourth morning we reached a larger city with new-looking direction signs. We came to a roadblock where signs led us through a gate into a large courtyard. In the front was a big office building and in the yard were other horse-drawn carts and many Poles and Ukrainians. Many more wagons kept arriving. When I asked why we were waiting, someone said that everyone had to get a permit to continue the journey. A Russian representative was due to arrive later to issue permits. We could only leave from the compound on foot.

Pearl and I took the opportunity to explore the city. It was a ghost town. It had been evacuated by its German population in panic as the Red Army advanced. The dwellings were deserted, their doors swinging open. We walked forlorn in our thoughts.

Suddenly we bumped into a Russian officer. His eyes were riveted on me. As he came closer, he stopped and asked me in Polish, "Jak sie ta buza wziela tutaj?" ("How did this face get here?") He meant that he was surprised to see a Jewish girl. So far we had not encountered a single Jewish soul and I still felt uneasy. I managed to respond with a polite smile. On impulse I denied it. We walked back to the courtyard.

In the afternoon I spotted a man in his early forties coming into the yard wearing a black robe, accompanied by two younger men. They entered the big building and went upstairs. Without hesitation I followed the man with the black robe. I asked whether he knew when the Russian representative would arrive. He replied that he was the representative and asked what he could do for me.

I said that I had been waiting since morning for a permit to leave. He told me to follow him to his office, asking me who I was. I took out the identification card issued by the German police that identified me as a Pole.

He looked at it and said, "The fact that you made it this far means you do not need any permit to go on with your journey."

He showed me his "kennkarte" (identification card) and said, "I received this pass from the Hitler administration."

The other two men showed me their identification cards and they all laughed. I replied that we were held up here and ordered to wait for a permit. He explained that permits were being issued by the chief of the Polish police. He sent a few aides into the town to bring the police chief.

In the meantime, the Russian officer whom we met in the city came into the office. As he saw me, he laughed, saying I had nothing to fear anymore; I could admit who I was.

Soon the police chief arrived and I received two permits, one for Pearl and one for me.

As I went down the steps, I saw a long line of people including Stefan, Zygmund and Irene. They were surprised at how I managed to be the first to receive permits. I took their documents and went back to the police chief. He called his aides and I got the permits. Soon afterwards we left.

In the evening we came to a village and were fortunate to find a place to sleep. We bought some food and prepared supper. However, for the second time, Irene refused to eat. The next morning she again declined to take food. We asked her whether she was sick, but she did not answer. The reason emerged once we were underway. The road became very steep, so we stepped off the wagon to lighten the load. Zygmund walked beside me and as we talked, Irene became agitated. Suddenly I realized she thought I was scheming to steal Zygmund. I tried to convince her that this was absolutely not my intention, but she became hostile.

At a small town, Ober-Glogau, a Russian patrol blocked our way and told us to drive into a farm, where we met other Poles and Ukrainians returning from Germany. It turned out that the Russians

were sequestering them to dig trenches.

My mind could not comprehend how that could be possible, as the dust had not yet settled from the recent devastation.

We were ordered to put our horse and wagon into a barn. We women had to peel potatoes and the men were taken to dig trenches. It was of course a great disappointment to be detained again, this time by the Russians, our liberators.

When we learned that the Russian commander was receiving people to hear their grievances, Pearl and I were waiting at 8 o'clock the next morning, as he arrived at his office. Decorated with many medals, he sat behind a huge desk covered with piles of paper. Behind him hung a large portrait of Stalin. A slim, tall native of Soviet Asia with an expressionless face, the officer listened with skepticism, as we recounted the hardships we had been through. He got up and left for a while. When he returned he denied our request to be released. We were not willing to give up.

More people arrived, among them a group of healthy young men. We watched while they shaved their heads and walked to the office. Soon they returned, jumped into their wagons and left. It turned out that the shaven heads were to fool the Russian officials into thinking that they had been prisoners in a concentration camp! This ruse supported a claim that they had suffered enough, so they were permitted to leave.

It seemed ridiculous to me that healthy young men should get permission to leave while we continued as slaves. We had a hunch that the one who gave them permission was not the same Russian officer whom we had met. We asked around and learned that the official who released them was of Jewish descent. We were determined to find him. However, the first place where we went to see him looked more like a warehouse than an office. When we eventually got hold of him, we told him the truth about our background and the hardships we had been through, and then asked permission to leave the compound. We let him know that he had been cheated by the men with the shaved heads, so he would know we were aware he had given them permission to leave.

He responded that he could not do anything for us that day, but said we should come to see him the next morning. We did, but then he said to come back in the afternoon.

We were so irritated that he had no compassion for our plight that we unwillingly burst into tears. German girls working there had the nerve to laugh at us. Humiliated by their mockery, I wanted to slap them. The official realized that the situation was getting out of hand and told them to leave the room. He promised us that passes would be ready that afternoon.

We got permits, but only for us two.When we explained that we had three companions and could not leave without them, he was unmoved. He replied that he had certain restrictions which he could not always sidestep.We said that we could not handle a horse, so he hesitantly gave us another pass for a driver, emphasizing again that his powers were limited.

Our companions decided that since it was possible to set forth on foot from the rear of the farm through the fields into Ober-Glogau, Stefan and Irene would do that and take the train home from there. Zygmund would take care of their belongings. As we drove off the farm three Russian soldiers stopped us. They were astonished when we presented the authorization to leave. They grumbled, cursing and throwing insults at us and the official who gave us permission, but they let us go.

In the town of Glogau, which looked like it had been a nice place before the war, we found sleeping quarters and bought some food. We left after breakfast and continued on through unknown villages and towns.

CHAPTER 56

THE RUSSIANS AND THE HORSE

After we drove for hours in bright sunshine through the countryside towards Oppeln, the scenery started changing. Some civilisation had returned to the region, as the fighting had long gone.Grain and vegetables grew in the fields.The villages looked inhabited and there was more traffic on the road, both Russian military and civilians.

Our horse was husky, beautifully built, light gray in colour with white patches. It was a special breed and got a lot of attention, especially from Russian soldiers. The Russians passing us wanted to take it. I explained as best as I could in Russian that this horse was the only way we could travel home. They were testing me to the limit, but I was determined not to give it up. Finally they let us go. Zygmund did not care. He was ready to abandon the horse. He wanted to take his parcels and go by train. His indifference made me mad. For Pearl and me the situation was doubly perplexing because we still did not have any idea where we would end up. For us the horse and cart meant mobility and a kind of temporary refuge. They preserved us from meeting hostile elements on our journey. Without them, we had no idea how we could get to the places we hoped to reach.

Just before Oppeln, an elegant carriage came toward us. It stopped and the driver gave us a sign to halt. Two high ranking Russian officers stepped out and came over to us. They too were fascinated by the sight of our horse. They proposed to exchange it for their brown horse, arguing that their animal was better suited for long distances and everyday use on the road. We resisted, but the officers

explained that our chances of continuing with our horse were very slim. Should we not trade with them, we could run into other Russians who would simply take it away without any exchange. We knew they were right because of our experience up to now, and we accepted their offer. Now we were hopeful that we would not lose the horse. Our spirits improved.

These were glorious May days and we were captivated with the farmlands and blooming meadows. We were making good progress toward Oppeln.When we arrived at the outskirts, I raised my eyebrows when some of the local people told us that we had to get special permission from the Red Cross to hold onto the horse.

I went to find out for myself. The streets and the compound near the Red Cross building were clogged with carts. Unharnessed horses were munching from their feed-bags. People were scattered all over the site. The whole place looked like a Gypsy camp. At the far end of the compound long lines of people were waiting. It was extremely hard to find out where the line-up began and where it ended. When I asked where the permits were issued, I was informed that it would take three days for my turn. I thought there had to be another way. I entered the Red Cross building and asked to see the director. A woman clerk went back outside with me and pointed to a young blond man who was talking with a group of people.

Without hesitating I approached him and inquired if he was the director. He looked surprised and asked me where I came from, as if he knew me from somewhere.

"I am from Sosnowiec," I answered. He asked if I had studied with him or if I was a friend of his sister.

I said, "There must be some misunderstanding. Actually, I am not from Sosnowiec. I was there during the war. I did not study with you and I did not know your sister." I said I had a problem and hoped he could help me. My friends and I were on the way to Sosnowiec by horse and cart and the Russians were taking all the horses. Apparently with a permit from the Red Cross we could hold on to our horse. He replied that a permit from the Red Cross would not make any difference because the Russians would not honour it. That was exactly what I thought. I went back to Pearl and Zygmund and

said, "Let's go."

On the road a young Polish man, named Janek, asked us to let him ride with us, and we did. There were other surprises. At one point an axle broke. We were now stuck on the deserted road.

Zygmund said, "There is nothing we can do." I was in a fighting mood and said, "I refuse to give it up!"

The obvious thing was for Zygmund and me to go to the nearest village and search for an axle, but he refused. I had to solve the problem myself. I asked Janek to help push the crippled cart to the side of the road and to come along with me to the village. After a long search we bought a new axle and walked back to the cart. As soon as the axle was installed, everybody felt better. It was quite a relief to see our cart functioning again, as we began to move along the road.

The next town was fairly large and filled with noisy traffic. We were not sure whether we had the name right. It looked like "Trzy Strzelce," but the sign was almost illegible. Before we came to the main square, there were signs pointing to the railway station, where the horses were to be given up. I simply ordered Zygmund to ignore the signs and to drive straight ahead, because we did not intend to give up the horse. I told him if he wanted to go home by train, he was welcome to do it. We would manage by ourselves.

At a crossroads we encountered a Russian military guardpost. Zygmund got scared and turned the horse through the busy traffic in the direction of the railway station. I told him to pull the horse back into the main road. The moment he did so, the teenage Russian guard started to yell and pointed his rifle at us. Zygmund got nervous and turned back towards the station, as were the other drivers.

I told him to move over and change places with me. I felt confident, although I had never driven a horse. I took the reins and slowly drove back to the main road. As we approached the guard, he looked surprised and waited to see what I would do. As we reached him, I whipped the horse across the back. It began to gallop. The cart jumped and shook along the cobbled road. I did not let the reins out of my hands. We raced ahead. I felt my face flushing with excitement. It seemed as though we would knock down everything

in our way. Every now and then I would whip the horse to make it go faster. If a Russian soldier tried to stop us, I planned to explain that the horse got out of control. I held the reins firmly and whenever the horse slowed down, I urged it to run.

Russian soldiers who were promenading on the sidewalks noticed our fast driving. I acted nonchalant when they gazed at me. I swore at the poor horse just like a man. "Perhaps all this is a dream," I thought. "I am still good for something," I said to myself. "After all, I outsmarted the Russians."

Outside the city I slowed down and gave the reins back to Zygmund. Whenever we passed a Russian military post, I took the reins again and accelerated the speed. Now Zygmund was happy to continue the journey with us.

To regain the time we lost with the broken axle we tried to keep our speed up as we drove through woods, meadows and villages. At one point we suddenly felt something went wrong. We thought the axle had broken again, but this time it was a wheel. Ever the pessimist, Zygmund said that there was no way to find a wheel that would fit. It was depressing to be somewhere on a main road, not even knowing how far the nearest village was. After having come this far, I was not going to let this relatively minor obstacle deter me.

I said to Zygmund, "I am going to look for a wheel that will get the horse and cart to Sosnowiec, on condition that I will be a partner to the eventual sale of the horse." Zygmund agreed.

Janek and I marched off with the broken wheel to the next village. After walking around for quite a while, we were really lucky to find a Russian smith repairing wagon wheels for the Russians. He had a workshop with many kinds of new wheels. He looked over his supply and picked one that compared with ours. He said it should fit, and if not, he would exchange it. He refused to take any money. I thanked him.

Everyone was surprised at our luck when we returned with a brand new wheel. It fit well. We passed through more villages and small towns. In one of the towns we were unexpectedly stopped by a young Polish man in civilian clothing with a black ribbon on his arm. He asked to see our permit for the journey. We were stunned and

asked him whether he really understood what he was asking. Zygmund explained that we were returning from forced labour in Germany. We did not see any reason to have a permit to return to Poland. This provoked an argument with him. Finally, I recalled that we had a permit from the chief of police in Ober-Glogau. I showed it to him and he was content.

Janek reached his destination and left us. Pearl and I were still wrestling with the question of where our journey should end. We wanted to visit Sosnowiec. Although we did not know if there were any Jewish survivors there or what kind of reception might await us, we wanted to visit Chaim's grave.

It had taken us eight days to reach Upper Silesia. The Kowalskis came to our minds. We did not feel completely at ease about looking them up. For one thing, Zygmund did not know we were Jewish and we were not ready to let him know. We decided that if we met them, we would ask them to keep our secret. We also remembered how they had intimidated us. With reluctance we decided to stop at their place, hoping for the best, but prepared for the worse. We skirted Sosnowiec and followed directions to the Kowalskis' village. At one point we came upon a group of workers. They stopped what they were doing and stared at us with bewilderment. They rubbed their eyes and made the sign of the cross, as if they were not sure whether they were seeing shadows or reality.

Suddenly we realized that these workers were the Kowalskis; obviously, they thought we were long dead. It was apparent that our arrival was not a pleasant surprise. It seemed they were afraid that we might ask for the goods we had left behind. Inviting us to stay was certainly not their preferred choice, yet they did not refuse to let us remain with them for a few days.

At the first opportunity I asked Mrs. Kowalski not to disclose to Zygmund that we were Jews. She promised not to divulge it.

Soon we found out that the main thing on their minds was our horse. They started asking what we planned to do with it. We said we would probably sell it.

This part of Poland had already been liberated for many months and transportation was more or less functioning. We did

not feel that it was necessary to keep the horse any longer, because Pearl and I wanted to stay in Sosnowiec for a short while. Zygmund was no longer interested in the horse because he wanted to get the money and go home.

Now was the right time to sell it. We were content when Mrs. Kowalski said she had a good buyer. She brought the man to us, but the price he offered was ridiculously low and we rejected it. We were sure that we could easily get double the amount. Zygmund showed a remarkable degree of firmness against Mrs. Kowalski on this matter. He left it to us to make the deal.

Mrs. Kowalski, as cunning as she was, looked for a way to exert pressure on us, to give up the horse for a negligible price. A day or two later as Pearl and I returned from a walk, I was disturbed at the way Zygmund looked at me. He scrutinized me with an irritated look, as though he was seeing me for the first time. The thought flashed through my mind that something was wrong. When I asked him what happened, he said impatiently and aggressively that he agreed with Mrs. Kowalski's offer for the horse. He kept saying that he just wanted to get his money and go home.

When I tried to talk to him he was combative and defiant and would not explain his change of heart. It did not take long to learn that his belligerence was all the making of Mrs. Kowalski. She realized that her friend could not get the horse for the price offered, so she wanted to get me out of the way. She told Zygmund that I, Gusti, whom he had known for nearly fifteen months as a Polish girl, was in reality Jewish! The rest was easy.

Zygmund could not absorb the fact that I was Jewish. He was filled with animosity and would not listen to my attempts to explain why I had deceived him.

Eventually, we settled with Mrs. Kowalski on her terms to please Zygmund. The cart was not included in the deal, but we left it with her. Zygmund took his parcels and without uttering so much as a "Good-bye", went home by train. Pearl and I left for Sosnowiec.

CHAPTER 57

IN LIBERATED SOSNOWIEC

Mrs. Kowalski told me that there were some Jews in Sosnowiec. We looked up the Jewish committee so we could register for ration cards to buy food. They told us that there was no housing available for survivors. The woman who registered us was critical of me because I spoke German, not Yiddish. She was right. Living fifteen months among the Germans and speaking their language, I was having difficulty switching back to Yiddish.

Allied forces entering the Polish and German territories had come across the concenttration camps with their gas chambers, the crematoria, the trenches filled with dead bodies, and the barracks where there were still a few starving people who could barely move.

On the list of survivors I found the name of Hella, who had been imprisoned with us in the AK and Srodula camp. We went to see her. It was a joyful reunion. Hella and another girl who had been liberated by the Russians shared an apartment consisting of a bedroom and kitchen. Being among the first survivors to return to Sosnowiec, they were lucky to get shelter. Hella invited us to stay with them until we could find living quarters. We slept on the kitchen floor.

The city was overcrowded; many buildings had been damaged. We even explored housing that we thought we might restore, but we discovered that replacement materials were costly or not available and decided to give it up.

There were food shortages even with the ration cards. The food obtainable on the black market was priced beyond our means. The money from the sale of the horse only let us pay for the most necessary items. With no shelter, no employment, and money with no purchasing power, we had no reason to stay in Sosnowiec.

We visited the cemetery to fulfil the vow we made at the grave of our brother, that if we survived, we would return. We could not find the board with the inscription "Here rests Chaim Kaplan, died December 16, 1943" which we placed there at that time. After a long search we gave up. There were a few graves without inscriptions and we assumed that one of them must have been our brother's. We were distressed that we could not find his grave and were overcome by sadness. Sobbing, we could not comfort ourselves: our beloved brother had left us at such an early age.

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The Warsaw Ghetto razed to the ground (1945)

CHAPTER 58

SEARCHING FOR SURVIVORS

Our next mission was to search for family members and friends. It was not impossible that by some miracle, somebody might still be alive. If we could outlive Hitler and his hell, why not others?

However, to call our life freedom was inconsistent with the news which reached us while we were still in Sosnowiec.

In the Polish city of Kielce, as well as in other places, Jewish freedom was being challenged by Polish anti-Semites who were organizing pogroms against returning survivors.

We found it hard to believe, but Polish militia under the name of Armja Krajowa (the army of the land), formed during the war and still in command of the country, instead of having compassion for the survivors, was killing many Jews who had struggled throughout the war and survived.

Nonetheless, we were anxious to go. Hella cautioned us to reconsider and wanted to persuade us to postpone our trip for a few days. But we were impatient, took leave from Hella and her roommate and embarked by passenger train to Warsaw. We were pleasantly surprised with the functional train which went to Warsaw via Czenstochowa.

From Czenstochowa a young Jewish couple shared our cabin. Because Czenstochowa had been liberated at the end of 1944, I assumed that these people might know about survivors of Majdanek. At first I was reluctant to say anything, but when the

train arrived in Warsaw and they disembarked, I caught up with them. The young woman looked at me like I was some kind of a nut and asked me where I was coming from. Did I not know that everyone in Majdanek had perished?

I found out later, that on November 3, 1943 the Einsatzkommandos undertook a massive killing of all Jews in Majdanek. On the same day other Einsatzkommandos massacred the Jewish prisoners in the Travniky work camp, forty kilometres to the south of Lublin.

I myself was wondering why I was asking a silly question. Majdanek was a death camp, but I still hoped Rifka had survived.

It was hot on that day in June 1945. The Warsaw train station was in ruins. I had difficulty getting oriented and asked around how to get to the former ghetto.The only transportation was a horse drawn cart. The place where the driver let us off was far away from the former ghetto.We walked the rest of the way, carrying our wooden suitcase.

A deadly spell hung over the whole area. As far as the eye could see, not a single building remained. The huge area was covered with rubble, with no traces of the Jewish population. We were not even able to identify where the streets had been and did not know where we were. In the distance we could see a single wooden pole with a street sign. We hurriedly climbed over the bricks and stones, hoping to find a clue that would indicate the former home of our father's family. The street name was not legible. We walked for hours looking for marks or symbols. Finally,distressed and exhausted, we rested on the bricks.

We recalled the pulsating life of Warsaw, the center of Jewish creativity and trade which reached all the corners of Europe. Only six years ago it had been a living world where people worked and prospered. All these masses of people, the well-to-do and the poor, just vanished and with them their houses and possessions. The Germans confiscated the goods, murdered the people and at the end destroyed the buildings.

After hours of grieving, we left the ruins of the former ghetto. Someone told us that there was a Jewish committee in Praga, a suburb of Warsaw. We reached it after five in the afternoon; the



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office was closed.

Once again we began walking without any destination. We met a Jewish woman and told her we were searching for family survivors, but the Jewish committee was closed. She had lived in the city of Sokolow, near Siedlce, before the war. Her husband was out of town. She offered us accommodation for the night and shared her food with us. Friday morning, as soon as the committee office opened, we went there and registered. Having had large family in Warsaw, we looked over the list of registered survivors, but it was a great disappointment not to find any familiar names. It was a hopeless effort at self delusion.

There I was informed that on July 22, 1942 the German began the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. Every day trains took away five to six thousand people to the gas chambers of Treblinka.

Within six weeks three hundred thousand Jews were taken away and murdered.

The Germans fighting against the Jewish armed resistance, burned and destroyed buildings and houses.The powerful flames accomplished what the German murderers could not do.

The flames chased the people out from their shelters, made them leave the previously prepared hideouts in attics and cellars.

Thousands of people perished in the conflagration. Charred corpses lay around on balconies, in window recesses and unburned steps.

With nothing more to do, we left for the train station. There were no passenger trains to Siedlce. The one available freight train was already filled up with people, with many standing on the steps and others sitting on the roof.

To squeeze into a freight car seemed like too much of a nightmare. To make matters worse, it was supposed to have left the night before, and nobody knew when it would actually depart. It did not take us long to make up our minds: we walked to the main road out from Praga and stopped a Russian truck. The driver said that he was going to Lublin. He would take us as far as the turnoff to Lublin.Then we would have to look for another ride to Siedlce. He gave us a place in the rear of the truck. Just before the road

divided we reached a small town. The Russians left us there and continued their journey.

It was noon. Before we could think what to do next, there was a brief thunderstorm and a heavy downpour. By the time we found shelter under a balcony, we were soaked. In a few minutes the sun came out and it was nice again.

We went back out to the road and stopped another Russian truck, asking the driver to take us to Siedlce. He hesitated, unsure whether he could take civilians with him. Finally, he consented to give us a ride only as far as the outskirts, because he was afraid of cruising Russian patrols. He told us to sit in the rear on a wooden box and stay out of sight. It rained again and we got splashed with dirt from the muddy road. We reached Siedlce in the afternoon. It had taken us three weeks to make our way back to our former home town.

We asked a Polish woman for some water to clean up. She told us that we could find Jewish survivors on Kochanowskiego Street. As we stepped over the railway tracks, the boundary of the city, my spirits improved and a carefree feeling came over me. It was a strange sort of happiness. I was thinking, "Surely someone from our family is still alive." Pearl had a similar feeling. We tried to account for it by contemplating who could have survived the destruction. We were not too hopeful, but we thought about two cousins, the sons of our mother's brother. They were courageous young men, bright and resourceful. They dealt with the Poles a lot. Some Polish acquaintances might have hidden them.

We entered Pilsudskiego Street. It took us a long time to cover the two kilometres to the center, because the wooden trunk hit our legs at every step and slowed our pace.

As we approached the intersection of Kochanowskiego Street, we were pleasantly surprised to meet a girl we knew from before the war. She recognized us and invited us to her apartment. We thought for a while, but thanked her and declined, because her quarters were in the area we had just passed and going back with the clumsy suitcase was too inconvenient.

At the corner we spoke with a few Jewish men, strangers to

us, from a village near Siedlce. We did not come across any more familiar faces. By now it was late afternoon. We stopped at a house where we noticed a young couple. Pearl asked whether they were Jews. When they said yes, Pearl uttered the words, "Let us enter with the right foot." We did not know them because before the war they too had lived in a nearby village. They asked about our background. We told them our family name was Kaplan. I described our father and mentioned our uncle's family name, Rowak.

At once the young man said he knew a girl named Regina who mentioned that her father's name was the same as ours and that her uncle's family name was Rowak. He ran out and vanished. We became nervous as we waited. Our hearts beat loudly.

His description sounded like Rifka and, if I heard it right, Regina and Rifka were the same name. It had to be her! Pearl agreed, even though it was difficult to believe our younger sister might have survived the death camp. I had always had an intuition that she survived. Now I thought of her wretched expression as they pulled her away from us to deport her to Majdanek.

I paced the room and wondered where he disappeared to. Then the door opened and the young man entered. Behind him stood Rifka in the door frame! It was a shock to see her alive. No longer a skinny child, she had changed in two years to a grown- up teenager. Short hair replaced the braids that had hung down to her shoulders.

"My God, you are alive!" she cried out and fell in our arms. Her face broke into a wide smile and her voice choked. Her eyes glistened with tears. Big tears started to run down my cheeks. We hugged and kissed each other, crying from joy.

When she calmed down Rifka asked where Chaim was. There was no easy way to break the dreadful news to her. We struggled to tell her. The grief and the wounds were fresh and not yet healed. Regretfully and with pain, we revealed to her that he was no longer among the living and had been put to rest at a cemetery in Sosnowiec.

CHAPTER 59

RIFKA'S STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE

As our tears dried up and the excitement subsided, we sat down at the table and Pearl and I described to Rifka what we had lived through. Then Rifka told us how she managed to survive.

After Pearl, Chaim and I were separated from her in Miedzyrzec in May 1943, she and some three thousand others were marched to the train station. They were packed into cattle cars which were then tightly sealed.

It was dark inside the car. She fell into a deep sleep. She dreamt that people were talking about her sisters and that we were killed by the Germans. When she awoke, she was overcome with grief, fear and exhaustion. She realized that she was lying on top of other people. The people were so tightly squeezed in the freight car that it was hard to get fresh air. She wore only one stocking and one shoe. The others were missing.

German and Ukrainian escorts sat on the roofs and shot people who tried to escape.The train arrived in Lublin the next day. It was shunted to and unloading platform. Everyone was chased out and ordered to march to Majdanek. Many had suffocated. Others were sick and some were wounded. Those too weak to move were shot. At the camp they were herded into a compound and a selection began. Families and friends tried to stay together, but the Germans separated them into groups of men, women with children and adolescents. Rifka, around twelve years old, was all alone. Her eyes scanned the crowd for a place to conceal herself. She knew she

was in a precarious situation because she could see that children were being sent together with their mothers straight to the crematorium. She placed herself among the adolescents, realizing that there was no way she could confuse the guards if they took a good look at her. But she did not want to give up. She kept on switching places among the teenagers. Even after all the women and children were led away to the crematorium, she still could not believe that she was out of danger. Shaking from fear, she was taken with other prisoners to a huge hall. They were ordered to undress and go to the showers. She was troubled by rumours that some shower nozzles gave out a fatal gas, but she calmed down when cold water came pouring down. Then she noticed holes in the floor and feared that gas might come through them. She never forgot that the Germans had tricked us many times before.

The camp was built on a huge open field. Low barracks stood in long rows. Guards stared down from watchtowers, giving the place a terrifying atmosphere. A bad smell hung over the whole area. In the distance inmates could see a fog coming from high chimneys.

The building to which Rifka was assigned was near the boundary. It was illuminated by bright lights which were attached to the electric fence. The rest of the camp was in darkness. During the night loud noises came from the other side of the fence. She was constantly afraid that the Germans might take them to the crematorium.

Each day at six in the morning and at six in the evening all the prisoners assembled on the "appealplatz" for a count. Inmates would be selected from the lineup and sent to their deaths.

Rifka was all skin and bones when she arrived. She had not eaten for several days before the deportation because of stomach aches and on the day of the deportation she felt no sensation of hunger because she was aware of the horrors that awaited us.

The kitchen was in the men's camp. It was staffed by Slovakian Jews. They distributed soup and bread in the women's camp, which was separated from the men's by a fence. Inmates received a bowl of soup and a slice of bread daily. Rifka could not tolerate the watery soup. The Slovakian Jews had compassion for her and another young girl and brought extra pieces of bread for them. This kept them alive.

Two weeks after our escape on the lumber car, the remaining Jews from Miedzyrzec were deported to Majdanek. Rifka met the people who shared their living quarters with us before our escape. They told her that we had left on Saturday, May 15, for an unknown destination. They assumed that we had gone to a village to look for a hiding place and that we had vanished. From then on Rifka lived with the conviction that we were all dead.

In Majdanek, people not useful to the Germans were killed. Those useful for slavery were transfered to work camps. While they awaited selection, survivors were given tasks. Rifka dug up clumps of grass and planted them near the crematorium, carried bricks by hand from one place to another, dug up soil and moved it with a push-cart somewhere else. These jobs had no useful function other than to exhaust the afflicted human body.

Like others in Majdanek, Rifka got typhoid fever. She fell unconscious for a few days and when she opened her eyes, she saw girls on wooden planks around, staring at her. They could not believe that she had not succumbed to the typhus.

A few weeks later rumours circulated that there would be a transfer to work camps. She decided to take a chance on this. The inmates were assembled, naked. Nearby sat a white-robed German SS doctor with SS women swirling around him. Each prisoner had to undergo an examination to decide whether they could perform slave work. In each case the doctor pointed with an outstretched arm for them to go either to the right or to the left.

When Rifka came before him, he merely glanced at her and pointed to the group of people she was to join. She felt sure she was joining the condemned.

In the turmoil she remembered what I said, if any of us were to survive, he or she must use any feasible means to fight for life. She felt an irresistible compulsion and some invisible power kept her from joining those who were putting their clothes back on.

She regained her self-control and ran back to the doctor. She said that she had a healthy body and could work. The SS women kicked her and chased her back to the group that she was positive, were about to be murdered. She became fearless and confronted the

doctor again. She told him that her sisters were in the other group and she wanted to be with them. The Germans were not prepared for resistance from a child. The SS doctor stared at her. He started to scream and became almost hysterical. No one could understand what the doctor was yelling. The SS women hit her repeatedly.

In the confusion she ran to the other group and squeezed herself into the middle. When the time came for that group to be shipped away, the Germans cut off a number of people from the front and the end of the line and sent them to the gas chambers. It was pure luck that she survived.

The others, with Rifka in the middle, were transported to Skarzysko-Kamiena. She was assigned to work in an SS man's vegetable garden for several months. In the fall she was transferred to camp Hasag A in Skarzysko-Kamiena and began working in a munitions factory.

She had no winter clothes and wore only wooden shoes, so she suffered from the cold as well as hunger, fear and loneliness.

In that camp Rifka met a young woman named Hendl who came from Siedlce and knew our family. Her father and ours had been in the same line of business. Her husband was a member of the camp committee and had a few privileges. They helped Rifka out by giving her extra bread.

There were regular deportations from Skarzysko-Kamiena to the death camps. Children were banned from the camp, but some were miraculously still alive. Rifka, one of the youngest, was highly vulnerable to be selected for deportation.

One day the Germans came knocking at Mrs. Hendl's door. With no time to look for a better hiding place, she stuck Rifka in a bed under the covers and thereby averted her deportation.

After many long months, Rifka, Mrs. Hendl, her husband and others were taken to labour camps in Czenstochowa. Rifka worked in Pelcery Werk A, another munitions factory. Later, Mrs. Hendl and her husband were sent to another labour camp and Rifka lost contact with them.

The terrible threat of deportation to the death camps persisted constantly in Czenstochowa. Rifka struggled relentlessly to survive,

hoping for a miracle.

In the winter of 1944-1945 the Russians came close. As they drew near, the German high command was determined to liquidate all the Jews.The SS guards received orders to speed up the movement of prisoners.The prisoners who could still walk were ordered to assemble for transfer.

Rifka did not have any walking shoes or winter clothing. The fierce winds and freezing temperatures went through her weakened body. She did not know what to do and had nobody to consult. She went to her bunk, took the blanket and her few possessions and joined the line-up. Rifka was sure that the transfer meant death, and decided not to leave. She threw down her bundle and went to the guard and said she wanted to go to her sleeping quarters to pick up her things for the march. The guard started to yell at her, but she ran back to her quarters above the factory.

A policeman came after her to check what she was doing. To get rid of him, she said she needed to go to the bathroom. She proceeded to do so and managed to lose him and then disappear in the factory. From her hiding place she could hear the sounds made by the inmates being driven out into the bitter cold. She had the feeling that this was a turning point in her struggle for survival.

The sound of gunfire broke the silence as a fierce battle got under way. The artillery barrage was intense; in the evening it lit up the darkness, forcing Rifka to stay in hiding. She was no longer certain that she had made the right decision, but now it was too late to change her mind.

In the evening she left her hiding place and was surprised to meet more inmates who had also been hiding. They broke into the kitchen to get something to eat.

Later a few Germans came and tried to trick them out. No one responded, so the Germans left. But in case they returned, the group decided to leave the camp at four o'clock in the morning. They thought when they left the gates, they would be on the outside, but in fact they found themselves in another camp. They passed through many camps before they finally reached the outer boundary.

The survivors entered houses which the Germans had aban-

doned in panic before the advancing Russians. That night Soviet troops forced their way into Czenstochowa, and Rifka was liberated. It was January 1945.

She learned later that Mrs. Hendl and her husband had been driven on foot with other prisoners to Dachau in Germany. A few months later they too were liberated.

But as the Russians forces swept over Poland toward German territory, thousands of other victims who were force-marched from the camps in Poland died from exposure and starvation.

Although they were free, the survivors' situation did not improve much. They were hungry. The Poles refused to help them. The survivors went so far as to cut pieces of meat from dead horses lying on the road to still their hunger. Later they found a pit in a field where potatoes and carrots were stored for the winter.

After a few weeks Rifka decided to go to Siedlce. Like Pearl and me, she thought perhaps our cousins Chaim and Szyja Rowak might still be alive. She traveled on a train with broken windows. It was so overcrowded that she had to crawl up to the baggage rack.

She had stayed with various survivors in Siedlce by the time we were reunited six months after her arrival. Depressed and crying all the time, she was convinced she would never see any of us again. Rifka had been contemplating going to Lodz, where she heard, she might be able to find work in a factory. Fortunately, she took her time in deciding.

We were overwhelmed with happiness to have our Rifka back and to be reunited again.

CHAPTER 60

SIEDLCE 1945

There were very few survivors in Siedlce.

Before the war there had been an active Jewish community of around twenty thousand souls. Our ancestors had lived there for centuries.

After the brief occupation by the Soviet army in October 1939 over two thousand people, mostly young, had followed the retreating Russians into the Soviet Union. At the closing of the Siedlce ghetto on October 1, 1941, the Jewish population was about seventeen thousand. In the first deportation about eleven thousand Jews were deported to Treblinka; this was a few days before the first deportation from Miedzyrzec. At the end of November 1942 the remaining few thousand Jews from the Siedlce ghetto were resettled to Genszi Borki a few kilometres away, where they stayed in empty barracks. There was nowhere to hide and before long everyone was deported to Treblinka.

My mother's two brothers and four sisters with all their families perished. My two cousins, Szyja and Chaim, were gone. Chaim, the older cousin, had been taken to a forced labour camp near the railway tracks where he was brutally maltreated and eventually shot by the Germans. Szyja was deported with the rest of the family to Treblinka.

The Jewish people had underestimated the destruction that would follow the German invasion of Poland. Over and over again Pearl and I were discovering that whole families had vanished without a trace.

All the homes in the former Jewish section were levelled to the

ground. There was not a single sign where a building had been. There were no indications of where we or our relatives used to live. The area became a meadow.

On the site of the synagogue, which was burned on Christmas night 1939 by the Germans, there is now a monument commemorating the seventeen thousand Jews who perished.

Rifka was the youngest among the survivors. One of the people who had invited her to stay with them was a former schoolmate of mine who, with her older sister, had been lucky enough to escape to Sweden.

The third day after our arrival, a hot Sunday, we were strolling through the streets when we met Mr. Kisilinski, a former neighbour who had lived across from our store. He rubbed his eyes to be sure that we were the people he thought he was seeing. Even looking at us, he could not believe that we survived.

His wife and child had perished. He came originally from a village called Opole, about four kilometres from Siedlce. My cousin Szejwa, a good friend of his sister, hid with her parents from the time of the first deportation in a cave they dug in Opole. The rest of her family had left Siedlce in 1939 with the retreating Russians. One night, only days before the end of the war, Szejwa left the hideout in search of water. She and her parents were discovered and shot.

Several days later we went to Miedzyrzec. It was late afternoon when we arrived. The city hall was closed and it took us a while to find survivors. We met a couple who were originally from Siedlce and spent the night with them. In the morning we met the son of Mr. Viner, our first acquaintance on our initial visit to Miedzyrzec in 1941. He and his girlfriend had survived and had just got married. With seven other people they had hidden in an attic over some stores in the marketplace. During the day they slept. At night when the market place was deserted they searched for food.

I ran into a man about twenty years old, the son of the Grossman family. From his late mother I had rented a few shelves to sell shoemakers trimmings in the summer of 1942. He had been working for a farmer in a neighbouring village and I had met him during his visits home. He survived, but his parents, brother and sister Sara

were deported to Treblinka. The dilapidated dwellings of the former ghetto were still there, but the people were gone.

We visited the Polish proprietor of the house on Warszawska street where we lived before the first deportation. Of course he was astonished to see us alive. We learned that Biumka, our former neighbour, had hidden in his house under construction on Warszawska Street. Because of harassment by Poles, he sometimes switched to the forest. When the Russians liberated the region, he along with other Jews was shot in a woodlot by Poles.

We went to visit Mr. Malczyk to express our gratitude for his extraordinary help. His mother and sister told us that he was not available. For some reason that I could never figure out, they were afraid. They asked us to leave. We gave up further searching and returned to Siedlce. We looked for eight days but could not find a place to live. We did not feel at home in Poland anymore. Tragic reminders seemed to be chasing us out. The week in Siedlce seemed like months.

We thanked the young people who had put us up and brought us together with Rifka. We said good-bye to the city we had grown up in. The three of us left for Sosnowiec, with a stopover in Czenstochowa, where we visited the places where Rifka had been incarcerated as a slave. We stayed two days to meet her surviving friends from the camp.

In Sosnowiec we went to see Hella and her roommate and introduced them to Rifka.

The Jewish presence in Poland more than half a year following the liberation was virtually negligible. In Sosnowiec as in Siedlce there was no vision for a better tomorrow; there was no revival of Jewish life. The liberation at the end of the war was the realization of what had happened. The survivors were having a hard time re-establishing themselves. We felt there was no future for us Jews. With winter approaching, we were not impressed with the prospect of sleeping on Hella's kitchen floor. We searched for at least a temporary habitation, but in vain. In the neighbourhood where our friends lived there was one vacant house, consisting of one room and a kitchen, that would have suited us. But all the windows were shattered

and the interior required a lot of repairs. On top of that we needed furniture - at least beds, covers, a table and chairs. Our limited resources were not enough. Heat would be another problem; coal and firewood were expensive. The outlook for employment was bleak.

We began to grow tired as we saw less and less possibility of finding decent shelter in Sosnowiec. We were losing our enthusiasm for settling even temporarily in Poland. It held too many bitter memories. The future unfolded under a shadow of past disasters. We started thinking about other possibilities.

With the chaos at the end of the war there were not many choices on the immediate horizon. We reluctantly decided to go back to Grulich-Rotfloss.

CHAPTER 61

JOURNEY TO GRULICH-ROTFLOSS AUGUST 1945

Pearl and I left Rifka at Hella's place. We took the train to Zabrze, but at Zabrze we could not find a connection to continue our journey. The German cities and towns were deserted because the future looked brighter to the Germans in the West, under the American or British occupation. They feared vengeance by the Russians for the suffering their troops had inflicted.

As the Russians advanced they had moved the Polish border westward to the Oder River in prewar Germany to compensate for the big chunk of eastern Poland taken by the Soviet Union. Stalin rejected the Polish government in exile and installed a Communist-dominated government.

Zabrze was in former German territory which now belonged to the Poles. The whole area was a wasteland, with no signs of cultivation and no transportation.We explored and ended up standing in the main street.

After a long wait we stopped a Russian military truck and the driver agreed to take us to Mittelwalde. As we climbed aboard we realized that we were in the company of three Ukrainian soldiers. While we sped along the highway they made obnoxious remarks and one started to squabble with us. We stayed quiet and impassive. Then the others joined in. Our restrained response was not enough to stop the abuse of these unsavory characters. The situation became unmanageable and to avoid further confrontation we knocked on the

rear window of the truck to alert the driver to stop and let us off. Finally he slowed down and we jumped quickly to the ground while it was still moving.

All around us was grassland. There were no humans and no passing vehicles. We walked, and after many kilometres we passed by a courtyard with rows of wooden barracks. We spotted a man coming in our direction. To find out where we were, we waited for him to come closer.

He turned out to be a Russian soldier in working clothes. He not only refused to give us information, but demanded that we should stay for a few weeks to work. It seemed ridiculous that we should become slaves for the Russians. We protested vigourously. We had expected to encounter surprises like the soldiers in the truck, but it had not crossed our minds that we might be abducted for work. We offered to work for a day or two, but he rejected that and, with a gun at his side, ordered us to go to the barracks. There was not a living soul we could ask for help, and it was pointless to expect a miracle. We would have to shelve our plan to go to Grulich-Rotfloss and now we were uncertain when we would see Rifka again.

Once we were in the barracks the soldier began to look for something in his pockets. He could not find what he was looking for, so he ordered us to wait and disappeared. Without hesitation we took advantage of the opportunity and ran away. The risk of being caught spurred us on.We ran for many kilometres over the meadows.

We came to an inhabited area. We reached a two-story building. Terrified, we hesitated to go in. We looked back, but could not see the soldier. We went inside. A Polish family resided on the second floor. They told us we were in the town of Kozle. They said we would be able to get a train in the morning. They let us stay overnight. In the morning, still frightened, we got on the train.

We reached Nysa (Neisse) at noon. The train to the next destination would be coming through only in three days. The sun was hot and we walked through the city to find shade. It was all but deserted, although not destroyed. The main street was the road to Klodzko (Glatz).

For several hours no vehicles or people passed by. Then a

middle-aged Russian officer joined us. He too was waiting for transportation. Another hour went by before we noticed a truck advancing in our direction. The officer stopped it. We liked his manners and asked him to help us by taking us along to Klodzko. He agreed. We reached a village near Klodzko as evening approached. The officer decided to stay there overnight. He found accommodation for himself and arranged for us to stay in another room. Unfortunately, he was gone in the morning when we got up. We boarded a crowded train to Klodzko. There we got on the train to Mittelwalde, (now Miedzylesia). We squeezed in among masses of people and waited. Eventually, it started to move.

In Miedzylesia we found out that there was now a border between Miedzylesia, Poland and Grulich-Rotfloss, Czechoslovakia.

We stopped a Russian truck which was part of a large military convoy. They gave us a lift to a village near the border. The Russians were staying there overnight.

As we explored we realized that this was a gathering point for the Russian military. The village was congested with uniformed men. There were no civilians in sight.

The sun was going down. We were not convinced that it was a safe place to take refuge overnight. We began walking in the direction of Rotfloss. We knew we could not cover much distance on foot and there was no question that the Czech border guards would let us pass into Czechoslovakia. We had to find someone who could provide us with a cover.

We stood in the middle of the road to stop a vehicle. Before long a car came. It stopped well away from us. It was a type of limousine, seldom seen during wartime. Two young Russian officers stepped out one from each side. We explained that we had to go to Rotfloss before nightfall in order to meet our sister and asked if they could give us a ride. Without replying, they returned to the car. Soon they came and told us to get in.

As it started to move, the last rays of the setting sun iluminated an older gentleman in a Russian uniform with medals on his chest in the back seat. His first question was whether we knew with whom we were traveling. He introduced himself. He was a Rus-

sian general and the two officers were his adjutants.

Our host was friendly. He had the impression we were partisans. He wanted to know more about us. We apologized for the inconvenience of stopping the car, and to avoid having to give him our whole story, I said, "We want to be reunited with our younger sister in Rotfloss."

Soon we arrived at the new border. The general exchanged greetings with the guards.They saluted each other, and we continued the journey. We conversed with the general and time passed quickly. It was a pity to leave such pleasant company to enter the unkind, dark night, not knowing what surprises awaited us in the village.

We walked along the side road to the Skalitzkys' farm. The moon was shining brightly, so we had no trouble seeing that the door of the house was wide open. The moon iluminated the interior. The house looked like it had been ransacked. Objects lay all over the floor. It was very strange and we could not comprehend what had happened. It was too scary to stay there overnight, so despite the late hour we walked back to the road.

At the railway tracks we met a neighbour whom I knew. She explained that the Czechs had driven the Skalitzkys from their house and we could find them at their daughter in Grulich. As it was quite late, we stayed at that woman's place overnight.

In the morning we walked to the daughter's house. The Skalitzkys said that after we left, Russian soldiers had occupied their farmhouse. As the Russians left, the Czechs came. They drove them out from the farmhouse and other Germans from their homes to the Polish border. This had been unbearable for the old man and he tried to commit suicide by hanging himself, but he was discovered in time and rescued. Mrs. Skalitzky wept bitterly in our presence.

In Grulich we went to the Czech authorities and received temporary Czech identification papers on the basis of our German documents .We got food ration cards and a furnished room. With the few German marks in our pockets, we could live there temporarily. We were considered to be Polish girls living with the scars of the past.

The Skalitzkys returned to their farm. I visited them a few times to help them out. They were not happy with the German girl who

replaced me. "She is not Gusti," Mrs. Skalitzky used to say. They mentioned in a conversation that they thought we were Jewish.We did not confirm it, but neither did we deny it. It seemed that Pearl's hopeless outburst that we had nowhere to go when the other Poles were excited about returning home, must indeed have rung a bell in Mr. Skalitzky's mind. It did not sit well with them. Our return to Grulich supported their suspicion that we had no family left and nothing lost in Poland.

In Grulich German signs were changed to Czech. The Nosek hotel was closed. Mr .Nosek had been arrested by the Czechs. Mrs. Nosek was staying with her brother, a butcher. One day we passed by his shop and she asked us to come in. We were surprised when she disclosed in her conversation that she too knew we were Jewish. I laughed and once again, neither confirmed nor denied it. Along with her sweet talk she offered us some food, but we declined and left.

There were only Czechs in the streets.

CHAPTER 62

BRINGING RIFKA TO GRULICH

To bring Rifka to Grulich we needed permission from the Czech authorities. Pearl and I traveled to Brno, the capital of the Czech province of Moravia. Our request was rejected. Furthermore, we were told that we ourselves could remain only temporarily. I decided to go to Sosnowiec to get her myself. On the way I stopped in Sumperk (Maehrisch Schoenberg) and went to the Russian military headquarters to see if I could get permission from them. I was determined and waited all day in front of the building to see the Russian representative. Evening approached and I had to look for accommodation. I came across several Jewish girls, survivors, who were residing in Sumperk temporarily. They let me sleep at their place. The next day went by without success.

The third afternoon I noticed a Russian officer emerge from the building. I stopped him and asked to help me see the Russian representative. I told him about my plan to bring my sister from Poland to Czechoslovakia and said I needed a permit.

"You are wasting your time. You have no chance to see any Russian representative," he said. However, he went on to say, "I am traveling by train to Poland and offer you companionship until you are across the Polish border. I promise that you will not be harassed by anybody. For the return trip you will have to find other arrangements."

I had to make up my mind quickly. Although his shaven head made him appear somewhat intimidating, he seemed sincere. I joined him. There was a mixed collection of people on the train. It was

quite unsafe for a young woman to travel alone, but in the company of that Russian officer I felt relaxed. He behaved quite correctly. During the trip he made acquaintance with another soldier who shared our compartment.

At Moravska Ostrava on the border the train stopped. There was an announcement that we were in a border town and the train would only continue the next morning. My companion, the Russian officer, his friend and I went in the dark of night to a Czech police station to get sleeping quarters. The Czech police seemed to be in good spirits, talking and laughing as they enjoyed their new-won freedom. An escort took us to a private house. There I received a separate room on the second floor and a key to lock myself in. I was exhausted and went right away to sleep.

At dawn the Russian officer knocked on my door for me to get ready to leave. It was quite far to the station and so dark that I could not see the two soldiers walking beside me. I heard only the sound of their conversation. I wondered how they knew the way.

We boarded the train, but it was quite a while before it started moving. As we entered Polish territory a twinge of sciatica knifed through my body. I was greeted by the unfriendliness and hatred of a Polish border agent. He recognized that I was Jewish and tried to prevent me from entering Poland.

He said, "You cannot cross the border; you have to undergo a delousing process!" The Russian officer, my protector, was standing nearby, listening. He asked, "What is going on?"

The Polish customs agent got scared. "Nothing, nothing," he responded."I didn't know that she was with you." And he disappeared. I was grateful and thanked the officer for his human response. Then I said good-bye, and we parted.

When I showed up in Sosnowiec, Rifka got very excited. We had not been able to communicate with her. She was ready to go. She packed her few things, we said thanks and good-bye to our friends, and left Sosnowiec without any regrets.

Back in Katowice I searched in various offices for permission to cross the border into Czechoslovakia, but I was not successful. We lodged overnight in a tourist house. There I heard somebody

talking about a Russian truck convoy making a stopover somewhere in the neighbourhood. I made up my mind to find out more.

In the morning I asked where the Russian trucks were. People suggested a few locations. In one of them I saw many trucks with Russian soldiers around them. I tried to communicate with a soldier, but I was not understood. I approached another.He said they might leave in the next few days for Olomouc, a city in the heart of Czechoslovakia. I asked who was in charge. He said their kommandant would be there the next day. The soldiers were acting strange, as if they were joking around. I spoke to another one, but his language was difficult to understand.I was determined to wait for the next day to see if they were serious. It was hard to decide whether we should go with complete strangers.

The next day I learned that the kommandant would be there in the afternoon. My doubts increased at that time when I heard he was not there yet. I went back later and finally got to see him. I explained my problem, in Russian, and asked whether he would be willing to take us to Czechoslovakia.

He stared at me and said, "Yes," but his response was mixed with a strange smile, which confused me and made me nervous. He looked to be a good- natured man in his forties, but I was not sure we could trust him. However, we were anxious to leave Katowice and this was an opportunity which we could not afford to pass up. The next day, at three in the afternoon, we were ready with our bit of luggage at the place where the convoy was assembled.

The kommandant was not there. This was not reassuring and I thought of backing out. Two young Russian officers were in charge. They approached us and asked us to take places in the rear of one of the trucks. We set out. About half an hour later the whole convoy of twenty nine trucks stopped near a building.

Our truck was recklessly backing up to park behind it. We had the impression that the driver was drunk and were afraid he was going to drive right into a nearby pond. Finally, the truck came to an abrupt stop and we were told to go inside. It was a restaurant. The kommandant had arrived ahead of the convoy and was waiting to

have supper with his soldiers. We were invited to join them.

As they started leaving the restaurant, we were advised by the kommandant to take seats in the driver's cabin in one of the trucks. The driver was a burly Russian soldier. As I sat beside him, I became nervous. In other circumstances I would have taken my sister and run. But here it was not so simple. I decided to keep his thoughts occupied. The question was what to talk about that would bring him down to earth if he had any foolish thoughts. I asked him about his mother and his family. He became completely involved in telling us about them until the order came for the convoy to move.

Whenever the convoy stopped for a rest, the kommandant came to our truck and asked how we were doing. He walked up and down close to our truck until we started moving again. He let the driver and soldiers know that he was watching that no harm should come to us. Later in the evening, just before the border, he ordered the soldiers to stop for the night.

He called me aside. He said there were 175 nationalities living in the Soviet Union, so there were many types of soldiers under his command. He could not vouch for any of them, especially at night after they had been on the road. He suggested that we look around among the Poles for accommodation.

The idea of staying overnight among Poles did not sit well with me, since I had no assurance that the soldiers would not enter the house where we were staying. I approached the kommandant and asked him if it would be possible to sit up overnight in his quarters, because we would not be safe anywhere else. He accepted my request and instructed two young officers who were accompanying him to pick up our luggage and take us to a Polish woman's house. He ordered a separate room for us and gave us the key to lock the door.

As they settled down to eat supper, we were called from the room to join them at the table. As we entered the dining room the two young officers were in their underwear. Apologizing, they asked us to wait outside until they were dressed. We were pleasantly surprised by their propriety.

The next morning we were hidden in the rear of a truck as we

crossed the border. When the convoy stopped for a meal, the kommandant brought us tinned fish with bread. He mentioned that he had a daughter who looked like Rifka. He actually took care of us like a father. It was a nice day and we enjoyed the journey. The convoy stopped for a while in Olomouc.

Needless to say, as we parted from the kommandant, we did not know how to thank him for his care. He was a pleasant person with a deep sense of human dignity. The soldiers behaved themselves properly during the journey, although many of them did not look very sympathetic.

In Olomouc we boarded the train to Grulich and we three sisters were finally reunited. We decided to leave Grulich and travel to Brno, the provincial capital, and from there to Bratislava, the capital of the province of Slovakia. The train to Bratislava was overflowing with returning soldiers and civilians and it dragged along for a day and a night. We had to stand the whole time, squeezed among the crowd. We even fell asleep standing up.

We arrived in Bratislava exhausted. Outside the station we saw an immense mass of people. We feared we would get lost in this strange environment.

We were too weary for new adventures, so we decided to go right back to Brno. When we inquired for a place to sleep in Brno, a woman offered us a place in her home for a few nights. We learned there of an institution which gave the survivors a short stay of recuperation. In Brno we registered in the repatriation office under our real names and received identification cards.

CHAPTER 63

LONGING TO SETTLE DOWN

After prolonged deliberation Pearl and I left Rifka at the repatriation institution in Brno, Czechoslovakia, and went by train to find a place to live. We disembarked at a train station between two Czech cities, Zabreh and Sternberk. After an hour or two exploring Zabreh, we decided it was not suitable and we went to visit the other town, Sternberk.

It was a nice afternoon and we strolled through the streets. In a courtyard, we met a young man painting a landscape. We began to chat with him and asked if he knew of a vacant furnished apartment. We explained who we were and he said, "Right across the street there is a furnished apartment. The former owners were Germans, Mr. Zetler and his wife. They were members of the SS and were thrown into jail by the Czech authorities. The housing office is now closed, but in the morning you should go there and ask about it." We thanked him and left.

It was time to find a place to sleep for the night. I knocked on a door and asked the woman who opened it if she knew where we could get quarters for the night. She offered us a place in her house. There we met a Czech couple who had also come to settle in Sternberk. The husband had been assigned by the Czech government to a management job in the city office. We quickly became good friends, especially with the wife, Mrs. Vsetickova.

The next morning the housing office allocated Mr. Zetler's apartment to us and we immediately took steps to bring Rifka to

Sternberk. The place was in good condition and well furnished, but we had no privacy. The mother of Mr.Zetler, a woman in her sixties, lived next door. She scrutinized our every move, even peering into our window whenever we had company. She had not been evicted, as she had an older Czech boyfriend who had a high position in the local government office. He came every evening to take her out for a stroll.

The newly arrived Czech clerks in city hall knew about the fine furniture in the former Zetler apartment and wanted to secure the furniture for themselves. Every few days there was some official or other who came to look at the apartment and its furniture.

We got tired of the constant harassment, and after a few weeks we found an empty house and moved there with the furniture. For a while we lived undisturbed.

As new arrivals we had to register in the economy department to get food cards. There we came upon a young clerk. His first question was whether we were working, remarking that if we didn't work, we didn't deserve food cards. After haggling with him for a while, we finally got the food cards. Pearl found a job in a pastry bakery and Rifka started to learn dressmaking. I did the housekeeping.

Obliged to write a letter in Czech to the institution in charge of refugees in order to keep the furniture, I felt awkward because of my inability to do so. I asked around to see if I could find someone to assist me. I learned that in the vicinity there lived a young man who might be able to help me. On my first try he was not home. On the next visit, however, I met Fred. He gladly wrote the letter for me. Both Mrs.Vsetickova and Fred became frequent visitors, particularly on weekends. We stayed in Sternberk over the winter of 1945-1946. In April 1946 we left our apartment and the furniture for Prague, where the Jewish Committee directed us to an emigration institution in Hloubetin, a suburb of Prague. At the emigration institution we became acquainted with others who were also interested in emigrating, one of them, a fellow by the name of Gustav Wajsgrus, the other a certain Moshe Roth. We stayed for a while in the hope of fulfilling our desire to emigrate to Palestine.

In the meantime, Fred came to visit us in Hloubetin.

From Hloubetin we were sent to a displaced persons camp of the UNRRA in Pocking, Germany. A few kilometres from the city of Pocking were barracks where German soldiers had been stationed during the war. We were quartered in the former barracks. Each consisted of rooms, a communal kitchen and a dining room. Washrooms and toilets were across the road. The facilities were quite primitive. All inhabitants of our block C 3, around fifty people, beloonged to Betar, a Zionist organization. A leader and an advisory board oversaw the management, recreation and other projects. Everyone was given a job and everybody had to cooperate. Some worked in the kitchen, some in the warehouse and some outside, all on a rotating schedule.

There were blocks whose residents belonged to other organizations. In some blocks, people shared rooms with others, but did not form part of any organization; these were the private blocks.

We were surprised when Fred arrived to join us in the late summer of 1946. He stayed in another block, C 10, with a friend, the same Moshe Roth whom we had befriended in Hloubetin. In our block we bumped into Gustav Wajsgrus again.

Not feeling comfortable amongst the others in block C 3 and despite the fact that my sisters chose to stay, I moved out to a private block.

In December 1946 Pearl married Gustav. In February 1947 the inhabitants of block C 3 made preparations to go to Palestine. Because I lived in a private block, I was unable to join my sisters. Pearl and my brother-in-law were hesitant to leave me alone. However, they finally agreed to go if I married Fred. At the beginning of February we got married. The clerk in the economic department who had initially refused to grant us food cards, became my husband. I borrowed a wedding dress from the wife of the rabbi of Pocking and Fred borrowed a suit from Moshe Roth.

After my sisters and brother-in-law left, Fred and I moved from Pocking to Munich. We were allowed a small room in an apartment belonging to two elderly German sisters. They harassed us constantly.

When I went to the German police station to register and to get food cards, I was presented with papers which I had to sign attesting to the fact that I was no longer a Nazi. I refused to sign, but was told that if I did not sign I would not get food cards. Proving that we were Jews did not help our cause. It was extremely frustrating that I, who had run for my life from the Nazis and by a miracle had survived, should have to sign such papers. My arguments were not accepted by the police. I was outraged and do not remember what I wrote in those papers.

The harassment of the two German sisters did not cease, even when we moved. Shortly after moving we received a court summons claiming that we owed them three hundred and fifty German marks. We went to court with a German lawyer supplied to us by a Jewish institution. The lawyer did not even open his mouth. We defended ourselves successfully and, at the end, the sisters were obliged to pay our lawyer. Later I was called to the police station and accused of stealing some clothing from them. After looking myself and my accusers over, the police smiled, refused to accept their accusation and allowed me to go free.

When my sisters and brother-in-law got as far as the Palestine coast, their ship was intercepted. An entire flotilla of the British Navy together with a part of the Royal Air Force had been dispatched to prevent the very few who had survived Hitler's hell from reaching the Promised Land. They were apprehended and taken to a camp on the island of Cyprus. During World War II the international community, including the United States, Canada, South Africa and Palestine under the British mandate, closed their doors to the fleeing Jews of Europe.

In Munich, my husband and I were unable to find work. We took courses in radio technology at the Organisation for Rehabilitation and Training (ORT) school, believing that such training would be useful when we emigrated to Palestine. When we finished the course my husband finally found work in the ORT warehouse. Several months later he got a job as a bookkeeper in the head office. We got a large room in the dormitory building of the ORT on Holbein strasse. To keep busy, I took a course in dressmaking. One

of my classmates in the course approached me and told me about a job in a newly opened wholesale food store, belonging to one of her neighbours, a Mr. Zukerman. The store carried American cigarettes and other items which were not yet available on the open market in Germany, such as citrus fruits, coffee, tea, cocoa and chocolate. I was hired and worked for Mr.Zuckerman until he and his family left Germany at the end of 1949 for the United States. In the process he sold the store to a new owner for whom I continued to work.

After the new state of Israel was established in May 1948, my sisters and brother-in-law moved there from Cyprus. The newly arrived survivors of Hitler's hell certainly did not find paradise. Immediately on arrival they were forced to fight the Arabs who wanted to drive all Jews into the sea.

We hoped to follow my sisters to Israel. However, letters received from my sisters were disheartening. They told us to postpone our coming to Israel, as economic conditions were poor. Rifka got married in the fall of 1950. We did not attend the wedding, hoping nevertheless that we would make it to Israel in the following months and be united once again with my sisters. However, feeling restless after the birth of our son Max, and unwilling to stay in Germany any longer, we emigrated to Canada. In May 1951 we landed in our adopted country and began a new life in Montreal.

Appendix One

ORDINARY MEN

1992 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the first deportation from Miedzyrzec to Treblinka. Several newspapers published an article I wrote on the horrors that I had experienced at that time. A New York reader called to bring to my attention the book

Ordinary Men, Reserve Battalion 101,
and The Final Solution in Poland

by Christopher R. Browning, a professor at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. (It was published in 1992 by Harper Collins.)

Professor Browning writes:

> We have long known how the Jews in the major ghettos, especially Warsaw and Lodz, were murdered. But most Polish Jews lived in smaller cities and towns with smaller population. How had the Germans organized and carried out the destruction of this widespread Jewish population? And where had they found the manpower during this pivotal year of the war for such an astounding logistical achievement in mass murder? The personnel of the death camps was quite minimal. The manpower needed to clear the smaller ghettos - to round up and either deport or shoot the bulk of Polish Jewry - was not.
>
> My search for the answers to these questions led me to the town of Ludwigsburg near Stuttgart. Here is located the Central Agency for the State Administrations of Justice (Zentrale Stelle der

> Landesjustizverwaltungen), the Federal Republic of Germany's office for coordinating the investigation of Nazi crimes. I was working through their extensive collection of indictments and judgments for virtually every German trial of Nazi crimes committed against the Jews of Poland when I first encountered the indictment concerning Reserve Police Battalion 101, a unit of the German Order Police.
>
> Though I had been studying archival documents and court records of the Holocaust for nearly twenty years, the impact this indictment had upon me was singularly powerful and disturbing. Never before had I encountered the issue of choice so dramatically framed by the course of events and so openly discussed by at least some of the perpetrators. Never before had I seen the monstrous deeds of the Holocaust so starkly juxtaposed with the human faces of the killers.

The group Professor Browning focused on came from Hamburg, by reputation one of the least "Nazified" cities in Germany. The majority of men in the Police Battalion were from a class that had been anti-Nazi. But they were converted into mass-murderers who helped to round up Polish Jews and cram them into boxcars bound for Treblinka or Majdanek. Stragglers, those caught in hiding, or people who could not be forced into boxcars when the trains were filled, were simply shot, sometimes in groups of hundreds. Some five hundred members of the Battalion took part in the campaign that began in 1942 in the Lublin district of Poland, which included Miedzyrzec (where I was lucky enough to survive five deportations). Professor Browning studied the transcripts of the interrogation of just over two hundred members of the Battalion. They had strict orders that not a single Jew should be left alive in the Battalion security zone.

I knew them as "Einsatzkommandos," (mobile killing units), and they participated in the mass killings of Jews. They wore dark green uniforms.

Appendix Two

The Postwar German Justice

The Germans of today do not fully understand the cruelty committed by their parents, grandparents and relatives against an identifiable group of unarmed and helpless civilians.

To compound their crimes against humanity and Jews in particular, the Germans of today have allowed those who perpetrated the brutal destruction of the Jews to go free. A very small number of war criminals have been caught and brought to trial. The remainder, numbering in the thousands, are free, with no effort being made to unmask them and bring them to justice. These murderers have attained high status, some in private life, some in political life. They have no remorse. They are protected by the state and are rewarded with pensions.

With the end of the Holocaust I was still left with everlasting pain. Some say that time heals all wounds, but the pain inflicted on me during the six years of German brutality will never heal. The most destructive aspect for my nervous system and health was to live day and night in an atmosphere of unending fear and terror.

For over a half a century I have fought to receive compensation, not for my family's spilled blood which can never be replaced, but for the long-term damaging effects I sustained during the six years of torture and the horrors in the ghettos, camps and slave work, with a death sentence constantly hanging over me. German judges rejected my case without my being present at the hearings. Nor was I allowed to have a lawyer present to represent me. They concluded that I had suffered for only ten months, whereas the minimum time during which a person must have suffered in order to receive compensation was twelve months.

Is this justice ? Have the Germans changed ?

AGMV MARQUIS
Québec, Canada
1999

This book is essential to our understanding of an era that defies compassion. The question it raises, though painful and anguished, must not and cannot be ignored, lest their lessons be forgotten.

Elie Wiesel, University Professor
and Andrew W. Mellon Professor
in the Humanities

I found your memoirs especially valuable. You provide a detailed account of tenacious and extraordinary survival in three different regions and situations: central Poland, East Upper Silesia, and the Sudetenland. This is a remarkable odyssey, and the accuracy of your memory and the notes that you took soon after the events you describe are supported by our current knowledge of the historical record. You describe your relations with the surrounding population in each of these regions with differentiation and detail. You provide the reader with a real sense of the texture of life and strained ethnic relations in these region

Christopher R. Browning
Professor of History
Pacific Lutheran University
Tacoma, Washington

Your manuscript is a remarkable story of how you, through perseverance, courage and faith, managed to escape death at the hands of the Nazis. There is no doubt that it is a "gripping story."

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