

TOBY:

Her Journey from Lodz to Samarkand (and beyond)

by

Toby Klodawski Flam

Drawings by Leah Taylor

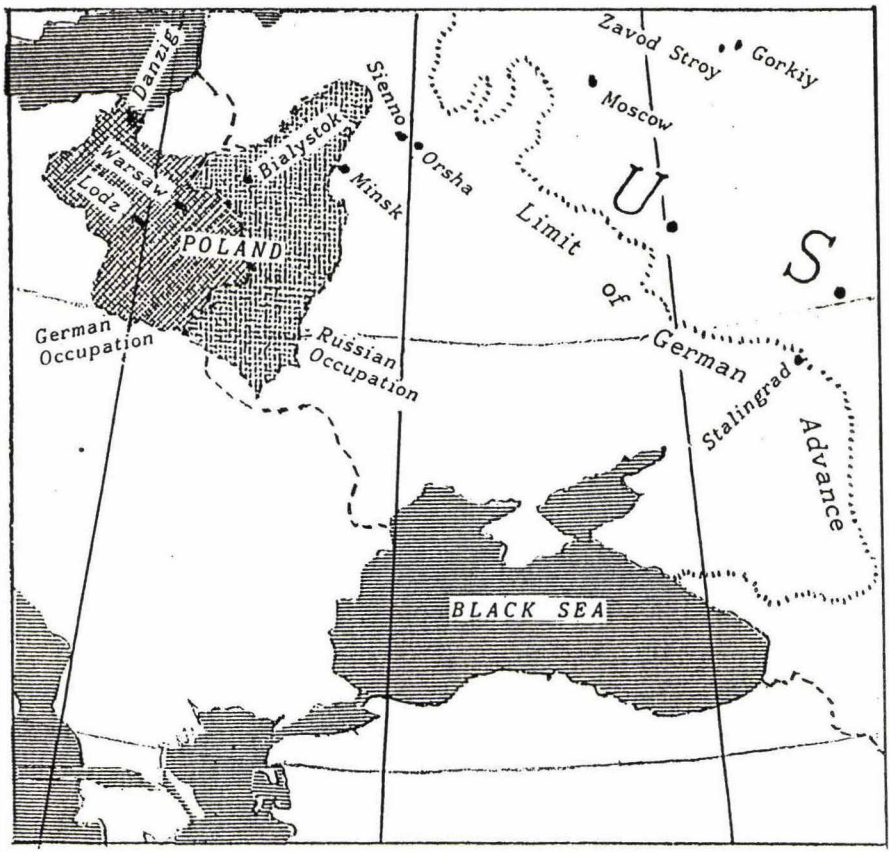
TOBY: HER JOURNEY



FROM LODZ TO SAMARKAND
(AND BEYOND)

To Willy
with love
Toby Wlodawer Flam

TOBY:
Her Journey



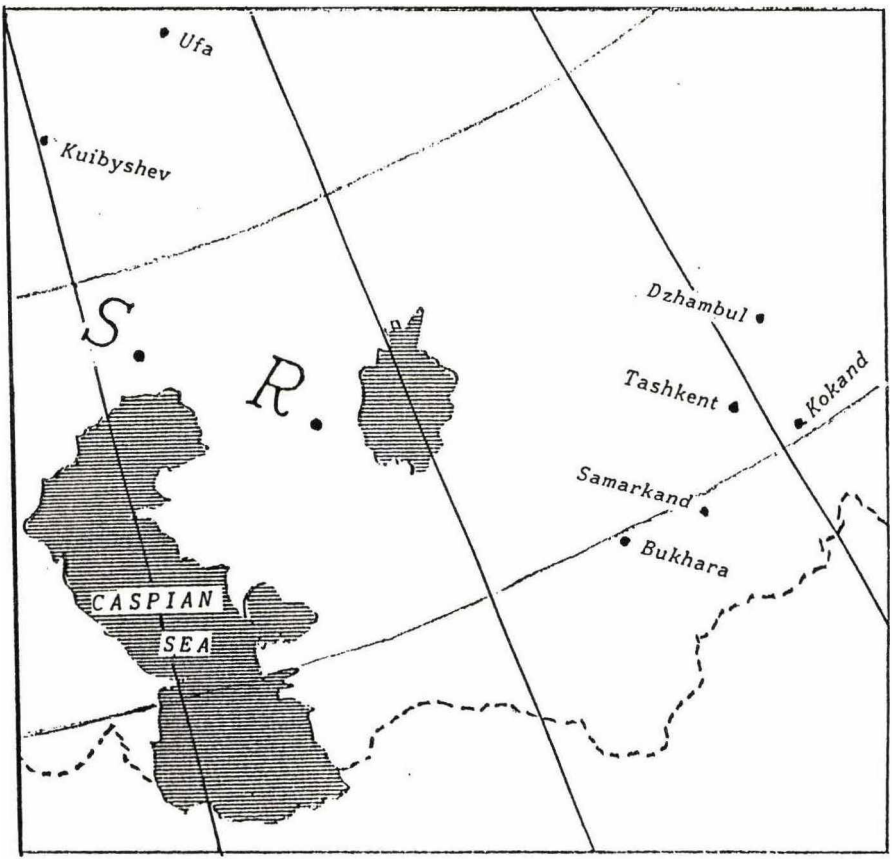
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from Lodz to Samarkand (and beyond)



CHILDE THURSDAY

1988

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For my sons Henry and Joseph.

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INTRODUCTION

In September, 1984, Toby Flam appeared among hundreds of others at Bathurst Heights Secondary School in Metropolitan Toronto. She was applying for a course in English in the rapidly-expanding continuing education department. There were so many applicants that fall that teachers were recruited to assist in the registration process.

Luckily for me, Toby was on my list. When she explained, shy but hopeful, that she wanted to improve her English, I asked the standard question, "Why?" She was obviously not, like many others, needing high school credits or more English, in order to enter the job market in Canada. In fact, according to her application form, she was seventy-two, had already worked for the National Ballet Company of Canada for some years in Toronto, and had retired. As my curiosity grew and my questions increased, Bathurst Heights faded away. It took only a few of the incredible details of Toby's experience to carry me off to lonely trains and exotic place names. She wanted to tell her story, to write her story, and I wanted to hear more.

Toby was in my class that year, and has been in many other classes at Bathurst Heights since then. She wrote a few episodes of her story each week, much to the enjoyment of myself, who checked it, and Carol Atkinson, who typed it up.

It is an account among millions: of a life totally *bouleversé*, turned upside down, by the turmoil of war, in particular World War II. Her recent determination to continue studying echoes an earlier determination to survive in the face of danger, destruction and painful family loss.

In the last language she has had to learn, Toby has written simply, beautifully, and with an instinct for good story-telling. She has given to her sons, family and all of us not only a personal history, but also a glimpse of her indomitable spirit. Thank you, Toby.

Mary Lou Johnston,
Outremont, Qué.,
January 1988.



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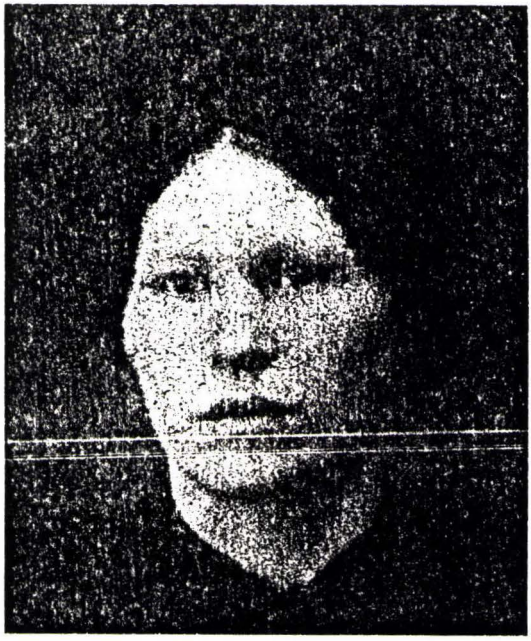
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My father and my mother:
Chaim and Fridla Klodawski.





I: EARLY CHILDHOOD AND MY SCHOOL

The first thing I remember from my childhood is my father holding me in his arms. When I looked at his red-golden beard he looked so old to me, but he was just twenty-six years old and I was around three.

My mother, as far as I remember, was around all the time. I didn't think about her as an older person. My earliest memories are of mother doing everything, every time. She talked, she sang, she played with me. In our home she was a friend, a teacher, a cook, a housekeeper, even a doctor too.

When I grew up I told my friends, "I love my father because he is a good and smart person, but my mother because she is a mother."

Together they were a nice couple. Chaim Klodawski was a short man with broad shoulders, Fridla Klodawski even shorter — a tiny lady my father looked up to for two reasons. First of all, she was six years older, although she looked younger; second, she had a little education. (She had short brown hair and brown eyes, and her short nose and wide cheekbones made her look more Polish than Jewish.) She never went to school but worked from her earliest years as a mother's helper, cook and housekeeper till her marriage. In her work she met many people from whom she picked up knowledge as much as she could. She learned in a practical way, sometimes things which you never learn in school. In her surroundings, she was ahead of her time. For example, she

didn't believe in any supernatural things. She wasn't superstitious at all. Many Poles and many Jews believed in ghosts and the "evil eye". My mother would say to me when I was going to visit my aunts, "Why are you afraid? If there's nobody in the street, there's nothing to be afraid of. And if somebody *is* there, not everybody is a bad person."

Mother taught us kids not to be afraid: to be nice to people and polite. Specially she taught us hygiene, which was known very little at that time by poor and lower-middle-class people.

The small town where father was born, Bielawy, did not have any public school for the children. The Jews were considered more educated because they had a religious school, which only boys attended from the age of four years. They learned there Old Testament, "Torah", prayers and religious laws. The students were all in one room. They attended as long as the parents could pay. My father at nine years of age had to go to be an apprentice shoemaker. For three years he had to learn the trade without any pay, just working for food. He had to "live in" and perform any other chores too. This was the agreement between his father and the shoemaker.

My parents married in 1910. Father built up a small shop in the city of Lodz, working from early morning till late in the night to make a living, supporting the family who kept growing year by year.

I was the first child, Tauba, born in 1912. As mother told me, I was a very tiny awful-looking baby, sick and cranky, constantly crying. Father, as a young parent, not knowing anything about children, didn't like me and that situation. He advised mother not to feed me because I would die anyway. "People said so."

Mother had pity on me, loved me and believed that I would get better and stay alive. She was ashamed to kiss me in front of father or other people. Just in the night she used to kiss me and hope that I would survive. And so it happened I kept alive and grew up in spite of World War I, hunger and hardship. After a year, my younger sister, Nacia, was born and after two years another sister, Eva. Father got used to having a family, children; he loved them all but me the best. By 1918 a new addition to our family, Anshel, was born. Much happiness. On top of everything mother was happy to have a son

because her sisters kept telling her that a bad woman bore just one kind of children. Later Tamara and Moses were born.

The first time when my parents moved, I was six years old. We moved just across the street from one room to a two-room apartment. This was a big achievement for my family. I was excited and happy because the new place had electricity. I couldn't stop switching it off and on to see how it worked. In that time in our city not many people were lucky enough to have electric light.

But in the new place we had just in one room a fireplace; the other room was very cold in winter. This was the room where father worked. In the corner of this room was my bed. I remember how father wrapped me up in a warm blanket, took me in his arms to the cold workroom and put me to sleep, covering me with a feather quilt.

It was the time of World War I. In our city, Lodz, there was a lack of work, money and food. Almost everybody, big or small, suffered from hunger. The stores were empty. Even if you had the money it was difficult to get needed things even from the black market.

One summer day, I was playing in the street with some kids. A lady confronted me, tapping me on the shoulder, asking me to come with her. I didn't know the lady but I think now she must have known me. She took me to the kitchen of her big house which stood around the corner. Without asking, she handed me a big slice of white bread with butter or cheese — I don't remember clearly — but I remember running home showing mother the gifts I got. I don't remember seeing any white bread before this. We had black bread only, which tasted very bad. You can't imagine how good the gift of bread was.

Another thing which comes to my mind when I think of mother is an incident that took place which showed how she taught me honesty. It was in my preschool time. As I was the oldest child, she called me "big girl". Often she asked me to keep an eye on the two younger sisters who played on the sidewalk in front of our home. Next door a neighbour's son, a few years older than me, had the same position — to watch the younger kids. His name was Tom. While we took care of the children we played,



Without asking, she handed me a big slice of white bread with butter or cheese.

learned some letters, read from signs, from the name of the street and from pieces of newspaper lying around.

One sunny summer day (it had to be a nice day because in rain or cold weather, we stayed home), we found a clutch purse with some money. I didn't understand the value of money but I think Tom knew. He offered me our findings in such a way that he got the money and I got the purse. I accepted gladly and I played with it as a toy.

A few days later, a lady passing down the street saw the purse in my hand. She asked where I got it from. When I told her, she asked to be taken to my mother. The lady said that this was her purse, which she had lost. Mother ordered me to give back the purse to the woman. But Tom's parents didn't act that way. They didn't return the money. In my child's mind, I was happy that the lady got her purse returned, she was so thankful.

When World War I ended, Poland after a hundred and fifty years got its independence. I don't remember anything of that time, but my parents talked about the turmoil which was in the country. There were fights between different political parties; group killings and pogroms took place. In the end the majority of the population elected a very democratic government which set up the first constitution. It was a good one for the citizens of Poland. They got so many privileges which they never had under the Tsar's rule.

For my parents the biggest gift was a free public education. For the first time in the history of Poland, all children, even Jewish children, had the right to enroll in school. Every parent who had a child from age seven to fourteen had to obtain a pink paper (I remember it till now), backed up with a birth certificate. Many parents among the Jewish population had neglected to get a certificate when their children were born. They had to pay a lot of money to get it for the school. I was the lucky one: to be seven years old, have a birth certificate and a new dress in the style all we schoolgirls wore (a navy blue woollen pleated skirt and a white cotton blouse). Mother was very excited and happy that her daughter would get an education just like the rich kids had.

Mother was happy that I was going to school, but I had a problem on my mind, which I didn't tell her. (I was too shy. I kept it to myself.) The problem was my Yiddish name, Tauba.

All my life from the time I was born and before that, the anti-Semitism was thick in the air. The Jews were blamed for any misfortune, from Jesus' death to the bad economic situation in the country. The gentiles treated Jews as a lower race, and the Jews had to live with that. It was common for a mother to tell a child who behaved badly, "Wait, the Jew will come with a sack and take you away," although in everyday life people worked and dealt together. Every Pole had Jewish friends, traded in Jewish shops, consulted Jewish doctors or lawyers or drank beer in the local restaurant owned by a Jew.

I grew up in a district where Polish people predominated. Just a handful of Jews lived there. Neighbours were mostly poor working-class people who worked in the nearby textile mills owned by rich Germans and Jews.

My parents were friendly with the neighbours, who liked them "Because," they used to say about my father, "he is honest and hard-working; he is an exceptional Jew." Also a Pole could say, "She is a nice girl. She doesn't look like a Jewess."

As a child I played with Polish kids. They liked me but they never called me by my name Tauba, just "the little Jewish girl" *("zydóweczka")*. I didn't want to be a Jewess; I wanted to be like all the kids in my neighbourhood. I wished to have a name like the others. In my childish mind I thought that if I had a Polish name, nobody would know that I was Jewish.

Mother was specially on very good terms with a Polish family Jagello. They had two children, Henio and Zosia, who were the same ages as me and my sister Nacia. Mrs. Jagello used to say that when Henio grew up, he would marry me even though I was a Jewess. Mrs. Jagello had also a sister; her name was Tola (Teofila). She was tall, blonde and very friendly. She liked me, and I liked her and her name. I figured out that the name Tola was similar to my name and would solve the problem.

And so, going to the school at seven years old, I promised myself that I would be called Tola.

And this name stuck to me until I came to the Soviet Union, where Tola was a nickname for a man (Anatol) and I had to change to Tania. After the war I came back to Poland and officially changed my name to Teofila (Tola), for the same reason: anti-Semitism. When I came to Canada, my relatives liked to make me a Canadian as fast as possible, and for the first step they wanted me to change to Toby, and now I'm Toby. I hope that will be the last change.

Finally the first day of school came. Mother and I went there, two blocks away from where we lived. In the office, a teacher from behind the desk selected children for three groups, because there were three classrooms. The selection was simple. In spite of age, whoever knew some reading or writing got to grade two or three, and others were in grade one. In my class (the first group) there were kids from seven years of age to their teens. What made the biggest impression on us was the teacher wearing a cap. The white four-cornered cap with green rim symbolized the status of the teacher. Mother kept saying that the teacher must be very good and knowledgeable because she was a university student or had graduated from university.

The first of September, 1919, I started school. From the first day I liked the school, the teachers, the kids, and even the discipline. I was a very quiet child and never spoke during the lessons. I used to listen so intently that I could repeat word by word what the teacher said. The teacher called me "The Sleeping Beauty: she looks like she sleeps, but she knows everything." All these years I was one of the best pupils. The children in the class knew that and used to ask for help.

I remember when I was in grade three, a bigger and much older girl took me in her arms to the blackboard to explain some arithmetic problem to her.

We had compulsory education. To be a good student meant to be good in every subject. I was very good in sciences but bad in art, singing, drawing, also in physical education because I was a very undernourished, anaemic, weak child and the doctor didn't let me do any exercises. As a result my average on the yearly reports was just good although in sciences I had top marks.

One year when I got the yearly report I looked it over very swiftly and by mistake I read wrongly that my mark for mathematics was just satisfactory. I started to cry. I didn't want to go home. All the children went home and I stood in the empty class crying. Finally the teacher noticed my state and asked the reason. Listening to my explanation she started to laugh because, poor me, I had mixed up the marks, and instead of seeing the mark for mathematics, *"Very Good"*, I saw the low mark for singing.

I liked the school and loved my teachers. On the last day of every school year, I would take my teacher a bouquet of flowers my mother had bought at the market.

I had all kinds of dreams, as every child does. I dreamed of being an engineer, an architect, an accountant, a bookkeeper or at least a clerk in a post office. But my biggest dream before I was about ten years old was to become a pianist.

My father once mentioned that if I would like to play a mandolin, he could buy one, but not a piano, which cost a fortune. Once on a winter evening I overheard my mother's conversation with a friend of hers. They talked about poor children and orphans who by luck were adopted and raised by rich people, and then became highly educated and successful. Sometimes large poor families would give away or even sell a child who was talented to a rich family so as to get an education and a good profession. The friend mentioned a case of a boy from a poor family who was given away and became a famous musician. He was thankful to his parents for what they had done for him.

I started to think that this would be a good way to realize my dreams. I wished that my parents would do this for me. For a long time I had the idea in my mind, but I didn't have the courage to talk about it.

Once I did mention it to my mother. She was shocked, but she explained very peacefully that that was not a good way to be successful. She believed that hard work was the way to fulfil my dreams; she loved me and she didn't want to lose me. She promised that she would do everything to let me get to high school (gymnasium).

The general curriculum at the public school was comprehensive. From grade three, besides Polish writing and reading, physical education, singing and drawing, we

started to learn history, geography, natural science and home economics (embroidery and darning). In grade five we got more German, as a second language, physics, chemistry and some home economics (sewing). In grade six, more subjects: algebra, geometry and anatomy. In the last grade, we learned also trigonometry. The teachers told us that in the future we would appreciate what we learned in school. Now I know they were right.

In spite of liking the school so much for excellence, it was very difficult for me to be on time at school. In the morning we started the classes with a prayer but most of the time I was late to it, maybe because I was weak or maybe tired. To be in school at eight o'clock in the morning was really a hardship. The classes ended at four o'clock. Mother would be waiting for me. She needed my help, as our family was growing. In 1922 my sister Tamara was born, and a year later the youngest brother, Moses, was born. Mother used to say, "I don't need any other help; just watch the baby." I wasn't the best babysitter. If the baby was crying I didn't play with it. I took it in my arms and read a book (I loved to read). Naturally, a baby didn't sit quiet as a doll, specially Moses. He was a very energetic child. He tried to reach for the book which was on the table. If he couldn't get the book, he scratched my face or tore my hair. I had no time to play with children my own age.

If I wasn't watching the babies, I was darning all the socks for the family. There were a lot of socks. When my younger sister Nacia grew older, she took over the job of darning. By that time I was twelve years old. I learned sewing in the class. We sewed shorts, and very plain tops for gym. From that time on I had to sew for our children. Mother was happy to save money on kids' clothes. As I watched the little ones, I used to sew by hand: and so sewing became my craft.

I never did my homework before the kids went to sleep. With six children at home it was very busy and noisy. My poor mother worked hard from six o'clock in the morning till midnight. I took pity on her; she was very good to me and I was willing to help her.

Going back in my memories to my childhood, I have come to the conclusion that I was taught by my parents many right things. One of them was a sense of obligation. As the oldest, I got used to the idea that I had

to take care of the children, to watch them when mother was busy.

Every time when I liked to go out with my friends, the kids insisted on going along with me, especially the two youngest sisters. I really didn't want them to, but mother used to say, "Take Nacia; she will be quiet, I promise," but when the other ones started to cry she begged me to take her, too. It was very hard for me to say "no". I took them everywhere. My friends knew; they accepted, but they didn't like it.

One day a girl invited me to her home: "Come over alone, without your 'gang'," she said. When I told mother, I was sure she would not let me go, but to my surprise she said calmly, "Clara is right," and she helped me to go out unseen. I was very thankful that mother was so understanding.

I went to Clara's home very happy, but after a short time I got so uptight, worried about what could happen when the sisters found out that I was away. Maybe they were looking for me in the street?

At that time a streetcar ran through our street, and the mothers warned the children of the danger. My feeling of obligation to the children was so strong that I ran back home to see if everything was O.K. On the way home I decided that I would peek through the keyhole, and if everything was quiet and mother was not crying I would go back to Clara's place. I did so but I never told mother. I was ashamed of my weakness. But from that time on mother never asked me again to take a child along with me.





II: MY GRANDPARENTS

I lost my grandparents early in my life so I haven't many memories, just some reflections. My maternal grandmother I did not know because she died when my mother was six years old. But grandpa Moses lived to a hundred and six. I remember him as a very old, old man with a long grey beard, walking slowly, talking quietly, difficult to understand. He lived with us and we loved him. He used to tell stories from the Old Testament, about the Jewish customs and traditions. He also taught me prayers. In the evenings before I had to go to bed, he prayed and I repeated after him. Everything was fine till in one winter evening when we were all sitting in front of the fireplace. Grandpa started to pray and I repeated as usual. Then my parents looked at each other and started to laugh. I didn't know why, but I had the feeling that it had to do with praying and I didn't want to pray any more. Grandpa was angry, very upset. He tried to convince me to pray, but it was in vain. Some years later mother told me that they laughed because it was so funny to listen to the way grandpa said the Hebrew words of prayer and I just mimicked his strange pronunciation without understanding a word.

In the Jewish religion, on the first day of every month of the Hebrew calendar, men are praying a certain prayer and all small children receive some money. That's what my grandpa used to do. He had a lot of change every time in his pocket and on the first day of the month he used to visit all grandchildren and give them a penny.

Even when the Russian kopek was no more in use, was worthless, he kept giving them to the kids. He died when I was six years old.

The first anti-Semitic act of violence which I remember was the harassment of my grandfather. A gang of hooligans beat up that old Jew and cut off his beard. He got sick and shortly after he died. I didn't understand why, but my mother told me, "The *Hallerchiks* hate the Jews." (Hallerchiks were followers of the reactionary General Haller.)

My paternal grandparents were younger and lived in the country. Grandpa was a tailor, but every spring he used to rent an orchard from rich farmers, with the intention of harvesting a fruit crop. Looking at the blooming trees, he had a fair idea of what the crop would be and on that estimate took care of the orchard. He moved nearby and would work there till he collected the fruit, which he sold to the buyers. These grandparents worked hard. They never had time to come to the city to meet the grandchildren. When World War I began, they weren't able to see us, and we couldn't visit them. When the war was over and life got better, my parents decided that mother would take the kids and make a trip to the grandparents. This would kill two birds with one stone. The children would meet the grandparents and would have a vacation in the country.

We took a train to the nearest town, but from there we had to travel by horse and buggy. We were three girls and my cousin, Helen, one year older. We were not used to that kind of transportation and we got ill with the seasickness. Mother had a very hard time with us, but when the horses came to a stop we recovered fast.

I didn't know if my grandparents were happy to have us, but I remember that grandpa Abraham hooked up on the ceiling two hammocks for the youngest children, because they didn't have enough beds for everybody. I think now that they were happy to see us.

The next day, early in the morning, grandpa woke us up by opening wide the door to let the bright sunshine in. He called us to come out. "Don't wear the shoes, don't waste them, walk barefoot," he said. It was good to run around barefoot in the orchard. It was warm and so different from the city: the sun, the grass, the trees. We were crazy and excited. It was a happy time for us.

We came to the grandparents in a time when the cherries got ripe, and grandpa was busy climbing the cherry trees. Beside every cherry tree, he had a big bushel basket, into which he collected the crop. The youngest sister, Eva, was just little, and when she saw the bushel of cherries, she put her tiny hand in the bushel and started to play by squeezing the red, juicy cherries. When grandpa saw that, he was very angry, but we didn't understand it. The next day Helen and I were wandering in the orchard. We saw trees with little green balls which we wanted to have. We took a ladder which was there and started to pick them one by one. We weren't aware that they were green plums which got ripe later; we had never seen fruit growing.

On the third day, mother took us home. We didn't understand what was going on. Listening to mother's conversation with father, relatives and friends, I put together the whole story. Grandpa had been very angry. He had lost a lot of money by our mischief. Mother got offended and she went home. "They are devils, not children," grandpa had said. "I don't want them here any more." Mother got upset and called him "Old Miser". A few years later my grandparents moved to the city and lived not far from us. They visited us and we visited them, but I felt very strange with them. I liked grandma. She was a very sweet, quiet little lady.

It was 1924 when grandpa inherited two thousand dollars from his sister (who died childless) in the United States. She had emigrated to the States before World War I, as a young bride. She married a successful young man. Shortly after, she sent tickets for her older brother, wife and eleven children. She promised also to send tickets for my grandparents, but the war started and that was the end of their dreams. After the war it was too late for them to emigrate to a new country. Also the news from the sister Sara was not happy. Her husband was killed as a soldier in Europe. He left her sick and childless. After a few years she died.

Sara left some money which was divided between the relatives in America and my grandpa. It was a big event in our family. Grandpa had to pick up the two thousand dollars from the National Bank in Warsaw. He had never been there and he was afraid to go alone, so father went with him.



My paternal grandparents.

I was so sure that my grandpa had become a rich man and I would profit from it, that when he and my father came through the door I started to jump for happiness, saying in a singing voice, "Now I will go to gymnasium, I will be educated." My grandpa replied, "Not with my money will you go to the gymnasium." I never forgot my disappointment. He didn't give away a penny to anybody, not as a present, not for charity. I don't remember how he managed with the money, but I know that after his death in 1927, just one hundred dollars was left for grandma. My parents sometimes were talking about him as a silly old man who had wanted to be a money lender, but people had cheated him, stealing the money from him. He died at the age of sixty-nine years from a stroke. I saw him a few days before he died. I felt sorry for him, but to me he was a stranger whom at times I didn't love. I couldn't cry. I wet my eyes to show my friends how sorry I was.





Our apartment block in Lodz.



III: THE FOUR SEASONS AND OUR FOOD

The seasons of the year in my childhood had a big effect on my life. Now every season brings back different memories.

The earliest I have are from the summer-time because I liked the summer for the warm, sunny weather, and the long days outdoors.

All the years as a youngster I was happy in summer.

I liked the summer for the fresh, tasty berries, for the fresh vegetables which we couldn't get in winter, for the warm milk I got direct from the neighbour's cow, kept in a little barn-like structure in the courtyard. I used to take my own tin cup, and asked the woman to milk right into the cup.

Once my uncle asked me if I was happy with the warm weather. "No, I'm crying." "Why?" he asked in astonishment. "I'm crying for every summer day that's gone," I replied.

The fall started with a good time — with the school, which I liked, and the fresh crop of apples which tasted so good. Mother bought them by the bushel and made all kinds of goodies: apple sauce, apple cake, and baked apple. I ate more than I should because in winter there weren't any apples.

But shortly came the bad time of colder weather, rainy days, wetness and mud all over. It made me sad. I

couldn't understand how anybody could smile on a rainy day.

Winter I remember with mixed feelings. I liked to walk on the fresh, white, crispy snow. The air had a wonderful smell. But I didn't like the cold and the short days. I hated to get up in the morning when it was still night and walk to school.

The winter was the longest season in the year. From November to the end of March we used to have snow and frost. Usually the winter in Poland was pleasant — a lot of snow, not any winds — but sometimes a big snowstorm happened when the snow drifted more than a metre high, like the winter of 1924, when the temperature reached minus twenty-eight degrees Celsius.

Winter was not bad when the homes were well-heated, but in my home, as in many others, it was cold. The houses were very little insulated, and were heated with coal or wood. The fireplaces, if they existed, couldn't warm up the rooms. In the home we moved to, there was just one big room. The fireplace didn't warm it up enough, so my father put an iron stove in the middle of the room. We still felt a draft when the wind blew.

The winter in 1922 was one of those winters. In the night the water in the pail got frozen. I picture in my memories one day in January. At that time, my father taught shoemaking to a young boy, Itchak. Itchak was fourteen years old. He was a quiet, polite and obedient teenager. He liked my father. He kept up the friendship with us for many years, even after he married and had his own shop.

On that certain cold day, when the temperature in the house fell to four degrees Celsius, he came in the morning to work as usual. Dad hadn't got any work for him. Anyway, it would have been too cold to work. We kids didn't go to school. All the family sat beside the fireplace shivering. Itchak joined the crowd.

"I have an idea to warm up!" he cried out in a loud voice. "Let's march as soldiers!" We liked that idea. Four of us, plus Itchak, started to march around the room and sing loudly to get over the cold.

The winter of 1926 I remember as a very cold winter, too. On top of the severe winter was a lack of coal. The schools were closed. The homes were cold. We stayed in



"Let's march as soldiers!"

our beds. Just father used to get up early to queue up to get some coal. The reason for the shortage was the strike of coalminers in England. The Polish mine-owners were happy with the opportunity to sell for a good price, and they exported all the stock. For the Polish population was left just the worst-quality broken coal, fine as dust and not enough to heat the houses Although this winter of 1926 was specially difficult, every winter all of us kids had frost-bite in the fingers and toes, because the house was not well heated. There wasn't any medication for frost-bite. Coming from school we were crying because of the pain in the fingers. Mother turned on the tap of cold water and we put our hands in. It helped a little. In the evenings when the house got warmer the frost-bitten fingers and toes got a very bad itch and we cried again.

Finally the spring came slowly; the sun started to warm us up. Then came the better time, the happy time. With the spring came the holiday times: the Christian Easter, the Jewish Passover.

We children liked the spring holiday very much for many reasons: the warmer weather, the special good food, free time from school, and the new clothes which every kid got. Even the poorest child had to have something new.

On the days of the holidays, the girls in their new shoes and dresses strolled in the streets to show off to their friends, comparing which outfit was nicest. We girls wore colourful cotton dresses, but bright red was thought of as a "peasant" colour. My hair was cut in straight bangs, and I wore a ribbon on top. I remember that once my father made me a pair of short boots from soft grey goat-skin. One of my school friends stepped on them hard, from jealousy.

In Poland, the spring came in April with all the trimmings. The countryside woke up, and people started working in the fields.

On May weekends people again enjoyed going for picnics, which in Poland we called *"majówka"*.

These are my memories of the four seasons of the year in my childhood.

Other memories are my mother's art of cooking.

As a youngster I was a bad eater. I didn't have any appetite. Seldom did I eat a full meal, but some dishes I liked very much and wished mother would make them often. These were matzo balls, blintzes and a sort of ravioli which we called *"kreplach"*, stuffed with meat, cheese or blueberries.

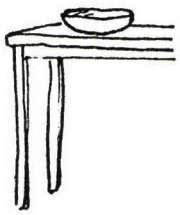
But these dishes I couldn't get when I liked because they were served according to the Jewish rituals of certain holidays.

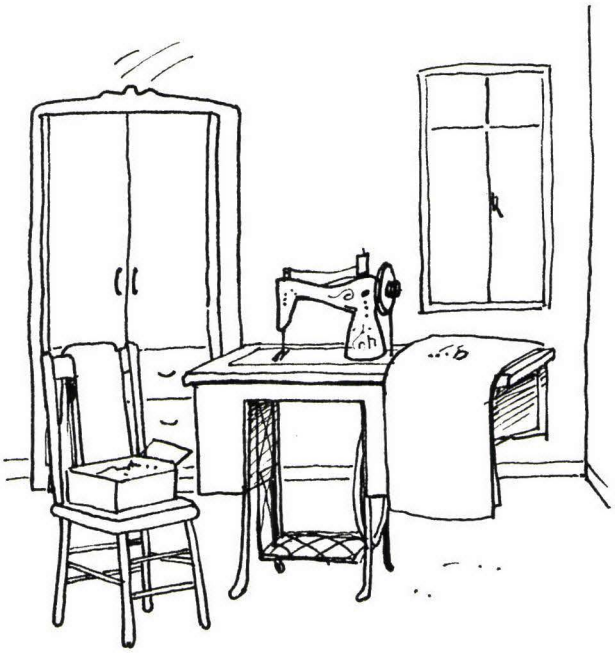
The matzo balls were cooked just on Passover holy days, and not at any other time of the year. During the eight days of Passover I ate matzo balls every day.

Blintzes and kreplach stuffed with cheese or blueberries, my mother made for the summer holy days in July. Nine days of these holy days we were not allowed to consume meat, only dairy dishes. I used to like that time very much and wait impatiently for the next year.

The kreplach stuffed with meat we ate in autumn on the eve of Yom Kippur, and on the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashana). In December there is a holiday for a week called Chanukah. It is a tradition to eat potato pancakes — potato *"latkes"*.

Now I'm my own housekeeper and I make these dishes any time of the year and when I like, but they don't taste as good any more.





But if she went out, I didn't sew.



IV: A SEAMSTRESS AND TO WARSAW

In 1926 I passed to grade seven. It was a very important year in my life. We had learned a lot, and finished the first part of our education. For some children who came from poor families, it was the end of school. The teachers knew that. One day we had to write an essay with the title "What I Want to Do in the Future".

I wrote in the essay that I wished the class would never finish because I liked school. I liked to learn and wanted to get more education, but I couldn't have it. My parents were not able to pay the tuition in "gymnasium".

The essay was so well written that the teacher read it to the class. Those were my thoughts which stayed in my mind.

My best friend was a girl who was lucky to be the youngest in the family (the older children were all working, and so there was more money for her). Her parents, with the help of the oldest brother, decided to enroll her in high school. She was sorry for me because we had to be apart. Every Saturday, the day free from school (we learned six days a week), we got together and cried over my bad luck. In the end I had to give up my foolish dreams and think of what to do next.

In our surroundings nobody could stay in the home and not earn some money. If a girl didn't learn a trade, she would have to get any job, even as a servant, or be married early with the help of a match-maker. But this my parents didn't want for me. They wanted me to

learn a trade, to be able to make a living in the future. In Poland, as in the whole world at that time, there was a crisis, a shortage of jobs, and no unemployment insurance. Whoever hadn't got a job or any savings became a beggar. It was thus very important to learn a trade which gave the possibility of getting a job, to make some money.

Mother wanted me to learn dressmaking, and tried to convince me that dressmaking was not just a manual job. "You have to use your brain to sew well," she said. I, on the other hand, kept thinking that I would like to be a bookkeeper, a typist or a clerk in a post office. But this was just a dream.

After many talks, I gave up. Mrs. Clavir, my mother's friend, offered to teach me sewing. She did not have any shop. She sewed for herself and for the family. The idea was to speed up my apprenticeship so I would be able to get a job as early as possible.

I was too young to understand the reality. I used to go every day to Mrs. Clavir's, but my mind was not on learning sewing but on other things. Mrs. Clavir was in a good financial situation. She had two girls; the older girl, Ola, was my age. Ola attended a private school, had a piano and a music teacher who taught her music at home. There was also a big library.

Mrs. Clavir was nice to me. She showed me how to sew and then she let me practise by sewing little things. But if she went out, I didn't sew. I read the books, tried playing the piano, remembering what the teacher had taught Ola. Mrs. Clavir never mentioned anything to me, but she must have come to the conclusion that I would never learn sewing in her home. She found a place for me in a dressmaking salon as an apprentice. A few girls were working there, and I became part of that group.

There I stopped being a child. I was a working teenager, and for the first time I understood that I had to take my position seriously. I made good progress and after one year I got paid wages. My job in the first years did not include much sewing: I was more of an errand girl. I delivered the dresses to the customers and bought things needed for the workshop.

Later, I became a real seamstress and had to work ten hours a day and six days a week when the season

was on. I worked at various places; for lack of machines, much of the work was done by hand. Nacia was also a seamstress, much admired for her perfect embroidery and beading. Additionally, Nacia and I worked in the evenings for our own customers, who were not prosperous people. We tried to copy models from Paris and Vienna that the women couldn't otherwise have had.

Time flows by like a river through my life. Good and bad things flew by. In our family of six children, many ups and down happened. Sometimes a crisis or a sickness shook up our lives, but never anything that could change or break our family.

The time when I grew up was a very important period in the history of Poland. After a hundred and fifty years the Polish republic was reborn. The Polish nation was free from its occupiers: Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary. On November 11, 1918, Poland got independence. The first parliament was democratically elected by all citizens. The first government and the constitution were very democratic. It was a ray of light for the Jews, who had never had equal rights in law, never the right to vote, to be elected, never the right to free education for all. In the first parliament there were thirty-five Jewish M.P.'s. It was a happy time, but not for long.

From all over the world, Poles came back home. Politicians and generals trained in many countries with many different ideas came to build the new Poland. Not everyone agreed with the democratic constitution. Many reactionary groups and parties fought to overrule the liberal government. The most reactionary group was led by General Józef Haller, who was a predecessor of Hitler. His slogans were: "Poland without Jews"; "Fight the Jews"; "Let them go to Palestine". Under the name of the National Party, he organized gangs of hoodlums who were very hostile towards the Jewish population. As I have mentioned, Jews called them "Hallerchiks", followers of Haller. All the racist, anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, reactionary parties of that time called themselves National Democratic, like the fascist parties in Western Europe.

During the years 1914 to 1922, the Jews were blamed from both the left and the right. The Polish Socialists proclaimed that the Jews were Zionists and rich, and that they didn't care for the Polish working class. They would emigrate to Palestine because of the Balfour Declaration in 1919. The National Democratic Party, on the other hand, propagated the idea that all the Jews were communists, "zydokomuna", traitors to Poland. Just at the start of the Polish independence in 1919, the anti-Semitic propaganda led to pogroms in Vilna and Pinsk (the eastern part of Poland), where the Jews were accused of collaborating with the Red Army. In reality the Jews were the only minority who supported the Polish republic. The other minorities, such as Germans, Ukranians, Lithuanians and White Russians, were enemies of Poland. But the racist propaganda prevailed; hatred and hostility never stopped.

In our neighbourhood, anti-Semitic acts came more and more out into the open, and my parents and a few other Jewish families living there moved to a Jewish neighbourhood. Needless to say, everywhere was the same anti-Semitism and the same discrimination.

However, in the city of Lodz, the anti-Semitism was much less violent than in some other places. The racist slogans were not so popular as in the other parts of the country. Yes, they called out, "Don't buy in the Jewish shops." In public places they handed out leaflets. Even my mother once got such a leaflet because she didn't look like a Jewess. Many theatres, movies and restaurants had signs in the windows: "For Jews and Dogs, Entrance Forbidden". The Jews were constantly verbally abused, but we were used to it, we couldn't care less; the life went on.

When I finished school and started to work as a seamstress, I worked in a Jewish shop with Jewish people, and my friends were also Jewish, but later when I joined the union I found Polish workers, unionists, who were democrats, socialists, and who fought the racist, anti-Semitic slogans. The unions in Poland were militant, and many times they defended the Jews. Also, among the Po-

lish intellectuals were many open-minded people who protested loudly against the discrimination and the anti-Semitic hostilities.

Very famous were the writer Wanda Wasilewska, Professor Tadeusz Kotarbinski, and Professor Kazimierz Bartel. Professor Bartel was teaching at the University of Lvov in 1936 when some disturbance occurred. He publicly condemned the act of violence on the campus and for this he was jailed. He was the first to be killed by the German fascists in 1939, although he was not a Jew.

I would like to say that in spite of the hostilities and discrimination, the Jews in Poland had a rich cultural life. The 3,500,000 Jewish population didn't give up. They constantly fought for their own rights. They had many schools, theatres, artists, writers, scientists and educators. Many books, newspapers and magazines were published in the Yiddish language. The twenty years in Poland between the two World Wars were still the best years in the Jewish life, compared to the oncoming Holocaust, the destruction of the Jewish population.

We stood together as a very close family, where love, respect and honesty dominated. For sure, my parents must have had hard times with us when we were teenagers; I don't know. Mother tried to solve every problem, as difficult as it was. She was so understanding and open-minded. My friends knew it, too. They liked to drop in to our home for many reasons and have a talk with mother. Some needed advice, some just to cry on her shoulder. Some liked my mother's cooking, others used to like mother's sense of humour. Sometimes a neighbour or a friend asked for help. They knew it would never be refused. In our apartment block there was a little girl, Henia, whose grandmother took care of her. When the grandmother had to go to work to earn some money, Henia was cared for in our home. She was a cute child, and we loved her. Specially my father liked to joke with her. She was like a little sister to us.

Mother was a big optimist — she never got depressed for long. She looked at the bright side of life. I remember her letter to my aunt in the U.S.A. in which she wrote, "Now when all the children are working, more money comes in. We are well, thank God... no com-

plaints." This was the last letter which my dear mother wrote. Shortly after, she got sick and was taken to the hospital emergency, and after a week she passed away. June 14, 1937, we lost our mother, and this was the biggest disaster in our family. It is impossible to describe our sorrow. Father cried day and night till he got sick. Just the obligation to the children kept him alive. Nacia didn't get up from bed for a few weeks; she wanted to die. She got sick with tuberculosis. Tamara blamed herself for mother's death because once she had been very angry with mother and had told bad words. She grieved and cried so much that she lost her voice for a time. She was fifteen years old.

I couldn't cry for a long time. I felt so helpless, so lost, near to losing my mind. I knew I should be strong and help father and the kids. I realized that I was the oldest and it was my responsibility. But I was afraid and weak. Many days after mother's death, I kept thinking that she had been buried alive, and had died just in the grave. I kept everything to myself. I was thinking about it day and night, although I had seen her dead. Finally I got an attack of hysteria. I cried a whole day, loudly, without stopping.

After that day I came a little to my mind, like after a sickness. I started to look around. I saw my sick father and Nacia. I saw how everybody and everything needed to be taken care of and I got very angry. I hated God, I hated mothers: mothers who give birth to children, bring them into the world, raise them for a time and then die and leave the children alone, helpless, sad and in sorrow as we were.

The strongest of us all was Eva, the third sister. She took over the kitchen. She was the one who had helped mother, and she had learned some cooking from her. Taking care of the rest of the household routine, I had to do. Nobody could do it but me. Problems occurred every day.

For a long time before this, my father had been a sick man; he had heart trouble. After mother's death he got some kind of blood infection. The doctor recommended that he go away to the country to rest. I found him a place in a rest home. He didn't want to go, but I was able to make him go. This was the first time in his married life that he had taken a rest from work.

Nacia was not well after my mother died. I didn't know the reason, but day by day she got worse. One time a friend of mine made me aware that Nacia must be sick, because although it was a summer day she felt cold and was looking very pale. The doctor told her that she had tuberculosis. He recommended that she go to a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients (located at Chojny in the outskirts of Lodz). Everybody in our city was familiar with the place because many people were sick with tuberculosis and went there for treatment. When my poor father came back from the country and found out where Nacia was, he cried again over our bad luck.

Nacia didn't like the sanatorium; she missed home, and after a few months father brought her home. She took the treatment she needed in an outpatient clinic. She liked that way much better, but it was not a good way, because she was susceptible to the cold weather. On a rainy September day when she caught a cold, she got very weak and I had to take her to the doctor again.

When the doctor in the office saw us, he couldn't believe that she was the sick one, not me, because I was looking sicker than Nacia. I was skinny, tired, weak, depressed, and I weighed only thirty-nine kilograms (eighty-six pounds).

All the time of sorrow, I worked. The money was needed more than ever. But the boss was not happy when I took time off for family reasons, and that made me sad, too, and frightened of losing the job.

Also in my personal life I had a setback. I had been going steady with a young men, Leon, for a few years. We loved each other and he wanted to marry me. But I kept putting him off. I was afraid of the obligations of being a wife. I was afraid to be a mother. I didn't like children. I wanted to be a child as long as possible. Things had been too good in my mother's home. My parents had treated me as a grown-up person. Mother had respected my privacy; she wanted me to look nice, dress elegantly, to enjoy myself and have a good time. She never encouraged me to marry young. Once she told me, "If I knew that you would look in your forties as you look now, I would recommend you stay single till that time. Married life is a hard life."

After I lost my mother, when I was overpowered with grief and sorrow, Leon was with me. He comforted me



Leon and myself.



Nacia and a friend in Warsaw.

and he felt sorry for me. But as I got deeper and deeper into the family problems he got tired and complained that I had never time for him. I changed. He didn't like my state of mind. He wanted me to try to get over my sorrow and be the same as I used to be. He was right. I wanted to but I couldn't. Many days I thought and I asked myself, who had to come first, me or father, or sisters and brothers? I came to the conclusion that the best solution would be marriage. I told Leon that I wanted to marry him, but this time his answer was straight. "Now is not the right time." His answer made me more depressed and unhappy. We stopped seeing each other.

This was the year 1939, when I took Nacia to the doctor for a checkup. His diagnosis was that she had in her lung a big hole the size of a chicken egg. She had to be in the sanatorium, the only place where she could be cured. The best sanatorium was in Otwock, a spa east of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, two hundred kilometres from home. Nacia didn't want to go because it was too far to get visitors or to come home sometimes. There was a lot of thinking in the family. Father couldn't make up his mind. The cost of the sanatorium was very high; he was not sure if he could manage it. His argument was that he shouldn't spend all the money for one child when in the family there were five more. "You never know what could happen."

And again I had to decide and I did. I told father, "I am going with Nacia to Warsaw; I'll put her in the sanatorium. I'll take a job there and will share the cost with you." Father was not too happy to lose two of us, but he knew that was the right way. He was very sad when we departed. When I kissed him goodbye he cried. He said, "I'm afraid I'll never see you again." And that was what happened.

The decision to go to Warsaw was the best solution for my personal problems also. For the first time I was on my own. Although I missed the family and I kept thinking about them, in the back of my mind I was relieved and more optimistic. I regained some energy, which helped me to make right decisions.

In Warsaw I found very friendly surroundings. My friends, whom I had known earlier in Lodz, had urged me to join them. They tried hard to help me recover from my depression. They assisted with getting a job,



Summer with friends in Warsaw, 1939.
Back row: Sala (left), Heniek (centre);
Front row: Anshel, Tola (Toby), Ruth, Abek.

a place to live. They helped me to meet people and to enjoy my time free from work.

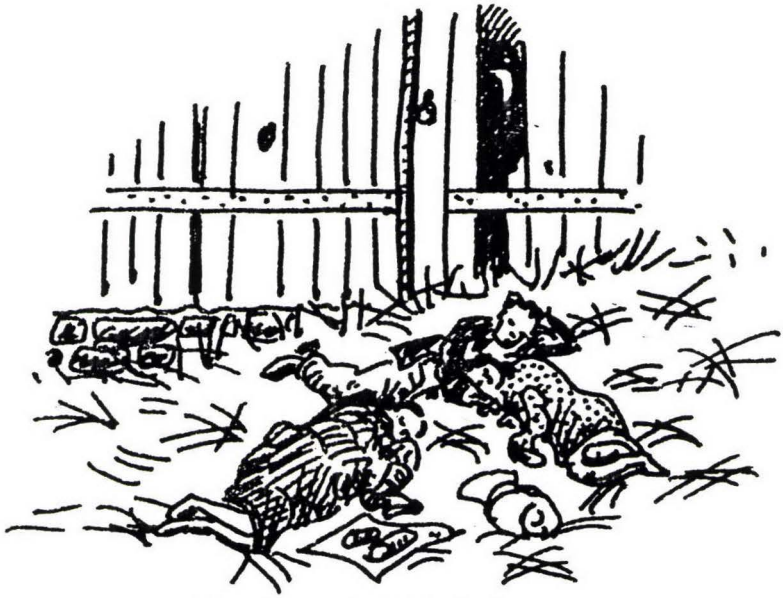
Especially Sala and Heniek were devoted friends to me. They showed me around the beautiful city that was Warsaw. They took me for picnics, to make me forget the sorrow. For the first time since mother's death I went with them to a theatre. They tried to repay what mother had done for them when *they* were in need. Heniek made a deal with me, even, to take turns visiting Nacia in the sanatorium.

The summer that year of 1939 was warm and sunny. For the first time in my life I saw a river. Every Sunday my friends took me sightseeing: to the beach, for a ride in a boat on the Vistula, to see the zoo which was famous in all Europe at that time, or just to walk through the streets of Warsaw, to discover the beauty of the capital of Poland. I felt so good that I even stopped thinking about Leon, and I stopped missing him.

Everything started to look brighter for me. Nacia was improving in health and in her view of life. She believed that she would get well. She kept saying that she was grateful to me for my help and support. When I visited her I felt uneasy at not kissing her. Sometimes I tried, but she never forgot that she was sick and she wouldn't kiss me, shake my hand or get too near to me. To her roommate she used to say, "Go away from my sister. I don't want her to get sick."

The place where the sanatorium was located was beautiful, with parks and woods nearby. The fresh air did her a lot of good. The doctors, also the nurses, liked her very much. She was a nice, quiet, neat girl. With her light blond hair she looked cute; they called her "Angel".

I felt rewarded — happy and hopeful that she would be healthy again — but the war was to change all that.



We slept at night in barns.



V: TO THE U.S.S.R.

In August that year, rumours started to go around that a war could be in the near future because the Germans kept provoking the Polish government by killing soldiers on the Polish-German border. The Germans also killed Polish political figures and army officials. A war had been expected by the Polish population since Hitler had come to power in 1933. His slogan, *"Drang Nach Osten"* ("expansion towards the east") was a sign of it.

Listening to the rumours, Nacia got very worried, and she insisted on going home. I didn't believe she should go, but I helped her to arrange everything and she went home.

Nacia was so right in her concerns. After a week, on the first of September, World War II started. Nobody knew the kind of disaster it would be for the people of Poland, the people of Europe and specially for the Jews. We were so naive, we believed that the war was a sickness which would rise to a fever pitch and then subside. Yes, there would be misery, killings, bombings, starvation and death, but after a time the war would be finished and the stronger people would survive. If the worst came to the worst, Poland would lose the war and Germany would occupy the country. Occupation would be very, very bad, but people would live and struggle again.

A point of disagreement between Germany and Poland was the city of Danzig (Gdánsk). After World War I, when Poland got independence, both

sides had claimed the city. The League of Nations established Danzig as an open city with its own government. Poland and Germany had rights to the use of the port and had some privileges. Hitler wanted the city of Danzig in spite of the written pact. Poland didn't want to give up its rights. Therefore many people had predicted that a war could start for that reason.

It was Friday, September 1, 1939, at two in the afternoon, when the radio announced the start of the war, and right away the bombs started falling over Warsaw. The population in a panic didn't know what to do. Some tried to collect food, as much as they could get. Some tried to arrange a shelter in their basement. Some looked for things in the bombed houses and stores. Some looted and robbed.

Every few hours, the loudspeakers warned that a new team of airplanes was coming with a new supply of bombs. People ran in horror to find a shelter. Many people couldn't make it to shelter and were killed in the streets.

When I listened to the bombing it sounded to me like a tiger roaring, and the only Polish warplane was like a little dog barking. And in my naive mind I wished that the little "dog" wouldn't bark, so as not to provoke the "tiger". But in reality the German aircraft bombed with the intention of destroying Poland, which was not prepared for the war at all. The army had not enough weapons. The simplest things like rifles were not in sufficient supply for every soldier. Therefore the Polish government couldn't mobilize all the young men who wanted to fight for the country. The whole western part of Poland was taken by the enemy without any struggle.

After one week, the German army was at the gates of Warsaw. The population of the capital didn't want to give up without a fight. The whole city was a battlefield, soldiers and volunteers in every street, but after three weeks of bitter fighting the Polish government capitulated.

What did I do at that time? I lived as all the people around me did. We queued up for food, in constant fear of our lives, in hope that the horror would end. For the first few days there were heavy attacks from the air. Between the bombings, we would do necessary errands or look for things in the stores.

The mayor of Warsaw, Stefan Starzynski, was a wonderful man. He kept talking on the radio the whole day. His voice sounded through the loudspeakers everywhere. Even the kids recognized him and listened to him. He tried to cheer up the people, to give advice on how to save on food and on fuel, and in this way to build up our hope. But after a short time, the hydro was bombed and we had a blackout. The radio stopped talking and the telephone was out of service. Everything stopped working except the bombs over our heads. There was shooting everywhere and the noise of buildings being wrecked.

I lived through the beginning of the war with the lady who was my boss, Mrs. Zemel. When the war started she owed me wages, but she hadn't got the money. She offered to let me live with her and share food with her and her two children. She was a good person. Her apartment was on the main floor and when the heavy bombing started, the neighbours from the upper floors came to us to find some kind of shelter.

She never closed her door on anybody. In the night we tried to make a place to sleep: on the floor, on a straw mattress, or on a blanket. But when the electricity went off and it was pitch dark, her son Peter, who was a student at a vocational school, had some idea about how to get electricity. He attached a little motor to the wheels of the sewing machine, and when I pushed the pedal we got light. I taught the men how to use the pedal. We took turns and we had some light when we needed it.

In the last week of September, the feeling of lost battle was very strong. The soldiers came into the houses with sad news. Sometimes they were even crying.

One evening a soldier came to the place where I lived and told us that he'd heard on the radio that everybody who didn't want to be under the German occupation was welcome in the U.S.S.R.: the borders were open for everybody.

I was terrified of the Germans, of Hitler. Before the war I had read about the Nazi atrocities against the Jewish population in Germany. I knew I would rather be killed than suffer under the Nazis. I said to myself, "Maybe there is a way. Maybe the U.S.S.R. will save my life."

On September 27 the fighting stopped. There was the first quiet night, but we had the feeling that there would be bad news. The next day we got the news that the Polish government had capitulated. The German army took some leaders of the government, some leaders of the political parties, and our beloved mayor of Warsaw as hostages. The Germans ordered the city of Warsaw to be cleared of Polish soldiers, and said that in case of riots the hostages would be killed. A terrible time came over Poland.

Right after I got the news of the capitulation, I went to look for my friends. The whole city of Warsaw was in ruins. I walked along and cried. I couldn't find Sala and Heniek. The house where they lived had been bombed. Nobody was there to ask. I went to see Ruth, Sala's sister, who told me that my friends had heard about the Soviet offer and decided to go to the east and meet the Russians. Sala and Heniek had wanted Ruth and her husband Abek to come along, but they couldn't make up their minds right on the spot. Ruth was pregnant, and therefore it was difficult for them to make up their minds. They didn't know what to choose. After a few hours of debating they came to the conclusion that they would follow Sala and Heniek, and they asked me to join them.

I had to face a big dilemma: to go home to Lodz to the family, walk a hundred and forty kilometres (because no transportation was restored yet), adjust to the life, to the new conditions with the Germans — or go to the east, get to Russia and adjust to a new and unknown life far from the German fascists. I decided to take the risk and go with Ruth and her husband.

With my decision made, I went back to Mrs. Zemel's to pack some of my belongings and to say goodbye to her. She got very angry. "Don't make such a crazy decision. Stay here until everything gets settled. You will see, the Germans are not so bad. The German women will need dresses, too."

She talked logically, but her way was wrong in the end. I survived and she vanished, as did many millions of people left in Poland.

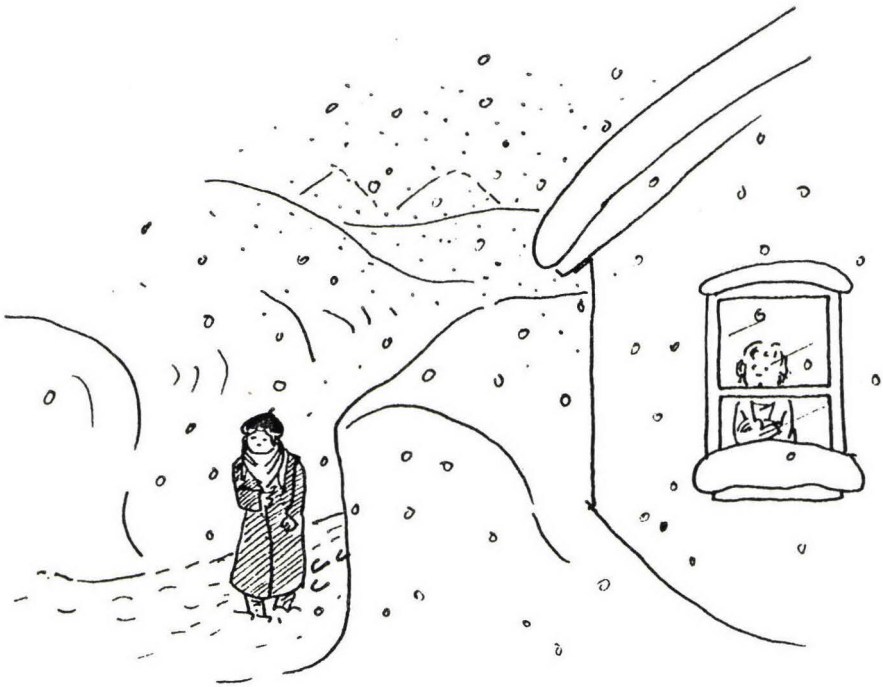
No, I didn't listen to Mrs. Zemel. I joined my friends and we took the road to the east, and that "wrong" decision saved my life. Thanks to the Russian people I'm alive today.

The morning of September 28, we walked out of Warsaw with very little luggage and with a very little amount of money. Again, I have to say that I was very naive. I didn't think realistically at all. I was intending to get away from the Germans, but how I would survive without any money, job, shelter, family, *et cetera*, I didn't think. It must be that my premonition convinced me with its strength, even though I didn't know what Hitler and the Nazis would do to humanity.

My brother Anshel was also with us, but I will tell his story later in the book. Our paths soon diverged.

The four of us, Ruth, Abek, Anshel and myself, walked during the daytimes, asking peasants on the way for a place to sleep. We walked on and on, asking how far to the Russian border. We slept at night in barns or in houses, and ate what the peasants gave us. Towards the end of our journey, a man with a cart took us to the town of Siedice, where we met the Russian soldiers, who showed us the way to a train. We didn't understand much, but from our knowledge of Slavic languages, we could understand what they said: "If you want to come with us, get on the train and we will take you over the river Bug, which will be the border." The next day we were refugees in the care of the Russian army in Bialystok. Bialystok was in the eastern part of Poland, but the Russians had annexed the east at the same time as the Germans had invaded in the west. The Russians considered this part of Poland as a part of Byelorussia.

We were well-treated and got some food and shelter. I went out onto the streets of the strange city and jumped for joy when I met a few young people from my home town, Lodz. We started to discuss our situation, how to let our parents and relatives know where we were. Some of us hoped that we'd get a job, get settled and would call our families. Some were pessimistic because so many people kept arriving at the city. Any possibility of a job or a decent place to live seemed small.



Shura used to watch me when I went to work.



VI: SIENNO AND MINSK

The Soviet authorities realized the problem of jobs, and they distributed leaflets everywhere asking refugees to apply for them. They offered jobs deep in the Soviet Union. Some people didn't want to travel so far, and decided it was better to go back and join their families. Some, including me, decided to get a job anyhow — and if I got a good job and an opportunity to make a living and a possibility of a job for father, I would bring my family over to the Soviets.

Together with a few other young people whom I already knew, and others whom I met on the way, we decided to take the offer of the Soviet authorities. We travelled by train for a few days in very bad conditions. The train was overcrowded, without any possibility of getting food on board. But when the train stopped at the station in Orsha, everybody was invited to the restaurant for a free meal, and the inhabitants of the town tried to talk to us in a friendly manner. They let us know that we were welcome in the U.S.S.R. Whoever understood the Russian language translated. They asked about the war, the bombing, about our families. They even had a candy or a drink for us.

Our destination was Sienno, a little town in the Soviet Republic of Byelorussia (a neighbour of Poland), a small town far from a big city, fourteen kilometres from the nearest railway station. The people expected us. They came to the station with horses and buggies to take us into town. Riding through the town, there came to my

mind a book written by the Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem, under the title *The Little Town*. I saw the same small wooden houses, cobblestoned roads and a wooden bridge over the stream which ran through the town, even an old, small synagogue built in Gothic style exactly as the writer described in his book. In the streets, we saw chickens, goats and cows. The town looked as if time had stopped here for at least a hundred years.

Very few people, mostly older folk, were in the streets. Everything looked quiet and sleepy. Some kids played in the street; otherwise the town looked half empty. We asked why we saw just older people, and where the young were. The answer was that the young were sent to the big cities such as Moscow, Minsk or Leningrad for education and good positions. Young people didn't care to build up the small town and to live in it. They never came back to the place where they were born, to the little town of Sienno.

Therefore the inhabitants were very happy to meet our group of young people. We were three hundred persons, men and women of varied crafts, willing and able to start work. The township authority decided to let our group meet the townfolk and for them to know us. We all got thirty rubles, the equivalent of a week's wages. It was easy to communicate because in our group we were mostly Jews who spoke Yiddish, and in Sienno the majority were also Yiddish-speaking Jews. They wanted to know about us, about the Jews in Poland, and about our lives there. In an organized way, the township authority got jobs for us according to our own abilities: some in cooperatives and shops, and some in the country as farm-workers In the same way, everybody got accomodation, first the families with children, then the couples and singles. The townspeople tried their best for us, but they didn't have the best conditions. They were poorer, a little more behind the times, and had fewer technical improvements than in Poland. The people of the town were more rural peasants than townfolk. Every inhabitant had a little piece of land — with his own vegetables, cows, pigs or chickens — and baked bread and made cheese and butter. But everybody also worked outside the home in some job to make a living.

What amazed me was that in these small primitive towns like Sienno there were many cultural institutions, and people were active in them. The only brick building

in town was the community centre with a theatre where every day there was a movie or some other performance. There were clubs, choirs, acting groups, sports teams and a big library. In every home was a radio, and every evening we could listen to nice music. The people had respect for culture and education and were proud of the young educated generation. Those who didn't go to high school and were labourers were called "good for nothing".

I got a place to live with a middle-aged childless couple, Efim and Shura. He was a Jew, and she was not. They took me as a member of the family without any pay for board or room, not because they were so well off but because they knew I had less.

When I came to them it was late fall, and on the porch of that small house, Shura had stored bacon, pork and beef salted in barrels, sauerkraut and tomatoes in a barrel, also homemade sausages, all for the coming winter. That town had no industries, just some shops to serve the townpeople, and there we got jobs.

I worked as a dressmaker. The women liked the dresses which I made for them. They were thankful and never complained. They were happy to have something new. They knew very little about styles, but as women they liked nice clothes.

The people in Sienno were very friendly to us. They invited us to their homes for a chat or an evening snack. They liked to listen about our lives in Poland. I felt good in that peaceful surrounding. After everything I had gone through, I needed a little peace, friendship, love and understanding. All that I got in Shura's home.

She and Efim treated me as their own child. Shura used to get up early in the morning, cook a hot meal and watch me finish my breakfast. Although she worked at a job, she made lunches at home, and never started eating before I came home. In winter when the weather was cold and I told Shura I would take a lunch to work as I used to do at home, she would bring a hot lunch for me to work saying, "It is too cold for you. You could get frozen as a little bird." (In Russian it sounded so nice.)

In the winter of 1940 there was a severe frost, and the snow on the ground was five feet high for all the long winter months. Shura used to watch me when I went to work in the morning, and she said that when I passed

the gate she couldn't see me any more. She was afraid I could get lost in the snow.

In the evenings we used to stay home and talk about our lives and our experiences. They were educated people, who liked literature, art and music. Efim was an amateur actor and dreamed of studying performing arts. I told them my dreams, how I wanted to be educated, and that just the lack of money forced me to be a dressmaker.

"It's a pity," Shura said, "that a girl such as you has to spend her life working in a shop." She encouraged me to learn the Russian language fast and to get back to school to test my ability. "The school is free for everybody: go and try," she insisted. She succeeded in persuading me.

From a girl in Sienno I had heard about a technical school of electronic communication in Minsk, the capital of Byelorussia. So in the summer of 1940 I sent in an application. In reply I got an answer requesting me to come for entrance exams. I was very tense and afraid when I came to the classroom, but instead of giving me the exam papers, the teacher asked me if I was sure that I would be able to understand enough Russian. I said, "I think so," and he replied, "You are admitted."

After nine months of being in Sienno, I left the friendly little town, expecting never to come back.

The next day I became a student at the Minsk school, got a grant, lived on campus, enjoyed the classes and liked the students, my roommates. I was as happy as could be; again I was ready to jump for joy. I enjoyed every minute in Minsk, a nice city where I met new friends, and old friends from my home town.

One of the old friends was Bronia. She and her husband had arrived in Sienno on the same train that I had. He got a job as a printer. She also had heard about the college in Minsk and like me was inspired to go there.

My dearest friend was Lena. We had been close friends at home in Lodz. She also had decided to get away from the German occupation after she experienced the first attack on the Jewish population in Lodz. With her brother she, too, had come to the Soviet Union, and settled in the city of Mogilev. Lena got my address from my sister, and right away she wrote a letter asking me to come to her; she wanted to be with me. But I explained

that I wanted to stay in Minsk because of my education, that I liked the school and wouldn't change my mind for any reason. Lena understood perfectly, and after a short time she and her brother moved to Minsk so that we could be together and renew our friendship. Lena worked as a seamstress there.

Once, in Lena's presence, I received a letter with a hundred and twenty-five rubles in it. Lena was surprised. "Who sent you the money? Is this a gift from Heaven?" she asked. "No," I replied, "it is from Joseph," and I told her about him and why I had received the money.

Joseph and I had met in Sienno when he came to visit friends. He asked me for a date, and from that time on we were in love. He decided to stay for good in the town. Therefore he took a job, and we were very happy. We started to make plans to get married. However, as it turned out, the job was unsuitable for him; there wasn't any future for us in Sienno, and he decided with my approval to go home to where his parents lived, near the Polish border on the Russian side. He would talk things over with them, get a decent job and a place to live, and then he would call me to join him.

I didn't just approve of this plan; I was also able to help. When Joseph quit his job and got ready for the journey, he found out that he was short of money for expenses. He asked around among his friends for a loan, but he couldn't get one. I then offered him my savings. He felt very uncomfortable taking the money, but I insisted, assuring him that I had trust in him. Finally he accepted the loan on one condition: that I would not tell anybody, because people would take me for a silly, naive girl.

Shortly I got the money back. When I went to Minsk and joined the school, Joseph put some money in every letter, to help me out because the grant was not too big.

Joseph wrote very optimistic letters, and his parents were looking forward to meeting me. He made all the necessary arrangements for my expected arrival. His mother even bought a radio as our first present, which at that time was a luxury. But as yet no permission was granted for me to join him.

Meanwhile I attended the school at Minsk, starting my higher education. I decided that at the end of the school

year I would join Joseph in his home town. I was happy and hopeful that everything would be fine. In early spring of 1941 I received a letter from Joseph. He pleaded with me to be patient because the authorities in the town still refused to let in newcomers. He also mentioned that there was some tension in the air. "Some strange birds are flying over the region," he wrote, referring to German planes.

After that I didn't receive any letters for a few weeks. Then in May I got a letter from Joseph's mother, saying that he had been taken into the Red Army. She didn't know where he was, but she promised to be in touch with me. This was the last letter I received with news about Joseph. After the war I wrote to that town, but I only received an answer from the post office of Bialystok. It said that the town, which was west of the city, did not exist any more, and they had no idea what had happened to the inhabitants of that town.

What troubled me at the start of my time in Russia, however, was that I didn't know how my dear father and the family were living under the Germans. I didn't receive any mail from them until the end of 1940. I knew from some people that they had had a bad time in Lodz. There was talk about the creation of ghettoes (confiscating Jewish homes and pushing all the Jews into one district), but at that time no one knew what this meant.

The first letter I got from Lodz was short and dull. Nacia said that the letter she was writing had to be written in the post office and not sealed: it had to be checked. She asked me to send them a parcel of food if it were possible. I knew how necessary it was. I tried to save some money, got a part-time job, and with the money from Joseph I was able to send from time to time a parcel of food to my dear family in Lodz.

Then a new cataclysm came over my head. On June 22, 1941, the Germans attacked the Soviet Union. A new phase of the war started, and shook up millions of lives, including my own.



VII: TO KUIBYSHEV

Once again I was a witness: to the start of the second part of the war. Again it was a horrible time which nobody could understand. People asked each other "Why?" No answer.

June 22 was a Sunday, the only day of rest, and was sunny and warm. (The people in the Soviet Union worked six days a week.) I woke up early, happy with the weather. I was to meet my friends in the park named "Park of Rest and Cultural Events". We were to have a picnic. I looked over my wardrobe: what to wear to look nice? What dress suited me best? I asked myself.

The park was full of people; there was song, music and laughter everywhere. I found my friends, who had a surprise for me: "Look who is here," said Lena. "It's Geniek!" Yes, it was, and I was very surprised to see a friend from Lodz. He had come from far away to Minsk, because he had no friends where he lived. He had come to Minsk just two days before, and planned to get a job and stay with us.

Suddenly we heard a loud voice. A man ran through the park yelling, "War! war!" *("Voina! voina!")* People stopped him, calmed him down, and then he told us that he had heard on the radio just a moment before a speech by Foreign Minister Molotov. Molotov said that the German army had attacked the Soviet Union and therefore from that time on the Russians were at war with Germany.

The consternation, the panic, is hard to describe. You could hear crying, swearing and praying. Everything got crazy. In our crowd, the most shocked person was Geniek. He kept crying like a baby, repeating, "What to do? what to do?" and nobody was able to give him any advice.

The loudspeakers in the streets announced the mobilization of the army. All young men were concerned. On the way home I met Lena's brother. He told me that in the morning he was going to sign up, and later he would see Lena. However, he never showed up and she never saw him again. Apparently he was drafted, and was killed in the war.

The third day of the war, the whole city of Minsk was in flames. Thousands and thousands of bombs were dropped on the city by the Germans. In panic the people started to leave the city, mostly by foot. The highways were packed, and the cries of children could break the heart. Some people took the direction of the trains, but the trains were objects of bomb attacks.

The campus where I lived with Bronia was also bombed and set on fire. Lena lived nearby. We lost everything and could save nothing. With only the clothes we were wearing, and no money at all, we had to leave the burning city. But where to go? "Let's go back to Sienno with Bronia," I said to Lena. "I'm sure the war could never come there. Such a little town, who needs it?" Bronia had to go to Sienno because her husband lived there. That was her home now.

We three girls made the decision — as did many other people — to leave the city. The trains were overloaded, impossible to get into. We had to walk. We walked hours and hours through the night until next morning. Finally we came to a railroad station. With a big effort we got into a train. But we did not stay aboard long. The German planes, noticing the moving train, started shooting. We were lucky to get off the train and run into the woods.

We walked again, with the same routine: daytime on the highways, in the nights asking for a place to sleep, mostly in the country. Nobody refused. Once or twice we even slept in open fields when we could not reach one of the settlements, and the nights were warm.



The third day of the war, the whole city of Minsk was in flames.

Our destination, as I mentioned, was Sienno. Bronia came home to her husband. We were welcomed by the people whom I knew before. They were anxious to hear about the war. They were sorry for the people of Minsk, but they didn't believe that the war could come to Sienno. One man, who was at that time a visitor, listened to us and replied in an angry voice. "Crazy girls!" he said. "Why are you running away from the Germans? I lived with them at the time of the first World War. I don't believe they are so bad. They are just like other people. I am not afraid, so I am going back."

I was happy to see the friendly faces, and even made up my mind to stay in Sienno till the end of the war. The manager of the shop where I had worked was willing to give me the same job which I had before, and I wanted to start right away. But he said, "Don't rush; get some rest. Let's wait and see what the near future will show us." He was not as optimistic as I was, and he was right.

On the third day after our arrival, Bronia's husband was drafted into the army. Before he left, he made an agreement that he would send letters to his cousin, who lived in Ufa in the mountains of the Ural, and Bronia would keep in touch with the cousin. In case of evacuation, Bronia should go there to live with her.

I visited Shura and Efim, whom I had not seen for a year. I came to them as to relatives. I could talk about everything with them. Shura asked about school, about Joseph, about my family in Poland, and she told me about her problems. I noticed that Efim was not as talkative as he used to be, so I asked him why he was so quiet. "As you know, I am an elder in this town," he said. "Today I got bad news that the German army is not far from Sienno. It is confidential, but I am telling you. Leave the town now. Nothing keeps you here. It could be that in a day or two we will all have to leave our homes to run away from the enemy."

Lena, Bronia and I took his advice, and the next morning we were on our way to the east, to a place far from war, from the noise of the German attacks by bombs and planes on the peaceful population. We kept walking again. If we got a chance to get a lift by car or buggy, it was a relief for our tired feet.

I was surprised when at one point a group of cars passed us, and I saw that one of them contained Shura and Efim. Shura waved at me, but they could not stop. I felt more than ever that we had been right to leave, because Efim had good information.

One day, when we were very tired, a group of tractor-trailers passed on the highway where we were walking, and somebody from the trailers called and offered us a ride. We gladly accepted and jumped on. The crew was travelling from the Ukraine. They were employees of a centre which supplied a region of farms with agricultural equipment and gasoline. In season, this centre worked around the clock from sunrise to dusk. The crews even lived at the centre, sometimes far from their families. When the war started and enemy forces kept advancing, the government organized the evacuation of the machinery to save it from getting into the hands of the Germans. As the tractor-trailers left, the crops in the fields were set on fire.

In this group there were more than thirty people: a few couples, but mostly single men who couldn't get in touch with their families. Although it was crowded in the trailers, they made a place for us three girls and shared their food with us. They were very friendly, talkative and curious to know about our experiences. They told us about their families, and asked us about ours. They told us that their destination was Kuibyshev, the city that at that time during the war was the temporary capital of the U.S.S.R., and which was far to the east, beyond the Volga.

We were happy that the crew accepted us and that we could get with them to a place which was far from the front line, far from the war and bombings. We travelled with them for a few days. The crew would get moving just at daybreak. After dusk they would stop somewhere near the woods, bushes or a body of water to get cleaned up, eat and rest.

One night when we were in deep sleep, Bronia woke up Lena and me very quietly and asked us to get out of the trailer with the things we had. We ran to the bushes where Bronia explained what had happened. A man of the crew, a driver, had asked her to make love with him. He was lonely because his wife was left behind and he needed a woman. "I don't want to harm the girls, your friends," he had said, "but you are a woman; it



A woman, carrying a kettle...

will not harm you. Maybe your husband is in the same situation." Hiding in the bushes, we waited until the night was over. Then we started to walk again, in the usual way, until we came to a train station. (It was possible at that time just to jump on the trains without buying tickets. The government had decreed that all forms of transportation should carry refugees, free of charge.)

The train to Kuibyshev stopped at every station, but there were none of the vendors who before the war had usually been waiting to sell travellers some fruit, buns or juices. The restaurants were closed; just at every station there was hot boiled water *("kipiatok")*. At one station a woman, crying loudly and carrying a kettle, boarded our car. She told us that she had lost track of her two children and her mother, who had been travelling with her on another train. She had gone to get some hot water, and when she had come back the train was gone.

At that time, the trains didn't stick to a schedule. The main idea was to move as many people as possible from the west, where the war was going on, to a safer place deep in the U.S.S.R. No tickets were issued. Sometimes a train would even change direction to avoid bombing by German planes.

The poor woman couldn't get any information about where the other train, containing her family, had gone. A railroad clerk recommended that she take our train, but he wasn't sure whether the other train had gone in the same direction we were going. She came with us.

Finally one evening the train stopped at the station of Kuibyshev. The woman started looking for her loved ones. We never knew whether she found them.

At Kuibyshev the big station was full of people sleeping on the floor: there was not a place to sit, not a place to walk around. Long lines of people waited to get food or a particular train. An office was working twenty-four hours a day to send people to different places to get a place to live and work. Bronia got on a train going to Ufa, in the Ural Mountains.

Lena and I chose to go to the southern part of the Soviet Union, because we were afraid of the cold weather in northern Russia. We didn't have any cold-weather clothes to wear. We were being sent to Samarkand, the

capital of Uzbekistan, in the Asian part of the Soviet Union.

It took us a comparatively short time — a few days — to travel to a country which we had never heard of before. The train journey was so much easier than our previous travels that it did not seem so far. People looked different, talked and dressed differently. Everything looked to us like in a dream, but we had to go on. The clerk in the office for displaced people (which was called the *"evacuobiuro"*) had recommended that we take a job in the country on a farm. In Samarkand a lot of people had no place to live and were unable to buy food because of shortages. We thought that on a farm, at least we would have something to eat. We took the offer, even though we had never been on a farm and did not know what a farm would be like in that country. It was such a strange situation that we looked at each other and actually started to laugh.

It was hard to believe how far I had come in my journey: many thousands of kilometres from home in such a short time, to places I had never heard of before, faces which I had never seen even in a movie. And in spite of some bad experiences I was trustful, optimistic and ready to learn more about life.





VIII: SAMARKAND, TASHKENT, DZHAMBUL

The farm we were sent to was small and located in a green valley near Dzuma, about one half hour by train from Samarkand. We went to a collective farm on the outskirts of this little town. The farm was part of a big government agricultural investment *("sovchoz")*. Twenty-three families lived there. The workers were mostly women and a few older men. All the younger men were in the army fighting the enemy.

In the time of the Tsars, the farm had been a large private property, but now belonged to the government. In this part of the world there was a nice climate, with no real winter and two crops a season. In the distance were mountains with snow on top. Because of the dry clay soil, irrigation was very important. A far-off river was diverted into small rivers with movable dams that could take the water to different places. On this farm in Uzbekistan, there were orchards and vineyards: the farmers produced raisins from the grapes.

Our farm was a breeding farm for rabbits, grown for their meat and fur. The cages were placed in an orchard of mulberry trees. The leaves of the mulberry were food for the silkworms which were also bred on the farm. (The farm was in the region of the old Silk Road.) The berries were food for the people, and tasted very good.

Our job was to take care of the rabbits, to feed them and to clean up the cages. There were more than three

thousand rabbits in the summer. I didn't like the job, specially in the mornings when we came to work. During the nights the foxes, cats and jackals hunted for the rabbits, trying to catch them through the screens. The remains were left in the cages, and we had to clean them up.

Once a young Uzbek invited us to his home, and I accepted gladly. Lena hesitated, but I convinced her that any tourist would pay much money to visit such a far place. "We get it free. Why not take the chance?" I said. And the visit was worthwhile. We learned a lot: their clothes, way of life, and the warmth of their hospitality and friendship. It was a good piece of knowledge for me.

Their houses were made of clay mixed with straw, and were low and flat-roofed. On top of them people put braided strips of cantaloupe, and grapes and figs, to dry.

The women wore loose cotton dresses over cotton pants. Their dresses were in bright colours. Many women covered their faces with a thick mesh veil when they walked out in the streets. The men wore quilted cotton outfits in the cold season, in summer off-white raw cotton outfits.

Everyone drank green tea (*"kok chai"*). We were served a sort of rice pilaf (*"palov"* in Russian), cooked with lamb and carrots and onions. In this region, the watermelons were very famous. I saw people at the market who did not cut them with a knife but just threw them on the ground and picked up the pieces. Also in the market-place were shops (*"chaihana"*) for drinking green tea. These shops were outdoor platforms. Instead of using sugar, the tea-drinkers would place a raisin or a grape in their mouths and then take a mouthful of tea.

The farm families were very friendly to us, and shared the scarce food. The door of our hut was never locked. Many times while we were at work, neighbour women would leave a gift of food on our table. This might be some potatoes, or cucumbers, or onions from their allotments. "The girls have nothing," they would say.

As the war went on, food got short, because it was being sent to the army. The situation with the food for the farm workers became a big problem. Only beets were left in any quantity.

There was a lack of transportation. Cars and horses were taken for the army. Delivering food was difficult and not regular. For a little while I had to meet the camel trains that carried goods to and from Samarkand. "The camels are coming, Tania!" people would shout.

So on this farm we met the new year of 1942. The time was very depressing, because of bad news from the battlefronts and the continuing winter rains: nowhere to go and nothing to do for enjoyment. We started to look for another place to live.

A woman who lived with us on the farm had a husband far away in Kazakhstan, working on a tobacco farm. She wanted to join him, and she asked Lena and me to come along with her. She assured us that we could get a job there.

In the spring of 1942, we got ready to travel by train to the neighbouring Republic of Kazakhstan, which was far away. We arrived at the train by noon. It was hard to get on because the train was packed: people were like matches in a box. There were no empty seats. We finally got on with our suitcases, and were just happy to be on our way. Conditions were good enough for the time. The conductor, a woman, made unfriendly remarks, such as that we were in her way, that we had better wait for the next train, and that we had better not make trouble for her. She pushed us here and there. At least the train kept going, and that was the most important thing for us.

Later that night, the train stopped at a rural place where there was no station. The woman conductor confronted us, pushing Lena and me out of the train and throwing our luggage out. A moment later the train continued on, but we were out in the middle of the night in a strange place, pitch-dark emptiness around us, not a sign of a living soul. We stood, two young girls, confused, not knowing what to do, where to go, and wondering why she had done such a thing to us. We stood and cried bitterly.

After a time of looking around, we saw a light far away, and started to go in that direction. The night was warm, but we were shaking from fear. Hungry and tired, we kept walking until we came to the small building with the light. Now we were afraid to knock on the door. Who would be there? Would they believe us? What should we



We saw a light far away.



A tobacco farm, our destination.

do? But there was nothing else to do. We had to try to get help from somebody. Lena decided to knock on the door. A tall man opened it. Lena started to talk, but he interrupted. "Come in, girls, and tell us the whole story."

Inside were a few men who worked for the railway. When they knew our problem, they calmed us down. "Don't worry, girls. We will get you on the next train. It's not supposed to stop here, but we will stop it." The men shared their food with us, and by midnight we were put on a train which took us to our destination. Before we said good-bye to the people there, the tall man said to us, "I know that woman conductor. She wanted a tip from you. That's all."

After this hardship on our way to the new job in Kazakhstan, we came to a tobacco farm, our destination. It was a big farm located on the border, to the north of Uzbekistan. Here the farmers grew tobacco and bred horses. Before the war these things had been for export, but since the war, everything had gone to the army.

This region was more desert-like. From December to February, the weather was much colder. The place was very windy. Mountains could be seen in the distance.

The farm was a government farm with a lot of workers who lived there with their families. It was self-sufficient, as in addition to growing the tobacco plants, fruit and grain, the farmers also bred sheep and pigs for their own use. People raised very sweet tomatoes, sweet corn, beets, melons in profusion, goats and chickens. We didn't get highly paid, but we paid very little for food. Every day we got all our meals in the lunchroom. The lunchroom had two kitchens. The native workers were Kazakhs, who were Muslims, and they didn't eat pork. For them, food had to be cooked separately. On the farm there was also a hospital, a medical clinic, a kindergarten and a free nursery. The community centre had a movie house. People could also get a piece of land, to plant what they wished: 0.07 acres per person.

Lena had never had a chance to grow anything in her whole life, so she wanted to try. She planted corn sunflowers and potatoes. This was a good idea, because from the corn we got flour to make a whole winter's pancakes. The sunflower seeds we sold, and with the money

bought a pair of boots. The corn we exchanged with neighbours for milk and eggs.

Every day newcomers came from the west: hungry, sick, heartbroken by the horror of the war. The name for the newcomers was, in Russian, *"bezhensky"*, which means "runners". Yes, we were runners; we ran away from the danger of the war and felt lucky to have found as safe a place as that farm, although we worked very, very hard.

Among the refugees we met a group of young men from Poland. We got friendly with them. They were our age, and lonely as we were. After a day of hard work or in the long winter nights, it was really a treat for our souls, to socialize with them, to exchange experiences, share memories and news. Sometimes, also, we gave one another help in need or a piece of advice. Sometimes, as young people, we forgot the bad time.

This was 1942-43, the worst time for the population of the Soviet Union and of Europe. The enemy was at the gates of Moscow and Stalingrad. The war was constantly on our minds, when we went to sleep and when we got up, when we were going to work or coming from work. Small and big knew that the priority was to fight the foe, to win the war. Kids saved money to send postcards with greetings to the soldiers. Old women knitted mittens and scarves for the soldiers. Everybody waited for some good news.

What amazed me was that the people were so hopeful, not depressed. They sang, danced, enjoyed the free time. Also at work, you could listen to them singing patriotic songs.

Meantime we worked in the tobacco fields: day by day in the hot sun, mostly women. The men were in the army. It was hard for me and Lena, but we promised each other not to complain. We had to be strong. We tried to bear up as much as possible, but we were very poorly off for clothes. We didn't have anything to wear. Why? There were many reasons for that. The industry at that time worked just for the army, for the defence. The stores were empty. To buy something was only possible at the flea markets. But you had to live in a city and have much money. We had no money, and the farm was far from a city.

One time when I touched on that subject, a young man from Poland, Joe, offered to lend us money. As a joke, he said, "I have a bank." He lives now in Toronto, but he doesn't offer to lend me money any more.

We helped each other, and that made our lives easier. Sometimes a boy would ask me to patch the only dress-shirt he had, and I did. Sometimes, somebody would fix my worn-out shoes for me. If people could get hold of a thing for us, they got it gladly.

From our families we didn't get any news, because we couldn't get any letters. We dreamed that when the war was over we would meet our families again. Nobody could imagine that the Germans in these years killed and tortured, in the ghettoes and in the concentration camps, six million Jews and twenty million people in Europe.

What we knew was that the Soviet Union had agreed to free the Polish officers, generals and policemen who had been confined as war prisoners, and let them form a military unit to fight the German army. The mediator was General Wladyslaw Sikorski, who represented the Polish government in exile. Many young Poles volunteered for the unit. The Soviet authorities allowed them to cross the southern border to Turkey and join the English army. That was for us the first sign of the "second front", but we didn't know anything at that time. Just after the victory over the Germans in Moscow and Stalingrad, we read the papers and listened on the radio, for news of the second front in western Europe.

These victories over the German army didn't come as a surprise. We were sure; we expected victory; we had trust in the army. When the news came, you could hear often: "You see, I told you our army would win." We didn't understand what importance the victory had for the world. For the population there was also a lot of sorrow: so much tragic news, so many killed — husbands, sons, daughters and fathers — so many injured and without legs, arms... crippled for the rest of their lives. When I saw the first crippled soldier I cried.

Our life on the farm went on. We got used to the conditions. I got a better job. Because I was a seamstress, I was asked to sew uniforms for the women who worked in the tobacco fields. The farm had bought a few hundred yards of material, but got just unbleached cotton, which wasn't good for dresses. The management



Jacob and Lena.

decided to use it for the cotton uniforms. I was happy to work inside because it was less exhausting. I was happy to do what I knew best.

Lena was a very nice-looking girl, friendly, talkative and good by nature. Everybody liked her. Two young men from our company, Joe and Jacob, fell in love with her and wanted to marry her, but she couldn't make up her mind.

Joe got drafted and was taken into the army. He left on the farm three brothers. The youngest, sixteen years old, was a messenger. Every day he took the mail to the nearest city and brought the mail for the farm. After his brother went, he checked the mail looking for a letter from Joe. One time, he recognized Joe's handwriting, but the letter was addressed to another girl at the farm, not to Lena. He got angry and opened the letter. "Oh God, a love letter to Sophia! How could he betray Lena?" he thought. "Lena is much nicer; she is Jewish. If I were just older I would fall in love with her." He didn't deliver the letter to Sophia, but he showed it to Lena and he told her everything which was on his mind.

Jacob was a smart young man. Right after Joe left, he quit the job on the farm and went to the nearest city, having in mind to find a better job and better accomodation, so as to be able to ask Lena to marry him. Lena agreed to marry on one condition — that I would live with them. She was like a sister to me and didn't want me to be alone.

I agreed, and we quit our jobs on the farm and moved to the city of Dzhambul, to Jacob's home. But I knew that it was not right to live with them. We had made an agreement that if one of us got married the other one would move out and arrange a life by herself. She forgot, but I remembered it.

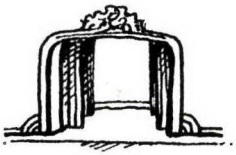
I was not happy, walking around with a long face, thinking what to do, looking for help and advice without Lena's assistance. I had been used to discussing everything with her. Jacob accused me of jealousy, but it was not true: I was confused and helpless.



Anshel in Polish uniform.



Mr. and Mrs. Citrinovitz (in 1971).



IX: THE THEATRE, AND ANSHEL

One day, unexpectedly in the marketplace of Dzhambul, I met a Mrs. Citrinovitz, who was a neighbour and friend from Lodz. She had come to that place with her husband and two small girls not long before. Mr. Citrinovitz, a tailor, had a job in a Yiddish theatre. At the start of the war, this theatre with all its employees had been evacuated, and had landed in the city of Dzhambul. On the way, their whole property had been lost, and they couldn't play. They asked the government for a grant. Because the financial situation was very bad, administration was even behind with paying wages. I really was sorry for the Citrinovitz family. But shortly after, the theatre got a million-ruble grant.

> *In every city in the Soviet Union there were community centres and theatres and halls. The size of a theatre depended on the size of the community. The local government helped to arrange everything.*

Now Mr. Citrinovitz asked me to work for him in the wardrobe. Everyone started rapidly to work to remake the props and costumes. This job changed my life completely. We travelled with the theatre group from city to city in Central Asia. The theatre played in two languages, Yiddish and Russian: played every day though not for a big audience every time. There wasn't any large grouping of Jews in that region, and sometimes the actors played even for a handful of viewers.

The permanent Jews who had lived in that part of Middle Asia for ages were distinct from the refugees who had come from the west to save their lives and look for work and a piece of bread. The permanent Jews didn't know Yiddish, the language of the European Jews: they seemed almost unaware that there were Jews in other parts of the world. They lived with the local people, spoke their language, dressed like them. They practised the Jewish religion, prayed in Hebrew and observed the Jewish holidays. I met some Jews in Kokand who were called the Jews from Bukhara. In the Middle Ages they had lived in a ghetto, but later they mingled with the Uzbeks, looked like them, lived like them and spoke the same language.

Our theatre brought some happiness to the displaced people. This theatre company was originally from Kiev, and the people who came from there were happy to listen to well-known artists and sometimes to meet a familiar face in the audience. I was one of those who met a friend there.

One evening, I was working backstage as a dresser. Since I had to talk to Mr. Citrinovitz about something, I looked around for him, but he was out front watching the play. I waited, and when the curtain went down I tried to find him in the audience. I heard somebody call my name. I turned my head and there was Mary, a girl whom I knew from the school in Minsk. She shouted, "You are alive! I don't believe it!" and I repeated the same words.

My conditions changed much for the better working in the theatre. I liked the job in the wardrobe as costumer. Sewing was easier for me than the work on the farm. The pay was better and I liked the surroundings in whatever city we were in at the moment. During that short time in which I worked for the theatre I learned a lot about art and artists. To know backstage life was for me a very interesting experience.

As a teenager in Lodz, I had enjoyed seeing all kinds of live performances. I had spent my pocket-money on concerts, theatre or movies, but the best was a play in the theatre. Because my friends and I never had a lot of money, we were never able to buy tickets in advance: stand-by tickets or sometimes a tip to the usher did the

trick. That way I was able to see many good plays.

Working in the theatre now, I could see how a performance came to life, how they made props, scenery, how the actors learned their parts, how the make-up changed the actors' faces.

The company had many difficulties. One of them was the lack of good theatres to perform in. However, the theatre tried to produce some very good plays such as *The Bewitched Tailor* by Sholem Aleichem, *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov, and *Crime and Punishment* by Feodor Dostoyevski. The theatre also put on a play by an unknown Jewish writer (I cannot remember his name) who in 1943 was in the U.S.A. and got the first information about the Nazi atrocities in Europe. It was a very sad play, but compared to the facts, it was just a fairytale. The name of the play was, in Hebrew, *Am Israel Chai ("The Jewish Nation Will Live").* I remember the most touching scene. An old Jew was taken by an SS man to a concentration camp. The old man couldn't walk as fast as the others. The guard forced him to run. The old man told the guard, "I can't see." "I will fix that right away," said the Nazi. He took the spike which was attached to his belt and pricked the old Jew's eyes. The Jew covered his injured eyes with his hands and cried out, "Oh God!" and from backstage was heard the Hebrew prayer song, *"Am Israel Chai".* Everyone cried with him.

Because of the summer's hot weather, we often worked at night. I liked this arrangement because in the daytime I could see the city we were in, meet people, make new acquaintances, listen to the news, read the papers and walk around in the marketplace. At that time I heard about the Second Front, the alliance of western nations fighting the Germans, and for the first time I heard about the concentration camps.

Although I had parted from Lena, I was in touch with her and exchanged letters often. Travelling from city to city with the theatre, I used to leave instructions on where to send my mail to the next city or town. I never knew the exact address, because sometimes I lived in hotels, sometimes in a guest house. Therefore I picked up my mail in post offices.

This certain day in July, 1944, the theatre was moving to the city of Kokand. Going to the railway station, I

passed the post office and decided to drop in to make sure that they were notified of my move to the next city, and by the way to check if there was some mail. To my astonishment the office clerk handed me a telegram which had come that morning from Lena with this laconic message: "Your brother Anshel is alive. His address is..."

Now, as promised earlier in this book, I will tell Anshel's story up to the point where, quite early in the war, our stories no longer ran parallel.

Anshel was at the time of the outbreak of the war in 1939 in Lodz with the family. He was twenty-one years old, ready to be drafted into the Polish army. But this never happened, because the German army attacked Poland unexpectedly. The Polish army was much weaker and unprepared, and couldn't fight the foe. In a few days the Germans took over cities and towns without a battle. They marched forward on Polish soil, killing people, wrecking buildings, burning properties. After a week, officials of the Polish army in Lodz called on all men able to fight to leave the city and go in the direction of Warsaw to join the army there. This was a treacherous act of some generals of German nationality who worked and spied for Hitler. The idea was to take over Lodz without a fight, without resistance, because Lodz was a big industrial city with many textile factories very useful for the Germans. Also, around twenty percent of the population in Lodz were German. The Germans wanted to give away the city in perfect condition as a gift to Hitler. Thousands of young and middle-aged men marched along the only highway to Warsaw to join other patriots "to fight the enemy". But again the Germans used the opportunity to kill, shooting from the planes. Only a small number of those people reached the destination.

Anshel was one of the lucky ones who survived and came to Warsaw. The people of the capital didn't know what was going on in the rest of the country. Our neighbours couldn't believe what Anshal told them. They took him to be a deserter.

The population of Warsaw fought heroically for three weeks against the enemy, but unfortunately

they lost the battle. The Polish government had to capitulate, and Germany occupied Poland. The capitulation was on September 27, 1939.

After that, when I went with my friends to meet the Russians, Anshel had come with us. When we arrived at Bialystok, I lost him, and I had no idea what happened to him. There wasn't any way to find him. The city was in chaos. There were many people from all over Poland without a regular place to sleep or any job. I put up notices at every possible place where there was a gathering of newcomers, but without any result. This was also the reason why I left the city of Bialystok to find a permanent place to live. I hoped that if Anshel was alive he would write home, and they would let me know where he was.

And so it happened. In 1940 I got a letter from my sister with the good news that Anshel was in the Soviet Union. She attached his address also, and asked me to visit him. But I couldn't make the trip because he was very far away and the trip was very costly. (I would have to pay for the ticket for a private trip.) Also, I didn't have the time, because I was in school. I sent him a letter, but I didn't get any answer. Then the Russian phase of the war started. I lost him again without any trace. The place where he was reported to live was west of Moscow and was taken by the German army.

You can imagine my surprise and happiness at the message that my dear brother was alive. I cried out loud. All my co-workers in the theatre joined in my happiness. A letter followed the telegram, in which Lena explained that, by chance, she had met a woman from the tobacco farm where we used to work. The woman told her that there was a letter for me in the office. Lena got the letter, intending to send it on, but when she found out that it was from Anshel (whom she knew very well), she got so excited that she sent a telegram before the letter.

During the war, in every city, town or settlement there were established offices where displaced people left their names, addresses and the names of relatives they were looking for. Copies of those lists were kept in a head office in Moscow. That

way Anshel got my address. It had taken a long time until I got that happy news.

In reply to my letter, Anshel wrote a very short letter: nothing about himself, just that he wanted to see me as fast as possible. He couldn't come to me; therefore he wanted me to come to him. "Quit your job; pack your belongings; I'm sending my friend Esther with a ticket," he wrote. "Don't waste time; make it fast, and if you have money buy a sewing machine."

He didn't ask if I agreed; he didn't give me time to think it over, to make up my mind. In a couple of weeks his friend Esther came with my ticket. In a big rush I said goodbye to my job, to the co-workers and my friends Mr. and Mrs. Citrinovitz. I bought a sewing machine and went to my brother, to a new place, to unknown conditions far away.

The place was near the city of Gorkiy, a few thousand kilometres from where I had been living. It took us two weeks by train to get there. The year was 1944; the war was still on, and transportation was in bad shape. There were not enough trains, not sufficient fuel for them. The two weeks were an unusual experience for a person like me who liked to be with people, to observe and to learn to know them and to look on the bright side. In that situation I met some people who acted helpful, were gentle, shared food with strangers, shared a place in a crowded train, were friendly and understanding. Others were selfish and rough. I even saw a couple of young people who got acquainted, fell in love, exchanged rings, and departed with tears in their eyes promising to meet again to marry.

On the day of my arrival Anshel was overwhelmed with happiness. He invited all his friends to meet his sister. I was happy to see him in good health and good spirits. He got time off from work. It was really a holiday for us.

After a few days of looking around, I got very disappointed. I couldn't understand why my dear brother had brought me to that place. How childishly he had acted; how naive I had been not to ask what conditions he lived in! How would I live here? I asked myself.

The place where Anshel lived, Zavod Stroy, was just a settlement with a few factories supplying war needs. Mostly the workers were single men. There were no stores,

no services. For almost everything you had to travel to nearby Dzerzhinsk. Every factory did have a lunchroom and a little store to supply the simplest needs of the workers.

I didn't want to upset Anshel, but after a few days I had to let him know how I felt. I asked him why he had brought me to that place without any opportunity to get a suitable job. "Wouldn't it have been better to come to visit me and let me choose for myself?" I asked him. "Listen to my life story and you will get the answer," he replied.

Then he started from the time when he was lost in Bialystok. In the shelter where we both were, he met a man who was a soldier in the Polish army, who told Anshel he had seen a notice that work was available for former soldiers. Anshel wanted very much to get a job, too, but he was not a soldier. They found a solution: "You tell them that you were a volunteer in the army," the man advised him.

They went to the office, but instead of giving them jobs, the authorities put the two of them, with others, on a train to a camp as war prisoners. They were not treated as enemies, just as internees, and conditions were not too bad. The food was satisfactory. They worked and learned the Russian language.

When the war started with Germany, the Soviet government made an agreement with General Wladyslaw Sikorski, (the head of the Polish government in exile in London, England), to build up a division of Poles to fight the German army.

In 1941 all Polish internees were freed. They had the choice of joining General Sikorski's division or getting a job, as every citizen was required to do. The recruiters for the Polish unit were very prejudiced and didn't want to take Jews into that army. Therefore Anshel settled in the city of Samarkand and worked there as a barber for a time. Ironically, we never met there, although we may have been at Samarkand at the same time.

During that period of the war, the Soviet government passed a law that all men able to be in

the army but not drafted had to be taken into working units and sent where workers were needed. Anshel was one of these.

He came with a large group, some single, some couples. They came to a place far from a city or town: a brand-new settlement. There were a few big factories, and new houses for people who worked in those factories. Everything was so new that the settlement hadn't even got a proper name. It was called, "Build a Factory" — in Russian, "Zavod Stroy".

The life in those surroundings was hard and lonesome. The inhabitants missed the dear ones whom they had left behind. In that horrible time of the war it was very difficult to contact people even if you knew the last addresses and even if they were Soviet citizens. People kept moving from place to place looking for safety.

What about people like Anshel who didn't know anything about relatives or friends? They dreamed and hoped that somewhere, somehow, they would get some good news. The only way was to write to the "Evacuo" bureau and wait for an answer. Anshel was the lucky one who got the happy news that I was alive. The whole community shared his happiness and looked forward to meeting me. It took a long time till he got my letter which made him sure that he wasn't just dreaming, that I was alive and well and living in the city of Kokand. He got so anxious to see me that he couldn't sleep or eat, thinking what to do.

He couldn't leave the place he had been drafted to. Discussing the matter with me in writing was a waste of time, he thought. He wanted to see me and be with me as fast as possible. He went out of his mind looking for a solution. After many debates and sleepless nights he decided to ask his friend Esther to go to Kokand and bring me to Zavod Stroy. Esther agreed to that task.

What could I say to Anshel when he had finished his story? I was overwhelmed with joy to see him in good health and to be with him.

But I was very confused. I couldn't imagine how I would live in that place, after my life in the cities, the

work in the theatre, the companionship which I had there. I missed the family Citrinovitz with whom I had so much in common; the city life; everything which I had left.

Anshel's mind was occupied with all kinds of plans. He wanted to find a nice place for both of us. I would be the housekeeper, and in my free time would sew for the women in the neighbourhood. That was the reason that he had asked me to buy a sewing machine. But for the time being I lived with him, Esther and her older sister. From the start I didn't like those two girls: I couldn't name why. They were a different sort from my friends. They treated me well, but I smelled some artificial behaviour. I never told my feelings to Anshel; I kept them to myself. A premonition told me that these two girls would never be my friends: on the contrary I could expect lots of trouble from them. But I didn't predict the disaster which came upon me.

Two weeks after I arrived in Zavod Stroy, Anshel got a call to join the Polish army unit named the Tadeusz Kosciuszko Division. This unit was established at the request of the Polish patriots who wanted to fight the Nazis on Polish soil together with the Red Army. It was a volunteer unit. Anshel had forgotten that he had applied (being busy with my coming). Therefore the draft was a big shock for him and for all of us. Everybody had different reasons to be hurt and confused. Anshel felt guilty and very sad. He knew he had mixed up my life. Esther was in love with him, and she wanted to marry him on the spot. She was afraid that she would lose him. To be sure of him, she and her sister pressed him to have a civil marriage ceremony. He hesitated. The girls asked me for support, but I refused because I knew that Anshel had left at home a girl whom he loved dearly, and deep in his heart he wished to find her alive after the war. With sorrow and tears Anshel departed, after being with me just twenty days.





Imagine me, in that long army coat!



X: AFTER ZAVOD STROY

Writing this report of my life, I think how strange it is that I was able to get through such a terrible time, the bad things that happened one after another. How was I able to keep going and not fall down, not get depressed and not lose my senses? I can't understand now. It must have been that my optimistic nature got to rule over me. This will to survive, to hope, to fight to exist was a miracle. After every bad experience I talked to myself: "It is so bad, it couldn't be worse. It has to get better; it will be." That positive thinking saved my life and made me look for the better things, although life played games with me and I was often the loser.

"Yes," I said to myself, "I'm again in the middle of nowhere." Again I had to find a way to survive, but how? I was faced with many problems; I couldn't find an easy answer. The obvious solution was to get back to where I had come from, but this was out of the question because I didn't have the money for a ticket. I could sell the sewing machine, but Esther refused to let me sell it. She said that she would keep the machine to compensate for the money which Anshel owed her. She suggested I stay with them and work at their home to pay off the debt. It was a lie that Anshel owed money, but I didn't know that at the time. I had the feeling that Esther wanted to be near to me to keep track of Anshel. She was not sure of him; she tried to "fence me in". I hated this the most. I had to find a job, and this was my

goal, but looking for work, I faced another big problem: the climate.

As I have described before, I had lived in the south of the Soviet Union in a very warm, almost tropical climate. In winter the weather had been mild — seldom any snow or frost, just rain. Living in the south from 1941 to 1944, I had forgotten about winter weather. I didn't have any warm clothes, I had no need of them. When Esther came to Kokand, it was September, warm and sunny, but when I arrived in Zavod Stroy the winter was in full swing. There was a lot of icy snow on the ground, and it was always windy. The temperature was much below zero Celsius. Nobody — not Esther, not anybody else — had mentioned to me the need of a warm coat or shoes. I had forgotten in a rush all the geography which I had learned so well in school, and which would have informed me of the cold climate.

I arrived in a summer dress and sandals, but I didn't regard this as a tragedy. I was used to problems, to difficulties. I was sure that I would manage with Anshel's help to buy something, sew something and get over the problem. But with Anshel's departure, the problem became a real tragedy. At that period of the war, it was not easy to buy something, even with money. There was a big shortage of any industrial products. Lucky me, I got a pair of used boots for a little money, and a hand-me-down soldier's coat. Imagine me, four foot, ten and a half inches tall, in that long army coat and big boots, walking in the street. People asked if I came from the front line of the war.

Now I was able to search for a job, and after a short time I got one. It was in the next factory-settlement, a distance of thirty kilometres from Zavod Stroy. The settlement was a bigger place, with a few shops, and a community centre with a theatre and a movie house.

Jelena Jakovlevna, who was in charge of the shops, was a very nice, smart and understanding person. I told her my circumstances and asked her to find me a place to live. She took me to her home where she lived with her husband, daughter and grandson. I became a part of that wonderful family. I began to work in one of her shops, and made all kinds of clothes and did alterations for the local people. I lived at Jelena Jakovlevna's till the end of the war, and from that house I returned in 1946 to Poland.

The wages which I received were not bad. I was able to buy some cloth, some warm boots and a nice warm coat. No more "soldier's coat", because I was able to buy better clothes second-hand in the market. On my birthday Jelena Jacovlevna gave me a piece of material for a dress. Getting the material was a big effort. As I said before, at that time it was impossible to buy anything in the stores. You had to look in the flea market, called the bazaar. In every city or town there was at least one bazaar where people looked for finds. You could find many, many things — from bread to watches, from farmers' products to hand-woven textiles, also livestock and tools — but you had to seek till you found what you needed. The bazaar was a haven for thieves and swindlers, also a centre of community life, a meeting-place where people got the news about what was going on in the war.

Everybody was interested in the news, listening to the radio or reading the newspapers, happy that the German army was retreating. Any good news made me optimistic, hopeful that the war would soon be over. I was at that time more involved because the fight was on Polish soil and Anshel was there. Every day, reporters told the public about Polish cities freed by the Red Army. Together with the good news about victory came, little by little, bad news. The war correspondents started to let the world know about the Nazi crimes against the peaceful population. Also, Anshel wrote very sad letters. His unit was not in the front line, but his job was to make contact in every city with the population. Everywhere he saw just ruins. Many people had been killed, or taken away to Germany to work there without pay, as slaves. The remaining people told horrible stories. He could find no Jews on his way, until the war was over and some survivors came back from the concentration camps and the other locations where they had been.

Jelena Jakovlevna didn't let me be sad. "Look on the bright side: the war will be shortly over," she used to say. "You are alive; go to enjoy a little." After work I used to go to the community centre for a concert, a movie or a play. Sometimes very good singers or other entertainers came to our settlement. In that winter of 1945 I heard singing through a microphone for the first time in my life. It sounded so wonderful to me that I still remember the song.

One evening I went to see a movie. It was a documentary about the Nazi atrocities committed against the Jewish population during the years 1941 to 1944 in Kiev. In one scene it was shown how the SS had taken the whole local Jewish population to a nearby ravine, shot them one by one and dumped them into the river. In the middle of that scene we heard a cry, and a man fell on the floor unconscious. As I found out afterwards, the man was a Jew from Kiev whose family still lived there. Watching the scene of shooting the Jews, he noticed in the crowd a familiar face which looked like his father. Maybe it *was* his father, he thought, and he fainted. The place is called Babi Yar. The well-known Russian writer, Yevgeni Yevtushenko, wrote a famous poem by that name.

Spring came with better news. The smell of peace was in the air: in the newspapers, on the radio or in the letters which I received from Anshel. I knew that Hitler would be defeated. But again the happy news was mixed with the sad. From the front lines, more trains with injured soldiers kept coming home. It was heartbreaking to see the crippled — some on stretchers, some without legs or arms, some with bandages on their eyes or their head, all with young faces. The sound of the crutches used by the crippled ones I remember till now. How painful it was for me to look at these people! I cried bitterly when I saw these scenes the first time, but we got used to it. "At least they are alive," people would say.

In the months of March and April, 1945, the newspapers were full of news from the freed countries of Europe. The war correspondents wrote many articles to let the public know about the situation on the front lines west and east of Germany. The best of the correspondents was Ilya Ehrenburg, the well-known Societ writer. His articles were written with human feeling and love for people. His sensitivity to human suffering made his writing a part of many people's lives at that time. People used to clip every article and read them at meetings and in schools. In one of his articles, Ehrenburg said that he had had a talk with a German officer who asked him what the Soviets would do to the German prisoners of war. "Not much, just the same as the Germans did to the Russians, Poles, Jews and others," Ehrenburg answered. "No, no!" cried out the German. "You are not so cruel!"

The first day of May, the national holiday in the Soviet Union, was sunny and warm. There was singing

and dancing in the streets. Everyone dressed in best clothes except the people who cried silently for the loss of their dear ones. The loudspeakers in the streets mixed news with patriotic songs and march music.

On May 8 we finally got the happiest news. On the late news at eleven o'clock, which everybody waited up for, the familiar voice of the announcer said loudly, *"Mir"* (peace). "The Germans have capitulated. There is no more war. There is peace now," he said. "Tomorrow, May 9, we will have a holiday. Nobody is going to work." We looked at each other. We couldn't open our mouths for a while. "You know what I will do?" said Jelena, the first one to speak. "First thing in the morning I'll wash the floor and put the white tablecloth on the table. Let's have a happy holiday."

Yes, it was a big holiday for all the people in the Soviet Union. The streets were full of people — happy, excited, exchanging kisses with strangers, repeating *"Mir, mir"*.

What did I do on that day? I was thinking of the future. I asked myself, "What has peace brought for me? Will I be lucky enough to find my father, brother and sisters alive?" I took a sheet of paper, pretending I was writing to Anshel. I wrote a big letter, but I never mailed it. What was the use of it? Could he answer my questions?

Anshel celebrated the end of the war in Poland in the city of Lublin, which was the temporary residence of the Polish government. Shortly after, the government moved to Warsaw, the capital of free Poland. July 22 is the official day of Poland's rebirth, and the National Holiday.

At the first opportunity Anshel went to Lodz, to our home town. The city was half empty. Some Poles had been taken to Germany for slave labour, some to prisons and concentration camps. Many Poles of German nationality, called *"Volkdeutschen"*, had worked for the Nazis and run away with them. The Jewish population had been swept out to the minimum. Where there had been three hundred thousand people, around eight hundred Jews were kept alive by the German police to clean up the streets of the ghetto. In the district of Baluty where Jews used to live, the houses were wrecked and burned. The remnant of the Jewish community opened an office to look for

survivors and gather information. Whoever was alive came to the office and put his name on the list in hopes that somebody would show up or let the office know a Jew was alive and looking for someone. Anshel did this, too, and he was lucky. One day he got the good news that our youngest brother, Moses, had survived the concentration camps and was in hospital. Moses recovered fast, and after a few months the two brothers got together in Lodz and sent a picture to me. I was hysterical when I saw the photo: Anshel as a soldier and Moses a handsome young man. I couldn't believe my eyes. "I have two handsome brothers!" I cried. Oh, how I dreamed of meeting them and being together, at home with the rest of the family.

Many people prayed to get home as fast as possible, but the priority was to bring the Soviet citizens home from the west. Almost every family expected somebody. Little by little the trains brought people home: discharged soldiers freed from prisons and concentration camps, the sick and injured. It was a time of reunited families. The displaced people who had saved their lives by going to the Soviet Union, and who were citizens of other countries, wanted to go back. The Soviet authorities helped them get home in organized groups. The repatriation took a long time because transportation was not sufficient for that huge demand.

The big day for my departure came on March 14, 1946. All my Russian friends and neighbours escorted me to the train with gifts and best wishes.

"Goodbye, my friends, goodbye Shura, Efim, Jelena Jacovlevna! Goodbye, friendly country!" I called from the moving train. "I'll never forget you, goodbye!"



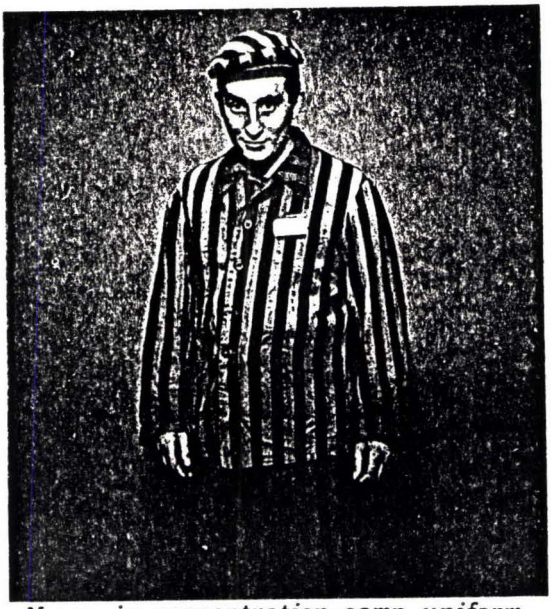


XI: EPILOGUE

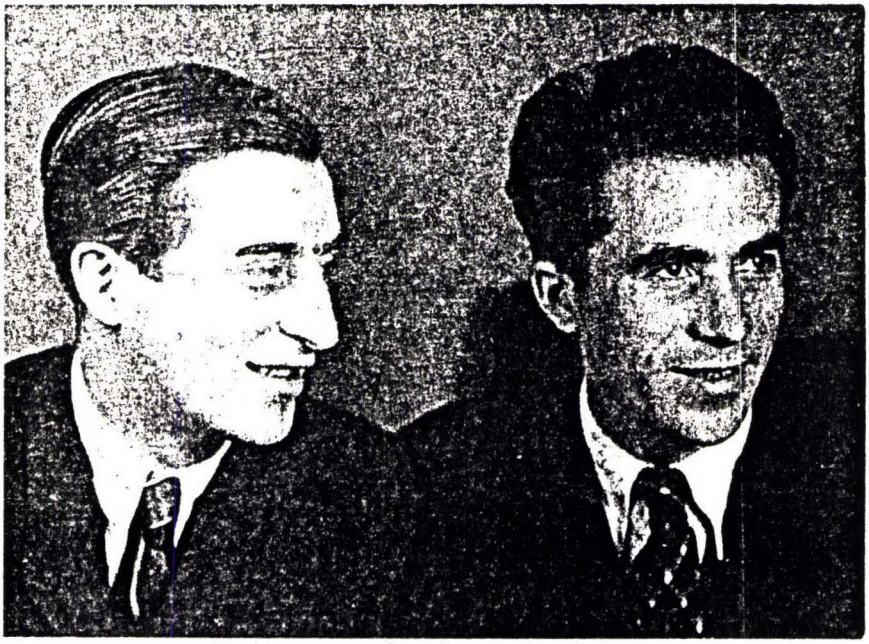
Coming back to Poland, I fully realized the horror of the Nazi occupation. The greatest damage had been done not to the cities and towns (except in Warsaw, which was completely in ruins) but to the population. Millions of Poles had been murdered. The population had declined from thirty-two million in 1939 to twenty-six million in 1946.

The biggest loss had been suffered by the Jewish people. Before the war in Poland, three and a half million Jews lived there. After the war, there remained only seventy-five thousand survivors, in a variety of conditions and circumstances. Some had survived the death camps, some had been hidden in bunkers, some had lived as partisans in the woods. Some had saved their lives by living among the Polish population as Aryans, and some had been hidden in attics or basements by compassionate Poles who risked their lives to help the Jews. Others had fled to friendly countries.

When I met my brother Moses, he told me that in 1943 my father, my sister Eva, my sister Tamara and himself had been taken to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Within ten minutes he lost sight of the others forever. My father was sent to the ovens and my sisters were sent somewhere unknown. Moses became a slave worker and survived. Nacia had died previously of tuberculosis in the ghetto. Moses said that Henia, who had been like a younger sister to us, had survived Auschwitz and wished to see me. She had been twelve years old when the war



Moses in concentration-camp uniform.



"I have two handsome brothers":
Moses and Anshel.

broke out. After the Jews had been driven into the Lodz ghetto, her grandmother died, and my father had taken her into his quarters in the ghetto. (After the war she returned to Lodz, hoping to see him.)

I walked in the streets of my home town, thinking how was it possible for three hundred thousand Jews living in Lodz to be swept away. No more Jewish faces were seen in the streets, no more Jewish stores or Jewish names were found on the signs. Not one Jewish family had remained in its own home during the gruesome wartime years. The Nazis forced the whole Jewish population to resettle in a ghetto to make room for Germans. The Jews had to leave almost everything behind, and were allowed to carry only their most needed possessions. The Germans moved into the richest Jewish homes. The poorest homes, the Germans granted to the "good Poles" who were collaborators and Nazi helpers.

After the war people started coming home, Poles and Jews alike, but they were treated differently. A Pole found his home, and some relatives and friends; he was welcomed everywhere by everybody. It was a different situation when a Jew came back looking for his home. He would find the place occupied by Polish neighbours or by strangers He was generally greeted with the following words: "You are alive? I thought all Jews were killed."

But life goes on. We survived to live, to build a new life in spite of the Holocaust. We had to build a future without parents, wives, husbands or children who perished and would never come back.

I wanted to stay in Lodz, but my brothers didn't agree with me; they didn't want to stay in Poland, in the "graveyard", as they called it. I wanted to be with them, but I decided to live in Lodz. I couldn't get rid of the past, of my memories. Every street reminded me of the time with my family, my friends, my youth and my dreams.

I married Felix Flam from Lodz, who had also lost his family in the Holocaust, and we have two sons, Henry and Joseph, to whom I have dedicated my writing. It was very hard to build a family, to bring up children without having dear parents to ask for advice. I had to learn the hard way, but many, many times I used to cry.

Anshel and Moses came to Canada in the late nineteen-forties. They married, and have fine families. All the time we kept in close touch with them. We often exchanged letters and photos. I missed them more and more. I especially wished to meet their wives and children. My son Henry asked once, "Why haven't I got a grandma? Why have the uncles never visited us? They are just in a picture." I wished I was with my brothers, and that my children knew them.

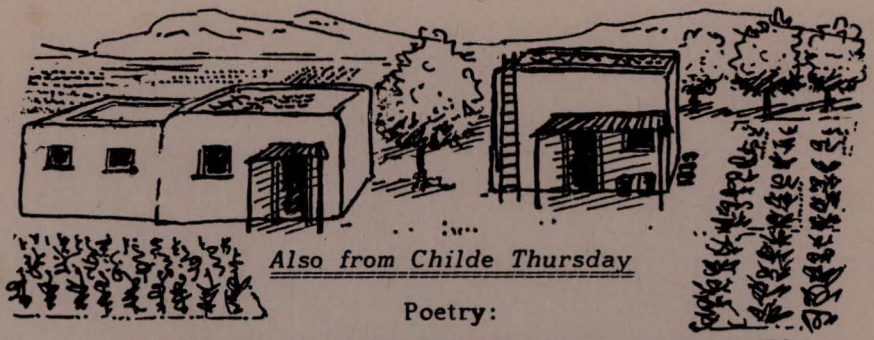
My brothers very much wanted me to come to Canada, and I started to think of joining them. It took a long time, but in 1958 we arrived in Toronto, where we have lived ever since, happy and thankful to our new country, which is good to us.

The friends with whom I shared the good and the difficult times are forever in my memories, but I'm not in touch with all of them. I know that Bronia joined her husband after the war. I paid her a short visit in 1946. They remained in the U.S.S.R., and have two sons. I still write her letters. Heniek was killed during the war, but Sala with her sister and her husband live in Warsaw. Esther and her sister emigrated to Israel shortly after the war.

Lena and Jacob came to Poland for a short time; they also emigrated to Israel. We promised each other never to lose track. We keep exchanging letters, and we know everything about each other's lives. They are living in Tel-Aviv, and have two lovely daughters and grandchildren. They promise some day to visit us in Toronto. I can't wait for the reunion.

Henia lives now in the U.S.A. She is a wife, mother and grandmother, and we keep in close touch with her as a member of the family.

Also Mr. Citrinovitz went to Israel in 1947 and started to work in the Hebrew National Theatre, "Habima", in Tel-Aviv. Although he is now an older man and a widower, he still works in the theatre and travels with the company. In his free time he likes to travel, visiting his friends all over the world. He has visited us in Toronto a few times.



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